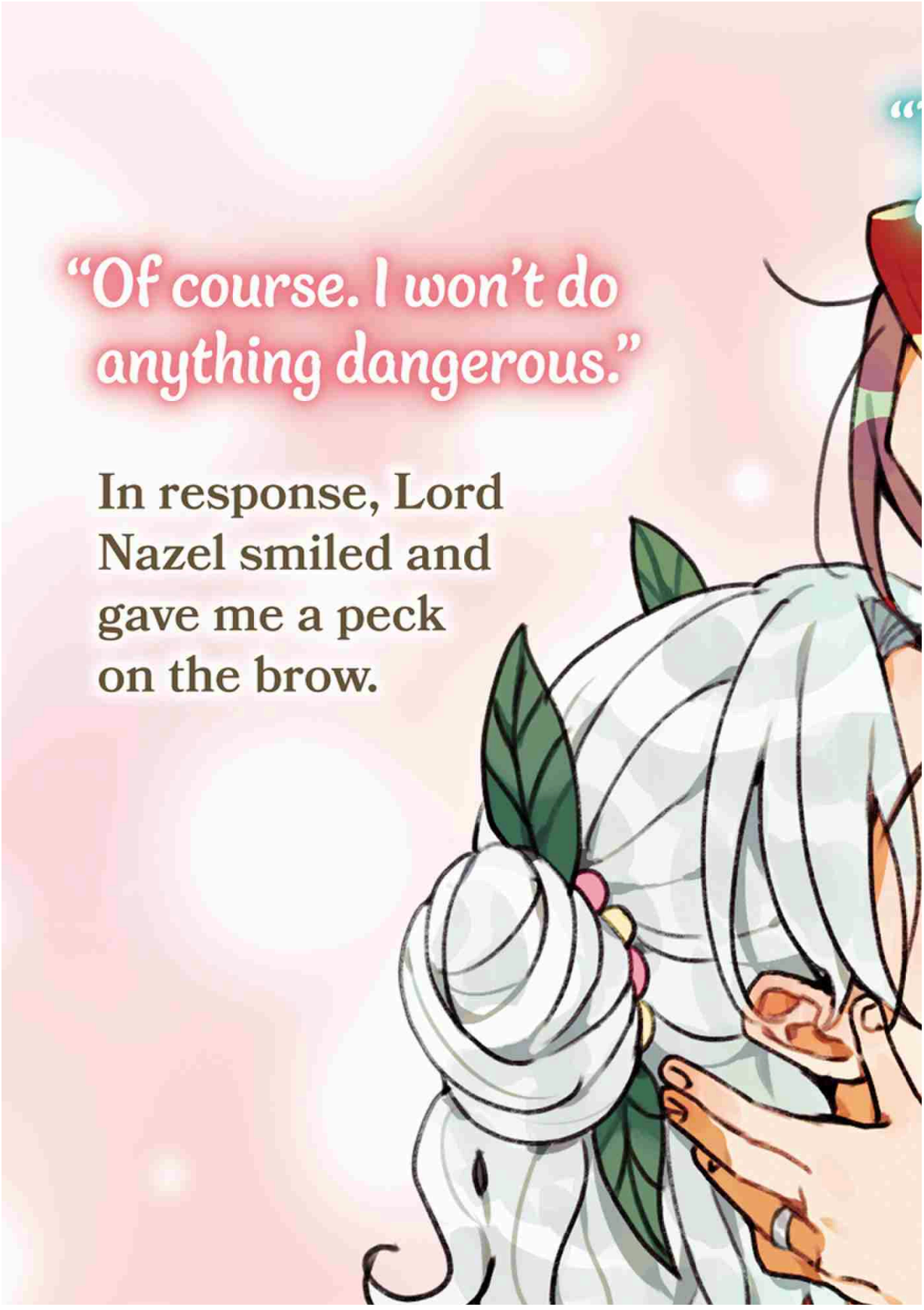
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"Of course. I won't do anything dangerous."
In response, Lord Nazel smiled and gave me a peck on the brow.



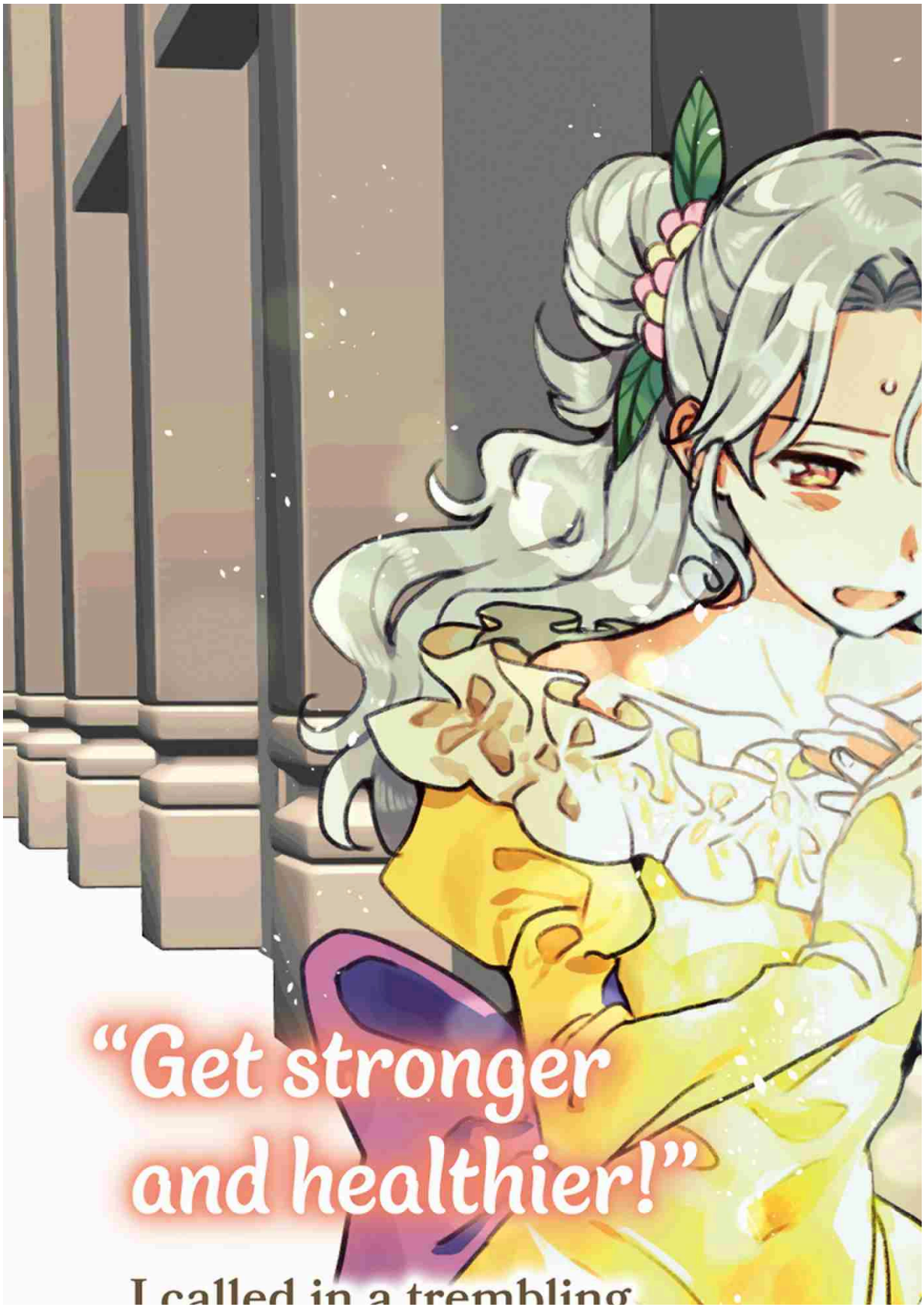

"Get stronger
and healthier!"
I called in a trembling

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Chapter 1: Madam Bumpkin Returns to High Society

After our wedding ceremony, spring passed, and I was about to enter my second rainy season in the frontier land of Sutrena. Lord Nazel had now become even more like a margrave and was continuing a busy life of coming and going between the fortress and our estate. As the margravine, I also worked hard to manage our ever-increasing number of servants, take more young noblewomen under our protection, secure higher income for our margravate, and improve the lives of the people here. The number of jobs I was capable of doing had gradually increased, and I'd grown rather busy.

I've finally gotten used to a margravine's work. But speaking of a margravine's work...there's still that one thing I'm terrible at. I felt gloomy whenever I thought about this topic. However, this was a duty I couldn't avoid as a proper wife who supported Lord Nazel.

"Social gatherings..."

Yes, social gatherings, something that only brought back bitter, sad, and painful memories. I'd experienced all kinds of hardships as Lady Bumpkin, so I felt insecure when it came to attending parties and the like.

Even though I'm not being ridiculed as Lady Bumpkin anymore, I find it hard to go to places where I'll draw a lot of attention.

As the wife of Lord Nazel—whom I'd married under shocking circumstances—I stood out whether I liked it or not. He'd always protected me during the parties I'd attended ever since we'd gotten married. But from now on, I had to brave the raging waves of high society on my own. The kind Lord Nazel would surely say something like, "You don't have to go to any social gatherings, Agnes. You don't like them, right?" but I couldn't let him spoil me forever.

That's right—I have to get my act together. I must advance

Sutrena's interests through social gatherings so that I'm not a disgrace as Lord Nazel's wife and so that I can support him even more than I have thus far!

That was my duty as the margravine of Sutrena and Lord Nazel's wife.

Now that it's settled, time to make my return to high society.

Up until now, I'd only participated in gatherings I'd been forced to attend, but I resolved to be more proactive from now on—even if the thought of attending more parties was a depressing one. Fortunately, ever since the incident with former Princess Mia and Master Robin had ended, we'd occasionally received invitations to gatherings or tea parties. And as Lord Nazel's influence grew stronger, the invitations continued to increase.

I was in my room, glancing at the mountain of invitations piled up on a corner of my desk.

The letters are exuding immense pressure. I had to do something about them soon. *Whose invitation should I reply to first?*

Deciding which event to attend was very important, and so was the order in which I sent my replies. But since I'd been completely isolated back in my Lady Bumpkin days, I didn't have the slightest idea which invitations I should reply to.

In that case, I can only ask Kelly to... No, of course she wouldn't know. Miss Sonia...wasn't even allowed to have a formal social debut. Asking Miss Furla...might be a bit dangerous. The other noble ladies we've taken under our protection are all unfamiliar with high society because of their own family circumstances.

I was in a bind. The more I thought about it, the more unapproachable high society felt.

I can, of course, rely on Lord Nazel, but I don't want to depend on him for every single thing. There's no point in me burdening him further when my goal is to help him out.

As I fretted over this dilemma, Kelly brought me a letter that had just been delivered.

"Another invitation has arrived, Lady Agnes."

"Thank you, Kelly. Oh, it's from Queen Latriche." Miraculously, the letter was an invitation to the queen's tea party. It was a real

lifesaver.

Queen Latriche isn't the type to hold tea parties often.

That was partly because Polpystan didn't have that custom and partly because King Bertrand's unusual circumstances had kept her exceptionally busy until recently. Queen Latriche must also have been working hard to be more socially active. It was reassuring to see that we were likely fighting the same battle.

"I've made up my mind, Kelly. I'll be attending Queen Latriche's tea party."

"Lady Agnes..." Kelly looked like she was thinking for a moment before she nodded quietly but firmly. "Understood. Please leave your outfit to me. I shall also accompany you to the venue."

"How reliable."

"However, Her Majesty's tea party will take place in the capital."

"That's right. King Bertrand is currently proceeding with a trial run of his mountbeast introduction policy, so I will take the opportunity to travel there on mountbeast."

"My training to learn how to ride a mountbeast has paid off."

Although she wasn't showing it openly, I could tell that Kelly was excited.

I was able to do this thanks to everyone supporting me, including Kelly, so I had to fulfill my own duty as well.

I'll also do my best! I slapped my cheeks to pump myself up and wrote a reply to Queen Latriche's letter at once.



Since this was an invitation from the queen herself, no noble would be offended if I prioritized attending her tea party above all others. We were also good friends, so I felt at ease around her. The more I thought about it, the more fitting an occasion it seemed for my first tea party not as Lady Bumpkin but as Margravine of Sutrena.

I'll tell Lord Nazel that I will be attending the queen's tea party. Since I would be going to the capital, I would surely stay overnight. I couldn't afford to worry my overprotective husband.

Later that day, I headed to Lord Nazel's room after confirming he had returned. He had been commuting to work on Dunk recently, so he got home early. He showed up as soon as I knocked on the door.

"W-Welcome home, Lord Nazel."

"I'm home, Agnes." It looked like he'd just finished changing into casual clothes. As he looked down at me, he suddenly put his arms around my back and hugged me tight. "Aah, I feel soothed. I love you, Agnes."

"Bwah?!" I was dragged into the room, still in his arms. "Eep! Lord Nazel?! Wait a—"

He didn't stop even when I raised my voice. He carried me to the sofa, placed me down gently, then sat next to me. Since he'd squeezed into his seat, the two of us were practically sticking to each other.

"Your heart's pounding, isn't it, Agnes?"

His guess was spot-on. He smiled happily as he moved his hand behind me and wrapped it around my shoulder. Our distance in our everyday lives kept getting shorter and shorter, and today, I was yet again at his mercy.

"So, did you have some business with me, Agnes?"

"Ah! That's right. I came to tell you that I want to attend Queen Latriche's tea party."

"You're going to a tea party, you say?"

"Yes. I thought it was about time for me to also take part in social activities."

"Hmm? You don't need to force yourself. You don't like that kind of stuff, right? I don't think there's any reason for you to make

yourself go.” Lord Nazel’s reaction was just the one I’d expected. He spoiled me to no end.

“U-Umm, it’s true that social gatherings aren’t my forte, but it would be strange for a noblewoman to never participate in social events, and above all else, I want to challenge myself once more. This tea party is Queen Latriche’s, so I thought I would feel safer there than going to a completely unfamiliar place with a host I don’t even know.”

Back when I’d attended tea parties or other events as Lady Bumpkin, I’d single-mindedly rushed toward the nobleman my parents had wanted me to get engaged to. Compared to those times, the queen’s party should be no big deal. But ever since coming to the frontier...I’d grown weaker. Lord Nazel and everyone else had been truly kind to me, so I’d grown content with my comfortable life.

Actually, when it comes to socializing, things are better now that I don’t have to reluctantly make advances toward someone I know isn’t interested in me. I shouldn’t get timid now. I renewed my resolve to be of use to Lord Nazel as his wife.

“Your determination is clear to me, Agnes. However, if anything unpleasant happens, come back home right away.”

“You pamper me too much, Lord Nazel.” It was nearly unheard-of for a noblewoman—even one who lived on the frontier—to completely avoid socializing.

“I’m just concerned for you. I know many ill-natured wives or daughters of nobles.”

“Don’t worry. I’m no longer Lady Bumpkin.” My days when people kept me at a distance, whispered insults about me, and bullied me should be over.

Having successfully gotten Lord Nazel’s permission to attend the tea party, I now felt truly relieved. However, I was unsuccessful in escaping from his side, and he ended up helping me with new tuber research. The dexterous Lord Nazel flipped through the pages of the illustrated reference book on the table while still embracing me.

“Actually, a new variety of tuber has been discovered in Sutrena,” he said.

"Oh my! So there are other kinds besides yams."

"Recent studies have shown that while most crops don't grow in this land, some wild plant species do thrive." Lord Nazel's hand continued flipping through the book and stopped on a certain page. "It's this one."

The illustration looked like some kind of vine.

"It looks like a beanstalk," I said.

"It's called a hodo. It's a type of tuber that grows in wastelands, but just like you said, it's part of the bean family. They're mainly cultivated in Polpystan's mountain regions. The people there have a custom by which a mother gives her daughter a hodo seedling to raise, so that it may one day provide the nourishment needed for childbirth. There are different species of hodo, but the ones found in Sutrena are the same kind that are cultivated in Polpystan. Perhaps manabeasts brought them here."

Lord Nazel could have been right. There were manabeasts that carried seeds or moved with plants hanging from their bodies.

"It's a great discovery that such an amazing tuber has taken root in Sutrena." I looked over the book together with Lord Nazel.

"Moreover, there's apparently a theory that when other vegetables have an abundant harvest, hodo become smaller, and when other crops have a poor yield, hodo become larger. They don't deplete the soil when planted repeatedly either. The text also says that they can be cooked just like potatoes, so they should be easy to eat."

"Ooh, further down it says that they also have breast-enlargement properties."

"I think you're perfect just the way you are, Agnes," Lord Nazel said following a short pause.

"Eep!" I secretly checked the size of my chest while hiding it with both hands so Lord Nazel couldn't see it. *I'm about average...I guess?* Nonetheless, if we managed to harvest hodo, I thought I'd try eating a lot of them. "What's been done with the hodo they discovered?"

"They were brought to our estate for research. They apparently prefer dry places, so since Sutrena's rainy season is almost upon us,

I put them somewhere safe just in case."

"Amazing as always, Lord Nazel!"

In one corner of our sunny estate, there was a building that served as both a greenhouse and Lord Nazel's laboratory. The hodo were most likely being kept there. Knowing him, he might have already started research into hodo that could withstand higher rainfalls.

"I'm looking forward to coming up with hodo recipes," I said.

"I need to successfully cultivate them for your sake too."

And so, yet another kind of tuber turned up in Sutrena.

***

A month after I'd replied to Queen Latriche's invitation, the day I would head to her tea party finally arrived. I would be spending roughly the next two weeks in the royal capital. I'd been busy all morning, preparing my luggage and getting ready to ride Geni. Today was unfortunately cloudy, but that was unavoidable since the rainy season had started. The weather was bound to change as we approached the capital.

"We'll arrive at the capital the day before the tea party and stay the night. Riding on mountbeasts, we should reach the capital in—" I started.

"Approximately three days," Kelly finished for me. "We already have lodging arranged for the trip. It takes ten days from Loa to the capital by carriage, so the mountbeasts will be a huge convenience."

Kelly had borrowed a pegasus from the fortress. Torre would also be coming along as our guard.

Lord Nazel has work, so he's staying in Sutrena. I'll be a bit lonely, but I'll do a proper job at the tea party and be of use to him.

As I rolled up my sleeves and was about to get on Geni's back, I heard spirited neighing from above me.

"Is that Dunk? Wasn't she supposed to be taking Lord Nazel to and from the fortress?" She usually loitered in front of the fortress after taking Lord Nazel there, and the passersby would feed her grass or vegetables. She'd become famous in town, and everyone

doted on her. It was always noon or evening when she was satisfied and returned to the estate with Lord Nazel.

As Dunk descended, I saw Lord Nazel riding on her back.

"Huh? Lord Nazel?"

"I came to see you off. We won't be able to see each other for a while. I wish I could go with you." His voice seemed to resonate from the depths of his body and was completely serious.

"I'll return soon. I'll bring back souvenirs too."

Lord Nazel jumped down from Dunk, rushed over to me, and softly placed his hands on my cheeks. His handsome, dreamy face drew closer to mine, and I squealed in surprise like usual. I could see his reluctance to part with me reflected in the amber eyes that kept staring at me.

"Agh, I don't want to be apart from you. If only I could also accompany you to the capital."

I also started feeling lonely when he said that. I wanted to spend more time with Lord Nazel.

Kelly and Torre smiled as they watched over the two of us from a short distance away. They looked happier the more quality time we spent together as a couple.

"Take care, Agnes. Don't follow any suspicious people, even if they give you candy, all right?"

"Of course. I won't do anything dangerous," I declared assertively.

Lord Nazel smiled and gave me a peck on the brow.

"S-See you later, Lord Nazel." I staggered away from him, my face probably beet red.

"Have a safe trip, Agnes," he replied with a gentle smile.

I feel painfully reluctant to leave.

I climbed on Geni's back, waved goodbye to Lord Nazel, and started flying toward the capital. Kelly, Torre, and the other guards Lord Nazel had arranged for us followed behind me. Underneath the gray sky, Geni seemed excited for our first outing in a while. He was flapping his wings more vigorously than usual. We left town, passing over thick forests and tranquil highways on our way north. We enjoyed our journey, stopping along the way to sleep for the night

and let our mountbeasts rest.

A few days later, we entered the capital's airspace in high spirits. As we approached the capital, the sky changed color and became clearer, while the weather got cooler. The capital had a vastly different climate from Sutrena due to its higher elevation. I looked down at the ground and called out to Torre.

"I see newly constructed sheds for mountbeasts. Is that a station for them to land over there?"

"It seems like it. According to my brothers who live here, new facilities to accommodate mountbeasts have been constructed in major locations in tandem with the introduction of mountbeast usage."

"I see!"

I had Geni land at the station which had apparently been prepared as part of the king's new policy, and we left our mountbeasts in the care of a mountbeast-exclusive stable. Since King Bertrand had only recently enacted this policy, all of the equipment was new and pristine. I took Geni to a spacious, clean stall and patted him as I talked to him.

"Geni, be a good boy here until I finish my business, okay? I'll be staying close by, so I'll drop by again to check on you."

Geni replied with a low growling sound. I left him in the stable and joined Kelly and Torre to head to the Florescruz estate where we would be staying. The overprotective Lord Nazel had said he'd be worried about my safety if I stayed at an inn, so he'd gotten in touch with his brother Lord Julian and arranged for us to stay in a room at the Florescruz estate's detached building. I hadn't seen Lord Julian since my wedding ceremony.

Is he doing well?

I walked from the mountbeast station to the estate, feeling a bit excited. The large estate's gate soon came into view. The estate's servants were all lined up in front of the gate waiting to welcome us, while Lord Julian was behind it.

They even came outside for us?! I approached the estate at a somewhat quick pace and hurriedly greeted Lord Julian.

"It has been quite some time, Your Grace. I appreciate you

having me here during my trip to attend Her Majesty's tea party."

"You're right on time. Impeccable as ever, elder sister. You're my sister-in-law now, so you needn't be so formal with me. Please don't hesitate to come to me if you need anything. My mother is presently away on a long-term trip, so I'm the only one staying here, but we have quite the number of servants," Lord Julian told me with a firm and confident expression.

I appreciate his courtesy. At any rate, Lord Julian has really grown up since the last time I saw him.

After the former princess and everyone else involved in the scandal had been exiled, Lord Julian had inherited the House of Florescruz at a young age. After all, his father and eldest brother had been arrested, and Lord Nazel, the second son of the House of Florescruz, had already become the margrave of Sutrena. Lord Julian had had no choice but to become the head of the family. He was currently working his hardest in his role as a novice duke.

"Thank you kindly for your generosity, Lord Julian."

After I finished greeting and thanking Lord Julian, the servants led us to the detached building and carried our luggage inside. The interior was just as clean as the first time I'd come here.

"Aah, this takes me back. This is where Lord Nazel took me under his protection."

When I'd been suddenly disowned and was left wandering the capital during the night with nowhere to go, Lord Nazel had brought me to this warm place. If he hadn't been there during that cold winter night, I would have no doubt frozen all alone.

And he proposed to me in that room over there. Aaah!

I remembered how dashing Lord Nazel had looked back then and got all excited. Back then, the two of us hadn't been as close as we were now. We had gotten married by royal decree because that had been the best option given to us. We'd joined hands and headed to Sutrena together.

I never thought the day would come that I'd visit this detached building again. In the time since my first visit, we became a couple, fell in love, and even held a wedding ceremony. Such happy times.

Next to me, Kelly was looking around intently, perhaps also

reminiscing about our time here. Behind us, Torre was deeply touched that he would get to spend the night in the home of the man he highly respected.

"Please rest well today in preparation for tomorrow, Lady Agnes." When we went up to the second floor, Kelly ushered me to my room, acting like she practically owned the place.

Perhaps out of consideration for my privacy, the other servants stayed on the first floor and remained on standby so they could immediately act if they were called.

"Kelly, Torre, you two must also be tired from the long trip. Make sure to take it easy today," I told the two of them, peeking my head out of my room. They had each been given a room of their own. As for mine, it was the same one I'd stayed in before, an elegant bedroom with a large window.

All right, I'll get some rest too. After I sorted my luggage, I took a bath, lay down on the bed with the delicately embroidered cover, and quickly drifted off to dreamland. The best way to recover one's stamina was to go to bed early, then get up early.

The next day, I was dressed by a fired-up Kelly, and headed to the queen's private garden in one corner of the palace. After I passed through an arch decorated with large flowers, I saw the venue for the tea party.

Oof! I'm so nervous. My light-blue dress fluttered over the green lawn as I looked for the host, Queen Latriche. *Is she over there? It looks like there are many people clustered together.*

Several noblewomen who looked like they would be participating in the tea party were already gathered around a large table. I recognized some of them from the parties I'd attended as Lady Bumpkin.

This party is bigger than I expected. I'm feeling a little nervous now. I moved toward the women, restlessly looking around me, when I saw Queen Latriche coming out from the back.

"Oh, Your Majesty!" I waved my hand widely toward her.

"Lady Agnes!" she responded and started walking to me, looking somewhat relieved. "Thank you for making the long trip to be here today!"

"No, no, I'm the one who's grateful for the invitation, Your Majesty. I wanted to see you again, and I was just thinking about returning to high society, so I'm happy you invited me."

Queen Latriche showed me a complex expression for a moment, then smiled a bit guiltily.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was actually hesitant to invite you to a social gathering; you seem to dislike these types of events."

Was she worried about me? Though she usually behaved in a dignified manner, she was actually a very kindhearted person.

"I'm certainly not very good with social situations, but I can't keep avoiding them forever. I decided to try and overcome socializing, for the sake of both Sutrena and Lord Nazel."

When I made my determination clear to her, Queen Latriche nodded and narrowed her eyes, looking deep in thought.

"I see, then we're in the same boat. I'm also not particularly keen on social events, but the queen of this nation has to frequently host tea parties or galas, unlike in Polpystan, where a queen only needs to display her military might."

It seemed that she was working hard as the new queen. I wanted to help her as a fellow socially awkward person. That was kind of a disgraceful name to call us, though.

I've finished greeting her, so I should step away for now. I couldn't keep monopolizing Queen Latriche—most likely many people wanted to speak with the host—so I went to take my seat at the party. Around ten women were seated around an oval table. It looked like the seats had been appointed beforehand, with name tags placed on each seat. There was also a servant standing by to lead people to their seats.

Oh, I found my name! I hurried to my designated seat, and a servant pulled my chair back with a refined motion. For now, I decided to take my seat and greet the women who were already seated next to me.

"G-Good day to you..."

The woman next to me looked at me in surprise.

"Oh, you're the rumored Lady B—no, the margravine of Sutrena, right? Just as I've heard, you look like a completely different person

now. That's a lovely dress."

"Thank you. My handmaiden is brilliant." As I had thought, it seemed hard to get rid of my infamy as Lady Bumpkin. To think that the nickname would be brought up even at this stage... "It's nice to meet you again; I'm Agnes Florescruz."

"I'm Tabitha Owen. My husband is a count and also serves as a minister here at the royal palace." The minute she finished her somewhat boastful self-introduction, she started chatting with great vigor. Her curious eyes fixed themselves on me. "At any rate, Lady Agnes, though Lord Nazelbart was forced to marry you as punishment for offending the former Princess Mia, he's now an eminent individual that not even His Majesty can ignore."

"Um, erm..."

"You've caught hold of a wonderful partner at just the right time. I've heard that Sutrena is also developing well thanks to his influence. I'm so jealous! You really have a keen eye for men."

Her words felt...kind of acerbic. Lord Nazel was certainly an outstanding husband, and it was true that he was developing Sutrena, but I hadn't decided to go to the frontier with him because of his talents. I'd accompanied him and worked my hardest alongside him because his kind, frank nature had utterly charmed me.

"Oh, and if I may ask, Lady Agnes, does Lord Nazelbart have no plans to return to the capital? How long does he intend to confine himself to Sutrena? It's such a waste for someone of his caliber to spend his entire life in the frontier. He's exactly the person we need here in the capital!"

"There has been no talk of that at present." Feeling pressured by Tabitha's enthusiasm, I gave her a noncommittal reply. Lord Nazel actually fully intended to continue living in Sutrena and found the goings-on of the capital a bother.

Lord Nazel still distrusts the people here. After all, he was doing an amazing job as a prince consort candidate, and yet they turned their backs on him as soon as the former Princess Mia broke off their engagement, placing him in an unfavorable position. Not to mention he also likes *his life in Sutrena. I doubt he'll ever return here.*

Of course, since he was a margrave, it was impossible for him to completely sever ties with the capital, but he had drawn a clear line of only interacting with the capital when it was necessary for work.

"Oh, I see. How unfortunate." Hearing my vague reply, Tabitha looked bored and took a small folding fan out of her bag, which she began using around her face. When I saw her reaction, I let out a sigh—a small one, so the people around me wouldn't notice.

