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LADY BUMPKIN AND HER LORD VILLAIN 2


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Chapter 1: The Series of Broken Engagements

The chalky white corridors in the Desnim palace were filled with the greenery of early summer. A large man stormed along one of them, both his hands balled into fists and an expression of clear indignation on his face. He was young, his body sturdy, muscular, and clad in the shining silver armor of a knight.

The target of the enraged man's glare was a handsome man dressed in expensive, gaudy clothes. He slouched casually against a pillar. He was Robin Levbition: the man who'd recently pushed aside his competition and happily become engaged to the princess. He brushed his light-pink hair up and gave the approaching man a bold smile.

"Do you have business with little ol' me? You're in my way, standing there in the middle of the hallway with that massive body of yours. See, I'm the studious future prince consort, so I'm on my way to the library."

A large vein twitched on the knight's temple and a heavy sigh escaped his thick lips.

"Cut the crap! You're on your way to *study*? More like to have a date with some random girl!"

Robin looked fully composed despite the man's shouting and opened his mouth while lazily adjusting his posture. His handsome features made his arrogant demeanor even more provocative.

"If you already know all that, be a good strong knight and move out of the way. I have a lady waiting for me, so off you go, okay?"

"Shut up, Robin. You 'diligently' go to the library and hit on my fiancée, Liliane."

"What was that? Your fiancée? You mean she's engaged?"

Robin's transparent pretense of ignorance irritated the large man further.

"Liliane and I are engaged! Now that you know, stay away from the library and scram!"

However, Robin simply grinned at him with a smirk calculated to rile up the knight even more. He moved away from the pillar as he

fiddled with his light-pink hair and briskly walked up to the large man with his long, slender legs. He squinted his charming, drooping eyes and closely observed the large man, until he eventually nodded to himself and smiled deeply, like he'd just been convinced of something.

"Poor little Liliane! To think she's engaged to *this* ugly blockhead gorilla! Of course she'd want to go on a *private* date with charming ol' me."

"You bastard! Where the hell did you get that idea?!" the perplexed man shouted in response to Robin's barrage of insults.

Robin didn't seem bothered at all.

"I think you're misunderstanding this whole thing. I never tried to seduce Liliane. *She's* the one who approached me."

The large man gasped as Robin suddenly gazed back sharply. Though Robin appeared chatty and casual, he had a certain eeriness that gave one the feeling he could see into the very depths of others' minds. But the knight didn't simply take Robin's words at face value and continued shouting.

"Stop mocking my fiancée! Liliane is an honest, quiet, and pure woman who—"

"Pffft, aha ha ha! Now I *really* feel sorry for Liliane. Is that truly how you see her? I thought you simply lacked a discerning eye, but you're an utter thickhead! Liliane always suffered from being perceived as all those things. She's a cheerful and lively person by nature, but she was being crushed by the expectations of being a perfect lady that others forced on her!"

Every single thing about the way Robin spoke rubbed the large man the wrong way.

"You're lying! There's no way that's true!"

"I'm telling you, it's the truth. And you call yourself her fiancé? Hilarious!"

The large man's frustration boiled over as he watched Robin feign shaking with laughter. He unconsciously raised his fist overhead, but a woman's high-pitched voice came from behind him at that exact moment.

"What are you doing?! Stop this at once! Violence is unacceptable!"

The voice belonged to a fair-skinned, prim and proper young lady in a light-green dress: Liliane. Her loosely braided chestnut

hair waved in the wind every time she moved, and a faint floral scent spread around her.

The large man was taken aback at the lovely woman's appearance and loudly gulped.

"Liliane! This Robin fellow is dangerous! You shouldn't meet with him! He's also Her Highness's fiancé!"

But Liliane didn't share his concerns. She looked at him sternly and rejected his plea.

"Master Torre, what are you doing in a place like this?! How horrible of you to try and use force against Robin!"

"N-No, I wasn't being violent. This is a misunderstanding."

Although the knight's—Torre's—fist had never reached Robin, it was clear to anyone watching that he had been about to punch him.

Robin took advantage of Liliane's words and shrank back, playing the victim.

"He's such a cruel man! He grabbed poor little me and viciously beat me up. It hurts so badly!"

"Stop lying, you bastard!"

Torre's words fell on deaf ears; Liliane seemed inclined to blindly trust everything that came out of Robin's mouth.

Torre was a knight who'd grown up surrounded by brothers and completely devoted to his swordsmanship. Although he was the son of a viscount, Torre was a boorish man somewhat lacking in discretion; his body tended to act before his mind. He had terrible compatibility with an opponent as eloquent as Robin.

"I seem to have misjudged you, Master Torre. You're an awful, violent individual. Please forget our engagement was ever a thing in the first place!" Liliane said, then turned around and hurried off. Robin happily skipped after her with a triumphant expression. There was no one to stop him.

"P-Please wait, Liliane. Liliaaaaane!" Torre's screams echoed down the corridor in vain.

***

Time passed gracefully and peacefully at the margrave's estate in Sutrena. The warm sunlight shone down on the garden terrace where Lord Nazel and I, Agnes, were enjoying our first day off in a

while. The people had grown to rely on Lord Nazel, so he was always busy with work.

"The new moon, a period when manabeast activity becomes more ferocious than usual, is almost upon us. We've taken countermeasures to a certain extent, but perhaps it would be prudent to put extra fences in the areas that have historically suffered the most damage at these times," Lord Nazel said.

Sutrena had a number of occasions every year when manabeasts became more active. Mana was as abundant in nature as the air itself, but when the amount of mana fluctuated for whatever reason, manabeasts were affected. Nothing could be done about it since it was a natural phenomenon, and so the frontier suffered damage every time because of its high manabeast population.

Among the various fluctuations in manabeast activity, the night of the new moon was said to be especially dangerous. Apparently, the mana in the atmosphere increased significantly, making manabeasts act far more savagely than usual. I'd spent most of my life in the capital and the Evantail domain, neither of which had much of a problem with manabeasts, so at the thought of this unfamiliar threat, my body subconsciously tensed.

"I'm willing to lend my aid at any time. Helping with the fences is a given, but I can also reinforce private residences."

I smiled at Lord Nazel as I set out black tea and sweets. Since I was now his wife, I wanted us to join hands and overcome all sorts of hardships together.

"Thank you, Agnes, you'll be a great help. By the way, the violaberry pie you all came up with is delicious. I never get tired of its taste no matter how much I eat."

"Heh heh, I'm happy to hear that. These violaberry cookies are also great. Open your mouth for me please."

"Hah, I suppose I'll have one if you praise them so much."

I fed Lord Nazel a cookie and waited to hear his impression with bated breath.

"It's not overly sweet and tastes nice too. It's just the way I like it," he said a moment later.

His words were the highest compliment I could have hoped for. I almost jumped for joy, but I quickly came to my senses and stopped myself.

Come to think of it, I still haven't replied to Lord Nazel's confession.

Although Lord Nazel had confessed his love for me during Prince Leonardo's party, we'd been interrupted as I'd been about to tell him how I felt, and I'd yet to give him a proper response. I'd tried confessing to him at every opportunity since then, but somehow, an accident would alway happen with the worst timing, and I'd lose my chance. Lord Nazel wasn't pressing me for a reply, but I couldn't take advantage of his kindness forever.

I can't give up yet. Our love is mutual, after all. Now is the time for me to confess!

I roused myself and took a deep breath.

"U-Um, well, Lord Nazel!"

"What is it, Agnes?"

His sweet, tender, gentle smile had me spellbound—wait, this wasn't the time for that!

"I-I want to tell you that I lo—"

But my once-in-a-lifetime confession was *yet again* interrupted at the worst possible moment.

"Lord Nazelbart, you have a visitor from the royal capital. I feel terribly sorry for intruding upon your private time as a couple, but this visitor isn't someone I could afford to neglect."

Kelly was the one responsible for this interruption. But she had an important message to deliver, so it couldn't be helped.

I took a short breath and steadied myself.

"I don't believe I've gotten word of any visitors planning to come. Who is it?" Lord Nazel asked.

"It's your younger brother, Lord Julian. Apparently His Grace your father has prevented him from contacting you until now, so he took matters into his own hands, left the capital without permission, and came straight to Sutrena."

"How reckless. Is it really such an important matter?"

The trip from the capital to Sutrena was taxing. It took roughly ten days to go by carriage from the capital to a provincial town. There, one would need to switch to a mountbeast in order to reach the margravate's capital. There weren't any proper highways that led to the frontier, so traveling the whole way by carriage was nigh impossible.

Lord Nazel hurriedly got up, and I followed him to the reception room where Lord Julian was waiting with a man unfamiliar to me.

The slight Lord Julian and the large man seemed to be close, as they were chatting like good friends. When Lord Julian noticed Lord Nazel, he quickly got up from the sofa, his face shining with excitement.

"I've missed you, elder brother! I'm so glad to see you in good health."

"I'm also happy to see you after so long. I'm sorry I made you go through all the trouble of watching over things at home, Julian. What business brings you here today? Does *he* have something to do with your visit?" Lord Nazel said, then looked at the large man next to Lord Julian.

The man also stood up and gave Lord Nazel a firm bow.

"I am extremely honored to be in your presence again, Lord Nazelbart!" His voice was deep and loud.

"And you're the same as always, Torre. Did you lose a little weight?"

Apparently, back when Lord Nazel had been assigned to work with the knight order while he'd still been Her Highness's fiancé, Torre had been his subordinate.

"Yes, I'd like us to discuss something regarding Torre, elder brother."

Lord Julian interrupted their conversation. Things looked serious.

"Torre's fiancée has gone missing. There has been a series of broken engagements in the capital recently—all involving the future prince consort. Torre's fiancée also told him she wanted to break up with him. However, her parents scolded her for acting on her own to end the engagement and disowned her. Her whereabouts became unclear afterward. An investigation turned up evidence that she was heading toward Sutrena, so I decided to come to you directly for assistance, elder brother."

"I understand. If that's the case, I will do anything in my power to help."

"Thank you very much, elder brother. This makes the tenth high profile breakup that Robin has been involved in this year. Each time, he seduces an engaged lady, resulting in the engagement getting called off. That vile womanizer!" Lord Julian grumbled, covering his face theatrically.

Master Robin looked like he got on well with Her Highness, yet

he made moves on one woman after the other. Was he feeling unsatisfied in some way?

Master Robin's engagement to Her Highness caused Lord Nazel a great deal of trouble, yet even now that he has Her Highness, he still carries on like this?

I was listening to their conversation, feeling somewhat displeased, when Torre hugged himself with both arms, as if he were chilled, and spoke in a gloomy tone.

"Liliane was obsessed with that damn seducer. After my engagement was called off, my family, the House of Torbert, decided to turn its back on Her Majesty and Her Highness. Letting a man like him do as he pleases is a huge nuisance!"

Was it really all right for him to say that here? Lord Nazel was one thing, but Her Majesty was related to the House of Florescruz by blood and had its official support. But any doubts I had on the matter were quickly cleared by what Lord Julian said next.

"I heard that you attended the party organized by Prince Leonardo, elder brother, so I'm pledging my support to him. Father and our eldest brother aren't too pleased about it, though."

"His Highness practically ambushed me with his request…but I do intend to support him and *not* Her Majesty. But to be frank, I'd rather not get involved in the capital's discord at all." Lord Nazel was very honest about his intentions.

Meanwhile, Torre looked around himself restlessly before speaking again.

"Incidentally, where might your wife be, Lord Nazelbart? I would like to greet her since I'm already visiting your estate."

"Huh?" I mumbled. Lord Nazel and I exchanged glances.

"What are you talking about, Torre? M-My sister-in-law is right here!" Lord Julian spoke up in a panic.

I hurriedly got up the next moment. Their conversation had started very abruptly, so I'd never had a chance to introduce myself.

"I apologize for my late introduction. I'm Lord Nazel's wife, Agnes."

The stunned Torre's mouth hung wide open.

"N-No way. I've seen Lady Bumpkin at evening parties. She had awfully thick makeup on!"

Lord Julian's fist made a thud as he hit Torre in the side. Lord

Nazel's smile was frightening.

"M-My sister-in-law is a beauty under all that makeup, and she's also an agreeable person, unlike Her Highness! My elder brother is happily married to her!"

Torre stared at me for a moment, then vigorously bowed his head to me.

"I apologize for failing to greet you even though you were right next to me! I'm Torre, the third son of Viscount Torbert!"

"Please, don't worry about it. But you must be tired from your long trip, so feel free to relax here."

"On that note, could you please let Torre stay in Sutrena for a while? He's very eager to search for his fiancée, and he said himself that he would prefer to be by your side rather than in the capital, elder brother," Lord Julian said.

"I don't mind, but what does the House of Torbert have to say about this? And what about his job as a knight?" Lord Nazel asked.

"Well, Torre is only the third son, and his parents are well aware of his heartbreak, so they said they'll let him do as he likes for now. As for his job, he apparently quit it on impulse."

Lord Nazel spent a moment thinking before carefully replying.

"Very well, Torre may stay at our mansion. This is perfect timing because I was thinking I wanted to assign someone capable to guard Agnes. Torre is both talented and trustworthy."

Torre seemed to respect Lord Nazel wholeheartedly, so his face was practically beaming as he bowed.

"It will be my honor! I will follow you for the rest of my life, Lord Nazelbart!" His voice was as loud as ever.

And so, our estate welcomed Torre as a guard.

***

Torre started living a fulfilling everyday life in Sutrena. He'd been spending his days at the capital in heartbreak only a short time ago, but thanks to his good friend Julian, he could now serve under the former superior he greatly admired. He was the third son of Viscount Torbert and currently eighteen years old. His father and older brothers served as court officials at the palace. But as Torre had excellent physical strength and stamina, he'd chosen the path of a knight for himself. The long trip to the

frontier hadn’t troubled him in the slightest, most likely thanks to his daily training.

Torre realized something after coming to Sutrena.

This place is nothing like the rumors.

Back during the tenure of Margrave Evile—Sutrena’s previous ruler—the place had been said to be a wasteland where crops didn’t grow and manabeasts ran rampant. But although it was certainly dreary compared to the bustling capital, the food situation had dramatically improved, and fences to keep away manabeasts had sprung up everywhere.

I would expect nothing less of Lord Nazelbart. He’s a magnificent ruler to have already tidied up the margravate’s affairs so well.

Nazelbart, the superior Torre looked up to, had given precise orders and had even fought himself using his magic. He had looked like a true war god in action and the entire knight order, not just Torre, was proud of him. That was why the knights hadn’t believed their ears when they’d heard that the princess had called off her engagement to Nazelbart, and they’d been indignant about the tyranny of the queen’s faction. They couldn’t publicly voice their complaints because of their status as knights of the country, but they privately harbored great distrust for the princess and Robin.

Incidentally, as one might have expected, soon after Nazelbart had left for the frontier, a slew of problems had begun cropping up in the palace one after the other.

Why does no one stop Her Highness and Robin’s oppression? What are His Majesty and Their Highnesses the princes doing?

Not long after Torre had grown frustrated with the various misdeeds of the queen’s faction, the incident with his fiancée being seduced by Robin took place. He didn’t want to think that his quiet, sensible fiancée would be unfaithful to him, but Robin had told him that Liliane’s true nature wasn’t what Torre thought. She was apparently a cheerful and lively woman at heart.

Come to think of it, have I ever seen Liliane smile from the bottom of her heart?

His fiancée’s smile was always an elegant one, fit for a proper lady.

“Why didn’t she tell me the truth? Were her smile and her gentle words all lies?”

Robin was the future prince consort, so there was no way he wanted to become engaged to Liliane. *Yet he still made a move on her. That's way too rash even if he is just a womanizer.* Torre still didn't understand the intent behind Robin's actions.

After Liliane turned her back on him in favor of Robin, Torre was so shocked that he absentmindedly spent his time doing strength training in a corner of the palace courtyard with tears running down his face. He was truly pitiful and at a complete loss, with no idea what he should do.

It was then that a certain man approached Torre. His golden hair and green eyes were quite unusual. He also had a mole next to his lips and a certain flamboyant aura about him. His appearance made it easy to tell at a glance that he was of a very high status, but Torre didn't remember ever seeing a noble like him.

"Wh-Who goes there?! You look really suspicious!"

The embarrassment of being seen crying made Torre raise his voice, but the man didn't seem to mind and approached him.

"I'm not a suspicious person, not at all. I can't boldly appear in public for certain reasons, but I assure you I'm a respectable resident of this palace. Incidentally, you seem to be suffering heartbreak. I can lend you an ear if you'd like to talk about it."

Torre thought that talking to someone about his problems might help him feel better, so in his despair, he opened his heart to the mysterious man.

"Liliane..." he said between sobs. The man looked at the grieving Torre with sympathy.

And so began a series of secret meetings between Torre and the mysterious man, as the former kept searching for a way to reconcile with Liliane. But no matter how hard he tried, his efforts bore no fruit. Some time later, Liliane and Robin's relationship became public. She was disowned for making a move on the princess's fiancé and then simply vanished. Torre searched for her on his own, but finding a lone woman in the huge capital was next to impossible. However, the mysterious man unexpectedly conducted a thorough investigation of his own.

"She's already left the capital, headed for the frontier territory of Sutrena. You should leave the capital too and follow your fiancée. This should work out perfectly. I believe your former

superior is currently in Sutrena. You should seek his cooperation," the mysterious man told Torre.

Torre was then told the mysterious man's identity for the first time, which he easily accepted. After that exchange, Torre got in touch with his friend Julian, who wanted to see his older brother again, and the two of them left for Sutrena. Torre was also happy he would get to rejoin the former superior he so admired.

When they met Nazelbart at Sutrena, he was significantly more lively than he'd been at the capital. He looked nothing like the "animated doll" people used to mock him as. Moreover, Agnes, the "unsightly" woman he'd been forced to marry, had abandoned the way she'd dressed as a member of the House of Evantail and been reborn as an absolute beauty. She had silver hair like silk and rose-colored eyes, she was a little taller than the average woman her age, and she had a healthy figure. She was also a magnanimous and positive individual. Torre only had eyes for Liliane, but he thought of Agnes as a captivating woman, not as Lady Bumpkin.

She's a wonderful lady, truly fit for Lord Nazelbart. She's far better than Her Highness, that selfish and wasteful woman!

It was an honor for him to guard such a brilliant woman. Torre vowed to himself to earnestly fulfill his duty. He was currently accompanying Agnes, the Margravine of Sutrena, and was for some reason building the wall of a massive building, wiping the sweat from his brow all the while. Agnes happily hopped around near his feet, her eyes sparkling as she called him incredible.

"Please step back, Lady Agnes. It's dangerous down there. I'd never be able to face Lord Nazelbart again if I stepped on you by accident."

"Yes, I understand," Agnes said before moving with light steps to the terrace with a view of the garden.

Torre's magic was called gigantification and allowed him to grow his body to three times its normal size. His strength increased threefold along with his size, so his magic had been awfully convenient during his time in the knights. It was obviously useful in combat, but also came in handy for quickly building field fortifications. However, it consumed a lot of mana, so he could only use it up to three times per day, for three minutes each time. He devoted himself to strength training every day in order to increase the time he could use his magic even a little.

“There’s something I’d like to ask, Lady Agnes. What will you be using this building I’m constructing in your garden for?”

“You see, we will be getting our very own mountbeast. A staff member at the fortress asked if we’d like to try raising a young wyvern. And I love wyverns!” Agnes happily replied with a beaming smile.

“I see now, it’s going to be your stable. I prefer pegasi myself.”

“I agree that pegasi are adorable, but wyverns are also wonderful.”

It would appear that Agnes loved wyverns from the bottom of her heart.

That’s Lord Nazelbart’s wife for you! She’s magnificently bold!

The estate already had a stable, but it had been built in a gloomy location where the sun didn’t shine, so it wasn’t a sanitary environment by any standards. It looked as dreary as a crumbling prison, so Torre agreed it was a good idea to build a new one. He went back to diligently constructing the stable while the energetic Agnes cheered him on.

Chapter 2: Madam Bumpkin Receives a Wyvern

Torre would be a live-in guard in the Sutrena estate from now on. Lord Nazel had been worried about me since I had a tendency to act on my own, so this was the perfect opportunity for him to hire his former subordinate. Torre had dark brown hair and green eyes that made one think of a deep forest. His large body was packed with muscle, exactly how one would imagine a knight, so he looked incredibly strong.

We had finished construction of our new stable. It was in a spacious place that got a lot of sunlight, and Lord Nazel had prettied it up by using his magic to create flowers which were safe for manabeasts to eat. The plants that Lord Nazel created with his magic couldn't reproduce naturally, so there was no risk of them adversely affecting Sutrena's ecosystem. The stable had a soft bed of straw inside, and it had a large window to let in more sunlight. Incidentally, we'd had the old stable demolished. There'd been bloodstains inside it, so it had felt really ominous!

Our garden was truly lovely now. Lord Nazel had started making a field for medicinal herbs, which I'd reinforced with my magic. Some incredible medicine had apparently been made using those herbs. It felt like we were making much more definite progress than when we'd first arrived in Sutrena.

Let's keep doing our best!

We could get more work done now that we had Torre as a guard, but there was something else to be taken care of first.

"Today, I'll be going to the mountbeast pen in the center of town to receive a wyvern," I said.

I invited Torre to come along and we headed into town. The mountbeast pen was near the fortress. They raised pegasi and wyverns there; the wyvern we rode when we went anywhere was one of them. These mountbeasts were invaluable for transporting the fortress's personnel.

We parked our carriage in front of the building and the mountbeasts' caretaker led the way to the pen. Torre had

experience with mountbeasts and happily peeked at the section with the pegasi. As for me, I went up to the female blue wyvern we always rode. The male red wyvern Connie had ridden when we'd first come to Sutrena was also there; the two wyverns were apparently mates.

"There, there, who's a good girl? You are!"

The wyvern we would be receiving today was their child. It was the staff's way of expressing their gratitude because I'd reinforced their breeding pen. Though I called it a child, it was already an adult and independent from its parents, so the keepers assured me it wouldn't feel homesick.

Our guide pointed farther inside the pen.

"That's the wyvern we will be giving you today. He's a young male that's just finished his training."

A beautiful wyvern with glossy pink scales stood before me. His eyes were cobalt blue and his tail changed color depending on the way the light hit it; at the moment it seemed to be a lemony yellow.

"H-He's so cute!"

"The wyvern you always ride is one of the fortress's mountbeasts, Lady Agnes, and it would be difficult to separate it from its mate. But we can easily move a wyvern that's just reached adulthood," the caretaker explained.

I vigorously nodded in understanding. I had no intention of snatching away a mountbeast they used, and I'd also read that it was impossible to separate male and female wyverns once they'd formed a pair. And most importantly, I'd feel terribly sorry for the wyverns.

"You may name him if you'd like."

I kind of got the feeling that the pink wyvern was looking at me expectantly.

Oh my gosh, he's so cute! I want to nuzzle him and pet him!

I suppressed my rising desires and stared back at the pink wyvern.

"Then how about Geni?" I'd actually thought of many possible names in preparation for this moment.

The wyvern made a shrill noise and kept staring at me as he slowly moved his head up and down. Wyverns were very intelligent animals, and according to a book I'd read, this gesture

showed affirmation.

"I'm so happy you like it. Let's get along, okay?"

Geni energetically nodded his head again and shook with excitement, eager to get out of the pen as soon as possible.

"I'm sorry, I can't take you with me right away."

I couldn't ride a wyvern on my own yet, so I had to practice how to ride before I could take Geni into my care. Having to ride with Lord Nazel every time was inconvenient, and I'd said I wanted to be able to ride on my own before, so the caretaker had prepared an instructor for me.

"Wyverns are more peculiar mounts than pegasi, but they're the fastest mountbeasts, so they're by far the most convenient once you get used to their quirks. Hey, come here and teach the margravine how to ride a wyvern."

The caretaker leaned outside the pen's window and called for someone—my riding instructor, apparently. The person summoned by the middle-aged caretaker looked back at us, startled.

Oh, if it isn't Connie.

He was Mister Henry's subordinate and had been rather mean to Lord Nazel and me before. He looked quite unhappy about this situation too.

It's pretty awkward since he was a bit nasty the last time we met.

Lord Nazel and I had both enjoyed our wyvern ride, so we weren't angry at Connie, but he wouldn't have gotten away scot-free if more quick-tempered nobles had been in our place.

The caretaker didn't know about the history between us, so he just talked to Connie casually.

"You're the best at riding wyverns, right, Connie?"

"Wait, wait, wait! I'd have to hold on to the margravine during practice! I don't want to be roasted by the margrave's flames of jealousy! It's a famous topic all over Sutrena how devoted a husband the margrave is. He's thoroughly infatuated with his wife."

What exactly was Connie talking about? Lord Nazel would never roast another person.

"You don't need to worry about anything. The margrave is a very gentle person," the caretaker said.

"Yes, exactly!" Torre loudly agreed from behind me.

The caretaker opened a nearby door and we followed him outside, but Connie was still complaining. It looked like he wanted to avoid teaching me how to ride a wyvern at any cost. As I was listening to him, wondering what I should do, I suddenly heard loud footsteps approaching from behind me.

It can't be Torre, right?! I mean, he's right next to me.

Startled, I turned around to confirm the source of the sound and saw a pink wyvern bursting out of the stable.

"Geni?! What are you doing outside?!"

Geni ran in a straight line until he stopped in front of me and happily rubbed against me.

How adorable.

I also fawned over him and petted his pink hide; it felt lovely to the touch. Geni started whacking Connie with his lemon-colored tail as I petted him.

"Huh? What's wrong? Why does he keep hitting Connie?" I asked in a panic.

The caretaker merely laughed.

"Geni is particularly intelligent even for a wyvern, so it seems he understood our conversation. He wants you to ride him, Lady Agnes, so he's pestering Connie."

"Oh my! What a good boy! I'll have to give you a nice carrot later!"

Wyverns were omnivorous, so they ate both meat and vegetables, but carrots were their favorite food for some reason.

After being hit over and over again, Connie sounded like he'd resigned himself to his fate when he addressed me.

"Fine, I just have to teach you to ride, okay? However, I'm only showing you the basics for now. I won't ride tandem with you and practice flying unless you've gotten Lord Nazelbart's express permission."

"I doubt Lord Nazel would get angry about something like that." I had no other choice but to nod along. "I'm looking forward to your lesson, Connie," I said as I continued petting Geni.

The caretaker and Connie took Geni back into the stable while pacifying him, leaving me alone with Torre.

"I also think that you should discuss your riding practice with Lord Nazelbart, Lady Agnes. He could be concerned about you riding with another man."

“All right, if you say so. I’ll talk about it with Lord Nazel then. Thank you for telling me.”

“No need to thank me! Anything for my esteemed Lord Nazelbart’s beloved wife!” His eyes sparkled with pure honesty.

“You really love Lord Nazel, don’t you, Torre?”

“I am greatly indebted to Lord Nazelbart from his time in the knights. He’s a man I highly respect! Many other knights look up to him too. He’s unbelievably strong, the way he wields his magic to attack is simply artistic, and he’s also an excellent mountbeast rider.”

Torre’s large body quivered as he told me at length just how much of a prodigy Lord Nazel was. It looked like Lord Nazel had allies even in the cutthroat world of the capital.

“Lord Nazel really can do everything, can’t he?”

I was happy to know that Lord Nazel was acknowledged by the capital’s knights. Torre and I continued talking about how brilliant Lord Nazel was for some time. He knew sides of Lord Nazel I was unfamiliar with. Hearing about them was a completely fresh experience.

After returning to the mansion, I went to Lord Nazel’s office and told him about today’s events. He readily approved of me practicing the basics of riding, but when it came to riding tandem with my instructor and practicing how to fly…

“I’ll teach you myself. I don’t want you ever riding with another man,” he warned.

Could he actually be jealous, just like Connie said?

I realized I would also have mixed feelings about Lord Nazel riding a wyvern with some other woman clinging to him.

I would be both happy and embarrassed if he thought the same about me. Yes, I truly do love Lord Nazel.

Lord Nazel happily squeezed my hand as he sat behind his desk, a smile like a field of blooming flowers on his face. My heart throbbed with happiness and nervousness as I felt the warmth of his fingertips.

That’s right, this is my chance!

I wanted to express my love for him this time for sure, so I looked right at Lord Nazel and opened my mouth.

“Um! You see, Lord Nazel, I—”

But I was interrupted in the middle of my sentence yet again.

“Lord Nazelbart! Would you like to train together? You’ve been worried about your body growing weaker recently, right? The weather is nice and cool today, perfect for some training!”

Torre, who’d finished his guard duty for the day, slammed the door open. I knew that he idolized Lord Nazel, but still…

You didn’t have to barge in right now, did you?

“And here we were spending some quality time alone as a couple,” Lord Nazel said as he heaved a sigh. He shot Torre a reproachful glare, though I felt like it didn’t get through to the latter.

He really values the time he spends with me.

Enveloped in even more happiness, I was overtaken by the desire to convey my entire heart to Lord Nazel as soon as possible. However, I couldn’t confess with the giddy Torre in the room.

I’ve tried confessing countless times since we returned from Count Lugre’s estate, but someone always arrives at an inopportune moment and interrupts me. I’d been completely unable to express my feelings as a result. *Confessing in front of Torre would be too much to ask of me. Let’s try another time.*

Torre kept gazing at Lord Nazel with glittering eyes, wholly unaware of the situation.

I firmly vowed in my heart to succeed in confessing tomorrow and tottered out of the office.

I went to the mountbeast pen in the center of town and started my wyvern riding training. The plan was for me to get my fundamental training at the breeding pen, then transfer Geni to the estate’s new stable and have Lord Nazel teach me the rest. He’d apparently also been a riding instructor during his time in the knights.

I’d read about general wyvern ecology, so I didn’t have any problems on that front, and my practice for how to mount, dismount, make the wyvern walk, and make it stop all progressed favorably. Geni was also really clever, so my ground training finished in the blink of an eye. The caretaker came around at some point to see how I was doing and praised me for being an exceptionally fast learner. My training ended without incident and the day I could take Geni home with me arrived.

“The day has finally come. Let’s go get Geni at once, shall we?”

I did one final inspection of our garden stable—now dubbed “Geni’s House”—and left for the town accompanied by the ever lively Torre. The caretaker always waited for me outside the breeding pen, but there was no sign of him today.

“Did we perhaps arrive earlier than the appointed time?”

The front door was open, so I peeked inside and spotted signs that someone was there. Perhaps they hadn’t noticed me because they were busy.

“Excuse me, it’s Agnes. I’ve come to pick up Geni.”

There was no response, so Torre got impatient and barged in, shouting, “Excuse me!”

“You shouldn’t enter without permission, Torre— Aaand he’s already gone.”

After hesitating for a moment, I decided to go after Torre and bring him back. I headed deeper inside while walking quietly to avoid scaring the mountbeasts, but Torre was too fast for me to catch up with. I was feeling vexed about the difference in our strides when Torre, who was also walking silently, finally stopped. It looked like he’d spotted someone, but what I saw was truly unexpected.

“Who’s a good boy? Who’s my cute widdle pegasus? Aw, you’re doing fine today, huh?”

It was Connie, talking to a pegasus like it was a little baby. He was nothing like his usual cool self and I wasn’t sure if I should call out to him.



Could he actually be a fellow mountbeast lover? No one who loves mountbeasts could be a bad person…probably.

I had thought of Connie as an ill-natured person, but my impression of him instantly improved. However, it looked like Torre had lost his temper with Connie for failing to notice us.

"Ahem, cough, cough!"

He coughed violently in a forced manner to announce our presence. I felt like I could hear his inner voice say something like "What do you think you're doing playing around with the mountbeasts instead of coming to greet the margravine?" But this was a very poor moment to let Connie know we were there.

"That wasn't very prudent, Torre. We should have pretended we didn't see anything and quietly left."

Unfortunately, Connie had now noticed us, and his head practically creaked as he stiffly turned it to look at us.

"But Lady Agnes! You had an appointment to visit at this time today! Are you saying we should just overlook this and forgive him for messing around here?"

I could understand Torre's complaint, but I also got how Connie felt.

"Connie usually acts tough and standoffish, yet someone just heard him using baby talk. Please try to understand how he must feel, Torre. This was a secret he didn't want anyone else to know."

And because he normally acted so differently from what we'd just seen, he was surely feeling embarrassed right now.

"What a kind soul you are, my lady! You have moved this Torre to tears! But Connie seems to have suffered further damage from what you just said."

"O-Oh my, I wonder why."

Connie watched our exchange with a completely blank expression.

"Don't worry, Connie, I won't tell anyone about this. We're fellow mountbeast lovers, after all!"

Perhaps my words didn't get through to Connie, because he remained frozen on his knees until the caretaker—who'd had to leave his post on urgent business—returned.

And so, I finally welcomed Geni to our home. Since I couldn't ride him properly on my own yet, Connie was the one who actually brought him to the estate. Connie was acting much more docile

than usual, likely because of his earlier embarrassing incident.

Our stable was perfectly ready for its new resident, with all the necessary tools for Geni's care in place. All the preparations for him to live at our estate were complete. I arrived at the garden first and waited for Geni. Soon I saw him descend from the sky, flapping his beautiful pink wings, with Connie on his back. He slowly folded his wings and landed in the center of the garden, which had now been cleared of any clutter. A gust of wind from his wings gently shook my hair and the flowers in the nearby flower beds. Geni seemed to like the stable we'd prepared for him and voluntarily trotted inside.

Dear me, you're so adorable. I'll give you a nice big carrot later!

Geni looked satisfied as he buried his face into the soft bed of straw with his wings folded. I was so glad I'd put in all this work.

"Thank you for bringing Geni here, Connie."

"Yeah, yeah." Connie averted his gaze and replied with obvious reluctance. Every part of his behavior was slipshod. He must have been extremely embarrassed that people had heard him use baby talk.

"Don't worry, I already told you I'll keep your secret. We're both quite fond of mountbeasts, right? Let's keep cherishing them together."

I thought those words would cheer him up, but Connie got even more flustered and his face turned red.

"Your garden has a completely different air about it now. A-Anyway, I have another job to attend to, so goodbye," Connie said.

"Oh, what a shame. Will you be taking care of the mountbeasts?"

"No, it's a briefing session for the upcoming manabeast subjugation. It's almost the new moon and all."

"Oh yes, you're also involved in manabeast extermination, aren't you? Be careful out there."

"Yeah, sure."

I waved at Connie as I saw him off, and he quickly escaped, his face still beet red from embarrassment.

He's being quite prickly.

I spent some time harvesting carrots in the field to give to Geni later, until Lord Nazel returned from the fortress. It looked like work had finished early today. I stopped what I was doing and

raised my head to look at him.

"I'm home, Agnes."

Lord Nazel noticed I was in the garden and started walking up to me, so I also rushed over. I was happy we'd get to spend more time together than usual.

"Welcome home, Lord Na— Eep!"

He embraced me tightly before I could even finish my sentence. He'd been giving me a lot of hugs lately, so my heart kept racing every single day.

"Aah, you soothe me so, Agnes. I want to spend the rest of the day with you."

Lord Nazel kept saying stuff like "This is soothing" as he hugged me tight. He looked truly exhausted. I felt a little sorry for him, so I softly caressed his face.

"There, there. Let's head inside, Lord Nazel. You look tired, so how about a short break?"

However, Lord Nazel shook his head while it was still pressed against my hand.

"No, I wanted to ride the wyvern with you today."

Lord Nazel was being unusually selfish today. I hadn't imagined he had this side to him when I'd first met him. I was happy to feel that he could let his guard down around me.

This isn't the first time he's acted like this, is it?

If spending time with me would help reduce his stress, then I wanted us to fly together.

"I was looking forward to flight training as I endured my grueling work. The new moon is approaching and making things extra hectic, so I want to be with you whenever I can spare the time."

"I'm happy to hear that. I'll be in your care then, Instructor Nazel!"

"Y-Yes?"

Lord Nazel's handsome face was dyed red with bashfulness from being called "Instructor." But he also looked somewhat pleased about it; his reaction reminded me of the time I'd dressed as a maid.

This is going to be fine...right?

I took Lord Nazel by the hand at once and led him to his first meeting with Geni. Geni wagged his tail around after smelling

Lord Nazel and made a shrill yet friendly noise. I'd been anxious about what I'd do if he acted aggressive like he had with Connie, but fortunately, those worries proved groundless.

"I'd like to fly on you, Geni," I said.

I showed him the saddle I'd prepared just for him and he made another happy sound. I placed the saddle on his smooth pink back and took him out to the garden.

"All right, Agnes. Show me the results of your ground training."

"Of course, Instructor Nazel. I can comfortably mount and dismount now, see?"

I looked at Lord Nazel from atop Geni and he hopped aboard behind me with a smile.

He's so agile.

We stayed like that as I had Geni walk and run around the garden.

"You're a fast learner, Agnes. You've perfectly mastered how to ride on the ground in such a short amount of time."

"Geni is a *very* good boy. He's friendly with people and obediently does everything I ask of him."

There were mountbeasts that had been captured in the wild and also ones that humans had bred in captivity. Geni was one of the latter, so he was used to and fond of humans.

"Now then, I'll teach you how to make him fly. Pull on the reins lightly."

Lord Nazel grasped my hand and gently showed me how to handle the reins.

He's even closer to me than usual with this posture. It's so embarrassing!

Even though I knew he was just teaching me, I got all bashful and my heart beat faster and faster. When I pulled the reins just as he'd taught me, Geni flapped his wings and took flight. Wyvern tack included reins and handles. The reins were used for riding on the ground and for regular flight, while the shorter handles were used for aerobatic flight. Geni rapidly gained altitude with Lord Nazel and me atop his new saddle. Thanks to the magical barrier mountbeasts could create, we didn't feel short of breath, nor were we affected by the temperature or weather.

"You're incredible, Geni. Such a good widdle boy! A real cutie-pie!"

Geni replied with a happy squeak.

We rode all the way to the fortress on our cheery wyvern's back. That trip took more time by carriage, but it was only a stone's throw away by wyvern. The main challenge was choosing a good place to land. Landing in the middle of town would cause quite the ruckus, and the mountbeast could get injured if the terrain was uneven. Sutrena had several landing fields for mountbeasts—places where the ground had been flattened and cleared in order to give the mountbeasts a vast surface on which to freely land. Places like that were unique to the countryside, which had plenty of open plots of land.

We had been flying for some time when Lord Nazel, still holding on to both my hands, complimented my riding technique.

"You're doing great, Agnes. I would never guess this is your first time flying."

"Thank you very much."

Geni sped up and we continued toward the forest. I heard loud manabeast roars coming from the forest, possibly because of the time of year. I doubted any of them would attack us in midair, but I still reflexively shuddered in fear.

"It's almost the new moon, right? The manabeasts will become more ferocious than usual and attack humans more often," I said.

"That's right. I will also have to go out to battle that day," Lord Nazel replied.

I became all the more worried when I heard him say that. I knew that he couldn't just shut himself away in our mansion since he was the one in charge of Sutrena. He had his duties as lord to perform, such as receiving reports from the entire territory and taking command of the defense forces. Some people claimed that the lord's safety should be the highest priority, but Lord Nazel was strong thanks to his experience as a knight, and he was quick-witted enough to react appropriately to whatever situation arose. And above all, he found it unacceptable to expose the residents of Sutrena to danger and be the only one staying safely at home.

"I'm worried about you, Lord Nazel."

"I'll be all right, Agnes. But it will be dangerous, so make sure to stay in the mansion. I believe the town center will be mostly safe."

"I also want to be of help to our people."

"You're already helping plenty, Agnes. You're the only one who

can reinforce fences and buildings."

Though he tried to reassure me, doing nothing made me feel even more restless.

I know I can't fight the manabeasts like Connie, but I still want to help with something else. Oh, that's right!

I came up with a great idea.

"Our mansion has several needlessly large halls, right? How about we use them as temporary shelters for the people? Reinforcing every single civilian residence is impossible, and some people could feel unsafe because of their homes' lack of durability."

Our estate was right in the center of town and was surrounded by high walls. Furthermore, I'd applied my reinforcing magic to the entirety of the mansion.

"I feel worried about inviting anyone and everyone in just because they're civilians," Lord Nazel replied.

"We have our guard, Torre, in case there's any trouble. We can also lock and reinforce the doors of all rooms that are off-limits to guests."

"I'm worried about *you*, not the mansion. I'd lose my mind if anything happened to you."

"Then how about I reinforce myself with magic too? I'll also use it on you—like a protective amulet of sorts."

I used my magic on Lord Nazel, Geni, and myself as a joke. I didn't think it would affect the human body, but the act still had sentimental value.

"Thank you, I'm happy for your thoughtfulness. How about you try doing a rotation next?"

"That's a bit sudden. Isn't it too difficult for me?"

"You have an aptitude for this. It's a useful maneuver for running away from flying manabeasts or avoiding incoming arrows."

I doubted a day like that would ever come, and I sincerely hope it didn't.

"Besides," Lord Nazel continued, "wyverns enjoy rotating mid-flight."

"I'll do it," I replied immediately. I'd do it for Geni's sake.

The short handles on the harness were necessary to practice rotating, so Lord Nazel ended up leaning over me to reach them. I

could feel his heartbeat; it seemed somewhat fast.

