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LADY BUMPKIN AND HER LORD VILLAIN

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Chapter 1: Lady Bumpkin's Lord Villain Proposes a Wedding

It had been almost an entire year since my arrival in Sutrena. The fall, rife with tropical rains, was behind us, and my second winter in Sutrena was fast approaching. Unlike the capital, which was at a high elevation and had four seasons, Sutrena was warm year-round and had only two seasons: dry and rainy. Fall and winter were essentially the rainy season.

Even today, a tepid wind was blowing outside the windows of our manor, and heavy rain was falling incessantly. In the spacious garden, the two mountbeasts we kept, Geni the wyvern and Dunk the grani—the latter of whom had only joined our household a little while ago—were happily bathing in the pool together. Wyverns were manabeasts that resembled lizards with wings, while granis were horselike manabeasts with eight legs.

Back when I'd still been Agnes Evantail, I'd been ridiculed as "Lady Bumpkin" by other nobles. The reason lay in my family's traditions. As they were still obsessed with the conventions of a century ago, they had forced me to dress in attire of the time. I had worn old-fashioned hairstyles, like one in which my almost-white silver hair was piled high atop my head, accentuated with gaudy ornaments. And that was only the tip of the iceberg. I'd had to wear face powder so thick that my face resembled a stucco wall, deep blue eye shadow bizarrely placed around my eyes, blusher and lipstick a deeper crimson than blood itself, a massive yellowed dress, and so on. Despite being dressed in a way that anyone would want to avoid, I had been forced to do something as risible as frequently attending parties to fish for a fiancé.

Things eventually changed for the better, and although I had a rough start, thanks to Lord Nazel and Kelly I managed to break free of the epithet "Lady Bumpkin," and became the Margravine of Sutrena in both name and substance.

Roughly a month had passed since the former queen, princess, and Master Robin had been condemned after their crimes had been exposed. The days kept going by peacefully and happily at

our estate. There had been some minor upheaval in the household due to us taking in some ladies who'd lost their homes in the previous incident, and then we welcomed some more who came seeking shelter later, but life was mostly harmonious. The women had also started finding new lives for themselves here at the frontier.

Now that everything had more or less calmed down, Lord Nazel and I had started working in earnest on food processing. We were currently searching for new ways to process the crops we harvested from our field, and periodically held gatherings to sample our processed foods. Lord Nazel was being very proactive about the project.

Lord Nazel was a young and capable noble with reddish hair—something unusual in our country of Desnim—and light amber eyes, and he was so handsome it was almost intimidating. During his time in the capital, he'd been derided as an "animated doll" for the way he'd indifferently carried out his assigned duties without showing a shred of emotion. While he'd been the former princess's fiancé, he had no time for himself, instead spending his days undergoing the harsh education of a prince consort. He'd gradually buried his humanity, and the people around him had come to think of him as inaccessible.

However, there were no traces of his past self now. Here he could be seen in his natural, gentle state as he happily observed the vegetables being processed. Every time I saw how expressive Lord Nazel had become, I felt glad from the bottom of my heart that I'd come to Sutrena.

"Now, about this processing method..."

I began explaining today's work without delay. Areas with cold, dry climates were the ones best suited for food processing. Food spoiled easily during the warm, humid rainy season of Sutrena, so it had to be consumed shortly after production. Magic could extend the shelf life of food somewhat, so up until now, we'd played it safe by relying on delivery companies that had access to storage and preservation magic. Violaberry pies were a prime example of a product whose marketability had always depended on someone else's magic.

However, we wondered if we could produce something different, even in this climate. That inspired us to try creating long-

lasting confections that used ingredients which didn't spoil as easily. Our current project in Sutrena was attempting to make snacks from processed tubers.

Tubers are sturdy, easy to grow, and suited to processing. They're truly an all-purpose food, ideal for our current objective!

Violaberry pies had become incredibly popular, so I wanted to do whatever it took to build on that success. Our main objective this time wasn't to profit from the sales, but to popularize the tubers native to Sutrena. Incidentally, because cakes with potato filling could already be found in confectioneries in the capital, we'd decided to try for something different.

"Today, after much trial and error, we've decided to create a snack made of potatoes or sweet potatoes deep-fried in oil. Its slogan is 'A snack anyone can eat easily!' It can be conveniently made at home as long as one has potatoes—it's perfect for promoting our tubers! Let's take this chance to cause a tuber boom in the entirety of Desnim!" I explained.

"Yeaaah!"

I felt reassured when I heard the maids shouting with so much motivation. There was quite the crowd gathered in the manor's kitchen: Kelly, Lord Nazel—who'd been able to take consecutive days off for the first time in a while—our guard Torre, our chef Mather, representatives from the maids, and myself. For some reason, Mister Henry from the fortress was also among us.

It seems that Mister Henry can sniff out the presence of food from anywhere.

Had he heard about today's gathering from Lord Nazel? He'd shown up every single time we were sampling some new dish. Mister Henry was a gourmet who made a hobby of eating out, so he was familiar with plenty of great restaurants and delicious foods all over Sutrena. Now that the food situation here had improved, his range of options had begun to expand significantly.

"Today's snack is quite simple. We'll deep-fry thinly cut potatoes in oil, then sprinkle salt or sugar over them."

There was a pile of big potatoes in front of us. Mather had received her instructions in advance, so she carefully carried out her job in accordance with them.

"Let me lend you a hand, Mather."

"Oh, thank you, Lady Agnes. Could I ask you to be in charge of

sprinkling sugar over the deep-fried potatoes?"

"Leave it to me!"

The kitchen had a warm and cozy atmosphere. When we'd first moved into this manor, the kitchen had only been a plain, dirty room equipped with the bare essentials, but after furnishing it according to Mather's requests, we had transformed it into a practical, inviting space. Nowadays, maids who liked to cook even used it as a place to relax.

Once Mather was finished cooking, all that was left was for everyone present to sample the food. The crisply fried, yellowish-brown potatoes were almost bewitching. A nice aroma rose up from each slice.

"They look rather delicious," I remarked.

"All right, let me try one right away." As I was still looking at the food with everyone else, a pale hand abruptly reached out and picked up one of the deep-fried potatoes. "Oh, these...would go great with a dinnertime drink. Approved!"

The "culprit" was none other than Mister Henry, the one who'd been looking forward to this the most. His expression was much more vivid than anyone else's as he confidently endorsed the food.

"You just naturally start making authoritative pronouncements during every sampling, huh, Henry? But your judgment is certainly accurate when it comes to food, so I suppose it's fine." Lord Nazel—the one who *actually* had the right to make the final call on the food—had moved next to me at some point and was looking at his subordinate with a tiny bit of exasperation.

Perhaps it was because I'd been raised in an overly strict household, but I loved this simple, lax atmosphere here at the frontier.

"You may all go ahead and try some too. Everything Mather makes is delicious."

Prompted by the composed Kelly, everyone else started sampling the food too. The line between master and servant wasn't as strict here as it was in the capital, and although we weren't all fully equals, we lived together like one big, happy family. I followed everyone else's example and also picked up one of the deep-fried potatoes, then tossed it into my mouth.

"Mmm! Phew! It'th hot but tathty!"

The crunchy texture was nice, and the saltiness worked well; it

was simply delicious. I also agreed with Mister Henry's statement that they would go well with drinks.

People who aren't very fond of sweets may enjoy a snack like this.

Next, I tried a crispy-looking sweet potato. These had been prepared in two different shapes: long and narrow, and round and thin. Both kinds had a crispy texture and tasted amazing.

Lord Nazel was also nonchalantly chowing down. However, after he was finished getting a taste for himself, he started feeding me potatoes one after the other for some incomprehensible reason.

"Lord Nazel..."

"Yes, Agnes? You're like a cute little squirrel." Lord Nazel looked delighted as he held a potato and focused his loving gaze on me.



“Urk…” When I saw how happy he looked, I couldn’t bring myself to object. I was also glad to see him looking even more peaceful than before now that he’d been liberated from all of his sorrow.

At the same time, he’s also paying more attention to me than before, and it’s making me embarrassed. But it’s all good if he’s happy.

The members of our estate watched over the two of us with neutral expressions as usual.

Ahhh, I’m so happy.

I savored my comfortable life here in Sutrena.

In the end, we adopted both kinds of deep-fried potato snacks. Potatoes sprinkled with salt and sweet potatoes sprinkled with sugar would be sold in the town market. Just like we’d done with the violaberry products, they would first be sold in a store near the fortress so we could more easily gauge people’s reactions.

I can’t wait.

The recipe was simple enough for every household to adapt it to their taste. That would likely lead to even more kinds of snacks spreading around, thus increasing the demand for tubers!

After the sampling was over, the participants were given the assignment of bringing us ideas for new products before they were dismissed. I looked out the window once more and saw the two mountbeasts still tirelessly bathing in the rain. The kitchen was on the first floor, so I had a clear view of the pool from its window.

What should I do now? I don’t really have any work. Guess I’ll go check up on Geni and Dunk.

In this country, wild animals that possessed mana were called manabeasts. Domesticated manabeasts that could be ridden were instead called mountbeasts. The hem of my comfortable, casual dress fluttered behind me as I rushed out through the rear entrance and stepped onto the damp garden’s soft grass.

I’m barefoot, but who cares?

Not sweating the details was the Sutrena way. We didn’t have any guests over, and the damp sensation on my soles was pleasant. I was already soaked from the rain when I approached the pool, and Geni and Dunk raised their heads when they noticed me. Dunk’s nose was twitching as she got out of the water and vigorously ran over to me, splashing water around her.

She's become really affable, huh? I can't believe she once tried to kick Lord Nazel to death.

Dunk had originally been kept by the previous margrave. She'd returned to the wilds after a certain series of events, but then attacked our estate, and was now living along with Lord Nazel and me.

"Aww, what's the matter, Dunk? Eep!"

Dunk just wouldn't calm down, sniffing zealously all around my mouth.

Could she be reacting to the smell of the potatoes I had earlier? She's got a keen nose.

Dunk had been involved in a gruesome incident long before we'd come here, but she was normally just an innocent, obedient girl with a big appetite. She was doing us a great service by devouring the weeds of our field.

She's a very intelligent mountbeast—she knows not to touch the crops. I'm truly glad we have Dunk with us.

However, deep-fried potatoes might be bad for a mountbeast's health. What a tricky situation.

I feel like foods with salt, sugar, or oil are out of the question. According to a book on manabeasts and mountbeasts I'd found in the manor, manabeasts had sensitive stomachs, so feeding them processed foods should be avoided.

"I'm sorry. Next time, I'll have some baked and steamed potatoes without seasoning made for you. I think even you will be able to eat them like that."

And so, I made Dunk wait until she could have a snack. She looked dejected as she started taking gulps of the pool's water. I gently stroked her mane in an attempt to console her. Geni also came over, apparently tired of bathing, and patted his friend's back with one wing to cheer her up. He was flapping that wing so enthusiastically that a bunch of droplets scattered around. Wyverns were quite intelligent mountbeasts, after all, and it showed.

This scene is so soothing! They're adorable!

While I was hanging out with the mountbeasts, I heard footsteps splashing on the damp ground. I turned around, and to no one's surprise, I saw Lord Nazel walking over to me with an umbrella in one hand and a pair of shoes in the other. To be more

specific, the umbrella was just a plant with a long stem and a large leaf on top that he'd created with his magic.

"You rushed outside barefoot again, didn't you, Agnes?"

"I'm sorry, Lord Nazel. It's just that holding an umbrella and putting on shoes is kind of bothersome. I went out without thinking."

I'd reinforced my soles with my magic, so I didn't need to worry about stepping on something hard or sharp and injuring myself. Whenever I had to do a small errand around the estate these days, I stepped out into the garden barefoot. I could easily walk to the stream or pool like this. It was pretty handy.

This behavior is probably a little *questionable for a margravine, but only those really close to me can see it.*

Lord Nazel pulled me over to the roofed terrace, made me sit down on one of the chairs next to the table, then pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and dexterously wiped my feet.

"U-Um, Lord Nazel? I can do this on my own."

"Don't worry about it. Just stay like that."

He smiled from ear to ear, his expression a little mischievous but also somehow pleased. But there was no way I could remain composed in this situation.

I can't believe I'm having my husband wipe my feet himself!

I felt truly embarrassed even though I was the one who'd made the choice to go barefoot. I should have thought about the consequences a little more. Geni and Dunk pretended not to notice anything and returned to their stable on their own at some point. Not only were those two smart, they could even read the room.

Lord Nazel finished by putting my shoes on for me, then sat down on a chair across from me looking fully satisfied. The rain kept coming down like a waterfall outside the terrace.

"It will soon be an entire year since we came here, won't it?" Lord Nazel suddenly said, matching exactly what I'd been thinking before.

"Yes, it will. We've been through a lot, but I'm happy that we've managed to return to our peaceful daily lives in Sutrena."

"So am I. I couldn't be happier than getting to spend time with you like this, Agnes. When we first came here, things were always hectic and difficult for us."

Lord Nazel's work had stabilized, so now he was spending less time cooped up in the fortress or his room working without break. He was still plenty busy, but he worked reasonable hours.

"That's true; our relocation was rather abrupt." We'd moved to Sutrena taking only Kelly with us from the House of Florescruz's estate. I'd felt awfully anxious at the time, but now, I felt that this was where I belonged, from the bottom of my heart.

Sutrena is a precious place to me.

I'd unconsciously placed my hands on the table; Lord Nazel wrapped them up in his and grasped them tightly.

"U-Um, yes?"

"Agnes, this is something I've always thought about discussing with you after our life here settled down. I've just been so busy recently that I never had the chance to properly have a talk with you." Lord Nazel was being unusually inarticulate as he looked at me with a hint of red in his cheeks. "Well, it may be a bit late to bring this up, but…"

I waited for him to continue, my hands still in his, wondering where this was going. He spent a moment to clear his throat, then stared right into my eyes, looking serious.

"Let's have a wedding ceremony."

Silence fell for a moment under the terrace surrounded by the endless rain. I froze in place, unblinking, as I faced Lord Nazel.

"A w-wedding c-ceremony?" Those words held great destructive force when uttered by my beloved husband. I was certainly happy, but the shock was so great that I needed time to sort my thoughts.

"It wasn't really the time for it when we first came to Sutrena, right? I've been wanting to hold a proper ceremony once things calmed down. As long as you're also on board, Agnes."

I gulped. Our marriage had happened suddenly amid all the chaos of Princess Mia's royal decree, my parents disowning me, and us being exiled to the frontier. Back then, the two of us hadn't even been aware of how the other felt. We'd departed for the land at the southern tip of Desnim, relying only on the trust we'd had in each other. Even after we'd arrived at Sutrena, our lives had still been one thing after another, so a wedding ceremony had been out of the question.

Lord Nazel laid his heart bare to me.

“Our people have requested us to ‘Have a grand celebration, by all means!’ Even Kelly said, ‘Your wedding should be celebrated!’ But above all else, I want to see how adorable you’ll look as a bride!”

“But I’m feeling a bit shy about dressing up for a wedding.”

“I’m convinced you’ll look wonderful.” He cocked his head slightly to the side and smiled at me.

Contrary to his appearance, Lord Nazel is very strong-minded.

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I thought that inside that smile of his I caught a glimpse of his determination to do whatever it took to accomplish his goal.

“Incidentally, where are you planning on holding the ceremony, Lord Nazel?”

“Everyone’s saying we can use the fortress; it’s right at the center of the margravate. If you’d prefer a coastal location, the west side of Sutrena is right by the ocean, so we could hold it there. Or how about we coax His Majesty to give us a territory with nice scenery? His faction’s influence has yet to solidify, and there’s a surplus of land belonging to the former queen and princess, as well as to the disgraced Baron Kigyonne and Count Appo. Should I negotiate to have him give me some of it?”

“You said something rather outrageous so *casually*, Lord Nazel.”

Given that he could very well act on his idea, I doubted it was a joke. During the previous incident, Lord Nazel had done a lot to put the newly appointed King Bertrand in his debt. Therefore, Sutrena would have an advantageous position in any negotiations with the crown. The outstanding Lord Nazel would probably be able to make his words a reality even if he didn’t have any favors to call in, but living in peace came first! I believed that we shouldn’t create any unnecessary discord.

“Forget all that, let’s hold it at the fortress! Oh yes, we have a lot of acquaintances here, and keeping it local is great! I’d be fine with anywhere else in our margravate too!”

The royal palace already had a lot to deal with at the moment. In addition, King Bertrand’s wife, Queen Latriche, was my friend. I didn’t want to do anything to inconvenience her.

“Please don’t go threatening His Majesty, all right, Lord Nazel?” No sooner had the words left my mouth than I suddenly came to my senses.

Uh…huh? Before I realized, I was talking like I'd already agreed to hold the ceremony. I could no longer say something like "Let's forget about it, it's too embarrassing." *He got me!*

When I turned to look at Lord Nazel, he looked satisfied, with a crafty smile that seemed to convey that he'd tricked me. I'd apparently fallen right into his trap. From the start, I'd never thought I'd be able to beat him in a battle of wits, but I felt a little frustrated that I'd been dancing in the palm of his hand all along.

"I'm so glad that you also approve of holding a ceremony, Agnes."

"To make it clear, I'm just not *opposed* to the idea, all right?"

I was speaking the truth. I was happy that Lord Nazel had been thinking about this so earnestly, but at the end of the day, I was still embarrassed. Because I'd been constantly humiliated as "Lady Bumpkin," I was still nervous about having a crowd watching me in a public space.

"If we *do* decide to hold a ceremony, when are you thinking of holding it?"

"How about spring? That's when the dry season starts and the rain stops, and we should have plenty of time to get ready if we start preparing now."

"True. But would it really be all right for me to put on an all-white wedding dress?" In Desnim, such a dress, decorated with floral embroidery, symbolized the bride's virginity.

Hmm, that custom could be tricky to handle. It doesn't apply to me anymore, does it?

I was hesitant because a lord's wedding was a grand event. I'd feel awkward dressed in pure white, but wearing a different color could easily be misinterpreted.

"I already have an idea for your wedding dress, Agnes. There's nothing to worry about. Can you wait in anticipation until it's complete?"

"Huh…?"

I couldn't help but feel concerned when he put it like that. However, my curiosity dissipated when he followed up with some meaningful words.

"Well… I'm mostly to blame for this, aren't I?"

That line is a lethal weapon when spoken by someone as alluring as you, Lord Nazel.

And so, today marked yet another day of my dear husband toying with me.

A lot of things were necessary for a noble's wedding; careful advance preparations were imperative. Weddings in Desnim were commonly held in churches, but unlike commoners getting married, we didn't have complete freedom of choice.

Nobles have certain restrictions they need to abide by.

Without exception, a priest of at least a certain rank had to be present at the ceremony, no matter the venue.

But speaking of Sutrena's church, well…

I remembered the run-down, abandoned building on the outskirts of town. Indeed, Sutrena had been without a priest for a long time, so the church had gone out of use, leaving behind only a decaying building. According to my investigation, it had been deserted around twenty years ago.

That's why Lord Nazel is planning to hold the ceremony at the fortress. There's no point to a church without a priest, after all.

Priests served the church and extended a helping hand to the populace. They prayed, gave counsel, and appraised children's magic. Their duties were various, but those who possessed appraisal magic were especially valued. Despite their scarcity, at least one of them was normally stationed in every territory of the country because of their necessity.

And yet…not a single priest was posted in Sutrena! Therefore, children born here for the past couple decades couldn't have their magic evaluated through appraisal. They could either obtain the appraisal in a neighboring territory's church or simply ignore the matter altogether. Putting it nicely, the people of Sutrena were all very laid-back; putting it bluntly, they were downright careless. Many people didn't have a good grasp on what kind of magic they possessed. I believed that one of the reasons they didn't worry about getting their magic appraised was that they couldn't survive on the frontier unless they were relatively tough in the first place, magic or not.

I'd like to eventually reestablish a local church for the citizens. Easy access to appraisals is only one of the reasons. But the prospects aren't looking particularly bright at the moment.

The church had been part of the former queen's faction, after all. As an institution, it was on horrible terms with King Bertrand,

Prince Leonardo, and their ally Lord Nazel, so the talks about sending a priest over to Sutrena were making no progress. There was concern that the church would send over a suspicious individual, which meant everyone was proceeding with the plan to reestablish a church in Sutrena with the utmost caution.

It would be better to have a priest officiate the ceremony, but if we can't get one here in Sutrena, so be it. I'm not particularly picky about it.

I wondered if Lord Nazel intended to speed up the process of stationing a priest here. He was already awfully busy as it was, and his work was about to intensify.

Also, brides dress in a certain way in Desnim.

The traditional wedding attire for brides here focused on the color white. The most common ensemble included a white silk dress and silver jewelry, such as a tiara, earrings, necklace, bracelet, or ring. Another tradition was wearing some kind of accessory inlaid with gems the same color as your future spouse's eyes. There was also a custom specific to Sutrena by which brides either wore flowers or held a bouquet—milomilo flowers during the dry season, and pelpel flowers during the rainy season. Milomilo flowers had thin, white petals with pink edges and were more subdued and cute, while pelpel flowers had thick, red petals with green edges and looked more striking and vibrant.

Does that about cover what I'll need for my outfit? Lord Nazel told me not to worry about it, but…

As a margravine, I couldn't afford to make any mistakes, so I checked all the items one by one in my head. Lord Nazel would handle the dress, but I still needed to see to the accessories and the flowers. Luckily, plenty of flowers grew in Sutrena. They blossomed in the mountains, by the roadside, and, of course, in private gardens. Anyone could go pick some at any time of the year. I'd even seen girls making wreaths out of flowers and playing pretend as brides.

We'll need to go to a different territory to get the accessories.

Metal accessories weren't typically available in Sutrena. Some stores had such products from other territories for sale, but they lacked in both quality and variety. It really felt like they'd gotten their hands on mere leftover stock that hadn't sold well elsewhere.

If I were to think of any nearby territories famous for their

manufacturing, our neighbor Hihime comes to mind. I've heard people from Sutrena sometimes go there to shop before their weddings. It's one of the leading centers of manufacturing in the entire country, after all.

Hihime was a viscounty filled with brown rocky mountains, located to the northwest of Sutrena. While it was fairly small, high-quality metals were gathered in its mines and processed, and there were numerous workshops, large and small, spread across the territory. The best craftsmen from the entire country gathered there and put their skills to the test.

Metal processing and manufacturing are its main industries. I don't know much about fashion, but accessories made in Hihime are apparently highly regarded even in the capital.

Kelly had told me that. She'd once been a stylist for Princess Mia, so she had a finger on the pulse of the capital's trends. Hihime was right next to us; a wyvern could travel there and back in less than a day.

"I'll do something about your dress and the priest, Agnes. I've already asked the capital's church to dispatch a priest for us. Even though they still haven't sent one even though I've been asking for so long... Well, Sutrena's domestic affairs have stabilized. Perhaps it's time for me to get serious. I'll try to hurry it up a bit."

"Y-Yes, thank you very much."

Lord Nazel's "a bit" was very often anything but. I decided not to comment on that though. I just silently nodded in agreement.

"I'd also like to have your magic properly appraised at some point. However, we'll only do that if the priest proves to be reliable. Your magic is truly unusual, after all. It would be a problem if information about it spread in a weird way."

When I'd been little, my parents had taken me to the elderly priest in their mark to have my magic appraised. He'd apparently said, "Her magic is one that can reinforce things." It was rare but nothing remarkable, so I'd only used it to reinforce the old clothes or bags my room had been filled with at first. Rather, I'd had no other use for it.

However, after moving to Sutrena, I'd started harboring doubts about my magic. The range of "things" it could reinforce was far too broad. Of course, I could still use it on ordinary objects like my bags, but also on manabeasts or people. Why, I'd even reinforced

the plants Lord Nazel had created with his magic. Not even I properly understood my magic.

This is just a hunch, but I think that my feelings—such as wanting something to become stronger or healthier—are reflected in my magic. But I don't really get anything more than that, so the rest is a mystery.

If possible, I'd have liked a priest to have appraised me. The elderly appraiser from my childhood had only given unreliable results, and since my parents had held absolutely no interest in their daughter's magic, I'd been left with only the information from that vague appraisal. I could never have predicted that something like this would happen.

"It's all right if we postpone the issue of my magic's appraisal, Lord Nazel. You're already busy. It would be awful if your workload increased further."

"That's far from the case. Most of the tasks I'm handling right now are things I want to do. When I was at the capital, I only thought about swiftly taking care of the endless chores that appeared before me. But now, I want to help Sutrena flourish more, I want to hold our wedding ceremony, and I want to learn more about your magic. All of those are things I *want* to do."

Lord Nazel was incredible to list all of that complicated work like it was nothing. He even researched plants and magic in his time outside work. He was superhuman, with unparalleled time management.

"Are you resting properly, Lord Nazel?"

"Of course. You're well aware of that, aren't you?"

I wished he wouldn't smile at me so suggestively, but it was true—he slept peacefully next to me every night.

Though there are also nights when I can't really sleep for...reasons.

Lord Nazel chuckled when he saw me blushing. I got embarrassed because it felt like my thoughts had become obvious to him.

"It's been a while since I've had multiple days off in a row, so let's take this chance to relax together."

"Of course, Lord Nazel."

"There's actually something I'd like to show you. This is the magic I've been researching in secret."

Lord Nazel tossed some small, seedlike objects out into the

rainy garden. A slithering sound came from the ground, then many vines extended from it and formed a dome-shaped space, large enough for several people to fit inside. It looked almost like a small house.

“What is that?”

“It’s my ‘plant residence’ prototype, a house made out of ivy. Some people lost their homes during the manabeast attack, right? I thought we could use this to easily create temporary homes for them. It’s easy to take down, and it will simply return to nature if left unattended.”

“I see. May I go inside?”

“It’s still in the trial stage, but go ahead. These plants are a new and improved version of the roof ivies that grow in the forests of Sutrena. They’re sturdy, full of vitality, and can survive in both the dry and rainy seasons.”

I ran out into the garden again, and went around the plant residence to observe it.

“You’ll get wet again. You should go inside quickly, Agnes.”

“Okay!”

One of the walls had a door made out of vines, and I could step inside like normal once I opened it. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all compactly covered by ivy.

“Looks like the roof isn’t leaking. And since the entire building is made of plants, the breathability is good too. But there are no windows, so I think it’s kinda dark.”

As I was checking my surroundings, Lord Nazel came in after me.

“Yes, that’s the problem. Adding glass would take time. I’m currently experimenting to see if I can create a material suitable for windows using plant fiber. I also have a few plants in mind to use for illumination. Sutrena is a real treasure trove of rare and unusual plants.”

“But people could simply bring in a lantern or something similar to use as a light source.” Even common households had items like that on hand.

“No, these plant residences will be for emergency use. People might not have access to lanterns and such during those times, so installing luminous plants should be a better option.”

“In that case, how about using ones found in Sutrena? There’s

luminous moss and mushrooms, and lamp flowers are also wonderful. Luminous apples and candle quinces should also do the trick."

We both proposed all sorts of ideas; I enjoyed our constructive conversations. I could hear the rain gently falling outside in the meantime.

"If possible, I'd also like to add some convenient furniture."

"And a carpet would be nice."

The more we discussed this, the greedier we got. The longer I lived in Sutrena, the more familiar I became with the plants and manabeasts of this land. I'd always enjoyed learning about nature, but as I acquired more and more new knowledge, the scope of my interests expanded. My current life was vastly different from the time I'd been confined to a small world back at the House of Evantail.

"Oh yes, Lord Nazel! How about we try installing some of these plant residences around town for the townspeople to try for free? I believe we'll get a lot of data on their usability, as well as people's personal opinions on them."

"Good idea."

If we added something like a suggestion box near them, we might make new discoveries thanks to the citizens.

"Then let's place them in the public square in front of the fortress. There's a lot of pedestrian traffic around there, and the fortress guards can watch over the residences at the same time."

A meeting at the fortress regarding the plant residences was apparently already scheduled for the near future. We decided to announce my desire to install two of these plant residence prototypes in the public square during said meeting.

"All right, you've taken a good look at the prototype, so I think it's time I go back to our room. You'll of course join me, won't you, Agnes?" Lord Nazel said alluringly, an imposing smile plastered on his face. When he looked at me like that, I had no choice but to obey, now did I?

"Um…yes."

I had a pretty good idea of what was waiting for me. The cheerful Lord Nazel scooped me up in his arms and I obediently let him carry me to our room. Now that there was nothing to get in his way, his love had recently tended to get out of control.

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The largest church in Desnim was located in the royal capital, where cold winds blew fiercely. It was staffed by numerous priests from all over the country, many of whom were capable of using appraisal magic. The priests who worked in the capital frequently met with nobles, so only the most outstanding ones were selected for this position. However, the capital's church was also rampant with factional strife, discrimination based on social status, and infighting as people kicked one another down or stood in one another's way. At the moment, it was a troublesome institution rife with conspiracy.

Even now, one young man who'd been defeated in such a race to get ahead was sulking along the church's corridors. The cold of winter had already crept inside the building's chilly interior, and the priests' white breaths filled the air. Since the capital was at a particularly high elevation compared to the rest of Desnim, it got cold rather early in the season. The androgynous, orange-haired young man stepped out alone into the deserted alley behind the church, and he looked up at the cloudy sky with his dark gray eyes.

"I can't believe I got demoted... This is a bit much—even if they *do* want to get rid of a nuisance," he mumbled.

The man's name was Emilio. He was a brilliant priest who possessed valuable, high-ranking appraisal magic. According to Desnim regulations, when children were appraised and found to possess that same magic themselves, they were entrusted to the church and raised as appraiser priests. Emilio was one of the children who'd been taken under the church's care. In exchange for having their future decided for them, appraisers were guaranteed certain standards of living.

However, even though they all possessed appraisal magic, the accuracy of their appraisals differed based on their mana capacity, personal skill, and magical strength. Priests who possessed magic as precise as Emilio's were rare. But as he was but a commoner, his life was full of struggles. Though he was guaranteed the bare minimum comforts, he was saddled with mountains of work, and there was a limit to the rank he could reach. He also wasn't entrusted with the work he wanted to do. Emilio's desire was to research various kinds of magic in addition to performing

appraisals, but all he was assigned were menial chores. Moreover, his superb ability had earned him the envy of the nobles around him, so today, he'd been demoted and told he was being sent to Sutrena, some nonsensical frontier backwater. Things couldn't have been any worse.

Ugh... All I wanted was to reach a middling rank and live peacefully here in the capital.

The church used to be part of the former queen's faction, so after the new king had taken the throne and that queen had been exiled, Emilio had been hoping that the church might see some reforms. But in the end, everything stayed the same. The church was still filled with corruption, power struggles, factional disputes, and ugly jealousy. Emilio found all of it ridiculous and had grown weary of earnestly working as a priest.

I don't care anymore! Royals and nobles can all drop dead!

He carelessly packed his bags and got into his carriage. He was headed to some provincial town called Loa, where he would have to switch to a mountbeast before going the rest of the way to Sutrena. Even thinking about the journey ahead made him shudder.

Sutrena, huh? They say it's a place plagued by manabeasts and a scarcity of food. I heard that things have been getting a little better recently, but I doubt it's changed all that much.

There was nothing for him to look forward to there...but that wasn't any different than the rotten church in the capital.

Chapter 2: Madam Bumpkin's Curious Magic

Today, I was diligently cleaning the manor and lavishly decorating the reception room, all in order to welcome the new priest coming to Sutrena. The church had apparently finally given in, and the priest that Lord Nazel had been demanding for so long was at last coming; he was scheduled to arrive today. The journey from the capital was long, and just like we did, he would also fly in on a mountbeast and land on the fortress's rooftop. The plan was for him to then come to our estate where we would all give him a warm welcome.

All right, we've finished cleaning and setting the table. Everything looks flawless! Mather is in charge of cooking—there's nothing to worry about there.

Kelly and the other maids were also doing their best to help.

"A priest who can use appraisal magic is finally coming to Sutrena! And he's a really talented one from the capital, no less! His appraisals are apparently really high quality!"

"Wow! There's been no way to get an appraisal here for a long time, so I don't have an accurate grasp on my magic. I didn't think getting an appraisal was worth traveling to a different territory."

"I haven't gotten an appraisal either. Should I go get one now after the priest arrives?"

The maids were all chatting merrily.

It's great that we'll be getting our own priest, but our church is still abandoned and hasn't been rebuilt. I feel a little sorry about that.

Since there was no functional church yet, it had been decided that the new priest would operate at the fortress for the time being. Since it was a clean building in an accessible location, it would be easy for the citizens to consult him or make requests.

"I can't wait," I said, glancing over at Kelly.

"Yes." She nodded quietly. Her expression was the same as ever, but she seemed happy. "Finally getting to identify your magic is a joyous occasion, Lady Agnes."

As we were chatting, I heard Torre loudly calling for me from

the hallway.

"Lady Agnes, it's almost time, so let's head to the fortress! You have to welcome the priest together with Lord Nazelbart!"

"Oh, that's right. Off I go!"

Today, I had the important duty of greeting the new priest as the Margravine of Sutrena. Torre and I left together under leaf umbrellas, then I quickly got on Geni and we headed for the fortress's rooftop.

I wouldn't mind going without an umbrella, but Lord Nazel would get worried if he saw me drenched. Not to mention I need to formally greet the priest. I couldn't possibly show up soaked to the skin.

Incidentally, Torre was riding on his pegasus. Lord Nazel had forbidden any other man from riding with me.

When we arrived at the rooftop, Lord Nazel, who'd already left for work earlier in the morning, was waiting for us. As soon as he noticed me, he tossed his umbrella aside and happily spread his arms. That was the cue for me to jump down toward him.

Urk... He's planning on catching me in his arms again, isn't he? It's certainly embarrassing, but I'm used to it now!

"Hup!" Like usual, I jumped from Geni, who was still turning around in the sky, right into Lord Nazel's chest. Just like always, he caught me without even breaking a sweat.

"I've been waiting for you, Agnes."

"Y-Yah..."

As my dear husband embraced me tightly, I could feel the people around us looking at us a bit fondly, so instead I tried to focus on Geni and Torre as they were landing.

"Will the priest be arriving soon, Lord Nazel?"

"Yes, I think he'll be here any minute now. It seems that he made it to Loa without incident."

Several of Mister Henry's subordinates were also standing by to welcome the priest. The reception was much better than when Lord Nazel and I had come to Sutrena. I didn't blame them, though, because Sutrena had been in truly dire straits back then. This welcoming party also showed just how eagerly everyone was anticipating the arrival of a priest.

A short time later, Connie—who'd gone to fetch the priest—arrived atop a pegasus, along with someone who appeared to be the priest in question. They were wearing raincoats, with hoods

fully covering their heads.

Looks like Connie was the guide once again. He didn't use a wyvern though.

It would seem that he'd done his job properly this time, without any intention of harassing the priest. Mister Henry looked relieved too. The pegasus quietly descended upon the rooftop. Connie nimbly jumped down, and after bowing to Lord Nazel, he issued his report with an uncharacteristically serious expression. He didn't normally act like this, but this must have been his way of being considerate. It would have been a bad idea for him to act too casual in front of a priest from the capital right from the get-go.

"Lord Nazelbart, Master Henry, I have brought the priest."

Connie reached out to the priest with concern and carefully helped him off the pegasus and onto the rooftop. When the priest noticed us, he raised his head and greeted us, even though he was clearly still feeling dizzy from the flight.

"Urgh... Hello, I'm the priest from the capital's church. My name is Emilio... Blegh..."