I think I'm not good at tea parties, after all... I thought, slumping my shoulders.

The rest of the women who were scattered around started taking their seats, followed by our host Queen Latriche. It looked like her tea party was finally starting. The seating order was based on each person's status, with the women of higher position closer to the queen.

I hope everything turns out peacefully, I prayed in my mind.

"Thank all you for being present today. Please, feel free to enjoy yourselves." Queen Latriche greeted everyone with a smile.

She truly has a regal presence. I felt impressed as I observed the party progress. However, the mood was somewhat peculiar. Although everyone was smiling, the words that came out of their mouths felt thorny and aggressive to me. For example, the woman sitting next to Her Majesty was complimenting the tea with some very questionable vocabulary.

"Oh my, this tea has quite a rustic flavor. It's a rare kind that can only be tasted here, isn't it?" The woman looked up at Queen Latriche meaningfully, the corners of her lips curling into a sneer.

Is this tea really so rare? I'd been taking sips for a while now, but I didn't feel like it had been made using any unusual tea leaves. *It doesn't have a particularly rustic taste. It's just ordinary black tea, isn't it? Is my sense of taste poor?*

I couldn't tell the subtle differences between tea leaves, but I thought that this tea was delicious and high-class. It was true that in Sutrena, we didn't have access to practically everything like they did in the capital, but back when I'd lived in the House of Evantail, there had been no shortage of black tea. I thought I recognized the taste.

So that would mean... I carefully observed the party's

participants.

"The tea leaves were a gift from the County of Nasi. I'm glad you like the taste," Queen Latriche replied in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone, but her eyes weren't smiling.

The County of Nasi was one of Desnim's greatest producers of tea leaves. Its black tea was famous for its high quality and pleasant aroma, and many nobles were fond of it.

The woman who'd spoken earlier kept up her sneer as she spoke to the queen again.

"Oh, is that so? I didn't realize the taste could differ so much depending on who brewed the tea. Nasi's tea leaves are certainly impressive."

Ah! Even I could understand the meaning behind her words. This was a blatant insult toward Queen Latriche. Some of Desnim's nobles looked down on our Polpystani neighbors to the south, calling them savages because the two countries had different cultures, and Polpystan valued frankness and boldness in conduct more than Desnim did. *Polpystan feels similar to Sutrena in a way.*

However, there had always been some Desnim nobles who despised those traits, calling them uncouth and barbaric. Desnim had more of a peaceful culture and valued elegance and modesty, so it couldn't quite understand the more assertive Polpystan. No, there were also those who *didn't want* to understand it.

I don't mind Polpystan's bright atmosphere. And I like Queen Latriche. She'd overcome numerous hardships to become the queen, but as she'd come here from a foreign country, her future still looked difficult. I wasn't anyone particularly important, but I wanted to help her as much as possible.

"This tea is delicious. So are these snacks," I hurriedly said in an attempt to get rid of the unpleasant mood. For just one moment, Queen Latriche's lips relaxed into a smile.

Tea parties are very, very scary!

In response, the woman who'd been snarking about the tea turned to me with a wide smile, though her eyes were clearly anything but pleased. Her lips, covered in thick, pink lipstick, soon parted.

"Heh heh, Sutrena's simple culture closely resembles Polpystan's! I'm sure Lady Agnes and Her Majesty must get along!"

Another woman leaned forward and chimed in with agreement.

"It seems that the eccentric Lady Bumpkin also matches unusual tea leaves and snacks."

The two of them laughed together, getting along like two peas in a pod.

Urk... The voices of hostility have doubled. Tea parties truly were terrifying places. But I now understood just how complex Queen Latriche's current situation was. There were no noblewomen in high society who would give her their complete support.

I wanted to offer Queen Latriche a hand, but when I—the former Lady Bumpkin of Sutrena—butted in, all I did was get in her way. Not only was I of no help, but Sutrena ended up being bad-mouthed too. It's so frustrating...

The two noblewomen snapping at Queen Latriche were seated close to her, so they were both of high rank. Therefore, the other attendees of lower rank found it difficult to openly express dissent. At least it was a relief that the rest of the noblewomen didn't join in actively criticizing Queen Latriche, instead opting to remain silent.

I'm sure Queen Latriche has already attended plenty of social events in the capital. If it was like this every time, she no doubt felt depressed. I also realized that there were many obstacles in my effort to socialize too.

In order to respond appropriately to these situations and help my friend...I need to get stronger. Also, insulting me—the former Lady Bumpkin—is one thing, but I hate to hear Sutrena also being disparaged like that. I had my work cut out for me as the margravine.

I passed the remainder of the tea party occupied with such thoughts; it ended without the awkward air ever dissipating. The other participants left in a hurry, as if to say that their business there was done.

"Lady Agnes," Queen Latriche called out, and I turned to face her. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you. May I have a bit of your time?"

"Yes," I replied a moment later with a quiet nod. Instead of returning to the Florescruz estate straightaway, I made my way to the drawing room Queen Latriche had prepared. We sat across from each other at a foreign-style table and exchanged our impressions of the tea party that had just concluded. To be honest, it had been quite the shocking event.

"You must have been surprised, Lady Agnes. I showed you quite the unsightly scene."

"U-Um, well..." I hesitated, unsure how to reply. Queen Latriche probably saw right through me, because she shook her head with an awkward smile.

"You don't need to sugarcoat it. That's the reality for a new queen from a foreign country. There are many noblewomen who used to get along with the former queen, and there are also cases where they maintained their status and power despite their husbands being arrested or dismissed during *that* incident. Those two rude ladies are among them. I still can't make light of those noblewomen with influential voices."

Those malicious noblewomen had wide-ranging connections and strong influence, so Queen Latriche couldn't openly slight them.

"The former queen held truly immense power. If she hadn't dug her own grave back then, she'd likely still be doing as she pleased. Even now that she's gone, her presence is still felt vividly... But I have no intention of letting this continue forever. I'm currently getting ready to strengthen my own influence. My performance at the tea party was a pretty sad sight, though."

Queen Latriche had been relentlessly criticized during the tea party, but it seemed that she was quietly working on strengthening her position. In fact, our new king and queen were expanding their influence little by little, and were gaining more noble supporters. I was sure that she would be able to accomplish what she'd just told me. In light of that, I decided on my next words.

"I will always be your ally, Queen Latriche. I won't be able to attend your tea parties often since I live in Sutrena, but I'm planning on participating in high society more from now on, so I'll spread as many good words about you as I can."

Queen Latriche gently closed her eyes and whispered, as if etching the words into her heart.

"Thank you, Lady Agnes. Your words always bring me salvation. I understand why Nazelbart doesn't want to let you leave. I also want to constantly have you by my side."

"Huh...?"

"Just talking to myself." Queen Latriche smiled evasively. "I mean that you're wonderful just as you are, Lady Agnes. If you're ever in any trouble, I will also do everything in my power to help you."

"That's reassuring to know." The queen herself had just declared she'd be my ally.

"Anyway, I'm feeling rather parched." Queen Latriche must have been unable to eat or drink during the tea party. She looked a bit embarrassed as she sipped the black tea her handmaiden brought her. Incidentally, I'd enjoyed plenty of tea and snacks even despite the party's awkward mood.

After finishing my first proper talk with Queen Latriche in some time, I got in a carriage with Torre and Kelly and we headed back to the Florescruz estate. Transportation in the capital was still accomplished through carriages or on foot, not by mountbeasts. Mountbeasts were currently being introduced on an experimental basis as a means of long-distance travel. If they were allowed to be used freely everywhere, the city would probably be swarmed with mountbeasts.

The carriage arranged for us by the House of Florescruz passed through the castle gates, traveled along paved streets, climbed a hill, and continued across a quiet district filled with noble manors. This was where the nobles who worked at the royal palace resided. I poked my head out the window and observed the district's scenery.

"Oh, I can see the House of Florecruz's manor."

"It's big, so it's easy to spot," Torre said.

"It's a ducal manor, after all. Oh, it looks like someone's at the gate," Kelly added.

Just as our carriage was about to pass through the gate to the Florescruz estate, the woman who'd been standing nearby—the one Kelly had mentioned—suddenly jumped in front of the carriage. The

shocked horses neighed loudly and raised their forelegs high in the air.

"Ah! Watch out!" someone cried.

The carriage shook terribly as our driver brought the horses to an abrupt halt, and I hit my head on the back of my seat.

"Eek!" I grabbed the handgrip next to me and avoided tumbling out of my seat by a hair's breadth.

Ouch... Is the woman who jumped in front of us all right? Worried, I stuck my head out the carriage's window again to talk to the stranger. She had short black hair, and was wearing a white shirt and vest, along with some pants that looked easy to move in. Based on her clothes, I assumed that she wasn't one of the nobles who lived around here, but rather one of the townsfolk.

"Are you all right? Were you injured just no—"

Before I could finish my question, the woman rushed over to me and loudly interrupted.

"You must be Lady Agnes Florescruz!" Her voice carried well despite her small build. I couldn't tell what her objective was, so I decided to just humor her for now.

"Yes, I am. Um, were you hurt—"

"I've been waiting for you to show up in the capital! I'm Olce from the Geelgog Times Company, and I would like to interview you!" Without waiting for my answer, Olce took out a notepad and pen from her breast pocket and stared fixedly at me.



I never agreed to do an interview, though. I felt a little uneasy, wondering what she was going to ask me.

Desnim had a high literacy rate compared to other countries, and many people read the newspaper, particularly in cities. The printing technique introduced from abroad had become widespread by now. However, newspapers were often filled with questionable contents, since they were nothing but rumors or were highly influenced by the reporters' own ideas. The House of Evantail had called newspapers "vulgar fiction," and my brother Paul and I hadn't been allowed to read them. In light of my upbringing, I was understandably cautious when it came to an interview.

"Despite being known as Lady Bumpkin in high society, you are now married to Lord Nazelbart Florescruz, the man who can even influence His Majesty himself. Could you tell me how you feel about marrying into money?! Is your life all nice and comfortable now?"

"Huh...?"

"Or are you perhaps fed up with life in your rural domain? Is that why you came to the capital?"

"No, that's not the reason. Sutrena is a wonderful—"

But Olce interrupted me yet again to fire off her next question.

"Do you have any thoughts on the exiled Princess Mia, Lady Agnes? Something like 'Serves her right!' perhaps? By the way, have you forsaken your bumpkinly ways?"

What was her deal with all of these tricky, awkward questions?

Just like the noblewomen at the tea party, her every word has thorns in it.

It was true that, as Lady Bumpkin, I had gotten married to Lord Nazel by pure happenstance, but I had no intention of showing off about it, and I liked the peaceful Sutrena. And though I had been angry at Princess Mia for the terrible way she'd treated Lord Nazel, these days I didn't give her any thought at all. And as for my "bumpkinly ways," I'd rid myself of them long ago thanks to Kelly.

I was about to tell Olce all of that, but Lord Julian showed up in front of the gate before I could, and one of his servants started driving Olce away.

"It's terribly inconvenient for us to have people acting as they

please in front of our estate. I ask you to take your leave."

"Wha—"

While the servant was dealing with Olce, Kelly took the opportunity to shut the carriage's window. The driver drove us through the gate, and we left Olce behind.

Ugh, I feel pathetic. I couldn't speak my mind. I'd been unable to handle the reporter, just like I'd been helpless at the tea party. *I'm sure that Lord Nazel would have evaded her flawlessly.* I couldn't help feeling a bit dejected.

"Lady Agnes, there is no reason for you to feel troubled by the vulgar questions of people who don't consider the inconvenience they cause to others. That woman insulted you so much yet didn't even realize it; she was extremely insensitive." Kelly's quiet rage was clear to me.

"Kelly... Thank you for saving me by closing the window. I need to thank Lord Julian later too."

From that absurd tea party to the unsolicited reporter, my social activities in the capital were one challenge after another. But I had many kind allies like Queen Latriche, Kelly, and Lord Julian.

I'll try a little harder!

When I returned to my room, I got close to the large window and looked toward Sutrena. Naturally, it was too far for me to be able to see any of its scenery, but it still calmed me down.

I miss Lord Nazel. It was still too early to go home, and I also wanted to achieve more here. Nevertheless, the absence of the man who was always next to me was disheartening. *No, I can't think like that! I'm the margravine! I'll do my best in my social activities, even alone!* Today's tea party had taught me that Sutrena was still misunderstood. I couldn't just stay quiet while people were bad-mouthing it like that. *I'll spread the word of Sutrena's positive qualities!* I steeled my determination as I looked toward the southern sky.

But the next day's newspaper almost shattered my determination into pieces. The article was titled "Passionate Affair Comes to Light! Madam Bumpkin Is Cheating with Her Brother-in-Law?! She Left Her

Husband Behind to Indulge in Debauchery in the Capital!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What even is this?!” I instinctively screamed when Lord Julian showed me the newspaper during breakfast. It contained a sketch of the ghostlike Lady Bumpkin, as well as an article with preposterous fabrications. According to the paper, I’d gotten sick of how rural Sutrena was and spent every night partying all around the capital’s downtown. Moreover, the article claimed that things weren’t going well between me and Lord Nazel because I was such a bumpkin, so I was trying to make a move on Lord Julian now... It was so horrible that my face went pale, just like the Lady Bumpkin sketch.

It would take a horrible person to go out gallivanting every night, then also cheat on top of that. This is allegedly all talking about me, but...I never said any of the things attributed to me. This article was credited to a reporter named Olce. It was the woman I’d met yesterday. *No matter how you look at it, her imagination is absurdly vivid.*

I stumbled forward dizzily and somehow managed to open my mouth to speak.

“I don’t recall doing anything to incur that reporter’s ire...” I muttered, feeling dazed.

“People like her don’t need to hold a grudge, elder sister. Once they find their prey, they just publish whatever falsehoods they can come up with. Their goals are money and self-advertisement; the facts are irrelevant to them. But I’m a bit worried about the future...” Lord Julian said with a sour expression on his face.

“I’m sorry for causing you such trouble during my visit.”

“This isn’t your fault. And what I’m worried about is the stress this is causing you, as well as my brother’s reaction when he sees this article. The Geelgog Times Company is a large newspaper company that operates mainly in the capital, but it recently started expanding its market to other areas of Desnim which are starved for entertainment. I doubt this newspaper is widely available in Sutrena, but there’s still a chance my brother will get wind of this article.”

“What should I do if Lord Nazel suspects me of cheating on him?”

“I doubt he would...but I can easily imagine him flying into a fit

of rage. In the worst-case scenario, he might even come all the way here."

"No way. He wouldn't go that far." Though I rejected the possibility, Lord Julian didn't look like he had faith in my words.

"It's impossible for me to stop my brother, but...for now, let's send the Geelgog Times Company a complaint asking them to revise that article."

"I apologize for all the inconvenience..."

I'd come to the capital eager to work hard on my social activities, but what was I even doing? I kept making a fool of myself. I felt gloomy as I left the main residence with heavy steps and headed to my room in the detached building. The breeze was refreshing and the sun was shining bright in the clear sky.

Haah, I can't go back to Sutrena in such a pathetic state.

Kelly and Torre were worried about me when they saw me return to the detached building and flop onto my bed. I'd thought my infamy as Lady Bumpkin had been mostly wiped out, but that was only true for the people I was close to and the residents of Sutrena. I'd just been reminded that my nickname was still present in high society, and provided gossip fodder for newspapers.

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Nazelbart was working diligently at the fortress. More than a year had passed since he'd first come to the frontier, but there were still plenty of tasks that required his attention.

"Aaah, I miss Agnes." He repeated that phrase every single day.

A large envelope was delivered to Nazelbart from the capital via mountbeast postal service. There was no sender listed. Normally, he would have just ignored it and disposed of it, but since Agnes was currently in the capital, he made sure the envelope was safe and opened it. A single newspaper was inside the envelope. It seemed to have been published a few days ago, but he got curious for some reason and decided to look inside.

"What...?" Nazelbart found a ridiculous article claiming that his beloved wife was cheating on him with his younger brother. His hand

holding the newspaper trembled. “Agnes is spending extravagant sums in the city every night?! She’s hitting on men? And as if that weren’t enough, she’s also having an affair with Julian *and* an illegitimate child?!” Nazelbart abruptly closed the newspaper and took deep breaths to calm himself. “There will be hell to pay for this...”

Nazelbart’s eyes were burning with quiet rage after he’d finished reading the article. Of course, his fury wasn’t directed at his wife for her alleged wasteful spending and cheating, but at the reporter who’d written this foul hoax that besmirched Agnes’s name and at the newspaper company that had published such sleazy drivel. Nazelbart was usually seen as a relatively mild-mannered person, but his boiling point dropped to an extreme low when it came to his wife.

“Henry, there isn’t much work left tomorrow onward, right?” Nazelbart checked the progress of their work with the brilliant assistant next to him.

“Indeed. You’ve worked at such a breakneck pace that we are well ahead, Lord Nazelbart. As planned, you’ll be able to surprise Lady Agnes by going to meet her ahead of time.”

“Yes, about that, I’m going to move up my travel plans even further. It looks like the situation in the capital has become a little concerning.”

Henry’s glasses glinted as he pushed them up and turned his gaze to the newspaper in Nazelbart’s hand.

“Does your decision have something to do with the publication you’re currently holding?” he asked calmly.

“Yes, I have some *business* in the capital,” Nazelbart replied with a nod.

Henry nodded back with a serious expression, likely realizing that Nazelbart’s resolve was unwavering.

“Understood. I will be able to handle matters here even on my own, so please feel free to go see Lady Agnes.”

“Thank you, Henry.” Feeling grateful for his subordinate’s understanding attitude, Nazelbart left to start preparing for his departure.

Henry had also earned the ire of those in the capital because he'd pointed out his superior's wrongdoings. As a result, he'd been falsely accused of some misconduct and sent to Sutrena as a demotion of sorts. He must have realized something by watching Nazelbart read the newspaper.

"I'll return as soon as I can." Nazelbart left the fortress as soon as he said this and returned to his estate. He set out for the capital riding on the cheery Dunk, whose eyes glittered as if to ask, *Are we going out?* "Dunk, I think it will be cramped, but I'll need to leave you in one of the capital's mountbeast stables, so please behave," he said, earning a neigh in response. "We'll return to Sutrena as soon as my work there is done."

Dunk replied with another neigh and began to accelerate. She had recently been identified as a type of mountbeast called a sleipnir, and her top flight speed was comparable to that of Geni the wyvern. The people of the frontier were already aware of Dunk's identity and just treated her like an incredible pegasus. After all, the very existence of sleipnirs was still debated in scholarly circles, and there weren't any studies with detailed information on them.

Nazelbart only took the necessary breaks for Dunk to rest and otherwise proceeded to the capital as quickly as possible.

"Agnes..." Hurrying wouldn't change a thing, but he couldn't stay calm. His heart was in utter turmoil as he impatiently hastened to the capital.

I need to dole out an appropriate punishment to the newspaper company that published that nonsensical trash. The kindhearted Agnes would surely be deeply hurt if she read that article. *It's already been a few days since that edition of the paper was published. I'm worried about Agnes.*

Chapter 2: Madam Bumpkin Returns Home

I'd been unable to leave Lord Julian's estate for several days since that article's publication because it had made me a pariah to people all across the city. I was apparently being called immodest not only by the commoners who'd taken the article at face value, but even by some among the nobility.

It seems that certain people are taking advantage of the commotion to amuse themselves.

Lord Julian had told me that it was better for me to not go outside for the time being because there was the risk of me being mobbed by emotional people in the city. I did just as he'd advised and stayed inside the estate's premises for now.

That article was nothing but lies, so why did things turn out this way? Instead of being useful to Lord Nazel, I had only attended a single tea party and had all sorts of problems show up one after another. *I should keep a low profile until things calm down, just like Lord Julian told me.*

Let's go for a little walk to distract myself, I thought as I looked down at the Florescruz estate's beautiful garden through the window. I would worry Kelly if I stayed cooped up in my room. Though she appeared composed, she'd apparently also been shocked by that article.

I left the detached building in some light clothing and started walking around the garden by myself. Everyone around me left me alone, perhaps out of consideration for my feelings.

And here I had grand plans to attend Queen Latriche's tea party, make connections there that would allow me to attend even more noble gatherings, and finally even host a small tea party of my own if possible.

But I hadn't gotten particularly close to anyone, and since the tea party at the palace had ended on such an awkward note, it was even more difficult to build any relationships. Even if I wanted to walk around the city, I couldn't go outside because of that article.

I'm completely cornered. I was planning on staying for two weeks, but it feels like I'm already done here.

I remembered the time I had still been Lady Bumpkin. I'd almost forgotten because I'd moved to the peaceful frontier, but this was how I'd always been treated—ridiculed by everyone around me day after day.

Things have just gone back to how they used to be when I was at the House of Evantail. There's no point in feeling down now. I slapped my cheeks, trying to pump myself up. *But this time is different...* I'd experienced the kindness of people who were truly on my side. I now knew that the terrible circumstances I'd once lived in weren't normal and were no longer my everyday life. That was why I could understand that my current situation was actually even worse than before.

It's hard to get rid of gossip that's spread just for fun. Before I knew it, that false information had taken on a life of its own. *I'm used to being treated as Lady Bumpkin, but this matter is hitting me harder.* The problem was that this wasn't an article ridiculing the existence of Lady Bumpkin herself, but one written to spread rumors about discord in my relationship with Lord Nazel and my affair with Lord Julian. I felt terrible that it had affected not only me, but the ones dear to me too.

I sat down at the edge of a nearby flower bed, hidden under the shade of some foliage, and let out a long sigh, something I hadn't done recently.

"Wanting to be of help to Queen Latriche and Lord Nazel in my current state is far too presumptuous of me. Ah, this is bad. I keep thinking in a negative direction." Getting depressed here wouldn't change anything in reality.

Seriously now, what should I do? I unconsciously hung my head and hot tears ran down my cheeks. The teardrops soaked into the dry stone tiles at my feet as they fell. *I should stay alone here until*

my messed up emotions settle down. I don't want to bother the people around me. I would surely regain my presence of mind after some time.

As I kept looking downward, a shadow suddenly appeared before me. I wiped my tears away and opened my eyes to see a familiar pair of high-class men's shoes.

"Hmm?" I raised my head in surprise and came face-to-face with the person I wanted to see the most right now...but also the one I least wanted to see me in my current disgraceful state. He quietly gazed at me with eyes whose emotions I couldn't read.

"Lord...Nazel...?"

Was I dreaming? I was looking at my husband who was supposed to be hard at work in Sutrena, not here in the capital. But for some reason, he was currently in the Florescruz estate.

Lord Nazel gently wiped the tears still running from my eyes with his fingers, then knelt down and stretched his arms forward. He held out his arms toward me like a gentleman, just like the time he'd proposed to me when I'd been disowned.



"Let's go home to Sutrena, Agnes."

"Huh?" I didn't know why Lord Nazel was here—this didn't feel real. But I wanted to take his hand while I cried and leave the capital just like he'd said. Through willpower, I somehow managed to suppress that wish despite my longing for it.

I can't let him spoil me and encourage me to run back home. What did I even come to the capital for? I couldn't forge any new friendships, and even Sutrena was insulted. I would be completely pathetic if I just clung to Lord Nazel in tears and returned to the frontier without having accomplished any of my original objectives. So, I raised my head to talk to my husband.

"Thank you very much. I don't know why you're here, Lord Nazel, but I'm sure you were worried about me and came to see me, right? But...I can't go back yet," I said quietly.

Lord Nazel shrugged his shoulders in distress.

"You managed to attend Queen Latriche's tea party, right?"

"Yes, I did...but..."

"You've achieved your original objective here, so why are you being stubborn? I can easily see that you're pushing yourself too hard. Maybe you still have other plans here, but I just want to take you away from the capital, no questions asked." His serious amber eyes pierced right through me. Lord Nazel always had a soft and gentle air about him, but today he seemed somewhat off. He was kind of restless, and it felt like he really would do what he'd just said.

"N-No, I'm not pushing myself. But I'm glad you're so worried about—" Before I could finish my reply, Lord Nazel picked me up from where I was seated and started gallantly walking toward the detached building. "Eep!" The surprise made my tears stop.

"I'm sorry for being such a worrier of a husband, Agnes. I want to fulfill my dear wife's requests to the best of my ability, but I'm not broad-minded enough to agree to everything you ask while you're crying. I want to completely *destroy* everything that has hurt you right now." Lord Nazel's voice was deeper than usual, showing just how serious he was. I obviously couldn't have him do something dreadful, but I was glad he felt that way, and I tightened my arms

around his back. His ears twitched in response and turned crimson.

I love you, Lord Nazel. It was hard to find someone like him who was unconditionally on my side.

"Let's head inside for now," he said.

"Yes..."

For starters, Lord Nazel carried me to my room and we sat at the table across from each other to talk.

"I heard about the situation from Julian, and I don't suspect you in the slightest. The newspaper company ignored Julian's request about revising the article, so I also went and gave them a piece of my mind."

"Hmm?" I thought I saw Lord Nazel's smile morph into a threatening form for just a moment. Was I just imagining it?

"Tomorrow, *everyone* will know that the article published about you was pure nonsense." Lord Nazel apparently knew all about the article.

"Th-Thank you." When I expressed my gratitude, his threatening smile got more intense. Huh? So I hadn't just imagined it earlier?

"Also, the reporter who hurt you with that groundless article has been fired. She won't be able to spread any more lies."

"F-Fired? You didn't have to go that far."

"Her scurrilous article insulted the entire House of Florescruz and also hurt you; this punishment is only the natural outcome of her poor life choices. In fact, she was treated rather leniently to *only* be fired."

"Is...that so?"

Apparently, some nobles had thrown people in jail for defamation or retaliated harshly against the perpetrator in other ways. I thought there was no need to go to such lengths, so I was glad that Lord Nazel had handed out a comparatively merciful punishment.

"By the way, how was Her Majesty's tea party? Did you have fun?" Lord Nazel nonchalantly changed the topic from the reporter to the outcome of the tea party, but I didn't have particularly good news about that either.

"Um, about that..." I hesitantly told Lord Nazel what had transpired at the palace. "In conclusion, it was a somewhat awkward

tea party. I was trying my best at social activities for you and everyone back at Sutrena, but I wasn't very successful—I'm sorry. I wanted more people to know that Sutrena is a nice place..." I'd been trying to become a model margravine by making an effort to socialize, but I'd suffered a setback right at the beginning. I felt more and more depressed as I reflected on how worthless I was.

Lord Nazel leaned over the table and gently wrapped my hands in his warm ones.

"This was your first time attending a regular tea party as a margravine, right? It was only natural that you couldn't conduct yourself perfectly. Be that as it may..." Lord Nazel suddenly looked like he was deep in thought. "Here I thought you'd be fine going alone since this party was hosted by a good friend of yours. I had no idea that the queen has so little authority. It was my fault for misjudging the situation."

"No, there's no way you are to blame for that, Lord Nazel." No matter how you looked at it, my own inadequacy had been the root cause of the unsatisfactory outcome. "Queen Latriche is in a difficult position at the moment because she has to deal with the noblewomen of the former queen's faction. As her friend, I wanted to help her out even a little...but I was unable to do anything useful at all..."

"It's still too early for you to go toe to toe with the former queen's followers; you only just made your tea party debut. Good grief, why did the queen invite you to a gathering like that?"

Apparently, said followers were all influential people who'd reigned over high society for a long time. There was no way that I, the former Lady Bumpkin who wasn't even able to hold a proper conversation with other nobles, could defeat people like them in a battle of words.

"You should get some rest today; we'll return to Sutrena tomorrow. Now that the tea party is over, you have no more work here, right?"

"But, Lord Nazel—!"

"If you want to participate in high society no matter what, let's first search for a gathering we can attend as a couple. I could never

send you into that pack of ravenous beasts alone as you are right now." When I saw how frantic Lord Nazel looked, I thought that I couldn't say any more selfish things.

I really don't want to leave after Sutrena was bad-mouthed like that, I want to help Queen Latriche more, and I want to be a worthy wife to Lord Nazel, but...there's no point in me being stubborn in my current state. Just like he'd said, it still took everything I had just to hold a normal conversation with other nobles. I didn't have any real experience in high society, nor was I acquainted with any women with enough social influence to support me.

Let's make a fresh start. At this rate, I will only end up worrying the people around me. I needed to study more in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future. I nodded my approval to Lord Nazel's suggestion and decided to return to Sutrena for now.

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Nazelbart was in a terrible mood. After following his wife to the capital, he'd entrusted Dunk to a mountbeast stable in the city, then immediately headed to the Florescruz estate. Upon asking Julian about the influence that article had had on the people of the capital, he'd learned that the situation was unfavorable.