Hold on, could this *be the ideal moment for me to confess?* No one *will come to interrupt us!*

With that thought in mind, I addressed Lord Nazel without a moment's delay.

"U-Um, Lord Nazel!"

"What are you so enthusiastic about, Agnes?"

"Um, there's something I've been meaning to tell you for a while, but I kept missing the timing. You see, I've always—"

But the moment the essential word was about to leave my mouth, Geni sensed that we were practicing rotations and happily started turning his body around. Wyverns were very smart creatures who could accurately perceive humans' feelings, but this time it seemed Geni didn't bother to read the room. There was still a subtle sensation of gravity even as my vision spun around inside Geni's barrier. Lord Nazel stuck close to me and I could feel his body and temperature even more than before.

Urk, this is a tough situation, but...I have to tell him! Please, let my feelings reach Lord Nazel!

Under these extreme circumstances, I strained my voice to tell him.

"Lord Nazel, I wuv you!"

"?!?!?!"

Lord Nazel froze in place upon hearing the sudden reply to his confession, then took a big gulp.

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Nazelbart found himself unable to think clearly, even as he was still mounted on the wyvern and gripping the harness's maneuvering handles.

"I wuv you!"

Agnes, who was sitting in front of him, had hit him with those destructive words. She had probably been trying to say "love" and ended up fumbling her words; it was *absurdly* adorable, to say the least.

Aah, I want to see her face right now.

Agnes's "I wuv you!" repeated endlessly inside his head. At any other time, he'd hug her tight and kiss her, and things would

probably work out fine after that. But Nazelbart told himself he had to be a gentleman right now.

At the same moment, Geni stopped turning, satisfied with his rotational flight.

“Lord Nazel, d-did you hear that?” Agnes asked timidly.

Nazelbart could feel her anxiety as he looked at her back. Come to think of it, she’d been trying to tell him something for some time. She’d been interrupted every time, but could she have been trying to reply to his confession? Her sweet “I wuv you!” echoed in his head again. The moment everything clicked, he found Agnes more endearing than ever before. He put more strength into his hands holding on to her delicate waist.

“I heard you loud and clear, Agnes. So you feel the same way I do. I’m overjoyed to hear it.”

Agnes went red to her ears. Nazelbart desperately wanted to look at her face, but he unfortunately had to prioritize safe flying at the moment. He used the maneuvering handles to change course toward the mansion even as Geni rotated again.

The sun was slowly setting beyond the mountains. They stopped practicing rotational flight and switched back to flying normally as they approached the center of town. The clever Geni headed for the estate’s garden on his own.

“You can switch from the handles back to the reins now, Agnes.”

“Yes, Instructor.”

Nazelbart once again fought against the urge rising inside him. It wasn’t just Agnes telling him “I wuv you!” Being called “Instructor” also moved him unimaginably; just what was the matter with him?

“Will you turn this way for a second, Agnes?”

She slowly turned around and looked at Nazelbart. Just as he expected, her already red face turned redder and redder.

Just how cute can she be?!

Unable to hold himself back, Nazelbart pecked at her plump, pink lips.

“Fnh, mgh, mnh!” Agnes closed her eyes and let out sweet noises while still gripping the reins.

Geni paid no mind to the two people riding him and slowly descended until he landed in the estate’s garden. Riding practice was over for the day. Nazelbart was split between two conflicting

feelings: the desire to stay this close to Agnes and the desire to spend more time with her on safe ground. He alighted from Geni, then turned around.

"Jump into my arms, Agnes."

As usual, he looked at Agnes with both arms spread wide. She blushed even harder and hesitated.

"I-I can dismount on my own!"

However, Agnes had no choice but to leap straight into Nazelbart's arms, because he was standing right where she would land, preventing her from dismounting solo. She puffed out her cheeks and struggled for a moment to find a way to get down on her own, but she eventually resigned herself and jumped down from Geni's back and into Nazelbart's embrace. He looked perfectly satisfied as he caught his angelic wife securely in his arms. He hadn't known he had such a stubborn side to him until he'd met her.

"Good work today. You're an excellent rider, Agnes. Even new knight recruits rarely manage this well. Technique is certainly important for riding, but so is mutual trust with your mountbeast."

"Really? Then it's all thanks to Geni."

Agnes was about to start crossing the garden, but she was unsteady on her feet because of all the riding practice. It was a struggle everyone had to face while they were still getting used to riding. She'd also staggered after they'd first flown to Sutrena. Nazelbart held her in his arms and carried her into the mansion, where Kelly was waiting for them.

"I'm leaving Agnes in your care, Kelly."

He took Agnes to her room and entrusted her to Kelly, her handmaiden. They'd been training for a long time, so Nazelbart himself also needed to wipe down his body and get changed.

"I'll see you later, Agnes."

"Of course, Lord Nazel. Thank you very much."

Kelly spoke to Agnes next.

"We wouldn't want you to get any sore muscles, Lady Agnes, so I shall give you a massage first. Please lie down."

Kelly was as fond of Agnes as usual and extremely overprotective of her. After they closed the door, Nazelbart could still hear their conversation from inside the room.

"Your entire body is stiff, Lady Agnes. Perhaps it's not because

of your flight practice but because you regularly read too many books.”

“That could be true. I want to quickly learn more about our territory.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself. Please keep everything in moderation. Let’s relax these muscles too.”

“Mm… Aah, it’s so good! Mmh! Right there!”

Nazelbart’s heart skipped a beat as he heard Agnes’s vulnerable voice through the door.

Chapter 3: Madam Bumpkin Saves Her People

Sutrena was one of the least populated territories in Desnim. Most of the region's people lived in the central town, while the rest lived in remote, scattered settlements. Since every settlement was so far away, travel by horse or mountbeast was indispensable. The central town usually suffered the least damage from manabeasts, and I'd already reinforced the walls surrounding the town with my magic.

Therefore, it was likely that most of the people looking for shelter would be those who lived outside the central town's walls or in remote settlements. In order to make them feel safe, I was dressed as a maid and working to prepare the mansion's halls to be used as shelters. Since the mansion was so vast, this was a major task even with all the maids working on it. Meanwhile, in another room of the mansion, Lord Nazel was holding a meeting with the people in charge of each settlement. I'd finished greeting them as the margravine before dressing up as a maid, so I was free until the meeting ended.

When the first stage of the cleaning was complete, I thought I would get some refreshments ready and headed to the kitchen.

"Whoa!"

But as I was on my way there, I was captured by Lord Nazel, who was lying in wait in a corridor.

"Got you, Agnes."

As he showed me a happy, gentle smile, my cheeks heated up.

"L-Lord Nazel? What about the meeting?"

"We've finished the essential parts, so we decided to take a short break."

"Then I'll get some drinks and snacks ready for you."

"I'm sorry to ask, but could I leave that to you, Kelly?"

Kelly, who'd followed me without me noticing, raised her thumb without making any expression. That gesture apparently meant "Understood." She wore a straight face like usual but somehow looked kind of happy too.

Lord Nazel picked me up in my maid uniform and carried me to his room.

“Good work today.”

He sat down on the bed with me between his knees then tightly embraced me. Maybe it was because I’d also confessed to him now, but he was acting even bolder than before.

“Can I hug you for a while until the break is over, Agnes?”

As I felt Lord Nazel’s breath on my nape, my face grew hotter and I was assaulted by intense embarrassment, throwing my mind into turmoil. I instinctively turned around and saw his face right in front of mine, happily looking at me.

“U-Um, this position is a little embarrassing.”

“Then you’ll need to get used to it, right?”

You bully!

Lord Nazel kept a bright smile on his face and wouldn’t let me go. He gently raised my chin with his fingertips and slowly brought his lips lower.

“W-Wait a—”

“I won’t.”

I saw fierce passion burning in Lord Nazel’s saintly amber eyes and came to realize that I would be unable to escape no matter what excuse I made. But when I saw his captivating lips curving in delight, I managed to endure my embarrassment.

“I love you, Agnes.”

“I love you too, Lord Nazel.”

I felt relieved that I managed to say the word properly this time. He kissed me again and again, and I absentmindedly looked at him to see a smile and a chuckle as he gently held my body and pushed me down...until suddenly, he raised his head and looked toward the door. At the same time, there was a loud knock on the door, so forceful that I was afraid it might break.

“Lord Nazelbart! It’s time! The break is over!”

Torre’s loud voice echoed from beyond the door. He must have come to inform Lord Nazel that it was almost time for the conference to continue. It seemed Lord Nazel didn’t feel like going, but he couldn’t neglect this meeting, so he reluctantly stood up. I decided to cheer him on.

“Do your best, Lord Nazel.”

“Thank you, Agnes.”

Lord Nazel covered his face with one hand and mumbled, “Cute, she’s so cute,” as he left the room. I was a little worried.

He must be tired if he’s mumbling such ridiculous things. Let’s add something to relieve fatigue to tonight’s dinner.

I abruptly got up and headed straight for our chef, Mather.

Preparations for the shelters were complete, and about the time I was really starting to get good at flying on a wyvern, the day of the troublesome new moon was finally upon us. This was the day a large outbreak of manabeasts would assault human settlements.

There was a specific reason for this phenomenon. Mana increased and became more stable the closer the cycle got to the full moon. Conversely, it decreased and became more unstable as the new moon approached. Although this had no direct effect on humans, manabeasts experienced a shortage of mana in their bodies during the new moon, which in some species led to a state resembling drunkenness. Manabeasts were already prone to assaulting humans, and when they ran out of mana, the resulting feeling of starvation could make them unimaginably ferocious, leading to indiscriminate attacks against human settlements. Sutrena was rich in nature and had a high manabeast population, so this problem had troubled its residents for a long time.

It is the responsibility of the margrave, Lord Nazel, to protect the people against this.

Though I understood that, I couldn’t help but feel worried. I felt uneasy as I stood by the entrance and had to see him off. Every member of the estate had gathered to see Lord Nazel off in the bright noon sunshine.

I have to see him off with a smile…right? But that’s so difficult.

I bit my lips tight and grabbed the cuff of his coat.

“Please be careful, Lord Nazel. Don’t work yourself too hard, okay?”

“I won’t. Goodbye, Agnes. You be careful too.”

“I’ll be just fine; it’s you I’m worried about.”

“Don’t look so sad. I’ll be back in one piece.”

Lord Nazel placed his hand on my back and buried his face in my neck in front of everyone. I felt more nervous than usual because I happened to be wearing a dress that exposed a lot of

my neckline. I got ticklish as I felt his breath on my skin.

"I'd like a farewell kiss, Agnes."

I felt like steam might start rising from my head because of the bold request he whispered right next to my ear.

"A kiss? Um, everyone from the estate is looking at us right now; I'd be too anxious."

"Are you embarrassed? In that case…"

Lord Nazel took my hand and led me out of the mansion and to the garden. Perhaps everyone else was being considerate of us, because none of them followed us outside.

Did he take the initiative to stop me from making excuses?

He stopped in front of a large tree and grinned widely as if to say, *All right, come on.*

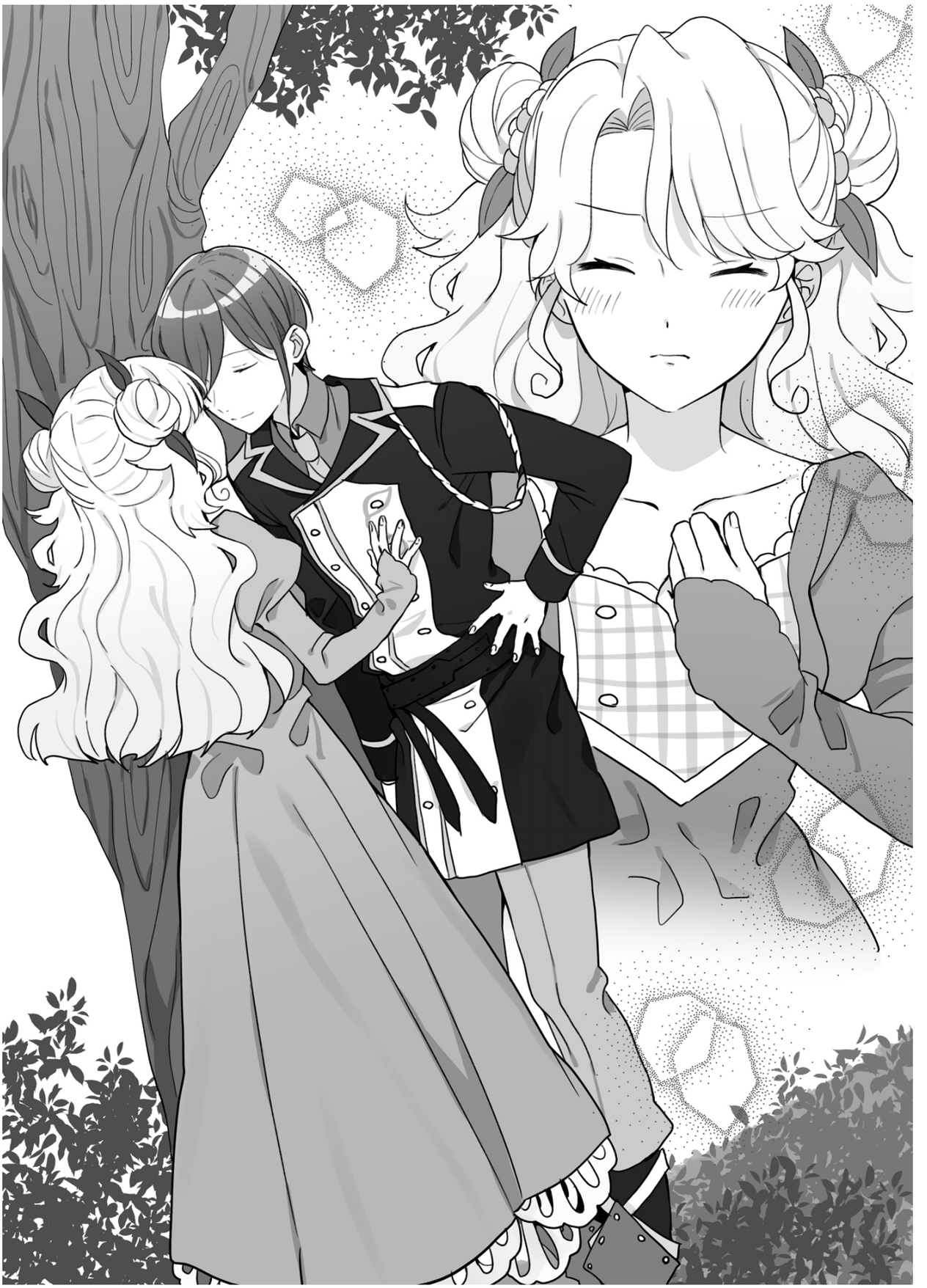
What a lovely smile!

Lately, I'd been thinking that Lord Nazel became a little bit of a bully during times like this. But he was heading off into danger soon, so I felt like granting any kind of wish for him. After all, the only thing I could do was wait for him.

"Very well. Then please lean over a little." Lord Nazel was tall, so I couldn't reach his face to kiss him no matter how I tried. "And don't look at me. Please keep your eyes closed, okay?"

"Heh heh, what a demanding wife. Sure, I'll close them."

Lord Nazel did exactly as I asked, as if even that made him happy. The sunlight filtered through the trees and illuminated his handsome face. He looked absolutely dreamy, and the sight made my heart beat faster. I steeled my resolve and shut my eyes, then pressed my lips against his for a kiss.



Aaagh, whatever will be, will be! But I'm so embarrassed my head feels like it might boil over!

Lord Nazel gently opened his eyes and swiftly grabbed me before I managed to back away. My body spun around and I ended up leaning against the large tree's trunk before I even realized what had happened. Lord Nazel was in front of me, with his hands on both sides of my body.

"I'm so happy, Agnes. I thought you'd kiss me on the cheek. I never expected it to be on the lips."

He looked at me so passionately, my cheeks burned.

"You had your eyes closed, so kissing you on the lips was the obvious thing, right?" I said.

I couldn't move because I was sandwiched between the tree and Lord Nazel. For some reason, I felt danger from him. I was just supposed to see my dear husband off, so how did things end up like this?

"You're truly adorable, Agnes. Don't worry, I'll finish my work in a heartbeat and come back to you."

"Please be safe."

"You used your matter reinforcement on me as a good luck charm before, so I'm sure I'll be okay."

I'd just used my magic for personal satisfaction; I doubted it would cause any changes to the human body. But I felt that saying so just before his departure would be tactless, so I kept silent and nodded along. Afterward, he kissed my hair and face all he wanted while I was still restrained, then left for work in an awfully good mood.

Since I'm staying behind, I also need to work hard managing the guests.

People seeking shelter had started sporadically gathering outside the estate's gate. There were only a few of them at the moment, but their numbers would likely increase as time went by.

"Kelly, it's about time to open the gate and lead people to the shelter halls. I think what we planned will suffice, but if we happen to go over capacity, we'll use the empty reserve rooms in the order we discussed."

"Understood, Lady Agnes."

"Mocha and Laurie will be the receptionists, and Marilyn will guide our guests from the gate into the mansion. You will be in

charge of the temporary maids we hired for this occasion. In the case of trouble, like a fight breaking out or a malicious evacuee causing a fuss, Torre will be standing by in front of the main entrance, so call him in to handle it. I'll be checking on the people in each of the shelter halls."

A crowd of people looking for shelter and carrying minimal luggage entered the mansion. All of the people who'd left their familiar homes to come here looked anxious. With Lord Nazel's help, we had set up plants to divide the large halls into smaller spaces and furnished each section with other plants that served as soft mats, and now we cheered the people on one by one. Mather and the temporary cooks were making food for this large crowd. Working at the lord's mansion used to be an unpopular job, but since its reputation had drastically increased recently, many people had applied for the job, even though it was just a temporary posting.

It also comes with the benefit of spending the night of the new moon in a safe location.

When the time came, the estate's gate would be closed, and everyone would spend the night here. The night when manabeasts rampaged would soon be upon us.

I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight.

I once again hoped for Lord Nazel's safety as I looked toward the fortress.

Once it was night and the manabeasts' ominous roars began echoing outside, people flocked to the estate and the shelter rooms were filled. We even had to open the reserve rooms; the mansion ended up becoming livelier than we had expected. Each civilian used their own magic as appropriate and helped each other out.

The inside of the mansion is fine. But I'm worried Geni might be scared outside.

The walls of the mansion had been reinforced, and the wyvern stable was also sturdy, but I couldn't calm down unless I checked for myself. I headed out to the garden alone to see how things were.

"Are you okay, Geni?"

I stepped inside the reinforced wooden stable and saw Geni was awake. Perhaps he could somehow sense that things were

different than usual, because he kept pacing around restlessly.

"There, there, it's aaall gonna be okay."

I caressed Geni's smooth skin to soothe him, but he became more uneasy than before. My pink wyvern kept peeking outside through the slightly open entrance.

"You can tell that something's different from normal, right? But your behavior is still pretty weird."

As I was trying to calm Geni down, I heard people's screams coming from the direction of the town, even though the stable's entrance was now mostly closed.

Didn't that cry sound pretty close to the estate? Is that why Geni can't seem to calm down?

The territorial capital was surrounded by strong walls, and people were deployed around those walls to fend off manabeasts. These personnel should have been able to eliminate the manabeasts trying to force their way into town, and thereby protect the citizens. For a manabeast to still enter the town despite the walls and guards could only mean...

"It slipped by the exterminators?"

Even if I used my magic to reinforce Lord Nazel's plant magic, we couldn't do something like cover the entirety of this vast town in a dome. The space directly above us was open, so a manabeast could get inside as long as it could get over the wall.

But only certain kinds of manabeasts can get past the wall. They'd need to have wings, or be able to jump really high, or perhaps have suction cups...

But most winged manabeasts didn't become drunk from a lack of mana even during the new moon, and it was said that it was rare for them to go berserk. Just like flying mountbeasts, they could withstand substantial changes in atmospheric mana; this was probably at least partly related to environmental protection provided by the barriers they created while flying. But almost everything had an exception.

"If a manabeast has already crossed the wall, what's done is done. I just need to do something about it now."

The mansion and the stable had been reinforced in every direction, so manabeasts couldn't destroy them, but the townspeople's houses weren't that sturdy. Their doors and windows would be particularly fragile.

“If I ride Geni and transport the people in danger to the mansion one by one, then… No, that probably won’t work. But I can’t abandon the people out there screaming.”

As I wrestled with this conflict, Geni started flapping his wings as if he’d grasped my intentions. His eyes looked like they could sense something that was outside.

“All right, let’s go. Escape to the sky if it gets dangerous, Geni.”

I couldn’t call Torre because he was safeguarding the people who were taking shelter at the moment, and I didn’t have the time to go back inside the estate. Fully resolute, I flung open the stable door, mounted Geni, and flew into the night sky. The night of the new moon in Sutrena was dark, like everything was covered in black ink, but flames were rising from some houses a manabeast had broken into, so their light illuminated the surrounding areas. There was an unusually unsettling air about the town center—a feeling that no doubt marked the chilling presence of a manabeast.

“Geni, let’s land on the level ground directly below us. Now, what exactly happened here?”

I pointed close to a burning house where two people crouched outside, driven from their home by the flames. There was no sign of any manabeast nearby. Geni slowed down and landed on the ground. I dismounted and ran up to the people.

“Everything’s going to be all right. Let’s evacuate for now. Can you stand up?”

The two of them raised their heads, and I gasped once I saw their faces. They were the couple who ran the Flower Mole, a diner I was very grateful to. They seemed unable to move because of their injuries and simply opened their mouths in a daze.

“Y-You are that maid from the estate.”

I was always disguised as a maid when I went into town.

“I’ll explain about myself later. Let’s head to the safety of the mansion first.”

I placed them both atop Geni’s back and transported them to the mansion. Riding with three people was difficult, but we somehow managed by not going too fast. Torre screamed when he noticed me returning to the estate.

“Where have you been until now, Lady Agnes?! I was worried because I couldn’t find you anywhere in the house!”

“I’m sorry, but I heard screams coming from the town. This is an emergency. A manabeast has breached the defenses. We need to do something! Kelly, please take care of these two. They’re injured.”

Kelly immediately took them inside. Thankfully, there was a doctor among the evacuees.

“There might be more injured people out there. I’m going to look.”

“Lady Agnes!”

Torre’s eyes went wide in shock, but I was the only one who could ride Geni at the moment. Geni was smart but also a little hard to please, so he only allowed Lord Nazel, Connie, and me to ride him.

“Protect the people taking shelter here, Torre!”

I rushed to Geni, who was standing by at the mansion’s entrance, jumped on his back, and once again headed into town. I wanted to save as many people as possible in Lord Nazel’s territory.

***

Nazelbart rode his horse at high speed from the fortress toward the town center. He’d received a report that manabeasts had been sighted inside the town. They had apparently managed to slip past the exterminators guarding the walls. It was fastest for Nazelbart to deal with this issue personally, as he was still inside the walls. And of all things, the manabeasts were rampaging close to the estate.

After advancing for a while, he heard a manabeast’s howl from the far side of a burning building.

Is it fighting someone nearby?

He moved toward the sound and saw that Connie, who’d been tasked with manabeast extermination, had arrived before him. He’d probably made it so fast thanks to his fleetfoot magic.

“I’m here to back you up, Connie!” Nazelbart called from behind Connie, then used a plant with sharp thorns to interrupt the manabeast’s movement.

“Thanks!” Connie shouted back. He raised his shortsword and thrust at the manabeast, finishing it off. The massive creature

collapsed on the spot with a loud thud. Nazelbart was relieved, but Connie still had a grim expression as he reported on the situation.

“One more manabeast got in. I couldn’t follow both, since they cleared the wall at the same time, so I prioritized the more dangerous one and lost sight of the other. But if it’s *that* manabeast, it’s probably still nearby.” Connie’s voice carried a sense of conviction.

“Do you know something more, Connie?” Nazelbart asked.

Connie hesitantly opened his mouth.

“I’ve seen that manabeast before. It’s the one that used to be kept in the margrave’s estate. It headed straight for the estate without attacking any civilians. The mansion should be fine thanks to Lady Agnes’s magic though.”

“There seems to be more to this than you’re letting on… In that case, we should hurry to the estate. You can tell me more details as we move to— Hmm?”

Nazelbart suddenly looked up and saw a wyvern flying above them.

“What’s a wyvern doing here?” he asked.

Moreover, he could recognize the wyvern, illuminated by the flames, and the woman riding on it.

“A-Agnes?!” Nazelbart screamed in shock at the unexpected sight of his wife.

***

As I continued my rescue operation, I came across Lord Nazel in the middle of town; Connie was with him. Once I landed, Lord Nazel anxiously rushed over to me and took my hand.

“What are you doing, Agnes? It’s dangerous out here!”

“I’m the only one who can ride Geni, so I’m helping the injured by taking them to the mansion. Torre can’t ride Geni, and anyway, I couldn’t have the one responsible for guarding the evacuees leave the estate. It seems that you exterminated the manabeast, Lord Nazel.”

A large, bearlike manabeast was collapsed on the ground behind the two of them. It had massive, thick legs distinctive to this kind of manabeast, and I assumed it had used those powerful legs to climb over the wall.

“It was terrifying. But one more manabeast has broken in, so I’ll be going to exterminate it too,” Lord Nazel said.

“Oh, I see. Be careful.”

“The danger level is low, but it’s apparently headed right for the estate, so we need to get there as soon as possible.”

The estate’s walls were tough, but there would be big trouble if the manabeast could get over them. Now that I knew the situation, I turned around and addressed the two of them.

“Then please get on Geni! He can get to the estate the fastest!”

I had Lord Nazel and Connie get on Geni behind me, and we flew off into the moonless night sky. The flames blazing around town were dying down, and our surroundings gradually became darker.

Once we approached the estate’s garden, Connie told us what he knew about the manabeast.

“Earlier, I told Lord Nazelbart that this particular manabeast used to be kept by the margrave. In fact, it was the cause of the previous margrave’s death.”

I was surprised by this shocking revelation and raised my voice.

“What?! It’s well-known that the previous margrave was killed by a manabeast, but the culprit was actually the one he kept as a *pet*?! Come to think of it, there was this old, ominous stable tucked away in our garden… Was he keeping it there?”

When we’d built a new stable for Geni, we’d had the old one demolished.

Connie started whispering an explanation about the previous margrave’s manabeast. Thanks to Geni’s barrier, I could hear him clearly even when he was being relatively quiet.

“It’s a rare, intelligent manabeast that had been kept as a pet by the old margrave’s house for generations. It can fully understand human language and can even grasp concepts such as hierarchy and social status. My parents used to work as mountbeast caretakers under the previous margrave. I know about that manabeast because I would help them with their work. It was originally a very gentle creature.”

However, the previous margrave had apparently abused the manabeast as a way to vent his frustration. Connie and his parents had stood up for the manabeast, earning the margrave’s ire, and the three of them had almost been killed along with the

manabeast.

“The manabeast killed the margrave to protect us. We set it free in the forest afterward and…covered up the entire chain of events. I never expected things to turn out this way,” Connie confessed, hanging his head.

“So why is this manabeast headed to our estate?” Lord Nazel asked Connie.

“Probably in order to kill the margrave once more. It detests the very existence of the margrave. It must have sensed people living in the estate again, and it’s possible that the resentment it usually keeps in check with its sense of reason went out of control because of the new moon’s influence.”

The manabeast had been captured by the margrave of two generations ago and kept in a cramped, dark stable, where it had been abused by the previous margrave. Its grudge probably ran deep precisely because it was so intelligent.

“Then I, the current margrave, must deal with it. Get somewhere safe, Agnes.”

I was worried about Lord Nazel, but I would only be a burden on him by staying; I knew that much.

This is so vexing… Well, I’ve decided what to do next.

Once we arrived at the estate, I returned Geni to his stable and decided to stay with him to observe the situation outside. I opened the window slightly and stealthily watched over Lord Nazel. A while later, a loud thud resounded across the garden.

“It’s here.”

There was a watch fire burning in the garden, so I could see even in the dead of night. An enormous, eight-legged horse had appeared. The earlier thud seemed to have been the sound of the horse jumping over the wall.

“I’m glad it didn’t land in the garden.”

I obviously couldn’t reinforce and harden our vegetables before they were harvested. Carelessly reinforcing the vegetables themselves could make them impervious to teeth or knives, defeating the whole purpose of growing them for food.

At that point, all you can do is throw them out or use them as decorations.

Connie saw the manabeast and rushed over to it while saying something. It looked like he was trying to reason with it. Lord

Nazel tried to stop him, but Connie ignored him and touched the large manabeast.

"I'm too far away to hear what he's saying. But isn't that dangerous?" I mused.

It might have been all right under normal circumstances, but the manabeast was currently unsettled because of the new moon. Geni let out a small growl of agreement by my side.

Just as expected, the manabeast started acting violently a moment later. It neighed loudly and raised two of its legs over Connie.

"Oh no, he's going to get trampled!"

But tragedy was averted thanks to Lord Nazel swiftly running in front of Connie and protecting him. The manabeast's legs struck Lord Nazel in Connie's place and sent him flying back across the garden.

"Lord Nazel!"

I forgot everything else and ran outside without a second thought. Lord Nazel's body drew an arc in the air and slammed against the ground; I was frustratingly far away. But before I could reach him, he abruptly stood up as if nothing had happened.

He can stand up just fine after a blow like that?! Is he invincible or something?!

Lord Nazel projected total composure as he used his magic to create plants and easily capture the manabeast. He made a large weed resembling a carnivorous plant that engulfed the manabeast; the horselike creature now raged impotently inside the plant's cylindrical flower-maw. Connie was safe since he'd been protected, but his legs had given out and he was sitting on the ground. His usual confident demeanor was instead subdued.

"Huh? Agnes?" Lord Nazel frowned when he noticed me. "I asked you to go somewhere safe. What are you doing out here?"

"I couldn't sit still after I saw you get kicked. Are you injured?"

"No, for some reason I feel full of energy despite the kick. I have an idea why I'm fine, though."

Whatever the case, Lord Nazel acted like it was nothing worth worrying about. He embraced me and rubbed his cheek against mine, then checked to see if I was injured.

"Please worry about yourself first."

"I really am unhurt. Did *you* go through anything dangerous

when you went into town alone, Agnes?”

“No, I didn’t. You defeated the manabeast after all, Lord Nazel.”

Connie recovered while the two of us talked, approached the captured manabeast, and started speaking to it. Even though Lord Nazel’s plant looked like a huge carnivorous flower, it apparently wouldn’t dissolve or otherwise harm the creature inside it.

“This man isn’t like the margraves from before. He isn’t going to hurt you. Everything’s going to be okay now, so please calm down,” Connie pleaded with the manabeast.

When Lord Nazel saw how desperate Connie was, he exhaled softly and approached him.

“Don’t worry, Connie. The manabeast rampaging inside the flower right now is going to calm down as the sun rises after the night of the new moon.”

I’d been so preoccupied with everything that was going on that I only just noticed the sky had started gradually getting brighter. Pale golden clouds that looked like they could dissolve at any moment moved across the clear violet sky; it was almost dawn.

“I’m going to make a cage for the manabeast, so you can go and get some rest in the house, Connie.”

Lord Nazel created a cage by sprouting a fence of plants around the manabeast, then released it from the flower. I helped by reinforcing the fence with magic. The fence-plants curved inward over the enclosure to form a ceiling, so there was no risk of the manabeast leaping out.

Connie thanked Lord Nazel with a humble expression.

“Thank you very much, Lord Nazelbart. Allow me to explain everything in detail later.”

“All right.”

After taking care of everything, Lord Nazel captured me as I was loitering around the garden and we headed toward the mansion. The ever-curious Geni peeked through the stable’s window with his cobalt blue eyes and happily gazed at the two of us.

***

Connie was taking a short nap in a corner of the boisterous shelter. He would have a lot of things to do once morning came.

Connie's grandfather was a former noble who had fallen into ruin. It was thanks to him that Connie was currently employed as a low-ranking government official. His parents had served two generations of the margrave's family as head butler and head maid. They were high-ranking servants with good terms of employment during the era of the margrave of two generations ago.

However, his successor eventually demoted them to stablehands on a cruel whim. That margrave often acted rashly, and he was wasteful with his money. He found Connie's parents a nuisance because they admonished him regarding this unwise behavior, so he reassigned them to positions outside the mansion. Around that time, the lord made many other staffing changes around the estate.

Most of the high-ranking servants were demoted or fired. They were replaced by personnel employed for cheap who wouldn't disobey the margrave, or suspicious individuals he met in town. The mansion was repeatedly remodeled, taxes were spent without a second thought, and the people of Sutrena were driven to poverty. Despite that, Connie's parents continued their jobs as stablehands without feeling discouraged; they didn't know any other way to live.

At the time, there had been a rare manabeast kept in the stable. It had been obtained by the margrave of two generations ago, and after his successor demoted Connie's parents, their new jobs had mainly revolved around its care. Connie had also visited the estate and helped his parents. The horselike manabeast had been peaceful but also terribly smart. It belonged to a species called grani that primarily galloped around forests and plains, but after becoming part of the margrave's collection, it had been confined to a small stable. The grani's life inside the cramped stable had felt constrained, and it had opened its heart to Connie and his parents.

However, the lord had been the kind of person who'd venture into the forest and hunt harmless manabeasts for sport. One time when Connie's parents were absent, the margrave had set his eyes on the grani, deciding it was a convenient way to vent his frustration without having to leave the estate. When Connie and his parents later noticed the grani's wounds and were in the

process of treating them, the lord had reappeared with a blade in hand and once again tried to approach the grani. Naturally, Connie and his parents had tried to stop him.

As a result, the margrave had turned his weapon toward Connie and his parents. Even with Connie's magic, it would have been fairly difficult for three humans and one manabeast to escape the wrathful lord. However, the moment they resigned themselves to their fate, the grani, who'd been standing by quietly up to that point, had neighed loudly, raised some of its legs, and kicked the margrave—again, and again, and again. It truly seemed to be protecting Connie and his parents from danger. Finally, the grani had just trampled over the margrave, inflicting fatal injuries.

Under normal circumstances, a manabeast that had hurt a noble—or any human—would be put down. That was why Connie and his parents had released the grani from its chains, opened the stable's door, and secretly let it escape. The clever grani had understood the situation and headed for the forest as instructed by Connie's parents. Thankfully, the incident had happened at night, so the three of them were the only eyewitnesses. Connie's parents had only been at the stable that late because they had been treating the grani's injuries; normally, they would have returned home long before that.

And so, the incident had ultimately been deemed an accident where the margrave had drunkenly approached the manabeast. Connie and his parents had feigned ignorance and hid the truth. With the lord dead, everyone working at the estate had quickly dispersed. Connie's parents had also quit their jobs and now worked as assistants at a mountbeast farm in an outlying settlement. The only other person who knew the truth was Henry Billket, the administrator dispatched from the capital to fill in for Sutrena's deceased margrave, who only happened to discover the incident. Henry had also decided to treat the lord's death as an accident. The truth would remain hidden forever...or at least it would have if a new margrave hadn't been appointed and the intoxicating influence of the new moon hadn't clouded the grani's judgment.

Connie felt gloomy as he thought about what was going to happen next.

***

Afterward, I spent some time sleeping in my room. When I woke up, I saw Lord Nazel sitting next to me. I could see the refreshing scene of our garden through the window behind him; it was as if last night's events had been a lie.

"Good morning, Lord Nazel. It's already bright outside, isn't it? Did you make sure to get a good night's sleep?"

"Good morning, Agnes. Don't worry, I slept well."

Lord Nazel smiled sweetly at me and gently stroked my hair. Although he couldn't have been up long, he already looked impeccable. He'd probably made his rounds inspecting our shelters already.

"Agnes. When I saw you outside last night, I thought my heart was going to stop."

"Um, well..."

"You were trying to save the townspeople, right? Everyone was grateful."

In the end, I'd rescued over twenty injured people while riding around on Geni. Later, the people grateful to me because of those events would arrange for the construction of a statue in the plaza depicting the gallant margravine riding atop a wyvern—absolutely embarrassing me—but that is a story for another time.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, Lord Nazel."

He looked a little troubled as he lowered his eyebrows and stroked my head again.

"Come see me after you're done taking care of the shelters."

"Hmm? Very well."

Lord Nazel gave me a kiss on the forehead and left the room with an elegant gait. I also got ready for the morning and rushed to meet up with Lord Nazel and Connie. The two of them were sitting across from each other in a room close to the shelter halls and were talking about the captured manabeast.

"I'm sorry for keeping something so important from you, Lord Nazelbart. If you're going to punish someone, please let it be just me. Master Henry isn't responsible for any of this; I'm the one who imposed on him to keep my family's secret."

Connie was hunched over in a way very uncharacteristic of him.

Lord Nazel nodded with composure and spent a moment

thinking before he replied.

“Under the circumstances, that manabeast can’t be considered safe. I’ll keep it caged in the garden for the time being and make a judgment after observing it further.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

“You’re also free to come see the manabeast. Now, I want to discuss the matter of my predecessor’s death.”

Connie gulped. I also stayed silent and watched the two of them closely.

“I’ve decided to continue to treat it as an accident. If it turns into a scandal requiring a major investigation, you and your family won’t make it out without consequences. It would also be a major problem for Sutrena if we were to lose Henry now.” Lord Nazel let out a short sigh. “In the first place, the entire incident with the manabeast was caused by the previous margrave’s carelessness. People in the capital would probably frown at how I’m letting commoners involved in a noble’s death off the hook…but this is the frontier. Thankfully, there are no eyewitnesses aside from your family, so I don’t believe it’s necessary to take any further action regarding this matter.”

Connie suddenly raised his head and looked at Lord Nazel.

“Thank you very much, Lord Nazelbart!”

He looked like he was about to cry as he deeply bowed his head.

And so, the horselike manabeast would be kept in our estate’s garden for the time being. It belonged to a species called grani and didn’t have a name yet.

“Should we name the grani, Lord Nazel?”

“That’s a good idea, Agnes. How about you pick a name, Connie?”

“M-Me?”

Connie was bewildered, but he didn’t seem dissatisfied by the suggestion.

“Then let’s go with Dunk.”

Judging by how readily he came up with a name, he’d probably already had a few in mind.

“Hey, Connie, is Dunk male or female?” I asked.

“Female.”

“So she’s a girl. The name has a very gallant ring to it!”

The night of the new moon was behind us, so I thought I'd go see Dunk later.

As we finished our conversation, Mister Henry, who'd heard what'd happened, arrived at the estate in a fluster, but he sighed with relief after hearing how Lord Nazel intended to deal with everything.

"You have my sincerest apologies, Lord Nazelbart," Mister Henry said.

"It's fine. I would have made the same decision you did. More importantly, do we know the extent of the damage across the entire town?"

"We don't have a complete grasp of the matter yet, but the area around here seems to have been hardest hit. Now, regarding compensation for the people whose houses got burned..."

"They will receive it, of course."

I realized something as I listened to their conversation. Both Lord Nazel and Mister Henry had barely slept! No, it was even possible that they hadn't slept a wink since yesterday.

I know we're in a state of emergency, but shouldn't they at least take a nap?

But as soon as their conversation ended, Lord Nazel turned to me.

"Agnes, as you promised, please make some time for me after you deal with the shelters."

"Oh, yes. However, Lord Nazel, Mister Henry... While I'm taking care of that, please sleep, even if it's just for a little while."

"Huh?" the two uttered in surprise at the same time.

If they didn't sleep now, when were they going to?

"The next room happens to have a sofa, so please go lie down there, Mister Henry. And you go back to your room, Lord Nazel."

"Agnes?"

"No arguing! I'll be the one to come talk to you."

I shut Mister Henry in the neighboring room and forced Lord Nazel to the bedroom. I then rolled up my sleeves and cheerfully headed to the halls we'd made into shelters. I saw off the people who'd come for shelter, and helped transport the injured to the hospital using Geni. We prepared rooms in the fortress for the few people who'd lost their homes, and the couple who ran the Flower Mole agreed to open up a cafeteria in the fortress. There had

already been plans to open a cafeteria there for all the officials who were too busy to take lunch breaks, and now they'd have the Flower Mole couple to serve as cooks.

After my work with the shelters settled down, I released Mister Henry from his mandatory nap time, then headed to the bedroom where Lord Nazel was. I didn't receive a reply after knocking on the door, so I tried quietly opening it.

"Lord Nazel?"

I entered the organized, elegant room as I called his name, and saw him sleeping face down on the bed. He looked as if he'd just barely made it to his destination, then passed out on the spot.

"He must have been exhausted. I want to let him continue sleeping like this."

I approached the bed and was softly picking up the blanket to put over him when suddenly Lord Nazel reached out and pulled me onto the bed next to him.

"Lord Nazel? Wait, were you awake?"

I heard him chuckle.

"I woke up just now after hearing your sweet voice."

"Did you get some proper sleep? I'll tie you to the bed if you were awake this entire time."

"Don't worry, I slept just fine. And getting tied up would be a real problem for me."

I took a close look at Lord Nazel as I lay down. His complexion looked fine, and there were no signs in the room that he'd been working. Perfect!