The new priest seemed to be a lot younger than I'd expected. He might even have been around my age. He had glossy hair with an orange tinge, gray eyes like the cloudy sky, and his build was on the smaller side. His face looked androgynous, making it possible to mistake him for a woman at first glance.

Lord Nazel and I were bewildered as we greeted Father Emilio, who was still suffering from a severe case of airsickness.

"Welcome, Emilio. Thank you for coming all the way from the royal capital."

"Um, are you okay? Please take a break inside the fortress for now."

I was well aware that certain people got sick from riding mountbeasts, but I'd never seen anyone with such a severe case before. Mister Henry couldn't simply ignore Emilio's plight, so he also recommended a short break, and the priest staggered as he followed him inside.

Lord Nazel and I exchanged glances and decided to talk to him after he was feeling better.

Emilio finally recovered from his motion sickness half a day later. We went to meet him in the break room he was resting at.

"I'm sincerely grateful you came all the way here to see me, milord, milady. I apologize for my earlier behavior. This was my first time traveling by mountbeast, you see. My motion sickness has completely passed. I'm feeling all right now."

His complexion was looking much better, so it seemed like he really was fine.

"That's great to hear. But let's take a carriage to the estate just in case," Lord Nazel suggested.

Emilio looked relieved to hear that. It seemed that his experience riding a pegasus had been a bitter one. However, his expression turned to confusion a moment later.

"Your estate? Excuse me, but won't I be going to Sutrena's church?"

Lord Nazel and I looked at each other.

"Unfortunately, our church is so run-down that it's not fit for human habitation. Honestly, since there hasn't been a priest here for a long time, it's practically a ruin. We'd like you to work here at the fortress while the church is being rebuilt. We'll remodel a room

to resemble a church sanctuary."

"Huh? There's…no church?" Emilio was dumbfounded. But he should have been informed of this in advance. Had he just not been paying attention while being briefed?

"My apologies. There seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding. Things have been hectic ever since I came here, delaying the church's reconstruction. But you don't need to worry about your daily life. Sutrena's long-awaited priest has finally arrived, so we'll treat you the best we can."

"Ha…ha ha ha…" Emilio's face grew stiff.

I thought things would be fine since he can use the fortress, but it seems that lacking a proper church is a bigger problem than I expected.

I left Emilio to Lord Nazel for the time being, and Torre and I flew back to the estate on our mountbeasts. I confirmed that preparations for the welcome party were already complete. All that was left was to wait for today's star.

A short time later, Lord Nazel and Emilio arrived before the estate's gate in a carriage. I took out an umbrella and left the manor to greet them, accompanied by our servants.

"Welcome, Father!"

"Come, come, hurry inside out of the downpour."

"Let us wipe you off!"

Urged by the maids, Emilio entered the manor, looking rather confused the whole time. I waited for Lord Nazel, and the two of us walked in the rain under our umbrella.

There was a feast ready in the manor's reception room to welcome Father Emilio. The lavish decorations on the walls and ceiling sparkled under the candles' light. The fortress staff had been invited beforehand and were already present. Emilio merely looked around the room in confusion. The maids who served as waiters and ushers led him to the seat of honor, where they started diligently attending to him. They, of course, wanted to properly welcome Emilio, but I also sensed their hopes that perhaps romance might blossom.

Appraisers are highly paid priests, after all. He's also young, good-looking, and easy to talk to.

According to Lord Nazel, it had been decided that Emilio would stay at our estate until the new church was built, and he would

commute to the fortress to perform his priest duties. I didn't know what kind of person he was yet, but nothing about him felt unsettling, so I hoped we could get along.

Father Emilio's welcome party started a little later, and Lord Nazel said a few words in front of everyone as our representative.

"The priest Sutrena has been eagerly awaiting is finally here."

In response, everyone shouted in joy together. Perhaps they were being too loud, because Emilio jumped in surprise and looked around restlessly.

"Allow me to formally greet you, Emilio. We've been asking for a priest for quite a long time. We welcome you here from the bottom of our hearts."

The guests erupted in cheers again, and Emilio shrank back in apparent fear.

You don't need to be so shy. I found his timid reactions a little odd. *Everyone on the frontier is so carefree and peaceful—I hope he gets used to things quickly.*

Next up, it was Emilio's turn to step in front of us and greet everyone. He looked rather pitiful as he awkwardly made his way to where Lord Nazel had been standing a moment ago.

"Um, my name is Emilio. Back at the capital, I mostly appraised magic or did the chores the noble priests ordered me to. I don't know if I will be of any help, but…I'll do what I can."

Another round of cheers echoed across the room, followed by a banquet. Sutrena didn't have much in the way of entertainment, so everyone wanted to use this chance to make merry. A large number of people soon started gathering around Father Emilio, today's honoree.

What a crowd. I'll talk to him a little later.

I made my way toward Lord Nazel. He was also surrounded by a group of people, most of them his coworkers from the fortress. They smiled as they offered him glasses of alcohol. The moment I saw that, I instinctively groaned. It would be fine if only one of them was offering Lord Nazel a drink, but there were so many of them. A long line of people holding glasses of alcohol stretched to the other side of the room.

Why are they all holding drinks for two *people?! I understand that they want to drink together with Lord Nazel, but they should realize there are limits!!!*

This was really, really bad. Lord Nazel couldn't hold his liquor at all.

I tugged on his sleeve and casually cautioned him, "Lord Nazel, I know this is part of your job, but take care not to drink too much, okay?"

His reply shocked me to my very core.

"Don't worry, I'm perfectly fine."

The words that came out of his smiling mouth were so unbelievable, I was left speechless for a moment.

"D-Don't tell me…he doesn't realize it? He thinks he can drink just fine?" I mumbled. It seemed that Lord Nazel was truly under the impression that he could hold his liquor. However, an image of the time he had gotten drunk flashed across my mind.

Oh no, Lord Nazel is the type who forgets everything from the time he was drunk, isn't he?

This event had taken place shortly after our arrival to Sutrena, when Lord Nazel had gotten drunk from too much wine. He'd been absent-minded and grinning the entire time, and the only thing he'd been able to say for some time had been "You're so cute, Agnes." The next day, his memories of the time he'd been drunk had vanished.

Lord Nazel seemed raring to drink tonight, but according to Kelly, he was an utter lightweight. His coworkers were likely unaware of that fact, so they were offering him drinks with good intentions. At this rate, he would get completely drunk again. However, I couldn't possibly expose his weakness before such a large crowd. I was pretty sure that everyone here would just laugh and dismiss a little carelessness on Lord Nazel's part, but it was still better for the margrave not to be drunk when so many eyes were on him.

Since it's come to this, I, Lord Nazel's wife, will do my best and drink the alcohol in his place! It's okay—I can do it if I try!

Protecting my husband, the margrave, was one of my important duties as a margravine. I clenched my fists and exhaled sharply through my nose to fire myself up.

All right, here I go!

I approached Lord Nazel nonchalantly, snatched the glass he was holding, and gulped down the drink in his place.

"Heh heh, what a delicious drink."

In order to avoid offending the man who'd offered Lord Nazel the drink, I wedged myself between them with a bright smile.

"A-Agnes? What are you doing?!"

My sudden intrusion had made Lord Nazel drop his usual smile for a look of sheer surprise. But I couldn't withdraw just yet!

"I think I'm quite fond of alcohol. So I'm going to take all of your drinks for myself, Lord Nazel!"

I had to keep drinking if I wanted to protect him. I emptied glass after brimming glass in single gulps. Lord Nazel was very clearly flustered as he placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Um, Agnes? Will you really be okay drinking that much?! I've never actually seen you drink before."

"But of course, this is my first time."

"Y-Your first?!"

In Desnim, it was recommended that people only started drinking after they became adults. Since the age of adulthood was eighteen, I was already old enough to drink. Despite that, I'd never had a drink before today. I'd never been pressured to drink, and since I knew that Lord Nazel was a lightweight, my interest in alcohol had been all the more lessened. As a result, I had no idea whether I actually could hold my liquor.

The people standing around Lord Nazel were also surprised to see how vigorously I was going through drinks.

"I see. The margravine is a heavy drinker, huh?"

"She sure knows how to drink!"

After I finished all of the drinks presented to me, I addressed the crowd again.

"Erm, Lord Nazel has more work after this, so... That's it for the drinks tonight!"

I didn't want to let anyone here realize that Lord Nazel possessed a drastically low tolerance. I had desperately come up with an excuse, which everyone accepted since I'd given a serious reason to stop the drinking. Lord Nazel gave the impression of someone who was always working, after all. It was plenty convincing.

"Oh, he does? Impressive as usual, Lord Nazelbart. You're a paragon of a lord!"

His coworkers were deeply moved. All of the margraves so far had been disappointing, to say the least. They were apparently

very fond of Lord Nazel, someone who worked his hardest for the sake of Sutrena.

"Agnes, I'm fine drinking as well, you know?"

Lord Nazel was blissfully unaware of his inability to stay sober. Even now, he was looking at me with a hint of curiosity in his eyes, but I would *not* be giving him any alcohol here. I simply laughed and changed the subject.

"Ah…aha ha. Oh yes, we need to go to the new priest! We've already greeted him, but I'd like to talk to him some more."

Lord Nazel's head was still tilted in confusion, but he respected my wish and tagged along. Father Emilio was a little farther away, looking as lost as before while receiving words of welcome from the people of Sutrena.

He's reserved, but he doesn't seem like a bad person. I feel like he's getting along with everyone.

We waited until there was a pause in the people crowding Emilio and approached him.

"Are you having a good time, Mister Emilio?"

Emilio hurriedly straightened his posture when I talked to him.

"You don't need to be so nervous. Everyone in Sutrena, myself included, is truly glad to have you here."

However, the more I talked to Emilio, the more he shrank back.

"There's no need for you to be so formal with me, milady. Please address me with my name alone."

"Oh, should I?"

"Yes. I would ask the same of you too, milord. I may be a priest, but I'm still a commoner—the formality might give me a heart attack."

"Well, if that's what you wish…"

I didn't mind much either way, so I accepted his request. I wanted to be courteous to someone who properly performed his duties as a priest, whether he was a commoner or a noble.

Lord Nazel and I continued talking to Emilio for a while. As the conversation progressed, I let my real thoughts slip.

"Nevertheless, to think we would be sent a priest possessing high-ranking appraisal magic. Lord Nazel isn't on good terms with the church at the capital, you see. This is a total surprise."

"Ah, about that…" Emilio seemed hesitant and evasive as he replied. "I had a disagreement with my superiors, and I was sent

to the frontier as a result."

"Hmm?"

That was what people called a demotion, right? Lord Nazel next to me also blinked a few times in quick succession. He seemed to be thinking the same thing I was.

"I'd never left the capital before, and, to be perfectly honest, I never imagined Sutrena would welcome me with open arms like this. How do I put it? The treatment here is so different from what I was used to that I don't know how to react. Back at the capital's church, I was at the very bottom of the hierarchy, so even when celebrations took place, I was busy working. Not a single holiday."

Lord Nazel and I made eye contact. Emilio's story was strange considering he could apparently use powerful appraisal magic.

A person possessing strong appraisal magic was treated as an underling? And aren't appraisers supposed to be highly paid with good working conditions? Between his poor treatment and demotion, there seemed to be some darkness lurking in the church.

"Your life at the capital sounds quite harsh, but here, you're free to do as you like as long as you perform your appraiser duties. A room for your personal use will be arranged at the fortress until the church is rebuilt. Please use it as you see fit," Lord Nazel explained.

Emilio's eyes went wide.

"Huh?! As I see fit?"

"Also, we've prepared a room for you here at the manor, so you can stay there tonight. You can keep staying there, but if you'd rather buy or rent a house and live on your own, we can make the arrangements."

"I can stay in this manor?! And you'd even arrange a home for me?! What kind of place is this?! This goes far beyond perfection!"

From our perspective, we were only trying to show the appropriate courtesy to someone who'd traveled here all the way from the capital, but Emilio was absolutely dumbfounded. Were priests treated that horribly at the capital? I found it rather odd.

Lord Nazel addressed Emilio again with a smile.

"Oh yes, there's a personal favor I'd like to ask of you. I've already informed the capital, but would you please give us a detailed appraisal of Agnes's magic?"

“Oh, yes. I was informed about that! But when I looked through the church’s archives for confirmation, I found a record that milady has already been appraised.” There was a rule that the kind of magic nobles possessed had to be recorded. All of that information was stored in the capital’s church.

“When she was little, her magic was apparently appraised once at the church in the House of Evantail’s mark. However, her appraisal wasn’t particularly specific, and her magic has now produced unexpected results. As her magic has no precedent that I can find, I’m also perplexed,” Lord Nazel replied to Emilio.

As Lord Nazel explained, Emilio’s eyes started growing brighter and brighter. It looked like he’d taken some kind of interest in my magic.

“That’s an unusual case. I would certainly love to appraise her magic.”

“Thank you. We’ll ask you again at a future date.” And so, Lord Nazel got Emilio’s promise that he would appraise my magic.

Just what was my magic anyway? *It seems to be a completely new discovery, so I’m a bit excited. Depending on the results, I might be able to help Lord Nazel even more.*

I looked at Lord Nazel and Emilio as my heart filled with anticipation, but then…I noticed something strange happening to my body.

“My head has been feeling a little light for some time. It’s really nice.”

“Huh?” When Lord Nazel noticed the change in me, he hurriedly placed his hands on my shoulders, drew his face closer to mine, and checked to see how I was feeling. “Are you okay?!” he frantically asked.

He was always so dashing and kind whenever I looked at him.

“Your face is beet red, Agnes. It’s because you drank so much without being used to it.” Lord Nazel quickly picked me up and said his goodbyes to everyone. “You will have to excuse us here. Today’s banquet is a casual one, so feel free to enjoy yourselves as long as you don’t bother the new priest.”

I could feel overwhelming composure from Lord Nazel as he carried me out with a bright smile on his face. He was so reliable. But the moment he left the room, he broke into a sprint and talked to me in a panicked voice.

“Are you all right? Does anything feel wrong? Do you have a fever?”

“Oh, yes, I’m just fine. This feels really pleasant.” When Lord Nazel placed his forehead against mine, it seemed really amusing for some reason, and I giggled.

“You really are drunk.”

“No, I *told* you. I’m fine.”

Lord Nazel rushed to our bedroom and gently placed me down on our bed like he was handling something truly precious to him.

“It would be better for you to lie down for now, Agnes. You may deny it, but in my opinion, you are no doubt drunk.”

But I pushed aside the fluffy blanket Lord Nazel had placed over me and protested.

“I’m telling you I’m not druuunk. Heh heh heh, you’re such a worrywart, Lord Nazel.”

I slowly got on all fours atop the bed and sidled up to Lord Nazel, but he stepped back, looking lost.

“You don’t have to move away.”

“You aren’t of sound mind at the moment. I beg you, please don’t tempt me any further. My sanity is reaching its limit. Also, your dress got flipped up when you got out of the blanket. Let’s put it back to normal, okay?”

I gasped as I checked the state my dress was in.

“My skirt got turned up.” Even in my drunken mind, I could somehow understand that this was wrong, so I hurriedly flipped it down. “There, you can’t see anything anymore. Heh heh heh.”

I drew even closer to Lord Nazel, and the moment I grabbed hold of his waist, alcohol completely clouded my mind. I didn’t want to even remember what happened next.

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Nazelbart was absolutely stunned at his drunk wife. For some strange reason, Agnes had snatched all of the drinks offered to him during Emilio’s welcome party, and had drunk all of them down to the last drop of alcohol.

Was she worried about me?

Nazelbart didn’t normally drink alcohol, as he didn’t have any particular reason to. He thought he didn’t have the disposition to

enjoy alcohol in the first place.

When I've had far too much to drink, there have even been times I forgot all about it the next day. I believe I also blundered by drinking too much in front of Agnes once.

He'd heard about it from Kelly afterward, but he didn't remember anything he'd done during that time. Perhaps Agnes had remembered that and decided to drink in Nazelbart's place.

That only happened because I drank copious amounts of wine to drown my sorrows. I'd be fine drinking just a little during work.

Nazelbart was aware that he was a lightweight, so he took care to only drink the bare minimum during work. Ergo, there was no problem. He'd told Agnes as much, but it seemed that he hadn't made himself clear enough, causing her to worry.

At any rate, the drunk Agnes had been acting strange for some time. She'd drawn close to Nazelbart, her face flushed red, and kept staring at him.

Just what is she doing looking so vulnerable? I'm glad I brought her straight back to our room.

He didn't want to let anyone else see her like this. Even men besides Nazelbart would undoubtedly feel dizzy if they saw how sexy Agnes looked at the moment. And he wasn't generous enough to allow that.

Nevertheless…

He was worried about the state Agnes was in. He kept moving her back to the bed, but she unsteadily crept out of it every time and returned to him. And every time, her skirt was disheveled, the hem rumpled upward.

Just what do you want me to do?!

Agnes showed no regard for how conflicted Nazelbart was feeling and just did whatever she felt like.

"Mmm, Lord Nazeeel. I wuv you."

Nazelbart was worried how long his sanity would last when his wife dropped such bombs on him with a sweet voice. And yet, she happily moved even closer and clung to him as she said things like "I'm not letting you get away" with a wide smile.



You little minx! She had a really, really nasty streak when she got drunk!

"Lord Nazel, you're so dashing, and wondahful, and ah wanna kiss you."

Her slurred words spoken amid her stupor rang like a large bell inside Nazelbart's head.

"Go back to bed quickly, Agnes. I won't be responsible for what happens if you keep tempting me like this."

However, Agnes giggled happily as she put her words into practice. She placed her slightly warm, soft lips against Nazelbart's cheek.

"Heh heh heh, and what will you do if I tempt youuu?"

Agnes smiled, her face bright red.

I mustn't let Agnes drink from now on, no matter what. I'll have to stop her before she winds up like this.

Nazelbart desperately held on to his composure as it threatened to crumble into pieces.

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The morning after Emilio's welcome party, I woke up lying on my bed next to Lord Nazel. I'd drunk every last bit of alcohol in his place yesterday, then we'd talked to Emilio, and...I could remember doing something preposterous after that.

No, I'm sure that...had to have been a dream! It all feels very real, but it was definitely a dream!

I told myself that over and over, but I still had clear memories of yesterday's events. And right now, I was lying on top of my bed with my dress still on. Lord Nazel was next to me, sleeping like—No, his eyes were open and he was looking right at me. I could see faint dark circles under his eyes.

"Good morning. What's going on, Lord Nazel? What happened to me?"

"You're finally back to your senses," Lord Nazel mumbled with a smile as I lay there confused; he looked sincerely relieved.

"Huh? What do you mean by that?" His peculiar wording left me uneasy.

"You got drunk yesterday. Do you not remember?"

It wasn't a dream!!!

I strongly wanted to say that I remembered nothing, but my memories of getting drunk and running wild last night were clearly etched into my mind.

Aah, what have I done?! I acted like a wild beast assaulting a handsome man! I'd boldly approached Lord Nazel with my underpants in full view, then stolen a kiss from him. The word "embarrassing" didn't even begin to describe it.

I'm so sorry, Lord Nazel! I acted so vulgarly! The shame was too much to bear, so I covered myself with a blanket and curled up like a potato. I could hear Lord Nazel sigh elegantly next to me.

"Oh dear... Your reaction tells me you remember everything that happened. Thank goodness."

"Huh?" Why did he sound glad about it? I could feel an ominous presence next to me.

Since I'm completely under the blanket, I can only hear him, but it's very likely Lord Nazel has a mischievous grin on his face right now. I can predict what comes next based on past experience!

During times like this, Lord Nazel was usually scheming. Ever since we'd confirmed our love for each other, he could be a bit of a tease, in a romantic sense. Every time that happened, I felt a mix of joy and shame, and my face turned so red it might have caught on fire.

"I'm not angry or anything, Agnes. In fact, I'd like to pick up where we left off yesterday."

"Huh?! I-I respectfully decline!"

Lord Nazel sounded gentle at first, but...upon closer inspection, he really was in the middle of something impish.

I couldn't possibly approach Lord Nazel, aggressively cling to him, and then kiss him, all while sober! I screamed in my mind in protest. *I-It's okay. I'll just stay like a seed potato and pretend to be asleep.*

However, Lord Nazel heartlessly stripped my blanket off then started turning me around, while I was still curled up and facing away, until the two of us were face-to-face.

He shows no mercy! My likely beet red face was now exposed.

"Here you go," Lord Nazel said while smiling from ear to ear.

Th-This means that he won't let me go until he's satisfied!

In the end, Lord Nazel didn't let me escape his siege of love until I repeated what I'd done yesterday, and then some.

I pulled myself together and finally staggered out of the bedroom, then excitedly headed to Emilio in an attempt to forget all of this morning's embarrassing events. I was visiting him in order to get my magic appraised. Lord Nazel was following behind me with light steps, his bright expression making his high spirits evident.

"There's no need to hurry, Agnes. Emilio isn't going anywhere."

"I-I'm in the mood to jog!"

Lord Nazel chuckled as he watched me give a lame excuse and continue walking at twice my normal pace.

I'm never *touching alcohol again. The consequences are too harsh.* Now that I'd confirmed I was even more of a lightweight than Lord Nazel, I was determined to abstain from drinking.

I descended our luxurious mansion's stairs, walked down a long corridor, and arrived at Emilio's guest room. Lord Nazel knocked on the door and called for Emilio, who quickly replied and opened the door for us, dressed in his priest's robes.

"Good morning, milord, milady. I sincerely appreciate the warm welcome you gave me yesterday. Please, come inside."

The guest room was actually split into two smaller rooms: One had a table and other furniture, while the other had the bed. Emilio guided us to the nearby table.

"Did you have fun last night, Emilio?"

"Y-Yes! Everyone here is kind, and they talked so politely even to someone like me. Not to mention you even prepared such a wonderful room for me, milord. I've never been treated so well before. This doesn't feel real yet."

"Please let me know if there's anything you'd like. I'll do my best to fulfill any of your requests."

"Huuuh?! Th-Thank you very much. But may I ask the reason for your visit?"

Our objective for coming here was clear: We wanted to have my magic appraised as soon as possible.

"We'd actually like to learn more about Agnes's magic as soon as possible. You'll surely be busy from now on, so we thought we'd have you perform the appraisal before that happens, and so came to talk to you about scheduling. We'd also like this to be confidential. Which day would be most convenient for you?"

"Oh, that's what this is about? I was shocked to see you both

come all the way to my room. I could actually perform the appraisal right now," Emilio said with a small smile. "But this sure is unusual. Every noble I've dealt with so far has forcefully called for me... No, never mind. Allow me to appraise milady's magic posthaste."

It would seem that an appraisal could be conducted without any advance preparations. Emilio showed Lord Nazel and me to the sofa near the table, where we sat side by side with him across from us.

"Please give me your dominant hand, milady."

"Here you go." I presented my right hand as instructed.

"Excuse me," Emilio said before taking it with his own, then pressed it against his forehead. This was apparently how appraisal magic worked. Although I had been appraised before, I had been too young to remember it well.

"Please keep your hand still while the appraisal is in progress. It won't hurt one bit, and it will be over very quickly."

"S-Sure, I understand."

It was said that an appraisal became more accurate the closer the appraiser moved to the other person's body. But they couldn't simply cling to people every time, so Desnim had adopted this method of placing a person's hand on the appraiser's forehead.

Nonetheless, an appraisal's accuracy depends heavily on the individual appraiser's ability.

Appraisal magic was divided into high, middle, and low ranks depending on each priest's magic strength or mana capacity. Appraisers with high-ranking magic shouldered only a light burden when they used their magic, which allowed them to get more precise information than those with lesser appraisal magic. However, I'd heard that there were far fewer of them than middle- or low-ranking appraisers. Furthermore, high-ranking appraisers were ordinarily stationed in the capital; it was highly unlikely one of them would come to a frontier territory like Sutrena. It was practically a miracle that Emilio had been dispatched here.

The results of his appraisal should be reliable since his magic's rank is high.

Emilio looked tense as he continued using his magic with a brooding expression. He'd been quiet during the entire appraisal, but a little while later, his eyes suddenly opened wide.

“Th-This is…!” he shouted.

“Huh?” His abrupt cry left me nervous and wondering what might be wrong.

Did something terrible happen?

However, my worries seemed to be unfounded. Emilio’s eyes shone brightly and he raised his voice even further.

“Magnificent! Your magic is unique—unprecedented—milady! It’s an incredible new discovery!”

“It is?”

“Yes!” Emilio said as he nodded vigorously over and over. “I was informed about the request to appraise your magic when I was still at the capital’s church, so I’ve already looked up the kinds of magic the House of Evantail has displayed across the generations. There have been many people with fascinating, unprecedented magic like yours. Your younger brother Paul’s levitation is also quite impressive; it’s unfortunate it can’t reach a bit higher. Your mother Lady Samantha’s adhesion is also wonderfully convenient; it only lacks a bit in strength.”

Emilio was unexpectedly highly critical of my family members’ magic. His earlier tension had vanished, giving way to unparalleled joy.

He’s quite voluble.

Emilio’s intense explanation about magic continued, giving me no time to interject.

“Your father Lord Michael’s all-wet is honestly rather underwhelming, but your great-grandfather’s rain prayer was remarkable! It’s a magic that will go down in history! Magic that can influence nature itself, like milord’s vegetation magic, is the most valued kind in our country. Now, allow me to get back on topic… I believe that milady’s magic is special, like Master Robin’s, that fellow who caused trouble some time ago and was ultimately exiled. It’s not just one magic but multiple mixed together.”

Lord Nazel took advantage of the short break to ask Emilio a question.

“So, what *is* Agnes’s magic? Could you explain in a little more detail?”

“Oh, yes. Milady’s magic isn’t the matter reinforcement mentioned in the records. The priest who performed her previous appraisal seems to have misjudged it.”

“Huh?!”

I hadn’t expected the appraisal to have been downright wrong.

“I’ve heard of cases of people with life reinforcement or life nurture magic, but…as far as I know, milady’s magic is a different, new kind never seen before.”

Emilio placed my hand on his forehead again and continued speaking with a serious expression.

“According to my appraisal, milady’s magic is *absolute reinforcement*. As for what it can do…it should be possible for it to reinforce not only people and objects, but even the land itself. I think it would also work on foodstuffs.”

Those were exactly the results my magic had achieved ever since I’d come to Sutrena. I’d only met Emilio yesterday, but I felt that I could trust his appraisal.

“Magic labeled ‘absolute’ is actually the strongest,” Emilio continued. “However, it’s difficult to recognize its effects, because the users are usually unaware of it and simply use it freely. That’s likely why milady’s previous appraiser was unable to properly perceive its effects. Incidentally, Master Robin, who had the most unusual magic we’ve seen in recent times, possessed mental recovery and a weak form of psychosomatic purification. Princess Mia called it sacred magic, but it only looked that way to her thanks to Master Robin’s silver tongue. After all, mental magic leaves an affected person’s heart vulnerable.”

King Bertrand had been rather vague when talking about Master Robin’s magic. Emilio, on the other hand…

Oh no, Emilio said something I wasn’t supposed to hear! Is it really fine for him to reveal Master Robin’s private information?

Lord Nazel was also making a conflicted expression. I decided to act like I’d never heard this.

“Anyway, my magic can reinforce anything, right?”

That was a pretty sloppy description, even coming from me. I was honestly surprised when I heard my magic could even reinforce the earth.

As for reinforcing foodstuffs…I did once use my magic on potatoes. Is that what he’s referring to?

Lord Nazel looked at me with an indescribable expression.

“I knew your magic wasn’t simple reinforcement.”

“It’s truly incredible. If we break it down further, milady’s magic

would be made up of at least three different kinds of magic. This is the first time a case like this has been recorded in our country's history. Her mana capacity is also incomparably higher than average."

Even when Emilio put it in such detail, the information was still not sinking in. I was fine as long as I could live a convenient life here at the frontier. In contrast, Lord Nazel had gradually become more and more serious. He addressed Emilio with an uncharacteristically stern expression.

"Can you keep quiet about this? To be honest, I only thought Agnes's magic was a little special. I never imagined it was made up of three—or possibly more—kinds of magic."

"I agreed to keep this confidential, but we priests have a duty to report every magic we've appraised to the country. Though, when I talk about 'the country,' it ultimately means King Bertrand."

"I want as few people as possible to know about this. I don't want my wife to be caught up in any trouble."

"I understand. In that case, I will only submit a report to His Majesty himself, though I imagine Prince Leonardo or Queen Latriche might also find out. However, I have no way to directly contact the king without going through the capital's church."

"I will help you on that front. I will also reward you for all the trouble I've put you through."

"Hush money, is it? Very well."

Lord Nazel smiled at Emilio meaningfully. Though Lord Nazel appeared gentle, he was tenacious in such matters.

"To tell you the truth, I love seeing and researching unusual magic. I actually wanted to work in magical research back at the capital's church. That's why I'm so happy that I got to appraise milady's magic." Emilio had prefaced his sentence with "to tell you the truth," but anyone could tell that just by observing his behavior.

"Milady, you may try out your magic on various things if you'd like."

"Then I will. The strange thing about it is that when I use it to reinforce growing plants, they grow faster and bigger, but when I use it on harvested crops, they become harder instead."

"I think that you most likely subconsciously split your reinforcement into different kinds in your head. I can't believe that

even I, the one said to be the best appraiser at the church, can't identify everything. This is stoking my adventurous spirit! I'd love to hear the results once you figure out more." Emilio looked truly happy.

"Oh, so you were the best at the church. That's praiseworthy for someone so young."

"No, I just happened to be blessed with powerful magic. I even earned the displeasure of the top brass recently and was demoted to— Ahem, excuse me. This isn't something I should be talking about in front of you, milady."

Lord Nazel and I blinked in unison when Emilio suddenly went off track. I could have sworn I heard him mention a demotion…

Is being sent to Sutrena really seen as a punishment?

I was a little shocked to hear that Sutrena was still seen in such a negative light, given that our territory had improved recently.

"Um, anyway, I'll be under your care for the foreseeable future. I look forward to working with you!"

But Emilio didn't seem like a bad person. I hoped we could get along from now on.

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Inside his office at the royal palace, Bertrand received a sealed letter from Emilio. His younger brother Leonardo, who'd become Bertrand's assistant ever since the latter had been crowned king, was on standby beside him.

"Mm-hmm, I hear that the priest dispatched to Sutrena is on bad terms with the upper echelon of the capital's church. But I believe things will be better for the frontier that way."

The clergy hadn't changed since the former queen's period of misrule. A portion of the upper brass had found the young, talented Emilio a nuisance, so they'd essentially gotten rid of him.

Losing a skilled appraiser with high-ranking magic is a demerit to the country. I need to conduct a thorough investigation of the church soon. It would be much easier for me to intervene if I had some kind of excuse though.

Bertrand sighed as he lowered his gaze toward Emilio's letter. It was a rule that the nobles of Desnim had to accurately inform the country about their type of magic. For that reason, appraisers

reported their findings to the palace whenever they appraised a noble. Because of Nazelbart's discretion, it had been arranged for the results of Agnes's appraisal to be directly delivered to Bertrand himself.

"Well, well, it appears Lady Agnes's magic is absolute reinforcement. I've never heard of it. It's a powerful ability an ordinary priest couldn't accurately appraise. Its rarity is on the same level as Robin's, the former prince consort candidate." Bertrand grinned as he finished reading the report. "This is yet another reason I can't keep my eyes off Sutrena. Fortunately, things are going well with Nazelbart for now."

Leonardo straightened his posture once he saw Bertrand's reaction.

"Indeed, elder brother. Sutrena has been assigned some outrageous rulers; it's a territory that requires our vigilance. It was a true blessing that Nazelbart stood against the House of Florescruz and became our ally."

"I completely agree. Luckily, Lady Agnes isn't a belligerent person. I doubt she'll pointlessly use her magic for things other than self-defense and reforming their territory. We'd better keep her magic a secret too. Nazelbart is likely to get annoyed if we needlessly provoke him."

"Yes. If we meddle too much with Lady Agnes's magic and Nazelbart gets mad, there will be trouble. Sutrena is on our southern border, and Polpystan is just across the river. On top of that, Lady Agnes's younger brother is currently studying abroad there. It's a scary situation, plain and simple; I don't want to be hostile to Sutrena. You're on good terms with Queen Latriche, so I believe things will be fine on Polpystan's end, at least."

While the two brothers were talking, the aforementioned Latriche entered the room. She'd put on the act of the devoted wife tending to her bedridden husband for a long time, but as soon as the truth about Bertrand's condition had come to light, she'd started showing her real nature. Now, she freely behaved like her normal self. It was much easier for her now that the former queen and her clique were gone.

"Bert, my siblings in Polpystan contacted me privately. They said there's been a bad harvest and they'd like to purchase as much food from Desnim as they can. It seems they'd like to know

whether that's possible."

Polpystan was a large nation, but more than half of its territory was in a desert, putting them in danger of food shortages, particularly in years the farms clustered around its oases did poorly. Latriche had been married off to the smaller and less powerful country of Desnim because Polpystan wanted to forge a friendly relationship that would result in receiving food or financial assistance. Moreover, Polpystan was surrounded by warmongering nations farther to the south, so Desnim was protected from them thanks to its neighbor acting as a bulwark.

"Since Sutrena has been successful in the mass production of food, the food supply in Desnim is in much better shape than last year. We'll contact them once the price and other specifics have been decided, but for now, tell your brothers that it's possible. Many of our territories would benefit from the additional source of income. We will also be providing assistance from our own food stockpiles."

"All right, I will inform my father the king. Nevertheless, Sutrena's crops, huh? Their trees and other plants now bear fruit thanks to the joint work of Nazelbart and Lady Agnes, right? Rather than food itself, I'd like them to share some seedlings or saplings, but…those plants can only flourish thanks to a combination of Nazelbart's selective breeding, Sutrena's soil, and Lady Agnes's magic, so cultivating them in Polpystan will prove difficult."

"Lady Agnes's magic is apparently absolute reinforcement, and since it's necessary to raise the plants, Nazelbart would likely be reluctant to share it. For now, we'd better supply food rather than any seedlings or saplings."

"Absolute reinforcement, huh? I've never heard of such magic before, in either Desnim or Polpystan."

Bertrand and Leonardo gave Latriche sidelong glances while she was deep in thought, then exchanged conflicted expressions with each other. They hoped that Sutrena would be able to remain peaceful.

"Come to think of it, are the 'reforms' progressing, Latriche?" Bertrand asked.

Latriche lowered her head in response; it seemed that things weren't going all that well. After becoming queen, she'd started

trying to reform the culture of Desnim's noble houses. The incidents revolving around Mia and Robin had been the trigger, bringing to light the absurd "education" Desnim's noble ladies received before marriage. Agnes and Liliane were far from the only noble daughters to have endured abusive upbringings. Bertrand had naturally been concerned, and Latriche, being a woman herself, had felt an even greater sense of crisis.

"Such abuse would be considered unconscionable in Polpystan!" she'd said.

However, changing "common sense" values was no easy task. And since Latriche hailed from a foreign kingdom, Desnim's nobles were all the more resistant to her reforms. There was a limit to how much she could press forward through force.

"You can rely on me if you come across any roadblocks, Latriche. Besides, this isn't a problem you can fix overnight. Don't push yourself too hard."

"I know. But as Desnim's reigning queen, I want to properly deal with this issue. Just like in Lady Agnes's case, this country has far too many parents with warped values!" Though Latriche seemed frustrated, she was still passionate about reforming toxic parents and their equally toxic education of their daughters. "Either way," she continued, "I will proceed with the reforms. Changing everything right away would be nigh impossible, but that doesn't mean this is a problem we can simply put off. You should also focus on your mountbeast introduction policy, Bert."