The article containing the groundless allegations about Agnes had become the perfect topic of gossip for bored people of the capital who sought some entertainment. There were even some nobles who had spread it around for their own amusement. Julian had immediately protested to the newspaper and asked them to retract the article, but they seemed slow to react. Julian had been misrepresented as Agnes's lover, so it seemed that the newspaper company felt it could ignore his requests. Therefore, Nazelbart decided to take action himself.

"I'll go to the newspaper." Nazelbart actually wanted to first go to the detached building and look at Agnes's face, but he also wanted to restore her honor as soon as possible. Accompanied by Torre, who happened to be loitering in front of the main building at just that moment, he headed right for the newspaper company and

successfully forced his way to the editor in chief's office. Nazelbart was fully aware that he'd acted very boldly, something he never would have done if he'd still been his old, meek self. But this matter had to do with his beloved wife, so he didn't care about appearances. He was no longer the obedient animated doll he'd been back during his days as Mia's future consort.

Nazelbart shook off the employees trying to restrain him, opened the door to the editor in chief's office without asking for permission, and barged inside. The man sitting at the other end of the room yelped in surprise at this intrusion; he was likely the one in charge. He seemed to realize who Nazelbart was, and his eyes darted about the room nervously.

"I'm fairly certain my brother has requested that you retract the false article about my wife."

The chief was at a complete loss; he'd never expected Nazelbart to personally come to the Geelgog Times Company's office all the way from the frontier. He couldn't even stand up from his seat as rivers of sweat ran down his body.

Nazelbart placed his hands on the chief's desk and smiled gently as he spoke.

"You ignored my brother's repeated complaints, so I will let you pick your poison. Either retract that article, publish a revision, and write an apology to my wife, or shut down this company right here and now."

"What... Please wait a second! Where is this all coming from?!" The chief was flustered, acting like he'd been completely caught off guard, but he was only getting his just deserts. Nazelbart didn't have the slightest intention of forgiving him.

"I'm deeply offended that my beloved wife was slandered. You didn't even interview her, and instead incited the populace by spreading those lies like they were fact. This company is a threat to public order. Perhaps I should have a word with His Majesty."

The chief's face went pale; it seemed that he'd finally realized how dangerous his situation was.

"Wha— We would never do such terrible things!"

"If you continue insulting us further, my brother will also have to

take serious action, and I think I'll be informing His Majesty of this deplorable fiasco. It would be better for the world and its people if newspapers like yours disappeared."

Julian still had a lot of kindness in him, like the Nazelbart of the past. But the kind of people who published such vulgarity would grow infinitely arrogant if they were forgiven once. The article had made a huge splash, and the Geelgog Times Company had apparently reaped great profits from it. That was another reason they hadn't retracted the article. It was also possible that the high sales would encourage them to write yet another article smearing Agnes. Nazelbart couldn't afford to back down here. When the former Princess Mia had broken off their engagement, he'd learned all too well how the public could suddenly turn its back on someone because of rumors.

"I would have overlooked some minor gossip, but this article was clearly full of malice. My wife and I are on perfectly good terms too."

Torre, who had accompanied Nazelbart as his guard, also looked enraged. That was just how spiteful and malicious the article had been.

"Do you enjoy the taste of food purchased with the money you made from disrespecting and hurting Lady Agnes, an innocent, fragile woman?!" Torre's intensity made the chief shiver and yelp in fear.

Nazelbart also had an intimidating smile as he spoke again.

"You should know what to do if you're a smart man, right? And of course, the reporter who wrote that article—"

"W-Will be held responsible! I'll f-fire her right this instant!" the chief shouted, his face white as a sheet.

"I'll get Julian to send someone over later to confirm you've kept your word. If you're slow to take action again...you know what will happen, don't you?"

Nazelbart left the editor in chief—who was nodding his head repeatedly like a marionette—and headed right back to the Florescruz estate. Once there, he immediately started looking for Agnes in the detached building, but she wasn't in her room. Kelly, currently on her break, told him that his wife was taking a stroll

around the garden. While she was at it, Kelly also told him about the events of the tea party, the incident with the reporter, and Agnes's reaction after seeing the article. She was always a reliable ally.

But still, that reporter... The fact that she was deliberately waiting in front of the estate for Agnes bothers me a little. It wasn't widely known that Agnes would be attending Her Majesty's tea party, so where did the reporter get word that she was in town?

Nazelbart thanked Kelly and hurried down to the garden to search for Agnes. There, he found her sitting at the edge of a flower bed, hidden by a tree growing in a corner of the garden. She raised her head when she noticed his presence, and as soon as he saw the tears running down her face, his sense of reason was almost blown away by his rage.

I should have used my magic to physically destroy the newspaper company! He led Agnes by the hand, fervently wishing to take her away from the capital as quickly as possible. *I shouldn't have let her come here.* He should have at least come with her. Even if he was ridiculed for being overprotective, it was still preferable to seeing Agnes cry.

Agnes seemed intent on doing her best to socialize as a margravine, but as someone who'd barely had any positive interactions with other nobles, it was far too dangerous for her to set foot in Desnim's toxic high society. Nazelbart had let her attend this tea party because Queen Latriche had been the host, but if the queen couldn't protect Agnes, there was no way he was letting his wife attend any other events on her own for the time being. That thought became even stronger in his mind after seeing her tearstained face.

Please wait just a bit longer, Agnes. Before long, I'll completely overturn the balance of power here. Originally, Nazelbart had had absolutely zero intention of intervening in the capital's political squabbles. The current king and queen had once thoroughly used him, so Nazelbart's original plan had been to let the two of them take care of their own problems. He would lend them the bare minimum assistance; he was busy enough with Sutrena's administration.

However, if the king and queen's political position remained weak, it could lead to situations like the recent one where Agnes would suffer. The tenderhearted Agnes treasured her friend without any selfish thoughts. Though she got along with Kelly and the estate's maids, she had no friends among the nobility. Queen Latriche was the only woman among Agnes's few friends who was also currently a member of the upper class.

King Bertrand was steadily expanding his influence, but there were still many nobles who opposed the new king and queen. Agnes had met some of them during the tea party. Nazelbart could understand the queen wanting even one more ally, but if that resulted in Agnes getting dragged into trouble, he intended to pull them apart, even if his wife opposed the idea. The straightforward Agnes wasn't suited for the world of political intrigue.

After Nazelbart carried Agnes to her room, she replied that she would return to Sutrena for now out of consideration for him. However, it didn't seem like she'd given up on participating in high society. She was always resolute, but Nazelbart couldn't help but worry that her brave heart would one day break.

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Olce trembled with anger as she walked the capital's streets; she'd just been fired.

"What the hell?! The chief just got intimidated by those snotty nobles' threats! And I finally got a major scoop too. Not to mention that the paper's sales skyrocketed thanks to my article. My star was supposed to be rising! It's crazy that I was let go so readily after contributing so much to the company!"

Olce had always been desperate to write articles that would draw even the slightest bit of attention and become topics of conversation. Working as a reporter in this country was difficult—even more so for a woman. But even though she'd been told it was impossible, she'd come to the capital chasing her dream. In order to compete with men, she had to perform above average. She was willing to do anything, from fabricating stories to conducting

cutthroat interviews. She didn't care about spreading lies or hurting people as long as she got results.

"That woman and her husband are overreacting over a single article about her cheating! They should be grateful that I raised the profile of boring rural nobles like them." Olce didn't think that she had wronged other people in the slightest, especially not nobles. In fact, she even thought of herself as heroic for resolutely standing against the powerful.

That's right. Those people abuse their authority left and right; whatever inconvenience I cause them is nothing compared to their injustices. That's the price of fame and status!

Getting fired from the newspaper was a huge setback for her. There were only two major newspaper companies in the capital, and the Geelgog Times Company was one of them. Since she'd caused trouble there and gotten fired, there was a high chance that the other company wouldn't care to hire her now. Much as Olce disliked it, the fact was that newspapers had to be careful about attracting too much attention from the nobility—and that went double for the other, smaller newspapers.

"Dammit, they went too far."

Olce quietly walked down a narrow alley while racking her brains over how she was supposed to make a living from tomorrow onward. On her way to the inexpensive apartment complex where she currently lived by herself, a man called out to her. Olce opened her small eyes wide in surprise; she wasn't expecting to be ambushed here.

"You're..." This man was the person who'd informed Olce about Agnes Florecruz. He had long blue hair and gray eyes. He was dressed in fine, noble clothing, but Olce had no idea who he was or where he'd come from.

Hold on, it's this guy's fault that I got fired! He has to take responsibility for it! He's dressed nicely, so he must have some money on him.

"I was just fired because of you! How will you make it up to me?!" Olce, still in a terrible mood, verbally attacked the man.

The man didn't seem the least bit agitated despite all the

complaints being hurled at him, and instead responded with an astonishing proposal.

"In that case, would you be interested in becoming a freelance reporter? I will give you my undivided support and encouragement, so I'd love for you to write a new article."

Olce was suspicious of this sudden—not to mention awfully convenient—offer; she at least had that much caution.

"I'm not so sure about that. I already have my hands full with my daily life. I'm not too keen on falling for a too-good-to-be-true offer like yours."

"You will be compensated, of course. Here's an advance payment. When you achieve results, I will provide you with my full support and promote you as an outstanding reporter," the man said as he gave Olce a hefty bag filled with silver coins.

***

Problems kept happening one after the other in the capital, so Lord Nazel had persuaded me to return to Sutrena for now. The more we talked, the more I realized that he was right. My inexperience had become clear. The gap between the peaceful high society I'd imagined through the years I'd spent as Lady Bumpkin and the real high society where survival of the fittest reigned supreme was now clear to me! Alas, I truly understood nothing about the social dynamics of the capital.

On the way back, Lord Nazel and I rode Geni together, while Dunk ran around the sky however she pleased on our way south.

I sort of feel completely worthless now and don't even know what I should talk about.

I was completely spaced out as we soared across the sky, when Lord Nazel provided the perfect conversation topic. He was always the ideal husband under any circumstances.

"Agnes, I've finished improving the hodo, so I'm thinking of planting some in our estate's garden. May I borrow your strength?"

"Of course." I was just glad to be of use to others.

"I've adjusted the hodo so they can grow even if you leave them

alone, but with your magic, we'll be able to harvest them right away. It will make it easy to confirm whether the improvements were successful or not." The kind Lord Nazel gave me the words I needed to hear, so I wanted to do my best to respond to his request.

Everyone gave us a warm welcome once we returned to our estate. That alone was enough to make me feel like I was home. Lord Nazel picked me up again and cheerfully carried me to our room, where he sat on the edge of the bed while still embracing me.

"You'll let me have you to myself for some time, won't you? We were apart all that time, so I'm hungry for you." Lord Nazel drew his face close to the base of my neck and took a deep breath. Having him breathe me in was really embarrassing, especially since I was probably sweaty from the long flight.

"We were together on Geni's back for the whole trip back, weren't we?" I gave his statement a small revision. We'd been practically stuck to each other throughout the flight.

"You can't speak calmly on a mountbeast, right? Besides, if I don't do this, you'll probably go off and start working on your own again."

"That's true, but..." I was weak against Lord Nazel's smile, and I got swept away like usual.

We just got back from the capital, so it would be nice to spend some time relaxing together with Lord Nazel in our room. And it was true that my time in the capital had been exhausting.

"Getting some good rest is also important," Lord Nazel said. It looked like he'd seen right through me, so I nodded, still in his arms.

The next day, Lord Nazel brought some seed hodo from his laboratory, and we went to our field together to plant them. Seed hodo resembled potatoes, but they were a bit smaller and had pointy tips. We planted them in a sunny corner of our field. Then, thanks to Lord Nazel's magic, small buds started sprouting from the seed hodo and pushing up through the soil, so we observed their progress. Apparently, Lord Nazel could grow plants up to seedlings during the improvement stage, but if he used too much of his magic on ordinary plants, they wouldn't be able to endure its effects and

would end up withering. That limitation only applied to naturally existing plants, not the ones he created with his magic from nothing.

"All right, it's my time to shine now. Get healthy and strong!" I applied my magic to the hodo while visualizing them growing strong and robust. Their leaves started rapidly growing, and their vines stretched out and coiled around nearby trees. Finally, beautiful flowers budded.

"If we remove these flowers, we'll get more hodo, since the nutrients that normally go to the flowers will go to the tubers instead."

After listening to Lord Nazel's explanation, I stopped using my magic for a moment. He took a pair of scissors and skillfully cut the flowers while I helped him out. After we cut all the flowers, I used my magic on the hodo again and their vines continued growing. Then, the parts of the plants aboveground gradually withered. According to Lord Nazel, they originally withered in the cold, but since we were in Sutrena, where it was warm year-round, he'd used his magic to adjust their sensitivity to temperature.

"It's finally time to dig them out." I started eagerly digging through the soil with a spade. I picked up a small hodo I discovered, then kept digging, until...a bunch of them came out all connected. "Lord Nazel, I harvested a bunch of them." When I looked next to me, I saw he also had many hodo hanging from his hands. This was kind of fun, so we became even more engrossed in digging.

Once we finished harvesting, cooking was the next essential step.

"How shall we cook these hodo?" I asked.

"Perhaps we should cook them the same way as potatoes, like the Polpystani do?"

"Let's discuss this with Mather." I headed to the kitchen and found our chef chatting with Mister Henry on his break.

Mister Henry, don't you hang out too much in our kitchen? The two of them had become gourmet comrades in search of fine cuisine. Their eyes lit up when they saw Lord Nazel and me bringing in a mountain of hodo.

"Those are a new kind of ingredient, right, Lady Agnes?" Mather asked.

"They're called hodo. Lord Nazel used his magic to improve on a wild species discovered in the mountains of Sutrena."

"We could try steaming, deep-frying, boiling, baking... The preliminary arrangements will take some time, so how about you two go take a bath while I figure out the details?" she suggested.

Now that she mentioned it, both Lord Nazel and I had gotten our clothes a bit dirty from all the farmwork.

"All right," I replied. I scurried off to the bathroom—until I came to a sudden realization.

At this rate...won't I end up taking a bath with *Lord Nazel again?* When I turned around, I saw him smiling back at me. *Eek! I-I was right!* I tried to run but he easily caught me and dragged me to the bathroom.

After getting out of the bath and dressing, we headed to the kitchen where Mather had already finished cooking the hodo. Our chef really was quick! The table was lined with various hodo dishes, each cooked in a different way.

"I added salt and butter to both the fluffy steamed hodo and the crispy deep-fried hodo!" Mather explained.

My eyes sparkled. Those definitely sounded delicious.

"Then we also have boiled hodo salad and baked hodo with sweet and salty sauce!" she continued.

Mister Henry had already taken his seat and was ready to begin tasting at any moment.

"Let's start sampling the food, shall we?"

We all took our seats at Lord Nazel's prompting and started tasting the freshly cooked hodo dishes at once. The hodo were gone in the blink of an eye, and it was decided that we would proceed with cultivating them in Sutrena.

Aah, what a nice mood... I really do love Sutrena.

I was certain that Lord Nazel had decided not to return to the capital for reasons similar to mine, besides the incident with Princess Mia and the palace's former attitude toward him.

Life here can have its inconveniences, but once you experience this relaxed atmosphere, well...

Though I loved my life here, it still didn't change the fact that I

had to do my best with social activities. I could only continue devoting myself to diligent study.

On the topic of high society, I didn't know if it was because word had gotten out that I'd attended Her Majesty's tea party or because the newspaper controversy had gotten people interested in me, but...invitations to various tea parties and other gatherings had been delivered to our estate. Noblewomen around my age, both married and single, had sent them.

I had a horrible time in the capital, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stay holed up here on the frontier. I couldn't stay depressed forever. I was the margravine of Sutrena, after all.

After the hodo tasting was over, I took the bundle of invitations to Lord Nazel, who'd already returned to our room. He'd said that I could go to gatherings as long as we could participate as a couple.

"Lord Nazel, here are the invitations I received. I picked out the ones where it looks like we can go together."

Lord Nazel was taking a break and embraced me before picking up the invitations.

"That's quite a lot. And these are only the ones we can attend as a couple, right?" He looked at the senders' names and started sorting the envelopes. "Rejected, rejected, rejected..." The stack of envelopes decreased in the blink of an eye. Half of them had already been rejected.

"Um, aren't you rejecting a bit *too* many of them?"

"I would never take my dear wife to some weird gathering." Lord Nazel rejected the majority of the remaining invitations, until there was only one left. "Hmm, yes. This one should probably be fine."

"Thank goodness. I was worried you'd end up rejecting all of them." I checked to see who'd sent this invitation. "It's from Countess Marie Nasi. She used to be the wet nurse for Princess Mia and Master Robin's son."

"That's right. It says that she would love for us to stay the night."

Lady Marie had a daughter around the same age as the former Princess Mia's son. After the uproar at the royal palace, the young prince had been left with nowhere to go, and Lady Marie had adopted him.

"The countess is an honest person, so I'm sure she won't say anything horrible to you. Nonetheless, try to stay as close to me as you can during the party."

"Yes, Lord Nazel." When I replied obediently, Lord Nazel tightened his embrace around me. In the end, I was still indebted to him in situations like this. My social education under the House of Evantail had been far removed from that of the rest of the world. I had to learn everything again from scratch.

I can't keep relying on Lord Nazel for everything. I need to quickly learn how to handle this alone. Looking at the way he did it made me want to learn how to properly deal with high society. *So I'll work hard to do what I can by myself!*

Although I had a late start, the next day, I began cramming my head with all the knowledge I would likely need in parties and events, like learning to match names to the portraits of all the nobles found in this year's edition of Desnim's *Noble Directory*, or researching high society trends. The portrait section of the *Noble Directory* had apparently been added this year. I was truly glad that no portrait from my time in the House of Evantail had made it in.

Lord Nazel was helping me memorize all the nobles' names. He was kind... He truly was, but...

"What's this woman's name, Agnes?"

"Um, she's Viscountess Belowcha."

"Wrong. She's Viscountess Pellowsha. You get punished for making a mistake."

"Huh? You never mentioned a punishm— Fmh! Mm! Mgh!" For some reason, when I answered incorrectly, I ended up being kissed as "punishment."

Does this mean that I'll be punished every time I make a mistake? It was already too late by the time I realized that.

"Who's this young lady, Agnes?"

"She's Count Belladonnar's daughter!"

"So close. She's Count Helladonner's daughter."

"Mnh! Mrgg!"

"What about this woman?"

"Marchioness Buolaleetablun."

"Incorrect."

"Hmnh! Mgrgh!"

I started to get the feeling that he was deliberately picking only women with really difficult names to quiz me on. By the time I realized, I'd already fallen right into Lord Nazel's trap yet again.

Chapter 3: Madam Bumpkin's New Encounter

The day of Countess Marie Nasi's party had finally arrived. At the moment, she lived in her husband's county, not the capital, and it seemed that their entire family got along great. Lady Marie had apparently taken a liking to me because I'd helped her evacuate during the violent incident at the palace. That was also why Lord Nazel had picked the party held at her estate for us to attend.

"You're as beautiful as ever, Agnes. Your dress looks great on you too. I feel like kidnapping you." Lord Nazel, ever the perfect gentleman, complimented me as I'd dressed up for today's party. Kelly had picked out a simple, light red dress for me today. I gave a slightly more mature impression than usual.

"Thank you very much, Lord Nazel. Your outfit is also dashing and wonderful. I-I feel like kidnapping you too..." When I tried mimicking the usual Lord Nazel line, he happily blushed.

"I'd gladly be kidnapped if *you* were the culprit, Agnes. So, what do you intend to do to me after kidnapping me? I'd like you to take this opportunity and put it into practice right here and now, won't you?"

As I looked into his amber eyes—which were filled with expectation and a hint of sadism—I realized I'd made a terrible mistake. *I shouldn't have said that!* My face right now must have been an even deeper crimson than Lord Nazel's.

"I-I won't do anything to you! Lately, you've been kind of mean to me often, Lord Nazel."

"What...? Even that little counts as mean? You're just so adorable that I get carried away without even realizing it. Yes, it's all your fault," Lord Nazel stated shamelessly, a bright smile on his face.

The House of Nasi's estate was located in the east of Desnim.

The area was difficult to access by land, but you could get there really quickly on mountbeast. King Bertrand's mountbeast introduction program was also being implemented here, so Lord Nazel and I had ridden here on Geni's back. We were accompanied by Kelly, Torre, as well as Dunk, who was currently devouring some vegetables in a mountbeast stable.

I'd first gotten changed into my dress in a changing room at the manor, then Lord Nazel and I went to greet Lady Marie at the party's venue.

"Oh my, if it isn't Lord Nazelbart and Lady Agnes. You have my sincerest gratitude for your help on that day. My son is also growing up well thanks to you. He can walk now." The countess's son and his older sister were playing on a nearby kids' bed, while the maids were watching over them with great care. The two kids were holding on to the bed's frame and standing up.

Princess Mia's baby boy looks healthy. I'm so glad to see that he's being raised with such love. He's actually gotten really big and chubby. The countess's adopted son even looked to be in better shape and healthier than her biological daughter. *Getting taken in by Lady Marie was great for this boy.*

After we finished our greetings, we went around the venue as a couple. The vast majority of the people attending this party were married couples, but it looked like there were also some engaged couples here and there. *This is a gathering where a partner is indispensable.*

We greeted several other nobles, but they all looked to be good-natured people. Many of them were older than me, and teased me for getting along so well with Lord Nazel or said they were looking forward to us having children, which made my heart pound like crazy. In contrast, Lord Nazel looked kind of pleased to hear that.

Lord Nazel sure is popular! It seemed that there were many noblemen who wanted to get close to Lord Nazel because he had ties to His Majesty, and so they continuously came to talk to him. Before long, he was surrounded by noblemen and disappeared from my sight. This party was only attended by people who already had significant others, so he obviously wasn't approached by any

women, but I had never expected the opposite to happen instead.

There are also people talking business. I paid close attention to the conversations I could overhear.

"My husband is such a troublemaker... He's completely engrossed in Lord Nazelbart. I'm truly sorry, Lady Agnes." The wife of one of the men surrounding Lord Nazel had an awkward smile as she came to talk to me.

"No, I understand him wanting to talk to Lord Nazel. I'm the same, after all."

"My, how innocent. Won't you tell me more?"

The women around me started getting excited, their eyes sparkling. For some reason, we discussed love. The topic shifted from Lord Nazel again and again, until eventually we were discussing the current circumstances of one woman's husband.

"And he was cheating on me!"

"That's horrible! Truly unacceptable behavior."

"He needs to be punished."

As we continued talking, some of the younger, engaged ladies suddenly cut in on the conversation.

"Come to think of it, isn't Lady Agnes just like him? I read all about it. Despite having a wonderful husband like Lord Nazelbart, she also laid her hands on his younger brother, His Grace Lord Julian." She was apparently talking about *that* article.

The married women around me became speechless when they heard her. They all knew that the article had been nonsense. Besides that, suddenly barging into someone else's conversation without so much as a greeting was considered a breach of etiquette in Desnim's parties.

"How about you let go of Lord Nazelbart and hand him over already?"

"'Let go' of him?"

"That's right. Lord Nazelbart's marriage with you was only a punishment imposed on him. Now that the former Princess Mia and her allies have been exiled, he no longer needs to be with you! Despite being *Lady Bumpkin*, you've continued to cling to your position as Lord Nazelbart's wife and keep him bound to the frontier!

Shame on you!" One of them rattled on and on while giving me a death glare.

Hmm... From the looks of it, she's unlikely to listen to me no matter what I say. It's difficult to persuade someone who's entirely convinced they're in the right. Miss Furla was just like that too. You had to be careful when dealing with people like her. I'd recovered from the newspaper incident, but having past articles brought up all the time in high society...made me feel somewhat gloomy.

"Besides, aren't you the daughter of incarcerated criminals?! Even if you were once a marquess's daughter, you're now unworthy to be the wife of a man who was once a prince consort candidate!"

"No, um—"

"I'm sure that deep down, Lord Nazelbart is unhappy about his situation! To think that he has to live under the same roof as a woman like you!"

"Um... B-Behind you."

I didn't have the chance to tell them that it would be best if they left it at that, because Lord Nazel rushed over to us faster than I could get the words out. He'd broken out of the group of men surrounding him and had heard everything. While there was a lovely smile on his face, his eyes were far from happy.

That's what Lord Nazel looks like when he's absolutely enraged! There were very few people who could make him truly angry, like Master Robin or Count Lubhuta. Though I felt like his boiling point had dropped to some extent recently, he was still a gentle individual. Yet right now...he was...*incredibly* scary.

"What was that you're saying I'm unhappy about?"

When the ladies heard Lord Nazel's pleasant voice, they all turned around and blushed crimson.

"Huh? Ah! Lord Nazelbart?! Eek!"

"Oh my, he talked to me! He's so dreamy!"

While the women were getting enthusiastic, Lord Nazel was the complete opposite—the air about him was becoming colder and colder. He didn't usually expose his true feelings to this extent.

"So? What am I unhappy about?"

Words started spilling out of the ladies' mouths like a torrent, and

they told Lord Nazel about me and the article.

"You should divorce this shameless woman, Lord Nazelbart! It's utterly repulsive that she'd make a move on her husband's own brother!"

"Indeed! Lady Agnes is unworthy to be your wife! Everyone's seen that article about her disgraceful behavior."

"So we told her to stop tying down a great man like you!"

The women repeated what they'd told me moments earlier. Lord Nazel's retort to them was calm.

"I'm fairly certain that article was later retracted. Were you all insulting my wife while fully aware of that fact?"

"It certainly was retracted, but...didn't Lady Agnes simply abuse her authority to force the newspaper to apologize?"

"Yes! It's truly unnatural for them to suddenly start denying their own article!"

"Hmm, is that so?" Lord Nazel replied with a blink of his eyes at the clamoring women. But his next words left them all frozen in place. "Actually, *I'm* the one who used his authority to make the newspaper take back its article."

"Wha—"

"Wh-Wha— Oh, of course! As a margrave, Lord Nazelbart is in a position such that he has to cover up any scandals involving him. I'm sure that's why he had no choice but to intervene!" One of the women had come up with her own imaginative interpretation.

"Yes, that's right. That's clearly what happened. It would be a real problem if his domain suffered because of his fool of a wife!"

"I can understand his actions, then."

Lord Nazel neither confirmed nor denied their theory, but the young ladies reached a conclusion on their own. Watching the whole process had taught me that this was how rumors were born. I was certain that it was because of social dynamics like this that anyone was still talking about the completely groundless article.

I was shocked when the article came out, but I've gradually become able to think about it calmly. Lord Nazel, on the other hand, didn't look the least bit calm. *He's still very obviously mad.*

Lord Nazel spoke to the women with an indifferent voice, as if he

were dealing with some annoying work.

"You all seem very eager to humiliate my wife. Who are these women, Lady Nasi?"

The nearby countess hurried to reply to Lord Nazel's question.

"You have my sincerest apologies, Lord Nazelbart. They only had their high society debuts recently and are yet to be added to the *Noble Directory*. They are all daughters of lords of nearby territories. Starting from the right, they're the daughters of Marquess Dinau, Count Maison, and Viscount Berner."

"I see. I've memorized your houses. How dare you take that nonsensical article at face value and hurt my dear Agnes? And then you kept insulting her... I forced the newspaper to issue a retraction to reveal the truth and protect my wife's honor. Agnes has done nothing wrong. Oh yes, you all must have come with your partners to this party." When Lord Nazel turned around, the men who should have been accompanying the three ladies flinched and started shivering.

"I'm so sorry! I just remembered some urgent work I need to take care of!"

"M-Me too!"

"Wait up, so do I!"

Rather than escort their fiancées out like I expected, the men left the venue and ran away on their own. They seemed to be declaring their intent to cut ties with the young ladies and avoid making Lord Nazel their enemy, even if it meant literally fleeing the party.

"What the..."

"How could he?!"

After their partners abandoned them, the ladies quickly grew pale and started trembling. They must have just realized the gravity of the situation.

"You are *never* to come near Agnes ever again," Lord Nazel warned the women, as if making sure they'd learned their lesson.

"No, please wait. This is all a misunderstanding! We only..."

"You only what?"

"We only wanted to protect you, Lord Nazelbart," she said in a pleading tone.

Lord Nazel looked at the woman with a frigid gaze, and his reply was equally cold.

"Don't make me laugh. It's true that the judgment I received from Princess Mia is what started our marriage. But the reason I wanted to make Agnes my wife was because I was charmed by her honest, strong, and kind character. We held our wedding ceremony because I wanted to. And you told *her* to stop keeping *me* bound? You are way off the mark. I'm the one who wants to keep her bound," Lord Nazel declared boldly. It was painfully obvious how much he cared about me.

But I'd rather not be in bonds. I wasn't into that kind of stuff.

Lady Marie found the right moment and clapped her hands. In short order, some of the estate's servants and guards formed up next to the three ladies.