"So, I'm here just as promised," I said.

"There's something I'd like to discuss with you. It's about your magic."

"My matter reinforcement magic?"

"Yes. I've been thinking that name may not tell the whole story. When did you learn what your magic is?"

"When I was still little, my parents took me to the appraiser in the local church."

Appraisal was a special kind of magic which could identify another's occupation, type of magic, or mana capacity. The accuracy of the readings and how many attributes could be appraised differed from appraiser to appraiser.

"The moment someone is found to possess appraisal magic,

they are conscripted as an appraiser by the church, regardless of how adept they are at it," Lord Nazel explained. "The church needs every appraiser it can get, since every territory is assigned at least one appraiser. The ability to ascertain people's magic is incredibly valuable."

I felt sorry for them being forced into the job of an appraiser, but it was just that important a job.

The work of appraisers also helps prevent the misuse of magic.

To make up for their mandatory career path, appraisers were guaranteed complete freedom outside of their work, along with an above-average standard of living.

It was common for nobles to get their magic appraised at the capital, because the more skilled appraisers worked there. But the people of the House of Evantail didn't bother going all the way to the capital. This was *the* House of Evantail we were talking about, after all!

"The appraiser at the local church was a very elderly man who gave some pretty vague results. 'Let me see, it's like... Her magic is one that can reinforce things,' he apparently said. I don't remember his words myself because I was so little at the time, but that's what my mother told me."

"So on top of the appraiser being vague, you've only heard his words secondhand?"

"The House of Evantail has little interest in magic. My parents said they only got me appraised because it would inconvenience them if I unknowingly had some absurd magic and went around causing trouble with it."

"Yes, I can somehow imagine it."

Lord Nazel had quarreled with my former family once before, so he understood how the House of Evantail thought; it was very easy to do so.

"And thus my magic ended up being called matter reinforcement."

"I believe your magic also works on people. When the manabeast attacked me yesterday, I suffered no injury. Don't you think that was thanks to your 'good luck charm'?"

"Now that you mention it, Dunk kicked you pretty hard when you protected Connie."

The previous margrave had been killed when he'd been kicked

and trampled by Dunk. Yet Lord Nazel was completely fine despite taking the same attack.

"I felt the blow hit me, but my body was fine afterward. I think that your magic is an unknown, valuable, and rare kind. Not only can it strengthen the human body, but it can even make plants grow."

"Should I get appraised again?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Of course, I won't stop you if you *want* to do it, but we'll have to find a trustworthy appraiser. Having your magic be widely known comes with its own problems. *Everyone* would want your magic, Agnes, if they knew what it can do. It can reinforce walls, crops, and even soldiers. If the truth about your magic got out, with the state the royal palace is currently in, I can only see a future in which you're forced to return to the capital and made to use your magic every day like you're the country's property."

"That sounds horrible!"

I absolutely refused to abandon this pleasant life or get separated from Lord Nazel!

"Exactly. So isn't it fine if we just continue pretending you have slightly unusual matter reinforcement magic?"

"Yes, let's do that."

"Incidentally, how long *does* your matter reinforcement last after you use it on a human?"

"Hmm... Until I undo it? Unlike your magic, mine doesn't create something from zero, so I don't need to worry about extra mana consumption while I keep it active."

In Lord Nazel's case, when he created plants from nothing, he had to continually spend mana for the entire time those plants existed. But when he modified preexisting plants to strengthen them, he only had to spend mana at that moment in which he used his magic. My magic worked the same as his in the latter example.

"That's incredible...and pretty much invincible. Be prudent about using your magic on humans from now on, okay?"

"I understand. I don't want to leave Sutrena."

I wanted to avoid a life where I would be constantly forced to use my magic.

"And another thing: How high is your mana capacity, Agnes?"

“I’ve never had it measured. My parents always said that since my magic is ‘just matter reinforcement,’ it didn’t matter whether I have a little mana or a lot.”

“That pesky House of Evantail. Okay, let’s properly look into your mana capacity. I’ll somehow find a skilled—and discreet—appraiser.”

I simply nodded. I felt secure that if I left this to Lord Nazel, it would probably turn out okay.

“It should be about time for the report on the town’s damage to arrive,” Lord Nazel said.

“I guess so.”

Lord Nazel got up a little reluctantly.

“Let’s go, Agnes.”

“Yes! I’ll help with repairs at the destroyed locations.”

After we finished talking, we left the mansion together, ready to deal with what lay in store for us.

Several days after the night of the new moon, I found myself assisting with the rebuilding work in one corner of the central town of Sutrena. The damage hadn’t been as bad as I’d expected; the residential district around our estate was the only place seriously affected by the manabeasts. Everyone said that the town had suffered incomparably more damage during previous new moons, so Lord Nazel’s manabeast countermeasures must have worked. He and Mister Henry had been the ones to give out instructions, and their subordinates had quickly implemented their plan.

Torre was also helping by growing larger and hauling away debris. The people were very grateful to him, and it was no wonder, because he made short work of tasks that would have taken others many hours of labor, all on his own. I stayed close to Lord Nazel as I worked and focused on reinforcing buildings and roads.

A question suddenly popped into my head in the middle of work, so I tried asking Lord Nazel.

“Sutrena suffers especially severe damage from manabeasts compared to other territories, right? But it’s not the only region that borders the forest. Do the other territories have some special countermeasures in place?”

Lord Nazel narrowed his amber eyes gently and gazed at me. As I looked back at the face of my beloved, my heart started beating like a drum yet again. He responded kindly even to this simple question of mine.

“I’ve looked it up in our documents, but I couldn’t find any relevant information. So I’m thinking of investigating a certain location in Sutrena bordering the forest, and the neighboring territories too. It seems that no government official has been there for a long time. Henry was also trying to investigate, but the nobles who live there considered him a bothersome meddler and obstructed his efforts. The place is pretty far from our central town, so a visiting investigator would need to stay overnight, and that would require imposing on the locals for food and lodging.”

The nobles in question were relatives of the previous margrave and still managed part of Sutrena. Lord Nazel had been too busy until now to see to the matter properly, but depending on how the area was managed, he was even considering seizing it.

“Oh my. Then you’ll be using your authority as margrave to force through an inspection, right, Lord Nazel?”

“That’s my intention. I can’t ignore our manabeast problem.”

Although Lord Nazel had been exiled, he came from a noble house of high standing, giving him a certain amount of clout he could wield against others.

“Um, I’d also like to go there. I’ll be able to help with my magic.”

“You want to come along? Your magic is certainly always a great help.”

I stared at Lord Nazel’s eyes and noticed that his face started gradually growing redder.

Is he perhaps being bashful?

I felt happy but also became embarrassed myself; it was a strange, ticklish sensation.

“All right, I’ll discuss it with Henry. But promise me you will always stick close to me or Torre, okay?”

“Of course. I won’t do anything dangerous.”

“You left the estate on your own during the night of the new moon.”

“Urk!”

“I was awfully worried, but I understand it was the only way to rescue the injured.” Lord Nazel gave me a soft kiss on the cheek.

“But please stop being so reckless, okay?”

“Um, people are watching, Lord Nazel.”

There were many people around us participating in the rebuilding efforts. I thought flirting in the middle of this crowd would be awkward, but…everyone was looking at Lord Nazel and me with a heartwarming smile.

“Oh, to be young again. It’s so nice to see a couple getting along so well.”

“Please spend the rest of your lives in Sutrena, you two.”

Our public display of affection was apparently approved. I was immensely embarrassed, but Lord Nazel looked happy.

And so, once the rebuilding settled down somewhat, it was decided that we would set off to investigate the area close to the frontier’s forest.

Chapter 4: Madam Bumpkin's Potato-Hurling Defensive

Robin was in a well-maintained room inside a large mansion in the royal capital's peaceful residential district. He had a displeased smile on his face as he ate some violaberry pie, the dessert that had been popular lately. One of his subordinates was kneeling in front of him.

"So you're telling me that Nazelbart has been accepted by the people of the frontier and is doing well?"

"Yes, Master Robin. He's solved their problems with food and manabeasts, and the locals have started idolizing him."

Robin crushed the piece of pie he was holding.

"This is why I *hate* oh-so-competent guys like him. I loathe them! Oh well, at least the poor chump is married to that hideous Lady Bumpkin."

"Ah, about that... There are rumors that Lady Bumpkin is actually quite the beauty. Apparently she was seen at a party and now word is spreading among noble circles."

"Aha ha ha, no way! That sounds like a bunch of nonsense. This is *Lady Bumpkin* we're talking about here. I'm sure people are just having fun gossiping. You may go now."

Robin dismissed the rumors surrounding Lady Bumpkin and drove his subordinate out of the room.

"Man, this isn't fun at all. I can't believe Nazelbart is adapting to the frontier so well. And he's already developed a good reputation as the margrave? I finally managed to get him exiled, so why can't he just pathetically fail for once?! Jeez."

Nazelbart had been a man with everything—status, looks, talent, and the position of the future's queen prince consort. He'd been worlds apart from Robin, a man with nothing. That was why Robin hated and loathed him so.

Robin had been born in poverty. His mother had been a prostitute and his father one of her clients. Robin had been brought up in the red-light district and used his good looks as a weapon to survive in that environment full of women. All the

while, he'd believed that he wasn't the kind of person who'd meet his end in a place like that. His desire to one day rise in the world was significantly more intense than most others' ambitions.

Around the same time as his mother's passing, he'd found out that his father was a baron. First he had learned that a certain baron who often visited the brothel was his mother's regular customer. Then Robin had discovered that he was the spitting image of that baron. He'd marched into the baron's home, blackmailed his father using the dirt he'd dug up in the red-light district, then convinced the baron that he would be useful. Thus Robin had been adopted. He really was confident in his own usefulness, because not only was his magic rare, but he also possessed two kinds. Normally a person could use exactly one kind of magic, but in exceedingly rare cases like Robin's, people who possessed two kinds of magic were born. He hadn't been appraised as a child because of the circumstances of his birth and had thus been overlooked by the authorities, but all people possessing two kinds of magic were customarily given special treatment by the country.

Robin had wandered from lady to lady until he finally reached the princess of this country. She was the woman with the highest status for him to marry into money, but she'd already gotten engaged. Her fiancé had been Nazelbart Florescruz, an absolutely flawless noble scion. Robin despised Nazelbart from the start. Nazelbart was handsome, yes, but he could also do anything well, and while he came across as unexpressive and emotionless, he was in fact compassionate too. Robin had been able to tell that Nazelbart was fundamentally different from himself—someone whose appearance was his only merit.

Nazelbart didn't tolerate injustice, admonished people who behaved poorly, and effortlessly completed every task given to him by the country like a well-oiled machine. However, he was such a genius that he'd caused feelings of inferiority in others and incurred the enmity of nobles who were so driven to protect their interests they didn't mind getting involved in illegal activity. That had been his sole shortcoming. The world wasn't full of only pure people. That was why it had been easy for Robin to act.

Robin had started courting Princess Mia, who was tormented by feelings of inferiority and doubted her own value because of

how perfect her fiancé was. The prideful princess hadn't been able to stand the way Nazelbart surpassed her in everything. The two of them had been on bad terms to begin with, but as the princess grew more frustrated with him, Nazelbart had also started avoiding his troublesome fiancée. Robin had gotten close to the princess effortlessly and comforted her with sweet words.

As Robin had been raised in the red-light district, he was used to dealing with women. When he also used his magic, more than eighty percent of women went crazy for him. Seducing the sheltered princess had been a piece of cake for him. Her personality had flaws, but Robin hadn't cared. She was just another person unfairly gifted with a perfect life that he could exploit for his own ends.

Robin had gotten the princess pregnant, fabricated Nazelbart's crimes, and taken advantage of the engagement party to cause a commotion. In order to hide the scandal, the royal family had made Robin the princess's lawful fiancé and exiled Nazelbart to the frontier. Robin ridiculed them in his mind for being so vain and foolish. Thanks to them, everything had proceeded just as he wanted. His father, Baron Levbition, was also delighted by his success.

"Now then, those rumors about Nazelbart excelling even at the frontier are a real nuisance. People are definitely still comparing us. Last I heard, there are even some irritating voices advocating for his return to the capital."

If Nazelbart again became the princess's fiancé, then Robin, her current fiancé, would be in major trouble.

I have to eliminate that risk.

Robin hated working and studying, much preferring kicking other people down over putting in effort himself. That was how he'd always lived.

He hummed as he left the baron's estate and headed to the palace library to search for a certain someone.

"Oh, there she is! Hey there, Liliane!"

Robin ignored the librarian warning him to be quiet in the library and called out to Liliane, who was reading a book at the moment. When she noticed her sweetheart, her cheeks visibly flushed; she was straightforward and cute. There were plenty of ladies in the palace willing to grant Robin's wishes, and she was

one of them. Her fiancé was thankfully kind of a blockhead, so it hadn't taken long before she had fallen under Robin's sway. All he'd had to do was treat her warmly and listen to her worries, and she'd opened her heart to him right away. Noble ladies had a habit of hiding worries they felt they couldn't share with anyone in the depths of their hearts. That created a weak spot Robin could take advantage of. If he then developed a deeper relationship with these women, he might even be able to use them when he was in trouble.

"I love you, Liliane! Have you had any worries lately?"

Robin kicked out the noisy librarian who kept nagging him about being quiet and took the hand of the young lady with the somewhat sorrowful expression.

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Liliane Lumiure, daughter of Count Lumiure, was in a perilous position. She had no allies and could only trust Robin at the moment.

The House of Lumiure was a distinguished noble family with a venerable bloodline. Her father was the vice captain of the knights, while her mother was considered a distinguished lady of high society. For generations, it had been tradition for the sons of the house to join the knights, while the daughters were treated as mere political tools. And as tools, perfect education and conduct was demanded of them; of course, showing their emotions was out of the question. Liliane lived her every day concealing her true feelings, whether at home or outside.

Because Liliane had been born a girl and not a boy, the people around her were very strict with her. The only woman in the country permitted to succeed her father as head of her house was Princess Mia, whose mother, the queen, held nearly absolute authority. A daughter becoming the heir would never happen in an ordinary noble house. However, the House of Lumiure currently had no male heirs. Therefore Liliane's fiancé, a man her father had arbitrarily chosen for her, would succeed her father as head of their house.

His name was Torre Torbert, a member of the knights and a true meathead. Strength training was both his hobby and his

special skill. It felt impossible to Liliane that she and Torre would ever see eye to eye about anything.

Liliane was a very active person by nature. When she was a little girl, she'd climb trees, fish in their estate's garden, and play around as she liked. But as she grew up and was assigned private tutors and expected to study and learn manners, she was forbidden from doing any of those things. If her actions deviated even a little from what her teachers said was the ideal lady, her wrists were repeatedly whipped. She gradually started smiling and talking less and no longer acted of her own free will. She became known as a distinguished lady of high society, just like her mother. Even her fiancé excitedly called her incredible—not that she was particularly happy about it. He didn't make the slightest effort to see what lay inside her heart.

"What part of this is incredible? Such nonsense."

Both at home and outside it, she was unable to create a place where she could be herself, nor could she confide her true feelings to anyone; she just suffered and suffered. She always hid and cried in a corner of the palace library. If she did so at home, the maids would inform her parents. Few people visited the library, so it was possible for her to avoid meeting anyone if she stuck to the more deserted areas. It was there that Liliane met Robin.

"Oh? What's wrong? Why are you crying? It's such a waste for a beautiful lady like you."

An incredibly handsome young noble she couldn't remember meeting before approached her. He had tanned skin—something rarely seen at the palace—a chiseled yet sweet face, and drooping eyes that oozed with a bewitching seductiveness. Liliane was captivated against her better judgment, then came back to her senses with a start and put up a front.

"It's nothing. I'm fine."

She put on the mask of an ideal noble lady as usual and bluntly pushed him away. Robin, however, didn't back down.

"You don't look fine. Come on, talk to me. I'm just a minor noble with zero influence, so I should be a convenient conversation partner."

Perhaps she succumbed to temptation, or perhaps her anguish had gone past her limit. Either way, Liliane told Robin everything about herself. He warmly lent an ear to her worries. He was the

first person to treat her like this, so she let her guard down. No one at home cared about the feelings of a “tool” like her.

“It’s okay; I’m on your side.”

“Excuse me, but what is your name?”

“I’m Robin, Baron Levbition’s son. And what’s your name?”

“I’m Liliane Lumiure.”

“Oh, Count Lumiure’s daughter.”

Robin leaned in close to Liliane. Having a man unexpectedly so close to her left her flustered, although he didn’t seem to mind.

“Being a count’s daughter must be so hard. Isn’t this around the time they start talking about your marriage?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Let me help you relax.”

Robin smiled as he softly took hold of Liliane’s hand. A faint light leaked out from the place he touched, and she felt all the gloom inside her quickly vanish.

“What was that?”

“It’s my very own special magic. It’s a power to help all those who suffer.”

All the sorrow that had been gathering in her heart faded, and her pain was purified.

“Master Robin…”

“You can just call me Robin. I’m just a lowly little noble.”

“Very well, Robin. Thank you. I feel a little better thanks to you.”

Liliane started spending more time with Robin in the library and eventually became addicted to him. Being with him was comforting, and he was the only one who saw her for who she truly was.

Liliane’s family eventually found out about her trysts with Robin. Someone must have anonymously informed them. It could have been the princess or perhaps another lady in love with Robin. Whatever the case, Liliane’s family was merciless to her once they heard about it.

“You unseemly daughter! How dare you bring such shame to me?! Everything is ruined because of you!” her father shouted.

“You had a secret rendezvous with another man when you already have a fiancé?! Apparently you’re really close to him too. You besmirch your mother’s good name. Was your education perhaps too lenient?” her mother sneered.

“I don’t need a daughter like you! I will marry off your sister Luluane and have her husband inherit the headship of the House of Lumiure! Now get out of here! Right this instant!”

With only a small bag and a little money in hand, Liliane was thrown out into the city without any idea what was going on. It was raining at the time, and there was nowhere for her to take shelter. But above all else, being seen in her current state was humiliating. It was clear at a glance that she was a daughter of a good family out in the rain all alone; anyone would assume there were disgraceful circumstances behind this.

And so Liliane’s destination was naturally the palace’s library. The people working at the palace were unaware that she had just been disowned, so although they were puzzled to see her soaking wet, they let her make her way to the library as usual.

“Robin, Robin, Robin! Please help me!”

Robin was her only ally. She clung to his hand when he appeared at the library. He listened to her worries cordially and looked like he sympathized with her from the bottom of his heart.

“It’s okay; it’s all gonna be fine, Liliane. I’ll help you out.”

The moment he touched her, she quickly felt at ease. His magic was a sacred power that saved people from their suffering.

“But before that, will you do one thing for me? It’s something I can only ask of you.”

“I’ll do anything if it’s in my power,” the cornered Liliane answered with no hesitation.

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Some time after the night of the new moon, Lord Nazel and I embarked on a new task. We headed for the outskirts of Sutrena on mountbeasts, accompanied by Mister Henry, Torre, Kelly, and several other government officials and soldiers. It was sunny, and a pleasant breeze was blowing.

“It seems like this will be a journey free of incidents,” Lord Nazel said.

“Yes, flying in the rain would impair visibility,” I replied.

Lord Nazel and I would ride our wyvern, Geni, while the others would be on pegasi. Our destination was a settlement in the northeastern part of Sutrena, the town of Kattena. Just outside

town to the east stood the forest, while the territories of Zazame and Hihime lay to the north. A small thicket demarcated the boundary between the territory of Sutrena and that of Zazame.

Incidentally, I was the one steering Geni today. He was happy for our first trip in a while and had been happily turning around in the air for quite some time now.

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry, Lord Nazel. Geni got a little too excited.”

“Heh heh, it’s fine. I’m enjoying it too. I get to stick close to you this way.”

Lord Nazel put strength into his arms to hug me even tighter.

“Eek!”

For some reason, Lord Nazel looked awfully happy about the rotational flight we’d been doing. It meant our trip took longer than regular flight, and we also had to hold tightly to each other. Geni continued turning around playfully, but we eventually arrived at the town of Kattena.

It was my first time here, so I kept looking around with deep curiosity. The town was dotted with plain buildings that appeared to be little more than piled up stones, and overgrown weeds covered much of the unpaved roads. It looked like a very desolate place even by Sutrena’s standards, and everywhere we turned, we saw broken fences and the tumbledown ruins of old houses. In the houses that were still inhabited, almost every window was tightly closed. There were no signs of people anywhere. The doors’ hinges, rusted red, looked like they would break apart from the slightest impact. When I looked down from the sky, I saw vacant plots of land scattered outside the town; it seemed that they had once been fields, but they’d been trampled down by manabeasts.

“This is truly awful,” Lord Nazel said with a scowl as we walked through the streets.

It was easy to imagine that the residents had already lost their livelihoods and were facing intense hardship.

“There are manabeast claw marks everywhere. It looks as if they’re constantly under attack,” Lord Nazel observed.

“I believe your assumption is spot-on. Judging by your reaction, it doesn’t look like you’ve received any reports about this. When their fields are in such a terrible state, can the town even produce any tax revenue?” I asked.

It was truly impressive how Lord Nazel had inferred that something was suspicious here and decided to come investigate in person.

As the two of us continued discussing the situation, Mister Henry spoke up from behind us.

“My previous investigation was obstructed midway so I had to quit, but in addition to the issues we knew about, it looks like there’s also a food shortage, most likely due to the fields being abandoned. The land here was never particularly suited for agriculture in the first place, but since the crop yields were meager even compared to the rest of Sutrena, I deemed a reinvestigation necessary.”

Ever since he’d gotten down from his pegasus, he’d looked dizzy, like he might collapse at any moment. He’d apparently gotten airsick, and he hurried to the edge of the street while holding his mouth shut. I really wondered if he was okay.

“This definitely sounds shady,” Lord Nazel said.

“I wonder if the people who interfered with Mister Henry’s investigation have something to hide.”

While we talked, Lord Nazel and Mister Henry’s subordinates began going around searching for residents to ask them some questions.

“You must be tired, Agnes. Let’s take a break while we’re waiting for the report,” Lord Nazel suggested.

“Oh, sure.”

We managed to find what appeared to be an inn nearby, so we decided to head there along with Mister Henry, Kelly, and Torre. The roads, where they weren’t overgrown with weeds, were rough tracks of bare soil, so moving through the town was a real pain. As I walked while Lord Nazel led me by the hand, I noticed something when I looked around us.

I feel like the town is in worse shape the closer we get to its center.

The people we occasionally glimpsed now that we were on the ground looked gloomy and restless.

As I was lost in thought, a commotion suddenly broke out on the other side of the street. I heard a shrill scream and angry shouts.

Is it some kind of argument?

We heard loud voices and the sound of running next—both

unfitting for this quiet town—and we all looked at each other in unison.

“Thieves! Someone stop them!”

As someone screamed for help, a boorish group of approximately ten burly men rushed toward us from the direction of the quarrel. Our guard, Torre, stepped in front of them, ready for battle.

“Well if it ain’t our lucky day. We have ourselves some outsiders here! Hand over your food and valuables!”

“And the women too!”

The men had a violent air about them as they all shouted together.

“I’m going to make you *regret* ever looking at Agnes like that.”

Lord Nazel smoothly drew the sword at his hip. Not even a second later, jagged plant stems sprouted from cracks in the ground in front of him.

“Don’t worry, Agnes. Stay behind me with Kelly and Henry.”

“Yes, Lord Nazel!”

We didn’t want to get in the way, so the three of us took shelter in the shade of a building. The men who had attacked us found themselves splendidly lying on the ground in a matter of seconds. The plants Lord Nazel had sprouted had gone on a rampage and knocked them down, settling the fight in the blink of an eye.

“Oh my, that was fast,” I said.

“Indeed, Lady Agnes. Despite their haughty attitude, they were all bark and no bite,” Kelly agreed scathingly.

The soldiers accompanying us started arresting the men, and Kelly assisted them without her expression changing in the slightest.

“Ha ha ha, you bunch of nobodies! I didn’t even need to use my gigantification! Lord Nazelbart never fails to impress!”

Lord Nazel had dealt with the situation alone, but Torre also acted proud for whatever reason. He retrieved the stolen possessions and returned them to their rightful owners.

While the passersby slowly realized the situation was under control and resumed going about their business, Lord Nazel ran straight to me.

“Everything’s all right now, Agnes. You must have been scared.”

“No, not really. You defeated them in seconds, so it wasn’t

particularly frightening.”

The overprotective Lord Nazel didn’t look like he believed me and hugged me tight. I was a little embarrassed because the people accompanying us could see, but once again, they all gazed at us with heartwarming smiles and said things like “I envy them for being so close.”

The townspeople looked like they’d calmed down, and they started gathering around us as curious onlookers. A little while later, a neatly dressed young woman burst from the crowd and approached us. She wore a patterned skirt that swayed softly, her hair was carefully arranged, and she had beautiful, brand-new shoes that were completely out of place in this desolate town. She was different from everyone else gathered here; her clothes were clearly expensive.

“My lord margrave! Thank you so much for catching those thieves!”

She acted overfamiliar with Lord Nazel as she approached him and tried to take his hand. However, both of his hands were occupied hugging me, so he stayed like that and only replied with a short “You’re welcome.” The woman froze with her hand reaching out to Lord Nazel. Her expression seemed to convey something along the lines of *I can’t believe they’re doing that right in front of me!*

Gaudy clothes, an equally ostentatious hairstyle, and overflowing confidence—I feel like she’s similar to someone I’ve met before. And it looks like she could tell Lord Nazel is the margrave at a glance.

The woman kept talking to Lord Nazel without being discouraged. I couldn’t tell whether he was actually listening to her; he simply grinned and continued staring at me.

“I heard that you have found an inn in town, my lord. Please, come to my house instead! We can provide you with the best hospitality, unlike that tatterdemalion inn!”

She was being so pushy, the soldiers and government officials were at a loss for words. However, before Lord Nazel even had the time to answer, a rotund man came trotting over from the other side of the street and started speaking in a loud voice.

“Ooh, if it isn’t Lord Nazelbart! Welcome to the land managed by our House of Kigyonne! You have my gratitude for helping my daughter. Please, make your way to my estate!”

It looked like pushiness ran in the family. Mister Henry approached the dubious Lord Nazel and whispered some information about those two.

“Lord Nazelbart, these are the nobles who interfered with my previous investigation. What circumstances would lead to them inviting us to their estate on such short notice? I can’t help but find this invitation questionable.”

Lord Nazel looked at Mister Henry and nodded thoughtfully.

“If I’m not mistaken, they were under suspicion of fraudulent activity, correct?”

“Their financial situation is strangely good. They should be unable to earn much from taxes with the state the town is in. They aren’t involved in any highly profitable business ventures either. And to top it all off, they were uncooperative with my investigation. I believe that they’re receiving some kind of funding from an unknown source, but I lack proof. There are many dark rumors surrounding the House of Kigyonne, but they’re a cunning bunch.”

Lord Nazel looked like he was in deep thought for a moment, then replied in a whisper.

“How about we conduct an undercover investigation at their estate? I’d also like to have Agnes stay in a clean mansion instead of an inn in an unsafe town.”

“The town certainly is unsanitary, not to mention the risk of getting injured by manabeasts.”

The two of them were still whispering to each other when Kelly also entered the conversation.

“Be careful, Lord Nazelbart. They are exceedingly black. That man’s emotions are particularly disturbing; he feels truly wicked.”

Kelly’s magic gave her a rough idea of others’ emotions. By “black,” she meant that a person held some kind of ill will toward us.

“I appreciate the warning, Kelly. Your magic is always reliable,” Lord Nazel said.

He was probably being cautious because I was here as well, but I wanted us to investigate these suspicious nobles as quickly as possible for the sake of the people.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Lord Nazel. I can use my magic on myself and everyone else, so I won’t slow you down. Let’s

head right to their estate."

"But, Agnes..."

"The town is in terrible shape. We need to take measures to help the people as soon as possible. I will be just fine."

Lord Nazel was still worried, however, and Kelly seemed to be opposed to me going to the baron's estate. The two of them were always so overprotective.

It was then that a new voice entered the conversation.

"Would you look at that! If it isn't the margravine! What a coincidence for us to meet here!"

"Huh?"

I turned around and saw a blond man with a cart full of goods, waving at me familiarly.

"Oh! It's..."

Bert, the merchant who'd purchased all of the unnecessary items from our manor, stood with his cart by the side of the road. Kelly and I had met him before, but this was his first meeting with Lord Nazel and the others.

"Lord Nazel, this is the merchant who purchased all those bizarre statues and other items from our manor."

After I introduced Bert, Lord Nazel looked suspicious.

"A merchant? Him?"

"Yes. Is something the matter?"

Bert put on his usual suspicious smile and gave us a troubled look as he shrugged his shoulders. He acted easygoing even when Lord Nazel treated him with skepticism.

"I'm a respectable merchant."

When Torre saw Bert, he started acting fidgety for some reason.

What's wrong with him? Does he need to use the bathroom?

Bert didn't seem to mind the perplexed men as he approached me.

"It really is *such a coincidence* for us to meet again in a place like this, Lady Agnes. If you're headed to the baron's estate, may I join you?"

Bert's intrusion completely changed the mood. Lord Nazel seemed to have something on his mind as he looked at Bert. Mister Henry then consulted his subordinates, and in the end it was decided that we would head to the baron's estate. Torre was going to help transport the group of thieves to a jail, so he would

meet up with us as soon as he was finished.

For some reason, in addition to the baron and his family, several groups of nobles who lived nearby were also at the estate. The inside of the luxurious mansion was decorated like a party venue.

When did they prepare all this? We only met a short while ago. Isn't it too soon for them to have put all of this together?

Our visit had been unannounced, so there was no way the House of Kigyonne should have known about it beforehand.

"Oh? Aren't those, uh, dazzling decorations over there from our mansion?"

The House of Kigyonne was apparently the party who'd purchased our unnecessary articles from Bert. I had mixed feelings about that as I walked next to Lord Nazel with the baron leading the way. Mister Henry and Kelly had gone off on their own. They'd said they would go rest in their rooms as an excuse to slip out, then go searching the manor for evidence of unlawful activity. It seemed that Bert had also gone with them; was he planning on conducting some market research?

At any rate, I had to get through this situation in a way befitting a margravine. When the dashing Lord Nazel appeared in the mansion, all of the women present seemed excited. The lady he'd helped earlier was also among them. I'd been thinking that she looked familiar, and it turned out that she was the older sister of Rebecca, one of the women who'd participated in the maid interviews.

Oh, right, her last name was *Kigyonne.*

As for Rebecca, she seemed afraid of Lord Nazel and was cowering in a corner; she didn't show any signs of wanting to get involved with us. Her older sister, on the other hand, was persistently talking to Lord Nazel; he was also surrounded by several other women.

Excuse me? Lord Nazel is my *husband!*

When I tried getting closer, the women fiercely blocked my approach.

What should I do? We've been separated.

I felt flustered, and it was at this time that some other people appeared and grabbed me by the shoulders.

“Hello, my lady. You are quite beautiful, unlike the rumors. Would you come chat with us?”

I turned around and saw many young men lined up.

“Wh-Who are you?”

I was suddenly surrounded by a group of men, creating a double-layered wall between Lord Nazel and me.

Oh no, I can’t get to Lord Nazel like this.

He was also trying to make his way to me, but he couldn’t just violently push the ladies away, so he was having trouble moving around. Then, another lady joined the group around him. Her outfit was more proper and reserved compared to the other women’s, but she also approached Lord Nazel aggressively.

“Greetings, Lord Nazelbart. I’ve always wanted to meet you. I, I…”

She was shaking as she turned her face downward, giving me an uncomfortable feeling; she was acting overtly strange. She pressed so close to Lord Nazel that even those other audacious ladies were astonished. She forcefully took his hand, and then her bluish black hair swelled unnaturally and suddenly changed shape into sharp, thick, piercing thorns.

“Watch out, Lord Nazel! Get away!”

I barely managed to shout a warning before her hair lanced toward Lord Nazel. The other ladies screamed and all ran away at once.

“I’m sorry, I bear no grudge against you. But this is my only choice.”

The woman spoke softly, then lunged at Lord Nazel as her sharp hair swayed frenetically. However, her hair only grazed his body and seemed unable to pierce him completely. That was to be expected, since his body was under the effects of my reinforcement magic. Lord Nazel was so tough at the moment that even being trampled by a manabeast would barely faze him.

“Wh-Wh-What?! I didn’t know about this!”

Faced with an impossible situation, the would-be assassin started panicking. Lord Nazel looked somewhat troubled, but he was still fully composed and stood there naturally just like always.

“Why can’t I stab you?”

As the confused lady’s spiky hair crashed into Lord Nazel again, the estate’s soldiers arrived, having noticed the commotion.

Among them was Torre, who'd returned from delivering the thieves to jail.

"Could I entrust this lady to you? She seems terribly shaken up."

Torre nodded in response to Lord Nazel's instructions, swiftly rushed over to the lady, took one look at her, and...suddenly jolted to a halt.

"*L-Liliane?!*"

His deep shout echoed across the manor in a volume so high it could've put even manabeasts' roars to shame.

Huh? Is she actually someone he knows?!

This was such an unexpected development that Lord Nazel and I stared at Torre in wonder. The lady he'd called Liliane was also taken aback and raised her head to look at him.

"O-Oh no... No way. Why is this happening?"

Not only had she failed to hurt Lord Nazel, but Torre had also called her name with all his might. Her face went pale and she started running away fearfully.

"Please wait, Liliane! Liliaaaaane!"

Lord Nazel and Torre went to chase after her, but the estate's soldiers sprang into action to obstruct them. The soldiers drew their swords and directly attacked the two of them.

"This must've been the baron's trap after all," I muttered to myself. "I need to find Mister Henry, Kelly, and Bert and get out of here! We would only get in the way if we stayed here where the battle will unfold."

The three I named were supposed to be in the middle of gathering evidence of the baronial house's wrongdoings. I wasn't strong, but I could at least reinforce my companions' bodies. I turned around and quickly exited the room into a corridor. It looked like the other nobles had run away, so there were few people inside the mansion at the moment. However, there were still several soldiers who hadn't headed toward Lord Nazel roaming the corridors.

"Hey, have you found the guests? We need to dispose of them immediately!"

"Not yet. They all seem to be missing from their rooms!"

From their conversation, I could tell that they were searching for Kelly and the others.

"I need to hurry."

I checked rooms one by one while avoiding bumping into the soldiers. In a stroke of luck, I quickly discovered Kelly, who was investigating the dining room. I ran up to her and used my magic on her.

“What’s the matter, Lady Agnes?”

“Staying here is dangerous, Kelly. We were attacked by a lady and the soldiers during the party. Let’s get out of the mansion for now.”

The door to the dining room slammed open before we could finish our conversation.

“There they are!”

The soldiers surged into the room, so I took Kelly’s hand and ran deeper into the dining room. After passing through the small doors the servants used, we arrived at the manor’s kitchen. In front of us were boxes carelessly stuffed with ingredients.

“I heard there was a food shortage, but they seem to have plenty of it here. It’s odd though…” I observed.

Most of the food was potatoes—vegetables with a long shelf life—but crops were difficult to grow in this territory, and potatoes were no exception to that rule. On top of that, we’d seen that almost every field in the area was abandoned. It was true that crops selectively bred by Lord Nazel had started circulating in the market recently, but the majority of the ingredients here weren’t the kinds he’d grown.

“Lady Agnes, I found a door that leads outside, but it’s locked, so we can’t use it.”

Kelly kept her composure even at a time like this. She was a truly reliable handmaiden.

“There don’t seem to be any other rooms beyond the kitchen. If there’s no way to escape, we’ll have to make one. But first…” I used my magic to reinforce the entire heap of potatoes piled nearby. “Kelly, let’s throw these at the enemy soldiers! They’ve caught up with us.”

“Understood. I’m excellent at throwing balls thanks to my experience taking care of my little brothers.”

“That’s very reassuring. I had no toys of any kind at the House of Evantail, so I’m not confident in my control. Your body is also reinforced, so hurl them with all your might.”

We aimed at the soldiers approaching the kitchen entrance and

barraged them with potatoes. Reinforced potatoes thrown by reinforced arms proved to be dangerous weapons. The impact of the potatoes caused unnatural sounds, like the men had been hit by iron balls.



“My magic can also be used like this, huh?”

The soldiers screamed in pain as they retreated. The potatoes might have been ineffective if they’d been wearing armor, but this was supposed to have been a simple job taking down noncombatants inside the mansion, so they were all wearing light clothing. Kelly and I kept rapidly flinging potatoes, then shut the kitchen door when all the soldiers retreated beyond it. We piled up tables, chairs, and shelves to seal the entrance, then tried opening the locked rear exit.

“If we can’t unlock it, let’s break it down. We need something to use like a battering ram.”

“How about this chair? We may be able to use it if you reinforce it with your magic, Lady Agnes,” Kelly suggested as she pointed at a small chair nearby.

“That’s a good idea. This old door’s hinges look brittle.” I swiftly reinforced the chair and lifted it together with Kelly. “All right, let’s do this! One, two, go!”

We both gripped the legs of the chair and swung it down at the same time, easily tearing the decaying hinges apart.

“We did it! The door’s broken!”

We safely made it outside, where the sky had already turned to twilight. The midnight blue darkness was slowly swallowing the entirety of the rustic town.

“We need to quickly find Mister Henry and Bert,” I said.

“Yes, but…”

Kelly was about to say something, but she hesitated for a moment.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, but I think Master Henry is safe. Master Bert is with him.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Master Bert is a merchant, but he knows how to handle a blade. More importantly, our pursuers will find us if we stay here, so let’s run away for now.”

Kelly and I left the estate grounds and made it to the town. There, we safely met up with Lord Nazel’s subordinates who were standing by.

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A breathless Liliane kept running down the bumpy road, up and down hills. She'd undone her magic and her hair was now a mess. She was headed to the rendezvous point they had planned in case something unexpected happened.

"What should I do? Robin asked for my help so seriously and I still failed. Why can't I even do something so simple?!"

The House of Kigyonne was one of the noble families that supported Robin; it had a good relationship with his House of Levbition. That was why Baron Kigyonne showed such hostility to Nazelbart, the margrave, even though his barony was part of Sutrena.

But his daughters didn't seem to have been told anything about today's plot. They just panicked and ran away.

Liliane was jealous of those innocent girls who'd been treasured and spoiled by their father. She, on the other hand, had been deeply involved in this incident and knew the secret of this town.

Manabeasts attacked Kattena more frequently than anywhere else. There was a definite reason for that: Baron Kigyonne and Count Appo, the ruler of Zazame, had reached a secret agreement, with Baron Levbition—Robin's father—acting as the mediator. Their two lands were adjacent to a thicket infested with manabeasts, and at first, they'd suffered equal damages. But after Baron Kigyonne had accepted Count Appo's proposal a few years ago, Sutrena's damages had increased significantly. Count Appo had offered Baron Kigyonne money in exchange for the latter taking on all manabeast-related problems.

Ever since, Baron Kigyonne would intentionally lure manabeasts from Zazame to the town of Kattena in Sutrena. He used their favorite food—potatoes—as bait. That was why the baron's mansion and food storehouse always had large quantities of food, despite there being a shortage in town. After they got their first taste, the manabeasts appeared all across town on a nightly basis. The townspeople were the only ones to suffer; the baron and his family lived in luxury inside his mansion's sturdy walls. And thanks to him, Zazame only suffered minimal damage from manabeasts.

Part of the funds Baron Kigyonne received from Count Appo went to Robin's father, the one who'd introduced them to each other. In return, the House of Kigyonne was supposed to receive

favorable treatment once Robin became the prince consort.

Liliane's chest throbbed in pain.

"Robin is Her Highness's fiancé and the future prince consort. I *know* that much."

He was beyond her reach. She was just one lady out of many who adored him. She knew better than anyone that her only value lay in her status, and now she'd lost even that. She had nothing left. Even so, her entire body was ruled by the desire that Robin not hate her. His kindness and empathy had seeped into her like poison, bringing her indescribable joy; no one else had ever paid attention to her.

"I must avoid being captured at all costs."

Liliane ignored the aching in her legs and lungs and ran at full speed toward the rendezvous point. When she finally arrived, she found Baron Kigyonne waiting. His collaborator, Count Appo, who'd also been invited to the estate, stood next to him. This incident was a scheme devised by the count and baron with the goal of eliminating Nazelbart, the current margrave, who'd interfered with their plans. From what Liliane understood, their agents had infiltrated the fortress in the center of Sutrena.

Liliane was the perpetrator. After she murdered Nazelbart with her weaponized hair, the plan had been for her to escape and receive the protection of one of their allies. She would then change her name and live quietly with Robin's help. That was what he'd promised. He'd also promised he would come visit her frequently. She'd undertaken this difficult task with that sole hope.

"You're late, Liliane. Finally made it, have you?"

Baron Kigyonne kept impatiently tapping the tips of his high-class leather boots on the ground as he glared at Liliane in irritation.

"You have my sincerest apologies. I have failed my task."

Still out of breath, Liliane looked up at the count and baron and saw the two men exchanging glances and nodding; they had telling looks on their faces.