"Very well. Our new queen sure is reliable. Then I'll devote myself to my own work."

Bertrand picked up a document sitting on his desk. The piece of paper detailed plans for a trial introduction of mountbeasts to areas outside the frontier. It was a draft advocating the use of mountbeasts in areas where travel by carriage was excessively time-consuming or where the landscape was unsuitable for horses. Presently, the use of mountbeasts was forbidden everywhere outside the harsh terrain in and around Sutrena. That was partly because most people didn't distinguish mountbeasts from manabeasts and feared all of them equally, and partly because more developed environments—with no space for flying mountbeasts to land—were unsuited to their use.

Even if individuals were free to have their own mountbeasts,

problems would surely arise.

There were a limited number of mountbeasts being raised at the frontier, with some people exclusively making a living from breeding them. However, Sutrena couldn't possibly produce enough trained mountbeasts for the entire country's population. If the use of mountbeasts were popularized too quickly, problems would likely occur. As breeders rushed to satisfy market demand, poorly trained manabeasts could start going up for sale and wind up injuring people. Contrariwise, there was a possibility that people unworthy of using manabeasts might work them too hard and harm them. Unfortunately, this world had people who couldn't do the obvious or lacked consciences. It was exactly because they were raised with care that high-quality manabeasts were treated like family at the frontier. If the use of mountbeasts became widespread, many rules would need to be established regarding their use and treatment.

I hope everyone can handle their mountbeasts properly and safely.

Mountbeasts were faster than horses and had their own quirks, so taking precautions against any possible accidents was also necessary.

We should start it as a national initiative and introduce their use to selected locations. There's still a lot of opposition to mountbeasts, after all. The people in charge of the project also need to be chosen carefully.

Bertrand personally wanted to travel by mountbeast on a routine basis; it was much faster than taking a carriage. He even rode in secret from time to time. Territories with poor transportation infrastructure would welcome the use of mountbeasts, at least. As the new king and queen, Bertrand and Latriche faced numerous pressing matters. On top of that, there were still many people who'd been under the patronage of the former queen. Those who hadn't assisted in the queen's and Robin's crimes had escaped judgment, but that wouldn't keep them—or other malcontents not associated with the queen's faction—from opposing and criticizing Bertrand at every turn.

I wish I could get rid of all the corruption.

Feeling disheartened by the mountain of work before him, Bertrand shifted his gaze to the capital's church outside the window.

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It was now winter, though for Sutrena that only meant a decrease in rainfall as we slowly transitioned from the rainy season to the dry season. Unlike in the high-altitude capital to the north, there wasn't a big change in air temperature here.

"Mm-hmm, nice weather again today!"

As usual, Geni was playing around in the large pool under the warm sunlight, and Dunk was eating the weeds around the garden. Our daily life was peaceful. I was sitting on the terrace and writing invitations for our wedding ceremony. My quill pen rustled as I wrote on the beautiful, watermarked cards Lord Nazel had obtained for us.

The date of the wedding ceremony is gradually getting closer.

Lord Nazel was the one in charge of handling most aspects of the ceremony. After all, it was a large event that involved the entirety of Sutrena. As a result, there were very few things I was responsible for. They were only minor tasks relating to the guests' hospitality and my bridal attire.

Today, Lord Nazel and I had plans to visit the neighboring territory of Hihime in order to place an order for a silver ring, one of the items I needed as the bride. Located to the northwest of Sutrena, it was also known as the Land of Silverwork. They gathered silver from their mines, processed it into high-quality crafts, and sold their handiwork in various places, including the capital. The central part of Hihime had a number of stores selling silverwork, as well as prestigious workshops that handled items meant to be presented to the royal palace. One could see silver being processed not just in workshops, but in the front yards of houses too. Besides accessories, their products included candlesticks and silverware.

Hihime was fairly close, so we could get there in less than a day on Geni.

"Geni, we're going out today." As soon as I called his name, my smart Geni quickly understood and came to my side.

"We'll pick up Lord Nazel from the fortress, then continue straight to Hihime."

I started fastening the necessary luggage to Geni's back; he was delighted to hear we would be going on a trip. The carefree Dunk

simply continued eating weeds. As I was still getting ready, I noticed Torre sprinting toward me from the estate's gate.

"Lady Agnes, preparations are complete on our end! Miss Kelly is already on standby."

Although my head handmaiden Kelly was a commoner, everyone at the estate—including Torre, Paul, and even Connie—called her "Miss" as a sign of respect. Kelly had told them several times to simply call her by name, but nobody listened to her. "Miss Kelly" had stuck as the normal way of addressing her.

I can sort of understand where they're coming from. Kelly is both outstanding and caring.

She'd even learned how to ride a pegasus over the fall. She would borrow one from the fortress and go on errands that were some distance away. Incidentally, Connie was the one who both had taught her how to ride and lent her the pegasus.

Love is in the air. However, Kelly had completely failed to notice his ulterior motives. I felt a little sorry for Connie that she wasn't aware of him at all.

I straddled Geni and gave an order to my companions.

"All right, time to set off."

"Roger!"

Multiple pairs of wings started flapping all at once. We first headed to the fortress, which was only a short flight on mountbeast from the estate.

The fortress's rooftop came into sight in moments. Lord Nazel, who'd been hounded by work all morning, was waiting there for us. Mister Henry was also there to see us off, enviously looking at us as we were about to depart on our trip.

"Lord Nazelbart, Lady Agnes, Hihime also has hot springs. And its galettes are also known to be delicious. How nice... I'd have liked to come along as well if I didn't have work to do."

I made a mental note to try to bring Mister Henry with us the next chance we got.

"I leave the fortress to you in my absence, Henry. I'll make sure to buy you some souvenirs."

"I'll be looking forward to it. Take care, and have a nice trip!"

Lord Nazel got up on Geni's back with a smile and waved at Mister Henry.

"See you later!"

Our mountbeasts vigorously flapped their wings and rapidly gained altitude as they headed to our destination. Thanks to the sky being perfectly clear, we could see a great distance away. The breeze felt nice and warm on my skin.

"Heh heh, the fortress looks smaller and smaller," I said.

"It really does. The sky is so clear, we can enjoy the scenery. We couldn't do this if it was raining," Lord Nazel replied.

"Yes, we'd get sopping wet flying in the rain."

The weather was perfect for flying, so we made good time and reached Hihime before evening. Although our job here was to pick the ring I would need for the wedding ceremony, we couldn't simply commission it and be on our way. This was a visit by the Margrave of Sutrena to Hihime, with a welcome party prepared by the viscount.

Ugh, I'm so nervous.

I used to be shunned by other nobles for being Lady Bumpkin—or rather, a member of the House of Evantail. I'd never visited other nobles' homes except when being forced to attend parties that doubled as fiancé hunts. In other words, my experience with social interaction was overwhelmingly insufficient.

I need to be careful not to offend anyone.

Viscount Hihime's family consisted of four people. He had two daughters around my age; the older was my age, while the other was a year younger, apparently.

Will we be able to get along well? I suppose building a reasonably good relationship should be sufficient.

In any case, I didn't want to get in Lord Nazel's way.

Hihime was full of steep mountains, and the viscount's estate was located in the center of town, in one of the few areas of level ground. The manor lacked gaudy decorations, unlike Baron Kigyonne's, and it wasn't pointlessly massive like ours; it looked like a perfectly ordinary manor. A flattened area for mountbeasts to land and a simple yet clean wooden stable for them were located in a corner of the meticulously kept garden.

They seem like an upright noble family.

Most of the nobles I'd met so far had acted very stereotypically—in the worst meaning of the word—so seeing something so normal was nice for a change.

Margrave Evile's and Baron Kigyonne's estates were gilded and

over-the-top, on both the inside and *the outside.*

Geni landed on the flattened area, then Lord Nazel and I alighted. The viscount's entire family had gathered to greet us.

"Welcome, Lord Nazelbart, Lady Agnes!"

Viscount Hihime stepped forward and greeted us with a smile; he was an affable middle-aged man with a well-groomed beard. The refined viscountess stood behind him along with their two daughters. One of their daughters was wearing a cute outfit and looked at us with great interest. Her mannerisms were a bit childish, but she had a certain charm to her. As for the second one...

Hmm?

I got a slightly uncomfortable feeling when looking at the second daughter. She had a reserved air about her, as if there were an invisible line setting her apart from the rest of her family, making her the only one who didn't fit in. Simply put, she gave the impression that she was out of place. However, before I could give much thought to the source of this odd sensation, the viscount continued talking in a cheerful voice, and I lost my train of thought.

"I know Sutrena is right next to us, but you must be tired from flying all the way here on your mountbeasts. Please come and rest inside my manor."

Since Lord Nazel was the older brother of Lord Julian, the current head of the House of Florescruz, he was highly respected despite being just a margrave on the frontier. After the former queen and Princess Mia's downfall, Lord Nazel's influence had also grown because he was a known ally of King Bertrand. That was why Viscount Hihime was being so courteous.

We were led to the drawing room. When we sat down on the sofa, the viscount introduced himself with a kindhearted smile.

"Allow me to formally introduce myself. I'm Giorgio Hihime, and this is my wife Lydia."

Lady Lydia greeted us with an elegant smile. The viscount then introduced their two daughters.

"This is Sonia, my eldest daughter, and Furla, my second daughter."

"I'm Furla!" the latter announced cheerfully. She was the one wearing a cute, frilly dress; she gave off the impression of a flower

blooming in warm sunlight.

“I’m Sonia…” the other girl murmured timidly. She was the gloomy one who had been looking nervous the entire time we’d been talking. Compared to her little sister’s, her clothes were rather plain and even worn-out.



I knew it; something is *strange about this family.*

I tilted my head in doubt, but Lord and Lady Hihime didn't seem to mind at all and continued talking merrily.

"On the topic of the accessory for Lady Agnes's wedding ceremony, we've made arrangements with the best silversmiths."

"Your thoughtfulness is appreciated."

Lord Nazel took the leading role in the discussion, and everything proceeded steadily. Viscount Hihime was cheerful the entire time, and never stopped smiling even while we shared dinner.

"There's actually a fine workshop close to our estate, so you may visit it as early as tomorrow morning if you wish. If you find anything you like, I will personally gift it to Lady Agnes."

They would apparently let us observe the entire silverworking process.

He's certainly quite generous.

We could think about the topic of the gift later. Since Lord Nazel and I were interested in the workshop, we definitely wanted to pay it a visit.

The next day, we met at the workshop next to the viscount's estate. We went around to the back of the building to avoid unwanted attention; my handmaiden Kelly and our guard Torre were both with us. As expected of a workplace employing first-rate craftsmen, it was a magnificent building. These craftsmen received support directly from the viscount, so they could focus on mastering their craft without worrying about their livelihood.

When I peeked in through the window, I saw several people each working on their own project. A nearby craftsman had intertwined several thin silver wires and was flattening them, forming them into a wavelike design. He made the base, the frame, then the inside pattern until he had produced a beautiful piece of silverwork. Both the process and the final product could be summed up in a single word: art.

W-Wow...

My eyes were glued to his hands' movements.

"What's the matter, Agnes? Let's go."

"R-Right."

Prompted by Lord Nazel, I followed after the viscount, who guided us into the workshop. Many completed pieces of art lined

the shelves. They would apparently be shipped to various locations after they passed inspection. While it was difficult to tell from her expression, I knew Kelly was enjoying herself behind me. Since she had great fashion sense and excelled at coordinating outfits, it seemed that she'd gained newfound inspiration after looking at the different silverwork pieces.

"Are there any designs you've taken a liking to, Agnes?" Lord Nazel asked.

"This one right here. The flower decorations are cute."

I pointed at a piece with a delicate, three-dimensional flower.

"It's beautiful. Then let's pick a flower-patterned accessory for the ceremony."

After we toured most of the workshop while talking, Lord Nazel informed the craftsmen of my request. My wedding accessory would be custom-made.

It seems that he also made another request. What could it be? But since it's Lord Nazel, it should be fine to leave it up to him.

However, he wasn't satisfied with just that.

"Since we're already here, I'll buy everything from here to there. They all look different, which means we can use them for different occasions."

"L-Lord Nazel?! I feel like that's a bit much..."

"I want to see you dressed up nicely. Is that so wrong?"

The way he worded that was a bit sly, but when I looked at his gleaming amber eyes, I could only wordlessly nod in response.

The viscount was in high spirits as we returned to his estate since the workshop tour had finished smoothly, and he'd made a large sale on top of that.

We decided on an accessory surprisingly fast. We had plans to stay for one more night, so we decided to do a little sightseeing tomorrow before returning home. *We also need to buy some souvenirs for Mister Henry.*

Hihime had plenty of stores and workshops besides the one close to the viscount's estate. Taking a look around them would be fun.

"You must be tired after walking around the entire workshop, right, Agnes? Let's go back to our room."

"Yes, Lord Nazel."

The two of us headed back to our guest room. But on our way

there, we saw something unthinkable in the hallway. The viscount's daughter, Miss Sonia, clad in a worn-out dress, was kneeling down and polishing the floor with an old cloth. The moment she noticed us, she looked up at us in surprise and went pale.

"Ah!"

Huh? What? What's going on? Why is a daughter of the house polishing the floor? Is no one going to stop her?

This might have made sense if they didn't have any servants, like how it had been for us when we'd first arrived in Sutrena, but the viscount's estate was fully staffed. There was no need to have Miss Sonia perform such chores when they had several maids who could do them instead.

"M-My sincerest apologies for showing you something so unseemly!"

Miss Sonia got up in a panic and ran away from us with the dirty cloth in her hand. Lord Nazel and I simply watched her flee with our mouths hanging open from sheer surprise.

"Wh-What just happened?"

The unexpected sight had left me paralyzed, until I heard an ear-piercing, enraged voice from the other end of the corridor.

"Sonia! You've finished already?! Then go clean up the drawing room and Furla's room next! Don't you *dare* show your dirty face in front of Lord Nazelbart and Lady Agnes! I'm leaving now, but I expect you to finish everything by the end of the day! There will be severe consequences if you leave anything undone!" Unless I was mistaken, that voice belonged to Lady Lydia.

But why could she possibly be shouting at her daughter like that?

She seemed like a gentle person, but to think she could be so scary. At any rate…

Why was Miss Sonia acting like a servant when they weren't short on hands? The mystery deepened. The feeling I'd gotten during our first meeting grew more certain; there really was something wrong with this family.

"Excuse me, Lord Nazel? I'm worried about Miss Sonia. May I go check up on her discreetly?"

"I'll come too. I'm also concerned, and I'm worried about the off chance of you getting caught up in something strange."

We walked past our guest room and headed in the direction Miss Sonia had gone. Fortunately, we managed to find her quickly. Her mother was no longer there; instead, her younger sister Miss Furla was present now. We found a hiding spot and observed the two sisters.

“My goodness, sister dearest. You should clean *my* room before worrying about the hallway. You can be *so* thoughtless! What if I slipped on some dust? It would be a major incident if I got injured before I was wed.”

Miss Furla looked like a completely different person compared to yesterday. Her smile had been replaced by a stern expression as she glared at her sister. Moreover, she was ordering Miss Sonia to clean her own room as if she were a maid.

S-Scary!

Even Lord Nazel’s cheeks twitched; he must have been equally shocked by Miss Furla’s complete change.

“Oh yes, my favorite dress has become frayed—patch it up for me. I plan to wear it when I talk to Lord Nazelbart tomorrow. He’s so lovely! And handsome! I know he’s already married, but perhaps he’s looking for a second wife. I’m quite cute myself, so I think I have a chance! Ehe! ☆”

I froze in place when I heard her say that.

That was a preposterous statement.

I timidly turned to look at Lord Nazel and found him staring frostily at Miss Furla.

“I have no idea what she’s talking about,” he said before turning his gaze back to me and adopting a serious expression. “You don’t have to worry about anything, Agnes. I would *never* take a second wife. You’re the only one I love.”

“Th-Thank you very much…”

I was influenced by Lord Nazel’s momentum and nodded my head repeatedly. I already knew how faithful he was.

The two sisters continued talking for some time, but eventually moved to a different room. Lord Nazel and I left our hiding spot and headed back to our guest room, feeling strangely gloomy. After we were inside the room, I decided to talk about what we’d just witnessed.

“It seems that Miss Sonia is being treated harshly by her mother and younger sister.”

I now realized that the sense of discomfort I'd felt yesterday had stemmed from the difference in their attitudes. Miss Sonia had been nervous the entire time, and the only one dressed in awfully plain, ragged clothes. The rest of her family had acted normally, without the slightest reaction to seeing her like that. Under normal circumstances, any parent would have made sure their daughter was dressed properly when they had guests over.

"Lord Nazel, I feel worried about Miss Sonia. I'd like to do something to help her."

My heart bled for her being the only one treated so horribly in her family. Did Viscount Hihime know about this and choose to do nothing?

That question would be neatly answered for me during tonight's dinner. Just like yesterday, we had dinner with the viscount's family. At one point, Miss Sonia's hands slipped, and she dropped her knife and fork on the floor. Her face was deathly pale and she looked sick. However, none of her family members looked the least bit concerned for her. In fact, all of them started criticizing her.

"Sonia! My goodness, just what are you doing? What unbecoming behavior in front of our guests!"

"Oh no, sister dearest. You really are *so* clumsy."

"Don't conduct yourself so disgracefully before Lord Nazelbart and Lady Agnes! Get out at once!"

When we saw even the viscount join the verbal abuse at the end, Lord Nazel and I reflexively stopped eating.

I-I feel sick! Even the food has lost its taste!

Cold silence enveloped what should have been a warm and cozy dining room. Hanging her head, Miss Sonia stood up, hurriedly apologized, then left the room. No one in her family tried to stop her.

"Um, hold on, Miss Sonia?" I asked, but she didn't seem to hear me.

As she departed, Miss Sonia's face looked even paler than Mister Henry's had been during my first meeting with him. She staggered so much she looked like she might collapse any moment. And yet her family was thoroughly unconcerned.

They look like they honestly couldn't care less.

A little while later, the viscount addressed Lord Nazel while

scratching his head, in what seemed to be an attempt to gloss over the entire incident with Miss Sonia.

"Oh dear, I must apologize that you had to witness that. Sonia is such a worthless daughter, you see."

As if to add to what her father had said, Miss Furla leaned forward and spoke up in a high-pitched voice.

"That's right! My sister is already old enough to get married, but she has no manners at all. It's sooo embarrassing! ☆"

"Gosh, Furla, you shouldn't say things like that in front of guests. Oho ho ho… Though I suppose it *is* the truth," Lady Lydia added.

Both mother and daughter shared the viscount's opinion. The servants standing at the edge of the room also remained silent, and placidly cleared away Miss Sonia's food like they were used to seeing her leave meals unfinished. It looked like she didn't have a single ally in this household.

I really want to help her.

Miss Sonia's isolation reminded me heavily of what I'd been through; I felt like her plight was also my own. It made me remember my life at the House of Evantail, and how unpleasant it had been. Perhaps Lord Nazel noticed my distress, because he gripped my hand under the table with concern.

"You don't have to worry about anything, Agnes," he whispered. "There's no need to recall your bitter past."

"Lord Nazel…"

We continued our dinner amid the gloomy, awkward mood. After we were finished, we returned to our guest room together and discussed what we would do moving forward.

"Um, Lord Nazel? Like I said before, I really want to do something for Miss Sonia. I tear up just thinking about her living among that family every single day."

I made my intentions clear right away. Lord Nazel reached out and gently stroked my head.

"Yes, I thought you'd say that, Agnes. So I'm going to lend a hand too. I can't bear to see you suffering as you remember your past."

"Thank you very much."

Wanting to save Miss Sonia was just a selfish desire of mine. Lord Nazel had nothing to gain from helping her; in fact,

depending on how things turned out, his relationship with Viscount Hihime could suffer greatly. And yet, Lord Nazel decided to go along with my wishes without the slightest hesitation. I felt truly sorry for putting him in that position.

"So... I was thinking about taking full responsibility for this matter," I said.

"Absolutely not. It seems that you're trying to be considerate of me, but that kind of concern is unnecessary between a couple. And if any problems do arise, I'll erase them entirely."

"O-Okay..."

Lord Nazel gave me some reassuring yet disturbing words of encouragement.

"Then first, I thought we should get in contact with Miss Sonia to take her under our protection," I suggested.

"Good idea. We need to learn her side of the story."

"Yes!"

And so, I left our room and stealthily headed for Miss Sonia's.

What I'm doing is unacceptable for a guest, but Lord Nazel said he'd handle any possible complications, and I'm still worried about Miss Sonia's condition.

I kept making excuses inside my head as I headed to the manor's second floor where Miss Sonia's room was.

I had a feeling things would come to this, so I asked Kelly to find out where her room is before dinner. Kelly had gotten various pieces of information by talking to the estate's maids. *She really is an exceptional handmaiden!*

According to what Kelly had heard, Miss Sonia was indeed the only member of the estate being abused. The viscount and his wife were kind to Miss Furla but surprisingly cold to their older daughter. Even the servants who knew everything weren't willing to help her because they were only looking out for themselves.

I suppose the servants' hands are tied to an extent. It would be dreadful if they earned the viscount's ire and lost their jobs.

Miss Sonia and Miss Furla were sisters by blood and greatly resembled each other. This wasn't a case of the older daughter being the product of a previous marriage; both of them obviously had the same parents.

"Then why do they treat their two daughters so differently?"

At first, I'd thought the viscount and his wife were very kind

people.

You can't tell a person's true character just by looking at them, can you?

I reached the second floor after climbing a long staircase. Miss Sonia's room was supposedly the one furthest to the back, but…no matter how I looked at it, that spot was occupied by a storage room.

No way, is that actually her room?

The House of Hihime's darkness ran deep. Even when I had still lived at the House of Evantail, I'd had a proper room, I'd never been made to do any chores, and although my education had been absurd, the treatment I'd received as a young lady hadn't been this horrible.

How can the viscount's family be so heartless?

I raised my right hand and gently knocked on the door, but there was no reply. I thought she might be absent, but it was hard to imagine a young woman being out alone this late.

Come to think of it, Miss Sonia looked quite unwell.

As I hesitated about what to do, I remembered how pale she'd looked during dinner, so I resolutely turned the rusted doorknob. The door was apparently unlocked, as it easily opened with a loud creak.

Huh? I was a little surprised even though I was the one who'd opened it.

"E-Excuse me." I timidly stepped foot into Miss Sonia's room.

Is no one here? The lights are off too, but…

I slowly headed deeper into the room, relying on the dim light flowing in from the corridor to guide me, when my foot hit something soft yet heavy, startling me. I looked down to find a human-shaped mass lying on the floor.

"Eek! A corpse?!"

Wait, no, this person is…alive? It couldn't be! When I looked closely at the mass, I realized that it was the unwell Miss Sonia, who had collapsed on the floor. She was unconscious and didn't respond even when I shook her.

"Oh no! As I feared, she's been sick ever since dinnertime!"

I hesitated about my next action for a moment, but I steeled my resolve and lifted her with a "Hup!" I was pretty sturdy and strong to begin with, and thanks to my reinforcement magic, I could carry

even heavier objects than I could before. I left the room with Miss Sonia in my arms, hurried down the stairs, and rushed to the guest room Lord Nazel and I were borrowing.

“Lord Nazel! It’s an emergency! I found Miss Sonia collapsed in her room! It was just a storage room!”

Lord Nazel had been anxiously waiting for my return right by the door. He was truly shocked to see me carrying Miss Sonia so effortlessly.



“I’m so glad you’re safe, Agnes! Let’s take Miss Sonia to the bed first. We should also call Kelly.”

Despite our panic, Lord Nazel and I laid Miss Sonia down on the bed and called Kelly to help us look after her. Kelly was truly reliable at times like this. Miss Sonia was still unconscious, but Kelly nonchalantly started nursing her with practiced movements. After she finished providing what medical treatment she could, we all sat down on the nearby sofa.

“Um, is Miss Sonia ill? I hope she gets better soon,” I asked Kelly.

“I think it’s either a cold or fatigue, but it’s hard to be sure without a doctor’s opinion,” she impassively replied while observing the sleeping Miss Sonia. “From what the maids told me, she was forced to work all day long today without break. Moreover, while we were touring the workshop, her younger sister poured dirty laundry water on her head. I’ve heard other stories as well.”

My goodness! Miss Furla was apparently not satisfied with just forcing chores on her sister, and vented her anger on her whenever she was in a bad mood.

“Miss Furla is strong enough to lift a bucket of water despite looking so dainty, huh? Wait, that’s not the part I should be focusing on! Miss Sonia surely caught a cold because of her.”

We had plans to depart from Hihime tomorrow and return to Sutrena, but if we left Miss Sonia like this, she would certainly continue to be abused.

I’ll ask Miss Sonia about the circumstances in her household, and if we can help her, I’d like to get her out of here.

I looked up toward Lord Nazel, who was sitting next to me. He nodded in response, as though he had figured out what I was thinking and agreed with me.

“Let’s talk to her once she wakes up. Depending on the situation, we’ll take her away from here and have her stay with us at Sutrena.”

“Thank you very much, Lord Nazel!”

“You’re kind on top of being cute, Agnes.” When he looked at me with his passionate amber eyes, my heart started beating like a drum.

“I should be saying that about *you*. You’ve always been so kind

and lovely.”

As the two of us were thoughtlessly about to enter our own little world, I heard some squirming behind me, and I instantly came back to my senses. It seemed that Miss Sonia had come to. I felt relieved as I rushed to her side, and Lord Nazel looked a bit disappointed as he got up from the sofa.

“Are you all right, Miss Sonia?”

Miss Sonia was startled as she turned to look at me.

“Huh? Wait… Lady Agnes?! And Lord Nazelbart too?! I-I should be in my room. What am I doing here?” Since I’d carried her here while she was unconscious, she was terribly disoriented.

“It’s okay, Miss Sonia. I found you passed out in your room, so I decided to bring you here. Um… We haven’t told your family yet.”

Knowing them, they would be anything but worried for Miss Sonia; I had a feeling they would just start cursing at her. That was why we’d intentionally kept her condition from the rest of her family. I expected Miss Sonia to be relieved, but instead, she jumped out of the bed, her face pale as if something had terrified her.

“O-Oh no! I haven’t mended Furla’s dress yet! I have to finish by tomorrow or I’ll get scolded!”

It seemed that Miss Sonia considered the chores her family had ordered her to do more important than anything else, including her own health. She must have been repeatedly disciplined ever since she was young. Either way, we couldn’t possibly let her leave when she’d passed out so recently. If she went out while she was still in poor health, she was bound to lose consciousness somewhere again.

“W-Wait a second!” I hurried after Miss Sonia and caught her as she was about to exit the room. “Don’t worry about the dress; I can fix it for you. Now, I’d like to ask you a few things, Miss Sonia.”

“I can’t have you do my chores for me, Lady Agnes! You’ve already gone to so much trouble for me!”

Miss Sonia was on the verge of tears as she pleaded with me, but nothing would get resolved if I simply consented and let her go. I hardened my heart and looked her straight in the eyes.

“I’m not letting you leave until we talk, Miss Sonia! Now, please tell me your circumstances!”

“Huh? My circumstances?”

“Precisely. Why are you the only member of your family forced to do chores? Not to mention how coldly they all treat you despite being your actual family!”

At first Miss Sonia listened to me with a puzzled expression, but then she calmly closed her eyes in understanding.

“Oh, is that what this is about? I’ve been entrusted with housework for the longest time, so you don’t need to be concerned about that. It’s been that way ever since my sister Furla was born. Helping with my father’s work, doing the housework my mother assigns to me, and taking care of my sister are all my responsibilities.”

Miss Sonia had apparently been treated in this pitiful manner practically her entire life. She’d grown so used to her situation that she’d become numb to it, but I couldn’t turn a blind eye to her predicament. There were some things I could see specifically because I was an outsider.

“How awful. I ought to protest.”

“It’s quite all right, Lady Agnes. I only need to persevere. Besides, my marriage has already been decided, so I believe I’ll be leaving this house soon. My departure will likely be a few days from now.”

“I’m not the slightest bit relieved to hear that.”

Her expression looked like that of someone who’d given up on everything; there wasn’t a hint of happiness in it.

I was utterly delighted just knowing that I will have a wedding ceremony with Lord Nazel.

Lord Nazel seemed to be on the same page; I could sense he was suspicious of what Miss Sonia was telling us. He addressed her with the same composed expression he had during work.

“Incidentally, may I ask who you will be getting married to, Miss Sonia?”

“Oh, of course. It’s Count Lubhuta who lives at the royal capital. Well, I won’t be his official wife, but he seems to have taken a liking to me when he visited our estate. So it was decided that I’d become his concubine in exchange for a dowry.”

“That’s not really marriage then, is it?” I reflexively interjected.

Why was Viscount Hihime’s daughter being intentionally sent to become some noble’s concubine? As far as I knew, Hihime had a good reputation. A young noblewoman of irreproachable conduct

like Miss Sonia should normally have had marriage proposals from noblemen her own age.

Is her father after Count Lubhuta's money? But her family shouldn't be struggling financially.

It didn't seem like the viscount had any trouble managing his territory, so I didn't think he had any financial reason to choose to send his daughter off as a concubine.

While I was lost in thought, Lord Nazel mumbled something truly outrageous.

"Count Lubhuta is around the same age as Viscount Hihime. When I still lived at the capital, I happened to hear that he apparently had multiple concubines. On top of that, he was widely rumored to be a sadist. I didn't put much stock in it at the time, but after listening to Miss Sonia's story, I think it might actually be true."

"What?! Then he's a really dangerous individual, isn't he?!"

"That he is. Since he's related to the House of Addamsgomes and used to be one of the former queen's supporters, I guess he could act as brazenly as he pleased. It appears that his lifestyle hasn't changed even now that most members of the former queen's faction have been taken into custody."

My head snapped around to look at Lord Nazel.

"Lord Nazel, do you know Count Lubhuta?"

"We aren't close, but we've met several times at the capital. He's currently the high priest there. While he's both a count and the high priest, he doesn't have land of his own. He's also the one who was so slow in assigning a priest to Sutrena despite our repeated requests."

"What?! So *he* was the one responsible for that?!" It seemed Count Lubhuta was actually someone connected to Sutrena. *However...* I had a question regarding him. "Is it acceptable for a priest to surround himself with concubines despite being a clergyman? The upright and pure image I had of them is crumbling to pieces."

Priests were allowed to get married in Desnim, but they were normally monogamous. Why was the high priest, of all people, keeping so many mistresses? And he even wanted to add Miss Sonia to their number, even though she was young enough to be his daughter.

It's a bit— No, it's really *disgusting.*

Just like me, who was quietly shuddering, Lord Nazel was also appalled at Count Lubhuta's behavior.

"Ordinary priests don't take concubines. Count Lubhuta is the only high priest I know of to have mistresses. And there are at least ten of them too…" Lord Nazel explained.

"That number easily surpassed my expectations. I'm shocked in more ways than one," I replied.

I wasn't the only one to be surprised by this information. Miss Sonia, who was listening to us behind me, was also dumbstruck. The poor thing was even shivering.

"Miss Sonia, have you not even *met* Count Lubhuta?" I asked.

Miss Sonia quietly shook her head with a grave expression.

"No, my father told me everything about the marriage. I knew that I would be his concubine, but not that he's as old as my father or that he already has several other women. And you said he's also a sadist…" In the worst-case scenario, Miss Sonia might even become a victim of the count's perverted tastes.

Count Lubhuta was apparently relatively notorious. It was one thing for me—someone who'd been shunned by high society as Lady Bumpkin—to have never heard of him, but Viscount Hihime must have been aware of the count's reputation.

"How could the viscount treat his own daughter like this? It's deplorable that he would hand his own flesh and blood over to some sadistic deviant." I was indignant. Viscount Hihime truly had a heart of stone. "Lord Nazel, can we take Miss Sonia with us back to Sutrena? If we leave things like this, she'll be taken to Count Lubhuta in only a few days."

I was asking for permission because the high priest was involved. I couldn't push the issue if it would cause great trouble for Sutrena or Lord Nazel. If it came down to it, I intended to act as the sole person responsible.

I need to think of a good way to resolve this…

However, Lord Nazel agreed with my request as if it were only natural.

"Of course we can take her with us. That's what I intended to do all along. I can't abandon her knowing that she'll end up that man's prey. His reputation is horrible, and King Bertrand has his eye on him, so I think he'll probably be ousted from power before

long.”

“Those kinds of arrangements were taking place without my knowledge?”

Lord Nazel gave me a faint smile; I could tell there was some hidden meaning behind it.

“I’ll contact His Majesty just in case,” Lord Nazel said.

The House of Evantail had been ostracized from high society, and I—Lady Bumpkin—had been similarly kept out of the loop regarding noble affairs.

Lately, though, Queen Latriche has been teaching me all sorts of things.

Conversely, Lord Nazel was alert when it came to important information. He regretted that he’d been unaware of Princess Mia’s movements before she’d broken off their engagement.

He personally communicates with King Bertrand now, and it seems that he’s diligent at gathering intelligence. He’s well-informed on the capital’s state of affairs.

Lord Nazel’s words were truly persuasive.

“I’m sorry to say this, but I can’t imagine any decent parent would marry off their daughter to Count Lubhuta at this point in time. Viscount and Viscountess Hihime seemed like reasonable people at first glance, but I suppose you can’t judge a book by its cover,” Lord Nazel calmly said, brushing fingers through his bright red hair and narrowing his amber eyes. It was now crystal clear that something was odd about the House of Hihime.

“Then, Lord Nazel…”

“Yes, we’ll depart first thing in the morning. If Miss Sonia really will be sent away in a few days, we have no time to waste. In the worst-case scenario where she’s taken to Count Lubhuta in the capital, rescuing her will be difficult.”

Miss Sonia looked uneasy, her eyelashes lowered and her shoulders trembling, so I smiled cheerfully at her to reassure her. I would protect her no matter what if she came to Sutrena; I wanted her to have even a little peace of mind.

“It’s going to be all right, Miss Sonia. Our territory is a nice place. Please leave everything to us.”

I felt even more reassured now that I had Lord Nazel completely on my side. Lord Nazel and I shared a look, our objective the same, and deeply nodded at each other. We were

only supposed to be here to buy an accessory for our wedding ceremony, but things had ended up taking a wild turn. I was convinced that this was also some kind of fate though.

During breakfast the next day, we braced ourselves and put the plan we'd formulated yesterday into motion. As long as Lord Nazel or I were present, Miss Sonia's parents wouldn't be harsher on her than necessary. We were planning on taking advantage of that.

"And so, I became good friends with Miss Sonia yesterday. I would just love for her to come and visit our territory, so I extended an invitation to her. May she accompany us when we leave for Sutrena?"

Miss Sonia's parents shook in their seats, presumably dumbfounded that we could have gotten close in a single night. They didn't raise their voices or make a fuss, but I could tell that various complicated emotions were swirling around in their minds.

"Oho ho, goodness me, Lady Agnes. Sonia is a truly inadequate girl. She's vulgar and unrefined, with no manners to speak of. She's only going to cause trouble for everyone at Sutrena."

What an awful thing to say about her own daughter. Miss Sonia, who was tearing pieces off a slice of bread, bitterly lowered her head.

I need to give her a helping hand.

I immediately stood up for Miss Sonia as I addressed her parents.

"I respectfully disagree. Miss Sonia is a gentle and lovely person. She taught me how to sew—she's quite skilled at mending clothes—and even showed me the trick to sweeping properly."