"My guests will be returning home. Please see them off." At the countess's command, her servants surrounded the ladies and started leading them to the gates.

"Wait!"

"Why are you doing this?!"

"This is all wrong!"

The three of them shouted various complaints, but Lady Marie didn't rescind her order.

That startled me... As I stood petrified on the spot, Lord Nazel hurried to my side and gave me a passionate embrace even though we had an audience.

"I'm sorry I took my eyes off you, Agnes. I'm the one who told you not to be alone, yet I let you be exposed to danger before my very eyes."

"Please, don't let it bother you." I bet even Lord Nazel hadn't expected such a large group of men to come flocking to him.

"No, I can't simply let it go. This is a great chance to make things perfectly clear."

"Make what clear?" I asked in confusion.

Lord Nazel turned to address the other guests, never letting me out of his embrace.

"It seems that the aforementioned article has caused a small

misunderstanding, but as you can clearly see, Agnes and I are happily married. You have nothing to worry about. I apologize for all the fuss, but I hope you can go back to enjoying Lady Nasi's party."

I didn't really understand why, but the people around us gave a round of applause. High society was full of mysteries. We were accompanied by cheers as Lord Nazel took me to a guest room that Lady Marie had pointed him to. The room was furnished with a small table and chairs as well as a large bed. Lord Nazel gently lowered me onto the bed and knelt in front of me.

"Are you all right, Agnes?"

"I'm perfectly fine since you helped me out." There was no need for Lord Nazel to blame himself.

"I never expected there to be guests with such a complete lack of common sense..."

"They apparently only had their debuts recently, so they must still be learning manners. I also have a mountain of things I don't know."

Lord Nazel disputed what I'd just said with a resolute voice.

"You're nothing like them. You don't have an ugly heart that's swayed by mere rumors and that attacks other people."

"I really wish I could have handled that well on my own. I ended up getting saved by you once again."

"It's because you're such a gentle soul that..." Lord Nazel looked like he was about to say something more, but he stopped there. I was really curious to know the rest. "Say, Agnes. Do you really intend to continue participating in high society? You're already doing more than enough for Sutrena as it is."

"I...want to continue." I was most likely not cut out for this. But nothing would change if I ran away now. What would lie beyond constantly running away and being protected?

"I really want to keep you bound to our manor..." The overprotective Lord Nazel said something pretty unsettling, but I pretended I didn't hear him.

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As the party drew to a close, a young man got into an expensive

carriage parked in front of the gate. He was a tall, beautiful man with straight bluish hair and refined mannerisms. He didn't have a partner with him—instead, one of his subordinates was also in the carriage.

"Did you enjoy the party, Lord Davier?"

The man nodded.

"It was so-so. Though they'd said I had to bring a partner, I was allowed inside even by myself. Their security was surprisingly full of holes."

Davier's subordinate heaved a troubled sigh in response and started admonishing him.

"Must you continue to mess around like this despite holding the esteemed rank of duke?"

"Hey, I'm completely serious. I hate social gatherings like this. I'd rather hole up in my mansion and work. I only attended because I had to."

Davier disliked noisy places, so he chose to avoid social events to the best of his ability. If possible, he'd like to shut himself away in some quiet territory and live a leisurely life there. However, such a life was no longer an option for him after both of his parents had been imprisoned. All of their power and responsibilities had heavily fallen upon Davier, their eldest son. There was no one more talented to take his place, so he'd had no choice but to succeed his parents as head of house. His position didn't allow him to escape his duties. As a result, he only participated in the bare minimum of social activities. This party had been one such case, though he'd attended under someone else's name because of some slightly unusual circumstances.

It's rare for Nazelbart to appear in public. He's a troublesome man who rarely leaves the frontier. And he brought along his wife, despite her questionable reputation.

Davier had been present during the fiasco when Princess Mia had broken her engagement, so he knew that Nazelbart had been ordered to marry the ugly woman everyone referred to as "Lady Bumpkin." Nazelbart's marriage had only been forced upon him—he'd had nothing to gain from it. After the former queen and her

faction had been judged, the vast majority of nobles had assumed that Nazelbart would get divorced before long.

However, Nazelbart and that woman had continued living together in the frontier, and they had even held a wedding ceremony to emphasize the status of their relationship. Moreover, it had been a great surprise to learn that the ceremony had been performed at Nazelbart's request. Davier was curious about the "Lady Bumpkin" Agnes who could make Nazelbart—once known as an animated doll for his lack of expressiveness—go that far. In order to look into what kind of person she was, Davier had fanned the flames of jealousy of some ignorant young ladies and had egged them on a bit to get them to act. He'd also wanted to see how Nazelbart would react. In fact, Davier was the one who'd anonymously sent Nazelbart a copy of the paper containing the scandalous article, just to make sure that he didn't miss it.

Davier had gotten these three women to dance exactly to his tune with laughable ease. They'd even gone and attacked Agnes directly, despite the fact that she technically outranked them. If she wasn't such a kind person, she'd have undoubtedly retaliated harshly. Instead, Davier had managed to see something very interesting: Nazelbart acting uncharacteristically emotional and humanlike.

"Sure enough, Nazelbart's weakness is...Lady Agnes. Very interesting." Disguising himself as a different person and sneaking into the party had definitely been worth it. "To think the once doll-like Nazelbart would become so taken with a woman."

Nazelbart's current behavior would have been unimaginable for his past self. Moreover, the feeling of tension he'd had about him when he'd been living in the capital was now gone. If his peaceful life in the frontier or his relationship with his wife had changed him, it was a little enviable.

As Davier was lost in thought, his subordinate addressed him again.

"What do you intend to do after this, Your Grace?"

"Let me see. I think I'll stay here in the County of Nasi for a bit and hold off on returning to the capital. I have some business to

handle, so I need to get ready." Davier really would have rather stayed cooped up in his room, but his position didn't permit that.

His subordinate smiled with satisfaction and nodded. He'd apparently received the reply he'd been hoping for.

"As you wish, Duke Addamsgomes."

Davier was a little fed up with so many people trying to play up his status. But if he did nothing, the House of Addamsgomes, which was at odds with the king, would decline, and eventually be eliminated. If that happened, everyone who'd contributed to the success of the House of Addamsgomes since his father's and grandfather's generations would turn in their graves.

Things aren't going how I'd like at all.

Davier directed his carriage to a nearby inn, where he was staying using an alias.

"There's still time until the plan. Should I go sightseeing around town tomorrow or something?" Davier muttered as he watched the townscape of the County of Nasi go by, an inconspicuous smile on his lips.

The House of Addamsgomes and the House of Florescruz were both powerful ducal families. The former had once held immense influence as Queen Coco Desnim's greatest supporter. However, its wrongdoings had been revealed alongside the queen's downfall, and Davier's father, the former Duke Addamsgomes, had lost his position, passing his title to his eldest son.

Davier had never wanted to take center stage—he'd always been the kind of person who hated attention. He was more suited to operating behind the scenes. He'd made great use of that skill to help his parents in the past, but he'd made sure never to leave any proof. Thanks to his careful personality, he hadn't been disgraced along with his father when the latter had dug his own grave. The eldest son of the House of Florescruz had apparently been arrested along with his father, but he'd always been less prudent than his younger brothers, so that outcome had probably been inevitable.

Though Davier was reluctant, now that he was a duke, he had to act the part. His immediate goal was to restore his house's influence to what it had formerly been—or even to surpass it.

That fool Lubhuta acted of his own accord and got caught. What a useless pervert... Lubhuta had always committed blunder after blunder, and when things went south, he'd try to cling to the House of Addamsgomes. He was a troublesome associate who had only brought debts instead of profits. He'd become too much of a liability this time, so he'd been cut loose.

I'd love some competent subordinates. The majority of such people serving his house had been arrested alongside his father.

If the current king's reign carried on as it was, the House of Addamsgomes would likely continue to be treated poorly, unlike the House of Florescruz, whose new duke and his older brother were allies of the king. Davier had his back against the wall.

Things can't go on like this. If only I *had been Princess Mia's partner... No, there's no point in thinking about what ifs. We don't have the same influence as before, but I still have to do what I can.*

First of all, the king had to be replaced immediately, before his faction solidified its influence. To that end, Davier had come all the way to the County of Nasi, where just the right person could be found.

"It's time to begin."

The County of Nasi was sunnier and warmer than the capital. Davier honestly didn't want to go out much, but he had decided to start taking action himself in accordance with the plan, since he wasn't the kind of person who felt comfortable leaving things to others. In fact, his father had been arrested because he'd gotten mixed up in the mistakes committed by those around him, and Davier himself had needed to go to the trouble of cleaning up after Lubhuta's mess. The only person Davier trusted was himself.

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The day after the party, I got dressed in a maid uniform and went into town. I'd been feeling down because of everything that had happened, so Kelly had suggested an outing for a change of pace. I tried to act cheerful to avoid worrying her.

Heh heh, nobody can see through my disguise in the County of

Nasi, even though everyone would recognize me in Sutrena dressed like this.

A messenger from King Bertrand had come to visit, so Lord Nazel was currently dealing with that. As for me, I was taking a stroll around town along with Kelly. This area was safe and had many stores catering to the rich.

Let's buy a souvenir for Lord Nazel.

The weather was nice today and it was a bit hot. The County of Nasi was located in a mountain basin, so the summers were hot and the winters were cold.

It would be best if we returned to the estate quickly before we collapsed from heatstroke. As that thought crossed my mind, a man walking in front of me staggered and crouched down in front of a nearby pillar. He'd probably been done in by the heat.

"Are you all right?" I quickly called out to him. "Kelly, we need to get him some water."

"Understood, I'll go look for some. Please stay here, Lady Agnes."

"Yes, I'll carry him to that shade over there." While Kelly was fetching water to nurse the man back to health, I carried him to the shade of a building and laid him down there. He had long bluish hair and was dressed in high-quality clothing, so he was probably someone wealthy from around here. His mannerisms were somewhat refined and made me think of Lord Nazel.

"You'll be all right. Excuse me for a moment." After carrying him to a cool place, I loosened his clothes a bit and waited for Kelly. I wanted to cool his body down, but unfortunately, I didn't have anything cold with me.

"I apologize for taking up your time." The man slowly raised his head, but when he got a good look at me, he looked surprised for some reason. "You—"

"Um, is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. I'm staying right around the corner, so I'll excuse myself here." Even though he was unwell, the man tried to leave in a hurry.



"You shouldn't move around yet. My handmaiden will return shortly, so please stay put until then." The man hastily stood up as if trying to escape from something, but I gently pushed him back down.

"Ugh! So strong!" Perhaps his heatstroke was to blame, but the man was surprisingly weak compared to Lord Nazel or Torre.

While we engaged in a weird struggle of him trying to escape and me trying to keep him there, Kelly came running back with some water and a towel.

"Lady Agnes!"

"Thank you, Kelly. Please drink some water to feel better." Kelly handed me the bottle of water and I passed it on to the man. He seemed to have resigned himself as he reluctantly started drinking. Next, Kelly took out a small pouch from her pocket.

"It's salt," she said. Both water and salt were necessary to treat heatstroke.

To think she even got her hands on salt in such a short time. Kelly never fails to impress. What a capable head handmaiden!

After the man had finished the water and calmed down somewhat, I lent him my shoulder and started walking him to the inn he was staying at. This was the most efficient way to make sure he got there safely. Once we arrived, we could probably leave him in the care of his attendants, family, or the inn staff.

"Y-You're quite strong," the man told me with a bewildered tone as I supported him.

"Eh heh heh, I hear that often."

We made it to the man's inn before long. It was the most high-class one in the area; even nobles stayed here. I entrusted the staggering man to the inn's proprietor, then Kelly and I headed back to the Nasi estate.

"Ah, the souvenir for Lord Nazel..." I got flustered, thinking that I'd forgotten to get him one because I'd been too preoccupied with helping the man, when Kelly took out a small package.

"I bought him something. The shop selling salt also had a confectionery famous in this county."

"Great job, Kelly!" Today was yet another day Kelly had been the

perfect handmaiden from start to finish.

We returned to the manor with souvenirs in hand, and found Lord Nazel and Lady Marie talking in the drawing room. Lady Marie looked troubled and it seemed that she was asking for advice. Next to her were a maid, her two infants, her husband Count Nasi, and King Bertrand's messenger. I had to pass in front of the drawing room to get to my room, so I could clearly hear them talking as I walked by.

"I've been feeling quite disturbed these past few days. I don't think it will cause a big uproar since we're in the countryside, but it's still troubling to hear that kind of talk. But even though I've filed a complaint, there's been no response," Lady Marie said.

Lord Nazel looked a little serious.

"That's not something that could be done by an individual. They either belong to some organization or have a relatively powerful backer. With things being how they are, I'd like to put out the fire before it becomes too big to— Hmm? Agnes?" As I was unintentionally gazing at Lord Nazel's serious expression, he turned toward me and noticed that I'd been eavesdropping.

"Uhm, I'm back! Please don't mind me and continue your conversation. I'll be returning to my room."

"You returned at the perfect time, Agnes. Come join us. Oh, you bought souvenirs?"

"Um, yes, there's enough for everyone." I felt awkward about intruding on a serious conversation, but then Kelly said that she would hand out the souvenirs after we were done talking and held on to the package for now. Thank you, Kelly. "You all looked rather troubled. What were you talking about?"

"To tell you the truth, there have recently been murmurs circulating in the County of Nasi that Princess Mia's son ought to be the next king. Such talk seems to be rapidly spreading among the people, and Count and Countess Nasi are apparently racking their brains over what to do," Lord Nazel replied with a summary of the situation.

The count and countess both nodded in agreement.

"We don't want our son Ralph to be the next king. We'd like him to live as just our son, the child of a count. We don't want him to get

dragged into a bloody fight for the throne. Just how much have King Bertrand and Prince Leonardo suffered so far?" Lady Marie said.

I also understood their feelings perfectly well. King Bertrand had once been poisoned by Queen Coco, while Prince Leonardo had been treated coldly and had no one to support him. The two of them had suffered until the queen had been convicted of her crimes.

I looked at the chubby boy who was sleeping peacefully. *I wouldn't want this adorable baby to be thrown into the perilous royal palace.* I was in full agreement with Lady Marie.

"I'm concerned about the way this opinion has spread so suddenly and unnaturally," Lady Marie said with a serious expression.

In response, Kelly—who was standing close to the wall—swiftly held out a piece of paper in front of me. Rows of letters were printed on it, just like a newspaper article.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's a flyer that was being passed around town. I was given one during our walk. There are also illustrations for the illiterate, and the person who was handing them out was loudly reading the contents of the article. This is probably where the rumors started. According to the townspeople, the person handing out the flyers appeared recently, but it seems that he was only hired to do this. When I asked him about it, he said that he accepted this job in exchange for money. He also said that the person who hired him only appears to him unexpectedly, and he has no idea who they are."

"Thank you, Kelly. The conversation can move forward thanks to you." As I scanned the flyer Kelly had given me, I noticed something. "It says here that 'King Bertrand usurped the throne. Prince Ralph is the only one worthy to be the next king! Count and Countess Nasi should return him to the palace.' The content is quite biased. Where have I seen this emotional and aggressive writing style before...? Ah!"

Concerned by my exclamation, Lord Nazel peeked at the article from next to me.

"Is something wrong with the article, Agnes?"

"Yes, Lord Nazel. This flyer's writing is quite similar to the scandalous article about me and Lord Julian, but it can't be the same

writer, can it?”

“Hmm...”

The reporter who’d written that article had apparently been fired for spreading lies on such a large scale. Perhaps she’d started writing articles again at her new job... The flyer didn’t include the name of a newspaper, but its harsh phrasing and aggressive literary style were just like that newspaper article.

Did she write this and hand it out on her own? But where would she have found the money for it? Printing presses and ink are extremely expensive, so only someone relatively rich could acquire them. Even old, stone printing tools are sold at high prices as antiques.

An entire set of modern printing tools was something you’d normally only find at a publishing company, or in the manor of a particularly eccentric noble.

Even if you wanted to buy everything, all printing technology is imported from abroad, so you’d need some kind of connection.

Besides, hiring someone to distribute the articles every time also took money. Having flyers handed out around town every day was fairly costly. It was impossible for a single commoner who’d been fired from her job to do all of that alone.

Hmm...

Lord Nazel looked over the flyer and eventually raised his head. He seemed to agree with what I’d just said.

“It’s certainly true that it has the same aggressive writing style that tends to get on people’s nerves, but I think it would be difficult for a single woman to come all the way here from the capital and then write, print, and distribute an article. Even if she found new employment, this flyer doesn’t have any newspaper’s name on it, and there are no newspaper companies based in the County of Nasi in the first place.”

“Right? There’s no way it was written by the same reporter,” I said.

“We can’t rule out that possibility for certain. If she was personally hired, or is affiliated with some affluent organization, there’s still a chance it could be her.”

"Hopefully, we'll find the person writing the articles and stop the rumors from spreading. If only we had some more clues."

It was decided that the House of Nasi would conduct a thorough investigation into the person responsible for spreading the flyers around town.

"Just in case, we should also inform King Bertrand about this article." Lord Nazel immediately started talking with the messenger, while the count and countess also moved into action.

The two babies were still sound asleep as little breaths escaped their lips.

Now that things had settled down a bit, I handed out the souvenirs and headed to the room we were staying in.

"Did you encounter any problems during your outing, Agnes?" Lord Nazel asked as we walked down the hallway.

"No, everything went fine. I had lots of fun looking at all the different parts of town. Oh, we found someone collapsed from heatstroke at one point, so we helped him out. He seemed calmer after some time passed, so I helped him return to the high-class inn he was staying at."

"Someone staying at an inn... A tourist perhaps? If it was someone who'd attended the party, you'd have recognized him..."

The County of Nasi wasn't very easy to access, but this town located at its center attracted many people from other parts of the county. Most of them were apparently merchants who came to sell their wares. After selling off their cargo, they would replenish their stock with products they could only buy here, then travel around the county again. It also seemed that the county's people would come to sightsee depending on the season. Though it was a little hot at the moment, many people visited even during this time of year.

"That reminds me, Agnes. The House of Nasi has apparently invited people for another party tomorrow. They asked us to participate too if we'd like, but I ref—"

"I'll join!"

Many gatherings and tea parties took place from spring to summer. I had a few dresses ready just in case. This time, I would aim to become a margravine who could enjoy high society.

"Say, why are you being so stubborn, Agnes? You don't need to bother with social activities. It's plenty for you to continue living a peaceful life in Sutrena like you have until now."

"I think it's especially because we live on the frontier that it's important for us to listen to other people's stories in social settings. Of course, I know that you look up information from all over the country, but there should be things to learn from conversations between women."

My kind Lord Nazel surely wanted me to live quietly in Sutrena, but social events had to be the best opportunities to spread the good news of our margravate.

When Lord Nazel saw that my will was unwavering, he shrugged his shoulders and heaved a little sigh. He realized my mind still hadn't changed and seemed to have given up on opposing me further. His long eyelashes pointed downward as he spent some time in thought, then he turned his eyes back to me.

"Agnes, to begin with, you never received a proper social education because the House of Evantail was in a somewhat...*unique*...position."

"Th-That's true, but..."

Thinking back on it, I truly found the social education I'd received from my father, mother, and other people of the Evantail estate unthinkable. The majority of their teachings had emphasized the importance of spreading the traditional and venerable values of the House of Evantail to the other, modern and pathetic nobles. That was why the House of Evantail had been widely disliked.

"Therefore, if you say you want to continue to tackle high society, I will at the very least ask Lady Nasi to help you out with your education. She's used to social settings and has many acquaintances. And as you've seen, she's a very caring person."

"But will it be all right for me to make her go to all that trouble?"

"It seems that she already intends to help. This second party invitation is apparently intended to provide an opportunity to instruct you in the ways of social life."

"I see." This was great news to me. My mother's social education had been quite absurd compared to conventional wisdom. "For now,

I'd like to attend that party."

"If that is your wish." Lord Nazel smiled gently at me.

We arrived at our room at that moment and opened the door to head inside.

"There's a great view from the window here. It's even possible to see all the way to the other side of the estate's gate," I pointed out.

"They must have deliberately assigned us a room with a good view."

Lord Nazel and I then spent some leisure time together while I thought about tomorrow's party.

Chapter 4: Madam Bumpkin's Tuber-Hurling Defensive, Round Two

It was the following day, and almost time for the second party. I was dressed in a mature, burgundy dress and Lord Nazel was escorting me to the party venue. The unfamiliar, fitted, and slightly sexy dress was making my heart beat like a drum.

Although we're still in the same building, this party is taking place during the evening. There are many older couples, so it feels more like an adult gathering. In the dimly lit hall of the Nasi estate, Lady Marie and several of her noble friends were present. The mood felt cozier than usual.

There seem to be around seven groups of people in total. I was relieved that the party was more small-scale than I'd expected. This was the perfect environment for me to study social etiquette.

Lord Nazel and I headed straight for Lady Marie.

"I would like to thank you for the invitation, Lady Marie. I hope we can all have a pleasant evening."

"Come on, Lady Agnes, you don't need to be so formal. Today's event is a small one with only those truly close to me in attendance."

Even if she told me to relax, I was still feeling pressured. I *really* didn't want to fail this time!

"It's all right, Agnes. I'm here for you."

"Lord Nazel..." His gentle encouragement made my nervous heart calm down just a bit. As we locked eyes with each other, I sensed that the people around us were giving us warm gazes.

"Heh heh, you two sure get along. It's so heartwarming." The women present were looking at us like we were their own children. I hurriedly straightened my posture in response.

Actually, their expressions are more *tender than my real mother's ever was. I wonder if this is what a typical mother is like. I need to thank Lord Nazel, Lady Marie, and the other guests.* My shoulders relaxed a little as all these kind people welcomed me.

As I pleasantly chatted with everyone, people started saying that we should dance soon, so I paired up with Lord Nazel. The other couples also faced each other and waited for the music to start. There usually wasn't any dancing at such a small evening party, but since bigger parties always involved dancing, Lady Marie had decided to provide me this opportunity to practice.

"Lord Nazel...I haven't danced in a long time. I'm sorry if I'm terrible at it." I decided to tell him the truth before I committed any blunders.

Back when I'd still lived in the House of Evantail, I'd been assigned a dancing instructor. I'd still been little at the time, but I'd more or less learned how to dance. Although the dances themselves had been somewhat antiquated, they hadn't completely fallen out of general use. However, this was where the problem began. Theoretically, I'd been given opportunities to dance during gatherings for noble children or ones where I'd been searching for a fiancé...but unfortunately, no one had ever invited Lady Bumpkin to dance. In fact, everyone had always thought of ways to avoid getting paired up with me, so as soon as the party had started, they'd all acted at once to secure dance partners. As a result, I had always ended up alone during dances.

Eh heh heh, I haven't danced in ages. I just hope my legs will move properly. I was honestly a bit nervous.

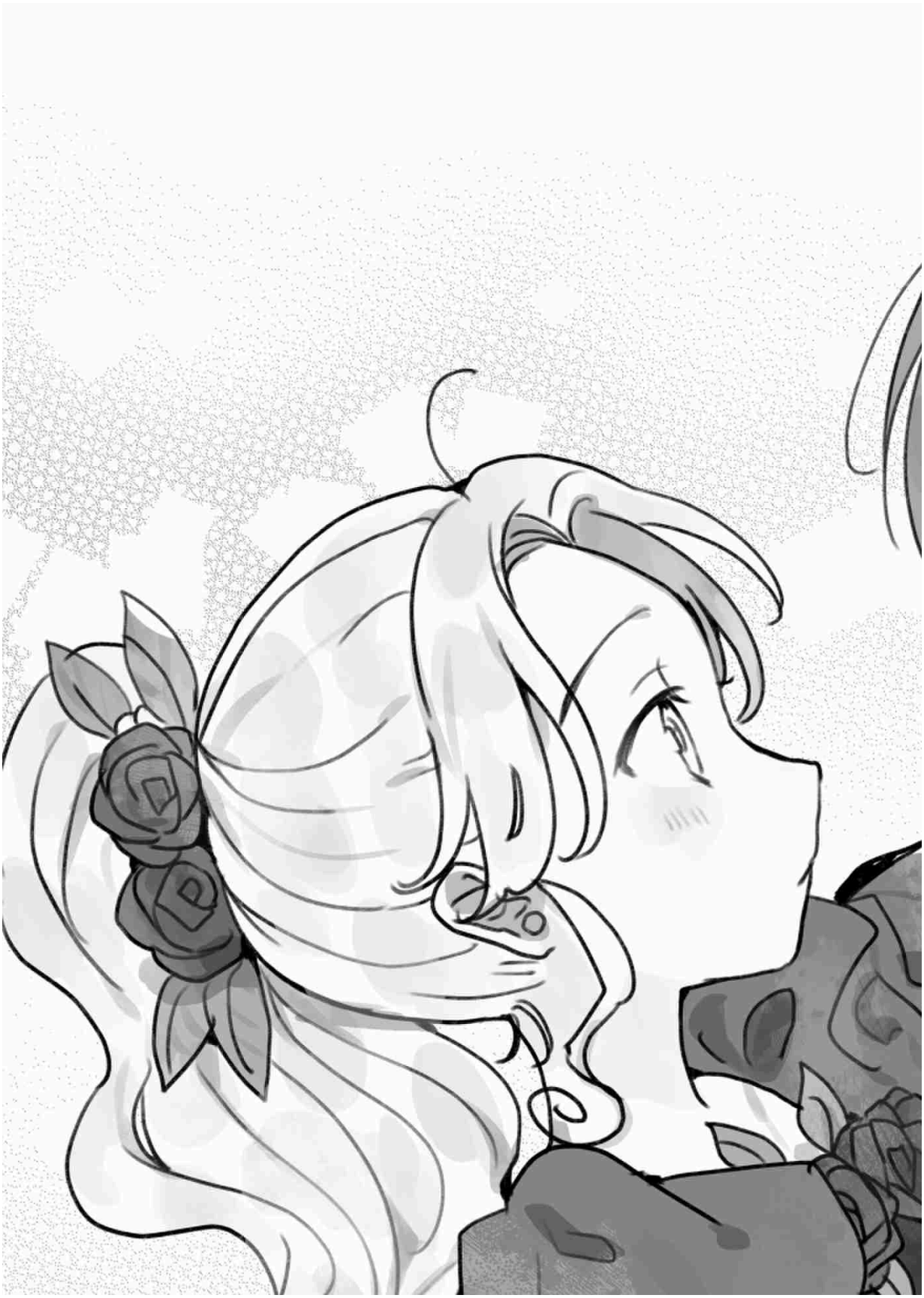
"Don't worry, I'll support you," Lord Nazel told me with his usual calm smile. He was so reliable! "Give me your hand, Agnes."

"O-Okay." I presented my hand to Lord Nazel and he gently grasped it, then placed his other hand around my back.

We're so close. I also timidly placed my other hand around Lord Nazel's waist.

Before long, the orchestra started playing music, signaling us to dance. As I mobilized all of my past memories about dancing and started moving accordingly, Lord Nazel gave me an enticing,

flirtatious glance.



"You're doing great, Agnes."

"Hwhoa?!" My entire face blushed red in an instant and my heart started pounding violently. I kept desperately moving my feet in my state of confusion. *Your expression is foul play, Lord Nazel!*

Whether he realized my flustered state or not, Lord Nazel continued to lead me in a perfect, refined dance.

"Come closer, Agnes."

"Okay..." I leaned in closer to Lord Nazel as my heart felt ready to burst. I felt bashful since our bodies were now practically glued to each other. I kept telling myself that this was a dance and managed to keep my embarrassment in check, until...

"Closer," Lord Nazel said and embraced me tight even though we were still dancing. As I worried that I wouldn't be able to move like this, the music suddenly stopped.

Oh, this was just the moment the first song ended. The other pairs were also striking poses, though none of them were as close to each other as we were.

As the second song was about to start, a pale-faced servant rushed into the venue. Lady Marie discreetly rose from her seat and left the room along with the servant.

Did something happen?

A moment later, Lady Marie returned, her face as white as the servant's, and told Count Nasi something.

"Is that true?" I heard him ask.

"Yes, I just confirmed it myself."

The couple's tense behavior made the other guests look at them with worry. The count quickly addressed us with an apologetic expression.

"You have my apologies, but we need to excuse ourselves to take care of some urgent business. It seems that moments ago, our son Ralph was kidnapped."

There was a huge commotion in the venue. One after another, the nobles around us offered to help in the search. Since they were good friends with the count and countess, they were obviously worried about little Ralph.

"He might still be nearby."

"Yes, I have subordinates standing by back at my inn who can help out."

"Let's send some of our guards and soldiers to search outside."

It looked like Lord Nazel also intended to take Torre with him and personally join the hunt.