"Excuse me, is something wrong?" Liliane asked.

"Don't worry. Master Robin has given us precise instruction for what course of action to take in case of a failure like this."

"Oh, he did? So, what do we do now?"

Liliane got a sense of discomfort from looking at the two men,

despite how magnanimous they were acting. She sensed malicious intent from them. It felt like they were looking down on her and preparing to hurt her, just like her parents and their servants used to do back at her family's manor. She'd been raised in a strict environment, so she excelled at reading people's expressions for signs of hostility.

"Master Robin told us that if by any slim chance the plan failed, we should pin the entire crime on you and cast you away!" Count Appo informed Liliane, and Baron Kigyonne nodded deeply.

Liliane panicked. Her mind couldn't accept what they were telling her.

"You're lying. My sweet Robin would never say something so horrible!" she objected while stepping back.

"Well, we were also told that even if you *were* successful, we should frame you as the lone actor and dispose of you," the baron explained, rubbing salt in her emotional wound.

Another shock ran through Liliane's heart. From the very start, Robin had intended to have her killed for the sake of his plan. Was a lady like her, who'd lost the backing of her father's house, no longer of any use to him? Perhaps he wanted to erase her before she could say anything that would cause problems for him. Even as these thoughts raced through her mind, her heart refused to accept the truth.

"Lies! I don't believe you!"

"You may think us liars if you wish, but we can't let Nazelbart expose our crimes."

"But won't it be impossible to frame this entire incident as just one lady acting independently?"

"Fret not; Master Robin will handle that for us. He has both Her Highness and Her Majesty backing him. A small matter like this can easily be hushed up."

Both Count Appo and Baron Kigyonne had agreed to testify that the two of them had only arranged a welcoming party for the margrave and deny that they had anything to do with Liliane's assassination attempt.

"Robin would never give such a cruel order!"

"Look at reality, you pitiful woman. You were just a disposable tool from the very beginning. Someone as strict with money as Master Robin has no need for you, a disowned lady who only

sponges off him. You will die here and become food for manabeasts, and all evidence of this incident will disappear," Baron Kigyonne said.

A moment later, the two lords' private armies emerged from the shadows to appear behind them. Liliane twitched in shock and started running in the opposite direction, but she could barely move her tired legs. Her heel came down on a rock, upsetting her balance and sending her tumbling to the ground.

"Eek!"

Soldiers approached the collapsed Liliane and unsheathed their swords without saying a word.

This seems to be the end of the line for me.

Liliane accepted her fate and shut her eyes, but then...there came the sound of nearby trees cracking and breaking apart, followed by the cawing of startled crows, and finally, a familiar, loud voice resounded all around her.

"Liliaaaaane!!!"

She reflexively opened her eyes, but she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Why are you here? Why are you standing in the way of my enemies to protect me? I'm only the horrible ex-fiancée who betrayed you.

Liliane had never felt any attraction to him since the day they'd met. Her ex-fiancé was just a thickheaded, crude, large, loud man. Her father was fond of him, so he was originally supposed to have inherited the House of Lumiure after marrying her. She only thought of him as a lucky man who would get to become a count while just absentmindedly living his life and had no interest in him beyond his title. When he'd interrupted her tryst with Robin, she'd thought that he would completely give up on her. But despite everything, he was facing an actual army just to protect her.

You should have just abandoned me.

Her ex-fiancé's actions were truly unbelievable.

"Graaaaah!"

Torre broke into a furious sprint as his body rapidly grew larger through his magic. One's magical ability was hereditary to a certain extent. Although children didn't receive exactly the same magic that their parents possessed, they often inherited some aspect of their parents' magic. Liliane's father had welcomed Torre as her future husband because he wanted this power.

“You won’t get away with this! I will punish you!”

When the giant Torre went on a rampage, ordinary soldiers couldn’t put up any semblance of a fight. They were mercilessly knocked aside and strewn along the ground one after the other.

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Nazelbart was in an awful mood. Many things had been on his mind ever since his arrival at Kattena, but the immediate reason for his foul mood was that as soon as he stepped inside Baron Kigyonne’s mansion, he was surrounded by ladies he’d never met before and separated from Agnes. He’d been on his guard, but he hadn’t expected these women to so completely lack any sense of etiquette; Agnes and he were an officially married couple. Back when he’d been engaged to Princess Mia, nobles couldn’t readily approach Nazelbart because they feared the authority of the crown. There had still been some nobles who had hoped to form ties with Nazelbart, but his connection to the royal family had meant they couldn’t act blatantly. But now, nothing like that existed to hold back these women.

“Perhaps that’s why…”

Nazelbart was an exiled duke’s son, so although his status was still high, his current position was inferior to his previous one. This must have emboldened some people to act more aggressively. As for Agnes, she had no supporters after being disowned by the House of Evantail; to be more precise, she only had Nazelbart. That was why all the other ladies present looked down on her. They believed that all of their actions would be justified if they could just get Nazelbart’s attention.

If all that wasn’t bad enough, Agnes was then also surrounded by a coterie of young men.

I know that she’s the cutest*, but do they think that excuses them for trying to make a move on a married woman? Or is infidelity the norm for married couples around these parts? If I remember correctly, Baron Kigyonne has several lovers besides his wife.*

Nazelbart felt horrified after recalling that detail.

I need to help Agnes now!

Just as he prepared to move toward Agnes, even if it meant violently pushing aside the ladies crowding in on him, a black-

haired lady pushed her way through the circle of women. However, she was evidently different from the rest. He cautiously observed her, even when her hair started swelling unnaturally, turned into sharp thorns, and ran him through…or not. Thanks to Agnes's "good luck charm," his body was tough enough to remain unharmed even after a manabeast's attack. The woman's spiky hair was barely enough to scratch him. She must have been able to control it and make it so sharp thanks to her magic. In any case, after failing to impale Nazelbart, she ran away in fear.

"Wait a—"

He tried to go after her, but the soldiers guarding the estate blocked his way. This was suspicious, incredibly so.

"So it *was* a trap."

The guests who'd been besieging him earlier got scared by these developments and scattered, fleeing the venue. They'd most likely been told nothing about this.

"Agnes, it's dangerous here, we need to run to…"

Nazelbart tried to call out to his beloved wife, but she was nowhere to be found. The nearby Torre told him that she'd escaped down a hallway, allowing Nazelbart to feel a little relieved. There were still dangerous soldiers in this room.

"I need to quickly take care of things here and go meet up with Agnes."

After dealing with the soldiers and leaving the manor, Nazelbart found Henry and Bert.

"Lord Nazelbart, Lady Agnes and Miss Kelly have safely escaped. They're apparently in town with our subordinates," Henry said.

"Thank goodness." All of the tension left Nazelbart's body at once, but things were far from over. "I'm going to look for that lady."

Bert, who'd remained silent until now, suddenly spoke up.

"I have a rough idea where that woman and the baron and his associates went. My manabeast has the baron's scent memorized, so we can simply follow. They should all be gathered in the same place."

Bert was far too competent for a "respectable merchant," but Nazelbart didn't have the time to care about that at the moment; he would concern himself with Bert later. There was a black canine

at Bert's feet, most likely a manawolf pup. Manawolves were a prolific species of manabeast that possessed a strong sense of camaraderie with whomever or whatever they identified as their pack. They would often attack livestock, but they could also be domesticated, in which case they became reassuring allies, like war dogs.

"Awoo!"

The manawolf howled vigorously and gallantly ran off, charging along the road up a nearby hill. Nazelbart and the rest hurried after it, and after running for a while, they heard people quarreling.

"I'll be going ahead, Lord Nazelbart!"

The flustered Torre started getting bigger with his magic as he rushed off toward the voices.

"Liliaaaaane!!!"

Nazelbart could remember Torre calling out that name inside the baron's mansion.

"Torre's fiancée was called Liliane, right?"

Why had Torre's fiancée come to a place like this? Nazelbart sensed a larger conspiracy behind the actions of the baron and his allies. He would need to capture them all and extract the details from them.

The fight, such as it was, mainly consisted of Torre going on an unstoppable rampage, while Nazelbart handled those who slipped away from him. A few minutes later, everyone in the baron's entourage was laid out on the ground unconscious, and Torre had returned to his regular size. A dumbfounded woman sat on the ground before him.

"All right, we need to carry them all down the hill back to town."

Nazelbart took a moment to catch his breath, still puzzling over Liliane's inexplicable presence here. A second later, he heard the loud flapping of wings overhead, followed by...

"Lord Nazel!"

...the voice of the most adorable wife in the whole world.

"Agnes?"

Nazelbart looked up. Even at night, he could see the pink wyvern spinning around in the air. Geni eventually landed gently with Agnes on his back.

"I'm so glad to see you safe, Lord Nazel."

“And I’m glad nothing happened to you either, Agnes. By the way, what is that you’re holding?”

“Potatoes. I thought I would bombard your foes from the sky if you were in trouble.”

It was all well and good that she wanted to help him, but where did the spuds come into play? Nazelbart couldn’t understand Agnes’s train of thought at times. Of course, that was just another facet of her cuteness.

***

When I arrived atop Geni, I saw Lord Nazel and Torre below me, standing in what appeared to be the mangled remains of a forest. Countless trees had been torn apart or cut down, and the ground had been torn up in various places.

The fallen trees must be the work of the gigantified Torre. And was Lord Nazel’s plant magic responsible for the state the ground is in?

At any rate, thankfully it looked like all of the people acting suspiciously had been caught. A short time later, Mister Henry, Bert, and our soldiers arrived from the hilly road. It seemed that they had followed after Lord Nazel and Torre. Mister Henry’s low endurance had caused him to go paler than usual, and he was being carried on the shoulder of a brawny soldier. Bert was majestically riding atop a horselike manabeast—the kind that couldn’t fly. The manabeast was pure white and moved with elegance; it looked very expensive. It had eight legs, just like Dunk back at our estate.

Being a merchant must be very profitable.

Our soldiers quickly arrested the baron and his group and started carrying them to the city at a brisk pace. Finally, the woman who’d attacked Lord Nazel came forward.

“Urk…”

She looked injured and walked with a limp. She was obediently following the soldiers’ commands, but she lost her balance and fell to her knees.

“A-Are you okay? Do you have a sprain?”

In a panic, I hurried to her side and examined her legs. The ankle she’d been careful with was horribly swollen; it looked quite painful. It might have been caused by her running in delicate

shoes. It looked like she would have a lot of trouble getting down the hill.

“Excuse me, I’d like to take her to town on my wyvern.”

The soldier who’d been escorting her looked troubled at my suggestion.

“But we couldn’t possibly have you transport a criminal, my lady.”

“Her magic is dangerous: It can turn her hair into sharp thorns. But Geni and I can carry her safely.”

“Th-Thorns, you say?!”

This soldier hadn’t witnessed the events at the baron’s mansion, so he hadn’t known what she could do with her hair. I’d tried to persuade him that it was better to let me take her by explaining how dangerous she was, but it backfired by only making him worry more about my safety. He just wouldn’t entrust her to me. Lord Nazel, who’d been quietly listening to us so far, approached.

“Then I will carry the lady, Agnes. I would regret it for the rest of my life if anything happened to you.”

“But…”

I felt worried, but then Torre also came over.

“Lady Agnes, Lord Nazelbart. I will transport Liliane! She’s my fiancée!”

I was slack-jawed.

I feel like I just heard an incredible piece of information.

Torre had told me before that he’d suffered heartbreak before coming to Sutrena. The cause of his broken heart had been his fiancée. I’d even seen him occasionally shed tears while training. Now he called someone named Liliane his fiancée, but their engagement had most likely already been called off. Was the woman in front of us actually the aforementioned Liliane? Just what was going on here?

“Please, Lady Agnes!” Torre pleaded in his powerful voice.

I was at a loss. He was always straightforward. I gave it some thought, then turned toward him and nodded.

“Very well. But just in case, I’m going to use my matter reinforcement good luck charm on you too.”

I used my magic on Torre just as I had on Lord Nazel.

“Thank you very much, Lady Agnes. I will be off!”

Torre easily picked Liliane up and walked away. She was

bewildered and told him to wait and put her down, but he just kept walking.

“Um, Lord Nazel…should we also head back?”

“Yes, we should, Agnes. I will also carry you in my arms.”

“Huh? Eeeep!”

Lord Nazel carried me to Geni. Moreover, he didn’t just carry me in his arms, he held me so we were face-to-face, making it twice as embarrassing as usual!

We eventually got on Geni and returned to town. Lord Nazel’s subordinates were gathered in the inn right next to the public square. We decided to only stop by the baron’s estate and instead rest in the rooms we’d reserved at the inn. Some of us weren’t going to the estate at all.

At the inn, there were piles of potatoes meant for feeding manabeasts. Some of the potatoes were the ones that had been at the baron’s mansion, while others had been scattered across the thicket or along the town’s boundary by the baron’s men. Our collection team was still gathering the remaining potatoes, because they would be eaten by the thicket’s manabeasts if left alone. Incidentally, the potatoes I’d brought while riding on Geni were leftover ones from the baron’s mansion. I’d brought them with me just in case I was attacked by enemy soldiers outside the mansion.

“I’ll undo my magic and turn them back into regular potatoes.”

I returned the potatoes I had to a wooden box with the other potatoes confiscated from the baron’s mansion.

A short time after we arrived at the inn, Torre also returned with Liliane in his arms. Our soldiers who’d taken the baron and count into custody were with him as well. What was only a short distance as the wyvern flies took substantially more time to travel by foot.

All of the captives were unconscious, which also must have slowed their progress.

I shifted my attention to the exhausted Liliane and noticed that her clothes were surprisingly tattered.

“Torre, bring Lady Liliane to this room. Kelly and I will check her injuries.”

We were temporarily using one of the inn’s rooms as a first aid station for women. However, the nearest doctor was in the next

town over, so one of Lord Nazel's subordinates had left on a pegasus to fetch him. This town had a doctor as well, but he'd apparently been attacked by manabeasts a few days ago.

Torre carried Liliane to a bed but then didn't leave her side.

"Torre, I'd like to take a look at her injuries," I explained. "Could you leave for a moment?"

"Ugh, but..."

"I understand that you're worried, but men are forbidden here! Come on, get out!"

"Liliaaane!"

I forcibly kicked the reluctant Torre out of the room. Liliane sat on the bed obediently. I'd already reinforced Kelly's body, so we would be safe no matter what happened.

"Relax your shoulders, Lady Liliane. We don't mean you any harm. I'm Agnes, and this is my handmaiden, Kelly."

"Urk..."

Liliane shrank back in fear and looked up at us with obvious wariness. She was genuinely afraid of Kelly and me and had none of the fighting spirit she'd exhibited when she'd attacked Lord Nazel.

"Do you have any injuries other than your leg, Lady Liliane?"

"Leave me alone...please... It's all...over for me anyway..."

"No, I won't leave you alone. I want to hear everything from you. Why did you attack Lord Nazel?"

Liliane remained silent. Kelly and I looked at each other and sighed a little.

"Let's get you changed first. Your dress is practically shredded."

Part of her dress looked like it had probably been ripped up by her own hair, but there were also other parts that were torn and dirty. Something might have happened after she ran away. Liliane went along with everything we did, a tinge of sorrow in her eyes. I felt an air of apathy from her, like she'd simply given up not only on resisting but on everything. Kelly and I removed her dress, which had now been reduced to nothing but a rag, and I instinctively gulped at the sight of Liliane's arms. Her wrists were covered in painful-looking welts. The wounds had mostly healed, but the bruises were clearly visible.

"Are these...whip marks? They look relatively new."

There was no way I could ever mistake these for something

else. Back when I'd lived under my parents' roof, my mother, handmaiden, or tutor would whip me whenever I acted against the house's policies. Kelly also seemed to realize something upon seeing Liliane's unusual injuries. I knew she was observant about this sort of thing, because she'd quickly noticed the signs of my abuse when I'd arrived at the House of Florescruz's detached building and had informed Lord Nazel.

"She doesn't seem to have any other injuries. For now, her ankle needs treatment, Lady Agnes."

"I need to be careful not to touch her injury while I clean up the rest of her, right?"

"Correct. I'll go and prepare a change of clothes for her."

Liliane remained silent while I wiped her body with a wet towel and helped her into a new dress. Incidentally, the dress was a spare one I'd had in my luggage. I used this opportunity to ask her another question.

"I'd like you to tell me why you attacked Lord Nazel. You don't have a personal grudge against him, do you?"

Perhaps she'd relaxed a little after being with us, or maybe she was being considerate of me, but Liliane timidly nodded.

"Who asked you to do this? Was it Baron Kigyonne or one of his collaborators?"

Liliane knit her slender eyebrows painfully and clasped her hands tightly.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you. I can't exactly forgive you for trying to stab Lord Nazel, but…he's safe and sound. Nevertheless, you're looking really pale."

Liliane was clearly feeling guilty; she looked terrified by the reality that she'd been involved in a crime.

"I, I…"

I supported Liliane as her breathing got quicker and she started shivering, then decided to change the topic. Kelly had just brought over some black tea too.

"Calm down, okay? Did you know that since Lord Nazel became the margrave, Sutrena's previously crumbling judicial system has been revised?"

Lord Nazel was in the middle of reforming various aspects of Sutrena. In the past, punishments had often been handed down depending on the margrave's mood—yes, on his *mood*. People's

sentences being decided so arbitrarily was, of course, a major injustice.

"No, I don't know anything about Sutrena's laws, but I made an attempt on the margrave's life. There is no conceivable way I would be allowed to live after that," Liliane replied.

What she had just said was only natural. The murder of the lord was a serious crime in other territories too; most of the culprits were executed. That was why Connie and his parents had covered up the previous margrave's death by a manabeast.

"Yes, murder is a heavy, unforgivable crime. But you only committed attempted murder, so you won't be sentenced to death if you confess everything."

Even after my advice, Liliane stubbornly refused to come clean.

"What good would it do me to survive now? I have nothing—no status, no place to live, no way to survive."

"What do you mean? You're a count's daughter, aren't you?"

"Not anymore, no. I've been disowned!"

"Disowned?! Why?"

Kelly and I exchanged glances. Was disowning one's daughter a fad in the capital right now? I shuddered at the very thought.

"I know I am suffering the consequences of my actions, but even so, I have no way to survive now that I've been cast out destitute."

"Should we try contacting your parents to ask them to rescind your disownment?"

"It's pointless. I've been abandoned not only by my family but by my last ray of hope too. Even though I always believed in him..."

"Who are you talking about?"

As I waited for Liliane to reply, she started laughing to herself like a dam had just broken.

"Heh heh, there's no point in protecting someone who cast me away...is there? I've been such a fool." She took a deep breath and looked me straight in the eyes. "I'll tell you everything."

Liliane's story was truly unbelievable. She, a count's daughter, had been tricked by Master Robin's honeyed words and lost everything. Of course, she was by no means completely innocent, but being disowned and left to fend for herself was far too harsh a punishment for the sin of falling in love with Her Highness's fiancé. The silver lining was that, unlike Her Highness, Liliane hadn't had

physical relations with Master Robin. But when Liliane had been at a complete loss after losing it all, Master Robin had used—and subsequently discarded—her in an attempt to eliminate Lord Nazel. Since she'd only arrived at the frontier recently, she seemed unrelated to the misdeeds of the baron's clique.

"Thank you for telling me everything honestly, Lady Liliane."

But I still didn't quite understand.

Why does Master Robin direct such enmity toward Lord Nazel?

I was flabbergasted, frankly. According to Lord Nazel, the two of them had almost never interacted. And yet Master Robin wasn't satisfied with fabricating criminal allegations against Lord Nazel and having him exiled to the frontier, so he'd manipulated a desperate young lady into becoming an assassin. His actions were devoid of all reason.

"Master Robin is unimaginably cowardly."

He never got his own hands dirty but instead dragged innocent people into his schemes, and now he reigned supreme as Princess Mia's future husband. Just how many people's lives had been thrown into chaos because of him?

"At any rate, I understand your story. I will be sure to relay it to Lord Nazel, so just focus on resting and recovering from your injuries for now, okay?"

I left the rest to Kelly and exited the room, but I found Torre practically clinging to the door outside.

"Torre, you'll be the way if you stand there. Kelly won't be able to come and go."

"I'm worried about Liliane."

"Were you listening to our conversation?"

"Yes, well... I apologize for eavesdropping."

I ripped the despondent Torre off the door, and we headed to Lord Nazel together.

"You still love Lady Liliane, don't you, Torre?"

"My love for her remains unchanged!" Torre answered with sparkling eyes; I could feel genuine affection from him.

"Say, what do you love about Lady Liliane? It's fine if you don't want to tell me, but I found it marvelous that you can think so fondly of her."

"I don't mind answering; it's nothing I need to hide. I love her honest, graceful, and pure heart. And above all else, I love how

hardworking she is! She may look like an obedient and meek lady at a glance, but she's actually quite gutsy, and she also studies diligently every day."

The cause of Torre's heartbreak had been Master Robin, and he'd apparently gone to complain to the man in person, which had led to them quarreling.

"Not only am I bad with words, but I also have a short temper, so I didn't manage to tell Robin all of that when we met at the palace. Liliane is an incredible woman who works harder than anyone else!"

Torre was certainly not the fair-spoken type, but he was direct and had a pure heart.

"I'd been thinking that I'd make Liliane's life easier when we got married. Her hardworking side is wonderful, but she always looked somewhat distressed."

"I see..." I remembered the welts on Lady Liliane's wrists. "Lord Nazel and Mister Henry will be the ones to decide how to deal with Lady Liliane, but there's a part of me that feels sorry for her."

When I saw Liliane's injuries, I'd thought that she was just like me. If I'd been left to my own devices after being disowned by the House of Evantail, if Lord Nazel hadn't rescued me... How would I have ended up? If someone had gently called out to me when I'd had nothing to depend on, I probably would have reached out to them, desperately grasping at straws.

"We can't blame Lady Liliane alone for this incident, but we can't completely forgo her punishment either. Let's go discuss this with all the details."

"Yes, Lady Agnes! I will follow you anywhere!"

I walked at a quick pace to match Torre's long stride, and the two of us headed where the others were gathered: the inn's dining hall. The people from the fortress were noisily chatting away, while Lord Nazel was waiting for me at a table in the corner of the room.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Lord Nazel! I managed to hear Lady Liliane's story. She's resting in a room right now. According to Kelly's magic, she bears absolutely no malice toward us."

"No need to apologize, Agnes. I've been busy with other work and only just got to take a breather."

Lord Nazel had me sit on his lap and smiled brightly at me. Torre sat down across from us.

“Oh yes, are you hungry? There isn’t a lot of food in this town, but we have some baked sweets Mather made back at the mansion and a meal hurriedly made with the confiscated potatoes,” Lord Nazel said.

“Yes, I’d love some food. May I take some to Kelly as well?” I asked.

It turned out the fortress staff and townspeople had already eaten up the potato dishes, so I snacked on some baked sweets.

“Of course. Connie looks free, so let’s have him take the food to Kelly.”

It seemed that Lord Nazel had summoned the manabeast extermination unit immediately upon seeing Kattena’s horrible condition. Many manabeasts were nocturnal, so the manabeast exterminators were free until the sun went down, and Connie was just dozing off in a corner of the dining room.

Lord Nazel took out some baked sweets from a pouch and brought a violaberry financier—one of my favorites—up to my mouth.

“Open wide, Agnes.”

“Aah.”

“Heh heh, you’re so cute, Agnes. Let me get you something to drink too.”

“Thank you very much— Wait, no! I have more to report.” I then told Lord Nazel about Master Robin’s manipulation of Liliane, as well as her circumstances. “And so, it would seem that Master Robin is the one pulling the strings. He’s connected to Baron Kigyonne and Count Appo.”

“Mm-hmm, I see. While she happened to be at the baron’s manor, the lady was only there to target me and has nothing to do with the damages caused by the manabeasts. Still, what exactly is Master Robin thinking? Why would he go to the trouble of sending an assassin after me here at the frontier? I’m no longer Her Highness’s fiancé.”

“Indeed!”

“He should be busy with his strict training as the future prince consort, but he has enough time to meddle with Sutrena?”

Lord Nazel looked deeply curious. The education for royal consorts in Desnim was apparently awfully demanding. It was common for them to be locked up in their rooms throughout the

entire day to study, they underwent the same training as knights, and they also had to take business trips to one territory after another. Sometimes, they would even have to go to foreign nations. The consorts were subjected to rigorous training to ensure the kings or queens didn't have to be clever themselves. When Lord Nazel told me, I couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"Well, I'd like to know about Lady Liliane's punishment," I said.

"I was just thinking about that. I'm still alive, and Kelly has judged that she bears us no ill will. Therefore, I believe she shouldn't be executed."

"Really?!"

The shout came not from me but from Torre across the table.

"Yes, there is room to consider her extenuating circumstances. She's also a valuable witness for this incident, so I'd like to get her cooperation. But of course, she can't be let off scot-free."

The people of Sutrena would be watching to see how the new margrave handled incidents like this, so it certainly wouldn't do to treat her as if she were completely innocent. Although Lord Nazel was unharmed in the end, she couldn't simply be forgiven for attacking him.

"I'm thinking of applying the new system for her."

"The one where criminals have to do manual labor for a certain amount of time, you mean?"

"Exactly."

Lord Nazel and his subordinates had planned to punish criminals with manual labor, such as cultivating fruit, taking care of mountbeasts, sewing, or manufacturing furniture. Sutrena was always short on hands, so it didn't make sense to just lock up potential workers in a prison. This system would support those malefactors who were willing to work and help them more easily reintegrate into society. That was the goal, at least. They would be paid, although just a little, and their necessities would be guaranteed modestly. In cases of good conduct, they could even be allowed to work outside the prison (although still under close supervision), and they would be released earlier.

"The system was originally intended for people who'd only committed minor offenses, but I don't think it would be a problem to include her as well, since she's no longer hostile. She won't be treated like a noble, though."

Honestly, this treatment was extraordinarily lenient for someone who'd attempted to murder a margrave. The petty criminals who would do similar work were mostly the starving people who'd stolen food during the previous margrave's reign.

Torre stood up and shouted in response to the verdict.

"Thank you very much, Lord Nazelbart!"

His voice reached every corner of the inn and outside it too.

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Torre had first met Liliane when he'd visited her house after their engagement, though he'd gone there to meet her father, not her.

Liliane had been born into the House of Lumiure, a noble family which had produced numerous knights for Desnim's military for generations. The role of a lady born into the House of Lumiure was to wed a knight with a promising future, which would bring someone of excellent lineage into the family, and to be a perfectly obedient wife who never opposed her husband. The daughters of the House of Lumiure, as well as the sons who were unfit for the military arts, led harsh lives. Liliane had been no exception and was forced to undertake education that could be considered abusive.

On his way home from meeting Liliane's father, Torre had gotten awfully curious about his fiancée, so he'd secretly peeked into a certain room facing the garden; it was supposed to be Liliane's. A shocking sight had unfolded before him: Liliane was taking dance lessons in tears as her tutor scolded her for every mistake and mercilessly whipped her, while her mother and handmaidens were standing over by the wall and calling her worthless. No one in there had been on Liliane's side. Nevertheless, his crying fiancée had gritted her teeth and desperately continued her dance lessons. That sight of Liliane had left a deep impression on Torre.

After witnessing this startling event, Torre had brought up Liliane's lesson with her father. This had given away the fact that he'd sneaked a peek at her, but he'd been so angry that he didn't care. However, her father had replied without even moving an eyebrow, openly saying that her education was intended to crush

her self-esteem and turn her into an obedient woman without opinions of her own. This was, he had claimed, a necessity in order for her to find a husband and “protect” the home. Torre had wanted to scream back that this was all a bunch of nonsense. Claiming that the only way to “protect” the house was to have a wife who acted as little more than a convenient puppet was absolutely ludicrous. In Torre’s view, the head of the House of Lumiure must have developed these ridiculous notions because he was small-minded and lacking in ability.

Be that as it may, Liliane’s father was the vice captain of the knights, and thus Torre’s superior. That was why Torre had been given the position of Liliane’s fiancé. Torre had been brought up in the knight order, where the commands of one’s superiors were absolute, so he hadn’t been able to disobey his boss face-to-face. Instead, he’d decided to wait until the day he got married to Liliane and became the new head of the House of Lumiure. He’d planned to free her from the traditions of her house once he had the appropriate status.

But Torre had been naive. Liliane’s heart had already been driven to the point of hopelessness. It didn’t take long before she had turned to Robin to escape her bitter reality. And after their trysts had come to light, she’d been disowned. Left with nowhere to go, she’d fallen for Robin’s smooth talk and headed to Sutrena. She’d failed in her attempt on Nazelbart’s life and was currently under arrest.

Before Torre came to the frontier, his family had been approached with a proposal for him to marry Liliane’s younger sister. But he hadn’t been able to so easily accept marrying the younger sister just because things had fallen through with the older one; actually, the very idea had seemed downright awful to him. The proposal had very appealing terms, but he had politely turned it down. And since he was just a third son, his parents had let him do as he liked.

But even so, Torre had most likely been able to make it to Sutrena without incident thanks to the assistance of a certain individual he’d met at the palace. That man apparently went by “Bert the merchant” at the frontier, and he would scold anyone who called him anything else. Bert would likely also skillfully handle the discourse surrounding Liliane back at the capital.

“But still, thank goodness for Lord Nazelbart being such a bighearted man.”

Nazelbart had been exceptionally forgiving with Liliane, considering that she’d tried to murder him. The duke’s son, although exiled to the frontier, was a virtuous man in every sense of the word. That was exactly why Torre respected him so and felt the need to be of use to him.

After finishing his work, Torre headed to his private room in the inn to take a short nap. He’d been so busy with all sorts of overnight tasks that morning had already come. Incidentally, Nazelbart and Agnes were resting in their room together. As Torre passed in front of Liliane’s room, he hesitated about whether he should enter his ex-fiancée’s chamber or not. Kelly had left Liliane’s room to go get some sleep, so a soldier was standing guard in front of the door in the meantime.

Torre and Liliane had only talked to each other a few times, and she’d gotten a horrible impression of him from when he’d tried to assault Robin. Perhaps she didn’t want to meet him at all; that was just how pathetic of a fiancé he’d been. But he’d made up his mind. If Liliane atoned for her crime and was released, he would ask her to become his fiancée once again. He couldn’t expect a favorable response, but his affection for her still lingered.

While Torre was hesitating, the door opened and Liliane asked the guard for some water. The guard then noticed Torre, who had arrived at the perfect moment.

“Master Torre, I will go get her some water, so could I ask you to stand guard in my place for a moment?”

The guard had seen into Torre’s heart when the latter had been restlessly fidgeting in front of the door, and decided to show some tact.

“S-Sure, no problem.”

Though grateful to the guard, Torre fell into a state of confusion as he was suddenly tossed before Liliane. He was anxious to say something, but no words would come out of his mouth. Liliane then softly looked up at him and spoke first.

“You have my sincerest apologies, Master Torre. You were completely right, yet I still foolishly did exactly as Robin wanted.”

Torre’s mind was still in disorder as he answered.

“It’s all in the past. Besides, I also have things I need to reflect upon. I should have noticed how you felt much earlier. Despite being your fiancé, I was too dense to notice just how much pressure you were under, even though I’d actually witnessed your grueling efforts in your manor.”

“So you were aware of my hardships? I never told you about my life, so of course you wouldn’t know the full extent of it. Don’t blame yourself.”

“I suppose I wasn’t a man you could ask for advice. I knew about your abusive education, but I was too afraid of my superior to make the decision to save you right away.”

“Please don’t worry about me anymore. Even now, I am only still alive thanks to Lord Nazelbart’s magnanimity. I’m just a commoner who’s lost everything and has nowhere to belong.”

Liliane was still trapped in solitude. She had no one to rely on and spent every day pushing and blaming herself. That would never change unless Torre, the only one who understood her circumstances and could act to help her, took action.

“Liliane,” he replied hastily, “this may be a cruel thing to tell you when you’ve only known your parents’ estate and the palace, but a place to belong isn’t something that will just be given to you if you simply wait. You have to find a role you can play and create a place for yourself.”

“Is…that so?”

“However, if you atone for your crimes and become a free woman and still can’t find somewhere to belong, don’t hesitate to come to my side.”

“Master Torre?”

“I still love you, Liliane. You’re the most hardworking person I know, and more straightforward than anyone.”

Everything Liliane had learned wasn’t pointless. Torre believed it would support her in her life from now on.

“I will be waiting for the day you atone for your crime and walk free again.”

“It would seem that I’ve overlooked something very important. Thank you, Master Torre. Your feelings are more than enough.”

“I’m serious! I want you to be my wife!”

Torre proposed at the top of his lungs. His voice naturally resounded throughout the entire inn. His plan for them to get

engaged after Liliane was released had already vanished from his mind.

“You are putting me in a tough spot. I won’t be released for at least a few years. I will be past marriageable age at the time.”

“I’ll still wait!”

“You’re sure to find a nice woman by then.”

“Never! I want you!”

Liliane’s eyes began to water as she faced Torre’s strong determination.

“You really…don’t have a good eye for women, do you?”

“That’s not true!” he emphatically declared.

The two of them looked at each other quietly for a moment. More and more spectators were gradually arriving to watch over them, but those two didn’t seem to notice.



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With the incident in Kattena resolved, Nazelbart and his party returned to their estate in the center of Sutrena. After all sorts of processes were complete, Count Appo and Baron Kigyonne were stripped of their noble status and were thrown in a Sutrena prison for serious criminals, along with all their collaborators.

Count Appo was succeeded by his very young son. The second prince negotiated with the king to have an advisor dispatched to help the young heir until he came of age. The prince's convenient intervention seemed too good to be true, so there was likely something else going on behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, Baron Kigyonne only had daughters and no proper heir, and since he was only a life peer, his remaining family members had to go out and work. The money he acquired illegally was all confiscated, and his luxurious estate was sold to Bert. There was some concern about the future of his third daughter, Rebecca, who'd shown up for the maid interviews, but she'd received a quality education as a noble, so if she turned over a new leaf, she shouldn't be troubled for employment.

The young nobles of low rank who'd been gathered at the baron's estate were indulging in luxuries with their parents' money, but they didn't have a direct hand in any wrongdoings. Although they weren't taken into custody immediately, as Baron Kigyonne's other crimes were investigated, other nobles' crimes also came to the surface one after the other, and many heads of noble families were arrested in quick succession. Their houses largely followed a path toward dissolution similar to the baron's.

Despite everything that had happened, the manabeast countermeasures implemented by Nazelbart, Agnes, Torre, and Connie proved successful, so the manabeast damage to the town of Kattena was drastically reduced. After that, Liliane was sent to an establishment for minor criminals and started her life of working like a commoner. The establishment allowed visitors, so Torre was already restless.

I should caution him later not to barge in uninvited too often and cause the people there trouble, Nazelbart thought.

After a busy time of traveling back and forth between Kattena,

the fortress, and his estate, a day when Nazelbart could relax finally came. He was determined to get some rest today at any cost, because he'd had very little time to spend together with his wife recently.

Sutrena was located at the southern tip of Desnim. Its climate differed slightly from that of the other territories, which all had four seasons. Sutrena was warm all year round and was split between a dry season with continuous sunny days and a rainy season with heavy rainfall in the mornings and evenings. The dry season had just ended, and the rainy season was quickly approaching. The temperature tended to be higher during the rainy season.

Nazelbart sat down on a chair on the terrace as he looked at the sunny garden right after the rain. Agnes was letting Geni play in the garden pool the previous margrave had built. The fenced-in Dunk watched from a short distance away. She belonged to a species of manabeast called grani and seemed to have grown accustomed to Agnes, who sometimes gave her carrots and patted her head. However, she hadn't taken to Nazelbart, perhaps because he'd captured her, and was still vigilant around him.

"Lord Nazel! Are you done with work?"

Agnes noticed him and rushed over with a smile. When Nazelbart saw her—or more precisely, when he saw her attire—he froze where he sat. Her blouse had gotten drenched by the pool water, so her undergarments were visible through it.

"Agnes, put my coat on right this instant!"

"Excuse me? Don't you mind your coat getting wet, though?"

"It's fine! Kelly, arrange a swimsuit for Agnes immediately. One that exposes as little skin as possible."

Recently, playing in pools had become a status symbol for nobles in the capital, and swimsuits were especially popular among young people.

"Lady Agnes's measurements have already been taken and her swimsuit has been ordered. It should arrive tomorrow," Kelly responded perfectly. She'd refrained from intruding on her lord and lady and was standing a discreet distance away.

Agnes had no interest in noble trends; she had simply ordered a swimsuit because she wanted Geni to have some fun. She also hoped that if Dunk got used to him, the two manabeasts might

even start playing in the water together.

“Won’t you join me in the water, Lord Nazel? It’s nice and cool.”

With Nazelbart’s adorable wife looking at him with sparkling eyes, he yielded in less than a second.

“Let’s go!”

Yes, time to bathe together! And so, Nazelbart spent a fulfilling day off in the pool with Agnes.

The next day, Nazelbart was in his office at the mansion when he heard that Bert had come to deliver Agnes’s swimsuit, which shook his composure.

Kelly talked about ordering a swimsuit, but I didn’t expect him *to be responsible for it.*

Although there were few merchants at the frontier, Nazelbart felt that Kelly was a little too biased in favor of Bert. He speculated that there was some deep bond between the two of them.

“Sutrena doesn’t have any swimsuit stores aimed at nobles, so the alternative merchants she could have dealt with are limited, but still…”

Nazelbart had his concerns over Bert. He claimed to be a merchant, but he looked *very* similar to someone else Nazelbart had once met. At first, Nazelbart had thought he was just imagining it, but the more he thought about it, the likelier it became that they were actually the same person. Therefore, after returning from Kattena, he had confirmed the facts with a mutual acquaintance.

“It really is him.”

Nazelbart had confirmed that “Bert the merchant” was just an alias used by Desnim’s first prince, Bertrand. Their first and last meeting had been when Nazelbart had gone to the palace to start his prince consort education. Bertrand was supposedly a frail prince who was afflicted with a serious disease and could rarely leave his room. He was said to be in such poor health that he was constantly bedridden, and the only one allowed in and out of his room was his wife, whom he’d married for political reasons. That was why he had nothing to do with the struggle for the throne, and most of the citizens had even forgotten he existed.

“Was all of that a lie?”

The prince had disguised himself as a merchant and was

making a killing at the frontier. Most recently, it appeared that he'd made a significant amount of money by being in charge of disposing of Baron Kigyonne's property after the incident.

Nazelbart also surmised that Bertrand had been the one behind the second prince's recent actions. Leonardo was fundamentally apathetic toward others and didn't care about anything else as long as his own life was safe. He'd never had any political backing from the moment he'd been born, and though he'd made that part of his survival strategy, it made him very unreliable as a second prince. However, Leonardo had recently started forming his own faction. Nazelbart had felt something was off ever since the second prince's invitation to Count Lugre's estate.

Since Bert had appeared with such perfect timing, Nazelbart was thinking of asking him about his circumstances. He was also concerned about Agnes's swimsuit, but he first wanted to know why Bert was masquerading as a merchant in Sutrena. As he got up from his seat to go confirm the facts with Bert, he heard a knock on the door.

"Lord Nazel?"

Nazelbart heard his wife's voice from the other side of the door, so he jogged over to her.

"What's the matter, Ag—"

Nazelbart's words got stuck in his throat. Both his composure and reason almost vanished beyond the stars. Agnes stood before him in her new swimsuit—a very revealing one that exposed parts of her body he couldn't normally see.

"What do you think? Does it suit me? Bert gifted it to me along with the one I purchased. He said that I should show you because it would make you happy."

"That little..."

Agnes looked uneasy in response to Nazelbart's words.

"Is it not to your liking?"

"No, I absolutely love it! You're charming no matter what you wear, Agnes."

Nazelbart hugged his wife, forced her back to her room, and headed to the drawing room where Bert was apparently waiting.

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After I changed out of my swimsuit, I went to the drawing room where Bert and the rest were. For some reason, Lord Nazel told me that I shouldn't meet Bert while wearing my swimsuit. Lord Nazel and I sat side by side across from Bert, who was sitting on a sofa, while Kelly quietly stood behind us, with her usual blank expression.

"Were you pleased by your wife's swimsuit?" Bert asked with a grin.

I doubted Lord Nazel thought much of my swimsuit. After all, he'd been engaged to Princess Mia, a rather voluptuous woman. I was just a bumpkin, very obviously lacking in many aspects compared to her.

Lord Nazel looked at Bert as he cleared his throat, then started speaking in a formal tone.

"Could you please stop the games now, Your Highness Prince Bertrand?"

"Hmm?"

The room instantly fell into audible-pin-drop silence.

Bertrand was the name of the first prince of Desnim. However, I'd heard that he was in terrible physical condition and lay bedridden in his room at the palace.

Bert does *have the same blond hair as the royal family, and I've always thought that he has a far too showy air about him for a merchant.*

After a moment, the air surrounding the grinning Bert became sharp and dignified. He straightened his posture and replied to Lord Nazel in a stately tone.

"So you've already noticed? You're no fun, Nazelbart."

His suspicious merchant attitude had completely vanished.

I can't believe Bert really is the first prince!