I observed Miss Sonia's family carefully as I spoke, and they all averted their eyes awkwardly. They seemed worried that I'd discovered how they'd been working her to the bone. *If you're going to regret it, you shouldn't have treated her that way in the first place.*

However, Miss Furla quickly recovered, her walnut eyes sparkling as she spoke in an inappropriately cheerful voice.

"Awww, it's no fair that only sister dearest gets to gooo! I also want to visit Lord Nazelbart's estate! ☆" Her cheeks were rosy as she focused her gaze straight on Lord Nazelbart.

Uh, Lord Nazel's a married *man.* As his wife, I was getting somewhat troubled by her flirtatious behavior.

Lady Lydia, seemingly unaware of my mental state, started going on and on, trying to join her daughter's line of attack.

"Th-That's certainly fine! Feel free to visit them, Furla. But as this is a formal visit, I'd like a few days for us to prepare. Oho ho ho!"

I imagined Count Lubhuta would be dropping by in those few days' time.

You really want to make your daughter the count's concubine no matter what, don't you? Are you after his influence or his money? Or do you simply wish to torment Miss Sonia?

If Miss Sonia was taken to the capital in those few days Lady Lydia was talking about, Miss Furla would end up coming to Sutrena alone, completely defeating the point of our entire plan.

How do we get through this without rocking the boat?

I was at a complete loss, until Lord Nazel threw me a lifeline.

"Actually, Agnes would like to ask for Miss Sonia's advice regarding our upcoming wedding ceremony. That's why this invitation was so sudden. I heard that Miss Sonia will also be leaving home to get married soon."

The viscount's family was obviously startled.

They're like open books…

I was grateful for Lord Nazel's assistance and jumped on the opportunity to continue talking. While the topic of Miss Sonia's marriage had come up, I absolutely would not talk about her being sold off as a concubine.

"Exactly. I was hoping we could talk as two brides-to-be. If I remember correctly, Miss Sonia will be moving to the capital, right? Talking to someone leaving home much like I did will prove very helpful. You have nothing to worry about. We will return Miss Sonia as soon as our business with her is finished." I silently added a caveat to that promise: *If and only if you lot reform your conduct.*

The viscount and his wife, whose behavior was unquestionably shady, were flustered. Of course, they couldn't say something like "She's going there as a concubine, not as a bride" or "She's supposed to leave for the capital in a few days." They also seemed afraid that we would learn the truth through Miss Sonia. They were directing stern gazes at her, as though warning her not to tell us the truth. The cat was already out of the bag though.

“This all came up too suddenly for us to prepare properly. We will formally invite Miss Furla another time,” Lord Nazel said.

Hit with his devastatingly handsome smile head-on, Miss Furla merely blushed and couldn’t raise any objections. We took advantage of the opportunity and urged Miss Sonia to the mountbeast pen so we could take her along with us. We planned to put her behind Kelly since she couldn’t ride alone.

Hihime is also on the frontier, so travel by mountbeast is indispensable. Pegasi are common enough that even a young noblewoman should be used to riding them…or so Lord Nazel said.

Before the viscount’s dazed family could regain their bearings, we departed Hihime without any trouble. The viscount’s cozy estate slowly faded into the distance.

Phew, I’m glad everything went well.

We safely arrived at our estate in Sutrena just past noon thanks to leaving promptly this morning. Lord Nazel and I alighted from Geni as Miss Sonia and Kelly also got down from their pegasus. After we collected our luggage, the mountbeasts started relaxing in the garden. Dunk, who’d been house-sitting in our absence, was again indulging in some apparently delicious weeds.

“Please come inside, Miss Sonia. You probably couldn’t relax yesterday, so go and get some rest in a guest room.”

Kelly led Miss Sonia to her guest room, while Lord Nazel and I moved to the garden terrace under the warm sunlight. We wanted to discuss what we’d do with Miss Sonia from now on.

“Now, let’s talk about what Miss Sonia told us last night, Agnes.”

“Yes, Lord Nazel. Honestly, her story’s hard to accept, but after observing how her family acted, I believe it’s most likely the truth.”

Miss Sonia had gone into even more detail the previous night. According to her, she’d been abused by her family ever since she’d been a little girl, and she’d been forced to constantly work.

And it wasn’t just housework. She was even made to shoulder the viscount’s work. Just when did Miss Sonia have the time to rest? It’s only natural that she collapsed from overwork.

She’d apparently grown so used to it that she lacked awareness of her situation, but Lord Nazel and I could tell that her circumstances were abnormal. Though she was treated coldly by her family, she was quite skilled, and the kind of person who couldn’t turn down a request from those around her. That was why

her work continued to pile up, making her situation all the more worse.

This is even worse than what I went through at the House of Evantail. My parents, obsessed with past trends, had clearly favored my obedient brother Paul over my rebellious self, but they'd still never made me do a servant's work.

"Miss Furla also joined in her sister's abuse," Lord Nazel said, eliciting a heavy nod from me.

"Yes, it's clear that the two of them don't get along. Miss Furla might have been influenced by her parents' behavior."

According to Miss Sonia, Miss Furla was skilled at getting people to spoil her, and their parents loved and cherished her. From what I'd seen during our short stay, her story seemed to be true.

"This time, I used my authority to more or less forcibly take her away, but if we hadn't visited the House of Hihime's estate..."

I proceeded to finish Lord Nazel's thought.

"Miss Sonia would have continued being abused, and eventually been sold off to Count Lubhuta."

The rest of Miss Sonia's family would then live happily off the dowry they'd received. I couldn't even stomach the thought.

"For now, I think we should let Miss Sonia stay here as our guest. At the very least, we have to protect her until the situation with Count Lubhuta is resolved," I said.

"I agree. We may be outsiders, but I can't turn a blind eye after everything we've witnessed."

Because Miss Sonia had no one to rely on right now, I would take on the responsibility and become her patron. Lord Nazel and I were of the same mind on this matter.

Chapter 3: The Viscount's Family and the High Priest

Furla Hihime had been in an unrelenting bad mood ever since her older sister had left for Sutrena.

"Ngaaah! What the heck?! Why was someone like my sister the only one invited to Sutrena?! It's just so unfair! Hmph! ☆"

With her sister absent, her dresses went unmended, dirty laundry piled up, her room became a mess, and the entire manor was filthy. Furla gave her room a sidelong glance; it was becoming a veritable garbage dump without Sonia to clean it. Next, Furla picked up a dress with frayed sleeves. She loved flashy dresses with lace or frills. However, contrary to her graceful appearance, she was rather clumsy, so her frilly hems ended up getting caught on all manner of things. The one entrusted with cleaning up her messes had been her sister Sonia, who'd always been good with her hands.

The estate had plenty of servants, but having Sonia do her chores was faster, and she left everything so neatly. Besides, Furla enjoyed condescendingly ordering her sister around. Furla disliked her sister, plain and simple. Just like their parents said, Sonia was charmless, yet somehow insufferably composed and a Goody Two-shoes. She always looked at Furla like she was pitying a poor little child. It made Furla feel like her sister was looking down on and making fun of her, irritating her even more.

In any case, I'm only playing the part of a daughter dearly loved by her father and mother. It's easier this way. I'm sure it must seem so foolish and ridiculous to my sister, though!

Furla wasn't brilliant like her sister; she was the clumsy and ignorant second daughter of the House of Hihime. She couldn't do anything on her own. In occasional introspective moments, she even loathed herself for being so pathetic.

It's all right. I'm the charming daughter everyone loves. I get to live in this nice and cozy manor.

But Furla knew that her parents' love wasn't actually free. It was something they only gave her if they saw her as a conveniently

“good” girl. The kind of children her parents actually loved were cute, foolish, obedient, and didn’t cause them any discomfort…just like livestock, not their real, flesh-and-blood daughters. They only cherished Furla as their mood dictated; she was but a pawn who curried favor with them. There had been a time she’d desired true love from them, but she’d eventually realized that was simply impossible.

I chose to accept the price—conforming to my parents’ wishes—so I could live an easy life. I’m not like my foolish sister, who despite being good at both work and her studies is a total moron when it comes to understanding our parents.

However, the current state of affairs was bad for Furla. Sonia had been responsible for the majority of their father’s work, but because she’d abandoned it and headed to Sutrena, mountains of paperwork had begun piling up, and the entire Hihime household had fallen into disarray.

I can’t live a comfortable life like this!

Moreover, as Sonia had also been in charge of preparations for their mother’s social activities, the impact was apparently visible there too. Attending to all her family’s needs had been Sonia’s duty. In fact, she had actually been the one working in the background and was responsible for the sound territorial administration the House of Hihime was known for.

My sister is so *irresponsible! She* knew *this was going to happen and went anyway.*

While Viscount Hihime’s estate employed servants, they had always pushed the troublesome work to Sonia, so it was hard to call them capable at their jobs by any standard. Sonia was the only one with a proper servant’s disposition and an eye for detail. The actual servants were all tactless. And now glaring flaws in the servants’ work had started showing up just because a single person—Sonia—had left. The quality of life in the manor had clearly dropped. But that was to be expected, since the servants had been mimicking Sonia’s parents and Furla, and they had left the majority of their work to Sonia. The effects of Sonia’s absence had been appearing everywhere for the past few days. The situation was totally out of control.

Everything will start going well again as soon as my sister returns.

Furla looked down on her sister. After all, so did their parents.

Everyone around Furla worked Sonia to the bone like it was the natural thing to do.

In fact, the more I antagonized my sister, the happier my parents became.

Ever since they'd been young, if Furla wanted anything of Sonia's, it would be hers the next day. Whenever she'd done anything bad, she'd blamed it on Sonia for not looking after her properly, and Sonia had been made to clean up after her. Sonia had used to occasionally protest this treatment, but their parents had never listened to her, instead shouting things like "How selfish of you! You have no compassion for your own family!" On the other hand, they'd been awfully kind to Furla. They'd bought her everything she asked for, and praised her daily for every trivial thing she'd done.

My sister really is stupid. Father and mother treasure a girl like me because I satisfy their desire to protect me. A woman like her who can do everything on her own is an uppity nuisance in their eyes. And yet, she still devotes all her efforts toward self-improvement…

Furla was convinced that she understood the true state of affairs of their household better than anyone.

That day, the House of Hihime was a little busier than usual. While Sonia was still away at Sutrena, a sudden message had arrived from Count Lubhuta, the man she would be sent off to. "I'm headed to the Hihime estate," the letter read. Furla's parents had contacted Nazelbart again and again, asking for Sonia to be sent back, but it seemed that there'd been no reply at all. Lubhuta had apparently been staying somewhere close to Hihime, because he'd moved quickly and arrived at the viscount's estate only a short time later. He was quite the impatient man. The curious Furla stealthily observed everything from the dance hall on the second floor.

"Is Sonia here? I've come to get her!"

A middle-aged man barged in without so much as a greeting. His massive body looked soft and flabby from excess fat, while his unseemly face was beet red. His sinister, small, sluglike eyes kept darting around. He was probably looking for Sonia.

I caught sight of him that time he came to ask for my sister as his concubine, but boy is he gross*! I shudder even at the thought of being*

that man's lover. My poor sister! Aha ha! ☆

Furla's parents greeted Count Lubhuta with their heads bowed subserviently. Though different from Nazelbart in many ways, Lubhuta was also a powerful noble with great influence. He was someone they absolutely mustn't make an enemy of. Furla's parents wanted to become acquainted with him one way or another. They believed that the more powerful people they curried favor with, the better.

"Welcome, Lord Lubhuta. Please allow us to guide you to the drawing room," the viscount said.

"No need. I'm a busy man. Just bring me Sonia and we'll leave for the capital posthaste."

"Well, the thing is... Our daughter Sonia is currently visiting another territory."

"Huh? What did you just say?"

They were talking about Sonia in, of all places, the middle of the hallway, which was visible even from the second floor. As a result, Furla could also hear everything from her hiding spot upstairs. She leaned forward, hoping to better listen in on their conversation. Her parents were telling Lubhuta the truth about how Sonia had gone to Sutrena and would never come back.

They couldn't exactly lie in this situation, could they?

When Lubhuta heard the news, his face flushed an even brighter red and he started trembling with rage. His agitation was clear to anyone.

"This is preposterous! Simply outrageous! How could you let this happen when you knew I would be coming?! Are you two making light of me?!"

Furla's parents, on the other hand, were deathly pale as they both fell to their knees on the hard floor. This might actually have been a precarious situation for them.

"You have our deepest apologies, Lord Lubhuta! We'll call Sonia back right away, so please find it in your heart to forgive us!"

"No! I refuse to wait! You'll pay dearly for this affront! I'll crush your worthless rural viscount house!"

It seemed that Lubhuta's rage was already past the point of no return. Furla thought that he could simply go to Sutrena himself, but according to what she'd once heard from her parents, Lubhuta and Nazelbart were apparently on horrible terms. Furla didn't

understand all the complicated details, but Lubhuta would most likely never intentionally set foot on Sutrena's soil.

What should I do? At this rate, father and mother will…

Despite Furla's intention to remain a spectator, she broke out in a cold sweat as she observed the conversation.

But there's nothing I can do… Oh no, Count Lubhuta raised his hand against father!

Furla continued observing Lubhuta, who'd started rampaging in the hallway, when he suddenly sensed her presence, looked up toward the second floor…and their eyes met.

Eep!

A horrifying, repulsive grin instantly formed on Lubhuta's face.

"You have another daughter here, don't you, Lord Hihime?"

"Huh? Whatever do you mean?"

The abrupt question made Furla's father follow Lubhuta's gaze in confusion. When he saw Furla hiding in the dance hall, his face grew pale as a ghost.

"F-Furla! What are you doing there?! Not Furla, Lord Lubhuta, she's my beloved daughter! I'll bring Sonia back no matter what it takes and hand her over to you!"

"Drop the nonsense! Do you take me for a fool?! If Sonia isn't here, I'll just take that girl home with me! You have until tomorrow to get her ready to leave for the capital, you hear me?! That's an order! I'll crush your entire house if you disobey me!"

Both Furla and her father shuddered in fear when they heard Lubhuta's arrogant words.

I'll have to become that scumbag's concubine?! This can't be happening!

After delivering his ultimatum, Lubhuta departed the manor with violent, noisy steps. When he'd finally left, Furla ran up to her father on the first floor.

"Father! I'd never take sister dearest's place as his concubine, right?! Let's bring her back home by tomorrow! Let's go to Lord Nazelbart's estate at once!"

Furla fully expected that her father would nod in agreement without a moment's hesitation, but instead he only groaned with a gloomy expression and wouldn't reply to her.

"Hmm, what am I to do?"

"What is there to even think about?! If we don't bring my sister

back, I'll become that man's concubine!"

"I can't disobey Lord Lubhuta, but I also want to avoid incurring Lord Nazelbart's wrath. I'm just a weak rural viscount, after all."

"Wait, what are you talking… Don't tell me you're going to do exactly what that lecherous count asked?!" Was Furla's father seriously considering turning her over to Lubhuta in Sonia's place? "M-Mother! You have to stop father! If you don't, I'm going to become Count Lubhuta's concubine instead of my sister! He said he'd come by tomorrow!" Furla pleaded for help, but her mother just stood next to her, pale-faced. "Come on, go and bring my sister back!"

Her mother awkwardly averted her eyes without uttering a single word; she did not object to her husband's plan.

"N-No…!"

Furla should have been perfectly aware of what her parents were like, but she'd somehow forgotten. What they loved and treasured the most wasn't their daughter Furla but themselves.

"You're both morons! I can't believe you!"

Following this unexpected turn of events, Furla rushed to her room. She stuffed jewels, dresses, and a map of southern Desnim into a bag, then opened the window wide. A large bougainvillea that reached all the way up to her balcony stretched out to her. It was a commemorative tree that her parents had planted to celebrate her birth. She timidly reached out to the relatively thick branches.

I'm scared. But if staying here means I'll be sent to live with that man, I'm running away!

Furla's plan was to climb onto the branch closest to her, put her arms around the tree's trunk, and slide down. With that, she would be able to escape even from the second floor. Resolute, she put her thoughts into action.

It's going to be okay. Gently, now. Gently…

But Furla lost her footing as soon as she stepped on the branch. She somehow managed to still grab hold of it, but her frail arms instantly cried out in protest. She reached the trunk after a hard struggle, and then she quickly slid down, landing on her backside.

"Ouchie! And my dress is all torn now."

Furla had escaped from only the second floor, making it without sustaining any injuries. If she'd tried the same maneuver from the

third floor, she might have gotten seriously hurt. She wanted to cry, but she had to leave the estate before her parents or Lubhuta discovered her. She dragged along the heavy bag she'd hurriedly packed and headed for the mountbeast shed in their garden. Her parents had spoiled her and raised her with great care, and unlike her sister, she'd been taught the basics of riding mountbeasts. She'd even flown over the garden on her own. Once she reached the shed and made sure no one was around, she placed her luggage on the House of Hihime's most obedient pegasus, then mounted it and gave it the order to take flight.

I've never been to another territory, but I should somehow make it...if I don't mess up the direction.

Furla's destination was Sutrena, where her sister Sonia was staying. If she dragged her sister out and forced Sonia to return to Hihime, she could escape the fate of becoming that disgusting count's plaything. He shouldn't threaten her parents anymore after that. Their family would be safe from his wrath, and everything would be resolved peacefully and neatly.

That's right. This mess is all my sister's fault, so I need to hold her responsible!

With Furla on its back, the white pegasus started flying straight to the southeast, where a small rainbow had appeared.

***

It had been a few days since Miss Sonia had arrived in Sutrena, and she'd spent her days fretting over everyone else's well-being at the estate. Watching her behave with such excessive submissiveness was actually painful. I continued observing her behavior with mixed feelings.

This just shows how much she must have been abused at the viscount's estate... But nothing will change unless Miss Sonia herself recovers mentally. She remains reserved no matter what I tell her. Master Robin's magic would probably be useful for cases like hers.

It looked like it would still take some time until Miss Sonia's mental state improved. As I was lost in thought, watching how the situation would progress, her light purple eyes suddenly met mine.

"Excuse me, Lady Agnes!"

“Yes? Is something the matter, Sonia?”

“W-Would you please assign me the same kind of work as the maids too?! I can’t just do nothing while you take care of me!” she pleaded with her head bowed deeply.

Now that’s *a conundrum. She was so overworked at her home that she collapsed from exhaustion. I can’t believe she’s saying she wants to go back to work before she’s fully recovered. Not to mention Miss Sonia is our guest. We can’t have her working like a maid.*

I was troubled by the decision I had to make, but then Kelly, who was fortuitously nearby, came to my rescue.

“Let’s have Miss Sonia help me with my work, Lady Agnes. Fortunately, I don’t have any difficult work today, so I have some free time.” Kelly was being unusually assertive, as if she had a clear plan in mind.

“Is that really okay, though?”

“Yes. Although my circumstances are different from Miss Sonia’s, I was also constantly forced to look after my younger brothers and do housework. That’s why I know how it feels to have various chores forced on you. You have work to do on processing the tubers soon, don’t you, Lady Agnes? Please leave this to me and head where you’re needed.”

“Thank you, Kelly.”

I left for the kitchen. Our tuber-processing experiments still had a long way to go. Today, we would be experimenting with cassavas, a type of long and narrow plant in the tuber family, which were widely cultivated in the neighboring country of Polpystan. Queen Latriche, once a princess of Polpystan, had taught me how to eat and process them. Those plants were tenacious, able to thrive even in wastelands. In fact, only the stalk needed to be planted to grow. Moreover, their leaves were also edible, or could be used to make textiles. They’d been introduced to Sutrena some time ago. However, in order to eat them, it was first necessary to remove their poison, which was a slightly bothersome process.

It takes a fair bit of time, and the cassavas spoil pretty fast once the poison is extracted.

It was said that most of a cassava’s poison was in the skin; in order to eat the tuber part, one first had to carefully peel them. The sprouts were toxic as well, so those had to be removed too.

After their skins were peeled, the cassavas had to be submerged in water for about a week. The water had to be replaced daily, which was somewhat of a hassle. Finally, once the water-soaked cassavas were boiled until they became soft, all of the poison was removed. Meanwhile, the leaves had to be dried in the sun or boiled in water before they could be eaten.

And so, today we'll be turning cassavas into flour.

When I arrived at the kitchen, the maids had already placed the cassavas in water. We would now grate those cassavas underwater. I took center stage and started issuing instructions to everyone; this was another important job for a margravine.

"First of all, we will grate the cassavas while they're still submerged in water. Next, we will filter the water with the grated cassavas, heat their remains in the pots to remove all the moisture, and then we will grind them into flour. Afterward, we will heat different pots containing muscovado, add the flour, and knead the mixtures into small balls."

We would then drop them all into boiling water. Once boiled, they would turn into squishy, edible black spheres. They were called "tapioca balls" in Polpystan and were apparently delicious when dropped into iced milk tea. Incidentally, the product gained from grinding dried cassavas was called cassava flour and could be used as a substitute for wheat flour. When processed into confectioneries and the like, the texture was a little springier than that of wheat flour.

Cassavas spoil quickly when left whole, but they keep longer as flour. Food that's both delicious and has a long shelf life is a real bargain, isn't it?

Our work proceeded favorably and we made many tapioca balls.

If cassavas become widespread, Sutrena's food situation will further improve. And above all, it's wonderful to be able to compare how different kinds of tubers taste!

About the time the prototypes were completed, Lord Nazel and Mister Henry returned from work. These two would always unexpectedly show up when it was time for sampling.

"You've made some strange food, Agnes. They look like frog eggs. How...creative."

"This is a Polpystani food called tapioca, Lord Nazel. Queen

Latriche taught me how to make it."

"You used cassavas grown in our garden as ingredients, right? But the color's completely different…"

"That's right. Since you're already here, please go ahead and try some."

Our chef Mather swiftly prepared some iced milk tea to which he added some bouncy tapioca balls. Lord Nazel's expression was stiff; he seemed wary of the tapioca.

He did *call them frog eggs.*

Lord Nazel had raised some bamboo for experimental purposes, and we'd cut some to make large straws with which to drink this milk tea. Their large diameter made it possible to suck up the tapioca balls along with the tea.

"It's sampling time. Use as much of the syrup that's on the table as you like."

"Are these things really edible, Agnes?"

"But of course. Come on, go ahead! No need to hold back!"

Lord Nazel and Mister Henry started drinking the tapioca milk tea—the former somewhat apprehensive, the latter with great curiosity.

"So, Lord Nazel? How does it taste?"

"I was worried what I'd do if it turned out fishy, but it's a bit sweet and springy. Setting how it looks aside, it seems edible."

"Thank goodness. As you can see, there's nothing fishy about these ingredients, okay?"

Kelly and Miss Sonia also came to the kitchen after finishing work, so I also treated them to some tea.

"You called this tapioca? It has a very curious texture."

Kelly sucked up every last drop of tapioca tea without the slightest hesitation. Miss Sonia seemed fond of the drink as she quietly finished her cup as well. It all disappeared rather quickly.

"Now, as usual, the tapioca milk tea will be sold at the store in front of the fortress. We have plans to spread it to other locations depending on its popularity. Let's do our best to advertise it."

The maids gathered in the kitchen cried out vigorously, "Yeah!"

The tea seems to be a hit overall. What if we served it at the wedding reception as a way to promote it?

I didn't know if it would become popular throughout the entire country like it was in Polpystan; the process of popularizing new

foods was one big challenge.

Some of our estate's maids were former Desnimer noblewomen who'd run away from home.

More and more ladies have come here seeking shelter, huh? Many of them wish to work as live-in maids, but we're actually getting a bit overstaffed…

The problem of work for the ever-increasing number of new maids could be solved by assigning them to tuber processing or sales.

"Next, I'd like to also make other products using cassava flour, not just tapioca flour. I might get addicted to this springy texture."

Cassava flour, which could be substituted for wheat flour, was made by drying the cassavas then grinding them. The cassava dishes we'd made in the past had seemed fairly popular with the maids, so other people should definitely like them too.

Oh yes. I should write a letter to Queen Latriche to thank her for teaching me about tapioca. Should I also let her know about Miss Sonia? Since the tuber-processing work is over for the day, I should—

I was about to take a short break after finishing work when I suddenly heard loud cries from the garden. The maids also looked toward the windows with curiosity.

"Hmm? What's going on?"

Lord Nazel and I rushed out through the kitchen door to check what the commotion was. Since I always tried to go outside barefoot, the maids had started keeping a pair of my shoes right by the kitchen's exit. I put them on and headed for the garden, where I found our mountbeasts restlessly moving around, all the while looking toward the sky for some reason.

"What's the matter, you guys?"

Torre's pegasus was neighing, Geni was growling menacingly, and even Dunk was snorting and seemed ready to fight. I followed the mountbeasts' gazes and saw an unfamiliar pegasus struggling above us.

"Um, what? Is that white pegasus…lost?"

The pegasus had a pristine white coat, so there was a high chance it had an owner. I strained my eyes and noticed that someone was actually riding on it. As I watched, the rider was thrown off because of the pegasus's rampage, and loudly shouted "Eep! ☆" as she fell and rolled across the ground. Because she'd

landed right on the hay we kept for feeding pegasi, I figured she was probably uninjured, but I felt dizzy since she looked like someone who wasn't supposed to be here.

"Y-You are..."

She was wearing a bulky, frilly skirt that wasn't suited for riding and was covered in grass and hay. The unlikely visitor who'd just fallen into our garden was...Miss Furla, Miss Sonia's younger sister, who I'd met during my visit to Hihime. However, despite being a viscount's daughter, she had no guards or retainers accompanying her.

That's strange. Viscount Hihime and his wife have only sent us letters asking for Miss Sonia's return. For the record, we'd been ignoring those letters. If we returned Miss Sonia to them now, she'd be sold off to become Count Lubhuta's concubine. Now that I'd decided to protect her, I'd stick to that choice no matter what happened.

Miss Furla lay motionless on the ground and kept glancing at Lord Nazel next to me, as if urging him to do something. It seemed like she wanted him to help her up.

How observant of her!

But instead of Lord Nazel, Torre was the one who pulled her up. He'd noticed his beloved pegasus's unusual behavior and rushed to the garden, shouting "Emergency!"

Oh my, Miss Furla looked displeased as she reluctantly stood up. I'm glad she doesn't seem to have any major injuries.

But the white pegasus was still panicking and flying around above us. I went to soothe our uneasy mountbeasts and retrieve the rampaging pegasus. I pulled up a carrot from our garden, tied a string to the leaves, and waved it around while shouting "Over here!" to guide the pegasus to land. Pegasi didn't willingly attack people, so there was almost no danger as long as one followed basic handling procedures. Just as planned, when the pegasus noticed the fresh carrot, it neighed loudly and descended docilely. It then approached me to get the carrot.

"Good pegasus. Come inside here, will you?" I guided the pegasus to the cage we'd once used for Dunk, and gave it the carrot to calm it down for now. It obediently followed all of my instructions. "Phew, what a relief. I'll let you out of the cage later, okay?"

While I'd been calling out to the pegasus, a conversation had started between Lord Nazel and Torre.

"Lord Nazelbart, isn't she Viscount Hihime's daughter?! What is she doing here? Was she sent by her parents?!" Torre had accompanied us on our trip to order the accessory for the wedding ceremony; that was likely why he also remembered her.

"Who knows? I have received no letter informing me of this visit."

Miss Furla's expression had been sour ever since Lord Nazel hadn't helped her to her feet, and she kept looking around her with disdain. After I finished locking the pegasus up, I returned to Lord Nazel's side. Our mountbeasts, now calm, seemed concerned and started loitering near me protectively. Meanwhile, Miss Furla started mumbling a somewhat lengthy monologue to draw attention back to herself.

"Phew, I somehow made it safely. This is no doubt the Sutrena estate, but it isn't very welcoming. Why isn't there a major reception when I personally came all the way here?" As soon as she finished grumbling, she approached Lord Nazel with unsteady steps. The shift in her demeanor was practically instantaneous. "Aah, Lord Nazelbart! I was sooo scared! ☆ It was such a long way here from home, and that pegasus was being so disobedient... Urk..."

Miss Furla arbitrarily reached out her arms toward Lord Nazel, someone she wasn't particularly close to, and tried to lean on him. Both Torre and I were so surprised we could only stare with our eyes wide open. This was a complete breach of etiquette for a young noblewoman—no, for any woman. Not to mention her target was a married man, and his wife was standing right there. However, Lord Nazel easily avoided Miss Furla thanks to his outstanding reflexes, then regained his posture as if nothing had happened. Miss Furla's excess momentum sent her crashing into Geni, who was behind us, eliciting a threatening roar from him.

"Eeeeek! Wyverns are scaryyy!"

My handmaiden Kelly came out to the garden, perhaps worried about me since I'd gone outside earlier. Next to Kelly was Miss Furla's sister, Miss Sonia. When she unexpectedly saw her younger sister in Sutrena, she shouted in surprise.

"Furla?! Why are you here? And you have no handmaidens or

guards with you… Just what is going on?”

Miss Furla was shivering in fear of Geni under a nearby tree, but the confidence returned to her expression once she saw her sister.

“My, oh my, you really were staying at Lord Nazelbart’s estate, weren’t you, sister dearest? Mm-hmm…”

Miss Furla escaped from Geni and hurriedly moved closer to her sister. The wary Miss Sonia was completely lost, while Kelly calmly observed our surprise visitor. Miss Furla immediately started shouting at the two of them arrogantly.

“Why aren’t you coming home, sister dearest?! Our home is now in a perilous position because of your absence. This is aaall your fault! Let’s go home right this instant. You, handmaiden, make the arrangements for her return! Though I really wanted to stay here longer, you know…” She kept sending passionate gazes toward Lord Nazel. “Buuut…this isn’t the time for that. I’ll come back once I’ve escorted my sister dearest home! ☆”

Miss Sonia’s expression grew lifeless when she heard her sister.

“Count Lubhuta came, didn’t he?”

It seemed that Count Lubhuta had visited Viscount Hihime’s estate to take Miss Sonia with him, just as the two men had originally planned. He’d probably caused an uproar because he hadn’t found her there.

As if Miss Furla hadn’t complained enough, she continued ranting at her sister.

“Because you left home, I was about to become that *gross* old man’s concubine instead! Don’t you feel sorry for your little sister going through such a horrible experience?! You really are cold. You don’t treasure me despite being my older sister, huh? Everything will be resolved peacefully if you come home, so let’s go right now.”

Miss Furla grabbed Miss Sonia by the wrist and started dragging her away. However, the distressed Miss Sonia gathered her resolve and resisted, firmly refusing to budge from where she stood.

“N-No! I-I don’t want to go home!”

Miss Sonia had been following her family’s whims up until recently, but right now, she was clearly expressing her own desires to her sister. But the next moment, Miss Furla’s expression

completely changed into something atrocious.

"Oh, I see. But that's completely irrelevant."

She raised her right hand high and vigorously slapped Miss Sonia on the cheek. The sound rang out loudly around us, and everyone present looked at Miss Furla with complete astonishment.

That looked like it hurt!

Miss Sonia grimaced painfully and pressed a hand to her swollen, red cheek.

"Listen here, someone of your standing shouldn't act so impudent with me! Just stay quiet and obey our parents! Isn't that what you've done until now? That's your life! Don't go causing me unnecessary trouble with your capricious rebellion! Your only use is getting married to that disgusting count!" Miss Furla shouted at her sister.

Miss Sonia must have incessantly heard such abuse in her homelife. Miss Furla was the only member of her family here right now, and even without her parents around, she was still being unreasonably selfish.

I'm the one who decided to take Miss Sonia in. I need to take responsibility and protect her.

I strode across the soft greenery and quietly approached Miss Furla, never taking my eyes off the girl.

"Miss Furla, Miss Sonia is a precious guest of mine. I would appreciate it if you weren't so aggressive with her."

I stepped in front of Miss Sonia to shield her, and faced Miss Furla. Her behavior was unacceptable in more ways than one.

After running away from home, you let your pegasus go wild at our estate, and you trespassed in our garden. Moreover, you started complaining to the estate's residents when they came to see you, and not only did you harm a guest of ours, you also tried to abduct her. You'd be immediately arrested and thrown in jail were you anywhere but Sutrena.

Surprised, Miss Furla responded by flailing her arms dramatically.

"Whaaat?! Why are you being so strict, Lady Agnes? I can't believe you would be so mean to me! Right, Lord Nazelbart?"

I was further stunned when I saw Miss Furla play the victim to Lord Nazel.

Both the way she acted toward Miss Sonia and what she's saying now... Her every action is utterly illogical.

Her parents must have continuously spoiled her throughout her life. As she looked straight at Lord Nazel, her face overflowed with the confidence that she was in the right. Although she both looked and actually was old enough to be engaged, she was awfully immature on the inside.

I'm sure no one at home has ever admonished Miss Furla for her conduct. That's why she has merely the appearance of an adult despite constantly acting without regard for what other people think of her behavior. Or is she only pretending to be that kind of person while living entirely reliant on the people around her?

Lord Nazel watched Miss Furla as if he were observing some unknown life-form. There wasn't a speck of kindness in his eyes.

I think that's the same way he once looked at Master Robin. It's like he's seen vermin suddenly pop up in his garden.

Lord Nazel usually hid his feelings behind a smile, but despite his placid appearance, he was actually quite picky about what he liked and disliked. I'd come to learn this unexpected side of his in our time together. And Miss Furla...didn't seem to be among the people he liked. His usual peaceful smile faded, replaced by an expressionless face like a doll's.

"'Mean'? Did you just call my adorable wife 'mean'? My gentle Agnes, whose kindness runs deeper than the Peppel Trench?"

When Lord Nazel began criticizing Miss Furla on a completely unexpected aspect of her behavior, she tilted her head in confusion and blinked repeatedly, showing that she had no idea what he was going on about. She then erupted in more excuses for herself.

"But Lady Agnes said some awfully strict things to me! ☆ Don't you think it's horrible of her to go hysterical over something so minor? Besides, if you look closely, I'm much younger and cuter."

"Huh?"

Why did Miss Furla suddenly call herself cute? Not to mention we were only one year apart. Now even Kelly and Torre wore the same blank expression as Lord Nazel.

Her words are simply incomprehensible. The only part I can understand is that she wants to seduce Lord Nazel...or at least earn his favor.

Miss Sonia, the person most used to Miss Furla's antics, was the one to break the strange silence.

"Please stop being disrespectful to our hosts, *Furla*. The people of Sutrena are taking good care of me. Everyone here is really nice."

"But—"

"I have no intention of returning to Hihime, no matter what you say. My time at this estate, no matter how short, has made me realize how appalling our family home is. I don't care even if I'm disowned by the House of Hihime. I have decided to work and live with my own strength. Fortunately, it seems that Sutrena has plenty of job opportunities."

Miss Sonia was even prepared to live as a commoner; that was how far she'd gone in turning her back on her family home. That resolve was exactly why she'd accepted my proposal and come to Sutrena alone.

"Wh-What are you talking about, sister dearest?! Do you actually intend to make a living through manual labor like some commoner?!"

"Yes, I do. The work is thankfully easier than what I had to do at home, and I'm being paid so I can buy my own things. It still feels odd that my life here is so much better than before."

Ironically enough, it seemed that her life at the Hihime estate was helping her now.

"Miss Sonia is an excellent worker. She perfectly finished all of the tasks I assigned her earlier," Kelly added, wanting to lend her support.

Miss Sonia had apparently displayed enough skill in this short time to have Kelly deem her excellent. Kelly was *extremely* strict when it came to work, so if she was praising Miss Sonia this much, the latter should have no trouble finding work even if she left our estate. But this information wasn't the least bit welcome to Miss Furla.