"It will be dangerous, so stay in the manor and help Lady Nasi, Agnes."

"A-All right!" I should focus all my attention on what I could do to help right now.

I went and supported Lady Marie, who looked like she might collapse on the spot at any moment, and took her to her room. Ralph had been the only one taken—Lady Marie's daughter was safe and sound. The servants looked at her with concern as she held her daughter close and refused to hand her over to anyone. The other women from the party also came to the room to cheer up the countess, while their husbands were all outside searching for Ralph.

"Oh, Ralph, just where have you gone to?"

The current theory was that someone had absconded with Ralph through the window after knocking out the servants. Everyone here felt frustrated that there was nothing that we could do.

"E-Excuse me! I'll go check the garden! I might be able to find some kind of clue!" I couldn't just sit there twiddling my thumbs. There was a high chance I would be going on a fool's errand, but I still wanted to do something—*anything*—for the kind Lady Marie.

"Then I'll go check the corridor next to the party venue."

"I'll search toward the entrance."

The other women also sprang into action. When she heard them, Lady Marie also stood up and wiped her tears away.

"Then I'll look inside the manor. Thank you, Lady Agnes. It's dark outside, so be careful. Please take this to light your way." Lady Marie handed me a beautiful lamp with finely crafted metal trim she had for her personal use. I gratefully accepted it and headed to the garden.

Nights in Sutrena were darker, so I was relatively okay even walking at night alone. The garden was also a reasonable size, unlike the enormous one in our estate, and there was no stream I

had to be careful not to fall into. The garden was maintained beautifully, so walking across it was actually really easy.

"Hmm, there was nothing at the front. Let's head to the back next." I turned around and started following a paved path deeper into the estate. It seemed that the servants often used the area I was headed to; their tools had been left here and there, and there were visible traces of human activity.

"Oh, what's that big pile over there? Some kind of food? I think we're close to the kitchen." Large, round, and rugged objects about the size of a baby's head were haphazardly stacked atop a basket. "Aren't these tubers? I've seen them in one of Lord Nazel's books. They're related to taros and can't be eaten without being processed. The book said that to make them edible, first you either boil and mash them, or you dry them out and grind them into powder. After that step, you mix in lye." We were also considering cultivating them in Sutrena, but not only were these plants delicate, but they also took three years to fully grow, so we weren't making use of them yet.

Are they harvested in this county? Although I was curious about the tubers, I returned my efforts to searching for clues. I heard some noise coming from the end of the garden, even farther inside from where the tubers were stacked. I headed toward the sound, thinking it was probably a servant or one of the other noblewomen. As I moved forward, I heard a cat meowing.

So it was a cat, not a person. But I also feel like I can hear a baby crying. I peeked around the corner and saw a light in the distance. The crying was coming from the same direction as the light. *Is that Ralph?* I extinguished the flame of my lamp just in case and started walking toward the crying while trying to be stealthy. As I got closer, I also heard an unfamiliar voice.

"Hey, hurry up and make him stop crying. Someone's gonna notice!"

"I can't. I got no idea how to deal with a baby. Man, just come and pick up this brat already. Is this really the right place to hand him over?"

"Yeah, no doubt about it. I was told that staying on the premises

would be a blind spot in the search effort. Oh, be gentle with the baby, all right? He's still the next king."

I was astonished at the man's words. *I feel like I heard something about that just recently... Ah! This is what was written in the flyer Kelly was given.* Could these men be sympathizers of that article? All I knew for certain was that they'd kidnapped Ralph. I had to save him before he was handed over.

Perhaps the man holding Ralph was fed up with his endless crying, because the man violently set the baby down on the border of a flower bed. Ralph's cries naturally became louder after he so forcefully collided with such a hard surface.

O-Oh no! Poor Ralph!

But this was a great opportunity. I might be able to stealthily take Ralph back while the men were looking away from him.

I'm all alone here. I have to take action. I walked slowly, careful not to make any noise, and relied on the men's light to see the way. *Careful, careful. Oh, Ralph stopped crying—this is my chance!*

Fortunately, I managed to get close to Ralph unnoticed, probably because I was in the shadow cast by the men's lamp. I took advantage of their carelessness while they were engrossed in their conversation and collected Ralph from the flower bed, then headed back the way I'd come.

Ugh, there's no light this way, so I can't see very well. And I've already extinguished my lamp. I could only proceed slowly, making sure I didn't trip or get noticed. *Please continue chatting, you two. Don't pay any attention to me... And don't cry, Ralph...*

I finally reached the corner, with the warm, heavy infant in my arms. *I should be fine once I reenter the manor. There are patrolling soldiers and male servants there.*

Nevertheless, my visibility was poor. My night vision was good, but my eyes were still adjusting, since I'd moved from an area illuminated by lamplight to complete darkness.

As I continued sneaking away, Ralph, who'd been docile so far, began to squirm.

"Hmm?" I had the feeling that Ralph kind of...smelled. "Did he soil himself?" He'd apparently been quiet all this time because he'd

been holding it in. He was probably squirming now because his bottom felt uncomfortable. I hastily fixed Ralph's position in my arms and hurried to the servants' service door.

"Hold out for a little longer, okay, Ralph? Gosh, what should I do?" I tried turning the doorknob, but the service door was locked since it was night. It looked like I had no choice but to go to the front of the garden. But as I broke into a jog, Ralph started crying.

"Waaah, mnh, urk..."

"Oh no, please wait a little longer! B-Be quiet!" I whispered to Ralph. If he started fussing now, the kidnappers would realize I had taken him.

"Wah, wah, wah."

"Eep..."

"Waaaaahhh! Waaaaaaahhh! Gyaaaaahhh!"

"Whoa!" I broke into a sprint. The time for stealth was over. Ralph was a big baby, and he cried very loudly. We'd been discovered because of him, but at least I no longer needed to be careful not to make noise or do anything that would make him cry, so I ran with all my might.

I hope someone in the manor notices Ralph's crying.

As I reached the box where the tubers had been piled up, I heard the kidnappers from around the corner. Their lamplight was drawing closer.

"Found him! The crying is coming from that direction!"

"Looks like there aren't many people. Let's get the baby back!"

On one side, we had a single woman holding a chubby baby, and on the other, two young men. At this rate, they'd probably catch up to me soon.

Ralph can apparently toddle, but he can't make it into the house on his own.

I hid him inside the tuber basket and grabbed a tuber with each of my previously reinforced arms. Ralph continued bawling even inside the basket.

"Waaaaah! Uwaaaaahhh!"

"It's okay, Ralph. I'll protect you!"

"Gwaaaaah!"

I could hear the two men approaching swiftly. I took aim...

"Heave-ho!"

"Waaaaahhh!"

I hurled one of the tubers toward the lamplight, but there was no response.

It's fine if I miss just once. Calm down... I had a veritable mountain of tubers left in the basket.

"Here goes another!"

"Uwaaaaah!"

This time, I heard a thud and saw the lamp fall on the ground. Looks like I'd hit the mark. The other kidnapper swiftly picked up the lamp and continued running toward me. He was pretty close.

Huh, he picked it up? That just makes him an easier target. I knew from my earlier experience that going from a bright place to complete darkness made it difficult to see around you, but I still thought he should have left the lamp on the ground.

"Take that!"

"Waaaaaaahhh!!!"

I heard another loud thud and the lamp fell to the ground again. The men seemed to have fainted and were quiet now, but Ralph was still as lively as ever.

"Mgwaaaaahhh!"

"There, there, everything's fine now. Let's go home."

"Waaaaaaaaahhh!"

I borrowed the kidnappers' lamp, retrieved Ralph from the basket, and headed for the manor's entrance. As I was on my way there, a nearby window opened, and Lady Marie peeked her head through it. It seemed that Ralph's deafening cries had reached her.

"Ralph!"

"Waaaaagh!"

She noticed me with a lamp in one arm and Ralph in the other.

"Lady Agnes! Is Ralph..."

I smiled brightly at the anxious Lady Marie to reassure her.

"Ralph is perfectly fine. He's unhurt and, as you can hear, is full of energy. He does need his diaper changed, though..."

"Oh, thank you, Lady Agnes! I'm coming to you right now!"

I could hear Lady Marie running off. I also headed to the entrance with Ralph still in my embrace. Everyone still in the manor soon gathered around me.

"Oh, Ralph, I'm so glad you're really okay!"

I handed the heavy baby over to his mother. Suddenly recognizing her, he finally stopped crying.

"Goo goo, ga."

"What a good boy you are, Ralph. My, your diaper looks full. Let's get it changed like Lady Agnes said."

"You see, Lady Marie, I saw..." I told her the whole story. I explained that Ralph's kidnappers had been planning on making him the next king, and I mentioned that they were lying unconscious in the garden next to the tubers.

"I'll have the soldiers arrest them at once. Lady Agnes, I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't need to. I'm just happy that Ralph made it back safely." As soon as the relief washed over me, my legs gave out and I fell on the floor. Although I'd reinforced my body with magic, fighting against two adult men had been terrifying.

"Lady Agnes!" The other noblewomen gathered around me with visible concern.

"Eh heh heh, I relaxed a bit too much. It's fine; I'll be able to walk in a moment." I smiled and tried to gloss over my condition, when I heard Lord Nazel shouting my name from the entrance. Torre was also running behind him, similarly calling for me. "What are you two doing here?"

"We didn't find anything outside the estate, so we decided to check the area closer to the manor too, just in case. We then saw all of you gathered at the entrance. What happened to Lady Nasi's son?"

"I managed to protect him without issue. See?" I pointed with both hands toward Ralph who was in Lady Marie's embrace—she nodded back with a smile.

"I'm truly sorry for all the trouble we've caused you. As you can see, Ralph is back home thanks to Lady Agnes's efforts."

"Agnes brought him back?" Lord Nazel asked.

The other noblewomen recapped everything that had taken place in the garden for him, and also explained why I was on the floor and couldn't stand at the moment.

"I see; so they're in the garden. Thank goodness they didn't manage to hand Ralph over. And I'm truly glad you're safe, Agnes. I'll carry you to our room. Torre, inform the other searchers."

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll get my wife some rest," Lord Nazel said after picking me up and promptly made for our room. The noblewomen completely agreed that it was a good idea and so I was carried off. After we were back in the guest room, we heaved sighs of relief. Lord Nazel gently lowered me onto the bed, knelt before me, and started checking again to make sure I wasn't injured. I'd been covered in injuries back when he'd taken me under his protection from the House of Evantail, so it seemed that the experience had given me a bit of trauma.

"Agnes, going out to the garden alone at night was quite risky..."

"I always do it back home, so I thought I'd be fine. Rather than searching for the kidnappers, I was only looking around to see if they'd dropped any clues. Though I suppose I did end up bumping into them." If I hadn't acted right then and there, Ralph might have ended up in the hands of someone scheming to usurp the throne. I hadn't had the leeway to go call for help. Lord Nazel was also aware of this and wasn't blaming me. He just hugged me tight from the front, as if to express all of his feelings for me.

"Eep! Lord Nazel— Mnh!" My mouth was sealed with a kiss and my arms were prevented from offering any resistance. When our lips eventually parted, a murmur escaped his mouth.

"I'm truly glad nothing happened to you."

"I-I'm sorry for making you worry." Even I thought I'd been pretty reckless. At this point, I was mostly just relieved that Ralph was safe. "Nevertheless, I wonder who's behind Ralph's attempted kidnapping."

"A thorough investigation will be necessary. Thanks to your efforts, it looks like the kidnappers were arrested, so I think Lady Nasi will look into things further."

This was a different territory's problem, so it wasn't advisable for us to intervene more than absolutely necessary. But I wanted to help out Lady Marie during our stay, and it seemed that Lord Nazel was of the same opinion.

"I hope the uproar surrounding Ralph dies down after this," I said.

"So do I." With a troubled expression, Lord Nazel looked outside the window, where it was pitch-black and nothing was really visible.

I feel like those flyers and the kidnapping are connected.

For the time being, it looked like the situation had been resolved, but we would later find out that Ralph's kidnapping was only the beginning.

***

The next day, I noticed some kind of commotion, so I went down to the entrance of the Nasi manor. Lady Marie was in the spacious, clean entrance hall, and was worriedly looking outside through the open door.

"Lady Marie, is something wrong?"

Her expression darkened in response to my question.

"The townspeople are making a racket outside the gate," she replied. After yesterday's events, she looked uneasy about this disturbance.

"You mean the residents of the County of Nasi? That's rather baffling."

"Yes, my husband is out there dealing with them right now."

It was a straight line from the entrance of the Nasi manor to the estate's gate, so I could see a little beyond the gate. The count and his soldiers were holding back the people who were violently trying to enter the premises.

"How did this happen?" I wondered out loud. Count and Countess Nasi were managing their territory reliably, and they had a good reputation among their people. It was strange that the residents would rampage under these circumstances. "I'll go check things out too."

As I was about to enter the garden, Lord Nazel also arrived. He'd stayed back in our room and had apparently gotten worried since I didn't return.

"You stay here, Agnes. I'll go." I didn't even have a chance to stop him as he ran toward the gate.

Although he'd told me to stay here, I was also worried, so I stealthily headed toward the gate too. The people's voices gradually got closer, and I could make out what they were saying. I strained my ears and managed to catch some of what they were shouting. They had some kind of complaint about little Ralph.

"We're telling you to bring out Prince Ralph already!"

"He's descended from true royalty and is the one worthy to be the next king! It was written in those flyers!"

"Yeah! Free Prince Ralph!"

Hidden under the shade of a tree, I blinked as I pondered what I'd just heard.

That's...the same as what the kidnappers from yesterday were saying, isn't it? Are the flyers, the attempted kidnapping, and the people gathered here all connected? I sneaked back to the manor entrance and told Lady Marie what I'd heard about Ralph.

"Either way, we should secure Ralph's safety to avoid a repeat of yesterday," I suggested.

"Yes, I agree."

We shut the door and headed to the nursery on the second floor to watch over Ralph and his sister. There was a chance someone could take advantage of all the confusion and try to kidnap him again.

"Um, may I use my reinforcement magic on Ralph? I'll undo it later."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"My magic can make people or objects sturdier. Someone affected by my magic will be unhurt even when kicked by a horse. I thought about using it on Ralph to make sure he doesn't get hurt."

Lady Marie spent a moment in thought and nodded with resolve.

"Please do, Lady Agnes. Could you do the same for my daughter Lorraine?"

"Very well." I used my reinforcement magic on the two babies. "Get strong and healthy!" This was the magic I always used on the soldiers of Sutrena. Though there was no visual change, the two of them wouldn't get hurt easily now. "That should do it."

"Thank you, Lady Agnes."

As Lady Marie and I were smiling at each other, we heard a very loud voice coming from outside.

"The count and countess need to hand over Prince Ralph right now! Are you trying to take possession of the baby prince to disrupt the legitimate succession of the throne?!" It was a high-pitched, aggressive female voice.

Her voice is louder than average, about the same as Torre's, and he works out his abdominal muscles. It's even loud enough to reach all the way here—could magic be responsible? Either way, I felt like I'd heard that voice somewhere before.

"What a horrible thing to say. You and your husband are raising Ralph like he's your own child." Anyone with a pair of eyes could tell that they treasured their son dearly. They'd both been terribly shaken when Ralph had been kidnapped.

"Guys! We'll take back the legitimate heir to the throne by force!" The one commanding and inciting the crowd had to be that loud woman. But even with a demagogue like her to incite them, the people before the gate had to be crazy to be so easily misled by all that nonsense and try to mob a noble's estate.

They're being manipulated... It's just like the time those rumors about Lord Julian and me were going around and people were fooled by the article and made a fuss.

The article about my supposed adultery was one thing, but a single look at Count and Countess Nasi should have revealed the truth about their contributions and character. They managed their county competently, they'd taken in Ralph when he'd been in a tough spot and were raising him well, and compared to other territories, their county's residents were overall more affluent and comfortable. Of course, that wasn't true for the entire population, but it was unfortunate that there were people who would turn their backs on their rulers despite the benefits they enjoyed.

"The garden sure is noisy. Let me strengthen the windows too, just in case. Get stronger!" As soon as I applied my magic to the nursery's bay window, something hard bumped into it. "Hmm?" At first I thought it was just my imagination, but things came flying and hitting the window one after another. *They really came here aiming for Ralph.*

With the window still shut, I peeked down through a gap in the curtains. Many strangers had come into the garden and were throwing rocks at the windowpane. They weren't only targeting this room, though—they seemed to be indiscriminately throwing rocks at any window they saw. The ones I hadn't reinforced were being smashed. Then I suddenly noticed people coming in through the first floor's broken windows.

"Lady Marie, intruders have entered the manor!" I hurriedly told her.

"No way!" she replied, pale as a ghost.

"The uproar at the front gate may have been a diversion. Ralph could be their true objective, like yesterday." Lady Marie, the babies, and I were the only ones in this room right now. We were in a really dangerous situation.

"I can't believe they came for Ralph both yesterday and today! It's inconceivable!"

"They might be taking advantage of that line of thought and doing what's unexpected, or they might have just gotten impatient after failing to kidnap him once... I'm not really sure, but I'm going to reinforce the door too." I used my magic on the nursery's door and walls.

"Will you be all right using your magic so much, Lady Agnes?"

"Ah ha ha, it seems that my mana capacity is really high. I'm perfectly fine." Oddly enough, I didn't get tired no matter how much I used my magic.

A short time later, we heard the rattling of the doorknob. *They really did come here.* We'd locked the door just in case, and I'd reinforced the lock along with the door. It shouldn't open for the time being.

There were voices on the other side of the door.

"Dammit, why won't it open?! This lock is stupidly sturdy and won't break!"

"Out of the way, I'm kicking it down!"

I could hear the noise of the door being repeatedly kicked. Lady Marie trembled as she held her two babies, who both had blank expressions.

I need to protect Ralph, Lorraine, and Lady Marie! But there's nothing in this room I can use as a projectile. It's filled with soft objects to make sure the babies don't get hurt. Since it's come to this, my only choice is to directly charge at them.

I readied my resolve and shut my eyes, but...the door remained unbroken no matter how much time passed.

H-Huh? Did I perhaps reinforce it so much they really can't break through? It looked like things were going to be okay. I felt relieved for a brief moment, until a large hole opened in the floor. They'd given up on coming through the door and had apparently destroyed the ceiling from the first floor.

"Eek!" I lost my balance and toppled over. I'd never imagined they would get in like this.

I should have reinforced the floor and ceiling too! A ladder was placed in the hole and people started climbing up. The way they moved made it clear that they were no ordinary townspeople. *Their movements are trained and efficient, like Lord Nazel's or Torre's. They're far too fast even though they're climbing a ladder. Just who are these people?*

Before I could stand, two unfamiliar men entered the room.

"He really was here. Give us the baby," one of them demanded.

Lady Marie trembled as shook her head fiercely in resistance, the two babies still in her arms.

"Never! I'm not giving you my children!"

"Which one is Prince Ralph? Hand him over already!" It looked like the intruders couldn't tell the two babies apart—they were wearing matching green outfits today. Unable to distinguish the babies, the two men were confused.

This is my chance. I quickly got up and screamed as I ran toward the men.

"Go away, ruffians! Take that!" I tackled one of the two. My reinforced body sent him flying easily, and he fainted when his head collided with the reinforced wall. But the second man took the opportunity to snatch Lorraine from Lady Marie's hands.

"Gaaah!" Lorraine cried in displeasure when she was separated from her mother.

"Lorraine! Stop it!"

"Oh, so this isn't the prince? Then I don't need her." To our horror, the intruder tossed Lorraine away.

"W-Watch out!" I dove across the floor and caught Lorraine in my arms—she was safe. Although she was being protected by my magic, I couldn't simply ignore a baby being thrown before my very eyes. As I stood up with Lorraine in my arms, the intruder stole Ralph from Lady Marie this time.

"Stop, stop it!" Lady Marie screamed in sorrow.

"Tsk, such pointless resistance. Prince Ralph is now in my—"

The next moment, Ralph, who looked as displeased as Lorraine, started waving his arms around in resistance.

"Gaaah! Waaah!"

"Hold still, dammit!"

"Waaahhh! Gwaaah! Daah!" In tandem with that last cry, Ralph's tiny fist hit the intruder's jaw.

"Whoaaa!" The intruder let go of Ralph and was violently blown through the hole back downstairs.

My reinforcement might have been a bit *too* strong, because Ralph had unintentionally knocked the man out. I didn't want Lady Marie or her attendants to meet a similar fate, so I gently weakened the magic I'd applied to the two babies.

Fortunately, Ralph had landed on a cushion and was just fine, that lucky boy.

"Gaah!"

"Bwaah! Dagah!"

Whether the babies understood what was going on or not, they were now saying something to each other.

I got to work repairing the room before more intruders arrived.

"I'll reinforce the ceiling and floor while I can. I'll lay out a

reinforced carpet over the hole in the floor, then place a sofa on it to add some weight and...done." My improvised barricade was complete. Thanks to it, no more intruders made it into the room.

Some time later, I heard Lord Nazel calling me from outside the manor. He'd apparently noticed our window, which was intact thanks to my reinforcement magic.

"Are you okay, Agnes?"

I opened the window, poked my head outside, and smiled at Lord Nazel, who was looking up at the second floor from the garden.

"Lady Marie, the babies, and I are all safe."

Intruders were lying down in the garden, restrained by Lord Nazel's plant magic. Their limbs were bound by the vines of an enormous plant.

Lord Nazel grew some grass, grabbed onto it, and then kept it growing, so that it lifted him up to the second floor. I was impressed to learn that he could do something like that.

"I'm sorry, Agnes. I realized halfway through that the people at the front gate were only a diversion, but I had my hands full protecting the town from further destruction, so I couldn't come here right away."

"I'm all right. I'm glad to see that you weren't hurt either. But what was that about the town being destroyed?"

"There were more than just townspeople provoked by the flyers shouting back there. Most of those people were actually soldiers hired by someone. There was no one leading them, so they went around rampaging. As a result, the areas around the estate suffered damages." Fortunately, it looked like few among the general public had been injured, but there had apparently been people who'd lost their homes or shops and suffered minor injuries. "Rebuilding will be necessary in the future. I'm thinking of offering support in the form of plant residences and such."

"The damage was that severe, huh?" It sounded like I might also be able to help with my magic.

"We'll need to transport a lot of things from Sutrena, so it won't happen right now."

For now, it seemed that support for those affected by the riot would be provided primarily by the House of Nasi. *I'm sure the count and countess will handle things just fine.* They were older and more experienced than Lord Nazel and me.

"Oh yes, we also captured the ringleader inciting the people. The count is talking to her downstairs."

"Um, was the ringleader that woman with the loud voice?" I asked, earning a nod of affirmation from Lord Nazel.

"You could hear her all the way here, huh? It was apparently thanks to magic."

"I knew it. She was as loud as Torre; I thought it would be hard for an ordinary woman to shout like that."

"Yeah... Torre is something else for being so loud without magic." Lord Nazel had a faraway look in his eyes. Torre was indeed something else.

"In any case, she must have been pretty well prepared to achieve all of that on her own." I felt somewhat uneasy about this loudmouthed ringleader who had been behind today's commotion. "Um, may I meet her?"

"She's currently in front of the main entrance, so you can see her."

"There's something on my mind, so I'm going to take a look!" I left the room, ran across the hallway, and peeked down at the entrance from the stair landing. Other doors and walls had also been broken in the mob's attack. The front door was open, so I could see the captured ringleader. She had short hair and strong-willed eyes. "I knew it! That's the woman I met in the capital."

Lord Nazel arrived a little later and also looked at the entrance from behind me.

"What happened to you all of a sudden, Agnes?"

"Lord Nazel, I know the ringleader!"

"What?!"

"She's the reporter who wrote that article about me cheating when I was in the capital!"

Standing next to me, Lord Nazel looked at me with surprise.

"I never spoke to the reporter face-to-face. Are you absolutely

certain that's her?"

I quietly nodded.

"Yes, that strong-willed woman is undoubtedly the one who accosted me in front of the Florescruz estate's gate. Her voice sounded similar, and the flyers distributed around town are also probably her handiwork."

"In that case, we need to let Count Nasi know. I'm heading downstairs for a bit. It's better if you don't meet her. I bet it's only going to be an unpleasant experience for you, and I don't want you to witness the questioning."

"Understood," I said after a short pause. There was nothing I could contribute to the interrogation. I headed back to Lady Marie and told her what I'd said to Lord Nazel. She was still shaken from the earlier events as she issued directions to her servants for the manor's repairs, but she looked calmer now. "You see, the ringleader was a reporter I encountered in the capital. Reporters are supposed to write the truth, so why is she trying to spread all this nonsense?"

Lady Marie shrugged her shoulders, showing she didn't really understand, but she eventually entrusted her babies to their caretakers and stood up.

"According to Lord Nazelbart, the town has been damaged. Let's start preparations for offering food aid, though the only things we can prepare quickly at the manor are the foodstuffs stocked in the kitchen. Where should we start?"

"Does your stock include those big tubers in the garden?"

"Oh, so you saw those. No, unfortunately it doesn't. Those tubers are poisonous. We don't know how to cook them, so we just left them there. Apparently, some merchant who also didn't know how they're meant to be eaten foisted them on us. We have plenty of ingredients inside the manor, so I believe we should focus on those." It seemed that they'd abandoned those tubers outside because they didn't plan on eating them.

"I-I know how to cook them! It takes quite some time, though..." I said, raising my voice. I'd only read the method in a book and hadn't actually put it into practice before, but it was still better than doing nothing.

“I can’t believe you actually know how to prepare them, Lady Agnes!” Lady Marie’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Um, there’s a possibility this method is only good on paper.”

“We should still try. It will be a huge help if we manage to eat all those tubers we had zero use for. I want to provide food to as many people as possible. Please tell us how to cook those tubers, Lady Agnes!”

I immediately nodded in affirmation to her request.

“Gladly!” I still lacked experience in high society and had needed assistance from Lord Nazel and Lady Marie this time, but helping with the manor’s repairs and tackling a new tuber dish were things even I could do.

***

The next day, Lady Marie and I headed to the kitchen. First, she gave her chefs instructions to start preparing food for the relief efforts. The kitchen’s window was broken and the garden was in full view.

“Some of you please come with me to the garden. Lady Agnes will teach us how to cook those tubers.”

“Those inedible, poisonous tubers?!” The chefs all began talking with comments like that and several of them followed Lady Marie to the garden.

“Please use any of the kitchen’s utensils as you see fit, Lady Agnes.”

“Thank you very much.” Usually Mather prepared everything from start to finish, but I had to do it alone today. Nevertheless, since I always thought up new dishes with her, I’d learned most of the steps for cooking and how to use the relevant utensils. “This will take some time, but let’s try to make these tubers edible. Or so I’d like to say, but we need some special ingredients to do that. May I borrow ash from your stove?”

“Yes, go ahead and— Hold on, did you say ‘ash’?!” Lady Marie replied.

I could tell that everyone around me was shocked. I’d reacted the

same when I'd first read these instructions.

"Um, we need to mix the ash with hot water and filter it," I explained.

Once the chefs took the initiative and started working, I continued. "I think we should go with the mashing method today. There is a second method where you slice them into thin pieces, dry them, and grind them into powder, but drying takes time, so it's better if we use the first one for now." First, we had to peel the tubers and soak them in water. "It's actually better to let them soak in water for an entire day unpeeled, then follow the same process. But today, we'll peel them first." I got right to work.

"Are you used to this, Lady Agnes? You handle the tubers expertly!" Lady Marie exclaimed.

"I don't believe it. Milady's guest is actually peeling the tubers at the same speed as we are..."

Every member of the Nasi household was shocked. I'd actually had many opportunities to peel tubers when processing them, so I was quite used to this kind of work.

"Next, we take the tubers out of the water, remove the sprouts, cut the tubers into round slices, and boil them in a pot. When they turn soft, we mash them." We then added hot water to the mashed tubers and mixed them firmly until they became elastic. After we let them set for a bit and they became firm, we added the lye we'd prepared beforehand and mixed again. Their color started changing from white to gray, and they lost their stickiness and became jellylike.

"When we're done mixing, we're supposed to shape them using a wooden frame, but since we don't have one here, we'll need to turn them into a sphere of an appropriate size," I continued. I rolled the mixture into a sphere then boiled it in water for a short time. Finally... "It's done." I took the jiggly substance out of the pot and placed it on a plate, then smiled at everyone.

I'm glad I managed to follow the instructions in Lord Nazel's book. I felt relieved. I cut the finished product—the konjac jelly—into pieces for us to try. However, everyone else seemed to be wary of it.

I can't blame them. This is something made by mixing inedible

tubers with lye, after all. Moreover, konjacs were poisonous when eaten raw.

"Um, this jelly apparently goes well with steak seasoning."