Lord Nazel looked back at Prince Bertrand with an unconvinced expression. I was taken aback and simply stared at His Highness's transformation. Perhaps he noticed my reaction, because he turned to me next and relaxed his lips.

"I'm sorry, Lady Agnes. Are you surprised to learn that I'm the bedridden first prince?"

Of course I was surprised, but I also didn't understand *why* he'd do this. Why would a prince act like a merchant? Why was he here at the frontier when he was so sickly? Did no one around him stop

him? Questions endlessly whirled around in my head.

Lord Nazel also seemed perplexed as he asked His Highness a question.

“Excuse me, but are you feeling well?”

“Ha ha ha, that’s your first question? You’re so kindhearted. The story about me being frail is made up, so don’t worry about it. I’ve only pretended to be bedridden because Her Majesty has poisoned me many times in the past. Having someone after my life was annoying, so I decided to confine myself to bed so she’d see me as less of a threat. Thanks to that, I can live freely; practically no one comes to check up on me for her anymore.”

If I remembered correctly, the first prince’s mother wasn’t Her Majesty but a concubine. There was a rumor that she’d been the woman His Majesty loved most, but she’d passed away when Prince Bertrand had still been little.

“Has no one noticed that you’ve slipped out of the palace?”

“There’s no problem. My wife is deceiving everyone with illusion magic. She can only create two illusory people at the same time, and having them make complex movements is difficult, but it all works out since I’m supposed to be bedridden. The people who occasionally come to check up on me are fooled by her illusion. And no one is really all that interested in me anyway.”

His Highness then told us the full history of the succession conflict. Her Majesty and Her Highness had strong political backing, and His Majesty was noncommittal about his heir. The two princes—the first born to a concubine, the second born to a commoner—lacked the influence to challenge the queen’s stranglehold on power. In order to bridge the gap, Prince Bertrand had been steadily gathering evidence of crimes committed by people in the queen’s faction while also assembling allies.

In the midst of that maneuvering, the scandal surrounding Lord Nazel’s broken engagement had erupted, and His Highness had thought it presented the perfect opportunity to advance his own goals. He schemed to take advantage of the engagement between Master Robin and Her Highness in order to oust the queen’s faction from power. Some might judge His Highness’s cloak-and-dagger machinations harshly, but he maintained that it was all just and necessary.

“So it wasn’t a coincidence that you were in the vicinity of Baron

Kigyonne's estate?" Lord Nazel asked.

"That's correct. I learned that you were planning to act, so I went there ahead of time. It looked like I would be able to grab hold of Robin's weakness."

"Is that so? I've also heard the story from Liliane. I'd hate to have another assassin sent after me, so I'd like to take measures to prevent that."

His Highness nodded deeply in response to Lord Nazel, then adopted a troubled look.

"Though I was acting separately from you, I more or less understand the recent events. I've also acquired evidence that Count Appo and Baron Kigyonne are connected to Robin, but it would be a bad idea to reveal that information now. Any misstep could lead to you being hushed up by the royal family just like when you were exiled."

"I hope you do your best with that, Your Highness." Lord Nazel shot him a defiant smile.

"Don't ask for the impossible. As things stand, Leonardo and I both lack authority. His Majesty would just turn a blind eye as we're crushed underfoot. We need our opposition to do something so spectacularly idiotic that His Majesty will have no choice but to act. If I could get a foothold in the palace's internal administration, I might have more options for how to proceed."

For now, all Prince Bertrand could do was instruct Prince Leonardo on how to steadily corner Her Majesty's faction. For Lord Nazel and me, having Master Robin stop interfering with the frontier was more important than what happened to Her Majesty and her faction. Even so, Lord Nazel was listening to His Highness with a serious expression. It seemed likely he wouldn't mind lending a hand if their interests happened to align.

"Well, that's the gist of it. Since you're also technically part of the second prince's faction, we'll be counting on you if something happens," His Highness said.

"I'd prefer if that 'something' didn't happen at all. Incidentally, *you* were the one who recommended the swimsuit Agnes was wearing earlier, right?"

His Highness looked puzzled for a moment, then doubled up, roaring with laughter.

"I thought you'd enjoy it, so I specifically picked it out for her!

Nevertheless, you've become a pretty interesting guy since coming to the frontier. I'm happy you show more humanity now, Nazelbart!"

"Please don't give my wife any more bizarre attire to wear."

"But you *did* like it. Also, you can't return the swimsuit. Oh, Kelly was the one who did everything to get your wife changed."

"Obviously!"

Kelly, who was standing by the wall, averted her eyes but otherwise remained as expressionless as ever. It seemed like His Highness was quite crafty. However, Lord Nazel wasn't one to take his teasing sitting down.

While they continued going back and forth, I spoke to Kelly.

"So, have you known His Highness for a long time?"

Kelly closed her eyes and bowed apologetically.

"Yes. I only got a job at the palace thanks to coincidentally meeting His Highness in the city one day. I worked as his wife's maid at first, then was unexpectedly poached by Princess Mia."

"It seems the two of you have made contact many times since you started living on the frontier."

"The princess consort was worried about me, so she continued to check up on me through His Highness," Kelly said apologetically.

"Please don't blame Kelly for keeping this a secret until now. She's loyal to you, Nazelbart, but I forbade her from saying anything. I was still debating whether I should recruit you, a member of the House of Florescruz, as an ally," His Highness said.

"No, I won't blame her. Kelly is a valuable member of this house and an excellent handmaiden. Her connection to you doesn't somehow negate her dedication. Besides, she hasn't done anything to harm us."

I had never suspected Kelly of anything, but it seemed that Lord Nazel had been observing all sorts of things without my knowledge.

"Now, Nazelbart. I would also like to ask for your cooperation."

"You've already practically forced me into Prince Leonardo's faction, haven't you?"

"Sure, there's that, but I'd also like you to cooperate with me directly. It wouldn't be a bad idea for you, right?"

However, Lord Nazel didn't seem particularly enthusiastic. He

ran his fingers through his refined red hair as he turned his uneasy gaze to the floor.

“To be perfectly honest with you, I don’t care about anywhere else as long as the frontier is peaceful. I normally wouldn’t want to get involved in the royal family’s disputes.”

“That moron Robin will definitely meddle with you again, you know?”

“Yes, and therein lies a puzzle. He shouldn’t have any reason to care about an opponent he’s already taken down.”

“He’s a really nasty fellow. But his methods are also very sloppy. Soon, everything will start coming apart at the seams. How much more will the royal family be able to hide?” His Highness’s eyes were filled with conviction.

“My cooperation with Your Highness comes with certain conditions. No harm will come to my mother or brother Julian, and when this is over, Agnes and I will be able to live here in peace. That’s the bare minimum I would like you to promise.”

“Do you have no intention of returning to the capital?”

“None at all. I’ve taken quite a liking to Sutrena.”

“Well, that’s fine by me, so please lend me a hand. Just like in the recent incident, there’s a high chance Robin or his minions will approach you again.”

“Very well. We’ve already gathered all the evidence from the recent happenings with the baron and count.”

Lord Nazel and His Highness were deep in conversation for some time. I thought that continuing to listen in would be improper, so I left the room with Kelly. After we returned to my room, Kelly started talking in a more somber tone than usual.

“I deeply apologize for keeping everything a secret from you, Lady Agnes. I hid His Highness’s identity and invited him into your home as a merchant.”

I paused to think for a moment before letting Kelly know what I thought on the matter.

“It’s all right, Kelly. You couldn’t disobey an order from His Highness, right? Besides, I was never inconvenienced in the slightest, and I’m thankful that we managed to dispose of all the clutter in the mansion.”

“But…”

“My handmaidens back at the House of Evantail called me

worthless. They all did exactly what my mother told them to; I couldn't trust any of them. They looked the other way even when I got injured. You're the first one to worry about me. I feel truly happy to have someone care for me so." I gripped Kelly's sleeve and continued, "So please don't quit, okay?"

Kelly turned her expressionless yet somehow perplexed gaze toward me.

"Okay..."

As usual, her facial muscles showed no movement at all, but to me, her eyes looked just a little more moist than normal.



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Around that same time, Robin was relaxing in his manor at the capital after skipping out on his prince consort education at the palace, his face yet again twisted in displeasure. His subordinate was kneeling at his feet with head bowed.

“So not only did Liliane fail to assassinate Nazelbart, those morons Kigyonne and Appo were arrested? Are you serious?”

“Indeed. Sutrena is now fully under Nazelbart’s rule. Any further interference on our end will prove difficult.”

“Good grief, not a single one of them can do a decent job. I’m totes angry now!”

Robin crushed a piece of violaberry pie that was on a plate before him as usual, then licked off the cream that trickled down his fingers. His etiquette teacher wasn’t there to nag him.

“Master Robin, don’t you think it’s unnecessary to concern yourself with Nazelbart now that he’s been exiled to the frontier? Her Majesty and Her Highness’s status is set in stone; they even have the support of both ducal houses. That animated doll should be too occupied with protecting his territory out in the boondocks to interfere with you.”

“But he took out Kigyonne and Appo even though I was helping them out. I can’t stand Nazelbart when he somehow makes everything work out well, again and again! Not when I’m having such a hard time!”

His subordinate wisely held his tongue. If he shot back with a comment like “You’re just suffering the consequences of your actions” or “When did you ever have a hard time?” his punishment wouldn’t stop at merely being fired.

“Oh man, being Her Highness’s husband-to-be is surprisingly troublesome. That prince consort education is such a pain.”

Robin had run away from that strict education during his first day. The queen had the real authority in the palace, so it wasn’t as if he needed to make any political decisions anyway. As a result, he didn’t feel the need to do anything at all.

I’m fine being a puppet! I can just give all the annoying work to my subordinates!

He only wanted to live in luxury as the next king’s father.

“I’ve gotta get revenge on Nazelbart somehow. Oh yes, I have an idea for the *perfect* person to handle this! I’m *so* well-informed!”

His dim-witted subordinate was looking at him inquisitively, so Robin started explaining his plan.

“That nonsensical group, the second prince’s faction or whatever, has started becoming active in the capital, right? It’s nowhere even close to rivaling Her Majesty’s faction, so we *could* ignore it, but…it’s kind of annoying, so we should just gather all the members together and get rid of them in one fell swoop! Can you get in touch with the people of a certain house?”

The subordinate’s expression became more and more perplexed.

“They’re hostile to the second prince. Let’s incite them to do our dirty work and have Nazelbart perish along with the rest of the second prince’s faction. I’m such a genius!”

Satisfied with the order he’d just given, Robin started getting ready to pay Mia a courtesy call. Capable men like him were extremely busy. He got on a carriage and headed to the palace, then to the princess’s room, where he found a displeased Mia holding her growing belly and pouting at him.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Mia?”

Robin was certain she’d be happy to see him, so he started sweating a little. He couldn’t afford for her to abandon him at this point.

“Everything, Robin! How about you put your hand on your heart and think long and hard about it?”

Robin was at a loss. Far too many questionable acts came to mind!

“If you don’t understand, let me give you a hint. Maria. Macy. Layla. Liliane. Are these names any help?”

“Eep!”

Those were the names of the ladies Robin had cheated on Mia with, flirting at a minimum and sometimes *much* more.

“Heh heh, don’t worry, I’ve already taken measures against them. I put pressure on their houses and got them disowned. They should all be at the Convent by now—not that I’ll let them get off so lightly.” Mia’s eyes were burning with jealousy.

I was aware of Liliane’s circumstances, but I never imagined Mia would go after all the women I got close to. She’s freakin’ scary!

Robin quivered as he thought of the faces of all the other ladies he still associated with.

It may be difficult for me to enjoy other women's company for a while.

He slumped his shoulders as he realized that being the princess's future husband was by no means an easy job.

Chapter 5: Madam Bumpkin and Her Brother in Tights

As the evening sun dyed the land orange, Marquess Michael Evantail slammed a table in his mansion with all his might.

“Damn it! Damn it all! Our ban on attending formal events hasn’t been lifted yet! At this rate, we’ll become isolated from high society!”

When the servants passing by saw his wholly ungentlemanly behavior, they secretly shuddered. Michael was in a terrible mood because he’d been banned from all official functions ever since a minor incident he’d been part of at a gathering organized by the second prince. His wife, Samantha, couldn’t simply watch him be so distressed and tried talking to him.

“Please calm yourself, dear, and mind your manners.”

“Shut up! Don’t order the head of this house around! Agnes and that filthy criminal are to blame for everything!”

Michael slammed the table again, and Samantha and the servants flinched and shivered.

Hidden from view, a small silhouette watched them. It was Paul, the son and heir of the House of Evantail, who was hunkering down as he waited for the storm to pass. As he had seen how his father had recently started finding fault with anyone and everyone, he had realized that his sister’s presence had been akin to a breakwater, shielding the rest of the house. Paul still couldn’t respect her, but his feelings toward her had grown more complicated ever since he had come to understand that she’d been taking the brunt of their father’s rage alone.

After the Evantails had been kicked out of the second prince’s party, Paul had begun attending noble gatherings without his parents. His parents were still banned from formal events, but Paul had been shown mercy since he was still a kid, and his position as his house’s heir had also been taken into account. Consequently, an exception had been made for him, and he’d been allowed to attend parties. His family name had been damaged because of the second prince, so Paul felt even more pressure to

secure a fiancée as quickly as he could. He was eager to find a partner soon to avoid winding up in a desperate situation like his sister had been in. His parents would exchange letters with another family in advance, and then Paul would attend an event and approach the lady they'd chosen for him.

Paul's first party had been a small gathering of children who hadn't yet had their high society debuts. He'd been in high spirits, dressed proudly in traditional attire for his first ever get-together with his peers. However, his expectations had soon been betrayed.

"Urgh, what the heck is he wearing?" a noble boy had said with a mocking expression as he pointed at Paul. In response, another boy, likely his friend, had started chuckling. The two boys' eyes had been glued to his tights.

"Did he actually forget his pants? Who would attend a party in just tights?"

Paul had been indignant at the boys' discourtesy.

"With all due respect, this is the proper attire of the House of Evantail. Wearing something as flimsy as pants is what would truly be weird!"

"What is this guy talking about?"

"My father always dresses like this as well. All my relatives prefer tights that show the lines of your body."

The two boys had stared at Paul with their mouths hanging open. A sweet girl who happened to be passing by had noticed the scene and approached them. While she hadn't been wearing good old traditional makeup, she had been beautiful and charming. She'd been none other than Paul's fiancée candidate.

"You shouldn't say things like that, you two. That's proper noble attire," she'd chided the boys with a smile.

Paul's spirits had instantly lifted when he heard her.

I'd expect nothing less from the fiancée my parents picked out.

He'd thought that people with a proper upbringing could tell right from wrong. However, what the girl had said next thrust him into a bottomless abyss.

"Though these are clothes from around a century ago."

The two boys had looked amused and started making a racket when they heard her.

"Come to think of it, my great-grandfather is dressed just like that in his portrait!"

“Oh, really? Then why is he,” the boy had said, gesturing at Paul, “dressed in something so old-fashioned? Is it to stand out? Or does he just like exposing his body?”

“No, no, he’s just part of the House of Evantail. Their eccentric and bizarre appearance is one of their peculiarities.”

“The House of Evantail? Oh yeah, I’ve heard of them too! My older brother once told me that their men all wear tights, while the women look as pale as ghosts! And I also heard that the current head of the house and his wife insulted His Highness the second prince, so they aren’t allowed to participate in noble gatherings.”

“Then what’s a member of their family doing here?”

“He’s a kid and also needs to search for a fiancée, so he was exempted from the house’s punishment as a show of compassion.”

Paul hadn’t been able to contain himself any longer and rushed away from them, his mind in a state of confusion. Their laughter had resounded behind him as he left.

“There’s no way he’ll be able to find a fiancée when he sticks out like a sore thumb.”

“I agree. I would never want to join the House of Evantail,” the girl had said.

Paul had been utterly baffled; she had joined the others in making fun of the House of Evantail despite being his fiancée candidate. He’d felt like the world he’d been living in until now had been turned upside down. He’d thought he was perfect since he was constantly praised as such by his parents, relatives, butler, and servants.

“How? Why?”

Not only had none of his peers dressed properly, but they’d also taken advantage of his parents’ absence to openly insult him. No matter where he walked around the venue, everyone around him had reacted the same and treated him coldly. He’d been looking forward to this party, but now everything looked faded.

Paul had suddenly remembered his sister’s behavior. Back when she was still living with them, she’d always hated the house’s traditional outfits, and she’d kept telling their mother that she wanted at least one new dress or pair of shoes. She’d also asked her handmaidens to make her makeup lighter, but they’d always refused. Paul used to wonder why his sister had wanted new, low-

quality clothes when she'd had their grandmother's outfits, or why she'd been so obsessed with wearing less makeup, but he'd now glimpsed part of the reason for her rebellious attitude toward their house.

However, Paul had felt that accepting his sister's views would be tantamount to giving in to those foolish nobles who'd ridiculed him. He'd refused to yield and started telling the other attendees about the virtues of the House of Evantail's traditions, just like his parents had when they would curse at his sister and lecture her about their house's venerable heritage. But all Paul had managed was to further isolate himself.

After receiving this major shock during his first party, Paul had come to hate the idea of attending any more gatherings of high society, even though he'd scorned his sister for repeatedly failing to find a fiancé. While he realized this way of thinking was unacceptable for his house's heir, he didn't care about finding a fiancée anymore.

When his mother—dressed in a heavy dress and wearing thick makeup as usual—saw Paul looking so miserable, she tried to console him.

"Dear me, Paul, don't let your past failures drag you down forever. The incident with Lady Celine is unfortunate, but you were just nervous because it was your first party. Unlike Agnes, you're an outstanding child, so you're going to be just fine."

Paul wanted to shout that he obviously wasn't going to be fine, but he couldn't say something like that to his mother. He was the outstanding heir of this house, after all. His pride wouldn't allow him to tell them the truth about how he'd been thoroughly ridiculed at the party and returned home without achieving anything. And the fact that this would most likely continue in the future was even harder to put into words. Why did he have to suffer through such a miserable experience?

Paul bit his lip and ran to his room. When he passed in front of the drawing room on his way there, he heard his father and an unfamiliar man talking, so it seemed that they had a guest. The House of Evantail rarely got visitors besides their relatives. Paul's father had told him that during his great-grandfather's era, nobles had constantly been visiting this territory, but now, out of respect

for the great House of Evantail, they'd changed their policy and only visited the Evantail estate in cases of emergency. His insolent sister hadn't believed their father, and after attending that party, Paul had started feeling reluctant to accept their parents' words at face value like he used to.

Paul got curious about the conversation in the drawing room, so he strained his ears and heard an astonishing exchange unfold.

"Good grief, Prince Leonardo is truly hopeless if he makes light of the House of Evantail like this."

"I wholeheartedly agree, Lord Evantail. Would you consider switching sides to our faction? You will be asked to take care of some *unpleasant* work, though."

"That's not a bad proposal. After my grandfather, the assistant of the prime minister at the time, passed away, my father was stripped of his authority by Her Majesty's family and was driven away to this rural area. Ever since, this country has only entrusted my family with menial tasks. That's why I joined Prince Leonardo's faction instead of Her Highness's. But I can't remain silent after his insolent treatment of our house. At the end of the day, he's still only the child of a woman of low status."

"Does that mean you are willing to cooperate with us?"

"Yes, I will assist Master Robin. But I'm currently not allowed to show my face in public."

"You don't need to worry about that. Although it was technically a royal decree, the order was given by the impotent second prince. You should have no problem participating in events that he's not attending."

"Of course, we could still have Paul attend any party His Highness will be at."

When his own name unexpectedly came up in the conversation, Paul got so surprised that his heart started loudly pounding away in his chest.

"Urk…"

Paul resisted the urge to shout that this would be impossible for him and hung his head. He'd already had enough of crowded places. Attending a gathering with the second prince as the representative of the House of Evantail sounded even more daunting. It was evident that this would be a worse, more painful experience than the previous party.

No, I don't ever want to do that!

Paul couldn't bear to stay there any longer and rushed out of the manor. But he had no idea where to go, so he could only wander aimlessly close to the estate. The territory the House of Evantail ruled was rural, but there was a small town just beyond their estate—a lonely place of old diners, inns, general stores, and residences that had been standing there for generations. As Paul walked among the people, someone called out to him. It was a suspicious man dressed like a merchant, his glittering blond hair fluttering in the wind.

"Oh? Does that outfit mean you're from the House of Evantail?"

"Who are you?! You look really suspicious."

"I'm not a suspicious person, not at all. I'm just a passing merchant. By the way, is something troubling you? It seems like you've been going around in circles for quite some time."

"I…"

Upon realizing that he'd been watched this entire time, Paul averted his eyes awkwardly.

A moment later, another person joined them—a tall, beautiful woman with reddish hair hanging down to her back, dressed in the kind of flashy outfit one never saw in this territory. She looked to be around the same age as the merchant.

"We'll be departing for the frontier soon, Bert. We've gotten a grasp on their movements, so we can leave the rest to our subordinates. Hmm? Who's this boy?"

"Oh, Latriche. He's apparently the son of the House of Evantail."

"Why is someone like him loitering around here? What should we do?"

As Paul listened to their conversation, his attention was drawn to Latriche's mention of "the frontier." In Desnim, the only place people called "the frontier" was Sutrena, the territory his sister now lived in.

"Are you two going to the frontier? Are you perhaps talking about Sutrena?"

"We are."

"Then please take me there with you!"

Bert and Latriche looked at each other in surprise when faced with Paul's desperate request.

"I can pay you! Please! I have no other option!"

Paul had few close acquaintances; his sister was the only person who came to mind besides his parents. He had no desire to ask the incompetent Agnes for help, but he did feel like she owed it to him to do something about this situation. After all, his current suffering was all her fault. He wouldn't be satisfied unless he gave her a piece of his mind.

"Well, well, this is an interesting development. Let's take him along, Bert," Latriche said in a resonant, calm voice. She had her arms folded in front of her and the corners of her mouth were raised into a faint smile.

Paul felt a light shine in his heart when he heard those words.

"I won't help you if Na—if *Lord* Nazelbart comes to hate you for this, Latriche."

"I hear that Lady Agnes is a considerate woman. I doubt things will turn out poorly."

Bert spent a moment in thought until he finally nodded at her.

"All right. He's just a kid, so he shouldn't cause much trouble."

The two of them formally introduced themselves to Paul as Bert, a merchant, and Latriche, a noble lady. Bert was apparently in the middle of transporting Latriche to the frontier at her parents' request.

"What would a lady like you do in Sutrena?" Paul asked, his head tilted in confusion.

"I'm going to purchase some of their popular violaberry jam," Latriche replied. That wasn't exactly a task befitting a proper noble lady to undertake personally, but she didn't seem to care and just hummed merrily. A lady of marriageable age going to the frontier alone would also be unthinkable for a member of the House of Evantail.

"By the way, young man, do your parents know about this excursion?" Latriche asked.

Paul gulped and couldn't get any words out, so Bert replied in a cheerful voice in his place.

"I doubt he's told them. There's no way Lord Evantail would allow it."

Bert was exactly right. Paul had decided to secretly leave the Evantail estate without telling his parents anything.

"But people will get worried if the marquess's son suddenly disappears. Have you left them a note or the like?"

“No, I haven’t… Oh, that’s right!”

Paul whistled, and his carrier pigeon, Pidgy, came swooping in from the estate. Pidgy was a precious pet to Paul, who didn’t have any friends. They were buddies who took strolls in the air together.

“Please deliver this letter to my father, Pidgy. I’ll tie it to your leg.”

“Coo-coo!”

“I’m leaving this to you.”

Entrusted with Paul’s handwritten letter, Pidgy vigorously flew back to the estate.

Afterward, Bert and Latriche kindly arranged to transport Paul with them all the way to Sutrena. Bert’s magic was called storage, a truly valuable ability that allowed him to manage all of their luggage. He could apparently also place himself inside his storage. It was incredibly useful in case he needed to hide. And then, to Paul’s great surprise, Bert took out two mountbeasts from his storage and told Paul to get on.

“Riding mountbeasts outside the frontier is illegal!”

“Going by carriage would take an absurd amount of time. These two are properly trained, so it will all be fine.”

Latriche had already straddled her mountbeast and pulled on the reins. The magnificent pegasus with a wavy blue-gray mane whinnied in a manner Paul felt sure was mocking when it looked at him.

“Wha—”

“You will be riding with me, Lord Paul. Latriche is a reckless, dangerous rider.”

Bert pulled Paul’s arm from behind as the boy moved to scold Latriche’s uppity pegasus, and placed him on the second mountbeast, a white pegasus.

“All right, we’re off!”

At Bert’s signal, the two pegasi galloped toward the sky in unison. Riding on a pegasus flying at incredible speed was nothing but a terrifying experience for Paul. But compared to Latriche’s rampaging pegasus, Bert’s steed was far, far preferable.

And so, Paul arrived at the central town of Sutrena much faster than he normally would have. Bert and Latriche dropped him off in front of the margrave’s estate, then continued flying off somewhere. Paul scowled at the gate in front of the towering

mansion as he floated in midair.

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Michael Evantail, the head of the House of Evantail, was fuming. He was clutching a letter written by his son, Paul, in one of his hands.

“Father, mother, there is something troubling me at the moment, so I have decided to take a trip. I plan to visit my elder sister. Please refrain from getting involved in disreputable activities simply because Prince Leonardo embarrassed you. You will bring shame upon the name of our venerable House of Evantail,” the message read.

Michael’s wife, Samantha, was flustered, unable to accept the fact that her son had left. Michael couldn’t wrap his mind around the contents of the letter either.

“Nooo! Paul couldn’t have run away from home! And he said he’s going to see Agnes? What kind of sick joke is this?!”

“Silence. Shut your mouth or I’ll shut it for you, Samantha!”

Their son’s disappearance had caused the couple’s relationship to become even more strained than it had already been, and the handmaidens and other servants shivered some distance away.

“I’m going to bring Paul back.”

The other residents of the mansion could only nod in response to Michael. Samantha also hurried to voice her agreement.

“You’re right, we can’t let him be subjected to the frontier’s terrible influence. Paul is vital to the revival of the House of Evantail, so we absolutely need his cooperation with Master Robin’s plan. I think he’s confused about something, but I’m sure talking to him will bring him back to his senses.”

Agnes was no longer there to act as their scapegoat. At this point, everyone except Michael realized that it was only thanks to her sacrifice—serving as an outlet for the marquess’s temper—that their house had barely functioned until recently.

“But still, Master Robin is truly unreasonable to ask for help in human trafficking,” Samantha said.

“If that’s the loyalty test for joining Her Majesty’s faction, I have no choice but to oblige. Terminating his affairs and selling off his own lovers makes him seem like a selfish future prince

consort…but this might be a fitting end for ladies of such poor character.”

“I agree. They’re a disgrace to ladies everywhere for laying their hands on Her Highness’s fiancé.”

“Quite a number of women are being disowned, though.”

“Let’s not think about it too much. It’s all for the restoration of our great house.”

Michael’s grandfather Louis—the head of the House of Evantail back in the day—had been highly skilled in politics. He was the star of this house who had managed to rise inside the royal court to become the assistant to the prime minister, despite being just a provincial noble. The House of Evantail had known great prosperity during his time; other nobles had admired it, and even His Majesty had thought of them favorably. Michael had still been little at the time, but he remembered. He remembered the exhilaration of having most other nobles kneel before a boy like him.

But after his grandfather left this world and his father inherited his position, the House of Evantail had fallen into a sharp decline. He didn’t understand why, but no one had said good things about his father anymore. On the contrary, some nobles had ridiculed his father, calling him an arrogant, incompetent loudmouth who committed blunder after blunder. Eventually, Michael and his family had been kicked out of the royal palace, and the House of Evantail had started living humbly, mostly off the revenue generated by managing its own territory. This state of affairs was humiliating to Michael, who’d been fawned over since the day he was born. His parents’ relationship had also started becoming strained because they’d been driven away to their territory, and his grandmother had lost her mind.

Michael’s mother had married into the House of Evantail from a family of higher status. Her father had acknowledged Louis’s achievements, so he’d sent his daughter over to form a connection between them. But because her husband had been kicked out of the royal palace for being a nuisance, the family she’d married into lost social standing. Ever since then, she had always complained that things weren’t supposed to be like this. As for Michael’s grandmother, she believed that as long as they did everything just like Louis had, they would return to the palace and regain the

position of the prime minister's assistant, so she had started creating the rules for the House of Evantail along with Michael's mother. That became her sole reason for living.

And so, the members of the House of Evantail had all started mimicking Louis in order to restore their house to its former glory. Michael spent his days in humiliation, all the while believing that if he received the same good old education as his grandfather, he would rise to become the prime minister's right hand. However, many less civilized nobles viewed that behavior of the House of Evantail as odd. Michael was convinced that they simply feared the power of his house.

Michael also thought it was necessary for the rules of the House of Evantail to be thoroughly drilled into his own children as well. Even if he didn't manage to restore the house in his own lifetime, it would undoubtedly rise and return to the royal palace during his son's time. His Majesty and the nobles of the royal court would then learn the magnificence of the House of Evantail once more.

Michael pulled up his prized tights snugly and gave his wife directions.

"Samantha, we're heading to Sutrena as soon as possible."

"Of course. But how exactly does Paul intend to go all the way there?"

"Agnes or that criminal must be helping him! I'll teach them a lesson!" Michael shouted, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he'd just been entrusted with committing a horrible crime himself.

The couple boarded their traditional, aged carriage prepared by their servants and departed the Evantail estate in a cacophony of rattling. The old carriage was slow in addition to noisy, so it would be a considerable number of days until it reached the border of Sutrena.

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It was a month after I had learned Bert the merchant's true identity as Prince Bertrand. Sutrena was now fully in its rainy season, and the high temperatures made it perfect for bathing in cool water. Geni and Dunk were in high spirits as they frolicked in the pool. I, Agnes, was also in the pool and was having fun with

the two animals. I was wearing the swimsuit that barely showed any skin at the moment.

“Aww, you two are such good kids! Oh my, look at you gulping that water down, Dunk!”

Dunk had completely settled down now. She was a girl with a big appetite, so ever since we’d let her out of the cage, she would eat the garden’s weeds and drink water from the garden’s river all day long. Although she’d gone on a rampage during the night of the new moon, she was apparently a calm and amiable creature by nature.

The crops in our field were growing even faster than they did during the dry season, so the food situation in Sutrena continued improving at a rapid pace.

While I was still playing around in the pool, Connie came from the fortress. He visited the estate whenever he didn’t have any manabeast extermination duties in order to train Dunk into a mountbeast. Dunk wasn’t the least bit violent and obediently followed Connie’s commands. Even now, she splashed him with water, getting him sopping wet. I found the whole scene kind of bewildering. He was soaked to the skin when he looked at me and started talking like he’d just remembered something.

“That reminds me, there was a suspicious guy in front of the estate earlier, Lady Agnes. It was a boy, so he seemed harmless, but he was dressed like some new type of exhibitionist and was floating in the air; it was a pretty uncanny combination.”

“A suspicious person, you say? We have maids commuting to the estate, so an exhibitionist would be a real problem. I’m going to drive him away.”

I was worried for this boy’s future if he behaved like this at his age. I put on a jacket and was headed toward the gate, when Torre, who was in the middle of working out, enthusiastically said he would accompany me.

“This seems dangerous, so I’ll go ahead, Lady Agnes. He sounds like a very sketchy person if he’s floating.”

“It has to be his magic. Someone in my family can do the same. Actually, it’s my younger brother who… Hmm? Hmmm?”

Oh no, what should I do? A boy dressed in a flamboyant costume, floating in the air? I suddenly had a very good idea of who he might be.

“Torre, we’re dealing with a kid, so don’t suddenly get violent, okay?”

“Understood! I’ll give him three seconds.”

“No! Wait at least a little longer than that!”

We continued talking as we arrived at the gate, where the boy in question was floating. Even though he was using levitation magic, he couldn’t go high enough to clear the gate. As soon as the boy saw me, he started gliding toward me. I was getting a strong case of déjà vu.

“I was hoping my prediction would be wrong, but I was unfortunately right on the mark.”

The boy’s hair and eyes were the same color as mine, his haircut made his head look like a white mushroom, and he wore pure-white tights. He was none other than my twelve-year-old younger brother, Paul Evantail. He was glaring down at me, just like he had during the party at Lord Yalata’s estate.

“You’re dressed as shamelessly as always. I mistook you for a molester.”

I’d been in the middle of playing in the water with the manabeasts, so I was only wearing a jacket over my swimsuit. However...

“I don’t want to hear that from *you*, of all people.”



I didn’t want my brother in white tights criticizing my appearance when he’d been mistaken for a shady character himself. He should have at least worn some short pants over his tights, but both my brother and father went out dressed in just tights.

“At any rate, why are you here, Paul? Where are father and mother?”

My brother pursed his lips tightly in response.

“...fault.”

“What was that?”

“This is *your* fault! Everything went crazy because *you* left home!”

My brother swooped down on me after screaming his grievances. As his white tights were almost right in front of me, Torre stepped between us.

“I’m not quite sure what’s going on, but I’ll protect Lady Agnes!”

Torre vigorously hurled himself at Paul. My brother couldn’t withstand my guard’s full-force tackle and was immediately knocked out and ignominiously captured.

We transported my brother to a guest room. I went to check up on him after his lingering enthusiasm had hopefully cooled down. On my way there, I could see Geni and Dunk through the window. They’d finished playing in the pool; the former was leisurely dozing off in the stable, while the latter was nibbling the grass. They looked adorable enjoying their freedom.

He might be feeling down, but Paul should have at least woken up by now, right?

I opened the guest room’s door and saw that Paul was conscious, as I’d expected. He was just staring somberly at the ceiling. His peculiar, roundish silver hairdo and clothes typical of the men of the House of Evantail were just like before. I’d wanted to ask one of the maids to take care of him, but I felt that it would be best if I did something about his appearance first.

Paul noticed me while I was still deep in thought. He still looked enraged at me, but he didn’t aggressively approach me like before.

He’s blaming me for leaving home, but it’s not like I had a choice in the matter; I was disowned.

Of course, with how things had turned out, I was now actually grateful to my father for disowning me and distancing me from the House of Evantail.

“Why are you in Sutrena, Paul? And how did you get here?”

“Oh, hush, would you? I can do whatever I want, and this is all your fault to begin with! Because you went and got yourself disowned! U-Urk… I’ve had enough of this.”

“H-Huh?”

As he shouted, tears started streaming down Paul’s face and soaked his tights. I was utterly baffled when I saw my always-confident brother bawling his eyes out.

“What happened, Paul?”

Paul, however, was too indignant to speak and just scowled at me with red eyes. I was at a complete loss as to what I should do, but thankfully Lord Nazel returned at just the right time.

“What’s the matter, Agnes?”

“Oh, Lord Nazel. My brother came to visit, but he won’t tell me why he’s here, and then he started crying.”

I could maybe understand Paul coming to consult with me about something if we’d had a relationship of trust and respect, but Paul and I were the furthest from that dynamic. I now regretted how worthless of a sister I’d been to him.

“I understand the situation. Leave it to me,” Lord Nazel said as he wrapped his hands around my cheeks and smiled at me.

“But I couldn’t possibly foist a problem of the House of Evantail on you!”

“You don’t need to worry about it. Just go back to your room, Agnes. Surprisingly, in cases like this, it’s sometimes better for an outsider to intervene,” Lord Nazel said as he lightly patted me on the shoulder to soothe me.

“Thank you very much. Please call me right away if any problems arise.”

“All right.”

I went into the corridor and tottered toward my room, feeling uneasy about leaving my brother in that state to Lord Nazel. Along the way, I happened to come across Kelly in the middle of her work.

“What seems to be the matter, Lady Agnes?”

“Well, you see…”

I told Kelly about the situation with Paul and Lord Nazel.

“If you’d told me earlier, I could have handled it.”

“I thought it would be better to avoid having women see him in tights.”

“That wouldn’t be a problem for me. I don’t know about the other servants, but I’m used to taking care of my younger brothers.”

“Come to think of it, you said you’re the eldest daughter of a large family, right, Kelly? Do you think you could help Paul get changed later?”

“Yes, of course. I will also bring him his meal.”

“Thank you, you’re a great help. If only I was an older sister he could open his heart to.”

“That’s how it is with your own brothers. My family didn’t get along that well either. Lord Nazelbart’s approach to the situation was appropriate.”

Kelly escorted me to my room, then started getting a change of clothes ready for Paul. Her fashion sense was exquisite, so I could entrust the task to her with no reservations. As long as Paul managed to move on from constantly wearing tights, I was sure he could also undergo a wonderful transformation. I nodded to myself as I opened my room’s door and plopped down on the cushioned sofa.

But I still wonder who brought Paul all the way here.

I’d thought our parents might be with him, but the House of Evantail was rather unsociable and didn’t visit other territories casually.

Paul making it to Sutrena on his own is just unthinkable, and I doubt he could have found any servants who would help him with this excursion.

The more I thought about it, the more the mystery deepened. As I fretted over everything, Lord Nazel entered the room, apparently having finished talking to Paul. I quickly got up to welcome him, but he picked me up and returned me to the sofa.

L-Lord Nazel sat me down on his lap again!

He had me sit on his thighs turned sideways, so I felt very restless. I tried to ease my shame by talking about my brother.

“Excuse me, Lord Nazel, but what happened with Paul?”

“He was willing to talk to me. He’s at the age when he has all

sorts of worries. He's started participating in high society, and he's bewildered by the differences between the outlook of the House of Evantail and those of other families."

"So he's started harboring doubts about the policies of the House of Evantail?"

"Yes, he seems to be conflicted."

"I never imagined Paul, who always listened to our parents so obediently, would start questioning the house's policies."

"That's precisely why he couldn't talk to you about it after all the abuse he's thrown at you over the years."

The House of Evantail had been banned from attending parties, but my brother alone had apparently been excepted. And when he'd shown up at a noble gathering, he'd suffered the same indignities as I had in the past.

"Paul told me that everything went crazy at home because you got disowned; he seemed like he wanted to push the blame to you, but I told him he was mistaken. Even so, he probably had to attribute his problems to someone else, because he couldn't come to terms with rejecting who he's been until now."

"Lord Nazel… I'm sorry you had to do all this, and thank you."

I gazed at my reliable husband while I was still on his lap. His counseling was excellent. He really was perfect in absolutely everything he did.

"Also, from what Paul told me, the ones who brought him here seem to be Prince Bertrand and Princess Consort Latriche. His Highness has apparently gotten his wife involved and is still playing the role of merchant."

"Latriche? Oh yes, that's Her Highness's name, isn't it?"

She was known as a devoted wife who took care of her sickly husband. She didn't participate in high society gatherings, but I'd heard her name.

"Yes, she's His Highness's wife, a compassionate woman who gallantly looks after her husband…or so the rumors go. She seems to be a person of strong character, like her husband."

"That sounds like His Highness's wife all right. I've been wondering how Paul came here since he couldn't have possibly managed to on his own. I'm glad he wasn't taken advantage of by any unsavory individuals. But where is His Highness?"

"I don't know, but we might see each other again soon at this

rate.”

Lord Nazel always had a distant look in his eyes when he talked about the unconventional first prince.

“And there’s one more thing that worries me a little from what Paul said. One of Robin’s messengers apparently made contact with Lord Evantail.”

After a few days, Paul had opened his heart to Lord Nazel and told him all sorts of things. One of them was information regarding a scheme for Master Robin and the House of Evantail to join forces, including getting Paul involved with their plan.

“My parents must bear a grudge toward Prince Leonardo and us, since they’re awfully proud in the worst way. They have almost no influence though,” I said.

“We also have to consider what to do with Paul. He apparently entrusted his carrier pigeon with a letter to your parents before leaving,” Lord Nazel replied.

“I apologize for all the trouble my brother has caused. I will do something about him for now.”

“I told him to send word to the House of Evantail, but Paul himself doesn’t want to.”

“At this rate, we might be treated as kidnappers. In any case, we should somehow convince him to contact them.”

If Paul didn’t want to return home, then he had to tell our parents the reason he had left and what he wanted to do himself. The lords of two different territories were now involved in this incident, so proper communication was imperative.

“I don’t really *want* to contact my parents either, but I can’t exactly do nothing. I *am* the Margravine of Sutrena, after all.”

If we didn’t have Paul write a letter to our parents, a conflict between nobles would surely break out. Things were already pretty tense.

“The problem is whether we’ll be able to get through to Paul.” He might snap again if I went to talk to him. “Since it’s come to this, we could force him to—”

Kelly interrupted my worried muttering.

“Please leave this matter to me, Lady Agnes. I have more opportunities to talk to him since I’m the one taking care of him, so I’ll ask him about contacting your parents while I’m at it. You

don’t have to worry about anything; I will deal with the matter while using my magic.”

Kelly made an awfully reliable statement before departing; she was absolutely dashing. And so, she started persuading Paul. He was reluctant at first, but he gradually opened up to her, until he finally agreed to write a letter to our parents.

I can always rely on Kelly!