"N-None of that matters! So what if you have a job now? If you want to work, I'll give you more chores at home than ever before, and I'll ask Count Lubhuta to do the same! And above all, I'll be the one in trouble if you don't come home! What are you even thinking?! At this rate, I'll become Count Lubhuta's concubine! Don't you think that's insane?!"

That was what Miss Furla had wanted to say all along. Everything she did was for herself and herself alone. She took it for granted that everyone would do things for her. She only cared about having an easy, enjoyable life. She had neither sympathy for others nor the intention to spend even a second thinking about them in the first place—because that was how she'd been brought up.

The reason she's never faced a single setback and lived an ideal life up to now must be because she grew up in the Hihime estate. My head hurts just thinking about it.

I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing for Miss Furla. However, if she'd grown up in a proper home, she would at the very least not have ended up this selfish. Even if she'd been a selfish person by nature, her parents or others around her should have taken the initiative to advise her against it. From that perspective, Miss Furla could be said to be yet another victim of the House of Hihime.

If we forced Miss Furla to go home now, it would be like we were accomplices in selling her off to Count Lubhuta; that would leave a bad taste in my mouth. It's clear that if she goes back now, she'll most likely fall right into his hands.

I was a little reluctant, but I began to consider that perhaps we should also look after her here in Sutrena. It would probably be a lot of trouble, though, and I honestly didn't want to do it…

If I remember correctly, Queen Latriche has started an initiative to reform noble households. Perhaps I should consult with her.

While I was lost in thought, Miss Sonia suddenly bowed deeply from the waist, then knelt down, raised both her arms high, and leaned forward until her forehead was pressed against the ground. Her abrupt behavior left me dumbfounded.

"M-Miss Sonia?! What's the matter?!"

"Lady Agnes, I sincerely apologize for all of my sister's discourteous words! But, well… Could you please let the two of us stay here? I'm aware that my request is selfish, but we have nowhere else to go. I'll be your servant or do anything else you ask of me, so please!"

While Miss Sonia pleaded with me desperately, Miss Furla shouted abuse at her with a venomous expression; the two of them couldn't be bigger opposites.

“Huh?! What are you talking about? Everything will be resolved if *you* just go home. Aren’t you embarrassed to bother the people of Sutrena like this?! You aren’t making any sense!”

Miss Furla was so self-centered, she interpreted everything in a way convenient to her; this made it hard to follow her train of thought. She didn’t pay attention to the people around her—nor did she ever intend to.

Miss Furla left home just like her sister, so how can she only criticize Miss Sonia for what she’s done? Just as she doesn’t want to marry Count Lubhuta, I’m sure Miss Sonia doesn’t want to either.

Lord Nazel, Kelly, and even Torre were looking at Miss Furla with cold eyes. I lifted the prostrate Miss Sonia’s face off the ground, then wiped the mud off her.

“You didn’t need to go this far…”

It seemed that Miss Sonia had a tendency to worry too much.

I need to be really considerate of her.

Lord Nazel eventually turned to begrudgingly speak to Miss Furla; it seemed that he really, *really* didn’t want to talk to her.

“Miss Furla, I honestly want to send you back home right this instant, but I’ve decided to respect Miss Sonia’s wishes. You should be grateful to your kind sister.”

Miss Furla’s expression turned into one of sheer confusion when faced with Lord Nazel’s cold, blunt words. Her eyes twitched, showing that she didn’t get it, and didn’t care. She really had absolutely no intention of understanding anything.

“Wh-Whyyy?!”

Miss Furla was still acting spoiled and trying to cling to Lord Nazel, but he indifferently evaded her. He looked down at her with an even colder expression before speaking again.

“As long as you can’t comprehend that—or show even the slightest effort to understand—anything I tell you would fall on deaf ears. I don’t feel like having pointless conversations with you.” Lord Nazel walked over and suddenly hugged me, then turned to Kelly and Torre. “I leave the rest to you, Kelly. Give Miss Furla her own room and…some kind of job.”

“Understood, Lord Nazelbart.”

“Lend Kelly a hand, Torre. It would be difficult for her alone.”

“As you command, Lord Nazelbart!”

Kelly quickly began leading Miss Furla inside, with Torre to

restrain her when she started struggling, and Miss Sonia followed after them. The restless mountbeasts seemed to have grasped the situation, as they each returned to their usual activities. Geni returned to the shed and lay down to take a nap, Dunk started munching on the grass again, and Torre's pegasus watched over her from a short distance away, seeming interested in her voracious appetite. The pegasus that Miss Furla had ridden here had regained its composure from inside the cage.

Watching the mountbeasts is so soothing.

As I watched over the animals with satisfaction, Lord Nazel excitedly carried me to our room. He went around the garden to enter the manor through a different entrance than the one Miss Sonia and the rest had taken, and we happened to bump into Father Emilio at the door; he had the day off from work.

Looks like he's headed for the garden.

He was surprisingly fond of mountbeasts, so he occasionally went to pet Geni, Dunk, or Torre's pegasus. Today, he'd apparently come to give Dunk a snack, as he was holding several clean carrots. Carrots were typically the favorite food of horselike mountbeasts, just like I'd demonstrated with Miss Furla's pegasus earlier. It seemed that Dunk had immediately smelled food, because I could see her running over from the garden.

S-So fast! That's just like Dunk, the queen of appetite!

Dunk's sharp eyes spotted the carrots, and she neighed merrily before drawing closer to Emilio.

What a calculating girl. But that's another cute side of hers.

Father Emilio went to the fortress for work every day, but he was given time off a few times per week, simply because the overuse of mana was perilous for the body.

"I can't believe I even get breaks!" he'd said, deeply moved.

Holidays should have been mandatory for appraisers. Surprised by his statement, I had decided to ask for more details.

"Just how overworked were you?!"

"The noble priests only attended to other nobles, so we commoner priests were the ones who appraised all of the many commoners," he'd replied, shocking me even further.

The royal capital's population was significantly larger than Sutrena's. Despite that, the majority of priests stationed there were nobles. This was partly because of the high number of

nobles in the royal court, and partly because the priests with highly accurate middle- or high-ranking appraisal magic had tended to come from noble families.

But if the nobles—the majority of the priests—did no work, most of the workload would fall upon the commoner priests. This was especially true for Emilio, someone with high-ranking magic, who had apparently been in demand across the entire capital. As expected, the commoner priests had to work even on their days off to handle the crowds of people waiting for appraisals. And when some of them inevitably fell ill, the burden on their commoner coworkers became even heavier—a vicious cycle.

Emilio's story had truly come as a shock to me. I had let Queen Latriche know as much in my letter. I was certain that King Bertrand would come up with a countermeasure soon.

Emilio was grimacing at his hands, now sticky with Dunk's drool, when he formally greeted us.

"Greetings, milord, milady. I'd like to thank you for entrusting me with performing your wedding ceremony."

Emilio had looked somewhat worn out when he'd first arrived, but now he was full of life. I was glad to see that his stamina had recovered. Meanwhile, Dunk merrily returned to the garden after eating the carrots, as if her work here were finished.

"Greetings to you as well, Emilio. This is perfect timing."

"Hmm? Can I help you with something, milord?"

Lord Nazel smiled at Emilio while still holding me in front of his chest.

"You came from the capital's church, right? There's something I'd like to know about the high priest, so I thought I'd ask you for the details. Could I have a little of your time?"

"Of course. I was only a minor grunt, so I've never talked to High Priest Lubhuta directly, but I can tell you a few things I happened to overhear as well as what the priests discussed among ourselves. I'm actually not supposed to talk about the church's inner workings so freely, but between you and the high priest, I would always side with you, milord!"

I was grateful to hear Emilio say that, but I got the feeling that he had a bit of a loose tongue.

"I'm sincerely glad I'm here. If I had stayed in the capital, I wouldn't have been able to do any of the things I wanted, and I

would have just continued to be exploited until I collapsed. Lately, I've been researching magic during my free time and taking walks around town and talking to people. Every day is truly fulfilling. So if I can be of help, I'll do anything you ask!"

"I see. I'm happy to hear that. Then let's go talk inside."

Lord Nazel proceeded to our usual living room. He gently lowered me onto a soft two-seater sofa before sitting down next to me. He didn't waste any time broaching the subject of the count.

"I'm actually investigating Count Lubhuta's women issues for a certain reason. I'm especially interested in his concubines' circumstances."

"Oh, that's what this is about. The subject of the high priest's concubines is pretty famous," Emilio replied, beginning to understand what Lord Nazel wanted to know. This was apparently a topic everyone in the capital was familiar with. "My information comes from when I was still in the capital, so things might be different now. High Priest Lubhuta had eight concubines at the time, all of them the unmarried daughters of lower-ranking nobles. There had been twelve of them a short while before that, but two of them escaped, and another two became mentally ill and were admitted for medical treatment. But strangely enough, their numbers are always replenished quickly. According to a well-informed coworker, he buys up noble ladies by either blackmailing their parents or lending them money. The high priest dislikes commoners and married women, so I suppose he prefers his concubines to be unmarried noblewomen."

It seemed that Miss Sonia's purpose would be to make up for the losses.

"Some escaped and others needed medical attention?" I asked.

When Emilio's story left me frozen in shock, Lord Nazel nimbly picked me up and put me down on his lap. I got the feeling that our routine physical intimacy had gotten somewhat intense lately. I stared at him, but Lord Nazel looked at me innocently as he touched my curly hair and caressed my head. Emilio didn't seem to mind our exchange either, as he continued where he'd left off.

"When I was cleaning the church, I sometimes happened to overhear the high priest himself talking, and...he apparently has a twisted fetish for whipping young women. However, it seems that his concubines are deep in his quarters, so a commoner like me

has never even seen their faces."

"So they're kept on a very short leash," Lord Nazel remarked.

"Exactly. Only the high priest and his closest followers can go that far inside the church."

"Nobles, myself included, typically stay out of each other's activities, but this is honestly too much. Keeping multiple noble ladies as his concubines and abusing them to the point that some need treatment could be grounds for censuring Count Lubhuta."

Likely, it would have been more difficult to raise the issue if the victims had been commoners, even if the rest of their circumstances had been exactly the same. We lived in a harsh world, but because Count Lubhuta's concubines were nobles, we could take the first step toward resolving this incident.

"Even though he's taken such outrageous actions," Lord Nazel continued, "low-ranking nobles can do nothing against him because he has the backing of the House of Addamsgomes. They have to accept their fates even when he steals their daughters. Hmm, come to think of it, wasn't King Bertrand looking for a way to completely eliminate all remnants of the former queen's faction?"

I tightened my fists and turned to Lord Nazel.

"Queen Latriche was saying the same thing. Let's work together with His Majesty!"

"I agree. If we join hands with him, he'll take care of the annoying aftermath."

That last bit was probably his true priority. Lord Nazel had become rather aggressive recently. Perhaps the incident with Master Robin was still on his mind.

"Oh, that reminds me, Emilio. We've yet to tell you that two young noblewomen who are running away from Count Lubhuta are going to be staying here. Go lend them an ear if you feel inclined. Also, you can refer to Agnes and me by name. I hope this will be the start of a long and fruitful relationship, and look forward to working with you."

Lord Nazel once again picked me up when he was done talking and left the living room. Emilio stayed behind, looking utterly stunned. I felt that his strict life in the capital had to be the reason he was being excessively courteous toward Lord Nazel and me. He must have naturally developed the habit of being vigilant around

nobles.

That politeness may be appropriate in the capital, but Sutrena's nothing like that, so I hope he can let his guard down a bit more. I need to be a trustworthy noble to make that happen.

It wasn't something that could happen in a day, but it would be nice if Emilio gradually became less reserved.

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As the gentle, orange light illuminated the earth, the evening found the Hihime estate in complete chaos—in stark contrast to the scenery outside—because both of the viscount's daughters had run away from home. Giorgio Hihime, the current head of the House of Hihime, was throwing open door after door in the manor.

"Furla... Furla's gone!" he shouted.

His wife, Lydia, was also shrieking inside her daughter's room with both hands on her cheeks.

"Nooo! The window... Her room's window is wide open! And one of our mountbeasts is missing! What should we do? Furla's never been on an outing alone! If something happened to my adorable girl, I-I...!"

"Who cares about that? We have bigger problems! Count Lubhuta will be here tomorrow! It's over—it's all oveeer! If we earn the count's ire, this house will be done for!"

Even if they wanted to look for a substitute, there was no time left. Plus, Lubhuta had already seen Furla's face, so unless they found some girl who really looked like her, it would be difficult to pass her off as their daughter. At his wit's end, Giorgio covered his face and looked up at the ceiling, as if he didn't want to accept this hopeless situation.

"Agh, if I'd known this would happen, I wouldn't have so readily accepted Count Lubhuta's proposal to sell him Sonia in exchange for a large sum and connections with the church!"

Giorgio had sent several messengers to Sutrena, but none of them had returned. Some of them had even gone missing along with their entire families. What could have been responsible for this?

"Dammit, I don't know what to do! I made Sonia take care of all of these troublesome tasks!"

As a matter of fact, Giorgio was unable to fulfill his duties as the viscount. All of his work had been taken care of by his late father, then had fallen to his daughter Sonia. There had been times he'd felt annoyed at her for being more capable than he. But now that she was no longer there, the paperwork kept piling up and no progress was being made.

Lydia spoke up again in agreement with Giorgio.

"Management of both the estate's finances and servants is in shambles because Sonia isn't here! There's a mountain of dirty laundry piling up, clothes need mending, and the manor's becoming a pigsty from end to end! Damn it all!"

None of that was actually Sonia's job in the first place, but every responsibility in the viscount's estate had been foisted on her. Even the servants left the majority of their work to her and didn't do anything properly. They all firmly believed that even if they slacked off a little, someone else would take care of things. None of them had realized that this "someone else" had been Sonia alone. They were only now discovering that they had been placing that much of a burden on a single woman. Sonia had been busy with all the work her family gave her, so taking on others' responsibilities had become normal for her, and it had seemed easier than confronting the servants and trying to make them change their attitudes. Thus, rather than reprimand the servants' sluggardly behavior, she'd ignored the problem and tried to do everything herself. It was only now that she was gone that the issue had actually come to light.

The viscounty itself was doing fine; its administration and finances were stable. The viscount's household, on the other hand, was currently on the verge of collapse for two reasons: None of them had valued Sonia, and the viscount had agreed to the high priest's implausibly convenient proposition without giving it much thought. And yet, both the viscount and the viscountess simply continued blaming their missing daughter and didn't show the slightest intention of getting off their backsides and trying to do something to improve the situation. Unfortunately, not a single sensible individual was currently left at the Hihime estate.

Chapter 4: Madam Bumpkin Conducts Diplomacy

A few days had passed since Miss Furla's sudden arrival. Our estate was peaceful yet again today.

Preparations for our wedding ceremony are proceeding well, and the House of Hihime hasn't taken action so far.

Miss Sonia was slowly getting acclimated to life at the estate. It seemed that allowing her to do some work had really helped her feel more comfortable. I happened to see her right after she was done ordering some supplies, so I decided to call out to her and invite her for some tea.

"Miss Sonia, would you come and talk with me for a minute? The breeze feels nice today, so how about we have tea on the terrace?"

Now that the rainy season was over, the garden terrace was warm, the sunlight was gentle, and the weather felt refreshing. Miss Sonia looked conflicted for a moment, but the other maids urged her to go, so she timidly nodded.

"Thank you for the invitation, Lady Agnes. I would love to accompany you."

We went out to the garden together and headed to the terrace. This was the ideal spot to have some tea. The clear stream flowing across the garden, the colorful flower beds, and the field brimming with life were all clearly visible from here. Our mountbeasts also occasionally loitered around us, so it was very relaxing. The setting evening sun highlighted the buds of the flowers that bloomed during the dry season. The rainy season was certainly nice in its own way, but since Sutrena never had any trouble with its water supply, the dry season was also quite comfortable.

Noble daughters from all across Desnim—who had either been expelled by their families or run away from home—had gathered at our estate, and I had taken them under my protection. Therefore, I made sure to periodically check how each one was doing. The other maids had surmised today was Miss Sonia's turn

and had readily sent her off.

I laid out the tea set myself and poured some warm violaberry tea into Miss Sonia's cup.

"Do you find anything in your life at the estate uncomfortable, Miss Sonia? If there's anything troubling you, I'll take care of it, all right?"

"Thank you, I'm doing just fine," Miss Sonia replied with a wide smile before lowering her eyebrows with worry. "Nothing here is uncomfortable at all. Everyone is so kind to me I could never thank them enough. But..."

"But?"

"My sister Furla is causing trouble for everyone, and it pains me greatly."

"Ah..." I knew what she was referring to, so I could only mutter a weird sound in response. I wanted to tell her something like "Don't worry, she's not that much of a burden," but Miss Furla's behavior was a bit too extreme for me to say that.

"I deeply apologize, Lady Agnes. You're treating us both so well, yet she only inconveniences everyone around her."

"That's not something you need to apologize for, Miss Sonia. I'm keeping a close eye on her."

After we'd rescued Miss Sonia from her family home, Miss Furla had shown up—uninvited—at our estate, and we'd ended up taking her in too. However, she was quite the troublemaker, bickering with someone every day and constantly causing problems. It gave me a headache. She neglected the work Kelly assigned her, brazenly picked fights with the other maids, and followed Lord Nazel around like a puppy. Just this morning, she'd even tried to assault Miss Sonia, only to be apprehended by Torre, who'd fortunately happened to be present at the time.

"I'm really, truly sorry, Lady Agnes. You only went to Hihime to prepare for your upcoming wedding ceremony, but you ended up getting dragged into our family problems."

"Please don't worry about it. I'm the one who poked her nose into your affairs. At any rate, perhaps it would be best for Miss Furla to return to Hihime once the matter with Count Lubhuta is settled. She'd probably have an easier time in your family home as long as the threat of becoming his concubine is gone."

Miss Sonia looked apologetic as she made herself small, her

pretty eyebrows lowered all the while.

“How could I possibly thank you for everything you’ve done, Lady Agnes?”

“No need. I’m doing this because I want to.”

As I was just thinking of offering to refill Miss Sonia’s tea, Emilio appeared next to the terrace. He was apparently giving Dunk carrots again. It seemed that he’d been awfully busy recently, always cooped up in the fortress conducting his appraisal work. Even today, he’d been appraising a crowd of people at the fortress since early morning. However, overworking our priest was forbidden in Sutrena. Since the overuse of mana adversely affected the body, he’d left work before he collapsed.

Emilio noticed me on the terrace and walked over with an affable smile. I felt that he’d finally started being a little more relaxed around me recently.

“So you were out in the garden, Lady Agnes. I was just thinking I wanted to talk to you. Lord Nazel appointed me as the priest overseeing your wedding ceremony. I was wondering about the arrangements for— Whoops, my apologies.” Emilio paused once he noticed Miss Sonia next to me.

“Oh, is this your first time meeting, you two? Emilio, this is Sonia Hihime, Viscount Hihime’s daughter. Miss Sonia, this is Emilio, Sutrena’s new priest who came from the capital. He’s currently staying at our estate.”

Emilio always left the manor early in the morning, and when he came back, Miss Sonia would be out shopping or helping Kelly with paperwork in her room. Also, as soon as Emilio came back, he would hole up in his room to research magic. It seemed that the two of them hadn’t met up till now on account of their different schedules.

Emilio seemed to have grasped the situation and looked at Miss Sonia closely, repeatedly opening and closing his mouth.

“So she’s the aforementioned...high priest’s concubine.”

“E-Emilio?!”

I’d forgotten that Emilio was the type to carelessly blurt out something like this. However, Miss Sonia didn’t seem particularly bothered by his comment. In fact, she even read the room and started talking to Emilio herself. She was such a gentle soul.

“You know about Count Lubhuta since you came from the

capital, didn't you, Father Emilio?"

"Yes, I did. The high priest's vices are well-known over there, though a humble priest like myself couldn't do anything… I'm truly glad you managed to escape."

Emilio's honest words seemed to have resonated with Miss Sonia, and she started opening up to him. It looked like the two of them had good chemistry.

"This is a rare opportunity, so how about you join us for tea, Emilio?"

"May I?!" Emilio asked, his face sparkling.

"By all means, I would be happy for you to join us." Miss Sonia nodded with a smile. "I don't have many acquaintances here yet. I haven't had a close conversation with anyone besides Lady Agnes, Miss Kelly, and the other maids."

"Hooray! By the way, I see you can make tea yourself even though you're a noblewoman, Lady Agnes."

Noble ladies didn't normally make tea. In my case, I'd learned how to do it because I wanted to make tea daily for the busy Lord Nazel.

"Kelly taught me how to make delicious black tea. Miss Sonia also makes a wonderful pot of tea."

"Oh, really? Noblewomen who can brew good tea are incredible! I used to think that all noble ladies were arrogant and difficult to approach."

The two of us were a bit out of the ordinary, partly because Sutrena was a special case. Miss Sonia had even been made to serve as a waitress back home. Still, I didn't want to shatter Emilio's illusion of good-natured noblewomen, so I remained silent.

When I glanced toward Miss Sonia, I noticed that she blushed with happiness when she heard Emilio.

Oh? Oh my? Could it be…?

Emilio and Miss Sonia made quite the lovely couple, did they not?

If Miss Sonia gets married, the matter of her becoming Count Lubhuta's concubine will be resolved, won't it? According to Emilio, it seems the count has no interest in married women. And if Miss Furla also got married, perhaps…

Finding a partner for Miss Furla would probably be difficult, but

she was beautiful, so there was a chance that a man who was into women like her would appear.

I reached out to my teacup as I observed their conversation.

"Oh, so you have a sister, Miss Sonia? I'm an only child, and I'm regrettably somewhat distant from my parents, since I was taken in by the church after it was discovered that I possess appraisal magic. Once things settle down, I'd like to invite them here."

"I'm so envious that you're on good terms with your family. As you already know, things aren't going well between me and mine."

"And I don't think you need to change that. Your family tried to sell you to High Priest Lubhuta. It's impossible to get along with people like them."

"That makes my heart feel a little lighter. When I lived at home, I used to think that environment was normal, and I kept blaming myself."

"Oh, I was exactly like that too. When I was still in the capital's church, I spent every day in despair."

It seemed like the two of them had found a kindred spirit in each other.

The conversation topic is pretty gloomy though.

I was happy to see Emilio and Miss Sonia getting along. Both of them had only come to Sutrena recently, so it was great that they could make more close acquaintances. As I was watching them, some maids ran up to the terrace with grim expressions.

"Lady Agnes! Miss Furla caused another incident. Also, messengers sent by Viscount Hihime arrived without prior notice, and Miss Kelly is currently dealing with the situation."

Oh dear... I quickly stood up.

"Thank you for letting me know. I'll head there posthaste! There's nothing to worry about, Miss Sonia. Please look after Miss Sonia for a moment, Emilio."

I followed after the maids as they ran across the wide garden.

As the margravine of Sutrena, I need to properly deal with any discord.

When we arrived at our destination, I saw the messengers making a racket at the entrance, and Miss Furla, who'd joined them for some reason.

Miss Furla's supposed to be working right now. She's slipped out again, hasn't she?

Kelly was keeping the messengers back, and next to her was Connie, who apparently had happened to be visiting our estate for work.

Hmm, this is complicated.

Connie often came and went between the fortress and our estate to run errands for Mister Henry. Since he loved mountbeasts, he also came to check up on Dunk, but his visit today seemed to be for the former reason.

“This way, messengers! Please take my sister dearest back to the Hihime estate right away!”

For some unknown reason, Miss Furla pushed aside Kelly—the one who was representing the estate—and started trying to take charge herself. However, the messengers didn’t just do as they were told.

“Miss Furla! We were ordered to also bring you back home! Please, come this way!”

“No, I’m not leaving! You can just take my sister with you, right? I’ll go home once the House of Hihime’s safety is completely assured!”

“No, I’m afraid we can’t do that!”

Miss Furla was once again saying selfish things, but the messengers were desperately trying to execute Viscount Hihime’s firm orders. I felt sorry for them, since they were just doing their jobs. They had no choice but to follow their master’s commands even if they didn’t want to.

Kelly stood to the side as Miss Furla and the messengers argued, and she confronted them with a dignified attitude.

“Please withdraw for today. Both Miss Sonia and Miss Furla wish to remain here. To begin with, you’re putting us on the spot by suddenly showing up here without prior notice. Do you believe Sutrena to be beneath you?”

“B-But there have been no replies to the viscount’s letters, so…”

Connie also boldly faced off against the messengers, as if to protect Kelly.

“I don’t know who you are or where you came from, but stop causing trouble for Miss Kelly!”

Despite this opposition, the messengers were deadly serious about not backing down. I was faced with a scene of impending carnage that made me want to groan, but as the lady of this

estate, I had to face it head-on and settle this. The time to test my ability as the margravine had come.

This calls for...the tactic of gentle persuasion that Lord Nazel taught me! Let's approach this amicably!

Even meddlesome opponents could be reassuring once turned into allies. This strategy was especially effective against people who had to act on orders.

I hope this goes well.

I quickly marched up to Kelly and Connie and confronted the overly serious messengers.

"That's enough. I, Margravine of Sutrena, will listen to what you have to say. I'd rather we didn't talk while standing, so I ask that you accompany me inside the manor. Kelly, please take care of Miss Furla."

In stark contrast to the messengers—who came along quietly—Miss Furla flailed her limbs, struggling and screaming for Kelly to let her go. She was acting just like a little kid who didn't understand anything.

"You're horrible, Lady Agnes! If you keep being so *mean*, Lord Nazelbart will throw you away!"

I pitied her for her ignorance, but I was getting a little fed up with her.

"Please go ahead without worrying about me, Lady Agnes."

"I'm sorry, Kelly. I'll be sure to make it up to you."

Kelly took Miss Furla, who was *still* screaming, by the hand and forcefully dragged her away. While it didn't show on Kelly's face, I could tell that she was fairly angry.

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Kelly dragged away Furla, who grew doubly frustrated at being prevented from fully expressing her anger.

Mrgh, I am so *not okay with this! This woman is quite impudent for a commoner!*

Although Furla looked quite adorable at first glance, Kelly had seen through her facade and wouldn't be deceived.

The handmaidens and maids back at the Hihime estate were all so easy to fool. What's going on here?

Moreover, all the maids in the Sutrena estate respected Kelly.

No matter how Furla tried to incite them, her machinations failed. She had heard that many of the maids here were of noble origin, and yet those absolute fools worked underneath a *commoner*. In fact, they even defended Kelly's actions and lectured Furla. It was truly incomprehensible.

No one stands up for me even when I act all cute and defenseless!

As a result, Furla could only shout and rebel on her own.

"Hey, let me go, you commoner! Both you and the margravine are really undisciplined."

Despite usually being expressionless, Kelly openly frowned.

"I don't mind you speaking ill of me, but I cannot accept you insulting Lady Agnes. You—"

Before Kelly could finish her sentence, a young man joined in.

"Stop being so cheeky to Lady Agnes and Miss Kelly! I've heard about your circumstances, but who do you think you have to thank for being allowed to stay here?!"

"Wh-Who are you?" Furla muttered.

She remembered that he was a messenger from the fortress who occasionally stopped by the estate. Few men visited the estate, making it easy to remember him. If she recalled correctly, he'd said that his name was Connie.

He's quite masculine, although nowhere close to Lord Nazelbart. Well, courtship with a commoner is out of the question, but he might yet be useful, so I'll entertain him with a response.

Furla put her bold scheme into action by hiding her villainous expression and trying to appeal to Connie in a coquettish voice. If she could win him over, her life might become easier. She was honestly fed up with working as a maid.

"But both Lady Agnes and this commoner head handmaiden are sooo mean to meee!!!"

During her time in the Hihime estate, she'd learned all about how her looks made her desirable to men and how the opposite sex was so soft on her. All she had to do was exploit their need to protect her.

I'm sure Connie will also become my ally. I'm cute and quite popular with men, she thought, practically on instinct.

She continued earnestly complaining to Connie about just how pitiable her position was.

"I suppose the servant takes after her mistress. The two of

them bully me every day! It's so horrible! I'm sure Lord Nazelbart can't relax when he has these two around the manor. That's why I need to go soothe him! ☆"

However, far from taking Furla's side, Connie looked at her with a cold expression of utmost contempt. She'd completely miscalculated. After heaving a *looong* sigh, he eventually spoke to Kelly.

"Uh, haven't you explained the situation to this woman, Miss Kelly? I feel like there's a huge misunderstanding here."

"I've talked to her over and over, but it seems she has no intention of listening to me. I'm currently looking for some other way to get through to her."

"She must be a lot of trouble, to make *you* say that."

Connie scratched his head as he stared intensely at Furla, who tilted her head in confusion and blinked her eyes repeatedly. She tried to convince herself that his stiff expression was surely only a product of her imagination.

"You don't seem to understand a thing—I had best explain. You have the wrong idea here. Lady Agnes and Miss Kelly are the ones *helping* you."

"That can't be true. They only say mean things to me day in and day out! Always telling me not to do this, or to go and do that! There are no rude people reprimanding me at the Hihime estate."

Furla protested yet again, but Connie still showed her no sympathy and breathed yet another sigh. The next words out of his mouth came as a big shock to Furla.

"At first, Lord Nazelbart intended to only help Miss Sonia and kick you out of the estate. His plan was to send you back to Hihime and hand you over to your parents."

"Huh...?" The unexpected information drove Furla's thoughts to a grinding halt. "That... That's a lie. The kind Lord Nazelbart would never forsake me." Her body shook, so intense was her disbelief. Kelly didn't refute Connie's statement either.

"This is something I heard from Master Torre, the guard, but Lord Nazelbart was apparently furious about your attitude toward Lady Agnes. He's usually composed, but he can really lose it when it comes to his wife. He kept glaring at me when I was teaching her how to ride a mountbeast." Connie had a faraway look in his eyes for a moment, making his story sound even more credible.

“Is it really true that Lord Nazelbart wanted to kick me out? You aren’t just making this up, are you?”

“It’s true. And the ones who stopped him were Lady Agnes and Miss Kelly. I think you should be more grateful to them.”

Furla desperately tried to sort her thoughts and make sense of things, but the more she thought about it, the more confused she became.

“But— No, that’s— I—”

“Despite appearances, Lord Nazelbart is quite a strict man. Given his position, he’d probably prefer to avoid a direct confrontation with the high priest. This whole matter could be resolved much more easily by handing you over.”

Furla couldn’t believe it. It was unthinkable that the gentle and handsome Nazelbart had nearly abandoned her. She’d believed him the perfect new person to sponge off of.

“To begin with, are you seriously thinking about what you’ll do now that you’ve left your home? I heard at the fortress that they completed the necessary paperwork for Miss Sonia to become a resident of Sutrena. According to Lord Nazelbart, she came here mentally prepared to live as a commoner. That’s why she’s doing her best at her job.”

“Who cares about all that?! Everything will be resolved if Sonia just becomes a concubine! Then I will be able to live in the Hihime estate just as I have until now!”

The easiest solution to everything would be to hand over Sonia to Count Lubhuta. That would solve everyone’s problems. Why did no one simply do that? Furla was getting irritated that the people around her weren’t acting the way she wanted them to.

As if to answer the question in Furla’s mind, Connie started speaking again with a serious expression.

“And I’m telling you that ship’s already sailed. Now that Lord Nazelbart and Lady Agnes have made this decision, Miss Sonia won’t become a concubine. You have three options: Go home and become a concubine, stay put and wait quietly for everything to be resolved before going home, or leave this estate and make your own way in the world. Nonetheless, this incident will likely hurt the House of Hihime’s reputation, so you should accept that your life won’t be as cozy as before even if you go home.”

“How cruel! Now you’re being mean to me too!”

Connie had taken the truth Furla didn't want to acknowledge and thrust it right in her face. Her eyes teared up as if to rebuke the man standing before her; crying was one of her specialties, after all. Whenever she did this, anyone was bound to feel guilty and apologize. Then the one who had hurt Furla's heart would be criticized by everyone around them.

That's right! When I act like a poor little girl, everyone gets worried and comes running to comfort me. It's always been this way.

However, Furla's ultimate technique didn't work on Connie. Instead, his face contorted into a scowl.

"Blegh! I really can't stand women like you."

"Wh-Wha?"

Connie's words were so rude and outrageous that Furla could barely speak in response.

"No one's telling you the truth here, so let me do it: You'll be in deep trouble if you continue like this. You antagonize the estate's maids, pick fights with Lady Agnes, and disobey Miss Kelly. How do you plan on surviving if you're kicked out of here? Most people aren't telling you anything because they've already given up on you, and you're on the verge of losing your place here. You should mend your ways while Lady Agnes and Miss Kelly are still willing to put up with you. In Sutrena, we frown upon spoiled people who don't take responsibility for themselves and instead just *take*, only relying on others for handouts."

After Connie straightforwardly told Furla everything he wanted to, he handed Kelly an envelope, saying it was a message from Henry to Nazelbart, and quickly left.

"What's the deal with that man? He was unbelievably rude!"

But for some reason, his words tightly gripped the depths of Furla's heart.

Why? He's just some guy who kept telling me terrible things.

Furla was uncharacteristically agitated; she'd never been directly scolded so harshly before. Indeed, no one in her family home had ever scolded her for anything. It had only been natural for everything she did to be forgiven, and for everything she wanted to be handed to her. She had been the one cherished, and anything unpleasant had been pushed to her sister Sonia. Furla's life had been easier that way, so she'd intentionally continued to play the role expected of her. But could that kind of environment

truly have been called normal? While living in Sutrena, she had noticed many discrepancies between her family's way of life and the norms of the people here.

I'd been deliberately pretending not to notice.

If what Connie had said was true, Furla was currently in a terrible spot.

A short time later, Agnes and Viscount Hihime's messengers happily came out of the manor together, having finished their conversation. There wasn't a trace left of the earlier tense atmosphere.

Just what happened in there?

Unfortunately for her, the naive Furla couldn't begin to guess what had taken place.

"I look forward to working with all of you," Agnes said with a bright smile, earning bows from the messengers in response.

"No, no, we're the ones grateful to be hired with such generous remuneration. We wouldn't have made it out safely if we'd returned like this. Viscount Hihime may look mild-mannered at first glance, but he's actually quite quick-tempered. Especially toward people of lower standing than he... He's only a good person on the outside."

"He is, isn't he? But please rest assured that we will protect you as long as you stay here."

"Lady Agnes! What a magnificent person you are! No wonder there are so many statues of you around town!"

"No, er, the statues are a bit..."

"We'll follow you for the rest of our lives!"

As Furla listened to the conversation between Agnes and the messengers in mute amazement, Kelly explained the situation.

"These messengers were sent to take you and Miss Sonia back home, but they can't accomplish either objective at the moment. If they went back without showing any results, the viscount would punish them for failing their task. That's why Lady Agnes kindly offered to let them immigrate to Sutrena, along with providing employment. We're short on male staff, so I'm happy for us to recruit more male servants. This will probably cause tension with the House of Hihime, but it's a bit late to be worrying about that now."

"What? How could father's subordinates change sides so

easily?! Don't they have any pride as representatives of the House of Hihime?!" Furla was displeased with the messengers' attitude and criticized them. She knew that her words wouldn't change anything, but she still couldn't forgive them.