When I mentioned what was written in the book, the chefs sprang into action, and a short time later the air was filled with a nice aroma. The people who had at first kept their distance from the konjac jelly and looked at it like some ominous substance were now drawn in by the smell and seemed less cautious. The jellies, which had been cooked like steaks, were quickly placed on a table for us to sample. Lady Marie was looking at them curiously.

I stood in front of the finished konjac jellies and cleared my throat.

"Ahem. I will try the food first as the one responsible for suggesting we cook the tubers." As I reached for the food, the servants all shouted, "Don't!" and stopped me.

"We don't know if this is safe to eat. We'll test for poison first. If anything were to happen to you, we'd never be able to apologize to Lord Nazelbart enough."

I had no choice but to let them be the ones to try the jelly.

"Lady Agnes, are these tubers a staple food in Sutrena?" Lady Marie asked, to which I shook my head in response.

"No, not at the moment. We are considering bringing them in, but we haven't planted any yet. As you can see, cooking them is a time-consuming process, so it's likely that most people would prefer to buy the finished product rather than the raw tubers themselves. But it will be hard to keep the food for long in Sutrena's climate. Another problem is that they take a long time to grow."

"Yes, the temperature is high year-round over there, after all."

"That said, dried konjac jelly might yet work."

As the two of us talked, the servants ate the jelly while making comments about the unusual texture.

"Then it's time I also try—"

"No," Lady Marie interrupted me. "We'll observe the servants' health for a few days to see if there are any adverse effects. You may try the jelly after that, Lady Agnes."

"Oh, come on..." I'd gone through so much effort to make it but

couldn’t try it? Talk about an unexpected development. But being pushy would only put the servants in a tight spot, so we agreed that if nothing happened to the tasters, they would make more jelly with steak seasoning another day.

Several days later, the tasters were feeling fine—in fact, everyone who’d tried the konjac jelly was full of vigor—so I was finally permitted to try the dish. Lord Nazel was also with me today—we would sample the jelly in the dining room.

“Thank you for coming to taste the food with me, Lord Nazel.”

“The rebuilding has progressed considerably. The plant residences have safely arrived, and thanks to your magic, rubble removal is also progressing smoothly.”

The personnel we’d brought in from Sutrena were all experienced in reconstruction work. Houses and roads were always being damaged by manabeasts and natural disasters. Although such incidents had decreased ever since Lord Nazel had become the margrave, many places were damaged in the massive manabeast outbreak that occurred during the special new moon that came once a year. This year had been no exception. One such outbreak had occurred during the dry season, and Lord Nazel had devoted extra effort to dealing with it. They’d managed to significantly limit the damage thanks to the lessons they’d learned from last year.

“Torre is putting in some major work. I’m also glad I could be of help,” I said.

I wasn’t sure what Lord Nazel was thinking, but he stared at me for some time before happily embracing me.

“You’re the best wife in the world, Agnes.”

The hug and compliments made me feel embarrassed and restless, so I changed the subject.

“We plan to serve this konjac jelly to everyone in town. Lady Marie even said, ‘Maybe we should turn it into a House of Nasi specialty.’ Apparently, these tubers are very easy to obtain in this county.”

“That’s true. The climate here is drier than Sutrena’s, so they only need to be careful about preserving them when it’s hot. It seems like a good idea.”

As we chatted, one of the House of Nasi's chefs brought over a dish. I felt elated as I looked at the fragrant konjac jelly. I would finally get to try my trial product. I stabbed a piece of steaming jelly with my fork.

"Time to dig in!" *Nom!* The tender chewiness was kind of strange, but I felt like I could get used to it.

Lord Nazel was showing clear wariness, just like the time with the tapioca tea.

"So this is konjac jelly... I've read about it in books, but is this *really* edible? Its color looks like stone, which would normally be unthinkable for food."

"It's soft and delicious. Open wide!" I moved my fork with a piece of jelly on it closer to Lord Nazel, and he opened his mouth in resignation. He would eat pretty much anything if I sweetly said "Open wide!" After elegantly swallowing the jelly, he squinted with a dubious expression.



"It's...flabby," he said after a short pause.

"It's an acquired taste. I'm quite fond of it."

"You really can eat anything, Agnes."

Just like Lord Nazel said, I wasn't particularly picky about my food. I ate everything, and my stomach was so sturdy that it had never been upset in my life.

We enjoyed the konjac jelly and chatted pleasantly for some time, but eventually we moved on from fun topics.

"So, about the arrested reporter, it seems that her questioning hasn't been finished yet..." I said.

"Yes, looks like it. I was also present for some of it, but she's quite stubborn. She kept demanding her release, insisting she's a harmless civilian being oppressed by us nobles. She hasn't told us who's backing her yet... Honestly, I have a suspicion that she doesn't even know. Count Nasi was disappointed that we haven't gotten anything more out of her."

"Is that so?"

"It doesn't look like she herself is strongly committed to making 'Prince' Ralph the next king no matter what it takes. I actually got the impression that she took delight in inciting people with her articles and speeches. She doesn't believe what she's doing is wrong either."

I couldn't comprehend that reporter's thought process, but I strongly felt that we couldn't simply leave her alone.

"Um...may I meet the reporter?" I asked.

Lord Nazel gaped at me in surprise.

"What are you saying, Agnes? It's better if you don't meet her—it's only going to make you feel terrible. She only recently wrote that dreadful article about you, you know?"

"I know that, but still."

She conducted one-sided, self-serving "interviews," and if she didn't get the answers she wanted, she came up with malicious fabrications. Her only joy was seeing her articles influence the people around her. To that end, she didn't care if the truth got distorted or others got hurt. I honestly wanted to keep my distance from such a selfish woman. But despite all that, there was

something I wanted to tell her.

"I wanted her to properly understand what she has done. She's responsible for the destruction of the manor's windows and walls, as well as parts of the town. She isn't the 'harmless civilian' she claims to be—not at all."

After some thought, Lord Nazel set the condition that both he and Torre would also need to be present, and he got permission from Count Nasi for me to meet the reporter. The count couldn't see any further developments taking place, and since the reporter's magic was relatively harmless and only allowed her to increase the volume of her voice, he easily agreed.

That same evening, I rode in a carriage with Lord Nazel and Torre guarding me on both sides, and headed to the jail where the reporter was being held. Said jail was close to the estate, right in the middle of town. Apparently, the majority of the people who'd caused trouble on the day of the riot were here. Illuminated by the orange sunlight, our carriage passed by people on their way home until it soon arrived at our destination.

"So this is the jail the reporter is in..." As I looked up at the ornately decorated stone edifice, I took deep breaths to calm myself.

All right, let's go. When I looked around me, I noticed that many buildings around the jail had been destroyed in the riots.

"How about we go back after all, Agnes?" Lord Nazel suggested, as if this were his last chance to ask.

"I agree with Lord Nazelbart," Torre added from the side.

"No, I'm not backing down."

"You've been...pretty stubborn lately," Lord Nazel said; I actually agreed with him on that.

A guard guided us up the stairs, and the single-occupant cell where the reporter was being held came into view. It was a comparatively clean room and even had a window. Inside, the woman was sitting on a wooden chair, grumbling and complaining.

The guard looked at me with visible concern.

"That former reporter, Olce—the one who caused all that trouble the other day—is in there. I'm periodically using my magic to seal her mana, but please keep a suitable distance from all inmates. My

mana is weak, so its effects don't last long."

"I understand."

The guard's magic was apparently the kind that could seal others' mana. It was even rarer than appraisal, and it seemed that many people who possessed it were recruited to be prison guards and the like. Many kinds of magic made escaping from captivity trivial, so there would have been no point in locking up such people without countermeasures. My absolute reinforcement or Lord Nazel's vegetation were certainly suited for breaking out of prison. The reporter's voice amplification magic had probably been sealed because it was a nuisance. There were many cells on this floor, so it would have been a real bother if her voice resounded through each and every one.

After walking for a bit, we arrived right in front of the reporter's cell. She was hanging her head and had moved to sit on the floor. When the guard opened the door, she raised her head and looked at the four of us with hollow eyes.

"You guys are..." Olce remembered me and opened her eyes wide in shock. "What are *you* doing here?! Shouldn't you be in Sutrena?!"

"Countess Nasi has invited me to stay at her estate. I was also inside the manor the day you caused that riot."

"H-Hmph. So, why did you come to this jail? To laugh at me?" Olce was talking to me in her usual aggressive tone. "Listen here, I've suffered a lot because of you and your ilk! I was fired, my hard-earned achievement was erased by a retraction, and on top of all that, I ended up behind bars. I'm sick and tired of you nobles' selfish behavior!"

She claimed she'd "suffered a lot," but that was actually what *I* wanted to tell *her*. I'd experienced a lot of hardship because of the lies her article had spread. I'd gone to the capital after such a long time and I hadn't even been free to walk outside. But above all that, I wanted to inform Olce—who only ever thought about herself—of the terrible state the town was in and make her face reality.

The words of a noblewoman from a different territory...might not really have an effect on her, though.

There were people who'd lost their homes or stores because of

that uproar—some had also become unable to work. Yet the only things Olce talked about were the damage she'd suffered or complaints about nobles.

"How do you intend to take responsibility for this?! Unlike you *great* nobles, I have to work desperately to make a living! But I've had both my work and home taken from me—"

"Many residents of this town also had their livelihoods taken from them. And *you* are the one who did the taking." I couldn't hold myself back and interrupted Olce. "Look outside the window," I said, then grabbed Olce by the hand and made her come with me. Behind us, Lord Nazel, Torre, and the guard were looking in bewilderment.

"Hey, let go! Ugh, I can't break free! What ridiculous strength is this?!"

I moved Olce closer to the cell's window and pushed her face forward so she could see the town. Below us, townspeople were gathered, working on the reconstruction.

"These are the people whose homes and stores were taken from them during the uproar the other day. Do you feel nothing when you see that? They were also desperately working to make a living, yet it all collapsed in a single day. But they continue quietly rebuilding their town without sulking or causing trouble for anyone."

Lord Nazel had donated the plant residences in the town square as temporary houses, but the town itself needed to be rebuilt.

There are still ongoing experiments to turn plant residences into large or complex buildings.

Long-lasting food was also being transported via mountbeast, but since many stores had been destroyed, commercial distribution of goods within the County of Nasi would likely grind to a halt for the time being.

Olce looked at the people for some time, and eventually moved away from the window and glared at me again.

"Who cares about *those* people?! They've been living blessed lives up to now, so it's fine for them to struggle a little. A filthy noble like you has no right to order me around! I just want to write sensational articles everyone wants to read! I want to become famous as a reporter and leave my stamp on the world! I'll do

anything to achieve that goal, use any means necessary! I'll be successful even if I have to crawl on the ground!"

"Do you really mean that?" Lord Nazel asked from behind us.

Olce shifted her glare to Lord Nazel and raised her voice again.

"I do. A commoner woman like me needs to achieve great results to climb the ladder in a newspaper company! I'm not the kind of person who'd molder in obscurity in a place like this!"

"You called that fabricated article an achievement. Do you have any idea how much it hurt my wife? You deserved to get fired."

"So what?! Your wife was the one pulling a publicity stunt by using that ridiculous 'Lady Bumpkin' epithet! I know all about it! I only made her more famous, so what's your problem?!" Olce continued screaming.

"Agnes was always tormented by that disgraceful nickname. Digging up her past is only a bother to her now."

No matter how much we tried to get through to Olce, neither my words nor Lord Nazel's reached her. She had no intention of understanding or accepting anything she was told. Vexing though it was, the only thing I could do was pray for her to change for the better.

"Let's go, Agnes."

"Yes, Lord Nazel. Thank you for bringing me this far."

Olce would remain in custody here until her sentence was decided. I hoped my meeting with her today would eventually become the impetus for her to change. I left the building while hoping for that.

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Night found Olce kicking the bars of her cell in irritation.

"Argh, this pisses me off! What was with that Goody Two-shoes act?! What exactly did I do wrong?! I only wrote those flyers, spurred on those rubes' sense of justice, and merrily led them along! It's not like *I* was the one who went on a rampage and destroyed the town! Those morons just got drunk on their own righteousness and cut loose! To begin with, I was just doing a job! I have no idea

who the client even is!”

As a former reporter, Olce had run her own investigation into this mysterious client of hers. But even when she found a promising lead, the trail invariably fizzled out before she could find out anything important. That haughty client was probably a noble with considerable power. He always suddenly appeared as if on a whim, gave Olce some work, then left. Subsequent exchanges between them happened through an intermediary, and a different one every time to boot. The client was truly cautious. Since he was trying to overthrow the king, Olce had judged that it would be dangerous to get too involved, so she had given up on investigating this enigmatic figure. For now, she was going through with this job for the money and fame.

“Dammit! I got arrested because of his request, so he could at least come help me out!” Olce screamed as she repeatedly kicked the bars. People in other cells were complaining and demanding she be quiet, but she couldn’t care less. After all, they were just garbage who wouldn’t have any impact on her life. Besides, they were all exaggerating about the noise—her voice amplification magic had already been sealed.

But after some time passed, a guard came and opened the door to Olce’s cell.

“Get out.”

Olce looked at the guard with some suspicion; she didn’t recognize him.

“Am I finally being released? Or have there been noise complaints?”

The guard remained silent and half dragged Olce away. She wasn’t taken to a different cell or another room of the jail, but outside the building. She was feeling excited, wondering if she really was going to be released. There was an inconspicuous black carriage parked there, and Olce was directed to enter it. That overly cautious client of hers must have pulled some strings.

Ah ha ha! I was getting worried there for a second, but I’m now a free woman. But I’m still furious. This time, I’m going to spread an article exposing the Nasi couple and Lady Bumpkin and her snooty

husband! I think I'll make the headline something like "Wicked Nobles Commit Double Adultery at Dubious Party!" I'm sure it will be a huge hit with the unenlightened masses!

For a short time, Olce was in a great mood, and she was practically bouncing off the walls of the carriage...but her final destination was a deserted, pitch-black alley. She was violently removed from the carriage and saw her client from the other day appear before her. She couldn't make him out clearly because it was dark, but he was undoubtedly the man who'd given Olce this job.

"I knew you were behind my release!" Olce smirked brazenly at her client.

The man remained calm and replied with sardonic politeness.

"Thank you ever so much for your hard work."

"Hmph, if you were going to help me, you should have gotten me out of jail sooner! It was cramped and boring—the worst environment ever." Olce was outraged as she spoke to the man, but he ignored her as he continued.

"However, you have failed at the job I asked of you. Therefore, I cannot give you the promised remuneration. A pity, truly."

"What did you say?!"

"Moreover, according to my subordinate who infiltrated the jail as a guard, your identity has been discovered by Margrave and Margravine Florescruz. That was a terrible blunder. They have most likely informed Count and Countess Nasi."

"So what?!"

"I can't use you anymore. Thank you for *everything* you've done so far. It's a small sum, but here's some severance pay. Goodbye."

"Whaaa—" Olce's voice quavered with unease. "What are you talking about? I'll be in real trouble if you abandon me while I'm a wanted woman." She shamelessly grabbed the hem of the man's shirt.

"Insolent cur!" shouted the guard who'd been riding with Olce in the carriage; he ripped her away from the client.

"Ouch! What was that for?! Hey, aren't you a warden? Is it really okay for you to participate in this?!"

The client replied to Olce's question as he brushed off the hem of

his shirt.

"He may be working as a guard for the moment, but he's my faithful subordinate. My orders take priority. If you value your life, live quietly from now on and avoid writing any more needless articles."

"What?! You want to take my articles away from me?!"

"To begin with, those 'articles' are trivial things, full of falsehoods. Only foolish, bored people would react to that kind of content. They could easily find out it's all a lie if they just looked into it, but they believe what they want to. It's truly pitiful." The man and the fake warden got into a different carriage than the one Olce had ridden in.

"Hey, wait a minute! Hold on!" Olce pleaded, but the carriage cruelly abandoned her. "You've got to be kidding me... I can't believe it..." With nowhere left to go, she fell into despair, but soon regained her composure.

I have to run. If she stayed here, she would get arrested again for breaking out of jail. The only money she had on hand was the so-called severance pay. She unhitched a horse from the black carriage. *I have some experience with horse riding.*

Olce was from a merchant family that was pretty wealthy for commoners, so she'd been able to receive a decent education and pursue a career as a newspaper reporter. Her family had been running business on a wide scale, but they'd earned the jealousy of nobles, who'd sabotaged them and made them go bankrupt. Her parents, both talented businesspeople, had divorced and—through their business connections—each remarried a different wealthy partner. Olce would have only gotten in the way of their new marriages, so she'd been left all alone in the care of an orphanage. But perhaps that had been inevitable, since she'd never been an adorable child to begin with and had barely ever seen her busy parents. Nevertheless, the fact that she'd gone from a wealthy environment to a filthy orphanage had been a terrible blow to Olce's heart.

That's why I hate nobles! They always abuse their power and never do anything good! That client is just like the rest of them! I thought I could take advantage of him and get some of his money. I

never expected things to turn out like this.

Olce rode her horse down the streets in the night to the main highway and headed toward the capital, her old stomping ground. The lightless road was dark and scary. And although the chance was low, she might even encounter manabeasts.

But now I have nothing left to lose. I'm invincible! Driven by her elation, Olce continued along the highway. *If I want to blend in with the crowds, it's better to go somewhere with many people, and I'm familiar with the capital. I'll make my comeback as a reporter before long...* She couldn't let go of her ambition yet.

Olce finally reached the capital after a long ride, where she was hit with some shocking information. The newspaper company she'd once worked at had gone out of business in an overtly *unnatural* manner. The building still stood, but it was completely deserted both inside and out.

"I'm sure my client is the one responsible. He must be going around destroying organizations he was involved with." Olce got chills down her spine as she thought that she might also have ended up terminated had she taken one wrong step. The only reason she was still alive was probably because he had deemed her to be insignificant. Even if she were to write an article with the truth now and tried to spread it around, it would only look like a criminal making up lies again. But if she weren't discredited and on the lam, that nobleman might have decided to erase her.

"Eep..." As she finally realized the truth, the worn-out Olce hugged her shoulders and trembled uncontrollably.

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Davier was deep in thought inside the carriage.

"I knew Margrave and Margravine Florescruz would get in the way. If it had just been Count and Countess Nasi, we would have surely taken the baby from them. And it's not just Nazelbart—Lady Agnes is also a formidable opponent."

The subordinate who had been undercover as a warden replied to Davier's monologue.

"Should we get rid of her? Nazelbart is one thing, but taking care of his wife would be simple."

However, Davier shut his eyes and shook his head.

"No, don't harm Lady Agnes."

"Huh? But why?" Davier's subordinate looked at him with confusion.

Davier knew that his subordinate was by rights correct to advise this course of action. He knew, but...

"Anyway, Lady Agnes is off-limits. Don't kill her."

"Yes, sir..." The subordinate looked perplexed, but nodded dutifully at his master's words.

Davier owed Agnes a favor for looking after him when he'd collapsed from heatstroke. Leaving that debt unpaid and having her killed would be a deplorable act that went against his principles. Besides, if possible, he wanted to avoid laying hands on such a kind woman.

When Davier and Agnes had met, he'd happened to have asked the subordinates that usually accompanied him to take care of a different task, and he'd been waiting for them in town by himself. He normally should have been under tighter guard, but he'd intentionally ventured with only a handful of people, ostensibly to avoid attracting attention. However, the real reason behind that decision was that he'd wanted to escape his suffocating life at least a little when he was out and about. Day after day, everyone around him kept pestering him about the restoration of the House of Addamsgomes, and he was a bit fed up with it. Every day, he desperately fought to hold in the feeble complaint that was on the verge of coming out of his mouth: "If you want to restore the house, go do it yourselves." Davier's natural personality made him unsuited to be the head of the House of Addamsgomes.

Why did I have to be born as a duke's eldest son? But Davier was painfully aware that things couldn't continue like this. As the duke, he had to prevent the downfall of his house in order to protect all those below him.

"Good grief. If *I'd* been chosen as prince consort, we wouldn't have had to go through this mess," Davier muttered.

"I wholeheartedly agree!" his subordinate added.

Davier and Nazelbart had once been the candidates for the position of Princess Mia's prince consort. At the time, Davier held faint affection for her. However, Nazelbart was chosen in the end, because he was more "perfect." Nothing could be done to change the decision, and Davier himself was also aware that he wasn't perfect. Nazelbart was more suited for the prince consort's duties, as he always worked as indifferently as a doll and was never wrapped up in anything unnecessary. Although Davier's father expressed his displeasure, he eventually accepted the royal family's choice. Davier had no say in the matter after that; he was never good at being proactive.

But as Davier made his peace with the facts and gave up, Robin suddenly appeared, coming as a bolt out of the blue for Davier. Just where had this man sprung from? Then Princess Mia's engagement with Nazelbart was quickly called off, and she gave birth to Robin's child. It came as a huge shock to Davier. Above all, he hated Robin. The queen, princess, and Robin went on a rampage, and as things escalated, only Davier came out innocent and safe.

The people around me say it's because I was being cautious, but that's not the only reason. His personal feelings had also played a part. He believed that this selfish obsession of his was why he wasn't cut out to be a duke or prince consort.

"For now, Nazelbart is an obstacle. We have to seal his movements. He always, always, *always* gets in my way, and so nonchalantly at that..." Davier continued carefully pondering his next moves.

His carriage rattled as it came to a halt in front of an inn that was right by a mountbeast stop.

Chapter 5: Madam Bumpkin's Tea Party Retry

As the County of Nasi's reconstruction came to a close, we decided to return to Sutrena for the time being. They were still searching for the mastermind of the incident, but we couldn't neglect Sutrena forever. I thanked Lady Marie and the other members of her estate, then got on Geni and flew off.

I truly have nothing but gratitude for Lady Marie. Thanks to her, I was able to become good friends with the noblewomen I met at the second party. She'd taught me many of the basics necessary for high society back there. *I want to one day invite them to Sutrena and show them the best hospitality.* I petted Geni as I thought about my plans for my next social event.

After we safely arrived at our estate in Sutrena, we spent some much-needed leisure time in our home for the first time in a while. A lot of necessary work had piled up that would keep us busy from tomorrow onward, but we had to focus on recovering our physical and mental strength at the moment. I lazed around on my bed to my heart's content. Kelly and Torre were also taking the day off.

"Whew! So many things happened."

Count Nasi had continued searching for the incident's ringleader, with Lord Nazel assisting him. An unusual thing had also taken place. From what I'd been told, the reporter, Olce, had suddenly vanished, along with one of the jail's guards. Even now, Count Nasi continued to investigate them under suspicion of having colluded in the jailbreak. Before leaving, I'd reinforced the entire Nasi manor, so I didn't think little Ralph would be abducted again, but I hoped they would catch the culprit soon.

As I continued idling on the bed, Lord Nazel joined me.

"Did you also come to laze around?"

"That's right. I came to laze around with you." Lord Nazel, charming as always, climbed gallantly onto the bed and embraced me from behind.

"Eek!"

"Ah, you feel so wonderful to hug."

"Lord Nazel, I'm not a body pillow. Besides, we can't exactly laze around in this position."

"It's fine. This is my own form of laziness." He always had a comeback ready. He turned me around to face him and gave me pecks on the brow, cheek, and lips.

"Mm, fwah..." I struggled to break free, my mind feeling hazy. I had a feeling that Lord Nazel's "laziness" would absolutely not end like this. My past experience convinced me of that. He gently placed his hand on my cheek and slowly drew his lips closer again. As I closed my eyes to brace for the incoming kiss, there was a knock on the door.

"Lady Agnes, you have a visitor!"

I hurriedly fixed my clothes, jumped out of the bed, and rushed to the door. I thought I heard a clicking tongue next to me, but it had to be my imagination. Lord Nazel would never click his tongue.

"I-I'm coming now!" I rushed out of the room, and the maid led me to the garden where my visitor apparently was.

Why are they in the garden instead of at the front door or the gate? I found it rather strange. When we arrived at the garden, I saw that a somewhat familiar blue-gray pegasus had landed there. The guest had apparently traveled on mountbeast. *I've seen this pegasus before.*

It was leisurely swishing its tail and obediently observing the garden. I could see long, light purple hair behind it. As I suddenly realized the visitor's identity, I called out in shock.

"Queen Latriche?!" For some reason, our country's queen, who should normally have been in the capital, was standing in my estate's garden wearing traveling clothes. She started walking toward me with an awkward and guilty expression.

"Hello, Lady Agnes." She seemed a bit down, and I wondered

what had happened. “My apologies for the sudden visit. I wanted to talk to you a bit...”

“O-Okay. Let’s head inside!” I first told Queen Latriche to get some rest, but she said she wanted to talk right away, so I took her to the drawing room. But instead of sitting on the sofa, she first looked at me and bowed.

“Lady Agnes! I apologize again for suddenly coming here uninvited!”

“Huh? What’s wrong?! Please raise your head!” Flustered, I ran to Queen Latriche’s side and forced her to raise her head and sit down. “It’s all right. I wasn’t doing anything today.”

“Please, you don’t need to show me such consideration.”

But I meant it; I really wasn’t doing anything.

“So, what happened? You suddenly came to the frontier... Does His Majesty know? Did you come here alone?”

“Yes, to both questions. I’ve informed my husband of my destination and I’ve also left a substitute at the palace, so it’s all fine. I hate being burdened, so I flew here by myself.”

Queen Latriche’s magic was called substitute. As the name implied, it could create exact copies of herself or other people. But from what she’d told me, the substitutes could only perform simple actions as they were mere copies, and she was limited to only two at a time.

“As for the reason I’m here...it’s because I wanted to rest for a bit. And I have a favor I’d like to ask of you, Lady Agnes...” Queen Latriche’s words were becoming more and more evasive.

“What favor?”

“I’m terribly sorry to ask this of you after everything that happened last time, but you’re my only trustworthy friend...”

“If you have something to tell me, please don’t hold back. Bring it on.” I leaned forward and urged Queen Latriche from across the table. In response, she lowered her head again and hesitantly squeezed the words out.

“Would you please attend another of my tea parties at the palace? I have no allies there, so I need you.”

“You need m-me? I was absolutely no help the last time,

though...”

“That’s not true at all! You don’t know how reassuring it was just having you present, Lady Agnes. But you might go through another terrible experience. It’s all because I’m such a worthless queen.”

Queen Latriche said that she hadn’t managed to form her own faction yet. She was in an unstable position as she was both a foreigner and the wife of the recently crowned King Bertrand. Moreover, the king’s act of being in poor health had come with its downsides, leaving him with little influence on those around him and an inability to establish himself in social circles. And on top of all that, the malicious nobles of the former queen’s faction opposed him at every opportunity, but they weren’t women he could make light of. He was fully in enemy territory.

Human relations are tricky. I wished I had some influence, but it would be difficult to stand against the old powers that controlled the women of high society. I’d only just learned the basics of aristocratic etiquette. After honestly conveying those facts to Queen Latriche, I continued.

“Therefore, I won’t be very reliable, but if you’re still fine with me, I’ll help however I can.” If Lord Nazel were in my position, he might be able to stand up to those malicious nobles, but I was still far from his level.

“I’m sure Nazelbart will be opposed to it. He’d never let his beloved wife head into the den of those ill-natured noblewomen.”

“A ‘den’? That’s a bit of an exaggeration. It will be just an ordinary tea party, won’t it?”

“It’s a battlefield for women, especially in Desnim. Compared to those women, the majority of manabeasts seem adorable.”

“Um, I will talk to Lord Nazel. In any case, please take it easy while you’re here, Your Majesty. Oh, I’d love for you to attend when I hold a tea party or other gathering in Sutrena.”

Queen Latriche was crestfallen like a wilted vegetable as I somewhat forcibly took her to a guest room. After showing her to her room, I returned to my bedroom and informed Lord Nazel of all the details.

“And so, Queen Latriche seems quite defeated. I’d like to

participate in her next tea party to help her out."

"I always want to grant your requests, but you may just suffer again."

"But I can't just leave her alone in that state. She can't run away from her tea parties no matter how much she hates them."

"I'm against it." Lord Nazel lowered his amber eyes and muttered in a low, ominous voice. "But if you insist, I'll accompany you to the tea party this time."

Surely he didn't mean that he'd attend the tea party itself. He must have just meant that he'd come with me to the capital.

"To think that you'll come all the way to the capital with me."

"I said I'll *accompany* you. Not just to the capital—I intend to participate in the tea party as well."

"Huh?! In a tea party full of women?!" I could feel extraordinary pressure from Lord Nazel's smile. He was absolutely determined to not change his mind. "Urk..." I didn't want to make him worry, so I gave up for now and obediently nodded.

I need to somehow persuade Lord Nazel to reconsider before the tea party! I was a grown woman. I'd be too embarrassed to be the only one with a guardian accompanying me.