Paul didn’t allow me to read the letter, but Lord Nazel confirmed its contents; according to him, it detailed the reasons Paul had left home and how he had arrived at the frontier, as well as how he felt and his desire to stay in Sutrena. I didn’t know what was going to come of it, but it was a perfectly coherent statement that Lord Nazel deemed acceptable.

After another few days, some changes cropped up in Paul’s behavior. He’d had nothing to wear while the clothes he’d worn from home were in the laundry, so he’d started wearing pants. This led to him finally putting his white tights behind him. He chose the pants Kelly picked out for him over his tights. With the change in his attire, he now looked like an ordinary noble boy his age. Dressed in the fashionable clothes Kelly had picked for him, he’d probably be popular with girls. Furthermore, his traditional round-framed glasses had apparently broken on the way here, so they’d now been replaced with a pair of modern frames. I’d always thought that the glasses our grandfather had worn were too big for a kid like Paul anyway.

His radical transformation makes me feel like I’m looking at my past self.

While we were waiting for a response from my parents, Paul had started to slowly but surely enjoy life at the frontier. He went for walks in the garden, timidly petted Dunk and Geni, and even became friends with Torre—whom he was afraid of at first and called a gorilla—and began working out with him. His attitude toward me was as frosty as ever, but he stopped lecturing me about the rules of the House of Evantail. Perhaps he was thinking about his house’s traditions in his own way, struggling to move forward.

Our parents are the problem here. I doubt they’ll quietly let Paul do as he wishes. I’m sure they’ll come all the way here in person and cause some kind of trouble.

Just as I'd feared, some uninvited guests from the House of Evantail arrived a few days later. Two very familiar people—unmistakably my parents—were shouting in front of our estate's gate. When I realized that passersby were stopping to stare at the two bizarrely dressed individuals making a commotion, it filled me with secondhand embarrassment.

It's all right; we've prepared for this day.

We knew the two of them would come to Sutrena, so we'd taken countermeasures. Lord Nazel had called Bert the merchant—aka Prince Bertrand—and Prince Leonardo, and they were lying in wait to confront my parents. They were quite the extravagant pair, but they had their reasons for taking action on this occasion. They were currently standing by in the mansion.

My brother's nervousness was plain as he came out to greet our parents, and he hid behind Torre. He wasn't wearing his tights at the moment. He'd moved away from the House of Evantail's traditional clothes ever since coming to the frontier and was instead dressed like any other noble boy.

Our father, Michael, had squeezed his plump body partway through a gap in the gate's bars and was apparently trying to force his way onto our property.

You really don't need to do that. We'd simply open the gate if you waited a little longer.

But the members of the House of Evantail were typically impatient.

"Ah! His tights got caught in the gate. Please stop struggling, father."

I hurried toward the gate to open it. My father's tights would get ripped if he kept trying to force his way through. When he saw me running toward him, his eyes filled with rage.

"You disgrace!" he shouted as he continued his rampage.

"Aah!"

Before I could stop my father, his white tights ripped, exposing bare skin.

How awful for our first meeting in so long to be such a mess.

My father kept raving on and on, still caught in the gate and paying no mind to his ripped tights.

"You're too slow, Agnes! Can't you even greet your guests properly?! My tights are in pieces because you didn't attend us fast

enough! How will you make up for this outrage?!”

My mother also joined the verbal assault.

“He’s right! You’re a truly preposterous daughter to embarrass your father like this! You’re a stain on this family!”

My parents didn’t seem to realize they were the ones at fault for charging in here without prior notice. Things had only turned out relatively fine because we’d prepared for them on our own; otherwise there was always a possibility that we’d all have been absent when they arrived. My father’s complaints were as unreasonable as usual. He just vented his frustration on the people around him whenever he got in a bad mood. I also used to feel down because I had mistakenly believed him and thought I was worthless, but I’d eventually realized that most of my father’s actions were illogical. Even now, his ranting was simply being fueled by his uncontrolled emotions.

“You filthy kidnapper! Give Paul back!”

Paul peeked his head out from behind Torre and trembled in fear. Our mother started shrieking when she saw what he looked like now.

“My goodness, Paul! What sort of vulgar appearance is that?! What happened to your tights?!”

“*That’s* the first thing she says to him?” Torre, who was unaware of the House of Evantail’s peculiar circumstances, froze in shock.

I’m sure anyone unfamiliar with my family would be surprised if they heard someone yell, “What happened to your tights?!”

Torre looked at Paul with sympathy. Paul faltered for a moment but then bravely raised his head and looked at our mother.

“I already said this in my letter, but I’ll be putting the House of Evantail’s garments behind me! From now on, I won’t be wearing white tights!”

“What did you say?!” our mother screamed as she stared in wonder at Paul’s determination.

“I’m the only noble scion who still wears clothes from a century ago. Of course, I believe that traditional garments hold value, and their excellent designs should be preserved for future generations. But tights don’t fall under that category! They only make me embarrassed when I walk outside in them! I was treated like a degenerate at the party and humiliated!”

“How could you say something like that?! Don’t you regret

disrespecting your ancestors?!”

Unlike our frantic mother, Paul remained calm throughout their exchange.

“When you speak of my ancestors, you must be referring to my great-grandfather’s generation specifically, right, mother? My secondhand tights are too big to fit me properly, and besides, they are so worn out from long years of use that they are on the verge of tearing. Oh, and I’d like to point out that the padding is also far too large!”

I was taken aback by Paul’s words. My father’s and brother’s underwear used padding around the crotch area. There was apparently a mysterious old custom which held that the more padding one used, the better; more emphasis on the crotch was considered appealing. It was said that some people even tied ribbons over their padding or attached gems to it.

“What’s the matter with you, Paul?! Please come to your senses! You must have done something to him, Agnes!” Our mother glared at me. “You were a terrible influence on Paul, weren’t you?! Aren’t you embarrassed to walk around in your flimsy dresses, without your traditional makeup?”

“No, I’m not,” I answered calmly. My answer would always be the same.

“I’m not wearing tights anymore, and I can’t endorse the House of Evantail’s practices!” Paul continued.

Our father—who’d finally disentangled himself from the gate—tromped toward Paul in astonishment along with our mother. However, since he’d forcefully ripped his tights when they’d gotten caught, his thighs were now in full view. It was completely inappropriate for him to expose himself in this way, and I had no desire to look at him.

“What kind of nonsense are you spouting?! We’re going home, Paul!”

Our father grabbed Paul’s arm and started pulling him away, but Paul braced his legs and resisted. Perhaps it was the result of all the training he’d done with Torre, but he was fighting quite fiercely.

“I’m not going back. I don’t want to be in a house where I blindly follow customs of a century ago! And I also know that you two got involved in criminal activity! I will never participate in

that!”

“Ho—”

I could read much from our father’s single syllable. It was obvious he was about to ask “How do you know that?” probably to be followed by “Why would you say that in front of her or her criminal husband?”

“I’ve talked to many different people since leaving home, and I now understand that you’re trying to sell unmarried ladies into slavery, right?”

Paul was speaking the truth. Many ladies had apparently already been rounded up. Master Robin had laid his hands on many women besides Liliane, and Princess Mia would get jealous every time she learned of them and would pressure their families to disown them. And after Liliane had failed to assassinate Lord Nazel, it would seem that Master Robin had given up on using the desperate, outcast women to carry out his evil schemes. Instead he had switched to capturing them and selling them off. His goal must have been partly to hide what he’d done and prevent any possible scandal and also partly just to put a permanent end to his relationships with them.

At this point, it’s very likely that even Her Highness is aware of the situation.

The slave trade was prohibited under Desnim law. If she knowingly turned a blind eye to Master Robin’s illicit activities, she was just as guilty as he was. Of course, that also applied to my parents, who’d started assisting them.

“Silence, Paul! Just obey what we tell you to do! The House of Evantail will return to the royal palace if we achieve results! I’m saying this for your sake! You’re only here in the first place because Agnes and her husband kidnapped you, right?” our father screamed.

“You call participating in slave trading ‘achieving results’? How do you not understand that nothing about that would count as a noteworthy achievement? You can still turn back. Let’s not turn against His Highness Prince Leonardo. And also, I came here of my own free will! Everything is exactly as I described in my letter!”

“Quiet! Don’t you dare order me around, boy!”

As our father was about to bring his fist down on Paul, two men came out of the mansion: Princes Bertrand and Leonardo, who’d

been staying at our estate in preparation for today. When the two of them stood side by side, the family resemblance became unmistakable.

"So much noise. Could you refrain from acts of violence in front of me?" Prince Leonardo said.

The unexpected appearance of my father's natural enemy made even his fist freeze in the air.

"Your...Highness?"

"Indeed. What's wrong? Are you surprised to see me here? Does my presence *inconvenience* you?"

My parents didn't know what Prince Bertrand looked like, so they ignored him and just gaped at Prince Leonardo in shock.

"According to my sister-in-law Latriche's investigation, you two are accomplices in human trafficking. The route you used to sell off those women from the Convent has been discovered."

"What are you talking about?! I don't recall ever doing something like that! Besides, everyone knows Princess Latriche is by Prince Bertrand's side at all times! She hasn't the time to conduct such an investigation!"

My father's extremely agitated behavior indicated that the aforementioned accusation was true; he'd apparently committed all kinds of crimes to curry favor with Master Robin before coming here. I had been secretly hoping that my parents hadn't gotten involved in Master Robin's schemes yet, but sadly they already had. It was now impossible for them to be declared innocent. They hadn't simply been framed either—there was clear evidence of their involvement—so there was nothing I could do to stop this crisis threatening to destroy the House of Evantail.

"His reaction when questioned about his crimes is far too obvious," Prince Bertrand said with a sigh of exasperation.

"It seems that you were tempted by Robin's offer. Did he promise to return you to the palace and grant you an important position? Did you actually think he would keep such a promise? To him, you two are merely pawns to be used for harassing Nazelbart. You're just as disposable as those ladies he's selling into slavery," Prince Leonardo said before turning to me. "I will have your parents arrested. Do you have any objections?"

"No, this is unavoidable. Human trafficking is a grave crime."

Prince Leonardo had come to our estate in Sutrena in order to

arrest my parents. He'd speculated that if he waited here, he would undoubtedly manage to apprehend them.

Paul meekly turned around to look at His Highness.

"Please go ahead and take them in."

"I will. I appreciate your cooperation."

My mother was running around in a tizzy, while my father became enraged and summoned his private army, the members of which were on standby outside the estate.

"Please stop that, father! Do you seriously intend to direct your soldiers at His Highness? Treason is a far heavier offense!" Paul shouted in panic.

"Shut your mouth, you damn traitor! You have zero awareness of your position as my heir! You're a disgrace to the House of Evantail just like Agnes!"

A great number of the House of Evantail's soldiers rushed through the gate I'd left open after letting my parents in, but we remained calm. This was all within our expectations. The whinnies of several pegasi sounded from deep in our garden, as if they wanted to say they'd been waiting for this.

"That's our cue, guys!"

Following a gallant female voice, an armed group took to the skies on pegasi. They were a group of talented personal guards, led by Her Highness. She was originally a Polpystani princess, from a nation that bordered Sutrena, and she'd apparently been well-known for her martial prowess back in her home country. It was only in Desnim that she was simply known as the kindhearted princess consort who devotedly nursed the bedridden first prince.

The House of Evantail's soldiers were caught off guard by the sudden appearance of mountbeasts, and they retreated while screaming. People who lived outside the frontier had few opportunities to see manabeasts or mountbeasts, so they weren't used to them in the slightest. My parents also let out weird shrieks and ran outside the gate. The hole in my father's tights kept growing larger as he ran with everything he had, leaving almost no clothing behind.

Please stop, father. Any more and it will be an actual crime!

Lord Nazel, who'd been lurking farther behind me out of sight, rushed to my side, then covered my eyes with his hand.

"It's dangerous here, Agnes. Let's return to the mansion first."

“Yes, Lord Nazel... Eep!”

He suddenly pulled me backward, picked me up, and started carrying me while we were both facing forward, something he’d been really into lately. I was taken back inside while under the two princes’ somewhat kindly gazes. Meanwhile, I could still hear my parents’ screams behind me.

Princess Latriche arrested my parents for their involvement in human trafficking, and Prince Leonardo took them away. They would be held for questioning. My cocksure parents could only tremble before Her Highness and the guards riding their mountbeasts. She and Prince Bertrand stayed behind to deal with the aftermath. After they were done, they came to talk to Paul and me with troubled expressions. I was in Lord Nazel’s arms the entire time, but no one commented on it. It was terrifying what people could get used to.

“I regret to inform you that the House of Evantail will most likely fall into ruin, because a large number of your relatives besides your parents were also involved in this incident. Many young women went missing one after another in the lands ruled by the House of Evantail, and upon investigation, it was discovered that they were all going to be sold off,” Prince Bertrand explained, to which Her Highness nodded. “Even if Paul wanted to inherit the position of margrave,” His Highness continued, “he’s only twelve years old and doesn’t know how to properly manage a territory yet. If someone else was appointed as margrave, the status of the House of Evantail would pass on to them. If they had a daughter, Paul could get engaged to her, but I’m not sure how well that would play out.”

Even if such an engagement did happen, there was no guarantee that the girl’s parents would hand their authority back to Paul once he grew up. The ignorant Paul couldn’t possibly hold his own against more experienced nobles.

“Therefore, I have a proposition.” Her Highness fixed her gaze on Paul. “Paul, how about you study abroad in the neighboring country of Polpystan? My homeland is currently inviting promising young nobles from foreign countries. I will be your patron.”

“I couldn’t possibly ask so much of you!” Paul replied in a panic.

“I have little influence in this country, but I’m still treated

relatively well in my home country. The House of Evantail will fall under severe criticism from here on, so I think it would be a good idea for you to go abroad until things settle down, and study while you're at it."

"I certainly have nowhere to return to."

"You also have the option of staying in Sutrena and helping out the margrave's family."

Paul spent some time deep in thought, until he eventually raised his head and looked back at Her Highness.

"Please allow me to study abroad. This incident has helped me realize that I'm but an ignorant child who blindly believed in the 'common sense' of his narrow world. I want to learn more about the rest of the world."

"All right, that settles it. I will let my younger brother back home make the arrangements. Please support Bert once you return to Desnim."

"I highly appreciate this opportunity. I will endeavor to be of use to both Prince Bertrand and you, Your Highness."

Her Highness was apparently on good terms with her brother from the same mother.

"I would also like to thank you, Your Highness." I had to express my gratitude for all she was doing for my brother.

"Don't mention it. I want to build a friendly relationship with Sutrena."

And with that, it was decided that my brother, Paul, would study abroad.

"And I'd also like to become friends with you, Lady Agnes. Because of Her Majesty throwing her weight around, it's hard for me to get close to other noblewomen. And I'm kind of a tomboy too."

I felt my heart throb when I heard Her Highness speaking so bashfully.

"Yes! M-Me too! I don't have any noblewoman friends either!"

His Highness spat out the tea he was drinking, Lord Nazel shook in place, and even Torre mumbled, "Come to think of it..."

It was true that I'd had no female friends as Lady Bumpkin, so Kelly and the maids had been my friends ever since I'd come to the frontier.

"I see. Then let's get along, Agnes."

“Of course!”

My first noble female friend was surprisingly Her Highness. Their Highnesses stayed at our estate for some time after that, so she and I rode on Geni together, and she also gave me a ride on her beloved pegasus. All in all, we had a great time.

After the human trafficking incident, Prince Leonardo got hold of several pieces of evidence and arrested all the culprits. The collapse of the House of Evantail for its participation in the crime was widely announced, so it was arranged for Paul to leave for Polpystan earlier than originally planned. We all gathered together to see him off.

“Goodbye. I’ll see you in the future,” Paul said.

Her Highness’s subordinates would escort Paul to the border. Prince Bertrand and Princess Latriche had already left Sutrena because they’d had some matters to attend to, but many of their subordinates had stayed behind.

“Elder sister…” Paul murmured as he looked at me, somewhat embarrassed. “Um, I’d like to apologize for everything, and thank you for sheltering me in your home.”

The unexpected apology from my awfully proud brother made my eyes reflexively sparkle.

“I didn’t do anything. Take care, Paul, and good luck!”

Paul nodded and got on a pegasus with one of Her Highness’s subordinates. He looked stronger and more dignified than back when he’d been at the House of Evantail. The pegasus spread its wings and flew away under the bright blue sky. I kept following the small shadow with my eyes as it continued to the south. When Paul was finally out of sight, I suddenly came to my senses.

“Hold on, if the House of Evantail collapses, won’t I become unworthy of being Lord Nazel’s wife?”

Our marriage was already ill matched, but now my lineage, disowned though I was, had crumbled.

“What do I do?!”

I paced through the garden restlessly, until Lord Nazel came after me.

“Are you okay, Agnes? I saw you running around all over the garden.”

“Lord Nazel, I’m unworthy of being your wife!”

“Huh? Where did that come from?! Are you…worried because the House of Evantail collapsed?”

“Yes, the daughter of a ruined house will only bring you disgrace! Now that it’s come to this, we need to get a d-divo—”

“Now wait just one second!”

Lord Nazel grabbed me in a hurry and turned me around to face him, looking at me with a serious expression on his handsome face.

“I don’t care about your family. I want *you* as my wife, Agnes.”

“But I’m the daughter of criminals now.”

“You helped get them arrested, didn’t you? And how could you say something so cruel when you know exactly how I feel about you?”

“I don’t want to be a burden to you.”

“I’ll close up that mouth of yours if it keeps speaking nonsense.”

True to his word, he closed up my mouth not even a second later—by directly pressing his lips against mine. I panicked and tried to back away, but a large tree just had to be right behind me, so I had no path of retreat available.

“Whew… You can’t run away now, can you?”

Lord Nazel parted his lips from mine and flashed me a soft smile but immediately went in for another kiss. As he came after me relentlessly and drove me into a metaphorical corner, I slowly sank to the ground and leaned against the tree. Lord Nazel swept me into his arms before I completely fell, and gazed at me amorously with his amber eyes. I could smell a refreshing perfume coming from him.



“I’ve been holding myself back until you got used to me, but you don’t seem to listen, so perhaps I should give you a reason not to leave.”

The moment I realized what Lord Nazel meant, I shrieked loudly and froze on the spot. Perhaps it was only natural if you thought about it logically. Whatever the events that had led to this, Lord Nazel and I were a married couple. But still!

“I-It’s too embarrassing.”

“It is, but I’m doing it to get rid of your concerns.”

“W-Wait!”

“I won’t. You’ve gotten plenty used to me by now, right? I’m not letting you go anywhere else.”

“Eep!”

I could feel something ferocious and enticing from the usually gentle Lord Nazel’s amber eyes.

“Should I stop?”

“D-Don’t.”

Alarm bells were ringing deep in my head, but when I looked at my husband smiling so warmly at me, I found myself unable to do anything. After all, I didn’t want to leave him either.

That night, I took another step toward adulthood.

Chapter 6: Madam Bumpkin Attends Princess Mia's Newborn Party

One day approximately seven months following the scandal of Princess Mia's broken engagement, the entirety of Desnim was abuzz with the sensational news of the birth of a new prince. Both mother and child were in great health, the princess was happy, and the queen was delighted about the birth of her grandchild. Meanwhile, Robin's face was twisted in the worst grimace in recorded history.

"That damn Nazelbart!"

He was of course pleased about the birth of his son, an event that solidified his status. However, his joy was outweighed by his anger toward Nazelbart, who'd so readily cut down Lady Bumpkin's family and ruined Robin's plans.

Oh man, I guess he wouldn't want to cover for his bumpkin of a wife.

Robin had thought that if everything went well, there would be a huge fuss about Nazelbart protecting his wife's family for their involvement in the kidnappings, and he would be stripped of his noble status along with the House of Evantail. This had been a major miscalculation on Robin's part. Moreover, the second prince had already arrested all the kidnappers. Thankfully for Robin, Prince Leonardo and his allies weren't on his trail, but he'd lost a convenient source of income.

"What to do, what to do? There are still ladies I want to end things with. I'll be in big trouble if Mia finds out about any more of my cheating."

Apparently, some pretty bad rumors had been going around about Robin and Mia's status as a couple recently. Concerned about their reputation, the king and queen had started wondering if they should bring Nazelbart back as Mia's official husband. If that came to pass, Robin would be demoted to a mere lover. There was even a possibility he would be blamed for everything inconvenient to the royal family and thrown away. Anxiety filled his heart.

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Princess Mia of Desnim was seething. She stomped her feet as she walked around the well-maintained palace courtyard.

"That filthy cheater, laying hands on other women during my pregnancy! I'm not going to take this lying down! Well, I did already pressure the families of those homewreckers and have them disowned, but that's not enough..."

Years of experience had taught Mia that everything would go her way if she just displayed her authority. After all, she was the biological child of the queen, the person with the most influence in the entire country. But no amount of power could help her when it came to romance. Mia still couldn't let go of Robin even after all his tomfoolery. However, she could vaguely sense that the current situation was bad. Terrible rumors about her and Robin had started spreading around the palace.

How disrespectful. The people spreading those rumors are bad enough, and I intend to fire them the moment I find them, but the government officials still whining about how Nazelbart's departure inconvenienced them are even worse!

Nazelbart was excellent at administrative work, so his exile to the frontier had apparently adversely affected the bureaucrats. Mia thought they were exaggerating the impact of losing a single duke's son, but the truth was that many tasks were being delayed. In fact, by pushing Robin into Nazelbart's position, the work of everyone around him had increased needlessly.

Robin is a moron, so he can't handle any work, though I kind of relate on that front.

Mia had always felt inferior to the outstanding Nazelbart. With just his natural skills, he could effortlessly surpass whatever abilities she'd striven hard to build up. She had been humiliated on so many occasions that her pride was in tatters. Back when they'd first met, she'd thought that he was handsome and docile, so she'd deemed him a suitable husband. But over the course of their engagement, she had come to find Nazelbart terribly dull, since he was so overly diligent about and completely absorbed in his prince consort education. The gap between him and Mia, who'd always skipped out on her queen training, continuously widened. Every time the people around her gossiped that Nazelbart had been

chosen as her fiancé to compensate for her lack of ability, Mia came to hate him more.

What, is my status my only merit? I'm not second fiddle to Nazelbart!

Nazelbart's amber eyes were like a doll's, impossible to read. He was steadfast about his duties and seemed uninterested in her, unlike the hangers-on that surrounded her. The two of them were a terrible match in every respect. In light of all that, it was more comforting for her to spend time with Robin, who was even less intelligent than she but cunning in his own way. He was the kind of person that was hard to find among nobility. She never got bored talking to him, and he was the only one who whispered sweet words to her without hesitation. Mia had only ever known life in the royal palace, so being taught about the outside world by Robin was a breath of fresh air.

But recently, her mother, the queen, had started saying incomprehensible things, like talking about turning Robin into just her lover and making Nazelbart the official prince consort.

"Aaaaah! It's making my blood boil!"

Why should she have to go to all that trouble? But it wasn't like Mia could disobey her mother, especially since the queen was the one who'd had to clean up her daughter's mess after she broke off her engagement.

Humph, Nazelbart's going to be the prince consort in name only. We'll foist all the work on him, and then Robin and I can live as we like. Of course, we'll need to have him divorce Lady Bumpkin for this to happen.

However, Nazelbart's wife was a total bumpkin anyway, and he'd only married her because of royal decree, so Mia doubted he'd feel reluctant to part with her, but arranging the divorce was yet another complication in the whole process.

"We could find a suitable man for Lady Bumpkin—perhaps the ex-fiancé of one of those disowned harpies, or someone whose wife has already passed on—and pull Nazelbart away from her. As for a new margrave for the frontier, I'll send over one of those insufferable nobles who keeps criticizing me. Oh dear, even if it's necessary to secure my peaceful life with Robin, I still hate having to come face-to-face with Nazelbart again. It's so disheartening!"

Mia had left her newborn son's care entirely up to the wet

nurse. That was how royalty in Desnim normally raised their children, but it was also true that Mia just disliked looking after her son, so she didn't want the responsibility. She'd much rather enjoy herself with Robin.

I'll quickly take care of all these nuisances, then have Robin soothe me with his magic. His magic was special: It could purify the weakened parts in someone's heart.

Mia returned to her room, picked up a pen, and started writing a letter addressed to Nazelbart.

***

One early morning, Nazelbart wore a complicated expression as he looked at a letter that had arrived from the capital. He was in his office along with Kelly, the one who'd brought him the letter.

I know that something's *written on this piece of paper, but the words are so messy I can't make them out!*

He recognized this handwriting. It belonged to Princess Mia without a doubt. When the two of them had been engaged, they'd had to exchange letters out of obligation, but even back then, Mia's letters had been incomprehensible chicken scratch, so they'd had to pause their correspondence on several occasions.

"Shall I decipher the letter for you, Lord Nazelbart?"

"You can do that, Kelly?"

"Even if only briefly, I was Her Highness's maid, so I learned the trick from the senior maids. Reading her handwriting was necessary for my job."

"You're a lifesaver."

"Now, if you'll excuse me."

Kelly accepted the letter and started carefully reading it aloud. But when she got past the salutation to the body of the letter, her voice stiffened, and as he listened, a vein popped up on Nazelbart's temple.

"To summarize, she expects you to leave your position as margrave, return to the capital, and execute your duties as the next prince consort. A rather one-sided and selfish letter. Shall I incinerate it along with the fallen leaves in the garden?"

"No, we can't burn it. We need it as evidence, though it *is* still infuriating. Moreover, there has been no communication from His

Majesty. Does that mean Princess Mia went rogue again and is acting on her own initiative? It's also possible this was Her Majesty's decision."

"I agree. Perhaps even Master Robin is unaware of Her Highness's letter. I believe he would be completely opposed to this plan. It seems that even the queen's faction isn't a monolith."

"I've received a message from Princes Bertrand and Leonardo that it's almost time to act. I can't accept Her Highness's proposition. She expects me to divorce Agnes? I wish she wouldn't take her nonsense that far."

Abandoning his beloved wife and becoming Princess Mia's partner sounded like a veritable hell to Nazelbart.

"Incidentally, where's Agnes?"

"She's still asleep."

"I see. Perhaps I pushed her too hard again."

Day after day, Agnes was just so charming Nazelbart couldn't help himself, and he'd fully gone on the offensive. He had to do something about Mia and Robin to preserve this lifestyle. He immediately wrote a letter to the two princes.

***

One morning that should have been invigorating, I sluggishly got up and crawled out of bed. It looked like Lord Nazel had already gotten up and was probably off working.

"Urgh, his stamina is monstrous."

Ever since that day, he'd continued showering me in his love almost every night.

Lord Nazel may look gentle, but he shows no mercy.

I got dressed and quietly leaned back in my chair as Kelly applied my makeup. For some reason, I felt like her expression was grimmer than usual. She was usually expressionless, but I got the impression she was somewhat angry.

"What's the matter, Kelly?"

"Lady Agnes... You have my sincerest apologies, but I can't tell you anything. Lord Nazelbart wishes to explain everything himself."

"So something happened."

After I was done getting ready, I headed straight for Lord

Nazel's office. When he noticed me, he smiled widely, like a flower in full bloom.

"Good morning, Agnes."

"G-Good morning to you too, Lord Nazel."

"Come here."

"O-Okay..."

As if lured by his sweet voice, I eagerly went toward Lord Nazel's desk, where he nimbly picked me up and placed me on my usual spot: his lap. As he held me in his embrace, I looked up at his handsome visage and tilted my head in confusion.

"Are you also angry, Lord Nazel? Kelly was acting strange this morning too."

"You're watching everyone closely, aren't you?"

"When I asked Kelly, she said you'd tell me what's going on."

"Yes, I will. This also involves you, after all. But remember that I love you dearly, so I have no intention of throwing away the life we have here."

"Hmm?"

A cloud of disquiet enveloped my heart when I heard his words. He then placed a letter on his desk.

"What's this?"

"I doubt you could read it, but it was written by Princess Mia."

"Is it written in code?"

"No, it's in ordinary script, but even I couldn't read it. I needed Kelly to decipher it for me."

I could only infer that Her Highness must be exceedingly skilled at calligraphy. According to her letter, she apparently wanted Lord Nazel and me to divorce and for him to return to the capital as her husband. He would be tasked with handling all of the government work that had been disrupted by his absence, while Her Highness intended to continue spending her time in idle amusement with Master Robin—who'd be demoted to her lover—just as she had up to now.

"That's...horrible."

Just who did she think Lord Nazel was? He wasn't some animated doll for her convenience but a human being with feelings of his own.

"Of course, I intend to turn down Her Highness's tasteless jest. I'm also fed up with Robin's weird obsession with me causing

trouble for the frontier. I think it's about time I put an end to this series of disturbances."

"Do you perhaps intend to cooperate with the two princes?"

"Yes. We have all the evidence we need of the queen's faction's crimes. I will need to visit the royal palace once again. There will apparently be an event held there at just the right time."

"What kind of event?"

"Her Highness's newborn party."

"Huh? Will she be all right attending a party when she just gave birth?!"

"Don't worry, the party will take place in two months. Besides, it's not like she's in charge of any childcare. Royalty and nobility typically have wet nurses."

The decisive battle would take place in two months. Lord Nazel and the rest would steadily make preparations until then.

"I'd like to help out. I can come with you on that day, right?"

"I appreciate the thought, but it might be a terrible experience for you, so I'd like you to stay here if possible."

"No, I will fight alongside you. I'm your wife."

Princess Mia's proposition was aggravating, and though I might have an unpleasant time at the palace, I wanted to be by Lord Nazel's side. I wanted to lend him my aid. After pleading for half a day, I finally gained his approval for me to accompany him to the palace.

Two months later, Lord Nazel and I arrived at the capital for the first time in a long, long while. We looked outside our carriage's windows and gazed at the nostalgic scenery. Many people walked along the well-maintained cobblestone streets, shops bustled with activity, and a refreshing breeze characteristic of this high altitude would occasionally blow. The royal palace, where the party would take place, towered over its surroundings at the very center of the city.

"We're almost there. The capital really is a large city, isn't it?"

"Do you like cities, Agnes?"

"No, I prefer the countryside. The capital is too crowded."

"Me too. I prefer Sutrena even though I'm from the capital."

We looked at each other and chuckled. Soon we would be encountering a foe we had to take on, but I was convinced

everything would turn out fine as long as I was with Lord Nazel.

Since we'd received an invitation from Her Highness herself, we entered the palace the day before the party to recover from the fatigue of our long journey. People who worked at the palace approached Lord Nazel one after the other and begged him in tears to return to his post. I got mixed feelings every time I saw it happen. When Lord Nazel had left for the frontier, nobody had come to see him off, nor had they raised any opposition to his exile. They'd watched everything unfold silently, and only now that their work was inconvenienced did they entreat him for help.

You're just trying to decide his future for your own benefit, aren't you?

Moreover, I couldn't look favorably upon the people who were trying to pull my beloved Lord Nazel and me apart. A short time later, we also got a message that his family wanted to meet him. The message was apparently not from Lord Julian, who got along with Lord Nazel well, but from his father and older brother who had acquiesced to his exile.

"I'm going to leave for a while to meet my father and brother. You rest well in preparation for tomorrow, okay, Agnes?"

"All right... Please take care."

"Don't look so worried. I'll be just fine."

I wanted to go with him, but I decided to do as he asked and patiently wait for him instead. He gave me a peck on the cheek before leaving our room. I stayed put for a while, but unlike in Sutrena, I had no work at the palace. In other words, I had an awful amount of free time, so I decided to leave the room and also take a good look at my surroundings. We'd been assigned the finest of guest rooms, and it connected to a courtyard where it seemed that I could freely stroll around. The area was quite secure to keep out any potential trespassers, so my safety was guaranteed.

I'd like to take in a breath of the outside air for a while.

I opened the door that led outdoors to see a tiled pathway extending between rows of small flowers.

What a lovely path for a walk.

Shallow bowls of water were placed here and there, with big flowers floating inside them and colorful glass decorations submerged in the water. The water had a nice herbal scent,

possibly because some kind of perfumed oil had been added to it.

"This path is surprisingly nice to take a walk on. I should take notes for the flower beds in our estate."

As I meandered around aimlessly, I heard the rustling sound of plants being pushed aside nearby.

"What's that? A manabeast? This place *is* safe, right?"

I hadn't thought I needed to have Torre guard me on a little stroll like this one, so I was completely alone, but perhaps that had been a terrible idea. But what emerged from the tall yellow flowers was…a young man with light-pink hair, tanned skin, drooping eyes, and handsome features—Her Highness's partner, Master Robin.

What's Master Robin doing here?! This is the guest room's courtyard; no one else should be able to enter. So he's trespassing?!

He didn't seem the least bit ashamed when he spotted me and instead stared at me with great interest as he approached.

"What do my little eyes see? There's a pretty maiden in this flower garden."

I stood silently, at a loss for words, before eventually managing a bewildered utterance.

"Huh?"

Did he not recognize me?!

I was right there next to Lord Nazel during the party when his engagement was broken off.

Come to think of it, though, Master Robin and I hadn't exchanged a single word back then. Perhaps that was why I'd left such a faint impression on him.

"Say, where are you from? You don't live here in the capital, do you? I'd never miss someone as cute as you."

"Um, I-I…"

I was perplexed at Master Robin drawing closer without hesitation, and I fell back one step at a time.

Why is he acting so overly familiar? Is he not in love with Her Highness?

To be honest, he was acting so differently from all the men I'd ever met that I had no idea how to deal with him. But he was Her Highness's fiancé, so I couldn't be overly impolite.

"Don't run from me, my little birdie. But man, you're quite the charmer! Like, hot damn!"

“Huh? Hey!”

Master Robin rudely took my hand in his and gave it a kiss. I got goose bumps all over my body.

“May I have your name, my dear, sweet lady?”

I shrieked in fear as Master Robin winked at me and kept moving his handsome face closer to mine. His behavior was so incomprehensible that it was terrifying me! But despite his faults, he was still the future prince consort. I had to make sure to avoid doing anything that could be considered discourteous.

“My name is Agnes Florescruz! So, um, please step back a little.”

Master Robin didn’t let go of my hand even after I gave him my name. He kept grinning at me in an enigmatic manner.

“Now that’s a good one! Why would a pretty girl like you jokingly introduce herself as Lady Bumpkin? That *is* the name of the hideous woman who married that criminal who got exiled to the frontier, isn’t it?”

“I really am Agnes, and married, so could you please keep your distance?”

I kept telling him to go away, but Master Robin only drew nearer.

What should I do? My words aren’t getting through to him!

I’d heard about all the ladies getting disowned by their families, but now I saw firsthand that Master Robin really did flirt with literally every woman he met.

“Come on, let’s go somewhere together. How about the two of us have some fun?” Master Robin said before swiftly caressing my buttocks.

“Eek!”

What kind of “fun” was he talking about?!

I’m not quite sure what he means, but it’s definitely something unacceptable! After all, he’s been sexually harassing me this entire time!

I braced my legs and exerted all my strength to resist Master Robin forcefully pulling on my hand. I couldn’t worry about disrespecting him anymore. He would take me away if this continued!

“Mrngh!”

When I pulled my hand back, I easily broke free of Master Robin’s grasp. Thrown off-balance by my sudden maneuver, he

tumbled onto his backside and stared at me in shock.

“Huh? You’re surprisingly strong, little birdie.”

I’d never dispelled my magic after the incident at Kattena, so my body was still reinforced, which made me stronger than usual. I would remain this powerful as long as I didn’t lift the effects.

“P-Please leave me alone. I’m going back to my room.”

Though I thought that I’d blundered, I felt relieved thinking that Master Robin would lose interest in me since I was very strong *and* married, but I caught him looking my way with sparkling eyes. Was he actually looking at me more intensely than before?

“Interesting, you’re veeery interesting, my little birdie! You have a nice butt with just the right elasticity! And I’m getting fired up by the way you play hard to get! I’m catching myself a married woman!”

“Huuuh?!”

What the heck was this man saying? His thought process just kept becoming more and more inscrutable. I had a bad feeling about this, so I hurriedly turned around and dashed to my room.

“Hey, wait for me, my little birdie!”

“Eeeek!”

As I frantically ran away from Master Robin, I turned a corner and bumped right into someone.

“Ouch! I’m so sorry.”

When I raised my head, I saw a perplexed Lord Nazel looking back at me.

“So this is where you were, Agnes. I didn’t find you in our room, so I came looking for you.”

“I apologize for making you worry.”

Lord Nazel hugged me tight and wouldn’t let go. However, I was currently in a race against time. I was reluctant to leave his embrace, but I had to tell him what was going on.

“Lord Nazel, the courtyard is a danger zone! Let’s return to our room right away. Retreat!”

“What are you talking about, Agnes?”

As he tilted his head in confusion, Master Robin plowed through some flowers while calling out to me.

“Widdle birdie! Widdle birdie!”

Eep! He’s already caught up with me!

However, the moment Master Robin laid eyes on Lord Nazel, his

face stiffened.

“Ugh! Why are you here, Nazelbart? Wait, is this little birdie *actually* Little Bumpkin?! But… But they look nothing alike!”

It seemed that Lord Nazel managed to grasp the gist of the situation from Master Robin’s words. He pulled me into an even tighter hug and showed no signs of letting go, so I obediently buried my face in his chest.

“Let’s go, Agnes.”

As Lord Nazel turned around and took me along with him to our room, Master Robin called out from behind us.

“Go on, be full of yourself while you still can, Nazelbart. I’m not letting you have my seat as the next prince consort, and I’ll also be taking your little birdie! It’s going to be a trivial task as long as I have my magic!”

Lord Nazel ignored the taunt and walked away briskly. It was rare for him to be so indifferent to anyone.

I felt anxious the whole way there, but the two of us managed to reach our room without further incident.

“Did that guy do anything to you, Agnes?”

“No, nothing much. All he did was pull my arm. Oh, he also kissed the back of my hand and touched my behind.”

“What?! That’s serious!”

Lord Nazel’s overprotective side flared up after that. After I washed my hands, I spent the entire day in his arms.

And so, on the following day, Lord Nazel and I finally attended Her Highness’s newborn party. I’d heard that she’d given birth to a boy, but this wasn’t a birthday party for him; such behavior was typical of Princess Mia.

The one playing the leading part today is Her Highness, not her son.

The party was held in a banquet hall at the very center of the palace—the same place, in fact, where Lord Nazel’s engagement had been called off. As we arrived at the venue, we saw Prince Leonardo and Princess Latriche standing by the entrance, apparently waiting for us. Prince Bertrand was currently absent, due to his supposed illness—emphasis on the “currently.” He would be confronting Her Majesty and Princess Mia today.

“All preparations are complete, Nazelbart,” Prince Leonardo said

as soon as our eyes met.

"Of course, Your Highness. We've gathered all the evidence from Sutrena and the House of Evantail's domain."

"This might lead to some unpleasant memories for you, Lady Agnes, but please go along with this little charade for a while longer."

"You don't need to worry; I understand everything. I will also put on an act."

"No, you may act like you usually do. The venue will be in an uproar just from you showing up looking nothing like you used to."

Aw, I wanted to play a part in their theatrics too, but I suppose I should just keep quiet.

Lord Nazel stared at me intently, once again wordlessly expressing that he didn't want me going in there. This was the twentieth time he'd done this today.

"Agnes…"

"I already told you I'm going to be all right. If anything happens, I will protect everyone at the venue with my magic."

If by any chance Her Highness or Master Robin lashed out when they were cornered, my matter reinforcement magic would ensure that no harm came to the other attendees.

Though the best-case scenario would be everything ending safely without me needing to use my magic.

The four of us entered the venue together. Lord Nazel squeezed my right hand tightly.

Everything's okay. I'm not here alone.

I'd been completely alone the last time I'd come here, but I had many allies in the palace now.

When the other attendees noticed the four of us, they started stealing glances at us. They weren't completely obvious, but I could tell that they were fidgeting with curiosity.

"That's Princess Latriche next to Prince Leonardo."

"She's been going through a lot. Prince Bertrand has been bedridden with illness for so long…"

"She always nurses her husband without complaint. What a modest and kindhearted woman."

Her Highness was perfectly playing the role of the devoted wife today. Princess Mia and Master Robin would apparently enter the

hall last since they were the stars of the day.

"But who could that woman next to Lord Nazelbart be?"

"His lover, perhaps?"

I listened carefully and took in my surroundings.

Here we go again…

I quickly became the target of gossip, just like I had during Prince Leonardo's party. However, some of the people who'd learned about my identity and changed appearance were present here too.

"That's Lady Agnes."

"She's a real beauty when she removes her makeup."

"The two of them make a lovely pair."

Many of the chattering voices seemed favorable toward us, so I softly sighed in relief.

The real performance begins now.

I fired myself up and waited for Princess Mia to make her appearance. Before long, a procession of guards entered and announced her arrival. Loud trumpets echoed across the venue, followed by Princess Mia and Master Robin, arms linked, descending a staircase at the very end of the hall. The time had finally come. The mere sight of Master Robin was enough to give me goose bumps again. A woman I assumed was the new prince's wet nurse walked behind the couple with a wailing infant in her arms.

"Thank you all for coming today. This is my newborn party, but I also have an important announcement to make. The nurse behind me is holding our baby, so you can look at him all you want. Unfortunately, he started crying and making a fuss the moment we arrived at the hall."