"Pride won't fill their stomachs, and with great power comes great responsibility. If the people around Viscount Hihime don't consider him someone worthy of his power or someone that they should follow, their relationship won't hold up. It seems that lately, the viscount hasn't been fulfilling his responsibilities as someone with power. He'd left most of his work up to Miss Sonia, so it would appear that the messengers' wages have been delayed. And yet, he gave them an arbitrary order, even threatening to punish them if they failed. I'm sure you can imagine what that would lead to."

"B-But still!" A strong feeling of frustration and unwillingness to accept these facts arose within Furla.

"Those who are in positions of responsibility... No, even those who aren't need to first think of the consequences and fully grasp what kind of effect their words will have before acting, otherwise they will only end up abusing the people around them. And eventually, they will be abandoned."

Furla didn't remember hearing anything like that before. To begin with, she'd always been convinced that everything around her existed for her sake alone, but now Connie and Kelly were chipping away at that conviction.

Oh dear, just what...should I do from now on?

If Sonia didn't return home, neither could Furla. If she went back now, she would undoubtedly be sold as a concubine to Count Lubhuta, but it was impossible for Furla to bring her sister back on her own. Even the messengers sent by her parents had given in to Agnes's diabolical persuasion. The only options left to Furla were to either leave Sutrena and find somewhere safe to live or stay at the estate and learn the work there. Those were the only feasible paths she could think of at the moment. It was just like that rude man called Connie had told her.

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Sonia, left behind at the terrace by Agnes, shivered as she placed her teacup on the table. She could barely breathe. Anxiety

would crush her any moment now.

The House of Hihime has contacted us again. Sonia's father had already sent several letters asking her to go back, but Agnes had dealt with them every time. He was in no position to oppose her.

"Now Furla is demanding my return as well, so I really might be taken home this time."

Emilio noticed that Sonia was trembling slightly and left his seat to draw closer to her.

"Don't worry, Miss Sonia. I'm sure everything will be all right. Lady Agnes is very reliable. And, well… I'll do whatever I can to help too."

"Father Emilio…"

"I'm not as reliable as Lady Agnes, but if the messengers charge all the way here, I'll risk my life to protect you!"

For the longest time, Sonia had thought that she needed to endure every trial all alone. But since coming to Sutrena, something had started changing for the better. Along with Lady Agnes and the other people who'd rescued her from the House of Hihime, now Emilio was also on her side, even though they'd only just met today.

"Why are you willing to go that far for my sake?" Sonia asked.

A friendly smile formed on Emilio's face and his eyes met Sonia's.

"Because I don't want you to become the high priest's plaything. You don't act self-important despite being a noble, you're beautiful, and you're kind even to a commoner like me. I'd like to get married to someone like you… Ah!"

Emilio suddenly blushed; he'd said too much. Strangely enough, Sonia's cheeks also grew hot.

"Th-That's not it, Miss Sonia! I didn't mean anything weird by it!"

"Y-Yes! I-I know!"

Because Emilio had panicked and started shouting, Sonia had also become flustered and replied in an equally loud voice.

Wh-What's wrong with me? My heart's beating like a drum, Sonia thought.

There was no doubt that today, and right now in particular, something about her was odd. This novel experience left Sonia staring at Emilio in confusion. She wondered if the fond feelings she had for this kind man were the same as the ones he had

toward her. She was curious but also embarrassed, so she couldn’t say anything in the end. Instead, she stood up to make him some more tea. However, he interrupted her before she could.

“Please let me make the tea this time, Miss Sonia. I did a lot of odd jobs at the church, so despite appearances, I know how to make tea.”

Emilio looked sweet as he smiled proudly, and Sonia nodded as she offered her hand to him.



“Then let’s go make it together. Since I help Miss Kelly with work, I know my way around the kitchen.”

“Wow, that will help a lot!”

The two of them left the terrace side by side and headed toward the kitchen’s entrance. The grim feelings inside Sonia had all but vanished before she knew it, and she was suddenly back to breathing normally again.

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Lubhuta returned to the capital’s church hopping mad.

“Dammit! Is this some kind of sick joke?!”

He’d been unable to fulfill his objective, and now his mind was swirling with murky feelings of dissatisfaction. To release this sort of anger, what he needed was a good session of whipping his concubines.

Shit! I went almost all the way to the frontier and it was all for nothing! And here I thought I could finally replenish my stock of females. Damn the House of Hihime!

He got down from his carriage, shouted at the priest who was there to greet him, tossed his jacket away, and stepped into the building. His close aides looked flustered as they gathered before him. They were all priests of noble origin, and Lubhuta’s trusted sycophants. However, they were acting strangely.

“It’s terrible, High Priest! There were intruders in the church!”

“They were so skilled we couldn’t capture them! We succeeded in chasing them away, but…”

Lubhuta couldn’t hide his irritation at how evasive his aide was being about the report.

“But what? Spit it out!”

“In the confusion of the moment, all of your concubines escaped. We’ve been pursuing them, but we’ve yet to find any leads. The search is still ongoing.”

“Ongoing? Are you morons kidding me?!”

Lubhuta ground his teeth in frustration, his face as crimson as a volcano seconds before erupting.

Damn it all!

His mind was filled with rage toward the two daughters of the House of Hihime who had escaped his grasp and the two nobles

from Sutrena who had meddled in the House of Hihime's affairs.

You won't get away with this, Nazelbart! You damn villain! You went against your house and betrayed us and got Queen Coco exiled! There will *be consequences!*

Lubhuta had held a grudge against Nazelbart for some time, not just because he'd helped Lubhuta's potential concubines get away, but also for his role in deposing the former queen.

Now that it's come to this, I'll crush the House of Hihime, and disgrace Nazelbart too.

Lubhuta swore revenge in his heart, flared his nostrils—which were big enough that he could have easily inhaled grapes—and rolled up the sleeves of his tight-fitting shirt.

"I'll find dirt on the margrave of Sutrena no matter what! That's right, I could use *that* person…"

The count was rotten to the core despite being high priest, and he was used to all manner of skullduggery. As usual for him, he breathed heavily as he boldly barked order after order at his subordinates.

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A letter from Queen Latriche in the capital arrived, addressed to me. I'd recently sent her a wedding invitation, but the two of us already frequently exchanged letters. My last letter to her included detailed information regarding our situation with the House of Hihime. Queen Latriche was a dear friend of mine, and she was currently working hard to try and reform the Desnim nobles' warped values. So in order to help her out even a little, I'd made sure to let her know every time there was some kind of incident involving nobles' daughters.

Most noble daughters in Desnim lived difficult lives. They were treated merely as pawns for political marriages and often suffered unjust treatment. Their own wishes were disregarded as they were forced to endure abusive educations, and sometimes they weren't allowed an education at all. I'd been one of them before. There were, of course, many cases beyond mine, and I endeavored to create a safe place in Sutrena for noble daughters with nowhere to go, in hopes of improving things even a little.

I periodically shared information about the women I'd taken in

with Queen Latriche, and this time I'd told her about Miss Sonia and Miss Furla, as well as Count Lubhuta. I'd ended up receiving an unexpected reply on the matter. My eyes widened as I stared at the contents of the letter.

"Wh-Whaaat?! Queen Latriche…broke into the church herself and rescued Count Lubhuta's concubines?! What the heck?!"

To my amazement, she'd apparently sneaked into the church along with the elite knights she'd brought from Polpystan, and released all of Count Lubhuta's concubines held captive there.

Queen Latriche sure is bold…

The concubines were currently secretly being given refuge in the palace, and the ones in especially bad shape were receiving proper medical care. The possibility of sending them home if they so wished was currently being considered. It seemed that King Bertrand was also aware of this incident. Incidentally, His Majesty would be attending our wedding ceremony personally. According to Queen Latriche, he was rather enthusiastic about the event and looked forward to it.

Eep… I only sent the invitation out of obligation, and the unthinkable happened.

At present, King Bertrand apparently sought to gather more evidence of the crimes of members of the former Queen Coco Desnim's faction. He would use that evidence to target her remaining loyalists and expand his own sphere of influence. As such, he was grateful to me for reporting the problem with Count Lubhuta. Many in the former queen's faction had treated her tenure as an opportunity to line their pockets by corrupt means. That was why they continued to oppose the new king and queen in any way they could.

I didn't send that letter for King Bertrand's sake, but I'm glad it led to the concubines being released. Things seem to be going well in the capital.

Though I had informed Queen Latriche of Count Lubhuta's case, I never expected she would take action personally. She was facing many challenges as the newly appointed queen, but I felt confident she would be just fine.

"Now then, break time is almost over. I need to go to the field."

I left my room and headed to our garden. Today, all available servants had been mobilized since early morning and were hard at

work harvesting vegetables.

It would be nice to serve our vegetables at the wedding reception. They're all so delicious.

It was currently harvest season, and a wide variety of crops had flourished in the estate's garden.

Harvesting is quite the tough job. Of course, the same is true for planting and taking care of crops.

Miss Sonia and Miss Furla were among the maids participating in farmwork, and Emilio was also there.

I was worried when I heard that Miss Furla would be working alongside the others, but it seems that she hasn't caused any problems so far. Miss Furla had become less confrontational, and she'd even started working a little. Unlike Miss Sonia, her fundamental skills were terrible, but she wasn't ignoring her assigned tasks anymore. Moreover, she now willingly did the work she'd only begrudgingly done in the past. She'd grown fond of tapioca milk tea, and she took part in the maids' cooking classes. *Did she have a change of heart?*

At any rate, I was relieved to know she was no longer causing trouble.

"All right, back to work."

The field was wrapped in an aroma of soil and greenery. Now that I'd returned, I picked up working where I'd left off and started digging up yams once more. I moved the brown, withered vines out of the way and dug out the yams themselves. Back when we'd planted these yams, we'd stacked wooden cylinders, then placed the yams inside the tubes. As a result, digging them up was really easy. Incidentally, the wood had come from a tree created by Lord Nazel, customized so its wood didn't deteriorate easily. As I held one of our long, rapidly grown, dirt-covered yams under the gentle sunlight, I smiled with a sense of fulfillment.

"Lady Agnes, I've finished harvesting that ridge too!"

The skilled Miss Sonia, who was working next to me, had come to report her progress. She'd become much more cheerful lately; this was a very welcome change.

Her change in environment is partly to thank, but there's another reason. I sneaked a few glances at the ridge next to us.

"I'm harvesting the next row, Miss Sonia!" Emilio called in a lively voice. Miss Sonia blushed slightly in joy when she looked at him.

I'm sure Emilio's presence has played a larger role than anything else in her progress.

From the looks of it, Miss Sonia and Emilio had feelings for each other, but they weren't a couple yet. It looked like they were concerned about the difference in their statuses and what the future had in store for them.

I must remember I'm only a third party here. That said, it's truly vexing not being able to do more.

For the time being, I quietly watched over them without saying anything. I actually couldn't wait for them to start going out, but an outsider's meddling would only needlessly complicate the situation—or so Kelly had taught me. And her advice was generally spot-on.

We continued harvesting until the afternoon, and stopped at the same time Lord Nazel returned home. I greeted him while covered in mud, as I'd still been in the middle of farmwork.

"Welcome home, Lord Nazel."

He beamed at me as I rushed toward him.

"I'm back, Agnes!"

If Lord Nazel had any work that could be done from home, he'd take care of it at the mansion, so there were days like today when he'd return in the afternoon.

"I have some good news for you. The repairs on Sutrena's church were finally finished today. It was completely in shambles, but the foundations were still solid, so work finished earlier than I expected. So while we were initially planning on holding our wedding ceremony at the fortress...it looks like we'll be able to hold it at the church instead."

"What a wonderful miscalculation!"

I'd been under the impression that the church wouldn't be rebuilt in time for the ceremony. Sutrena had finally gotten its own priest after all this time, so it seemed that the laborers had given it their all for his sake.

"We should be able to make a lot of changes to the interior design before the wedding. I need to discuss this with Emilio," Lord Nazel added.

"I can't wait." Thinking about the wedding made me feel a strange mix of embarrassed and awkward yet also satisfied.

I was still absorbed in my thoughts when Lord Nazel happily

took me into a tight embrace.

“Um, Lord Nazel? My clothes are dirty right now, so I don’t think you should touch me.”

I’d been diligently working in the field all day, so I was covered in dirt. I didn’t want to get mud on his clean and tidy work clothes, so I quickly backed away.

“Then let’s take a bath right away.”

“Huh?”

Lord Nazel smiled widely, like he’d just said the most natural thing, but didn’t this mean we’d end up in the bath…*together*?

No way, right…?

I was completely lost and flustered, scrambling to figure out what I should do. My head turned up empty no matter how much thought I gave the situation. Before I’d even noticed, Kelly had come up beside me and whispered to me that the bathroom was ready.

Kelly! Nooo! This is one of the times you don’t *need to be perfectly prepared!*

However, it seemed that my intentions hadn’t gotten through to her. She looked completely satisfied at a job well done. Kelly always took Lord Nazel’s side in cases like this one. Now that he had a reliable supporter, Lord Nazel gripped my hand tight to prevent my escape. The warm sensation left me bashful, and my heart thumped loudly like usual.

“Lord Nazel, you see, well…”

“Yes, let’s head to the bath quickly, okay?” Lord Nazel was as heartless as ever.

Eep!

And so, with no means of escape, I was pulled by the hand into the manor.

Several days later, Emilio moved his work from the fortress to the completely repaired church. The church was in the western part of Sutrena, which was a little far from the central part we lived in. The trip was very short by mountbeast, but other means of transportation, like a carriage, took time.

Sutrena’s sole church had been built on a beautiful beach where the sun shone brightly. Along with his change in workplace, Emilio’s residence would also move to be close to the church. Lord

Nazel had apparently purchased a conveniently available single house for Emilio to reside in. It was a warm, sturdy, and spacious wooden building. Emilio had trembled and muttered in surprise about getting his very own house, but since Sutrena had vast plots of land and a low population, most residences outside the central town were single houses.

The capital has many apartment buildings.

Miss Sonia looked restless and anxious as she witnessed Emilio's departure.

Should I teach her how to ride a mountbeast to distract her? That way, she'll be able to fly to Emilio's side at any time, right? I was still not very sure how much I should assist in other people's love affairs.

Chapter 5: Madam Bumpkin Lends a Yam

The waves quietly resounded across the western part of Sutrena. Emilio was outside alone, feeling the pleasant sea breeze on his skin and thinking about Sonia, who was still living at Nazelbart's estate. The two of them had gotten close after Agnes had introduced them, talking together about this and that ever since.

I wonder if she's doing okay… Wait, what am I even thinking about? We weren't a good match anyway. A mere commoner like him falling for a noblewoman like Sonia was utterly presumptuous. He understood that deep down. *When this whole incident is resolved, she might even return to the House of Hihime. I'm sure plenty of marriage proposals from worthy suitors will come her way then. I mustn't get in the way*.

The rebuilt church was beautiful despite being on the smaller side, and Emilio much preferred it to the lavishly decorated building in the capital. Besides, he was the only priest here, so things were more carefree compared to when he had so many noble priests looming over his shoulder.

People visit for appraisals often, so I'm pretty busy; there are also the preparations for milord and milady's wedding. My time here is truly fulfilling.

One day, when Emilio's mind was filled with thoughts like that, several messengers from the capital's church suddenly visited. The church had completely ignored him after dispatching him all the way to the frontier, so what business could it possibly have had with him now? Their presence made him feel sick, and he really wished they would just leave him alone.

Emilio greeted the messengers despite his irritation. One of them stiffly announced that they were here on the high priest's orders. Confused, Emilio asked for confirmation.

"The high priest sent you?"

The high priest was surrounded by only bad rumors, in the capital and the frontier alike. Not to mention Emilio had never even spoken to him back when he'd still worked in the capital. The

high priest despised any contact with commoners, so why would he send messengers to Emilio now? Why was he going to such lengths to get in touch with a commoner? The more Emilio thought about it, the worse his unease got.

Unaware of Emilio's nervousness, the leading messenger arrogantly informed him of their business there.

"High Priest Lubhuta is searching for the atrocious Lord Nazelbart's weakness. Tell us anything you know."

The preposterous statement left Emilio at a loss for words.

"Atrocious"? Really?

Nazelbart had been very grateful to Emilio for coming to the frontier and had accorded him every courtesy. He was nothing like the higher-ups in the capital's church, who'd oppressed Emilio because they disliked him for being a commoner and sent him all the way to the frontier.

"Um, Lord Nazelbart's weakness, you say? I can't say I know of any... Like the rumors say, he's practically a perfect ruler."

"I knew a commoner would be useless. The people of Sutrena's central town told us that the priest of this church had lived at the margrave's estate for some time, so we had some expectations, but alas."

Emilio was enraged at the messenger's attitude, but then remembered that this man was the son of a low-ranking noble.

I think I heard that he's the tenth son of a baron and that he came to the church like he'd been kicked out.

He was being worked to the bone as a simple messenger; he wasn't that much different from Emilio, a commoner priest. His excessively prideful manner was unwarranted given how truly lowly he was. However, Emilio knew from experience that arguing here would lead to trouble, so he simply apologized in an inoffensive manner.

I hope they leave soon.

So Emilio wished, but the messengers looked like they were still planning on staying.

"I have an order from the high priest for you. Interact with Lord Nazelbart more and continue searching for his weakness."

"I see..."

Although displeased by Emilio's indifferent response, the messenger tried his best to maintain his composure and

continued.

"And now for the essential part. You must entice the two young noblewomen—Sonia Hihime and Furla Hihime—who are staying at the margrave's estate and get them outside the premises."

"Those two? Why?"

"You don't need to know that. Those were the high priest's orders; we'll leave it at that."

Emilio gave the same indifferent response as before. He had a perfect grasp of the situation, but he had no intention of obediently following these orders. Furla was one thing, but he couldn't accept Sonia becoming that fiend's concubine. He refused to let that happen.

Unfortunately for you, I would never hand over the woman I've fallen for to that brute.

Emilio summoned every last ounce of his courage and spoke.

"I refuse."

Even if it was a direct order from the high priest, Emilio would rather lose his job as a priest than be a party to such wickedness.

The messengers all frowned and looked at him reproachfully.

"Is that so? I understand your decision. I hope you don't regret it." With these menacing last words, the messengers turned and departed.

They might come by again. Uneasy, Emilio hurriedly sent a letter with all the details of this conversation to Nazelbart, just in case.

However, by the time Nazelbart opened the letter, Emilio had already become involved in an incident brought about by the high priest. Later that day, he quietly disappeared from Sutrena's church.

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Roughly one month after Emilio had moved to his new post, we received a message from the coastal land on the west side of Sutrena that the priest had gone missing. Lord Nazel and I had something on our minds, so we went to the fortress to try and ascertain Emilio's location. The regular fortress staff were with us, including Mister Henry and Connie.

"I heard a letter came from Emilio yesterday. Apparently its contents were quite unsettling," I said.

Lord Nazel nodded in confirmation, a mysterious expression on his face; I thought he looked somewhat regretful.

"The letter said that the high priest had sent minions to Sutrena, so I was preparing to send some soldiers over to Emilio, but our enemies moved faster. They likely already had a plan for what to do in case Emilio refused to cooperate," Lord Nazel explained.

"Were there any eyewitnesses to his kidnapping?"

"No, apparently no one saw the act itself, but the local investigators said that there are eyewitness reports of a suspicious carriage, which seems to have headed north."

I thought about the local geography as I started speaking again.

"The church is on the west side of Sutrena, right? North of there would be...Hihime?"

"Indeed. I'm going to take some soldiers and head to the scene of Emilio's disappearance. For caution's sake, I will fortify the estate's defenses too. According to Emilio's letter, Miss Sonia and Miss Furla are being targeted."

Many people came and went from the fortress in the central town. We were currently in Lord Nazel's workroom, and as his subordinates turned up one after the other, he skillfully and smoothly gave them their orders. The highly competent Margrave of Sutrena at work was a sight to behold.

Lord Nazel is far too talented. He was just what one would expect from a former prince consort candidate. I wanted to follow his example.

After Lord Nazel had more or less finished giving orders, he gathered some soldiers and was about to return to the estate when I steeled my courage and addressed him.

"Excuse me, but may I also come along to the west? I can protect myself with my magic, and I can reinforce the soldiers' weapons and bodies, so I think I can be of help." I was the one who'd advocated for us taking in Miss Sonia and letting Miss Furla stay at the estate. I didn't want to burden Lord Nazel with the job of taking care of all the problems that had now appeared.

"Thank you, Agnes. But you're adorable—what if you catch Lubhuta's attention? This will be dangerous, so I'd like you to remain at the estate."

“Don’t worry! Count Lubhuta has no interest in married women!” I said as I vigorously struck my chest. As I was Lord Nazel’s wife, I was completely outside Count Lubhuta’s tastes, which was precisely why I could take action.

“I suppose it would be reassuring to have you support us from a safe location…”

“Yes! I won’t set foot in any dangerous places!”

Lord Nazel hesitated for a moment, but finally nodded quietly.

“All right, then. It’s a pleasure to have you along, Agnes.”

We first returned to the estate to get ready for our departure as soon as possible.

Oh, that’s right. I should bring these *with me, just in case.*

I picked up some things from the garden and added them to my backpack before hurrying over to Geni. Perhaps he’d realized it was time for a long-distance trip, because he came out of his shed and happily nuzzled his nose against me. Dunk also wandered over from the field.

I’m not sure, but I feel like Dunk wants to come along.

I always rode Geni on my outings, while Dunk stayed back house-sitting. She’d never shown any particular interest in going outside; she always just devoured the garden’s grass. But this time specifically, she was restlessly looking up at the sky.

“But you can’t fly.” Going by land was much slower than flying. And since every second mattered right now, we couldn’t afford to take Dunk with us. “I’m sorry, Dunk. Let’s go on a walk another—”

Agitated, Dunk interrupted me with a loud neigh. She didn’t wait for me to say anything more and started kicking and thrashing around. Then, her hooves began shining like they were wreathed in blue flames.

“Huh? Hold on, Dunk! What’s going on?!” To my utmost surprise, Dunk rose high in the air and started running with her shining hooves.

She doesn’t even have wings. This is completely absurd! That was when I had a sudden realization. This was how Dunk had crossed the wall on that night of the new moon when she and other manabeasts had run amok.

I was certain she had simply jumped over the wall, but she actually ran across the sky? She’s never shown any inclination to leave the estate’s garden, so I was under the impression that she couldn’t fly!

Dunk landed nearby and neighed as her muzzle quivered with pride, then prepared to take off again along with Geni. Under normal circumstances, I would have immediately stopped her and convinced her to stay, but I was in a hurry at the moment. I didn't have the time to argue about this with her. As I continued to dither over what to do, Lord Nazel arrived after finishing his own preparations. We had originally planned to ride together on Geni's back.

"What should we do, Lord Nazel? For some reason, Dunk seems raring to come along with us."

"Huh?! Why now, of all times? We can't take her along when she can't fly."

The intelligent Dunk neighed again as if to contradict Lord Nazel, and her hooves started shining with the same bluish light as before. She kicked around and started running across the air like last time.

"Could Dunk...always fly?" Lord Nazel blinked in surprise as he watched her soar above us.

"It's news to me too."

"I'm sure I read in a field guide that granis are flightless manabeasts."

"Huh? Then what exactly is Dunk?"

"I have no idea..."

So there were things that even Lord Nazel didn't know. At any rate, we had no time to discuss the matter further. I resolved to thoroughly look into Dunk's case after we returned.

"All right, Dunk, follow Geni."

Since Dunk hadn't received any riding training, only exceptional riders would have stood a chance of riding her. Therefore, we had her tag along without a rider. Dunk was a smart girl, so she neighed in understanding. Highly intelligent manabeasts like Dunk and Geni could understand human speech to a certain extent. It was possible she even understood the situation we were currently in.

"We have little time, Agnes. Let's hurry."

"Yes, Lord Nazel!"

We jumped on Geni's back and headed to the west of Sutrena alongside the soldiers and fortress staff. I was a little worried about Dunk, but she kept perfect pace with Geni. Everyone

besides those of us from the estate looked curiously at the mysterious manabeast running across the air with us. Connie, who'd come along as Mister Henry's proxy, was also shocked to see Dunk easily dashing across the sky.

"Dunk... So you could fly?"

Dunk replied with an energetic neigh and proudly shook her head from side to side, spraying her saliva directly onto the staff members flying behind her.

After a brief flight, the rebuilt church quickly came into sight. The clear blue sea with its beautiful, glistening water was visible just beyond the church. Several small boats were anchored along the white sandy beach. Despite the sea's welcoming, jewellike appearance, it was doubtful whether one could catch lots of tasty fish here. For some reason, not many edible fish lived in the waters off Sutrena's coast. The fish that did live here had all kinds of problems, like being poisonous, being little more than scales and bones, or just being incredibly smelly and unpalatable. Thus, although many fish lived in these waters, the people didn't have a good supply of food. The boats we observed below were mainly used for transportation, not fishing.

It seemed that Emilio had been making progress on his preparations for our wedding, because the church was surrounded by beautiful greenery. The vibrant flower buds looked like they would be in full bloom right on time for the wedding. They made for a lovely view even from the sky. However, one spot of that wonderful garden was ruthlessly devastated. Ornamental trees that had been planted uniformly lay broken, and flowers were scattered everywhere; I could clearly tell even from up here. It was a terribly painful sight. It was very likely that a large group of people had trampled all over the flowers and trees as they charged in to kidnap Emilio.

"Damn you, Lubhuta. You'll pay for this. Not only will I have you arrested, but you'll also be held responsible for all of this afterward," Lord Nazel muttered in a low voice filled with hatred from behind me.

He's serious...

Unbeknownst to him, the high priest had made an outrageous enemy.

Before long, we arrived where the suspicious carriage had been

spotted, and alighted from our mountbeasts. There were wheel marks still visible on the wide main road, a clear indication that a carriage had passed through this spot.

“I see; this is the place.”

The people of the frontier often rode directly on horses or mountbeasts rather than used them to pull carriages. They would sometimes use carts for hauling cargo, but the wheel marks on the ground didn’t match those left by the carts used around here.

These marks don’t belong to wheels designed for rough terrain. This shape is commonly seen in carriages that run on nicely paved roads, like the ones in the capital.

A nearby resident who’d witnessed the carriage had been waiting for us here. He explained what he’d seen to Lord Nazel with a nervous expression.

“The carriage went straight that way and entered the forest,” the local said. “Hihime is on the other side of the forest.”

“Yes, we roughly knew where it was headed. Then…”

The problem was what came after it had entered Hihime. The town just past the forest was the most prosperous location in Hihime. Viscount Hihime lived in a quiet corner of that town, at the end of the rows of workshops. However, that area was well paved, so the carriage might not have left any traces behind.

“I understand. Thank you.”

We swiftly moved through the forest, following the wheel marks which gradually became scarcer and less reliable. At some point, Dunk took the lead for some reason. Perhaps she was enjoying our outing, because she was in much better form than usual. She happily neighed and snacked on the weeds that grew along our path. Even when we left the forest and arrived at a cobblestone road, she continued steadily marching forward like a one-man—or rather, a one-manabeast—army.

“Wait, Dunk! Don’t go ahead on your own!” I called out to Dunk to try and stop her, but she didn’t seem to care and just kept running through the sky. In fact, even Geni started chasing after Dunk on his own, like he’d been spurred on by something. “Hey, Geni?! What’s wrong?!”

Geni replied with a shrill cry, and he wasn’t alone. The pegasi that Torre, the soldiers, and the fortress staff members were riding all neighed vigorously, following Dunk and Geni one after

another.

Wh-What's going on?! They all went into action of their own accord… Just what's going on?!

I'd lost control of my rampaging mountbeast, so I decided to trust in Geni's judgment. There was nothing I could do to stop him anyway, but I also believed that there had to be a reason for the clever Geni to be acting independently of me. Lord Nazel seemed to be thinking the same, as he stayed silent and looked in the direction Geni was headed.

"Viscount Hihime's estate is around here, right?" I asked.

"It is. We've finally caught up to Dunk. Is she headed straight for the viscount's estate even though she's never been here?" Lord Nazel replied.

"Now that you mention— Ah! She flew over the gate and entered the premises! What do we do?! That's trespassing!"

Dunk was pretty much doing whatever she pleased. I anxiously watched the situation, but there was no response from beyond the gate. Perhaps no one had noticed us yet.

"We never told her the way, yet she still reached the Hihime estate… Oh, come to think of it!"

I remembered something I'd read in a book about manabeasts back in our estate. Granis had an extremely acute sense of smell. Whether Dunk was actually a grani was rather uncertain at this point, but perhaps she had perfectly memorized Emilio's smell, since he'd given her carrots before. Then Geni and the pegasi must have understood Dunk's intentions thanks to the mysterious coordination manabeasts had with each other. It was hard to believe at first, but from what I'd seen, this was the only explanation that came to mind.

Is this the power of…gluttony?!

In any case, we could only keep following after Dunk. Lord Nazel and I passed over the fence atop Geni's back and landed at the estate's garden. From the rest of our group, those who could fight dismounted from their pegasi in front of the gate, then climbed over the fence one by one and entered the premises. Fortunately, there were no gatekeepers or soldiers patrolling the garden.

Maybe the House of Hihime has a principle of not spending money on that kind of security.

The actual reason was that in Miss Sonia's absence, the estate's finances—the management of which had entirely been her responsibility before—had rapidly deteriorated, so the viscount had been left with no choice but to lay off servants and guards. However, we would only learn that fact later, after everything had come to light.

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Emilio was inside an unfamiliar room with a large window. He had no idea how to respond to High Priest Lubhuta's harassment. He had been tied to a chair for some time, and he'd been repeatedly censured for disobeying orders. He really wanted a break here. As he looked at the high priest—who just had to occasionally mix derogatory comments about Emilio being a commoner in with the rest of his complaints—he remembered what the situation had been like when he'd been working at the capital.

Yes, things have always been this way.

Emilio had almost forgotten about those times thanks to his peaceful life in the frontier. The noble priests, who had constantly lorded their authority over him, considered a priest who could use high-ranking appraisal magic despite being a commoner nothing but an insolent nuisance. The type and strength of someone's magic wasn't determined by the status they were born with. Heredity played a part, but sometimes children were born with magic completely unrelated to that of their parents. Emilio had met many such people through his job.

Lady Agnes is one example.

Emilio remembered the kind margravine. She was Margrave Nazelbart's sole weakness. Robin Levbition, a man who had once climbed to the position of the princess's companion, possessed rare magical talent. Agnes possessed multiple kinds of magic just like he did, or rather, even more than he did. She was so talented that, under normal circumstances, her magic should have immediately been reported to the government. However, because of the incorrect appraisal she'd received during her childhood, neither Agnes nor anyone around her had realized how extraordinary her magic was.

It was only recently that the truth about the type and effects of Agnes's magic had become known, thanks to Emilio's appraisal. And even then, everything about it hadn't become completely clear; there was still much to explore about her magic. During his free time, Emilio had investigated her magic by reading various books he had ordered through Nazelbart and forming hypotheses based on his experience. He was delighted to finally be able to research magic like he'd always wanted to.

This is pretty bad. The members of the royal family were more or less aware of the situation and were apparently watching over Lady Agnes, but if an outsider were to poke around and make a big deal out of this, they could also be accused of concealing her magic for nefarious ends, even if it was actually unintentional.

If the government was forced to put up a pretense of being unaware of Agnes's magic, Nazelbart and Agnes might end up punished. Emilio didn't want that to happen.

I'm not confident in my ability to keep quiet, but I must absolutely keep milady's secret!

The high priest had been desperate for some time to have Emilio reveal Nazelbart's weakness.

"You stayed at his estate, right? Why didn't you get any information on the margrave and his wife?!"

"I'm sorry, but as you know, I'm just a lowly commoner. It's difficult for me to get close to nobles," Emilio replied in a solemn tone, deliberately using the high priest and his ilk's favorite word against him.

"You worthless fool!"

The high priest pulled out a long, thick whip out of his breast pocket. Emilio reflexively shuddered; he'd never seen its like before.

"Is that the whip you always used on your concubines?! Hold on... I'm a guy, you know!"

Emilio shuddered, wondering if the high priest's tastes had expanded. Emilio was aware that his face was feminine, and he was also single, but he was clearly neither a woman nor a noble. He shouldn't have met the high priest's criteria.

I should have been safe! Why?! Does the high priest swing the other way now?!

The high priest was currently hiding in Viscount Hihime's estate.

It was easy for him to avoid any investigations inside a noble's estate, and even if the people of Sutrena sent out a search party, they would likely head toward the nation's capital. The elated Lubhuta figured his pursuers would never imagine that he and Viscount Hihime were working together.

"If you don't know Nazelbart's weakness, help me bring Viscount Hihime's daughters back with me. They're outside my reach right now because of the heavy security in Sutrena, but you could create an opening if you enter the margrave's estate."

"I refuse. I would never assist in a crime."

"Are you in a position to say that? Commoners truly are foolish. It's time to teach you a lesson."

Like a child with his favorite toy, the high priest snickered gleefully as he started swinging his whip around. He seemed to be showing off, not specifically trying to hit Emilio. The whip whooshed through the air as the count swung it around recklessly, and it grazed Emilio's arm. Despite the high priest's obvious fondness for the whip, he handled it clumsily; even so, being struck with it still hurt. Emilio couldn't hide his discomfort.

"I'll teach you some manners so that you never act so impudent again! I usually whip women, but hitting an impudent man is nice for a change. Bwa ha ha!"

When the high priest swung his whip again, Emilio instinctively shut his eyes tight.

Urk! He's gonna hit me again!

But the whizzing whip didn't hit Emilio this time. He thought he heard a horse neighing outside, and then something crashed through the window and entered the room.

"A-A manabeast! What is it doing here?!" the high priest squeaked. He dropped his whip and ran to a corner of the room as fast as his legs could carry him.

You were acting so confident earlier, yet you were so quick to run away...

Still tied to the chair, Emilio was left behind. *Abandoning me here is a bit much.*

He hung his head, resolved to be attacked by the manabeast, when instead he felt something licking his face.

"Whoa!" Emilio raised his surprised face and saw an awfully familiar, large, horselike creature looking at him. "Huh? You're the

one who always pestered me for carrots! Uh…Dunk, right?”

The manabeast replied with a neigh and shook her head vigorously, as if to assert that Emilio was right. A large amount of saliva splashed onto his face.

A few seconds later, a strong gust of wind blew in through the window. Emilio turned his head and saw yet another familiar creature—a pink one this time—right outside the window. Because of the creature’s flapping wings, all furniture and other objects in the room were blown away, flying toward the high priest who was trembling in the corner. Lubhuta screamed in fear and stumbled in a panic as he ran for the door and left the room entirely. At the same time, a figure jumped down from the pink creature.

“So you really were in Viscount Hihime’s manor, Emilio.”

It was none other than Nazelbart, Margrave of Sutrena.

Huh? What’s the margrave himself doing here?

Emilio was completely lost, and his shock had rendered him speechless. Dunk helpfully answered in his place with a loud neigh.

“What are you doing in Hihime, Lord Nazelbart?”

“We arrived here after following Dunk. This outcome is a bit surprising, but Viscount Hihime’s estate was among the suspicious locations. I’m glad to see you safe.”

Emilio couldn’t hide his surprise at the fact that Nazelbart had personally come here. He was also deeply moved that Nazelbart had likely come all this way just for him, an insignificant commoner.

“Thank you very much, Lord Nazelbart.”

“Our soldiers are on standby outside. We outnumber the guards Lubhuta brought with him, and Agnes has even reinforced our people through her magic. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“That’s…reassuring.”

Nazelbart took out a knife from his breast pocket, skillfully cut Emilio’s restraints, and prompted him toward the window, where a slender hand suddenly reached into the room.

“Emilio, over here!”