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Some time later, the day of my second tea party in the royal palace arrived. Wearing a bright yellow dress, I stepped into the garden that served as the party's venue. This time, Lord Nazel had accompanied me to the capital and was currently meeting with King Bertrand. I didn't know what they were discussing, but it had to be some important topic that concerned the country itself.

I somehow managed to convince him not to follow me into the tea party itself. Thank goodness...

The same people from the previous tea party had gathered in the palace's garden. It would appear that those mean-spirited women were regular attendees. I could understand a little why Queen Latriche couldn't feel at ease here. The women had their fans unfolded and were pleasantly chatting in low voices. Based on the

words I could overhear, they were probably slandering people behind their backs.

Everyone took their seats, and tea was served just like last time.

I hope we can drink our tea in peace this time. I nervously took a sip and quietly observed everyone around me.

The first ones to take action were the meanie trio from last time. Starting from the right, they were Marchioness Parara, Marchioness Pyraene, and Marchioness Purnon; all of them were distant relatives of the royal family.

Memorizing their faces and names was worth the effort.

These women were displeased that a young, foreign princess had claimed the highest-ranking office in Desnim that a woman could hold; in other words, they were bitterly jealous. That was why they picked on Queen Latriche in all sorts of ways—just like they were doing right now.

"Oh my, the tablecloth today has such a novel design. It's more or less Desnimer, but I've never seen anything like it before."

Queen Latriche placed her teacup on the table before replying.

"It's apparently a new work personally designed by the famous artist Moninnin. He wanted to give it to the royal family, and had a merchant deliver it."

"Dear me! *The* Moninnin sent it?!"

"The one who rarely accepts commissions? The very same?! Has he taken a real liking to you, perhaps? Just what kind of trick did you use?"

The meanie trio looked somewhat frustrated as they fanned their faces. They exchanged glances with each other, looking like they were trying to somehow embarrass the queen.

If I remember correctly...Moninnin is a highly popular artist in the capital who works primarily in ceramics, right? I've heard that he's very hard to please and only accepts commissions from people he likes. I quietly sipped on my tea as I mentally reviewed what Lord Nazel and Lady Marie had taught me.

"I have to say that I'm impressed, Your Majesty. It's incredible how you took the genius Moninnin's work and turned it into something so tasteless. Oh, my apologies, I let my true thoughts slip

there." These women could create insults out of nothing—it was apparently their specialty.

I think the tablecloth has a lovely floral pattern, but if I say that, they're going to dismiss it as "a bumpkin's vulgar tastes" or something, which will end up causing trouble for Queen Latriche instead. Is there nothing I can do to help? I decided to try changing the subject.

"The weather sure is nice today, isn't it? The flower beds are absolutely beautiful too."

Several of the participants exuded an air of relief. Their reactions showed me that not everyone present was choosing to pick on Queen Latriche.

I see, there are many opportunists too. Unlike the meanie trio, perhaps they don't bear the queen much ill will. Simply put, if Queen Latriche's influence exceeded that of those three marchionesses, the rest would easily switch to her side. I hadn't had the leeway to observe things so carefully last time, but I'd gotten used to parties now, so I'd become able to calmly read the room better than before.

These other women pretended to agree with me, saying things like "Yes, it really is nice" or "They're indeed beautiful."

Thank goodness. If the tea party proceeds quietly like this—

However, perhaps not amused by my meddling, the meanie trio now switched their attention to me. *The friend of my enemy is my enemy!* That was what they seemed to be thinking.

"Come to think of it, Lady Agnes, I've read that famous article about you. You took some rather bold action, heh heh heh! Those brothers are truly handsome and you have them both under your thumb. I have to say I'm jealous!"

Here comes that article again... Don't you have anything else to talk about? Feeling a bit weary, I turned to the meanie trio.

"A retraction and correction has already been published. Lord Nazel and I are happily married, but thank you for your concern."

"Heh heh, which article contains the truth though, the first or the second? In any case, don't you think putting the newspaper company out of business was a bit excessive? Now there's only one newspaper left in the capital."

"Huh?" This was my first time hearing that the newspaper had gone out of business. Lord Nazel had only requested for them to correct their first article; he hadn't shut down the entire company.

Hmm... What's going on? Did they write another off-putting article and incur someone else's enmity? I can't tell.

The marchionesses seemed somewhat dissatisfied, perhaps because they found my reaction boring as I fell into deep thought. They likely decided that attacking me any further wouldn't be any fun, so they started getting chatty over a different topic; as usual, they were bad-mouthing someone.

I still have a long way to go, but this isn't as unpleasant as last time. Have I gotten a little better at attending these parties?

After that, the tea party somehow ended peacefully, and Queen Latriche and I were free of the meanie trio.

Whew, I feel refreshed!

Queen Latriche returned to her official business, while I took a stroll around the garden as I waited for Lord Nazel. It was still bright outside, so I was happy to explore the beautiful garden with flowers swaying gently in the breeze. The capital was built at high elevation, so I couldn't feel any heat here like in the County of Nasi. As I strolled around with light steps, I suddenly saw a familiar man walking toward me. He had long, blue hair and gray eyes. His clothing was very obviously of high quality, which made me think he was probably a noble of the royal court.

He's refined and handsome, and has somewhat of a dark image, not unlike Lord Nazel... I should be seeing him for the first time, but I have this feeling that we've met before.

The approaching man also noticed me, so he slowed his pace and stopped.

"Hmm?" I stared at him until I realized that he was the one I'd helped recover from heatstroke back at the County of Nasi. "Aah! You're the one from back then..." I was in a bit of a panic because I'd spoken much louder than I'd intended to, when someone who seemed to be the man's attendant came sprinting from behind him.

"P-Please wait a moment, Duke Addamsgomes! You're walking too fast..." Although the man's attendant was talking to him, the

duke wasn't replying for some reason; he was awkwardly averting his gaze.

Hmm? Duke Addamsgomes? Wasn't he the former queen's greatest supporter, one who stood against Lord Nazel?

After sending his attendant a meaningful glance, the man turned to face me and greeted me cordially.

"Greetings, my lady. You have my heartfelt gratitude for your assistance the other day."

"N-No, I'm just glad to see that you're doing well." Just as I was thinking of inoffensively taking my leave, Duke Addamsgomes started introducing himself.

"I'm Davier Addamsgomes. Please feel free to call me Davier."

"Y-You're too kind. I'm Agnes Florescruz." I had no choice but to also introduce myself.

As I was speaking, my mind was working overtime. For some reason, Duke Addamsgomes had been in the County of Nasi, where Ralph's attempted kidnapping had taken place. When a reporter had incited the people by claiming that Princess Mia's son was the only one fit to become the next king, soldiers had appeared out of nowhere. Were all of these incidents truly unrelated? I couldn't help but feel that it was all too much to be a coincidence.

If I hadn't met him there, I wouldn't have noticed anything. Could he be... I was deep in thought, but the attendant became wary after he heard my introduction. *I can't blame him. I* am *the wife of their powerful political adversary.* It would probably be better for me to leave quickly and quietly. Fortunately, Lord Davier didn't seem to be the kind of person you couldn't reason with, like my father, or Master Robin, or High Priest Lubhuta.

"W-Well then, have a good day!" Taking care to act like a proper lady, I quickly turned on my heel and left cheerfully and elegantly, but I was feeling really nervous on the inside. *I need to let Lord Nazel know right away! I've realized an incredibly important fact!* It would be fine if my worries were groundless, but I had the feeling that Lord Davier was involved in something major. My stride reflexively grew faster. Lord Nazel had to still be in the palace. But as I was about to reach the entrance, a small, white rabbit suddenly

jumped at my feet.

"Whoa!"

The fluffy rabbit stared at me with its teary, red eyes. *I-It's so cute...* Moreover, it wasn't being wary of me at all and snuggled up to my feet. *Is it someone's pet? It's really friendly. But I need to get inside the palace quickly...*

"What a cute widdle bunny! It's dangerous here, so pwease move away from my feet, okay?" I gently said to the rabbit, but it didn't even budge an inch. *Aww, what do I do now?*

As I was about to pick up the clingy rabbit and move it out of the way, someone behind me suddenly pressed a piece of cloth against my mouth.

"Mm?! What? This smells weird... Is it some...drug...?" I tried to muster my strength and push that person away, but I felt my consciousness quickly fading and couldn't move my body much. Before I could offer any resistance, my body collapsed on the spot and someone picked me up. In my last hazy moments, I heard a conversation between two men.

"Yo...ace...no need for such a roundabout method. We could just get rid of her."

"Silence. This is my decision. My apologies, Lady Agnes. I had no intention of getting violent with you, but I can't let you tell anyone about what happened back then. I promise to safely return you to your margravate once everything's over."

"What about this rabbit? Should I dispose of it?"

"The rabbit was in this garden from the start. The spell is already lifted, so simply let it escape to the brushwood. You're far too violent. The other day, you even got rid of that newspaper company..."

"No, your consideration for everyone else makes you far too lax! Any uncertain elements should be eliminated!"

Their conversation eventually faded as my mind was completely enveloped in darkness.

***

When I came to, I was inside a spacious, unfamiliar room. A plain carpet was spread out over the clean, well-maintained floor. There was no furniture, but the curtains were drawn.

I lost consciousness at the palace garden. Was I then taken somewhere else? All I could remember were the events of just before I passed out. *The low, beautiful voice was unmistakably Lord Davier's.*

I got up and checked my limbs to discover that I wasn't restrained in any way.

"How careless of them."

I pulled the curtains and looked outside, but it was too dark for me to see anything. I could hear the rustling of trees through the window, which made it clear to me that I wasn't in the city.

This room isn't on the first floor. It's dark out, so I may get injured if I jumped down now. And the window's locked, though I could *easily smash it.*

After I took a brief look around the room, I headed for the door that was on the wall opposite the window. If I couldn't escape through the window, I'd just need to try a different route. I might encounter manabeasts in the forest during the night, so it was honestly scary, but I didn't want to remain clueless and captured by those who were likely Lord Nazel's political opponents.

"All right, time to break out."

The door was obviously locked, but thanks to my absolute reinforcement, it broke after I repeatedly yanked on and pummeled it. As the door loudly crashed into the floor before me, I heard piercing screams from the next room. The surprise made me momentarily freeze. When I looked through the doorframe, I saw noblewomen in dresses idly sitting on the floor. All of them had participated in the tea party—even the meanie trio was present. I looked at the door at my feet; it seemed that it had been locked from the other side, and numerous splinters were scattered across the floor.

I suppose this room is also locked, which explains why they can't leave, but why are the other women here in the first place? Especially the ones who are part of the former queen's faction—

aren't they allies of the House of Addamsgomes? Isn't it strange that they were also captured? Lord Davier and his attendant had probably kidnapped me to stop me from telling Lord Nazel about the events that had taken place at the County of Nasi. I didn't understand why they had also captured everyone else.

"Why are all of you here?" I asked.

"We have no idea!" the meanie trio shouted back. "We saw you talking to Duke Addamsgomes in the garden, so we took the other ladies present and went to spy on you. But the next thing we knew, we were here..." Apparently, after being unable to embarrass me during the tea party, the meanie trio—bothered by my nonchalant attitude—had followed me even after the party to try and somehow trip me up.

But the fact that they were able to kidnap so many people at once means that the person with Lord Davier wasn't just an ordinary attendant. I felt anxious seeing how prepared and formidable they were—very unlike Master Robin or High Priest Lubhuta.

I felt a little pity that the meanie trio had been dragged into my kidnapping. *But they were spying on me to find my weakness, so...they reaped what they sowed.*

In any case, based on what Lord Davier had said, I could conclude that we weren't in any immediate danger. Therefore, I had to face the situation with composure and come up with a way to get everyone out of here safely. First, I surveyed this second room.

There are two doors other than the one I broke through. Let's try opening them both. One of them was wooden, just like the one leading to my room. As for the other one...

"An iron door?"

One of the meanie trio heard me and spoke up.

"Her Majesty is in there. She's also being kept prisoner. The door is locked, so we can't do anything without the key. We could hear her talking until a short time ago, but it's gotten quiet now."

"Even Queen Latriche is here?!" I rushed to the door and tried tugging and pounding again, but this one didn't break so easily... It looked like it would take me longer to get through. *Then I'll have to do* this*!* I reinforced the wooden door I'd broken earlier, held it under

my armpit, and rammed it into the iron door.

"Please move out of the way, Your Majesty!" The next moment, the iron door was blown forward with a bang, and I could now see inside the third room. The other women once again screamed loudly. "Are you all right, Your Majesty?!" I ran into the room and saw Queen Latriche leaning against the wall, looking distressed. She didn't seem to be injured, which was a relief.

"Lady Agnes! So you were safe."

"Yes, I'm just fine."

"Thank goodness. You didn't seem to be in the room next to mine, so I thought it was already too late..."

The House of Addamsgomes and the House of Florescruz—Desnim's two great ducal houses—presently each endorsed a different person to be the king. The former wanted Princess Mia's son, Ralph, to succeed the throne, while the latter supported our current ruler, King Bertrand. And although Lord Nazel had become a frontier lord, he'd come from the House of Florescruz, and was even more influential than Lord Julian, the current duke. As Lord Nazel's wife, I was no doubt a hindrance to the people of the former queen's faction. That was probably why Lord Davier's attendant had suggested they get rid of me back in the garden.

"Just what happened, Your Majesty? Why are *you* being held captive here? Don't tell me you were also spying on me."

"No, I wasn't."

Unlike me, she didn't know Lord Davier's plans. There was no reason for them to kidnap her right now. Lord Nazel had informed King Bertrand of the events at the County of Nasi, but no one else should know that Lord Davier had been in the county at the time. Even I would have been none the wiser if I hadn't happened upon him at the garden, and his attendant hadn't called his name. So I couldn't come up with any possible reason for Queen Latriche's kidnapping.

"Then why are you here?" I asked, perplexed.

Queen Latriche flashed me a reassuring smile.

"To help you, of course."

"Huh?"

"I let myself be captured on purpose. But since you weren't in the room next to mine, I feared I was too late. I'm truly relieved to see you doing well. I couldn't ask for anything more than your safety."

I looked at Queen Latriche in astonishment. Come to think of it, she'd gone on a trip with King Bertrand and brought Paul to the frontier, and she'd also infiltrated the capital's church to rescue the high priest's abused concubines; she was a somewhat reckless queen. This time, it looked like she'd marched into enemy territory to save me...

"That was very rash of you. I'm truly glad you weren't hurt, Your Majesty."

"Don't worry, I'm full of energy. It's only natural that I'll come help you if you get hurt."

"Does King Bertrand know about—"

"He doesn't. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision."

According to Queen Latriche, she'd been walking down a hallway in the palace when she happened to see me talking to Lord Davier in the garden. She'd continued watching out of curiosity, then saw them knock me out and try to take me somewhere, so she'd rushed after them. However, there had been more of Lord Davier's subordinates than she'd expected, and she'd judged that the royal guards wouldn't make it in time if she called them, so she'd deliberately let them knock her out and carry her here.

"I was remorseful and wanted to apologize to you, Lady Agnes."

I had no idea what this was about, so I only cocked my head in confusion.

"Up until now, I've continuously been spoiled by your kindness. The tea parties were an ordeal I should have overcome by myself as the queen, yet I relied on your help for them. I even imposed on you in Sutrena and dragged you to an unfamiliar place where you had a terrible time. I was feeling anxious because I was struggling to establish my authority as queen."

"No, no, it was an informative experience that taught me about high society."

"And even amid all that, you didn't complain once and achieved incredible growth, helping me out as well. Looking at you has made

me realize that there's still plenty of room for me to work harder. Thank you."

I never meant to do anything so grandiose. Besides, socializing was an unavoidable part of my position as the margravine.

"And now, because I called you to the palace, you ran into Duke Addamsgomes. I'm going to help you no matter what it takes."

"I think they probably kidnapped me to keep my mouth shut. I suppose they intended to keep me locked in here until things calm down. It's pitch-black outside, so we have no idea where we are." Queen Latriche seemed skeptical of my inference that I'd been kidnapped to keep me from leaking vital information, so I told her about the events in the County of Nasi.

"Once it's bright outside, let's check our surroundings again. I'll go and get some help," she said resolutely.

"But how?"

"I'll use my substitute magic. While a fake me stays here, the real me will get in touch with Bertrand and the palace and inform them of the situation. Don't worry, my substitutes can also perform simple actions without problem."

In any case, we would decide on the details tomorrow. We decided to get a good night's sleep in order to preserve our stamina. When I looked inside the neighboring room, I saw that the meanie trio was already asleep. They were unexpectedly resilient...

The next morning, Queen Latriche and I once again checked what was outside. We were surrounded by a forest, and it looked like no one would come even if we shouted for help.

"I can see the palace in the distance. We aren't that far from the capital," Queen Latriche said.

"But there are soldiers outside. They'll notice us if we do anything flashy. Besides, although nothing happened last night, it should be time for Lord Davier's subordinates to come see how we're doing." Considering what Lord Davier had said yesterday, they had no plans to eliminate us, so I thought they would at least bring us food. I wondered what they would think after seeing the broken doors.

"In that case, we need to get out of here even sooner. I'd like us to escape before they reinforce their security. Can you break these

windows, Lady Agnes?"

"Of course. But they will undoubtedly notice that."

"Yes, they sure will, so we'll confuse them by breaking two windows in quick succession."

I realized what Queen Latriche's plan was, so I picked up a broken door and nodded.

"Take that!" First, I destroyed the window next to Queen Latriche. It broke very easily with a loud noise of shattering glass. The alarmed soldiers below gathered to see what had happened. "It's terrible, Her Majesty is feeling unwell!" I poked my head out of the window and acted like I'd been forced to break it to let them know of the queen's condition.

"V-Very well, we'll send someone."

I pulled my head back once I heard their response.

"Time for the next one." With the door still in my arms, I then rushed at the window in the room I had first been in. "Here goes!" The windowpane shattered and rained onto the ground below.

"Nooooo! You savage!" the other women screamed. They'd been very talkative since yesterday.

"Everyone should be gathered under the window on the opposite side at the moment, Your Majesty!"

"Thank you, Lady Agnes. I'll be sure to return with help!" Queen Latriche created a magic substitute and placed her foot on the window frame. She was much nimbler than I would have been as she dexterously walked along an outside ledge, jumped onto a nearby tree, then safely descended from there. She gallantly ran between the trees, faster than the soldiers could come to see what was going on.

Have a safe journey, Your Majesty. Queen Latriche's substitute and I gazed in the direction she'd run off to.

"All right, time to play my part too." I first moved away from the window and had the substitute lie down in a corner of the room. Although she wasn't a real person, it seemed that she could somewhat understand what I was saying, so she obediently lay down.

A short time later, the door opened and two soldiers entered to

check up on us.

"What the hell is going on?!" they said, their faces twitching when faced with the disastrous state of the three rooms.

"Oh, you're finally here," I told them.

"Why are the doors broken?! And there are also *two* broken windows! How did that happen?!"

"Um, it seems that the iron door's hinges were in poor condition, so it came off on its own. As for the wooden one, we all battered it down using the iron door." It was an awfully poor excuse, but the soldiers seemed to believe it since it should be impossible for frail women to break through the iron door. If there was magic that could destroy iron doors, it would most likely be famous. My absolute reinforcement wasn't well-known, and had even been mistaken as ordinary reinforcement magic for many years.

"The iron door is a little bent, though."

"I think it was hit in a bad spot. More importantly, we'd like a blanket or something similar for Queen Latriche." I pointed at the substitute lying down in a corner of the room.

"Very well. We'll bring it along with your breakfast." The soldiers left for a short time and soon returned with food.

Mercifully, the other women stayed quiet. They understood that if Queen Latriche got help, they would also be able to get out of here.

"I'll take care of Queen Latriche."

The soldiers left her care entirely up to me, partly because she was a member of the opposite sex. That was very convenient for me.

"But to think you'd break both windows."

"My apologies. We decided to split up and inform all of you."

My excuse made the soldier place one hand on his brow and sigh.

"You can't use this room anymore. Once you've finished breakfast, we're moving you up one floor."

We obediently complied and followed the soldiers. Queen Latriche's substitute pretended to be asleep while one of them carried her. All we could do now was wait until she got help.

I hope she makes it to a safe place without incident.

Since they'd locked me up here because I'd seen Lord Davier in

the County of Nasi, I had the feeling they were planning to do something soon. If Queen Latriche made it in time, she would surely let King Bertrand and everyone else know. I sat by the wall of our new room on the upper floor and tried to think of a way to improve the situation as I waited for help.

***

Nazelbart had spent a sleepless night during his visit to the royal palace after his wife, Agnes—who'd accompanied him there—had suddenly disappeared. He'd been in Bertrand's royal office since this morning, and the two of them had been conducting an investigation. Strangely, it wasn't just Agnes; somehow everyone else who had attended the queen's tea party that day had also gone missing.

If only I'd finished my conversation with His Majesty sooner and gone to meet up with her... There was no end to his regret for being absent at the time. *We don't even have any clues yet about where she's been taken.* He was worried, as well as worried, and also worried for his beloved Agnes...so much that it might drive him crazy. When it came to Agnes, he always lost his calm.

"In any case, is the palace's security really that lax?" Nazelbart made a snide remark toward Bertrand.

"I do have soldiers patrolling the grounds," Bertrand retorted as he awkwardly averted his eyes. He was also restless since the queen had vanished.

“I’m truly delighted, Lord Nazel.”

“You’re so adorable, I feel like I might go crazy,” he muttered, saying something disturbing again. The area around his eyes was tinged red. “I’m also delighted, of course.”

We looked at each other and both burst into laughter.

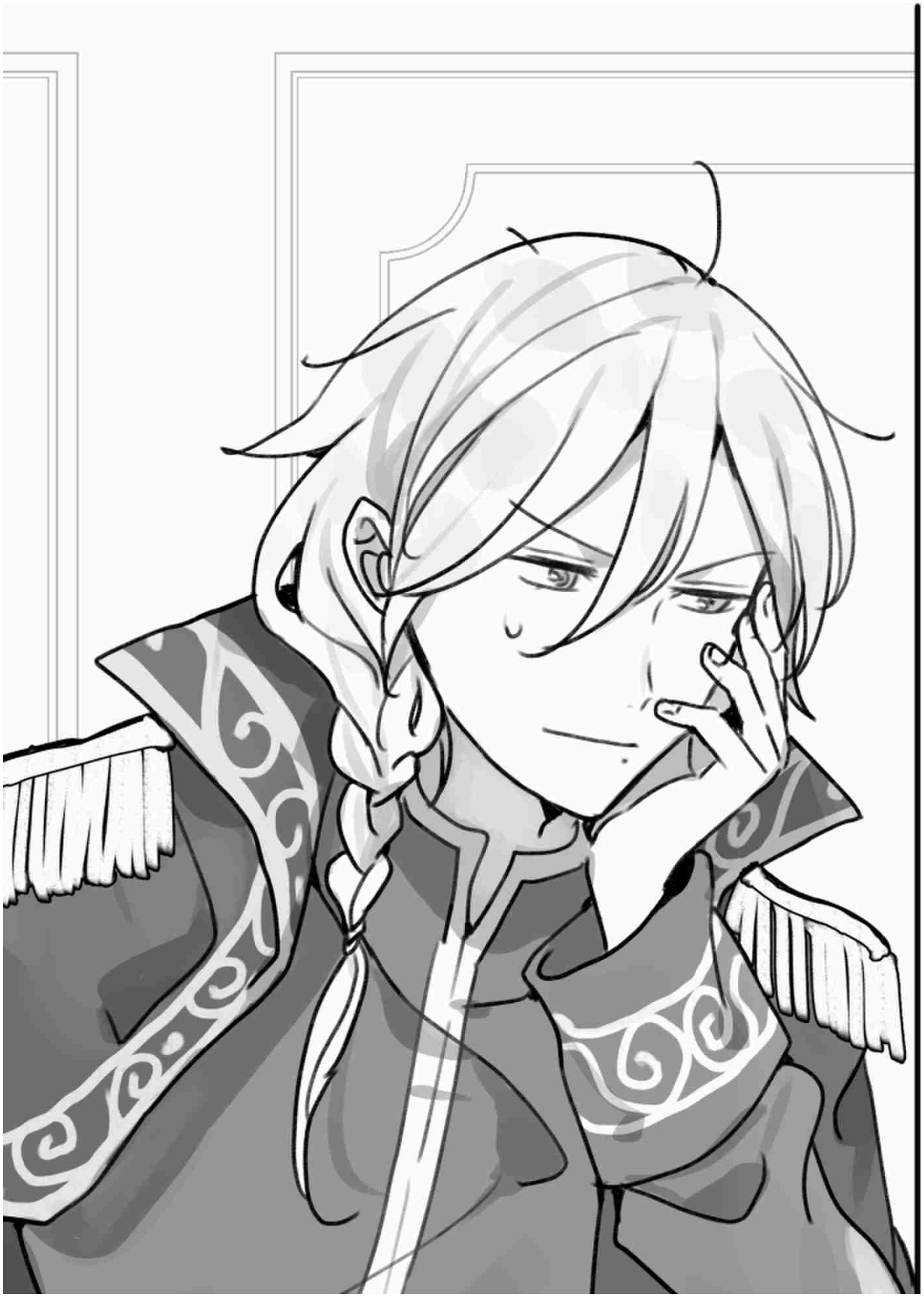
“You’ll need to rest during your pregnancy. You can’t ride the mountbeasts or carry anything heavy, throwing tubers at miscreants is of course out of the question, you shouldn’t take dips in the pool because you’ll get cold...” Lord Nazel’s overprotectiveness was already going out of control as he came up with new rules for me one after the other.

“U-Um, Lord Nazel? There’s no need to be so strict.”

“It would be terrible if anything happened to you.”

I turned to Kelly, wordlessly asking her for help, but she seemed to agree with Lord Nazel in this case, as she replied with a serious nod. *Oh, come on...*

Thus, my temporary “happy but slightly strict daily life” was decided. Learning of our impending child was undoubtedly a joyful occasion for me, the disowned “Lady Bumpkin,” and Lord Nazel, the exiled “Lord Villain.” A couple of outcasts who’d gotten married through sheer chance were now eagerly awaiting the birth of a new family member, basking in the blessings of everyone around them.



It would be one thing if it had only been Agnes, but it was truly bizarre that such a large crowd of women had disappeared all at once. That would require a large number of troops. The two great ducal houses were the only ones who could pull that off in the royal palace.

The two great ducal houses, huh? One possibility emerged in Nazelbart's mind. *It couldn't be. But it's worth looking into.*

As Nazelbart was about to talk to Bertrand, one of the king's subordinates suddenly barged into the room.

"I-I bring urgent news! One of our search teams has taken Her Majesty into protective custody on the capital's outskirts! She's on her way here!"

Upon hearing the report, Bertrand jumped out of his chair, making it clatter behind him.

"Truly?!"

"Yes, we just received word via carrier pigeon. She's safe and sound and currently traveling by horse."

"Very well. Bring her here once she returns. And another thing... Was there anyone else with her when you found her?"

Nazelbart strained his ears, but the subordinate's reply betrayed his expectations.

"No, Her Majesty is the only one we found."

After finishing his report, the subordinate left the room in a hurry, leaving Nazelbart and Bertrand alone again.

Bertrand now looked even more awkward than before.

"In any case, let's wait for Latriche's report."

"Yes...let's," Nazelbart agreed. "By the way, I happened to have this thought... Duke Addamsgomes could have commanded a large number of soldiers inside the castle. He'd know the royal soldiers' patrol times and positions, and he could gather many people quickly."

"That's certainly possible. But while I could understand him going after Latriche, he'd have no reason to target Lady Agnes. The same applies to the other women. Some of them are even members of the former queen's faction."

Soldiers had been dispatched throughout the capital, but the only

report they'd gotten so far was about Latriche. Nazelbart's anxiety kept growing stronger and stronger.

That afternoon, Latriche was finally escorted to Bertrand's office. She rushed up to him in her dirty clothes.

"Bert! Duke Addamsgomes is the culprit! He's the one who kidnapped Lady Agnes! She's in the forest just outside the capital. Everyone's safe, but we must hurry and rescue them!"

Latriche then told them all the details. She said that Agnes had coincidentally met Davier Addamsgomes while he'd been undercover in the County of Nasi, so he'd kidnapped her after sensing the possible danger. The other women from the tea party had happened to witness the kidnapping, so he'd apparently had them taken as well to keep their lips sealed. Latriche had tried to rescue Agnes, but there had been no allies nearby, so she'd let herself be captured with everyone else. At the moment, Agnes was locked up in a vacant house along with Latriche's substitute.

"Do you know where that building is, Your Majesty?" Nazelbart asked Latriche.

Latriche drew a simple map on a piece of paper.

"This is the palace, this is the highway, and this is the forest. There's a multistory wooden building around here," she explained.