The guests went dead silent in response to Her Highness's words.

"As I've only recently given birth, I shall be resting here."

She sat down on a luxurious chair prepared for her at the foot of the staircase and leisurely crossed her legs, with Master Robin standing next to her. All of the nobles present scrambled to give their congratulations. Her Highness looked satisfied to be showered in words of praise. As for the young prince, he was left all alone in a corner of the room, held in his wet nurse's embrace. The nobles flattering Her Highness had seen how she treated her

son and had thus chosen to prioritize her.

What is wrong with these people?

The nobles in Prince Leonardo's faction stood back and observed the ones who swarmed around Her Highness. As I got closer to the wet nurse, I discreetly went to see how the baby was doing. For some reason or another, I'd gotten worried about the little boy being neglected by his parents.

"Excuse me, may I take a look at Her Highness's son?"

"Yes, of course."

The wet nurse gently turned the baby in her arms to show him to me. The chubby boy looked full of energy and was being properly looked after; he'd stopped crying and was now quiet. He squinted his eyes drowsily and was on the verge of dozing off. Lord Nazel came to stand next to me and quietly looked at the baby, not wanting to disturb his imminent nap. Perhaps this little boy was pretty bold, to be able to sleep in the middle of a party like this.

I didn't want to be a burden on the wet nurse or the baby, so I decided to step away after I made sure the prince was doing okay. There was still a long queue of nobles in front of Her Highness, so I decided to observe them for a while. Distracted by all that was going on, I apparently got separated from Lord Nazel in the crowd without noticing. And that's when a shrill voice called to me.

"Agnes!"

I turned around and saw two women dressed in bizarre-yet-familiar outfits approaching me.

They're members of the House of Evantail!

My parents were of course absent since they'd been arrested, but some of my relatives who hadn't committed any crimes remained free.

"My, oh my! I'd heard the rumors, but it's really true that you're no longer dressing like a member of the House of Evantail!" one of the women—my aunt—exclaimed. She'd married into our family and was the wife of my mother's older brother. My mother was from the House of Evantail to begin with; she and my father were cousins.

"Aren't you embarrassed as a member of our family to cause such an uproar?!" the other woman—also my aunt, this time the wife of my father's younger brother—complained. "And how could

you make your own parents suffer like that? You unfilial child!”

“If you are referring to my parents’ imprisonment, that was a punishment for their own crimes, not my doing,” I replied.

“And thanks to that, the head family of the House of Evantail has collapsed in disgrace! Our two families are doing fine, more or less, but some members of the other branch families have been arrested or had their noble status revoked!”

“Precisely! It’s unfair that only you get to have all the fun!”

“Huh? Unfair?” I repeated.

I stared at the two of them in wonder. What exactly were they trying to say? It didn’t seem like they were simply complaining about my parents’ punishment.

“That’s right, you’re being unfair, Agnes! We’ve had to endure all manner of hardship ever since we married into the House of Evantail! You clearly lack perseverance!”

“I’m not following the House of Evantail dress code because I like it, but I’m part of the family now, so I’ve been putting up with this! Why can’t you do the same when you were born into this venerable family?!”

This was the first time I learned how my aunts, who’d only joined the House of Evantail later in their lives, truly felt. Even these strict women had conflicted feelings about the Evantail way of life.

In other words, they’re displeased that I, someone born in the House of Evantail, can now live so freely, while they, who’ve come from other families, still have to endure all of the house’s strict rules.

Because they’d suffered all this time, they wanted some kind of excuse to force that same suffering on their niece. But I believed that their way of thinking was wrong. If everyone tried to make those around them experience pain because they’d been through the same, the world would be full of miserable people. I didn’t want to live in a world where nobody won. My aunts were perfectly aware that I’d long opposed the House of Evantail’s methods. I’d lacked the strength to break free of the house’s customs until Lord Nazel took me under his wing, but if my aunts and I had worked together back then, the future might have turned out differently.

If we had cooperated, we might have been able to escape the House of Evantail’s traditions.

However, instead of supporting me, my two aunts had joined in with the people criticizing me and forcing me to follow the Evantail lifestyle. But just because they reluctantly followed the house's rules, why should I have to do the same?

I raised my head and fixed my gaze on them.

"You two are *weird*."

My aunts glared back before raising their voices in protest.

"How are *we* the weird ones? You're describing yourself! Do you think society will tolerate your selfish behavior?"

"Exactly! How do you think all the women who've married into the House of Evantail feel?"

"You're also a terrible influence on our children! Think of the people around you a little. What if you end up hindering their education? The House of Evantail will never allow this!"

Between "society," "everyone," and "the people around you," different people were always finding fault with me. They kept going on and on about how much they'd suffered or endured and kept criticizing me for being "unfair." They wanted to pressure me into suffering under the house's rules because everyone else was doing the same. However, I'd had enough of that. Making me suffer alongside them wasn't constructive in the slightest.

"So society, the people around me, and my family won't tolerate my behavior?" I said.

"That's right, it's truly unacceptable! Your thoughtless actions have—"

"*You* are the ones who won't tolerate it, aren't you? You two are personally displeased with me, aren't you?"

From the way my aunts talked, you might think literally everyone was thinking the same thing they were. But in reality, they were just spouting personal opinions, not views shared by everyone else. I disliked it when people tried to falsely legitimize their views like that; it was a cowardly tactic.

"What's wrong with being a bad influence? The remaining members of the House of Evantail will likely start changing from now on. I sincerely hope no more children have to go through the suffering we have."

"Wh-What are you saying?! Nobody will tolerate that!"

"Again, *you* are the ones who won't tolerate it, not 'everyone,' right? You should stop claiming that those around you agree with

your opinions. The only ones who share your views are the remaining members of the House of Evantail—no one else."

"Th-That's not..."

When they saw that they were now the focus of the conversation, they shut their mouths. They realized that they were at a clear disadvantage.

"If you don't like the House of Evantail's rules, just stop following them. Or are you going to make your children suffer the same pain you have? You are the ones who get to decide—not those around you, and not me either. It's certainly no easy feat. I continuously fought against the house's policies, but I didn't manage to break free of them until I was disowned. But you two are not alone: You have each other. And isn't it possible there are other wives in the branch families who feel the same as you?"

Several nobles listening to our conversation started cheering me on.

"That is all I have to say."

I gave my parting words and headed to Lord Nazel.

"I was thinking of jumping in to help you, but you dealt with them before I had any time to intervene. Very impressive, Agnes."

"That was something I had to handle as a former member of the House of Evantail. You have your own vital mission to take care of soon, Lord Nazel." I didn't want to bother him over something as trivial as the House of Evantail's antiquated outfits.

The two of us held hands and braced ourselves for the battle that was to come. Everything was going to be all right—we'd made thorough preparations.

As Lord Nazel and I stared into each other's eyes, I heard someone calling me from yet another direction.

"Heya, little birdie! There you are!"

My entire body instantly got goose bumps, and my memories of the events in the guest room's garden resurfaced.

"Master Robin..."

I turned in the voice's direction and saw Master Robin leaving Her Highness behind and approaching me, his eyes sparkling.

Um, what about Her Highness?

He'd left her to deal with the surrounding nobles all alone. Even though she'd only recently given birth and surely needed his support, Master Robin didn't seem to have any intention of

helping her out.

What a worthless man! He's neglecting his own child too. Does he not cherish Her Highness and his own son?

Master Robin didn't pay any mind to my confusion and rapidly approached with a wide smile on his face. My lips twitched as I raised them into a forced smile and gave him a formal greeting.

"G-Good day to you, Master Robin. I offer my congratulations for Her Highness's safe delivery and your son's birth."

"Oh, come on, who cares about that? Let's share the joy of our reunion!"

Y-You don't care?!

His statement was so shocking I was at a loss for words.

"I wanted to talk with you more, so I'm so happy we got to meet again, little birdie. You have a really nice butt, you know."

The awfully self-centered future prince consort approached me naturally and tried to caress my bottom again.

"Eep!"

As I instinctively stepped back to avoid him, Lord Nazel stepped in front of me to protect me, his face frozen like a doll's with a cold expression. But when Master Robin saw that, of all the possible responses, he unbelievably started provoking Lord Nazel!

"Oh? You seem pretty on edge, Nazelbart. But I get it; little birdie here is a beauty, isn't she? Have you perhaps developed feelings for the woman you were forced to marry? Then in that sense, your marriage to Lady Bumpkin turned out quite well for you, huh?"

"Are you only interested in your partner's looks, Master Robin?" Lord Nazel asked.

"Noble ladies are all pretty much the same on the inside, aren't they? They're quiet and weak willed, so it makes you want to get *real* close to them."

I was still speechless as Master Robin flashed me a dubious smile. A reddish tinge appeared in his jet-black eyes, and they changed into a mysterious color. I soon noticed a change happening in my own body.

Huh? I can't take my eyes off Master Robin?! What's going on?

I couldn't move and felt shaken, but no one else had noticed yet.

"You must have your own worries, right, my little birdie? Don't

you actually hate living on the frontier with all the accompanying troubles? Little ol' me here can give you some advice. Go on, lay it all bare."

Master Robin narrowed his eyes alluringly with a satisfied smile, and I suddenly felt all the small worries and anxieties in my heart grow fainter.

What...is this? Could it be his magic?

This unfamiliar, mysterious sensation gave me a soothing comfort. Perhaps "purification" was an appropriate word to describe it. I felt light and warm.

"You've had it hard all this time, right? And why wouldn't you? You were forced to marry a man you don't love, you got sent to the frontier, and even your family is in shambles now. I understand how you feel. You don't need to hold back because Nazelbart's here. Vent all of your complaints right here."

Master Robin's expression made him look like he truly sympathized with me.

You may be acting like a nice person, but you're *the one who got the House of Evantail involved in criminal activity.*

However, the words I was thinking deep down started coming out of my mouth on their own, as if in reply to Master Robin. I was so scared by this loss of control!

"I-I'm..."

Master Robin's face relaxed in delight as he watched his prey—me—start talking. Judging from his expression, I realized that his goal was to have me air my complaints right here in public in order to embarrass Lord Nazel.

What a horrible man! But my heart feels light and my mouth's moving on its own.

I didn't want to say it, and I knew I shouldn't, but I had no choice. I spoke my true feelings following Master Robin's instructions.

"I'm...happy. Happy to have met Lord Nazel and to have gone to the frontier."

"That's right, you— Wait, whaaat?!"

Master Robin suddenly became flustered, probably because my reply was different than what he was expecting, but I continued speaking my honest feelings.

"At first, I felt sorry for Lord Nazel for having someone like Lady

Bumpkin forced on him, but he loved me despite who I was. I'm no longer in danger of being physically abused like I was in my family home, and I've grown close to many wonderful people—it's like a dream come true."

The nobles listening to me were almost moved to tears. I still felt lightheaded as I kept going on and on, but everything that came out of my mouth spoke of how satisfied I was with my current life. I even ended up *boasting* about my lovely relationship with Lord Nazel; the embarrassment was killing me!

Master Robin's face twisted in clear dissatisfaction, possibly because he hadn't managed to drag the words he'd wanted out of me.

"Agnes? Hey, Agnes?"

Lord Nazel looked worried as he gently shook me. Thanks to him, I slowly returned to a sound state of mind. The effects of Master Robin's magic had likely started to wear off. I could confidently say that his magic was responsible for my earlier disoriented state. This "purification" was a strange magic that took away the anxiety in someone's mind and made them feel at ease. Then, it brought out whatever they were thinking. It had left me feeling dazed for a short while.

It's a very unusual magic. It could be either good or malicious depending on how it's used.

Magic that could temporarily clear away the unease from someone's mind was probably something that could truly help weak-willed, fearful people. But it could also make them dependent on it if used excessively. Moreover, because this magic left one's mind unusually vulnerable, it could also be abused to manipulate people to honestly speak whatever they were thinking.

It's pretty much a truth serum.

The user could make others dependent on them and get a hold of their weaknesses and secrets.

"I'd like to have a word with you later, Master Robin. But for now, I'd have you stay away from my precious wife," Lord Nazel said.

"Aha ha, I wonder how long you can keep saying that. You should also get what I mean."

"And perhaps you should take your eyes off my wife for a moment and look behind you."

“Huh?”

Her Highness was standing imposingly right behind Master Robin, with her arms crossed and fury evident in her eyes.

“Hello, Robin. I thought you were gone, but what are you doing *here*?”

“Urk, Mia?! Aha ha, I’m not doing anything.”

“Really now?”

“Yup, yup! Man, you also look stellar when you’re angry! A total knockout beauty!”

Her Highness was certainly mad, but she was apparently as weak to Master Robin as always.

“Haah… Well, whatever. I’ve grown rather tired, so it’s time to leave. And I’ve also found the person I was looking for,” she said before giving Lord Nazel a challenging glare. “It’s been a while, Nazelbart.”

Prince Leonardo and Princess Latriche were quietly observing the situation a short distance from us. Lord Nazel formally greeted Princess Mia, and Master Robin hurried back to his fiancée’s side.

“Have you surprisingly been enjoying your life on the frontier? You even brought your lover along, you lucky guy. What happened to Lady Bumpkin?” Her Highness asked.

“She’s right next to me,” Lord Nazel replied. He smiled as he lovingly stared at me with his amber eyes; he was so wonderful I felt like I would melt.

“Surely you jest. You clearly brought a completely different woman with you!” the princess crowed triumphantly.

“There’s no doubt that’s her, Mia. Lady Bumpkin is surprisingly beautiful without her makeup,” Master Robin told her in a low voice.

“What?!” Her Highness’s expression immediately turned sour, her glossy lips curling into a frown as she fixed her gaze on me. “You have some nerve trying to tempt my fiancé with your body. Is this your way of getting revenge for last time?”

Her utterly bizarre accusation made me forget my words.

How did she arrive at that *conclusion? I’ve tempted no one!*

Rather, I’d been the one in a tough spot thanks to Master Robin pestering me. Speaking of whom, he now looked delighted for whatever reason.

“Wow, I’m so popular! Whew! Don’t fight over me, girls!”

Just what was going on inside that man's head? It was impossible for normal people to comprehend him.

I glanced next to me and saw Lord Nazel looking perfectly expressionless.

He's gotten even angrier.

I was able to tell because we'd spent so much time together. His stiff, doll-like expression reminded me of the Lord Nazel of the past who'd been accused of lacking humanity. That had been a measure he'd taken subconsciously, in order to protect his mind as he'd carried out his duty with his true feelings sealed away.

"I should be the one saying that, Your Highness. My wife was feeling troubled because your fiancé was flirting with her. Please keep a closer eye on your partner."

"My, how impertinent! You dare talk back to me? You've grown rather arrogant. I'm going to smash that insubordination of yours to pieces!" Her Highness boldly pointed a finger at Lord Nazel. "Nazelbart, this is an order! Break up with that bumpkin next to you and become my fiancé! I'd rather not do this, but it's my mother's wish! But never, ever seek my love, you understand? You will be my fiancé for appearances only, quietly taking care of government work while leaving me alone, so just—"

"I refuse," Lord Nazel replied without changing his expression. "I'm already married to Agnes, and our love is mutual, so I have no reason to comply with your demand. Please look for someone else."



“Like I said, this is an order! You have no right to refuse!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“What was that?! You sure are impudent for a mere frontier lord.”

“I gratefully accept your words as the true opinion of the future queen.”

In response to Lord Nazel’s reply, some nobles started huddling together and making a fuss. That’s because Princess Mia had just brazenly picked a fight with Sutrena. Even if most people disdainfully spoke of it as a lowly frontier region, they still knew it was a strategically important march. Sutrena was on Desnim’s southern border, adjacent to the neighboring country of Polpystan. Relations between the two nations were good for now, as evidenced by the fact that Princess Latriche, a Polpystani royal, had married Desnim’s Prince Bertrand, but Sutrena’s significance couldn’t simply be ignored.

I observed Princess Mia, wondering how she would act next, but to my surprise, the first one to make a move was the man standing by her side, Master Robin.

“Oh no, no, please don’t rely on that detestable man for anything, Mia. You have me, don’t you?” he said, taking the opportunity to draw attention to himself once more.

As all this was happening, I’d come to gradually understand what Her Highness and Master Robin were thinking.

The two of them aren’t of the same mind. Master Robin is still opposed to Lord Nazel being reinstated as Her Highness’s fiancé. But that’s only natural, because he would lose his position as her official husband and get demoted to just her lover.

However, Her Highness tried to reason with Master Robin.

“I know, Robin. Like I’ve said *many* times already, my feelings for you and our relationship won’t change. We’re only going to make Nazelbart take care of the prince consort’s responsibilities. You hate working and can’t perform those duties, right?”

Her Highness meant no harm with her words, but she had just exposed the fact that Master Robin was incapable of doing his job, and in front of a large crowd, no less. And was it just me, or did his omnipresent grin look a little stiffer than before? Whatever the case, he appeared to be a very proud individual.

“B-But Nazelbart’s a real villain, you know? Making that guy the

prince consort will be a disaster!" Master Robin protested.

"If you're referring to his harassment toward you, he will be monitored from now on."

"Gosh, that's not what I'm talking about! He's committed *yet another* horrible crime!"

The insistent Master Robin once again launched into an incomprehensible spiel. What was he causing all of this fuss over?

"Are you saying Nazelbart has already picked on you?" Her Highness asked.

"No, no, no! It's something much bigger. You see, Nazelbart...teamed up with the little birdie's family and got involved in human trafficking!"

Master Robin's ability to consistently leave me at a loss for words was almost impressive, in a way.

You're the one who did all that! Why are you blaming Lord Nazel for it?!

This was an inexcusable affront toward Lord Nazel, a man of irreproachable conduct. However, he didn't look worried in the slightest, and his expression actually became more nonchalant as his lips relaxed into a smile.

"Dear me, blaming others for everything is rather unseemly, Master Robin. *You* were the one who took part in human trafficking, were you not? There is clear evidence proving so."

"I-I've also prepared evidence for today!"

Master Robin raised an eyebrow in contempt as he grinned daringly.

What he just said sounds very *suspicious.*

However, Lord Nazel was the one with proper evidence. He'd thoroughly investigated both the incident at Kattena and the House of Evantail's involvement in the slave trade.

"I even have witnesses!"

Master Robin pointed toward a group of noble ladies who were timidly approaching us. The women looked like they were present in body but not in spirit and also appeared frightened of something. However, the way they deliriously gazed at Master Robin reminded me of Liliane when she'd attempted to assassinate Lord Nazel.

"All right, let's hear your testimonies now, chop-chop!"

Prompted by Master Robin's inappropriately cheerful voice, one

of the women slowly opened her mouth.

"W-We were living in the capital's Convent, when we were almost sold off! B-By that man!" she whimpered, pointing a trembling finger at Lord Nazel. Her eyes were darting all over the place, possibly because she was feeling guilty about lying.

"That's right. Um, uhm, he…he courted me!"

A second lady made an equally preposterous claim. Her words sounded awfully forced, like she was desperately trying to remember lines she'd been given in advance. Clearly, being seduced by Master Robin was no guarantee that one was cut out for acting.

"Y-Yes! And then, he sexually harassed me!"

Many nobles opened their eyes wide when they heard a third lady's complaint. What kind of charade was this?

It would be easy to imagine someone filled with sketchy motives like Master Robin doing these things, but a man as honest and handsome as Lord Nazel would never go out of his way to do any of what they claim. He doesn't need to court women; he's plenty charming simply by standing there!

I'd witnessed many women come on to him, but never the other way around. It seemed Master Robin's strategy was based around the assumption that since he acted that way, other men must have done the same, but it was already starting to fall apart. That fact was evident from the way all the nobles gathered here were looking at Master Robin suspiciously.

Yes, this situation is different from the time Her Highness called off their engagement.

Master Robin hadn't yet noticed the change in the crowd. Many nobles had already reached the point where they wouldn't simply take him at his word.

Master Robin had dropped down like a meteorite during Her Highness's engagement party. Back then, almost no noble had known who he was, so they'd all silently waited to see how things would unfold or had been subservient to Her Highness for the time being. That was why things had unfolded as they had, with the truth being suppressed and Lord Nazel quickly being exiled to the frontier.

But at this point, Master Robin's engagement to Her Highness had greatly inconvenienced pretty much everyone around him, to

the point that some people had even begun insisting on Lord Nazel's return. Master Robin's poor behavior had stood out so much that he'd invited the displeasure of the people who'd once been his allies. His reputation among the general populace was also downright terrible.

Everyone outside Prince Leonardo's faction has also started to realize that Lord Nazel was falsely accused and that Master Robin was the one pulling the strings.

Moreover, Master Robin had fabricated a rather nonsensical accusation this time. The mood toward him could only be considered scornful at this point. And although Lord Nazel was once again expressionless, it was clear to me that he was also fed up with Master Robin's strategy.

"I have absolutely no interest in any woman besides Agnes. Who even are you women? Does Master Robin perhaps have something on you?"

"Wha— Absolutely not! Master Robin is a kind man who simply listened to my worries!" one of the women said, prompting a reaction from Her Highness this time.

"Y-You… You're that home-wrecker of a viscount's daughter who made a move on Robin! You should have been disowned a month ago! What is she doing here, Robin?!"

"Um… I think you have the wrong person, Mia."

"No! This woman, and that one, and the one over there are all ladies whose parents I pressured to kick them out! You said that you'd settle things with your lovers and send them to the Convent!"

"Eep! You know *all* of them?"

It would seem that Master Robin had called upon some of his past partners for help and was trying to use their slanderous lies to protect himself.

Just like Liliane, their love for Master Robin has blinded them. Using these maidens' hearts and leading them to commit crimes—he's the worst kind of person. And by "settling things," Her Highness was talking about selling them off as slaves through the Convent, wasn't she? Does that mean Her Highness has been acting while fully aware of the human trafficking?

In any case, the miscommunication between Her Highness and Master Robin had raised doubts about the exceedingly suspicious

evidence he'd presented to condemn Lord Nazel. Perhaps they hadn't discussed things enough in advance or hadn't communicated properly, but the two of them were sabotaging each other.

"Gosh! Be quiet for a moment, Mia! I'm going to get Nazelbart convicted now."

"I refuse! There is work for Nazelbart to do. Haven't I already told you he will be appointed the prince consort? That is what my mother wishes."

"I'm against it! I'm more than enough as the prince consort on my own!"

"And like I said, this is your fault for being unable to do your job!"

"Don't blame me for this, okay? If you're going to take it there, wouldn't it just be better for *you* to do the work? You may not be as good as Nazelbart, but you can still more or less do it, right?"

"Stop! Don't bring up his name now!!!"

Her Highness and Master Robin started fighting in front of the gathered nobles. The three ladies Master Robin had called in as accusers could only tremble in fear and make themselves as small as possible.

Won't the two of them bring about their own ruin even if we don't do anything?

Despite my feeble hope, things didn't progress so easily. A sharp voice I'd never heard before cut through the room.

"What are you two arguing about?! You are causing a scene!"

I turned around and saw Her Majesty standing imposingly at the top of the staircase, as well as His Majesty quietly approaching behind her. Her stately crimson dress adorned with gold thread eloquently communicated that she was the most influential person in the room.

"M-Mother!"

Princess Mia turned to look at her mother as if seeking salvation. Her Majesty moved next to her in a relaxed manner, opened her folding fan as she glared at the nobles around her, and finally parted her scarlet lips to speak.

"Did something happen in my absence? What is the meaning of this disturbance?"

"This is horrible, mother! Nazelbart says he doesn't want to

become my prince consort! And Robin is complaining that he doesn't want to switch to being my lover!"

Her Highness blurted out everything to the queen like a little kid. Her Majesty frowned as she stared at Master Robin and laid her displeasure bare.

"You ignoramus. The likes of a baron's illegitimate son is protesting *my* decision?"

Master Robin was stunned; even one as loquacious as he seemed to have no words to speak back to Her Majesty. In other words, Her Majesty was powerful enough to frighten him.

She's strong! Princes Bertrand and Leonardo both said she almost killed them on multiple occasions. She's clearly the most dangerous person here.

Her Majesty shifted her gaze to Lord Nazel next.

"Now then, Nazelbart. You used to be her fiancé, so what about my Mia displeases you? Your house also approves of this arrangement, so it only stands to reason that you should obey."

"The House of Florescruz and I have a difference of opinion on this matter. I intend to continue governing Sutrena. I have no desire to waste my skills here at the palace."

"How impertinent. That is out of the question."

At some point, Lord Nazel's brother Lord Julian had slipped through the crowd of nobles and was now standing close to us. I assumed that the two red-haired men standing behind him were Lord Nazel's father and older brother. The two of them were looking at Lord Nazel reproachfully. Their discussion yesterday had apparently ended in a stalemate.

"Are you planning to oppose the House of Florescruz's plans, Nazelbart?! You bring shame to our family!"

Lord Nazel's father was red-faced as he censured him. He seemed to be displeased that his son had rebuked Her Majesty in public.

"I am. I can no longer endorse your methods."

Lord Nazel's family had a blood relation to Her Majesty, so he and Princess Mia were cousins. His father and older brother had left a poor impression on me. They'd readily discarded Lord Nazel during the most difficult time of his life. Even if they talked about their plans and whatnot now, Lord Nazel was unlikely to want to go along with them. The only allies Lord Nazel had in his family

were his mother and Lord Julian.

“This is a direct order from me, Nazelbart. You will become the future prince consort!”

Her Majesty made this grand declaration, but yet another person joined the conversation.

“Unfortunately for you, that future won’t come to pass.”

Everyone’s head turned to the direction of the voice as if by reflex. A young nobleman in formal attire stood at the top of the staircase behind Her Majesty. The suspicious air he’d had about him as a merchant was gone, and he boldly descended the steps with refined movements.

“Wh-Who is that man?!”

“He has the same blond hair as the royal family. It couldn’t be! The first prince?!”

Prince Bertrand, the supposedly frail and bedridden prince, had a calm smile on his face. He looked like he was enjoying the reactions of the crowd. A commotion spread among the nobles who knew nothing about him.



“That’s right! He’s the first prince without doubt! He resembles Princess Mia and Prince Leonardo closely!”

“What is Prince Bertrand doing here?!”

His appearance sent an impact through the banquet hall, throwing the guests into a tizzy. As if she’d been waiting for this, Princess Latriche moved from Prince Leonardo’s side to Prince Bertrand’s. Prince Leonardo and Lord Julian took up positions close to Lord Nazel, completing the preparations for our counterattack.

“Why are *you* here, Bertrand?! You… You should be permanently disabled and unable to leave your room!”

Her Majesty shook as she shouted with great emotion, eliciting a smile from Prince Bertrand.

“True, I almost died several times thanks to a certain someone. But I managed to escape death and I’m now fit as a fiddle. Does my ability to walk around freely perhaps inconvenience you?”

His Highness spat sarcasm at Her Majesty with a dignified demeanor completely unlike the one he had as a merchant. He’d apparently been poisoned by Her Majesty several times and experienced significant peril.

“Knowing you, you’d try to kill me again if you knew about my recovery, right? So I stayed a harmless, bedridden prince, though I accomplished a lot of things behind the scenes. I’m perfectly healthy now, and thanks to diligently studying in secret, I’m fully capable of handling government affairs. My competent younger brother, Leonardo, who studied under Nazelbart, is also on my side. This sounds like a much more secure future for Desnim than letting Mia become the queen, no?”

Prince Leonardo nodded his head in agreement. Some of the nobles also clearly expected great things from the princes, judging by the approving looks they were giving the two.

Though they’re all quiet because Her Majesty is present.

Her Majesty’s mood was getting worse and worse, and she wrinkled her nose before arguing back against His Highness.

“I have decided that Mia will be the one to inherit the throne! You two should be silent!”

“The one with the right to decide the next ruler is His Majesty, not you. Could *you* please be silent?” His Highness wasn’t about to back down. “In any case, it’s impossible for Mia to become queen.

She and that man next to her have committed too many crimes."

"That man next to her" referred to the person who was stealthily moving behind Princess Mia—Master Robin. It seemed that he wasn't good at dealing with Her Majesty.

"Their crimes include conspiracy in Sutrena, attempted murder, human trafficking at the Convent, defrauding of noble ladies, and so much more. I have evidence of all their offenses, and I'm going to disclose everything right here and now."

"Y-You're lying! Robin has done nothing wrong!" Princess Mia shouted to interrupt her brother and protect Master Robin. "Nazelbart is the one who committed those crimes, isn't he? Robin and I are innocent!"

"Don't be silly, Mia. You're well aware of Robin's crimes. After all, you also had a hand in the human trafficking. Like I said, I have proof of everything."

Following that preamble, Prince Bertrand began disclosing all of the charges against the couple.

"Mia, due to your own jealousy you pressured the families of numerous noble ladies to disown them, then had the disowned ladies sent to the Convent, where they were sold off as slaves to various influential people. Robin might have been the main perpetrator, but you gave your tacit approval to the whole endeavor. Furthermore, Robin earned additional ill-gotten money by facilitating a conspiracy to direct manabeasts to attack specific areas in Sutrena. He even used his connections there to plot the assassination of the margrave, Nazelbart. While he made it out in one piece, his death would have spelled disaster."

Her Highness could do little except repeatedly denounce His Highness as a liar, while Master Robin looked ready to make a run for it and abandon her at any moment.

"I-I got a sudden stomachache... Owww, it hurts so bad!"

"Hold on now, it's much too early to run away, Robin. I've brought some witnesses just like you did earlier. It seems that they can tell us the full extent of the crimes both of you committed," His Highness told Master Robin, a tinge of laughter in his voice.

"L-Like I care! I'm a busy guy!"

Master Robin bolted, but a large pair of hands held him firmly in place.

"We finally meet again, Robin. It's time for you to pay the piper

at last. You're not getting away!"

The one who'd stealthily joined the party and forcefully grabbed Master Robin by the collar was my guard, Torre. He was in top form as the time for him to get his revenge approached.

"Settle down, will you?! Now is the time to clear away Liliane's sorrow!"

"Hey, let me go, you meathead!"

"Now, Liliane! Reveal all of Robin's crimes!"

Prompted by Torre and the two princes, the first witness to appear was a woman who had once been seduced by Master Robin and lost everything: Liliane.

"I'm also a criminal involved in the aforementioned crimes, but I've been temporarily released from captivity in order to testify. I shall now tell you the entire story that led to me committing that crime."

Liliane braced herself and started carefully explaining the background of the assassination attempt in Sutrena, as well as Master Robin's modus operandi of manipulating noble ladies.

"Everything started with Robin committing crimes in various different locations. He approached a lord who was having trouble with manabeast attacks and, for a cut of the profits, suggested using the power of money to foist the problem of those manabeasts on a different lord."

Crimes were revealed one after the other, including the truth of the injustice committed by the two lords at Kattena, and their connection with Master Robin's noble house.

"And so, when I was disowned and had nowhere to go, Robin ordered me to assassinate Nazelbart. Like a fool, I did exactly as I was told and participated in Robin's crimes."

After Liliane was done telling everything, Master Robin raised objections to her testimony.

"Huuuh? I don't recall doing *any* of that! I was just being a little nice to you. How did you jump to such a weird conclusion, you hag?! Excessively self-absorbed women are such a pain to deal with." Master Robin started speaking ill of Liliane, but then Torre's grip on his neck tightened, and he quieted down with a groan of pain.

I led Liliane away to protect her and let her rest.

"Thank you for testifying, Lady Liliane. Are you feeling all right?"

“Yes, Lady Agnes. You need not concern yourself over me. I simply wanted to repay you all for the lenient treatment you have afforded me. I’d be glad if I managed to be even a little useful.”

Liliane watched over the subsequent testimonies with a resolute expression. I was looking not at a frail lady who relied on others to maintain her mental stability but a strong woman who had come to grips with reality and was facing forward.

The next witness was a boy who had temporarily returned to Desnim from his studies abroad to testify about the human trafficking incident: Paul.

“I will talk about the human trafficking my parents participated in after they were incited by Master Robin. It started when a man calling himself a messenger from Master Robin visited the House of Evantail, which had been isolated from high society by order of His Highness Prince Leonardo.”

Paul, who had put the traditional House of Evantail getup completely behind him, confidently explained the crimes committed by our parents and Master Robin. Perhaps this was a result of his studies abroad, but I felt like my brother had grown up a lot.

“My parents served as the link between the women who lived at the Convent after being disowned and the human traffickers. Subsequent investigation revealed that the trafficking was operated by Master Robin’s noble house. Furthermore, the House of Levbition was involved in human trafficking through other routes too. It has also been discovered that in a separate case, Princess Mia herself contacted several nobles and solicited their assistance in the trafficking of noble ladies. Apparently, she acted to sell off ladies she was displeased with to unscrupulous nobles.”

Master Robin approached weakened, isolated women and tempted them with alluring words. He happily deceived all those who took his hand as their last hope, and cast them away after he’d used them for his convenience. This travesty had to stop now, and Her Highness’s reckless behavior also required correction.

After Paul, other witnesses prepared by Prince Bertrand appeared one after another and spoke of Her Highness’s and Master Robin’s crimes. Physical evidence was also presented. The venue was in an uproar, and the nobles directed piercing glares at the two accused.

“Wh-What in— Those ladies are to blame! They made moves on Robin despite knowing he’s my fiancé! Isn’t that right?!” Her Highness tried to make excuses for herself, but her words were akin to an admission of her own guilt.

“I didn’t do anything wrong either! My dad is the one who did everything!”

To the very last moment, Master Robin kept trying to lay the blame for his crimes on someone else. His father, Baron Levbition, was apparently also present, and all eyes focused on him at once. The baron was dressed in extravagantly luxurious attire and his body had grown flabby from overeating. He seemed shaken by his son’s words and avoided looking anyone in the eye.

“Wh-What are you saying, Robin?! *You* are the one who planned all those crimes! I only lent you funds and manpower to— Ah!”

To my surprise, even the baron carelessly admitted to his crimes. They had nowhere to run to anymore. The soldiers His Highness had deployed in advance surrounded Master Robin and his collaborators. But then, Her Majesty intervened.

“Such insolence! I shall not permit this outrage!” Her Majesty declaimed as she brandished her fan.

His Highness, however, merely smiled at her.

“Worry not, Your Majesty! You will, of course, be apprehended alongside them.”

“What?! You dare insinuate that *I* did something unlawful?! Retract your preposterous allegations at once!”

“You have quite the nerve to say that. Don’t you recall how many times you tried to poison Leonardo and me or sent assassins to take our lives?”

Another wave of commotion washed over the venue in response to His Highness’s words. I heard several nobles blurt things like “So you mean His Highness was bedridden because…” Though he’d eventually recovered, he had, indeed, been poisoned. While in reality he had survived unscathed, the well-known story about him being bedridden gave more credibility to his claim about having been poisoned by Her Majesty.

“You have no evidence to support that! I grow tired of your fabrications! You have disrespected me enough!”

A moment later, three unfamiliar men appeared. Perhaps the queen recognized them, because she went wide-eyed at the sight.

“Her Majesty ordered us to assassinate the two princes!”

“She threatened us by taking our subordinates hostage!”

“And we were cast out of the palace with nothing because we failed! She also sent men to silence us, and we only narrowly escaped thanks to Prince Bertrand rescuing us!”

All three of them started denouncing Her Majesty. His Highness breathed a sigh as he watched the scene unfold.

“Your Majesty, you shouldn’t treat the subordinates to whom you entrust important jobs with such disdain. Otherwise, they will gladly reveal the truth, just like these three are doing right now.”

“Urk!”

Her Majesty bit her lip in frustration, but it seemed that she hadn’t given up yet. She glared toward one end of the room before raising her voice.

“To work, men! *Deal with* every last one of these insolent wretches!”

Following her command, some of the soldiers stationed in a corner of the venue sprang to action. They were apparently a private army directly under her command. The startled nobles screamed in terror.

“Please calm down, everyone. Right this way!”

Liliane and I, as well as Paul, helped pacify the panicking nobles and guided them to safety. Of course, we also evacuated the infant prince. Meanwhile, our combatants, like Lord Nazel and Torre, intercepted the enemy. However, Her Majesty’s soldiers were numerous, and reinforcements poured down the stairs one after the other. I could only be amazed at Her Majesty for managing to slip so many of her own allies into the soldiers’ ranks; she wasn’t someone who could be dealt with by ordinary means.

“I’ll go help out a little.”

I ran toward the center of the room with my hands tucked into my dress pockets.

“Take that!”

I retrieved some pink objects from my pocket and tossed them at Her Majesty’s soldiers. They were pink taros—a delicious plant that grew bountifully even in Sutrena—that Lord Nazel had selectively bred. However, their skin was thick and hard, so they were still a work in progress. I reinforced the taros with my magic and slung them around using the strength of my already-

reinforced arms. My throwing skill had improved, so I now hit enemies at a rather high accuracy rate.

“Agh!”

“Mngh!”

“Gwaaah!”

The soldiers screamed in agony and lost consciousness, collapsing onto the floor in quick succession. As I repeatedly picked up the taros from the floor and tossed them again, the enemies still on their feet significantly dropped in number. Lord Nazel and the rest had almost taken complete control of the room.

I need to make sure to collect the taros later. Wasting food is wrong.

Her Majesty and Her Highness had found shelter in a corner of the room, their faces bright red as they kept screaming. Perhaps Lord Nazel’s father and older brother weren’t the fighting type, because they were similarly shivering in one end of the room. Lord Nazel’s mother had already evacuated, and Lord Julian was still here; he seemed just fine.

Thank goodness, everyone is safe, not to mention we’ve taken down our enemies.

But as I was feeling relieved, a tanned arm suddenly grabbed me from behind. I realized too late that Master Robin had at some point sneaked behind me and now held me in his arms, pointing a knife at my cheek.

“Please let me go, Master Robin.”

“Don’t wanna. Mm, you smell really nice, little birdie.”

“Eek!”

My whole body broke into a cold sweat when he sniffed the base of my neck.

“You’re so soft and nice to hug… That damn Nazelbart, I’m so envious.”

“Please stop touching me in weird places!”

“Aw, come on. It would be a waste not to touch you when we’re finally getting nice and close to each other.” Master Robin paused the sexual harassment for a moment to shout at Lord Nazel. “Hey, Nazelbart! If you value the little birdie’s life, drop your weapons and prostrate yourselves before me!”

Lord Nazel and the two princes flinched at his words. What a despicable coward! He’d stooped to taking a hostage this late in

the game?

But to think he'd pick me... Talk about the worst choice possible.

I was scared, but simply shivering in fear wouldn't do anything to change my predicament. I raised my foot and stomped on Master Robin's toes. This was a form of self-defense useful for repelling perverts that Princess Latriche had taught me. She'd felt terribly sorry for me when she heard about all the abuse I'd suffered at my parents' hands, so since she was trained in combat, she'd given me a crash course in self-defense during her stay in Sutrena.

I wasn't wearing high heels, but my party shoes had fairly hard heels. When I ground my foot against his, Master Robin groaned in anguish.

"Urk!"

"I'm not done yet!"

I shifted my body to the right and elbowed him in the solar plexus.

"Graah!"

"And another one!"

I grabbed Master Robin's left arm as he writhed in agony, abruptly passed under his left armpit, and pulled his arm tightly behind his back.

"Ow, ow, owww! Is this...a joint lock?!"

Master Robin screamed as he was forced into an unnatural posture.

Lord Nazel rushed over the next moment, calling my name. With his target locked in place, he finished off Master Robin with a merciless flying kick from his long legs.

"Robin! How dare you treat my wife like that!"

Lord Nazel took me into a protective hug and gave orders for Master Robin to be arrested. As Prince Bertrand had arranged, the soldiers who weren't working for Her Majesty arrived and swiftly restrained Master Robin; he was now unconscious and foaming at the mouth.

"I'm sorry, Agnes, you must have been so scared. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Master Robin was really weak, so even I was somehow able to manage."

"To think he would dare lay hands on you, even at the last

moment. What a contemptible man.”

I was certain that even if I hadn’t broken free and used a joint lock, Lord Nazel would have come to my rescue in short order. But I was also a little pleased that I’d managed to resolve this mostly by my own strength. My self-defense teacher, Princess Latriche, looked at me happily.

“Take Her Majesty and Princess Mia to a different room.”

The soldiers loyally fulfilled Prince Bertrand’s command. Her Majesty’s faction didn’t have a single ally remaining anymore. Looking at this scene, I could understand that the power structure in the royal palace had been rewritten. Finally, His Highness looked up at His Majesty and smiled.

“And so, please keep your promise, father.”

His Majesty slowly nodded with his eyes closed.

“That was my intention all along. You did well, Bertrand, Leonardo. I thank you for your cooperation, Nazelbart.”

His Majesty turned around and left the banquet hall at a leisurely pace to follow after Her Majesty and Her Highness as they were being taken away.

“I’d also like to thank you for working with us, Nazelbart!”

Prince Bertrand was always smiling, while Prince Leonardo was listless. The two of them were quite the contrast to each other, but they both appeared relieved and pleased to have completed this task.

“Maaan, those two nuisances are finally gone,” Princess Latriche said with her hands linked behind her head; she also seemed to be in high spirits.

“To whom are you referring?”