Emilio poked his head through the broken window and looked up to see Agnes holding out her hand from atop her wyvern Geni. She and Nazelbart had apparently ridden here together.

“This place is dangerous, Lady Agnes!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll leave soon. Please come sit behind me. This is an emergency, so Lord Nazel won’t mind if I ride with another man.”

It seemed the rumors Emilio had heard about Nazelbart being so infatuated with his wife that he didn’t want her riding a manabeast with other men were true.

As Emilio hesitated—this would be his first time riding a wyvern—Geni drew close, grabbed the hood of his habit with his mouth, and flung Emilio toward his back. Agnes used her strong arms to catch the airborne Emilio and forcibly placed him behind her. It was a magnificent show of teamwork.

“All right. I’ll be standing by outside the gate, Lord Nazel.”

“Yes, be careful. Don’t stray away from Torre, okay? Our soldiers are coming in through the front and back entrances, so I anticipate Lubhuta will be captured soon.”

“Okay! You be careful too, Lord Nazel.”

Agnes dexterously had her wyvern make a U-turn and flew toward the gate. Her guard was in front of the gate, and his body had become gigantic thanks to his magic.

“Ooh, Lady Agnes! And Father Emilio! It looks like Lord Nazelbart’s improvised plan was a success! Oh man, I was really nervous when Dunk just went in by herself! At this rate, that damn Lubhuta should be captured soon!”

Viscount Hihime’s unconscious soldiers were piled up between the gate and the manor’s entrance. It seemed that the giant guard had taken care of all of them on his own. His magic, which could transform his body, was famed for its high offensive potential. Witnessing this scene allowed Emilio to really understand that it deserved its reputation.

Meanwhile, Nazelbart’s magic could manipulate nature—which was said to be the most powerful category of magic—and Agnes’s was the unprecedented absolute reinforcement. These two had powerful synergy when combined. Even an inexperienced novice who’d just started working as an appraiser would have been able to recognize the extraordinary potential of their magic.

They’re dangerous when they work together. Picking a fight with Sutrena was a bad idea. Emilio came to realize that all over again. Now that he felt safe after being rescued, his mind drifted to the person responsible for his kidnapping.

The high priest must be in dire straits right now. His magic is only middle-ranking appraisal, so I doubt it'll be any help to him as he tries to escape.

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Lubhuta was cornered. As he'd scuttled out of the room on the second floor where the manabeast had attacked, a subordinate had arrived at that exact moment and informed him that intruders had entered the manor. And it wasn't just a couple intruders. Several—no, maybe dozens of—soldiers could be seen from the upper floor rushing inside.

Lubhuta cried out like a squashed frog. His plump body ran unsteadily deeper into the manor.

"Someone do something about those invading soldiers! Just who exactly sent them here?!"

Lubhuta's subordinate, running alongside him, wheezed out a reply.

"They are all soldiers from Sutrena."

"What?! So that blasted Nazelbart has already gotten wind of this place?! That was simply way too fast!"

"This is *Nazelbart* we're talking about. We can't compare him to an ordinary person, right?"

"Oh, shut up! In any case, we're running away! The House of Hihime can't stand up to Nazelbart! We need to return to the capital and regroup! And if that isn't possible, the main branch of the House of Addamsgomes will—" Since Lubhuta was completely out of breath, his sentence was cut short as he gasped for air. He desperately rushed into the room at the end of the hallway, but...

"Hello. Took you long enough."



Nazelbart, the person Lubhuta least wanted to see right now, was waiting for him inside the room, smiling. Out on the balcony, beyond the shattered remains of a large window, a manabeast with its hooves clad in pale blue light was neighing and stamping.

How terrifying! Two monsters had appeared together before Lubhuta. He wanted to pass out right this instant. *Did he enter this room by jumping onto the balcony using that manabeast?*

Soldiers riding on pegasi were on standby behind the creature. There was nowhere for Lubhuta to run. He fled the room in a panic and tried to escape from the house via a different exit. However, the soldiers rushing in through the main entrance blocked his path; he had nowhere to go.

"D-Dammit..."

He decided he wouldn't go down without fighting but then realized he'd dropped his favorite whip somewhere and was now unarmed. The sound of Nazelbart's terrifying footsteps drew closer.

"Lubhuta, you've caused me all sorts of trouble for a long time now. That's in the past, so I might have let it go, but this time, you had the temerity to lay waste to my wedding venue and injure the invaluable officiant. Compensation for that will cost you dearly."

"Uh, huh? What wedding? What are you talking about?!"

"That's enough!"

At Nazelbart's command, his subordinates all leaped upon Lubhuta at once.

"G-Get off meee!"

There was nothing Lubhuta could do, but he didn't know when to give up. He kept screaming his resentment, mostly at Nazelbart for being the cause of this whole situation, but also at the worthless House of Hihime.

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I suddenly sensed that there had been some kind of development, so I turned around. I could hear Dunk's neigh, filled with motivation, and an unfamiliar man's loud screaming from the manor.

I wonder if Lord Nazel is all right.

I felt frustrated as I stood outside the gate and imagined what

might be going down inside the manor. I was sure that Lord Nazel was safe and sound, but as his wife, I still wanted to pray for his safety.

You picked a fight with the wrong person, Count Lubhuta.

Lord Nazel was very, *veeerrry* angry that our wedding venue had been vandalized. The fortress staff and soldiers all sensed it too.

Lord Nazel is more human right now. I believe that's a good thing.

A short time later, Count Lubhuta's subordinates were dragged out of the manor one after another. All of Sutrena's soldiers were outstanding, so they'd quickly and skillfully taken control of the manor. According to them, this had been much easier than exterminating manabeasts. Next, the plump Count Lubhuta was carried outside through the combined effort of three men. He'd been tied up with rope like a large piece of ham you'd see for sale in stores. Finally, Viscount and Viscountess Hihime, the remaining soldiers, and Lord Nazel exited the manor.

"Hello, Agnes. I'm sorry I took so long. You didn't do anything dangerous, did you?"

"Of course not!"

Lord Nazel gently smiled as he bashfully apologized for being late, but he'd finished the arrest incredibly fast.

Dunk soon came flying over. There was grass around her mouth. She must have shrewdly gone for a meal in the viscount's garden.

"Now then, Lubhuta, it's so good to be able to talk face-to-face. Kidnapping our priest, the incident with your concubines, extorting the viscount, destroying the church's property... You've caused all manner of trouble, but I'd love to learn more about your *other* crimes as well. I'm *very* interested."

Despite being bound, Count Lubhuta trembled.

"Oh yes, His Majesty is also eager to hear about your other offenses, so you simply must tell us. Apparently, he still wants to do something about the former queen's faction as well as the other nobles thoughtlessly opposing him."

I could tell Lord Nazel was being deliberately vague about the king doing "something," but was I the only one who somehow found his words disquieting? Taking Queen Latriche's letter into account as well, I couldn't help but think that the new king and

queen must've been facing many trials.

"Fortunately for you, I want to quickly go home and spend some quiet time with Agnes, so I'll leave the questioning to the experts. Agnes brought just the right thing for the occasion."

Among the soldiers we'd brought were some trained in interrogating captives. They'd been on standby thus far, but now it was time for them to take the stage. They were gripping long, looong magically reinforced yams, freshly picked from our garden. I'd brought them from home. Every time the soldiers swung them as practice, they made a whistling noise as they cut through the air, and an earthy scent filled the surroundings. The sight made Count Lubhuta's face grow pale, like an unripe violaberry.

"I suggest you confess everything before your buttocks become swollen."

Lord Nazel's words made me realize what was about to happen. Count Lubhuta was accustomed to hurting others, but now he would be on the receiving end. He had to be aware of just what terrifying treatment awaited him.

"Now then, Agnes. You don't need to bear witness to the questioning, so let's leave first. We also need to get Emilio back to the church."

"Yes, Lord Nazel."

Although Count Lubhuta had whipped him, Emilio had only suffered a graze on his arm. It would be fine with some basic medical care.

"Torre, have Emilio ride with you, okay?"

"As you command, Lord Nazelbart!" Torre shouted in response, then suddenly picked Emilio up, placed him on his pegasus, and finally mounted behind the priest.

Lord Nazel held me in his arms and mounted Geni, and the lively Dunk also leaped into the sky. Our guards followed behind us. The clear wind caressed my cheeks, and the Hihime estate gradually faded into the distance.

"Agnes, after we stop by the church and drop Emilio off, let's have some proper leisure time together; it's been a while since we did."

"Sure."

Although the arrest had gone smoothly, the sky had started steadily growing redder and redder. At this rate, it would already

be late at night by the time we returned home. I decided to just enjoy the breeze and relax after a job well done.

"You can sleep if you're tired, Agnes. I'll support you."

"I'm perfectly fine!" As if I could leave everything to Lord Nazel and simply doze off! I glanced behind me and saw that he looked disappointed that I wouldn't rely on him. I still didn't really understand exactly what made him happy, though I really wanted to as his wife.

"A lot has happened, but now we can focus on our wedding with peace of mind."

Lord Nazel was smiling as he said that, but I thought it was still too early to feel relieved. The church was in a horrible state, and since the House of Hihime had gotten involved with Count Lubhuta, it looked like its head and his wife would also face consequences for this incident. As a result, it was unclear whether we would actually receive the custom-made accessory we'd ordered; there was a high chance the deal had already been canceled.

But I feel like as long as I have Lord Nazel, the two of us will get through it together.

The relationship of trust we'd built so far wouldn't be shaken by such trifling difficulties. Therefore, I honestly replied that I was very happy.

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Several days later, the accessory we'd commissioned from the House of Hihime's craftsmen actually arrived, much to my surprise. Given the whole situation with Miss Sonia, Miss Furla, Count Lubhuta, and Emilio, I'd assumed that our order had been called off.

"How was our order completed without incident after everything that's happened?" I inquired.

"Your accessory was safe. Because of the House of Hihime's poor financial situation, the viscount dismissed a large number of craftsmen—the craftsman who was making your accessory included. As soon as I learned about it, I sent people over to protect him."

"Impressive as usual, Lord Nazel."

His information gathering ability and brilliance were truly astonishing. That was why I believed that the incident during which Princess Mia broke off their engagement must have been truly unexpected for him. No one would have expected that the *princess* would cheat on her fiancé and even conceive a child.

"And so, here's your completed accessory."

Lord Nazel showed me an elaborately crafted ring, one of the indispensable parts of my bridal attire. The flower pattern I'd requested had evolved into something much more detailed, beautiful, and elegant. The ring was inlaid with round ambers, the same color as Lord Nazel's eyes. I loved this color—it was warm and gentle. The additional request Lord Nazel had made to the silversmith at the time had apparently been for these ambers.

"What do you think?" Lord Nazel asked me with a slightly serious expression.

My answer had been set in stone since the moment I laid eyes on the ring.

"It's wonderful. I'm absolutely delighted." In Desnim, many young noblewomen wore accessories that matched the color of their fiancé's eyes. I'd been secretly wishing to do the same.

When Lord Nazel saw just how blissful I looked, his expression softened and he looked at me fondly.

"Also, your wedding dress is finally finished. Can you try it on before the ceremony?"

"O-Of course." *I've actually been really worried about my dress.*

I hurried to the room where the dress was being stored. When I entered, I saw the designers and tailors—as well as Kelly. They'd more or less measured me beforehand, but they would apparently be making the final adjustments here.

"I'll be waiting outside, so come show me once you're done changing, okay?" Lord Nazel said a bit hastily, then left the room just like he'd told me.

First, the tailors presented the finished dress to me.

I let Lord Nazel take care of everything, so I wonder if it turned out all right. Kelly was also there and said that she offered her detailed opinion though. I was terribly anxious, but the moment I saw the dress displayed before me, I realized that my fears had been unfounded.

"Wow! It's fantastic!"

A sigh of admiration escaped my lips as I looked at the garment before me. A beautiful dress, made of lustrous white fabric and decorated with numerous plants stitched with light green thread, was hanging on a tall dress form. The delicate patterns of flowers and leaves on the soft-toned fabric caught my attention. The hem of the dress was thin, soft, and fluffy, its layers spreading out and overlapping like flower petals.

There's a lot of embroidery. It must have been really hard to make.

Even if it wasn't pure white, the dress Lord Nazel had ordered was splendid and looked fitting for a bride.

"Wedding dresses with plant embroidery have always been common in Sutrena. They're usually stitched with white thread, but we used a light green instead. We have plans to spread this dress across the country as a new product from Sutrena. Let's create new fashions in Sutrena from now on, shall we?" Kelly explained with unusually passionate eyes. She truly was fashion-conscious, excited to finally set trends rather than just follow them.

So I'm going to wear it and spread its popularity like some kind of living advertisement? That's a heavy responsibility...

I was already nervous, and it felt like my body was about to lose all strength. Kelly and the tailors urged me to get changed and skillfully helped me into the dress. Incidentally, I also put on the silver ring Lord Nazel had given me.

"My, oh my, the dress fits you to a T. We don't need to make any adjustments. Your ring also looks great on you."

"This dress suits Lady Agnes's silver hair much better than an ordinary, bright white one would."

The tailors all seemed to speak from the heart.

"My hair is pretty close to white, after all." If I wore an all-white dress, I would transform into the "Lady Curtain," just like in the past.

After I was done changing and everything had been checked over, we called Lord Nazel, who was waiting outside. It was finally time for the unveiling. When he entered the room, he stared at me with intense concentration, then his face turned red with joy.

"It looks wonderful on you, Agnes. You're simply lovely."

"Thank you very much for preparing such a magnificent dress for me, Lord Nazel."

I was also grateful to Kelly and everyone who'd worked on the

dress. I raised the hem of my dress—which was delicate as a feather—into a curtsy and bashfully expressed my gratitude to everyone.

“When I see how adorable you are, I feel like taking you away right here and now,” Lord Nazel muttered next to me with a serious expression.

“Not until the day of the ceremony!” Kelly strongly retorted. It seemed as if she thought he really would do it if she didn’t say anything.

“Heh heh, don’t worry, Kelly. Lord Nazel is a gentleman. He wouldn’t be so brash.”

“No, Lord Nazelbart sounded serious.”

Silence followed.

Kelly possessed a peculiar magic that let her more or less understand how other people felt. If she said he’d been serious…

“Um, Lord Nazel? Don’t tell me…” I was confused as I looked next to me and saw him embarrassedly averting his gaze, like his scheme had been uncovered. Kelly had apparently been right on the mark.

“But you really are beautiful, Agnes. I was torn between wanting to boast about you to everyone and wanting to hide you so nobody else can see you.”

When the tailors noticed our behavior, they looked at us with heartwarming smiles, saying things like “My, they sure get along” and “How lovely.” My cheeks flushed red from the attention.

“In any case, now everything’s perfect for the wedding,” Lord Nazel said.

“Yes, I can’t wait,” I replied.

Lord Nazel blinked slowly and gave me a gentle smile of satisfaction. Filled with joy, I responded with a smile of my own.

The day after the dress arrived, we received a report regarding all the incidents Count Lubhuta had caused. After having their behinds violently spanked with yams, the count and his subordinates had apparently confessed to everything the same day we apprehended them.

It hurts even listening to it. I know I’m the one who reinforced those yams, but I never expected them to be used like that.

I’d prepared several of them thinking they could be used as

spare weapons. But I also wanted to find other valid ways to utilize the yams—besides spanking. With that thought in mind, I'd conducted a survey aimed at consumers and the fortress staff, asking about the yams' ease of use. The results showed that the reception was generally favorable, but I also found out that there was room for improvement.

The skin is rough, so you need to be careful when disposing of the roots. (Glasses of Solitude, male, thirty-two years old)

My hand got a rash, so I'd prefer if you cultivated lotus roots instead of yams. (Manabeast Lover, male, eighteen years old)

If you're looking for lethality, I recommend konjac potatoes. (Three Time, male, nineteen years old)

A wonderful product. Their creator is beautiful, gentle, and splendid. (N.F., male, twenty-two years old)

Besides the last one, which seemed oddly biased, I would keep all of these valuable opinions in mind.

The terrifying yam spanking had uncovered plenty of proof of the count's misdeeds in Hihime and Sutrena, as well as his crimes in the capital. From my understanding, Lord Nazel was planning to send that information to King Bertrand in the capital and put him in his debt.

"So, what about Miss Sonia and Miss Furla? What will happen to them from now on?"

"The two of them are currently completely free. However, it seems that Viscount Hihime will be retiring and handing his peerage over to a relative because of the Lubhuta incident. Miss Sonia probably won't return home, but I plan to tell Miss Furla that she can go back if she wants to. I doubt she'll be able to live the same lavish life as before though."

"I suppose so..."

No matter how much Miss Furla's parents had cherished her, they'd also considered handing her over to Count Lubhuta.

At first, I thought it would be better if she returned home as soon as possible.

Unlike when she'd arrived, she hadn't caused any trouble recently, and though she complained, she was making an effort to learn how to work as a maid. Moreover, she'd undertaken the difficult job of a laundress on her own initiative.

It's a very positive change, indeed.

Laundry was terribly heavy when it had soaked up water, so carrying it was very hard labor for a young noblewoman. Even our diligent ex-noblewomen maids tended to shy away from laundry duty. This increased the respect I felt for the hardworking Furla volunteering for the job.

Come to think of it, I feel like Miss Furla has stopped following Lord Nazel around lately. If anything, she seems frightened of him at times. Did something happen?

The truth was shrouded in darkness. But because Miss Furla was now working as a laundress, I'd had plenty of opportunities to meet her in the garden lately. And when Connie came by to check up on the manabeasts, she would persistently pester him for some reason, though he was so engrossed in playing with Dunk and the others that he mostly ignored her. Whatever the reason, Miss Furla no longer found fault with or sulked at everyone around her.

Chapter 6: Madam Bumpkin's Wedding Ceremony

King Bertrand and Queen Latriche were both troubled once High Priest Lubhuta had been sent back to the capital with swollen buttocks and a mountain of yams after picking a fight with the margrave of Sutrena. Not that they were really concerned about the high priest's behind; the real problem was the litany of crimes the high priest was being charged with, as well as Nazelbart's complaints.

"I'm sorry, Bert. I got ahead of myself and freed Lubhuta's concubines, and it seems that he snapped back by harassing Nazelbart. As a result, Sutrena's church has been damaged."

Latriche hung her head with a hand on her forehead. She regretted provoking Lubhuta, but she couldn't have let those injured concubines wait until the case was resolved. Among those women they'd taken under their protection, some had been seriously injured, while others had been in terrible health from excessive blood loss. Their lives might have been in danger if they'd been left at the church. The savage Lubhuta's sadism was completely unhinged. He could no longer have been allowed to do as he pleased. If Latriche were ever to find herself in a similar situation, she would surely choose to save those women again, even if that was the "wrong" choice for a queen.

"Hmm… Nazelbart's ex post facto report is riddled with cutting remarks like 'Please inform us of your plans in advance' and 'I will be billing you for the damages incurred during this incident.' The first one is a reasonable complaint though. Who would have thought Nazelbart to be such a clingy and vindictive person? When he was still in the palace, he was as docile as a doll. I've once again come to realize that he's someone you really shouldn't make an enemy of."

"It was *obvious* he's really clingy, Bert. You've seen how he behaves toward Lady Agnes. His obsessive infatuation is definitely abnormal."

"I suppose you're right… Lady Agnes must also have a hard time

with a husband like that."

Completely unbeknownst to Agnes, the two royals had needlessly taken it upon themselves to worry about her.

"According to the concubines we rescued, Lubhuta would threaten various low-ranking nobles and steal their daughters. There are many nobles who caved to his demands, frustrated though they were, and we've even tracked down women who managed to escape from him and struggled greatly afterward."

"That's true. There was also embezzlement in the church, unjust personnel practices, and excessive workloads imposed only on the commoner priests… There's an entire pile of evidence of Lubhuta's crimes—more than enough to take him down. I owe Nazelbart another favor now."

All the corrupt priests, including Lubhuta, had been punished. They would never return to the church.

The entire church was punished this time because of the high priest's crimes, but has the House of Addamsgomes made any moves?

High Priest Lubhuta was one of the major figures in the former queen's faction. Now that one of the faction's pillars had collapsed, Bertrand and Latriche could move much more easily. However, it was very ominous that the House of Addamsgomes hadn't reacted at all, considering one of its relatives had been arrested.

"We need to remain vigilant against the members of the former queen's faction who are trying to regain their power."

With a stiff expression on her face, Latriche nodded deeply in response to her husband.

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Lord Nazel and I were visiting Sutrena's church, which was undergoing repairs. Lubhuta's subordinates had caused a lot of destruction; the church's walls had been broken through, the door had been ripped off its hinges, and the beautiful new flower beds had been devastated. It was apparent that Emilio had fully regained his vigor as he came to greet us and awkwardly looked up at us and apologized. Even though he'd gone through a terrible experience, he'd promptly returned to his job.

"My apologies. Because I resisted, the high priest's messengers drew weapons and tore the walls, ceiling, and floor to shreds. The

damage inside the church is horrible. And the old building had finally been properly repaired and all."

"It wasn't your fault, Emilio. The inconsiderate, meddlesome Lubhuta is to blame." Lord Nazel had a bright smile, but his grudge against Lubhuta had yet to fade, and his heart was still furiously boiling with rage. "Now then, I need to go check up on the repairs."

Emilio's eyes widened in shock when he saw the margrave quickly getting down to business.

"Huh?! You're going to inspect things personally, Lord Nazelbart?!"

"Yes, it will be faster if I take care of it myself. And I won't just look—I'm ready to help with the repairs. I have some new magic I've been meaning to try out."

I nodded in agreement.

"You must be talking about the plant residences, right, Lord Nazel?"

"I tested them out in the central town, and they were unexpectedly popular with the people living there. It will take time to restore the church with regular repairs. But if we apply the same techniques used in the plant residences, the repairs will undoubtedly be finished in time for the wedding ceremony. The church will look a bit overgrown, but if you just ignore that part, it's really sturdy construction."

If Lord Nazel and I combined our magic, we could create extremely durable, easy-to-use building materials.

Emilio, who was always easy to read, looked at us with a mix of astonishment and expectation.

"Huh?! Is it really okay to have Lord Nazelbart do all that for me? Well, the roof is leaking, among other problems, so I would be truly grateful if the repairs could be finished soon."

"Don't worry about it. It's for the sake of the ceremony."

Lord Nazel had brought along the plants most suited for growing into plant residences, as determined by the experiment conducted in the central town. My job was to reinforce the plants he manipulated. I was perfectly motivated.

"Um, then... Thank you for the help," Emilio said timidly.

"Leave it to us!"

We decided to start repairs from the most damaged area. We

fixed the damage using a variety of flora Lord Nazel had brought with him, such as a type of vine that emitted faint light. He would place the vine near the spot he wanted to repair, then adjust its size with his magic. As long as he was dealing with a preexisting plant, he could freely alter its shape and leave it in place almost permanently.

His magic can't make plants grow faster or bear fruit, but it can modify them.

The vine sprouts rustled as they extended and hardened, then intertwined to form a meticulously stitched, lacelike wall. I then took turns applying my reinforcement magic to the vines, which rapidly increased their strength.

Next Lord Nazel took out a mysterious moss to fix the roof leak. It stopped any water from coming through and was handy for filling gaps. Moreover, it also shone in dark spaces.

Emilio stared at us with great interest.

"It goes without saying that Lady Agnes's magic is fascinating, but Lord Nazelbart's magic is also highly interesting."

"Would you like to appraise me after we've finished work?"

"I'd love to!" Emilio said with sparkling eyes. He apparently researched magic in his free time even here. He'd always been interested in studying magic, so his current life was very fulfilling.

He's also exchanging letters with Miss Sonia.

I'd been worried when Emilio moved away, but their relationship was progressing steadily. I continued watching over them in suspense, but I was somewhat relieved for now.

"The interior repairs are mostly finished, so let's go take a look at the garden next."

We exited the church and moved to the garden, where broken trees had crushed the flower beds. Looking at the remains of the desolate flower beds and stomped, withered flowers made my heart ache.

I want to restore them all quickly.

I passed through the church's garden, which was filled with the smell of fresh leaves, and arrived at the top of a cliff where the sea breeze blew. As I gazed at the coastline, I saw the surface of the sea sparkling as it reflected the light.

"The views from the church are spectacular. And the sea breeze is pleasant," Lord Nazel said.

“Yes, I’m truly moved that we can have our wedding ceremony here,” I replied.

The two of us strolled through the garden hand in hand and fixed the damaged areas one by one. Lord Nazel examined our surroundings and told me which plants could be saved.

“This fallen tree isn’t dead. We can still restore it.”

“Understood. Get stronger!”

When I used my magic, the broken tree regenerated, growing branches once more, and dense leaves started sprouting on them. This technique didn’t work for the dead trees, but I could restore the ones still alive.

“Your magic is ideal for this sort of work, Agnes. Although my magic can adjust the properties of and restore plants, it’s difficult to make wilted crops bear fruit, or do much to help existing plants that simply failed to thrive.”

I nodded as I listened to Lord Nazel’s explanation.

“The rest is a job for my absolute reinforcement. I’ll do my best!” I held up my hands and wished for the now healthy tree to get stronger, and it grew bigger than ever before.

“Your wish for the plants to get stronger seems to also strengthen their vitality.”

“I noticed when Emilio told me about this, but it seems that my magic changes depending on the most relevant definition of ‘stronger’ for a given context. To put it in your words, it depends on whether I want to strengthen vitality or physical power. That’s why there are all kinds of different changes, like faster growth, hardening, and reinforced abilities. There may even be other ways for me to reinforce things.”

“Exploring the options seems like it could be fun,” Lord Nazel agreed.

Behind us, Emilio happily listened to our conversation on magic with his undivided attention. He was also jotting down notes. He was passionate about magic research.

We had to replace the dead trees and flowers, but we successfully restored the trees and flower beds that had survived.

“I’ll plant flowers here. I hope you’ll love them! Let’s have a wonderful ceremony,” Emilio said.

“We appreciate it.”

Lord Nazel and I thanked him and left.

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The day of our wedding ceremony had finally arrived. I was relieved to see that the weather was nice; the sky was clear and the sun was bright. Early in the morning, the estate's female staff, led by Kelly, had started applying my makeup and dressing me. Several people were necessary to put on a wedding dress, after all. The dress was of soft, sprout-like colors and was lighter than it looked; it had been made with the wearer's comfort in mind. I had a feeling that Lord Nazel and Kelly had weighed in on this.

"The preparations are complete, Lady Agnes. Lord Nazelbart is waiting for you outside."

"O-Okay!"

Now fully attired as a bride, I left the room. I felt so stressed that my body had grown stiff, but I somehow reached Lord Nazel. He was in a waiting area, with only a single door separating it from the nave of the church where the ceremony would take place. I could sense the large crowd of guests on the other side.

I'm happy about the ceremony, but I also don't want to be the center of attention. Nobles' weddings were rather grand affairs. Although I understood this was unavoidable, a part of me was intimidated nonetheless. I was still not a fan of high society events.

Lord Nazel was dressed in his groom's outfit, exuding intense sex appeal as he sat elegantly on a simple wooden chair that had a rustic feel to it.

Whoaaa! The sight of my husband in a white tuxedo—with subtle embroidery on the cuffs that matched my own outfit—was simply stunning. I wanted to have a picture of him dressed like this in a frame so I could hang it up in my room. *Ahhh, he's a sight for sore eyes.*

As soon as Lord Nazel saw me, his eyes lit up and his face relaxed. I was incredibly weak to that expression. I felt like I would forgive anything he did.

"You look fantastic in your bridal outfit, Agnes. You really are so cute that I want to take you away."

Despite Kelly, who had accompanied me, trying to stop him, Lord Nazel gave my cheeks and brow several kisses. I didn't even get a chance to compliment him on how handsome he looked

before he assaulted me with this torrent of kisses, leaving me gasping for air.

My current outfit didn't include a veil, which was commonly worn in Desnim. Instead, it incorporated elements from Sutrena's very own local traditions. At the time of Desnim's founding, tribal societies had still existed in Sutrena. A unique culture, unlike that found in other territories, had taken root there. Remnants of those past traditions had been passed from generation to generation, and until recently, pure-white wedding dresses and veils hadn't been popular here. Instead, many brides wore dresses embroidered with familiar plants, and they adorned their heads and gowns with flowers. My hair was also decorated with a milomilo flower ornament along with a silver hair ornament. Using local flowers as an essential part of the outfit was apparently a custom of the past. While the House of Evantail was full of only nonsensical traditions that I was happy to discard, I hoped traditions like these would continue to be passed down.

But being kissed repeatedly because I don't have a veil to cover my face is really embarrassing. The ceremony will start any minute now, Lord Nazel! Though he might have done the same even if I had a veil on…

Emilio, who was also waiting with us, cleared his throat, acting like he hadn't noticed anything.

"The ceremony is about to start, so please proceed through the door when you get the signal. I have to go now. Lord Nazelbart, I know that Lady Agnes is beautiful, but please keep everything in moderation, all right? Agh, I'm so nervous… We have some crazy attendees today…"

Emilio opened the door first and left us behind. I could feel my tension increase further. And Lord Nazel's expressions of affection hadn't stopped all this time. When I looked away in embarrassment, I noticed that the door Emilio had left through was slightly ajar.

Oh? There's a small gap. Maybe I can see what the guests are doing. I casually glanced through the opening and almost fainted when I saw who was on the other side. *Wha— King Bertrand and Queen Latriche are sitting in the front row! Even Prince Leonardo is there!*

I'd invited them myself and had even received a response

confirming they would attend, but the impact of actually seeing them there in person was immeasurable. It was just like Emilio had said: We had a star-studded guest list. Lord Nazel's mother, his younger brother Julian, and my brother Paul—who'd rushed here from his studies abroad—were all seated close to the royalty.

Paul... In the short time I haven't seen him, he's grown taller and more muscular, gotten tanned, and has become an all-around delightful boy. He must have continued Torre's muscle training regimen even in Polpystan.

I was impressed by my brother's growth into a strong person during his studies abroad.

The people present in the church were mainly nobles connected to Lord Nazel and me. A later, separate reception had been arranged for the commoners we were close to. In addition to that, a formal debut had been scheduled for the general public of Sutrena. The next few days would be awfully busy.

"Please don't look away from me, Agnes," Lord Nazel whispered into my ear seductively, bringing me back to my sweet reality. It seemed that he never tired of fawning over me.

"Lord Nazel, we need to enter soon..."

"Hmm? We still have time."

The cheery Lord Nazel showed his determination to keep going until the very last minute, but sadly for him, it was our time to go soon, so he reluctantly took my hand and we slowly approached the door. Then the door was opened and a bright light shone in my eyes as I slowly walked forward. Upon entering the nave, we were greeted by the guests' thunderous applause and cheers, and we advanced down the aisle in the middle of the room until we reached Emilio.

"Lord Nazelbart and Lady Agnes are here."

"My, what a lovely pair."

"I'm glad we still get to see their wedding despite the recent incident."

While the guests chattered, I was panicking because I wasn't used to being the center of attention before such a large crowd.

Eek, am I walking properly? Right, left, right, left...

In contrast to my awkward steps, Lord Nazel's expression was perfectly composed when I looked up at him. He was exceedingly reliable.

Wedding ceremonies here were generally the same as in the rest of Desnim. The couple entered the venue, said their vows, then signed a pledge. We were already married, so some parts would be abridged or modified, but the overall process hadn't been changed that much.

Emilio recited his speech without making any mistakes. Lord Nazel and I confirmed our vows at his prompting. Next would be the kiss and the signing. The guests had their eyes glued to us to make sure they didn't miss the kiss.

Aaaaah!

The mere thought made my cheeks flush crimson. However, as I was about to burst into screams, Lord Nazel grabbed me and pulled me closer, a bewitching smile on his face. I had a hunch that perhaps...he knew that I was weak to that expression and had done it on purpose. He was a highly intelligent man and sometimes showed his calculating side.

It looks like I have no choice but to accept this.

So, I did just what Lord Nazel was hoping for. The moment I gently closed my eyes, I felt a warm sensation on my lips along with his breath. Even in this situation, I was deeply aware of the soft feeling and how fast my heart was beating.



When I opened my eyes, I saw a beautiful pair of amber eyes looking right back at mine. As I looked at Lord Nazel's face overflowing with love, I realized that he treasured me greatly, and I got the unshakable confidence that everything would be all right in the future.

"I love you, Agnes. I hope I can always make you happy."

"The feeling is mutual, Lord Nazel," I replied, looking down in embarrassment.

Lord Nazel chuckled and held me tight.

"I'm not letting you run away anymore," he whispered impishly.

Caught in his warm embrace, there was just one thing I wanted to tell him.

"V-Very well! Bring it on, I say!" I firmly replied.

"You're adorable, Agnes. And very reliable too."

I was still looking down, so I couldn't see Lord Nazel's expression, but I could tell that he was overjoyed from his tone of voice. I was happy to know that.

The ceremony proceeded as normal and finished without incident.

This only leaves the final event: the bouquet toss!

Once we were sure that all of the guests had exited the church, Lord Nazel and I also headed outside. We passed through the large door and into the church's garden, where I promptly turned around with a large bouquet of milomilo flowers in hand. I would stand in front of the door and toss the bouquet toward the crowd of guests behind me.

The members of our household who couldn't participate in the ceremony were also gathered out here. Among them, standing modestly some distance away, were Miss Sonia and the maids, who were all helping out as servers—even Miss Furla was here, standing off to one side, by herself. Mister Henry and Connie were also present in their capacity as assistants to Lord Nazel.

"All right, here it comes!"

Just as I uttered those words, I tossed the bouquet as hard as I could. However, because I'd used little more force than normal thanks to my reinforced arms, it rose high in the air and flew backward with incredible speed. And then...the gorgeous bouquet landed remarkably far away from all the guests. My head handmaiden Kelly happened to be standing there, busy with work.

“Hmm? My, what’s this?” Kelly stared at the object lying on the ground and picked it up. There was no one else close to her, so she’d had no choice but to pick it up. Then she called out, “You put too much strength into it, Lady Agnes. What do you expect me to do with the bouquet?”

Kelly started complaining with her usual expressionless face, but as the guests erupted into cheers, she fell silent with a troubled look on her face. Paul and Connie stared at her passionately, but she didn’t notice at all. I cheered them on in my head. *Good luck, you two.*

Paul and Connie approached Kelly slowly, trying to play it cool. But as usual, when they talked to her, she brushed them off easily, showing no signs of romantic interest in either one.

Our schedule after the formal ceremony was packed with several functions, like a gathering for our public debut, a gathering for our relatives, and a visit with Sutrena’s residents. Lord Nazel and I didn’t have any time to rest yet; we would be busy going from place to place.

For now, our next plans were for a simple reception in the church’s spacious garden with everyone gathered here. A short distance away, seating had been prepared for a meal in the style of a garden party. The damaged flower beds had been restored, and the garden was more beautiful than ever before.

“Let’s go, Agnes.”

And so we set off. We had to greet our guests. First we searched for King Bertrand and Queen Latriche, the most high-ranking people present. Queen Latriche ended up spotting us first and called out to us.

“Congratulations, Lady Agnes!”

“Thank you so much, Queen Latriche.”

“Your wedding dress is simply fantastic and a different style from the ones seen in the capital. The embroidery has a bit of a Polpystani feel to it.”

“Perhaps the two cultures are similar because Sutrena borders Polpystan.”

Next to me, Lord Nazel had started talking to King Bertrand, so I decided to continue my conversation with Queen Latriche.

“On a different note, Paul has gotten even more robust. Thank you for suggesting he study abroad in Polpystan, Queen Latriche.”

“What are you saying? I should be thanking you, Lady Agnes. You keep being a major help. In particular, taking all those noble ladies under your protection in Sutrena has been a tailwind for the policies I’m pushing forward. We are in the middle of constructing shelters in the capital for abused noblewomen, but there are still a lot of details to iron out. So it means a lot for there to already be somewhere that will take them in. You also assisted in the incident with the high priest. I’m truly sorry that we ended up causing trouble for Sutrena.”

It seemed that Queen Latriche was apologizing for freeing the concubines from the capital’s church without notifying us beforehand.

“Please, you don’t need to apologize. I heard some of those concubines were so heavily injured they were on the verge of death. I’m glad you took them in as soon as possible. Being whipped…really hurts, after all.”

During my childhood at the House of Evantail, I’d been whipped again and again by my private tutor. The whip we’d retrieved from Count Lubhuta was even longer and thicker than the one my private tutor had used. And the one wielding it had been an adult man of large frame, unlike my female tutor. No doubt the count put more strength into his swings, so the blows must have hurt much more than what I’d experienced. I was truly relieved that the concubines had been rescued.

“The concubines are being given refuge and receiving treatment in the palace. It will take some time until they fully recover, but some of them have started regaining their presence of mind.”

“If any of them wish to come to the frontier, I will welcome them into our estate.”

“I appreciate it. The incident took place in the capital’s church, so rumors spread around the city quickly. I was thinking that some of them would have trouble finding a place to go once they left the castle.”

The concubines—who couldn’t return home, or go to the Convent since it had ties to the church, or live normal lives in the city due to the rumors—were facing a problem of life and death. And even if that weren’t the case, it would be really difficult for those former noblewomen to start living as commoners with no

assistance. No matter what they did, their upbringing would become apparent from their mannerisms. Few people would willingly want to have anything to do with a former noble who smelled of trouble.

“Sutrena is really far from the capital. It’s the ideal place for them to pass the time until the heat from the Count Lubhuta incident cools,” I said.

Many daughters of nobles, both those who’d run away from home and those who had been disowned because of some scandal, now worked in our estate. The majority of them had seemed content to settle down in Sutrena. Lately, some of them had even become independent after having cultivated their skills working for us. Among them were those who had passed the fortress’s employment examination and started working there, as well as others who had gotten married to townspeople or started their own successful businesses. I was delighted to be able to assist in expanding the possibilities of all those young ladies with bright futures ahead of them.

Behind me, Lord Nazel and King Bertrand were talking about recent developments. In the sunlight, Lord Nazel was absolutely dashing; his groom’s outfit looked amazing on his slender figure.

“So, regarding Hihime, and also Zazame… You’re the only one I can ask right now,” King Bertrand said.

“I don’t really mind, but it will create more work for me. You’ll owe me for this one too. I only want to leisurely spend my time with my wife,” Lord Nazel replied.

“I…will definitely pay you back,” King Bertrand said after a short pause.

“I sure hope so.”

Lord Nazel was mean to King Bertrand at times. It seemed that he still held a small grudge both for being discreetly used when the former princess had broken off their engagement and for all the trouble His Majesty had caused him after that.

“I would also like to ask for your cooperation regarding my previous suggestion to start using mountbeasts outside the frontier.”

“Yes, in that case—” Lord Nazel noticed that I was staring at him while he was talking to King Bertrand. “What’s the matter, Agnes? Your bridal outfit looks great on you. It’s beautiful under the

sunlight. My desires to show you off and hide you are at odds with each other and it’s driving me crazy.”

Lord Nazel said the same thing he had before. When I remembered that I’d also thought he looked great under the sunlight earlier, I became flustered and restless.



“I’m pretty sure you’re already crazy in the head.”

King Bertrand took a calm jab at Lord Nazel, but he didn’t seem to care in the slightest. Instead, he smiled and tilted his head to one side to hear my response. He knew that if he kept persisting like this, I’d give in and tell him everything he wanted to hear.

“Erm, I was thinking that you also look wonderful in your groom’s outfit, Lord Nazel.”

When he saw me hesitantly tell him my true feelings, his amber eyes started shining with deep emotion.

“Agnes, you’re so adorable! I really just want to kidnap you and lock you up somewhere!”

“Are you two always like this?” King Bertrand mumbled in shock.

“Is this *really* the Nazelbart people used to call an animated doll?” Queen Latriche added from behind me with a slightly distant look.

Across from us, Lord Julian and Prince Leonardo were chatting merrily. They were close in age, which probably made it easier for them to hold a conversation. A little farther away, Paul was talking to Kelly while she worked; Connie was right next to them as well.

Those two are really persisting! That’s the spirit!

And for some reason, Miss Furla—who was supposed to be here waiting tables—was loitering behind Connie, though he didn’t notice her at all. Paul and Connie were sticking around Kelly, still worried about the result of the bouquet toss. Besides them, there were a few other men who seemed interested in her.

Kelly’s popular with the fortress staff too. I knew they regarded her as the cool, beautiful, and capable head handmaiden of our household.

After we finished greeting everyone at the party, Lord Nazel and I boarded a roofless carriage pulled by mountbeasts for a triumphant tour through our margravate. The goal was to spread the word about our wedding to all the people of Sutrena. Our carriage would follow a predetermined route, with some stops to rest included, and take us from the coastal church to our estate in the central town. Ahead of us went musicians, dancers scattering flowers, and people handing out sweets. Needless to say, we stood out a lot. It was truly embarrassing. Lord Nazel was brimming with thoughtfulness and embraced me in our carriage,

much to the delight of the people who had turned out to see us.

The sky had already begun getting dark when we finally arrived at the fortress; even here, at the end of our route, there were still many townspeople gathered to cheer for us.

“Phew, we’re finally here. Thank you for your hard work, everyone,” I said, thanking all of the people who’d assisted us on our journey. Everyone besides Lord Nazel and me had been working in shifts. Kelly and the other maids who had been working nonstop in preparation for today had been allowed to rest during the trip.

Next, we would hold a banquet with everyone from the fortress and the estate. Our venue would be the most spacious room in the fortress.

All right, time for the after-party.

We were guided inside the already-decorated venue and seated in the most conspicuous front seats. I disliked being the center of attention, but I’d gotten really used to it thanks to that parade. Now that I’d gone through an entire journey continuously exposed to the public gaze, I felt like my senses had grown numb to all sorts of things.

Thank goodness, the fortress is also filled with familiar faces. Oh, Mister Henry is in the emcee’s seat.

With Mister Henry as the host, Lord Nazel greeted the guests, and a lively reception began. The fortress staff loved to drink, and it looked like they’d already downed a few glasses.

“How about a drink, Lady Agnes?”

“Thank you.”

Some of the staff came to talk to me with a wine bottle in one hand. However, Lord Nazel intervened before I had a chance to act.

“My wife can’t hold her liquor, so allow me to have it instead,” he said, holding out his glass. The clear glass was soon filled to the brim with bloodred wine.

Ah… Oh, Lord Nazel, you’re just as much of a lightweight, you know?

Perhaps he didn’t want to show his weakness to everyone around him, because he drained his first glass with a composed expression.

Aren’t things going exactly the same as they did during Emilio’s

welcome party?

I immediately signaled Kelly and Miss Sonia with my eyes. The two of them nodded in response, took several other maids with them, and quickly headed to the fortress's kitchen.

Time to carry out the operation!

They returned with bottles containing mostly grape juice or violaberry juice, drinks with incredibly low alcohol content. The plan was for them to nonchalantly place those bottles on the tables of the people taking drinks to Lord Nazel and swap them with the bottles of actual alcohol. The fortress staff were already drunk, so they wouldn't notice the switch…hopefully. Thanks to the maids' skillful performance, the drinks brought to Lord Nazel were almost alcohol-free.

Phew, I'm glad we weren't found out.

The people who couldn't drink alcohol were instead drinking juice made from fruit gathered in the estate or tapioca milk tea. On Lord Nazel's instructions, I was forbidden to have any other kind of beverage. I couldn't very well seduce him in public, after all.

And so, the after-party ended peacefully, and we headed home feeling delighted.

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It was deep into the night when we finally arrived home. True to his earlier words about wanting to kidnap me and lock me up, Lord Nazel took me to our room still in my dress. Despite my efforts, he was a little drunk.

I'd like to get changed first…

We'd swapped the alcohol partway through the party, but Lord Nazel had been drinking wine until that point.

"Are you all right, Lord Nazel? Are you feeling drunk?"

"I won't get drunk from just that little. You worry too much, Agnes. Ahhh, you're so cute." Although he was behaving questionably, I couldn't tell whether he was actually drunk. "I'm truly happy to be here with you in your wedding dress."

"I'm also happy to be with you in your dashing groom's outfit—Eep!"

Before I could finish my sentence, Lord Nazel hugged me

tightly. But the hands touching me were very gentle and I felt that I was truly being cherished.

“Please stay by my side forever, Agnes.”

“Of course. I also wish we can stay together. I will devote myself even harder to my role as the margravine.”

“You’re perfect just the way you are. I’m fine with anything as long as Agnes is Agnes.”

“Your words aren’t making much sense. You really must be drunk, Lord Nazel. Please lie down on the bed and get some rest soon.” I tried to guide him to the bed, but he wouldn’t budge.

“I told you I’m not drunk. But if I’m going to lie down, let’s sleep together.”

Lord Nazel went to the bed without waiting for my response and pulled me toward him. I was less nimble with my dress still on, so I lost my balance and ended up falling right on top of him.

“Eek! I’m sorry, I must be heavy.” I tried to get up, but Lord Nazel held me down with both arms.

“No, you’re light as a feather. You’re so fluffy, you look like an angel. But it looks hard to move like that.”

“Um, I’d like to get changed.”

“I’ll give you a hand. It must be difficult to do that on your own.”

I felt a disturbing presence as Lord Nazel started making some preposterous statements, and I made to escape, but my attempt was futile.

“N-No, I’m f-f-fine! I’m just going outside for a bit!”

“Now, now, there’s no need to be shy.”

Lord Nazel was pushy despite his laid-back attitude. I really couldn’t tell if he was drunk or sober anymore. However, somehow I found myself getting swept up in his rhythm once again tonight.

The next day, Lord Nazel and I made our formal debut to the people of our margravate. I was wearing a different dress from yesterday, but it still had a bridal air to it. We stood side by side on a wide veranda in the central town’s fortress. A large crowd had already gathered in the public square in front of the fortress, where people were giving their blessings to us for our wedding ceremony. Back when Lord Nazel had first taken up his post here, he’d been frantically focused solely on reforming Sutrena, so he hadn’t been able to hold a grand celebration like this. The two of

us had just tried our best to do everything we could.

Has Sutrena become a bit easier to live in? Are the people feeling glad to have been born here?

To be honest, I constantly had my doubts and worries, but…

At the very least, the people gathered here look truly happy to see us.

Perhaps this meant that they'd accepted us as their rulers. I'd be happy if that were the case.

"Let's wave at them together, Agnes."

"Yes, Lord Nazel."

I felt nervous, but I managed to awkwardly move my right hand, and the crowd's cheers erupted into a roar. I turned toward Lord Nazel in surprise and saw that his alluring amber eyes were narrowed mischievously.

That's the face he has when he's plotting something!

I hurriedly tried to put some distance between us, but I was too slow. Or rather, he was too fast. I was tragically captured and hugged tight in full view of everyone. For some reason, people were shrieking in delight.

"Why did you try to run from me, Agnes?"

"Busted…"

Lord Nazel's somewhat amused face drew closer to mine, and then…I felt the touch of his lips.

Th-This is our second public kiss, following the one in the church!

In that instant, there was excited cheering, screaming, roaring… Whatever you called it, tremendously loud voices, incomparably louder than anything so far, resounded through the square; I could only assume the entire town heard the tumult. There were women collapsing with nosebleeds, elderly people shedding tears, children with sparkling eyes, and sculptors keeping their eyes peeled to avoid missing a single moment.

In any case, our debut at the fortress became a major event that went down in Sutrena's history.

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After the incident, Count Lubhuta and his collaborators had all been dispatched to some of the strictest convents in the country. The count himself had apparently been sent to the same place

Master Robin had been confined to: the Sempli Convent. King Bertrand systematically sent all nobles who'd caused problems related to women there.

Master Robin and Count Lubhuta both have rather...unique...personalities, but I wonder if they can get along. Nothing would come out of me worrying, so I thought I'd trust the Sempli Convent to do the rest.

The treatment of the other people involved in the case was also being finalized. Miss Sonia, Viscount Hihime's eldest daughter, had decided to leave our estate and become independent, moving to the west of Sutrena. She'd apparently take charge of the church's affairs from now on. She'd essentially been running the Viscounty of Hihime by herself, so I wasn't worried at all when it came to her work; in fact, I felt completely reassured.

And Emilio is over there too. Should I start counting down the days until their wedding?

Miss Furla, Viscount Hihime's second daughter, wouldn't return to her family and would instead continue working at our estate. Her work performance had been steadily improving lately. According to Kelly, she wanted to take the examination to work at the fortress, so she was studying hard in her free time.

After our wedding ceremony, by King Bertrand's order, Lord Nazel was entrusted with the management of Zazame and Hihime in addition to Sutrena. That was apparently what the two of them had been discussing during the lunch party. And so, after losing their rulers, Zazame and Hihime were now annexed by Sutrena.

Lord Nazel was busy going from place to place on Dunk's back, since we'd discovered she could actually fly. After researching in various books and talking to experts, his current theory was that Dunk wasn't a grani but rather a sleipnir. Sleipnirs were apparently legendary manabeasts—even rarer than granis—who could fly thanks to the mana in their legs.

In order to help Lord Nazel now that he'd become even busier than before, I flew along with him on Geni and started learning how to tackle work beyond our estate. There were still many things for me to study. But I felt that I could overcome any obstacle as long as I was together with Lord Nazel and the people of the frontier.

All right, time for another day of hard work. Harvesting the field

first, then going out!

I put on my shoes and left the kitchen through the nearby door. I took a deep breath of the refreshing morning air, walked on the dry grass with light steps, and headed straight for the field.

Side Story 1: Father Emilio's Counseling Room

Emilio had recently taken up an important task as a priest: As part of the church's philanthropic work, he provided a counseling service for the people of Sutrena. People could come anonymously and confide their worries directly to him, send letters with a return address included, or simply ask for him to listen to the cries of their heart. The church was flooded day and night with all sorts of people seeking his counsel. He also received countless letters from different parts of Sutrena.

Since this workload was impossible for Emilio to handle alone, he left some of the counseling replies to his reliable apprentice priests, who'd recently been dispatched from the capital to assist him. However, there were some thorny problems that they couldn't decide how to deal with, and those letters ultimately ended up in Emilio's hands. Today was yet another day with such troublesome concerns landing on his desk.

"Four of them today, huh..."

Emilio checked the sender of the first letter and opened it with a serious expression. The counselee was using the pseudonym "Three Time," and the letter was titled "I want to see my beloved!"

"Uh...just go and see them, then."

The message was written in intense, large letters and talked about the sender's fierce affection for the one they loved. "I want us to get married!" was also written at the end of the letter. Apparently, this person's beloved had gotten involved in a crime and was presently in a rehabilitation facility, so they could only meet on limited occasions. The sender's marriage proposals had also been turned down repeatedly.

Emilio spent some time in thought and eventually wrote "Don't give up" as his reply. He sympathized with the part about them only being able to see their beloved occasionally and tried adding his own wishes to his reply.

I also missed Miss Sonia while we lived apart. And I also want to propose to her one day.

Emilio sealed the reply containing his slightly personal feelings and tossed it into a box next to his desk labeled “Answered.” This letter would help bring a couple together in the future, but he had no way of knowing that yet.

Emilio moved on to opening the second letter, which also requested counseling about romance. The sender’s pseudonym was “Manabeast Lover,” and their letter was titled “The one I love is too cool, calm, and collected.”

Another one about love, huh? There’s clearly no romantic interest from the other party. From the title alone, he could already vaguely guess that the situation was tragic. It was honestly heartbreaking. Just as he’d suspected, the sender’s loved one didn’t realize the sender’s affection, nor did they take any notice of them at all. The writer was asking what they could do to make their crush’s heart beat faster. As an additional wrinkle, they apparently even had a worthy rival for the object of their affection.

This is a tricky situation.

“You should convey your love more intensely,” Emilio wrote. If they made such an obvious move, the other person would have to respond in some way, though he didn’t know whether things would go smoothly. He placed his reply in the “Answered” box and continued with the third letter.

The next one was titled “The one I love is too cold. ☆” It bore a striking resemblance to the previous letter. The sender’s pseudonym was “Furi-furi ☆” and Emilio assumed this was a woman based on the handwriting. He wrote the same reply as before and picked up the fourth letter.

The last letter was titled “Concerning my wife,” and had been sent by “N.F.” Letters asking for advice about marital problems were very common in Emilio’s work. Though he was still inexperienced in romance, he tried to reply to couples’ worries as sincerely as possible. However, as he swiftly scanned the letter, his complexion gradually grew paler and paler.

Okay, first of all, this letter is unhinged. And the sender’s initials bring a certain person to mind… Also, hasn’t the same person sent me a similar letter?

The letter’s contents were full of tricky aspects, as would be expected for any note that had been passed on to Emilio to deal with personally. To be perfectly honest, he was worried about how

he should reply.

"Erm, 'My wife is so adorable, I don't know what to do.' Still the same as ever."

Emilio could already feel a headache coming on from the first sentence alone, but he continued reading the letter. The sender's wife would sometimes disguise herself and walk around town, and every time, a person of the opposite sex would approach her, which made the author feel uneasy. Some of them even took direct action and started passionately cozying up to his wife, so he wanted to somehow eliminate them… The letter contained some extremely disturbing content.

For now, Emilio replied with "You should desist from that idea." Those were his sincere thoughts on the matter.

Lord Nazelbart… He's an excellent margrave, but he can be surprisingly petty when it comes to Lady Agnes. There were times he would show glimpses of this behavior when they were together, but this letter was decisive proof of his over-the-top love for his wife.

After Emilio finished writing his reply for this perilous counseling request, he put it inside the "Answered" box and cheerfully stood up from his chair.

"Agh! I want some counseling for *my* worries already!"

The young priest's shout echoed over the night sea. His counseling service would continue on to the next day…

Side Story 2: The Sempli Convent's Newcomer

That day, Robin was lurking near the convent's entrance, hiding from the demonic monk who supervised him. He wanted to see the face of the newcomer arriving from the capital. The Sempli Convent was the strictest in all of Desnim and was off-limits to women. The lifestyle was austere, the training was intense and sweaty, the senior monks were scary, and so on; this institution was an absolute nightmare for Robin.

Several months had already passed since Robin had been confined to the convent by royal decree. There was no entertainment to be had here, he was forced to do various chores since he was the newest member there, and the other guys were constantly after his butt, so he had no moment to feel at ease. Moreover, all of the other monks were unrefined brutes who didn't know the first thing about style. He and they didn't mesh together in the slightest.

I might be able to carry on a conversation with someone from the capital. Talking to guys is boring, but it's only men here anyway. And if someone lower-ranking than me comes, I'll just have to work him to the bone!

Robin continued hiding behind the stairs next to the entrance, plotting his sinister schemes. Some time later, the massive entrance door was unlocked, and a single man was dragged inside by soldiers.

Hmm, I can't see him very well with the soldiers in the way.

Tired of waiting, Robin leaned forward to take a closer look at the newcomer. The man, already dressed in a habit, was an unbelievably fat, red-faced, middle-aged man!

Blech! And here I had my hopes up because I heard he came from the capital... What the heck, this guy sucks! Actually, I feel like I've seen him somewhere before.

Robin, formerly the princess's fiancé, had a hard time remembering the faces of men. The newcomer was also in plain clothes, so it was even harder to recognize him. He just looked like

some ordinary fat guy to Robin. As he continued observing the man, the demonic monk suddenly appeared behind him.

“Hello there, Robin! You skipped out on martial arts training again, didn’t you?!”

“Eek, the demon’s here!”

“Get changed into your loincloth right away!”

“No! Way! I simply can’t accept being dressed like that! Oh, that’s right, don’t we have to teach the newcomer all sorts of things? I’ll take very gentle care of the newbie! Leave it to me. Since we’re here already, why not have him join the martial arts training?”

Robin was already scheming to use the new guy to his advantage. But then, the newcomer looked toward Robin and was able to identify him.

“Well, if it isn’t Master Robin!”

Huh? Who is this guy? I literally have no clue.

The demonic monk pointed at the fat man and shed some light on Robin’s confusion.

“That’s Count Lubhuta, the former high priest.”

That’s crazy talk! The high priest who dressed in those gaudy clothes and was always holding a whip has come here?

Though he was surprised, Robin immediately put on a patronizing air.

“Heya, Count Lubhuta. Things probably don’t make sense since you just got here, so nice little me is going to teach you everything.”

“We can talk later, Master Robin. Hey, someone carry my luggage! And get me some women right now! I will only accept unmarried daughters of nobles!”

Robin was taken aback to see Lubhuta brazenly making a fuss mere steps past the entrance, completely forgetting his own past deeds. The demonic monk behind him was outraged.

Wow, this old man is a real piece of work! As if there would be any noblewomen here!

The only people here were merciless, hardheaded, sweaty monks. They all silently looked in Robin’s direction to hear the opinion of the demonic monk, the one who oversaw all of them.

After some careful thought, the leader shouted “Go get some loincloths!”

“Yes, sir!” the monks replied before running off to do as they’d been told.

Robin had a really bad feeling about this.

“Huh? Why loincloths? Can I just leave now?”

Lubhuta stared in confusion, completely lost. He even made the embarrassing remark of wondering whether they made noblewomen wear loincloths here.

“We’re all training in martial arts today! We’ll dispel our worldly desires through sweat, exercise, and camaraderie!” the leader said.

“Yeaaah!” the other monks all cried out in deep voices.

“Yes, that’s some great solidarity!” The demonic monk nodded in satisfaction. He noticed that Robin was running away, so he leaped upon him with bestial agility.

“Hey, stop that! I’m not interested in getting all butty-butty with guys!”

A short distance away, Lubhuta was shouting without hiding his dissatisfaction at all.

“Where are the women?! Bring me a whip!”

“Shut up! Go get changed into a loincloth right away!”

The demonic monk’s cry had smashed Robin’s scheme to pieces. Lubhuta and Robin were both dragged to the training grounds. These two men cut from the same cloth were later relentlessly tossed about by their senior monks during training.

Side Story 3: Madam Bumpkin's New Disguise

The "Statue of the Margravine Disguised as a Maid" had finally been completed in Sutrena's central town. It was a conspicuous stone statue depicting me dressed in a maid outfit—except it was as tall as a two-story building.

Nooo! Why did they build it like that?!

Lord Nazel had informed me of its construction beforehand, but they'd still been carving the stone back then, so I'd never imagined the statue would end up so extravagant. I felt greatly troubled as a maid who'd been sent out shopping informed me about the statue. According to her, it had such a high level of perfection that anyone could tell it was me at a glance. And as if that weren't enough, they'd even erected it in the public square in front of the fortress, a place plenty of people regularly passed through.

What should I do?! I can't go into town incognito dressed as a maid anymore!

The main street passed by the public square, and most of the stores I frequented were lined up on that road.

No matter how you look at it, my disguise will be completely useless now! It's embarrassing! If it's come to this…

I called out to Kelly, who happened to be passing by at that exact moment, and asked her about a new outfit to use during my outings. And so, I became Kelly's dress-up doll for the various disguises she'd prepared. She'd brought everything over as soon as I'd asked; just when did she have the time to arrange all of this?

"Thank you, Kelly. You must have prepared these in advance for this kind of situation, right?"

"No, I've just been collecting them as a hobby. My, this one would also look great on you, Lady Agnes. And this outfit too… Heh heh heh!"

Although Kelly appeared composed at first glance, it was clear that she was more excited than usual. It was in her nature not to make a lot of obvious fuss. But since I'd spent a lot of time with

her, I could sense her quiet joy. Her usually placid eyes were opened wide, and her cheeks were just a bit flushed!

"Um, Kelly?"

"Should we go with a town girl outfit, or a housewife, or maybe men's clothes? What a terribly tricky question. How about using a different outfit every day?"

As Kelly earnestly worried over my choice of disguise, there was a knock on the wooden door.

"Hmm?"

She quickly tidied up all the clothes and went to see who it was. When she approached the door, we heard Lord Nazel's voice from the other side. It seemed he'd returned from the fortress.

"Is Agnes in there?" he asked.

"Yes, she is. She just finished changing. Please come in," Kelly replied in a nonchalant voice before opening the door to show Lord Nazel inside.

I was dressed in men's clothing at the moment, appearing just like any commoner boy you'd see in town. Kelly's intention had been to make me look like an apprentice at some firm. I was in a white shirt, a vest that was of somewhat fine quality yet still casual, and gray trousers. My hair was hidden underneath a hat, and I was wearing a pair of smooth, black leather shoes.

"What a cute boy," Lord Nazel said with a smile when he saw me. He cleared his throat then spoke again with a serious expression. "A boy this cute might be taken away!"

"It's true that Lady Agnes is absolutely lovely in men's clothes, but…please don't actually do what you just said, Lord Nazelbart," the expressionless Kelly interjected calmly.

But if Lord Nazel recognized I'm disguised as a boy, I must actually look like one, right? I can go out like this without problems. After carefully checking my disguise, I decided to go with this man's outfit.

"By the way, Lord Nazel, did you need me for something?"

"Yes. Looking at my cute wife's face is an important task, don't you think?"

It looked like he didn't have any business to attend to, so I thought of making a suggestion.

"How about we go into town together, Lord Nazel? I want to try walking around in the clothes Kelly prepared for me." And check

up on that problematic statue at all costs.

Kelly nonchalantly prepared a new set of clothes.

“I also have clothes for Lord Nazelbart here. The intention is to make him look like an ordinary clerk, the kind you might find at any firm.”

“Eh…”

Lord Nazel and I looked at the clothes Kelly was holding; she’d clearly prepared these in advance.

Kelly’s far *too well prepared for this.*

Lord Nazel also got changed into an incognito outfit. Kelly saw us off with a satisfied expression as we set out together side by side. We boarded a carriage because we would stand out too much if we took Geni.

I smiled as I looked up at Lord Nazel from the seat next to him.

“We look like brothers, Lord Nazel.”

“My heart would be soothed every day with a cute brother like you. Let’s take this chance and pretend that we’re siblings, then.”

Lord Nazel kept calling me cute today as well, even though he was perfectly sober.

I could see the peaceful townscape passing by through the carriage window. A short time later, we parked the carriage in an inconspicuous location and put our disguises into action. As Lord Nazel and I walked hand in hand on the recently paved cobblestone path, a doubt suddenly popped up in my mind.

“Um, do brothers still hold hands at this age?”

I had a feeling that it wasn’t all that common, so I decided to check with Lord Nazel just in case. He had Lord Julian as a younger brother—I figured he should know.

Unfortunately, Paul and I have never been close enough to hold hands at any age.

Lord Nazel replied as he led me toward the main street.

“Yes, they do.”

“Eh, really? So you walk around town with Lord Julian like this even though you’re adults now?!”

Silence.

“We do.”

Why did he pause before replying? Although Lord Nazel was smiling and wouldn’t let me read his true feelings, I found his reply suspicious. I didn’t want to be immediately found out when I’d

gone to the trouble of disguising myself in men's clothes.

"Lord Nazel, let's start acting like proper siblings."

"How, exactly?"

"First of all, I don't think adult men hold hands. Let's keep an appropriate distance."

Lord Nazel looked dissatisfied, but he listened to my request and let go of my hand. We continued walking along the street until we arrived at the statue. I approached the massive "Statue of the Margravine Disguised as a Maid" and examined it from up close.



“This statue…is certainly quite detailed. They’ve even accurately reproduced my maid outfit’s design,” I said.

“I can tell that it’s you at a glance. I want to take it back home.”

I felt like Lord Nazel had been making more and more outlandish statements lately. I didn’t want to be hard on him, because he must have endured a lot up to now, but I was worried about how far he would actually go with some of his wilder ideas.

Next, we went to the marketplace along the main street, but…

“Oh, if it isn’t the margrave. You’re so handsome that I immediately recognized you. You look great in commoner’s clothing too.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

Oh my goodness. An old lady passing by had immediately seen through Lord Nazel’s disguise. To be fair, he really was exceptionally handsome, so it made sense to me that he couldn’t fool her with a change of clothes alone. *We might need to put a lot of makeup on him to make him look like a different person.*

The woman then turned her attention to me.

“My, my! At first I thought this was just your attendant, but if it isn’t the margravine! I recognized you right away from your unusual hair color. So grateful for your happy marriage and that Sutrena’s future looks secure!”

Lord Nazel was one thing, but even my identity had been quickly discovered!

My hair color was the problem?! Maybe I should try dyeing it next time.

The woman looked at us with a heartwarming smile.

“I can’t wait to see your baby. At this rate, it looks like you’ll have an heir soon.”

I squealed as I covered my cheeks. My palms felt hot.

We parted ways with the cheery old lady and hastily went around the marketplace, Lord Nazel leading me by the hand. I had no room to think about stuff like how holding hands was unusual for siblings or how it would be bad if even more people realized our identities.

“An heir, huh? I’ll try even harder.”

Lord Nazel started saying some truly outrageous things as we left the marketplace and were on our way back to the carriage. I hastened to correct him.

“No, no, no, you’re already doing *quite* enough. If you try any harder, my body won’t last! We should just let nature take its course.”

Even after we got on the carriage and headed home, my heart kept throbbing loudly.

One month later, talks about constructing a new statue in the central town of Sutrena began. It would be called “Statue of the Margrave and Cross-Dressing Margravine Going Incognito” and would apparently be built on the main street. A maid in charge of shopping told me the news.

“I’m looking forward to the new statue, milady.”

As for me, I mostly just felt embarrassed. I had only gone into town dressed like that a few times, but perhaps the sculptors watched for me more closely than I’d thought.

In that case, I’ll have to try a new disguise to go into town! This time I’ll surely stay undercover without anyone discovering my identity!

I tightened my hands into fists and steeled my resolve before heading to once again discuss outfits with Kelly.

Afterword

Greetings, I'm Ageha Sakura. I'd like to sincerely thank you for purchasing this book. I'm overjoyed that this series is still going.

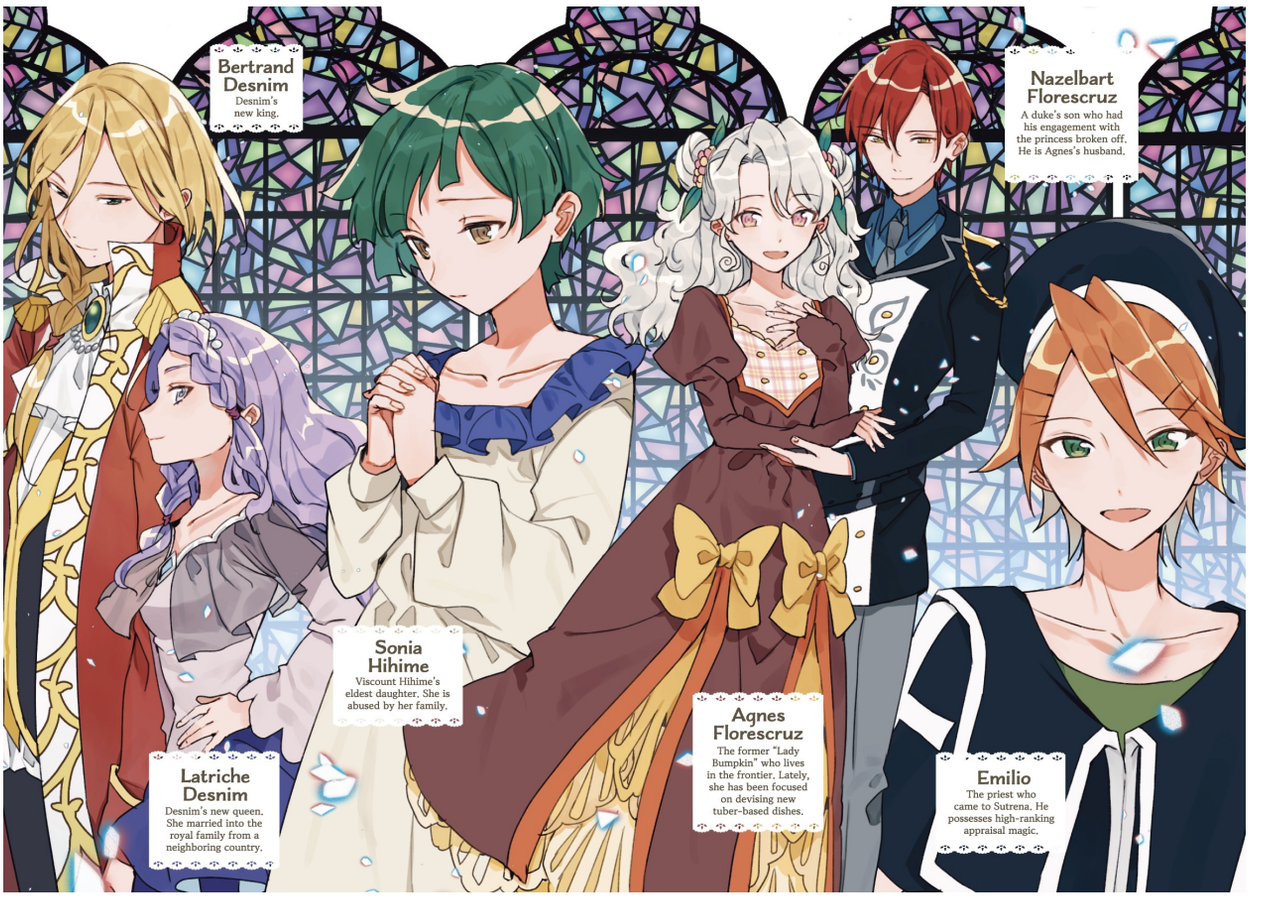
The story picks up and continues from the second volume. As you can see from Kurodeko's adorable, wonderful cover, this volume is centered around a wedding ceremony. Nazel, who has been freed from his unfortunate circumstances and has become full of spirit in many ways, and Agnes, who's gradually grown into her role as the margravine, are finally holding their wedding ceremony. Robin, who was arrested in the second volume, is the same as ever, but he's in good health at the convent. I hope he can make new friends and live a fun, humble life.

The manga adaptation of *Lady Bumpkin* is also in serialization with art by Narina Nanaura. It's a really fun and interesting manga, so if you haven't read it yet, I highly recommend you look it up!

I'd like to offer my heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in the production of this volume—as well as to all you readers. I hope we can meet again.

Ageha Sakura


“Let’s have a wedding ceremony.”


Bertrand Desnim
Desnim's new king.
Nazelbart Florescruz
A duke's son who had his engagement with the princess broken off. He is Agnes's husband.
Sonia Hihime
Viscount Hihime's eldest daughter. She is abused by her family.
Agnes Florescruz
The former "Lady Bumpkin" who lives in the frontier. Lately, she has been focused on devising new tuber-based dishes.
Latriche Desnim
Desnim's new queen. She married into the royal family from a neighboring country.
Emilio
The priest who came to Sutrena. He possesses high-ranking appraisal magic.


The ring was inlaid with round ambers, the same color as Lord Nazel's eyes. I loved this color—it was warm and gentle.
"It's wonderful. I'm absolutely delighted."



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Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain: Volume 3
by Ageha Sakura

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