“Her Majesty and Princess Mia, Lady Agnes. They pestered me incessantly, telling me that a hostage like me should know her place or whatever.”

“Oh my. I’m shocked that a powerful nation like Polpystan doesn’t value its own princess.”

I decided not to inquire further on the topic. I felt that more and more secrets would end up coming to light.

“We will deal with the rest of the problems in the palace. However, we will probably need you two to help us in the future. For now, go ahead and rest in the guest room,” Prince Bertrand suggested.

As Their Highnesses were busily moving around, Lord Nazel and I returned to our room for a breather. I somehow felt like they'd discreetly taken advantage of me. I didn't particularly mind, but I still wished that they'd told me in advance.

"His Majesty might have been waiting for things to settle down from the start. He lacked the strength to suppress Her Majesty on his own, but he wanted to avoid having Princess Mia become queen for the sake of the country."

"Prince Bertrand mentioned a promise."

"I overheard that too. There must have been a secret agreement between them. At any rate, I'm glad things concluded without us being separated. Not that I was ever willing to part with you," Lord Nazel said as he held me in his arms, still in my dress, and lowered me onto the guest room's bed. "You seem fine, Agnes. Were you injured anywhere?"

"No, I'm unhurt. Neither Her Majesty's soldiers nor Master Robin put a single scratch on me. Although Master Robin did touch me all over, which was awfully unpleasant."

A vein popped up on Lord Nazel's brow.

"That damn Robin will pay for this. I will say a few things when it comes to his punishment."

He was even angrier than the time Master Robin had set him up.

"U-Um, Lord Nazel?"

"I'm sorry, I'm well aware that I've lost my composure. But I just can't keep a cool head when you're involved," he said before falling on me with all his weight. I could hear his heart thumping loudly.

"L-Lord Nazel, I— Mngh!"

He gently stole my lips, leaving my thoughts hazy.

Perhaps Lord Nazel is feeling unexpectedly unsettled after successfully dealing with all of these trying incidents. He's always so perfect, so he doesn't readily show his feelings.

It was easy to understand that he was angry at Master Robin, but I had a feeling that this wasn't the only reason he was feeling so restless.

In that case, what can I do for him?

I reached out my hands for my beloved's cheeks and touched them softly. He seemed taken aback and immediately stopped.

"I-I'm sorry, Agnes. I was being very forceful. Your dress is all

wrinkled now too."

"It's fine, I can just iron it later. But more importantly, you have work to do starting tomorrow, so you need to get some proper rest. I know you're feeling agitated right now, but you can talk to me about anything you'd like."

"Thank you..."

"I'm your wife, after all." The desire to be of help to a loved one was perfectly natural. "Now then, let's get changed first. Your jacket is also full of wrinkles."

"Wow, you're right. Kelly will surely scold me."

We chuckled together and changed into some light clothing. Of course, Kelly noticed the wrinkles in both of our clothes and let out a short sigh with her usual blank expression.

The next day, Prince Bertrand came to summon Lord Nazel and me. I was surprised to see the first prince come to our room personally, but...when I gave it some thought, I realized anything went with him.

"Sorry for bothering you so soon after yesterday's excitement. I'm going to explain things in detail, so please come to the audience chamber."

"To the audience chamber?" Lord Nazel parroted.

His Highness replied with a nod.

"His Majesty would like to speak to you too. You may also come, Lady Agnes."

Lord Nazel and I exchanged glances, then followed His Highness and soon arrived at the audience chamber. This was my first time in a place like this, so I felt nervous and my entire body was frozen stiff.

"You can relax, Agnes."

Lord Nazel seemed familiar with situations like this. He embraced me and guided me along.

Princess Latriche and Prince Leonardo were also in the audience chamber. Her Majesty, Princess Mia, and Master Robin were, of course, absent. His Majesty sat on a throne at the end of a blue carpet stretching across the room. He stood up when he noticed us enter.

"Thank you for coming, you two. Your hard work on this occasion is appreciated. With the queen's, the princess's, and

Robin’s crimes coming to light, our country has been saved from peril for now.”

Prince Bertrand had a retort to His Majesty’s words.

“What are you even saying, Your Majesty? When you get right down to it, things only turned out like this because you’re unreliable. If you’d shown some dignity and stopped Her Majesty at the start, neither Mia nor Robin would have grown so arrogant.”

“I am ashamed to agree. But that was impossible for me. The queen and both ducal houses were constantly monitoring my every move. They might have erased me if I had stepped even a little out of line. That’s why I had you work behind the scenes. They were apparently wary of Leonardo, but you were a complete blind spot, Bertrand.”

“Good grief... You just pushed all of the problems onto me.”

“Don’t get upset. Just like I promised, I will now retire as a way of taking responsibility for this mess.”

“Yes, and I will inherit the throne, so you can rest assured, Your Majesty.”

The promise His Highness had mentioned yesterday apparently referred to him taking the throne. His Highness and His Majesty looked toward Lord Nazel and me next. His Majesty addressed us in a formal tone.

“Nazelbart. I would like you to continue supporting Bertrand.”

“Certainly. However...I am the Margrave of Sutrena. I have no plans to move to the capital.”

Lord Nazel looked a little bewildered, but His Highness sounded very relaxed as he responded.

“That’s fine. Sutrena is an important territory, so I want to be on friendly terms with you two. I already know that you want to return to Sutrena, Nazelbart.”

“I see. Then I will gladly lend my aid. I will entrust the duty of assisting more directly here in the capital to my younger brother, Julian.”

“That will be a great help. It looks like Julian will be the next head of the House of Florescruz. As you already know, it was proved that the current head and your older brother had both assisted Her Majesty’s schemes. That’s not something that can be overlooked, so they will certainly be arrested. But rest assured that I have no intention of taking down the House of Florescruz itself.”

“I apologize for my father and older brother’s actions. I am thankful for the lenient punishment.”

“We captured all the real nuisances, and I have you and Julian as my allies now, so it’s not a bad deal for me either.”

His Majesty and His Highness then started talking about how Her Majesty, Her Highness, and Master Robin would be dealt with.

“First of all, the queen and princess will be stripped of their status and exiled to a penal colony on a solitary island. It’s a warm place abundant in nature, so they should be able to lead ordinary lives as commoners as long as they don’t expect anything excessively extravagant. That will likely prove difficult for those two, though. As for Robin…he’s liable to cause considerable strife even on a solitary island, so we’ve decided that he alone will be given a different sentence,” His Majesty explained.

His Highness smiled happily and took the reins of the explanation.

“For his punishment, he will be confined to a Convent where no women are allowed, for the rest of his life. Said Convent is famous for being the strictest in our country, and also the only one that didn’t participate in the human trafficking scandal. The rector is an acquaintance of mine, so I asked him to train Robin from the ground up, in both body and mind.”

Lord Nazel tilted his head in confusion and questioned His Highness.

“But isn’t Robin’s magic dangerous? I got the impression that it’s the kind that can manipulate people’s hearts.”

“Robin’s magic isn’t that big a deal. Mia called it ‘sacred,’ but it’s essentially a weak form of mental healing and purification. By all rights, it’s not a magic one should be scared of, but it turned into such a big problem because he was such a smooth talker.”

I spent a moment thinking and decided to join the conversation.

“Um…come to think of it, when Master Robin used magic on me, I felt strange, like the depths of my heart were being fully cleansed. Is that what you meant by ‘purification’?”

“That’s right, Lady Agnes. Robin’s purification affects the mind, temporarily erasing all negative emotions and leaving the other person’s heart vulnerable to manipulation.”

“That sounds scary, even if it’s relatively weak.”

“If only all women were as strong-willed as you, Lady Agnes. There was no end to the number of ladies who fell for Robin’s honeyed words and easily let their guard down around him. We have determined that his healing and purification can be addictive to the mind and can also cause greater harm if abused.”

“Won’t he cause any harm at the Convent?”

“His magic will be sealed just in case. I have a subordinate who can use a minor form of mana sealing magic, and it should be possible to seal magic at the level of Robin’s. He’s only ever used his magic on ladies, so there might not even be any harm in letting him have access to it in his new environment, but we’ll seal it just to be safe.”

An exclusively male holy order—that would surely be a harsh environment for a womanizer like Master Robin. There wouldn’t be any more victims of sexual harassment with him confined there, so I felt that it was a fitting punishment.

Several days later, we returned to Sutrena. Approximately a month later, the entire country heard the news that His Majesty had abdicated, and Prince Bertrand was appointed the new king, with his wife becoming the new queen. Prince Leonardo was apparently assisting his brother now. As long as they were there, Desnim should do fine for the time being. With the downfall of their ally the previous queen, the influence of the two great ducal houses declined. Lord Julian succeeded to headship of the House of Florescruz. He was apparently on good terms with Prince Leonardo, and the two of them met often. After the battle, Paul had returned to Polpystan and devoted himself to his studies. However, it seemed that he often sent letters to Sutrena addressed to Kelly. She showed me his letters, and they...sort of looked like love letters to me.

Don’t tell me...

During Paul’s stay at our estate in Sutrena, Kelly was the one who’d primarily taken care of him.

Oh my, so that’s *how it is. Kelly’s a tough one, Paul.*

Kelly didn’t think of Paul’s correspondence as love letters. I secretly rooted for my brother’s love, but the road ahead of him was steep.

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The soldiers dragged Robin into the audience chamber, where he was reunited with the disgruntled Princess Mia. He wasn't restrained, but the soldiers behind him kept a watchful eye on him, so he couldn't do anything reckless. Although the two of them had once loved each other and even had a son together, Robin's heart was cold to her now. After all, the only reason he'd gotten engaged to Mia was for her status.

If not for her status, why would anyone ever wanna get hitched to this selfish pain in the ass of a woman?! I suppose her face and body are pretty nice, but the little birdie is more my type!

Incidentally, their son's existence had completely vanished from Robin's mind. To him, his son had been nothing but a tool for him to become the next prince consort; he had no more business with the boy after his birth. As for Princess Mia, her son was no more than a pair of shackles to keep Robin by her side.

While Robin contemplated how he would talk his way out of this situation, the king standing right before him announced his punishment, as well as that of the queen and princess.

"The queen and Mia will be stripped of their status and exiled to Peppel Island!"

The two of them started screaming the moment they heard their sentence. For the record, the two women also had soldiers stationed behind them to ensure they wouldn't act out.

"N-No way! Father! That's an island for criminals! That's far too horrible a way to treat your own daughter!"

"Indeed! Just who do you presume me to be?! Such treatment is unforgivable! My family shall not remain quiet about this!"

Ignoring their complaints, the king slowly continued his speech in an instructive tone. At some point, the two princes appeared next to him.

"Perhaps you haven't heard yet, *dear*, but the heads of the two great ducal houses have already been exiled. They've been banished to a different penal colony, not Peppel Island. I deemed that putting you all on the same island wouldn't lead to anything good."

Desnim had a number of isolated islands, all of which were used to quarantine criminals. The two prison islands in this case each had a warm climate and decent environment, but one couldn't keep leading the same sort of decadent lifestyle as they'd

had in the capital. These islands could be considered quite harsh places for nobles who'd indulged in all manner of luxury.

Hmm?! Am I also getting exiled?! But if you ignore how primitive island life would be, I'd have a high degree of freedom, so I might be able to make it work.

As Robin was pondering how he would operate on an island, the king's eyes fell upon him.

"Robin. Your sentence will be a little different than theirs."

"Huh…?"

"Your destination is the Sempli Convent—a place where no women are allowed entry. You will spend the rest of your life there in honorable poverty and under constant supervision."

This shocking revelation left Robin speechless, but he quickly came to his senses and started loudly objecting.

"What?! Why only me?!"

Unless he'd misheard, the king had just mentioned something outrageous about a Convent with no women. A place with only men was number one on the list of locales Robin didn't want to go to.

"No, absolutely not! Please at least make it somewhere with women! What would I even live for if I were forever surrounded by dudes?!"

"That is what makes it a punishment."

"A-Are you freaking kidding me?!"

Robin clenched his fists tightly, firmly refusing to accept this punishment.

How can I get him to withdraw it? Oh, got it!

Robin quickly came up with a plan to avoid getting sent to the Convent, no matter how inappropriate shouting at the king would be.

"I'm… I'm the father of a prince!" Robin glibly used the son he hadn't particularly cared about so far as a shield. "A kid needs his father! Don't you feel sorry for my son, tearing me away from him like this?!" he continued confidently.

The princess immediately joined in.

"H-He's right! A child needs his parents! Not just his father but his mother too!"

Even the former queen tried to get in on the action.

"A grandmother is also indispensable! I am firmly opposed to

being separated from my dear grandson!”

The audience hall devolved into chaos, but anything was fine with Robin if he could avoid going to the Convent. However, the first prince left the king’s side and moved to stand right before the condemned trio.

“You three are a truly moronic bunch. You’ve completely neglected that boy but now act like his family when it’s convenient for you? Don’t worry about him; the wet nurse will adopt him as her son. The woman who has cared about his well-being this entire time is far more suited to be his family than any of you.”

“Th-That’s absurd!”

“Even during the commotion you caused at the party the other day, the wet nurse was the one who protected my nephew.”

The queen and princess had nothing to say in response. The position of the princess’s wet nurse was always given to a woman from a noble house of a certain status.

If I remember correctly, the wet nurse comes from a count’s family and has a baby girl the same age as my son. He may no longer be royalty, but he’ll still have an easy life. But that’s a problem for me!

Robin wanted to find a way out of this situation, but his magic had been sealed in advance. He’d been driven into a corner. He also hated how triumphant the prince looked.

“Mrgh!”

“Ha ha ha! This may be a painful sentence for a man filled with carnal desires like you, but it beats being castrated, doesn’t it?”

“Huh?! C-Cas…”

“That’s the punishment some of the more radical nobles requested for you—mainly frontier nobles whose wives you hit on or whose fiancées you seduced. I found the idea a bit much and rejected it, though. But we could still go with that if you’d like.”

“Eep!”

Robin hurriedly covered his privates with both hands.

Several days later, Robin—who was now perfectly docile—was safely transported to the Sempli Convent in the northern part of the country. And thus began his bleak life among the monks, surrounded by gray stone walls.

He was currently alone, slouching on the floor in a corner. His life had become a living nightmare ever since he’d been sent here.

Ugh, why do I have to go through this?! Everything is Nazelbart’s

fault!

The Sempli Convent was highly regarded by a select few as a strict order where women weren't allowed. As for why women were prohibited, it was to extinguish all worldly desires from the inhabitants. The monks trained their bodies and minds daily, both separately and together, and devoted themselves to the cultivation of virtue in this strict environment. Being trapped here was practically hell for Robin, a womanizer and the personification of illicit desire.

Robin was forced to dress in highly unfashionable white and deep-blue garments and had to repeat complicated, incomprehensible prayers every single day. Dozing off was not permitted, and he had no place to run to either; the Convent's gates were tightly shut to prevent his escape. In addition, the food was plain to the point of being disgusting, his bed was hard, he had to share a room with a guy, and so on; the list of his complaints was never-ending.

If I show any resistance, that stern, demonic monk will take me behind the church and lecture me nonstop.

The magic Robin took pride in had also been sealed, not that he'd want to peer into the hearts of people of the same sex in the first place.

On the bright side, since he'd been a lower-class commoner, he managed to adapt relatively easily to the modest living conditions. He'd actually lived in an environment even worse than the Convent up until being adopted into the baron's family.

I bet the royals and nobles who handed down my verdict didn't expect this. Hah, bunch of morons!

Robin had a dark grin on his face when he heard an angry voice echo right next to him.

"I've found you, Robin! So this is where you've been hiding!"

"Urk! The demonic monk found me!"

Robin had, in fact, skipped on the schedule he'd been informed of and was currently trying to nap in a deserted area. The large, muscular monk before Robin right now was his instructor. He was in charge of all the men in the Convent and held immense influence there.

"I'm sure I told you there would be martial arts training at this time! Cast away your worldly desires and live in honorable

poverty!”

The Sempli Convent’s monks trained their bodies daily to protect the church in its hour of need. Some of them were even powerful enough to match the knights.

But I don’t want to master martial arts!

Robin ran down the corridor at full speed but was captured soon after and dragged to the training grounds. As he’d lived a frivolous life where his number one priority had been taking things easy, his reflexes weren’t all that good. He was also a slow runner and unskilled in martial arts.

I was even weaker than the little birdie, after all.

And so Robin was hauled off to a suffocatingly hot indoor training area that reeked of men. Sweat poured down the brawny bodies of monks dressed in only loincloths. Their damp bodies often came together as they sparred, wrestled, and trained in martial arts. Loincloths were a type of underwear that left one’s buttocks exposed and had been introduced to Desnim from a foreign country to the far east.

Amid the monks’ shouts filled with fighting spirit, Robin was told to also get changed into a loincloth.

“N-Nooo!”

“No objections! Now take your clothes off!”

Robin was stripped against his will and had just a loincloth thrown at him, leaving him with only two options: go naked or wear the loincloth.

“Get rid of that rotten nature that led you to a life of crime! I’ll stick with you all the way!”

Seeing that Robin had finished changing, the demonic monk entered a martial arts stance.

“Eeeek! Stay awaaay!”

As the mostly naked towering monk approached Robin, he instinctively made a run for it. However, the monk followed him everywhere.

“I got a sudden stomachache, and headache, and back pain, and—”

“I don’t care! Reform yourself!”

“Aaah!”

The middle-aged monk was already covered in sweat, probably because he’d run while dragging Robin with him earlier, and every

part of him that touched Robin felt sticky and greasy. His pungent male stench drifted over to Robin's nostrils.

Ew, a man's sweat feels disgusting!

Robin turned around to escape from his training, but he was violently grabbed and easily flung to the floor.

"What's the matter, Robin?! Try fighting back a little!"

"I caaan't..."

It seemed that the demonic monk had gotten tired of waiting for Robin to get up and so had come over and tackled him.

Sure, martial arts have pinning moves, but not like this!

Afterward, Robin was forced to train with many other monks too. Some of them teased him for having a nice ass, and he seriously felt like his chastity was in danger.

Around the same time, the irritated Princess Mia walked along a sandy beach in the middle of the day. As she listened to the waves gently breaking on the shore and retreating, she kicked the coarse, rough sand and looked off into the distance. The Desnim mainland was so far away that not even its shadow was visible.

"Good grief! How dare they treat me like this?! I won't stand for it!"

She was holding a large porcelain bottle filled with freshly harvested shellfish and seaweed. She'd have to return to her new home and cook these herself if she wanted to survive here.

Peppel Island was one of Desnim's solitary islands and was used to house criminals exiled from the mainland. This country had several such islands serving as prisons. Peppel Island was blessed with the bounty of both the ocean and the forest and had a nice climate that was warm all year round. There was no shortage of food, and there were dwellings available, however plain. The prisoner population included craftspeople with various skills such as building and weaving, and the island's residents had access to basic clothing and tools. Their standard of living was considerably behind the mainland though.

Even so, there was a major problem that Mia simply couldn't tolerate: No one here had any interest in serving royalty!

"Why, why, why do I have to do all this myself?! Just watch. Soon, I'm going to bring down the hammer on these ignorant people who defy me."

Mia glared hatefully at the settlement farther inland and laboriously set off with the bottle in hand. For the former princess with no muscles to speak of, even carrying that light bottle was an ordeal, and she'd ended up walking bowlegged. Her once glossy hair was now damaged and dry thanks to the salty sea breeze, and her previously porcelain-white skin now had a light brown tan.

When Mia had first arrived at the island, she'd gathered all her fellow prisoners and bossily ordered them around.

"Prepare a large, luxurious dwelling for my dear mother and me! It seems that there are no decent houses on this island! Also, the two of us are hungry. Show some consideration, will you?"

However, the islanders had ignored her commands and leisurely returned to their homes.

"You dare disobey a royal decree?!" Mia had shouted in rage.

"If yer so hungry, just go and get some food yerself. Ya can find something to eat if ya walk 'round a bit," one of the islanders had replied with a mocking chuckle.

"Wha—"

"I don't care if yer royalty or whatever, but everyone sent here's a criminal—the worst kind that needs to be exiled. So there ain't no masters and servants here, 'kay?"

The rest of the islanders had all shouted in agreement. Mia had been so dumbfounded she could only stand stock-still.

And so, that state of affairs continued to the present. Her current home was an isolated shack. Neither Mia nor her mother had any talent for construction, and since they'd made the other residents hate them during their first meeting, no one would build a new house for them. The two of them had reluctantly moved into the old home of someone who'd passed away. Despite having been the most influential person back at the palace, Mia's mother could do nothing here. She was, frankly speaking, even more powerless than Mia!

"Have you finally returned, Mia? I am feeling parched."

Despite her daughter working so hard, the former queen was just lying completely motionless on a mat. Mia had been taking care of her mother's every need since they'd come to this island, but she'd finally had enough.

"If you want water so much, why don't you go draw some yourself? I need to prepare lunch!"

Mia had finally become able to get a fire going and could also cook despite not being all that good at it. There were plenty of fruits that could be eaten with no preparation, but she'd grown sick of eating the same things day in and day out. With no other choice, Mia had observed the other islanders' lives and started imitating their cooking.

In contrast to her, her mother was still unable to do anything for herself. Moreover, since she'd only spent her time eating and sleeping the past several months, she'd grown fat like the sea lions Mia saw on the rocky parts of the island.

"I'm busy, mother."

"That is an inappropriate way to address your mother, Mia."

"I don't need such a high-maintenance freeloader. I'd rather look after an infant; at least *it* wouldn't give me orders. I'll kick you out if you keep being so bossy."

The former queen got up slowly and reluctantly staggered off to the well.

"Haah, I wonder what Robin is doing right now. Unlike here, he has a sturdy roof over his head at the Convent, and he's given meals. I'm so jealous."

With no idea of when she might be able to return to the mainland, Mia thought back to her former fiancé.

***

Ever since the commotion at the capital, I, Agnes, had been spending my time peacefully in Sutrena. Even now, I was leisurely flying over the central town atop Geni. I'd gotten perfectly used to riding him on my own.

"You're the goodest boy, Geni!"

My wyvern, Geni, happily spun around in the air as he did a U-turn to take us back to the estate. When we reached the sky above the garden, I saw Lord Nazel waving at me below.

Has he already returned home from his job at the fortress?

He looked happy to see me and spread both arms wide.

D-Don't tell me he...wants me to jump down into his embrace?

He always caught me in his arms when I alighted from a wyvern. After Geni landed, I braced myself and jumped into Lord Nazel's chest with a little "Hup!" As usual, he easily caught me.

“Welcome home, Agnes.”

“Here I am, Lord Nazel.”

“I got off work early today. Would you like to have some tea together?”

“Gladly!”

We headed to the garden’s patio at once, where the new maids were currently taking lessons on waiting tables. That’s right, our estate had gained more maids. We’d started taking noble daughters with nowhere to go under our care, and their numbers just kept increasing. All of them had a common past of being disowned by their families after being taken advantage of by Master Robin. After Master Robin and his clique were convicted at the party, some ladies had had their disownment withdrawn and could return home, but many of them had been left in the same state. Therefore, I had decided to look after them at our estate in Sutrena until they became self-reliant. They had offered to help out with work, so they were entrusted with simple tasks for now.

I went through something similar. When I was out in the cold after being disowned, Lord Nazel took me in. I can’t abandon women who’ve suffered the same way I have.

At first, I had thought Kelly might have trouble acting as the superior of these former noble ladies, since she was a commoner, but no one had complained so far. I didn’t know where they heard the rumors, but more and more ladies kept coming to seek refuge at our estate—women who’d either been disowned or had run away from home on their own—and at present, there were around twelve new maids at the estate. Liliane’s younger sister was also among them; she was one of those who had run away from home. The senior maids we’d hired through interviews were terribly busy teaching the newcomers.

Perhaps I will send some to work at the fortress if we get even more. Many of the personnel there are bachelors, so they might enjoy it.

The new maids were happy to help out by weeding the garden or taking care of the field, so their work was greatly appreciated. The estate grounds were rather large, after all! Dunk, who was now fully domesticated, had taken the initiative and helped out the maids by eating all sorts of weeds. I got the sense that she was simply being a glutton, but she was a good girl nonetheless.

Lord Nazel and I sat down and talked about today's events while having tea. Our tea was violaberry flavored; it was a new kind that had been recently commercialized in our territory.

"As Sutrena has gotten wealthier and wealthier, the work at the fortress has also kept increasing. We'll need to get some more staff. How is the estate doing, Agnes?"

"As usual, noble ladies continue coming to seek shelter. And it's not only women; this morning, a noble boy covered in wounds came to our doorstep. I'm not quite sure if I should give him a job. He's apparently only ten…"

"I heard that one lady's parents stormed in screaming the other day."

"Yes, but I would never return their abused daughter to them. King Bertrand and Queen Latriche are working toward reforming noble culture, so things should gradually get better."

On more than one occasion, the parents of one lady or another had come to our estate acting violently, but Torre had driven them all away so far. As I'd reinforced him with my magic, it would take a considerably powerful individual to defeat him. If such a person appeared, I could also fight back by throwing all kinds of tubers. There were potatoes, taros, sweet potatoes, yams, konjacs, and so on. We had a great variety growing in our field at the moment. We'd also started selling seedlings recently. The entirety of our field was plowed now and various crops had been experimentally planted in it. I was also diligently working with every member of the estate to come up with products that used those crops.

"I'll keep working my hardest to ensure there's even one fewer suffering lady out there."

"You're such a gentle soul, Agnes."

Lord Nazel gazed at me with a warm smile, so I returned a smile of my own. Ever since we'd returned from the palace, he'd gotten even more overprotective than before. It seemed that he was in a complex state of mind where his relief from resolving the long-standing problems surrounding Princess Mia was mixed with feelings of jealousy toward Master Robin. At present, he vented all of those emotions toward me. I would have never imagined this when we'd first met, but Lord Nazel was unexpectedly the type whose love could be overbearing. But even though he was constantly concerned about his wife, his work was still perfect;

that was just like him.

"Incidentally, it seems that *another* statue of me is being constructed outside our estate."

For some reason, ever since I'd saved people from the manabeasts on the night of the new moon, our subjects had been constructing statues depicting me in various places across Sutrena.

"Oh, that one. The statue of you riding Geni is quite marvelous, but the one of you throwing potatoes is also fantastic. But I do have mixed feelings about exposing my adorable Agnes to the eyes of so many people. I'm sure there are men with wicked thoughts about—"

"There's no one like that."

"I wonder about that. They even tried to build a statue of you in a swimsuit once, you know? I used my authority as the margrave to shut it down, though. You're extremely popular in Sutrena."

People had to apply at the fortress to build statues in town. It would seem that there'd been some kind of battle between Lord Nazel and the people who wanted to erect statues of me.

"The one they're building right now is apparently called 'Statue of the Margravine of Abundant Harvest.' It's said it will depict you harvesting large violaberries."

"I see. No wonder I thought they were building something pretty large."

"Also under construction are 'Statue of the Margravine Taking in People with Nowhere to Go,' 'Statue of the Margravine Disguised as a Maid,' and 'Statue of the Margrave and Margravine.' For that last one, I think I'm going to order them to emphasize how well we get along."

"Please don't use your authority for something that trivial."

"No, this is an important task," Lord Nazel replied with a serious expression. He said some pretty odd things from time to time.

But the townspeople have completely figured out my disguise, huh?

This came as a great shock given that I'd thought my disguise was flawless. It would be hard to go shopping dressed as a maid from now on.

"I think it's about time to return to our room," Lord Nazel said before picking me up and starting to leave.

"M-Me too?"

“Of course. I lose all my motivation without you there.”
“That’s absurd!”



Lord Nazel had grown a little more selfish now that he'd been freed from all manner of old obligations, but considering how pitiful he'd seemed back then, I felt that it was fine.

"Is that a problem?"

As Lord Nazel looked at me with slight doubt in his eyes, I felt intense charm leaking out of him.

"N-No, it ithn't!"

After all, I was also happy to be together with Lord Nazel. Unbothered by his wife's fumbled words, he merrily headed toward our room. The flowers in our now perfectly tidy garden gently shook in the wind.

A lot of things happened, but thankfully we can spend our days peacefully now. I hope our current lifestyle will continue forever, I thought as I spent my time happily with Lord Nazel in Sutrena.

Side Story: What Became of Mia

One year into her exile, Mia had grown used to her life on the ever-warm Peppel Island. She'd become able to do most of the things she needed to survive, and although she'd hated studying, she still possessed knowledge from her education as a princess, which proved unexpectedly useful. The island had a hopelessly low literacy rate, so tragically, no one was able to decipher the books or notes left by their predecessors. These useless books had all been abandoned inside a vacant house on the island. Since Mia had plenty of time on her hands, she'd recently started going to that house of her own accord to read.

This journal has information about agricultural and fishing techniques, and even blueprints for tools and explanatory notes for their use, yet no one's putting any of this to use! What's wrong with these criminals on this deserted island?

Mia didn't know what the situation on other islands was, but Peppel Island was full of criminals who'd reached adulthood without ever receiving any education. In the first place, many people committed crimes driven by the struggles of poverty. In the past, there had apparently been some people on the island who could read, but none of them seemed to be alive anymore. Besides the criminals themselves, the island was also populated by the children of those who'd gotten married there, but Mia had lumped them all together in her indignation.

"I suppose it can't be helped. I don't know about the rest, but I will certainly make use of this knowledge for my life."

Mia started bringing book after book home and putting their contents into practice, until at some point, many curious islanders had started loitering around her for some inexplicable reason.

"What do you all want? This isn't some kind of spectacle! Shoo, shoo!"

She was right in the middle of researching how to cultivate a field. Fruit grew naturally on Peppel Island in such great supply that farming wasn't strictly necessary, but Mia had grown sick of eating the same things all the time. For a former princess, living

on the same fruits, shellfish, and seaweed every day with no variety was harsh. Her patience had long since gone past its limit.

First, I need to acquire some seeds. I'll try requesting them from the crew of the ships that periodically come by here.

A ship visited the island from the mainland once per month to supply the residents with the bare minimum of commodities. There were no watchmen stationed on the island, so this could also serve the purpose of observing the island's state of affairs. Technically the prisoners could try to escape by boat, but any unkilled sailors with small vessels would get swallowed up by the currents and end up adrift or stranded. This part of the ocean was perilous to navigate, which was what made this island ideal to accommodate criminals.

The ships have brought livestock in the past, so perhaps seeds aren't an impossible request. I'd like to ask for farming equipment too, but if they turn me down, I'll have to make it on my own. I have the blueprints, so I might be able to.

Mia had done embroidery during her time as a princess but not any other handicrafts.

I'm worried whether the soil is suitable. I remember hearing that normal crops won't grow in Sutrena, even though it's in the southern part of Desnim, for example.

Mia complained in her mind as she made plans to reform the food situation on Peppel Island. It was tedious work, but she didn't mind doing it. This island didn't have any subordinates closely observing her every move or any nobles constantly comparing her to others. In a way, life here was carefree. Mia had loved both reading and studying when she'd been little, but after her engagement to Nazelbart, she'd been compared to him unfavorably in regard to every little thing, and she'd grown bitter and apathetic toward learning. The people around her had only seen potential in Nazelbart and reserved all their praise for him, while she'd been regarded as just a tool to grant him the status necessary to run the country. The harder she'd worked, the more fed up she'd gotten with everything.

I should have kept working hard instead of stagnating, and perhaps I'd have been able to support the country together with him, huh? That was the correct thing to do as the princess.

But Mia had been unable to handle her feelings of

powerlessness and discouragement and had abandoned everything. And then she'd clung to Robin, who had conveniently appeared before her. Now that she thought back on it, Mia couldn't help but find her past self foolish for being unable to see through Robin's worthlessness. Her mother kept complaining about their current life, but this exile was honestly an incredibly light punishment for the crimes they'd committed.

They showed us great consideration, didn't they?

Nevertheless, she still disliked Nazelbart and hated her two brothers.

When the supply ship arrived the following month, Mia asked for seeds and livestock. The vessel that came the month after that brought her taro stems and some chickens. There were already other islanders who kept livestock, but the majority of them hated Mia and her mother, so none of them would share.

"I will be able to eat eggs now! Time to say farewell to my shellfish life!"

Incidentally, Mia couldn't fish. She couldn't make a fishing rod, didn't know how to prepare fish, and was afraid to even touch living fish. Her attempt to construct a chicken coop ended in failure, but she managed to make some simple fences and bred the chickens free-range. The former queen looked at the chickens dubiously at first, but perhaps she came to like them, because she soon took charge of collecting their eggs. It would be great if her plump body, reminiscent of a sea lion's, became even a little firmer thanks to her moving around outdoors.

Next, Mia attempted to make new farm equipment. In the end, she had only managed to get seeds and livestock from the supply ship. The equipment had been deemed unnecessary since there were no farmers on this island.

That's all because these criminals are satisfied with always eating the same food.

The irritated Mia attempted to assemble a tool that resembled a hoe by reading the instructions left behind by her predecessors in the vacant house. But no matter how many times she tried, the joints simply wouldn't stay together.

The handle won't fit into the hoe head. Is the hole perhaps the wrong size?

Mia was in a bind, when she heard a voice behind her.

“Whatcha doin’?”

She turned around and saw a tanned woman around the same age as her looking down toward her curiously. She was one of the people who’d started loitering around Mia recently. If Mia remembered correctly, the woman was the daughter of two criminals and had been born on this island.

“Can you not tell by looking? I’m building this.”

Mia pointed at the blueprints. The woman had probably come to make fun of her, so she continued to work without paying her any attention.

“Uh-huh, so ya wanna put this stick through that hole? Gimme those.”

The woman snatched the wooden block and stick that Mia intended to turn into a hoe from her, used her knife to modify the hole Mia had opened, and finally inserted the handle and fixed it in place.

“It’s just like the drawing now. If you wanna make it more stable, you can smear some sap from the sticky tree on it.”

Mia suddenly realized that even if the islanders couldn’t read, they could understand drawings.

“I appreciate it.”

“Whatcha gonna do with that thing? I’m curious ’bout what you city folk do. I dunno anywhere other than this island an’ all.”

“Oh, that’s right. You were born and raised on Peppel Island.”

Even if she wasn’t a criminal, she would be unable to leave for the rest of her life.

“I’m Largo. I’m the daughter of the island’s toolmaker.”

The tools on this island were only things like poles used to knock fruits out of trees, simple kitchen utensils, fishing rods, and buckets. However, they were still a great help.

“Is it all right for you to talk to me?”

“I heard yer some big shot’s daughter. Lot of the people here hate ya. But I don’t care ’bout that, and I’m curious about what yer doin’ here.”

“I have a name, you know: Mia!”

“’Kay then, Mia, let us join in the fun too. Course, we’ll help ya out with the work.”

Life on this island was peaceful but boring, so the youngsters were constantly looking for fun things to do.

“‘We’? Does that mean there are more besides you?”

“Yup. There’s the builder’s son, the weaver’s son, and the fisherman’s daughter. Wanna also call the hunter and the potter?”

Those were the people who always hung around Mia along with Largo. They were all young and brimming with curiosity.

They will certainly be of help, but this feels somewhat strange.

As a matter of fact, Mia had always been surrounded at the castle, but those people had been distant. There had been a large crowd courting her favor because of her status, but not a single one of them had been interested in Mia herself.

“What’s written in this book? It’s been lying around that empty house since way back, but I can’t understand jack.”

“It describes how to make farming equipment and cultivate fields.”

“Farming what now?”

“I have to start from there?! But I suppose this island doesn’t have any farms. It will be faster to show you in practice than simply explaining. Call your friends over too.”

“Really? Thanks!”

Mia was dumbfounded by how carefree and agreeable Largo was, but she didn’t exactly mind this. She smiled awkwardly when she realized that she’d apparently felt lonely, just like most people did.

When the builder’s son and the weaver’s son joined them later, their work efficiency dramatically increased, and they successfully planted a taro field. Mia went on to add even more new crops while also teaching the youngsters how to read. In time, she ended up leading a reform of the entire island. Her name would go down as an eminent figure in the island’s history.

Afterword

You have my sincerest gratitude for picking up volume 2 of *Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain*.

This time we finally have the reunion with the sources of all sorts of problems: Mia and Robin. I hope you enjoy it. I leave what became of Robin up to your imagination. Mia is one thing, but Robin's personality isn't the kind that easily changes.

Nazelbart's wife is so absolutely adorable that after she confessed their love was mutual, his mildly sadistic side started coming out. Also, Torre is probably a masochist.

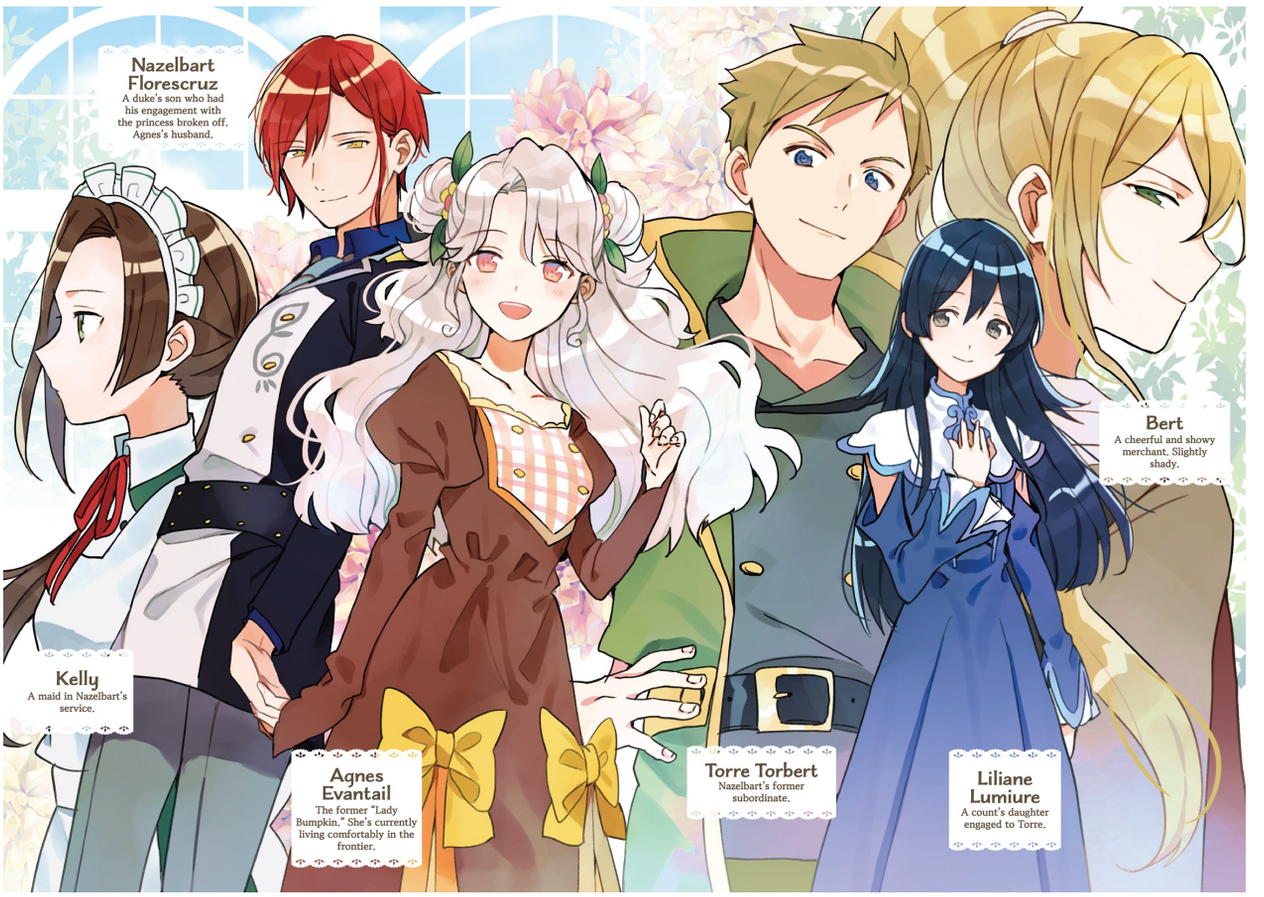
The hidden popular character Paul gets his first illustration in this volume. He's such a handsome boy! It's quite a shame he was dressed following the House of Evantail's dress code. Torre and Liliane were also wonderfully designed, and I was once again looking forward to seeing the cover and illustrations. I'd like to thank the artist, Kurodeko, for drawing such spectacular illustrations again.

A manga adaptation is currently in the works, so please look forward to it; I know I am.

I'd like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in the production of this second volume, as well as to all the dear readers who purchased it. I hope we can meet again!

Ageha Sakura


"Open your mouth for me please."
At the Garden Terrace


Nazelbart Florescruz
A duke's son who had his engagement with the princess broken off. Agnes's husband.
Kelly
A maid in Nazelbart's service.
Agnes Evantail
The former "Lady Bumpkin." She's currently living comfortably in the frontier.
Torre Torbert
Nazelbart's former subordinate.
Liliane Lumiure
A count's daughter engaged to Torre.
Bert
A cheerful and showy merchant. Slightly shady.


"Lord Nazel,
I wuv you!"
"?!?!?!"



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Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain: Volume 2
by Ageha Sakura

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