Nazelbart immediately stood up, ready to go and rescue Agnes, but one of Bertrand's subordinates rushed into the room again, bringing a report that dramatically changed the situation.

"I bring urgent news! A large number of suspicious papers have been scattered all around the palace's garden. They all say the same thing: 'Hand over Princess Mia's son.'"

"Show me that." Nazelbart suddenly raised his head, grabbed the piece of paper the man was holding, and swiftly scanned it.

The paper's contents were extremely unpleasant. "Hand over Princess Mia's son, Ralph Nasi, in exchange for the queen and the other women." Nazelbart shook in anger as he handed the piece of paper to Bertrand. The latter's expression turned grim when he finished reading it.

"I see, so the events in the County of Nasi and this mass kidnapping are all connected. They're awfully persistent. I'd never

hand over that adorable baby to those malicious nobles. It's painfully obvious that they'll only take advantage of him. Since we know where the abductees are, we'll go rescue them straightaway. You're coming too, right, Nazelbart?"

Nazelbart spent a moment in deep thought. He felt a slight sense of unease about this whole series of events. During the incidents in the County of Nasi, Davier had tried to act covertly. He'd attempted to have Ralph handed over in the Nasi estate's own garden, and he'd sent soldiers into the manor while people were rioting in front of the gate; none of his methods were straightforward. If the same was true now, would his goal simply be taking hostages and demanding an exchange? If he'd tricked them and gone off to do something different, they'd be in dire straits later.

"Can you find out if Davier is currently in the capital, just in case? He's a cautious man, so he might be planning an additional scheme," Nazelbart asked Bertrand, who nodded in agreement.

"I'll leave it to my brother, Leonardo. He's good at thorough investigations. I'll go ahead and rescue the hostages. Nazelbart, you can join the search for Duke Addamsgomes."

"Yes." Nazelbart actually wanted to go rescue Agnes first and foremost, but if he got careless, he'd expose her to even greater danger. It was a painful choice to make. Nazelbart knew he was probably the only person here who could stop Davier. "I'll get in touch with Your Majesties as soon as I know the specifics. I leave Agnes's safety in your hands."

Nazelbart left the room after Bertrand and Latriche nodded solemnly.

"Davier Addamsgomes, huh? We haven't seen each other in a long time," he murmured.

Nazelbart and Davier were the same age, and they'd used to meet in the palace often, as they'd both been prince consort candidates for Princess Mia once upon a time. Although Davier was an outstanding individual, he wasn't the type to take the initiative or seek the spotlight. Nazelbart believed that Davier was like him: He simply disliked social events and preferred to take it easy. Although they'd ended up as enemies, Nazelbart didn't feel any real hostility

toward Davier, who was quite unusual for a duke's son.

It's a different story if he got Agnes involved, though. Anyone who kidnapped or hurt Nazelbart's precious wife would pay.

Nazelbart remained on standby inside the palace for only a short time before Leonardo's messenger arrived. Davier's estate was in the capital, so it was easy to quickly go and return from there.

"Have you found out anything?" Nazelbart asked.

"Yes, Duke Addamsgomes is most likely not in the capital. Apparently, a suspicious carriage left the capital last night. Furthermore, there have been eyewitness reports of a mountbeast leaving a mountbeast stable to head to the County of Nasi. According to the stable's administrator, a very important-looking customer came in the middle of the night and rented a pegasus. It seems that the administrator was bribed into secrecy, but he told us everything once His Majesty's name came up."

"Very well, thank you for the information. Unfortunately, my hunch that the hostages were only a diversion has proven right. Please inform Their Majesties that I'm heading to the County of Nasi."

"Yes, sir." The messenger bowed and promptly left the room.

"Haaah... Agnes keeps moving farther away. But I have to go... This favor will cost you dearly, King Bertrand." Nazelbart directed his chilly gaze outside the window as he got up from his chair. He left the palace in a hurry and headed to one of the capital's mountbeast stables along with several guards.

"Geni, Dunk, we're going out."

The clever creatures popped their heads out of their respective stalls when they heard their names called; Geni trilled while Dunk neighed. Nazelbart took the two of them outside, mounted Geni, and took flight. He also instructed Dunk to take to the sky.

"Fly toward that forest, Dunk. Their Majesties' mountbeasts should also be there, so I think you'll meet up with them soon. Agnes is there. You can track her by her smell, right?"

Dunk neighed as if telling him to leave it to her. She had an amazing sense of smell and was also extremely smart. She'd definitely be able to find Agnes and the others.

"Geni and I will head to the County of Nasi."

Geni gave his own cry in response.

After giving both mountbeasts their destinations, Nazelbart started flying toward the southeast on Geni's back.

Chapter 6: Madam Bumpkin Dashes Through the Sky

It had been half a day since Queen Latriche's departure. Trapped inside the windowless room on the third floor, the kidnapped women had started losing their composure. Many of them found solace in Queen Latriche, who'd gone to seek help, and were eagerly waiting to be rescued. But some of them had already started showing dissatisfaction; it was none other than the usual meanie trio, Lady Parara, Lady Pyraene, and Lady Purnon.

"Excuse me, why is our rescue taking so long? The capital is only a stone's throw away."

"I couldn't agree more. Shouldn't it only take her a short time if she makes her mountbeast run its fastest? Has Her Majesty truly gone to ask for help?"

"She couldn't have abandoned us and run away by herself, could she?"

The other women also started feeling uneasy once they heard the meanie trio blathering. I really wished those three wouldn't make such needless remarks during our time of crisis.

"We'll be all right. Queen Latriche isn't the kind of person to do something like that." I cut in because I didn't want everyone to feel even more stressed. "Just getting through the forest on foot and reaching the highway without getting captured is a difficult task. It's understandable for her to take a bit of time."

Queen Latriche had decided to brave the danger and go get us help. The only reason she had been captured with us in the first place was to help me.

The meanie trio still looked discontent, but they settled down for now. I was a bit concerned by the way they kept whispering to each other in a corner, though.

A short time later, a soldier keeping watch over us brought us dinner. Our meals were simple but surprisingly good: we were served bread, salad, and soup. I considered it relatively good food considering we were captives.

I was eating my dinner while pretending to look after the fake Queen Latriche when the meanie trio suddenly started making a racket in front of the soldier. I watched them closely, worried about what they were going to say this time.

"Hey, you! Release us from this place already! You understand what I'm saying, don't you? I'm not asking you to do it for free: We'll give you some valuable information in exchange."

"We heard some of the conversation between Her Majesty and Lady Agnes. They said that Duke Addamsgomes is trying to take influence away from the current king. That would make us your allies, wouldn't it? Won't you just release us members of the former queen's faction? I think we can get along."

"I'm of the same mind. If you treat us favorably now, we'll happily provide even more support to the House of Addamsgomes."

The meanie trio kept stealing glances toward the rest of us. I had a bad feeling about this.

Don't tell me... I left my tableware on the floor and headed over to try and stop the conversation, but one of the meanie trio spoke before I could get there.

"Incidentally, the queen over there is a fake. Her magic can create substitutes. The real one took advantage of this morning's confusion and escaped through the window! Didn't you think it was strange? Even if Her Majesty was feeling ill, breaking two windows was unnecessary."

"Wha— Why didn't you say that sooner?!" The soldier looked shaken.

"Because I wasn't sure whether I could trust you or not. You kidnapped me even though we're part of the same faction, you know?"

"W-Well...our superiors ordered us to..." the soldier said hesitantly.

The meanie trio member continued pressing the soldier.

"If Duke Addamsgomes is planning something, we would gladly offer our cooperation. We're not like Lady Agnes Florescruz over there. Her family is allied with the current king, and they've schemed against you, haven't they?"

She was hostile to Queen Latriche and me, no matter what the circumstances. Together with her two friends, she turned to look at the rest of the women.

"Say, you'll also work to support Duke Addamsgomes, won't you? If you join our side, you'll get out of here at once. If you ally yourselves with Lady Agnes, you might stay locked here for the rest of your lives. Oho ho ho ho!"

The other women—the opportunists—were visibly flustered. They were hesitating between which side to choose. With their victory assured, the meanie trio grinned triumphantly as they looked at me with eyes full of confidence. If the other women abandoned me now...things would get bad. But I had something to tell them before they made their choice.

"The final decision is yours, but please think of what will happen if help does arrive. If you side with the kidnappers now, it will be considered an act of treason against His Majesty and you'll be in danger of being punished. I think you should carefully consider both the pros and cons before making your choices."

The meanie trio glared at the opportunists, who started timidly walking toward them. They'd decided to side with the former queen's faction.

Well, that was to be expected. Doing what the marchionesses tell them to is essentially these women's modus operandi. Thus, I'd been completely isolated. I was now truly surrounded by Lord Davier's allies.

"You, soldier! Seize Lady Agnes at once!" Somehow, Lady Parara started giving orders, and the soldier approached me. Things couldn't be worse.

Since it's come to this, I'll use my absolute reinforcement on my entire body and...run! I slipped past the soldier and dashed through the door behind him, then bounded down the stairs. *I noticed earlier that the door is unlocked. It seems that they got careless since we're*

all noblewomen and Queen Latriche was feeling unwell. Either way, this works in my favor.

"One of the women escaped! Capture her!" the soldier shouted behind me. He apparently had allies downstairs.

Eek! Oh no, I'll be flanked... But the windows on the second floor should still be broken!

I stormed into the second-floor room and ran toward a window. As I'd expected, they hadn't been repaired yet, so the windows were just like I'd left them. However, unlike Queen Latriche, I wasn't dexterous enough to walk along the narrow ledge and jump onto a tree. I had no time to hesitate, though.

It's all or nothing...

I exited through the window, being careful not to get injured on broken glass, and...just jumped down. Perhaps thanks to the soft grass below, I somehow landed safely with both hands on the ground.

Oh, I'm uninjured. Is it thanks to my absolute reinforcement? I felt grateful for my magic and my body's overall sturdiness as I sprinted toward the palace. The soldiers were probably swarming the ground floor entrance at this moment. *But it's only a matter of time until they realize I've escaped the building. I have to put some distance between us.*

As I kept running, I heard the neigh of a horse from straight ahead. Someone seemed to be there, but there was no guarantee it was an ally, so I headed in that direction with caution. I weaved my way through the trees and slowly approached, until I could see soldiers riding pegasi.

But are they friends or foes?! While I was still confused, someone behind me suddenly grabbed my arms and pulled me down onto my back.

"Eek!" I went wide-eyed in surprise and looked up to see one of the hostile guards looking down at me. He'd chased me all the way here.

"Good grief, I'd rather not waste my time on this nonsense. We're going back."

"Ouch! L-Let me go!" I tried fighting back, but my poor posture

left me unable to properly use my strength.

As I was being dragged through the forest, a shadow passed over us from above. I was momentarily confused, and the next thing I knew, there was a loud neigh and the soldier grabbing my arms was knocked backward. I wiped the dirt off the hem of my dress and somehow stood up to see Dunk standing in front of me, wagging her tail in excitement. She'd kicked the guard who'd come after me, knocking him out.

"Dunk? Why are you here? Weren't you in a mountbeast stable in the capital?"

Dunk replied with a neigh and a snort, as if telling me to follow her, and guided me toward the soldiers on pegasi I'd seen earlier.

Are they allies? I trusted Dunk and followed her, until one of the soldiers spotted me.

"I-I found one of the noblewomen!" he shouted.

Other soldiers' voices echoed through the forest, and a blue-gray pegasus pushed through the men to approach me. Queen Latriche was riding atop it, safe and sound, looking like she was about to burst into tears.

"Lady Agnes..." She jumped off her pegasus, ran up to me, and hugged me tight. "Thank goodness you're safe!"

"I'm also glad to see you made it out safely, Your Majesty. Thank you for calling for help."



After risking her life to escape, Queen Latriche had gotten help and had come rushing to our rescue.

"Oh, you look a bit injured. Let's get you treated later. By the way, are the other women safe?" Queen Latriche asked.

"Well, here's the thing..." I started telling her everything that had occurred at the shed. The meanie trio had suggested joining forces with the soldiers, and the rest of the women who followed them had also declared their support for Duke Addamsgomes. The meanie trio had then told the enemy about Queen Latriche's substitute, and they had revealed that she'd escaped. Finally, with no allies left, I'd run away on my own.

"I'm sorry for leaving your substitute behind, Your Majesty. If I'd been more persistent, maybe those women wouldn't have turned traitor."

"I can freely erase and create substitutes with my magic, so don't worry about that part. But you're mistaken about one thing."

I cocked my head in confusion at Queen Latriche's statement.

"Those women themselves decided to sit on the fence, and as a result, they were swayed by the stronger party and aligned themselves with Duke Addamsgomes. You don't bear responsibility for that. You aren't their guardian."

"Precisely. Adults shouldn't leave all their decisions up to others, nor should they blame anyone but themselves for their own choices." A voice of agreement came from behind Queen Latriche, revealing King Bertrand had come too. I never expected the king himself to come all the way here... Behind him, I could also see Torre, his right fist shaking.

I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart to see so many familiar faces, but... *Lord Nazel isn't here.* I kept looking around for him restlessly.

Queen Latriche must have realized what was on my mind, because she addressed me with a troubled expression.

"Nazelbart apparently flew to the County of Nasi. We got word via carrier pigeon a short while ago."

"So something happened?" I felt worried about what Lord Davier had said before I got kidnapped.

"Yes, our kidnapping was only a diversion. Duke Addamsgomes headed to the County of Nasi to accomplish his true objective. It probably has to do with what you told us before: Mia's son, Ralph. Nazelbart figured it out and left first to chase after the duke and his men."

"I see..." I wanted to see Lord Nazel, but this wasn't the time to say something like that. I turned to face the king. "Your Majesty, if you go straight that way, you'll soon come across a three-story building. The other women are gathered on the third floor, but the second floor has two broken windows, so you should be able to jump in from your mountbeasts."

"All right, we'll head that way, either to arrest or rescue them. You and Torre should return to the palace before—"

"No, I'm going after Lord Nazel. I'm sure there's something I can do to help the people of the House of Nasi."

When I said that, Dunk came to stand beside me, as if telling me to get on her back. Torre had also jumped on his pegasus, perhaps anticipating my decision.

"It goes without saying that I shall accompany you, Lady Agnes!" he said.

"Thank you, Torre, Dunk. We'll be heading to the County of Nasi, Your Majesties!" I eagerly mounted Dunk, who started galloping and took to the air. Torre's pegasus also spread its wings and flew up into the evening sky.

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In order to stop Davier's plan, Nazelbart had taken several soldiers with him and hurried to the County of Nasi via mountbeast without break. He arrived at the Nasi estate early the next morning, where he was once again greeted by Count and Countess Nasi. When he explained the situation, their expressions turned grim. He told them everything from start to end: about what had occurred at the palace, how Ralph was again in danger of being targeted, and that Davier was possibly somewhere in the county.

"I see... So all of that took place. Thank you, Lord Nazelbart. We

haven't noticed any unusual movements on our end yet. The town is as quiet as usual," Count Nasi said.

"Ralph is also safe. He's playing with Lorraine in the nursery right now," the countess added.

The count and countess were surprised by Davier's movements, but they soon adopted resolute expressions and started taking emergency countermeasures. This was the third time someone had come after their son, so of course they were more courageous than before. They were also worried about the captive Agnes.

"I'm sure Lady Agnes is fine. She's a strong woman." Marie had noticed Nazelbart's distress, so she tried to cheer him up.

Nazelbart could only nod in response and mentally cursed at himself for being so worthless.

The House of Nasi was on high alert, and Ralph was under strict guard. The baby himself didn't have a sense of the impending crisis though, and was just playing by throwing his toys around in the nursery. Nazelbart was also in the room with Ralph, vigilantly glaring outside the window, when he suddenly noticed something strange.

"What's that?" The leaves of a tree growing in the garden were swaying unnaturally. "No, that's not it." The appearance of swaying was an optical illusion. He was actually looking at birdlike manabeasts with green wings. They had swarmed the tree, perching on all its branches, and were fixedly observing the room. *What's going on?* There was something eerie about the birds' coordinated movements.

"Let's change rooms." Nazelbart quickly picked up Ralph and moved him away from the birds' gazes. *This rings a bell. If I remember correctly, Davier's magic can manipulate small beasts or manabeasts.*

Ralph suddenly looked down. When Nazelbart followed the baby's gaze, he saw a squirrel running along the floor. He was startled, feeling an even greater sense of danger.

"Goo, gah!" It seemed that Ralph was interested in the squirrel, so he was stretching his arms and struggling to get to the floor.

"Lord Nazelbart, why did you suddenly pick up Ralph?" Marie chased after him.

"It seems that at least one of Duke Addamsgomes's agents is inside the manor."

Marie reacted with shock as she realized what that meant.

"But where? I can't see anyone suspicious around. Oh, how'd that squirrel get in here?"

"That's probably Duke Addamsgomes's magic. He can manipulate multiple animals like this one at the same time. He can also see and hear through the creatures' senses."

"Oh dear! Ralph is obsessed with the squirrel. Do you think he was also lured away by one before?"

"I can't say that much for certain, but I'd like you to be careful. We need to be even more alert now that the manor has been infiltrated. It's only small animals right now, so they can't do much harm, but we should assume that our adversary knows anything we say or do. That's the kind of magic the duke has." Nazelbart then spoke to the squirrel. "Davier, are you listening? Your entire scheme has been exposed. Give up the pointless resistance and surrender."

The squirrel stood still. But then, a loud noise rang outside the manor, followed by sounds of people marching on the manor, just like they had during the second attempt to kidnap Ralph.

So he's made his next move. And this time, the attack also seemed to come from the sky.

"Mountbeasts?! There are pegasi and wyverns! Whoargh!" someone shouted in the garden.

"Take the baby and go to the next room, Lady Marie. Don't leave the guards' side."

"O-Okay..."

Lorraine was sound asleep next to Ralph, also under close guard.

"I'm going to join the guards outside." Nazelbart headed to the mountbeast pen in the estate's garden where Geni was. The wyvern had noticed the unusual events and was already outside; he excitedly nuzzled up to Nazelbart. "Geni, this will be a slightly dangerous flight, but will you let me on your back?"

Geni growled his consent, grabbed Nazelbart by the collar, and tossed him onto his back. Nazelbart twisted his body and made a safe landing, then grabbed the reins of the airborne Geni and

launched a counterattack against the aerial surprise attack. As a former member of the knights, he could easily conduct himself in aerial combat. He flew straight ahead until he saw a blue-haired young man in front of the gate giving orders, surrounded by guards of his own.

"Davier... So you did come here."

Riding a purple wyvern, Davier also noticed Nazelbart and straightened his posture.

"Nazelbart." He'd already seen that Nazelbart was here through the eyes of the small animals he controlled, so he wasn't particularly surprised, though he still looked annoyed.

"I know that you were behind the previous incidents too. Agnes apparently met you in town."

"I was convinced that you'd go rescue Lady Agnes. That's exactly why I left her somewhere close to the capital."

"How unfortunate that your expectations were off. I just thought that, as the saying goes, everything that happens twice will surely happen a third time. I can't let you install Mia's son, Ralph, as the next king."

"If he becomes king, as his supporter, I might be able to freely condemn you. Just like you once did to Princess Mia." When the topic of Princess Mia came up, Davier looked sullen for a moment, but quickly returned to his previous apathetic expression and issued orders to his troops. "I will stop Nazelbart, so you all storm the manor. I'm having the small manabeasts that entered through the chimney open the locks one after the other."

Nazelbart was shocked. It appeared that Davier was still using his magic even while he was taking command in midair.

Impressive as usual. However, Nazelbart had also ensured that sufficient troops were deployed inside the manor.

Davier looked frail at a glance, but he'd also once been part of the knights. Although he disliked that fact, he possessed great ability. As Nazelbart smoothly drew his sword, Davier confronted him and also readied his own blade.

"I wanted to avoid fighting you if possible," Nazelbart said.

"Likewise. I don't particularly hate you," Davier replied.

"In that case, you should quit being one of the former queen's supporters."

"Things wouldn't be so difficult if I *could* do that. But since I'm now a duke, I have to live up to the expectations of those around me. Just imagine if every day you had people demanding that you revive the House of Addamsgomes, seize power over this country, or produce an heir! Under the circumstances, this was the only choice I could make. I have my own responsibilities and people I have to protect. A duke's duty rests heavy on my shoulders."

A second later, the two of them crossed swords. Before their superior swordsmanship, their troops could only watch over them.

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I rode on Dunk's back and arrived at the County of Nasi alongside Torre. We hadn't taken any breaks on the way, so I was exhausted.

"You should rest your body, Lady Agnes."

"No, I'm heading to Lord Nazel's side. He should be at the Nasi estate."

It was past noon, and the sun was bearing down on us. We went past the town and approached our destination, but...things looked strange.

"It looks like something has already started. I think people are fighting, like the other day," I said.

"They are most likely Duke Addamsgomes's troops. They must have come to kidnap Lord Ralph again!"

It seemed we'd arrived a little late.

"It looks like getting in the manor will be difficult. Dunk, let's join our allies."

Dunk replied with an energetic neigh as I observed the Nasi estate from the sky.

"All right, they still have that large pile of tubers. And it seems that there are more of them now. Lady Marie must have started making konjac jelly in earnest. Torre, we'll each pick up one of those baskets."

"Understood! But I don't want the enemy to know that you're

here, so I'll avoid any conspicuous actions."

"Okay, got it."

We landed amid all the chaos, picked up baskets filled to the brim with tubers, then got back on our mountbeasts and returned to the sky. These tubers were the valuable raw ingredient for konjac jelly, so I reinforced them all to make sure they didn't break. I planned on picking them up later and putting them back.

"Aah! There are several soldiers on the roof atop their pegasi. It looks like they're trying to break part of the manor to go inside," I said.

"I'll stop them! I'll aim right at the soldiers to avoid hitting the pegasi!"

"I'm not very confident in my aim, so I'll drop tubers on the kidnappers marching toward the entrance."

"Like a rain of blunt weapons! Way to go, Lady Agnes!" Torre was already hitting the enemies with tubers. His throws were incredibly accurate!

I also resolutely threw tubers all over the place from atop Dunk.

"Take that!" As I shook the basket and made it rain tubers, the soldiers below me screamed.

"Aaargh! What the hell was that?!"

"Ouch! Wait, is this a tuber? Why did it fall from the sky?"

Some of them fainted, while others fled; the number of people heading for the entrance decreased dramatically. The rest of them would likely be driven away by the House of Nasi soldiers keeping watch over the door.

In any case, where is Lord Nazel? The combat was a free-for-all, so it was difficult to tell where a specific person was.

"Lord Nazeeel! Oh?" Behind the manor, there was a spot where many plants had dropped from the sky. *Those are Lord Nazel's rapidly growing magical plants.* Unlike when he used his magic to make existing seeds grow faster, the plants he created out of nothing with his magic disappeared after a while. They needed to be constantly given magic to remain materialized, but the ones I could see hadn't vanished yet. *Which means that Lord Nazel is nearby!* I hurriedly scanned my surroundings, until I spotted two wyverns

flying above me.

"Lord Nazel! Geni!"

Lord Nazel was repeatedly attacking with his sword and magical plants, but there were countless birds surrounding and obstructing him. The birds flew in a coordinated fashion and obstructed the vision of Lord Nazel and Geni.

Those birds are moving very unnaturally, too coordinated to be explained even by training. Is magic behind this?

I looked at the person riding the second wyvern and went wide-eyed in shock.

"Lord Davier!" He also seemed to be struggling, since he was being attacked by magical plants from the ground and air.

There's no room to come between those two. I don't want to call Lord Nazel's name and make him lose focus, so should I just watch over him? Wait, hmm? A part of the estate's ground had been gouged out, probably as part of the fighting involving so many soldiers. The section of the wall that extended into the ground toward the building's foundation had been exposed and destroyed. *I obviously never thought to reinforce the basement's walls!*

Someone might have already entered through the broken wall. I joined up with Torre again and we sneaked into the manor through the hole into the basement. As for Dunk and Torre's pegasus, we told them to leave the estate and head to a mountbeast stable in town; they would be safer there. Furthermore, Dunk was very distinctive thanks to her six legs, so the staff at the stable should remember her from the last time we left her in their care.

"Please take care to stay close to me, Lady Agnes!"

"All right, Torre!"

The door that led from the basement to the upper floors was open. Someone really must have invaded through here.

"Aah! All of the windows are open! They were unlocked?!" I'd reinforced the windows, but there was no point to it if someone opened them from the inside. And since every window in the corridor and the doors to every room were all open, it would take significant time to close them again.

For now, let's at least close the basement door. I decided to look

for Ralph while closing every window I could see. *Is he in the nursery?*

As we headed toward that destination, we bumped into an enemy soldier who'd probably come to kidnap Ralph.

"Who are you two? People of this estate?!"

"Eep!"

Torre jumped in front of the soldier approaching me.

"Please leave this to me, Lady Agnes!" The energetic Torre knocked out the soldier in the blink of an eye. He was *strong*.

We arrived at the nursery where we found Lady Marie, Ralph, and Lorraine surrounded by enemy soldiers. The room's window was wide open. Lady Marie's guards were also in the room, fighting against the intruders.

Lady Marie!

Torre sprinted inside to assist the guards, giving our side the advantage. But the next moment, something seemed to bump into the manor from the outside, and the whole building shook violently. Several guards and kidnappers—that is, both friend and foe—fell to the floor, screaming.

Did a manabeast do this?

The soldiers all scrambled to their feet, clearly wary of whatever had struck the manor. Our allies had the upper hand thanks to Torre's help, so they gradually pushed forward and defeated and arrested the kidnappers.

Lady Marie was trembling in fear as she curled protectively around Ralph and Lorraine.

"Everything's all right now, Lady Marie. Torre is very strong."

"Thank you, Lady Agnes."

"I'm more concerned about that shaking from earlier." I took a look through the window and saw a familiar figure floating outside. Even though I'd ordered her to go to town, Dunk was unexpectedly looking at me from the other side of the window. Torre's pegasus was also there, perhaps having been influenced by Dunk. "What? H-Hey, Dunk?! Why are you out there?! I was really surprised when the building suddenly quaked."

Dunk shook her head, as if to say that she wasn't the one

responsible, and neighed in dissatisfaction.

"So it wasn't you?"

Dunk neighed and nodded in agreement this time.

"I'm a little confused. Lady Marie, since the kidnappers have been captured, I'll go check on things outside! Torre—"

"I shall naturally join you!"

I asked the allied soldiers behind me to close the door, then Torre and I each got on our mountbeasts and took to the air. Now that we were outside, I realized what had caused the startling impact earlier. Lord Davier's wyvern had crashed onto the manor's roof and lay there unconscious. Geni seemed to be safe and was still flying with Lord Nazel on his back. He probably noticed me atop Dunk, as he growled happily and descended with great speed.

More importantly, where's Lord Davier? I looked around and spotted him lying in the garden. Adorable, small animals were gathered all around him. *Did Lord Nazel win?* I had Dunk land and I dismounted. Lord Nazel soon approached and landed next to me.

"Agnes! You were safe?! It's really you, right?" He timidly caressed my cheek.

"Yes, it's me. I was rescued, so I came after you."

"I'm so glad nothing happened to you. I'm sorry I couldn't go save you myself."

"You don't need to apologize. I'm also relieved to see you unhurt. Oh, Ralph is fine too."

"I see. I defeated Davier, so it looks like we're getting things under control. We just need to capture the remaining enemy soldiers, then leave the rest to the proper authorities."

It seemed that Lord Davier was still conscious.

But he looks injured from his great fall.

When I approached Lord Davier, he noticed me and raised his head.

"Lady Agnes. If you're here, that means the other plan also failed."

"Yes, King Bertrand and Queen Latriche rescued me."

"Is that so? How unfortunate, although it was a reckless gamble to begin with. I deeply apologize for making you go through that

awful experience."

"Oh, not really..." I got a bit flustered because I wasn't expecting an apology. *I thought the same when we talked in the palace, but perhaps he's only our enemy because of his position and isn't actually such a bad person.*

Besides, Lord Davier didn't seem particularly bothered even though his plans had just failed. In fact, he looked like he'd been freed from something after losing to Lord Nazel, like he was relieved that everything was over—I felt like he was filled with a sense of liberation.

As I pondered this oddity, Lord Nazel suddenly approached me and embraced me without a word; his hands were shivering.

"I'm happy you came here, Agnes, but please don't be so reckless."

"I-I'm sorry. I was worried about you, so I came here against my better judgment."

My coming here, along with my abduction, seems to have made Lord Nazel worry. I gently reached my hands around his back.

"Let's return to Sutrena together, Lord Nazel."

"Yes, let's go home."

As we embraced each other, the House of Nasi's soldiers went past us and secured Lord Davier and the other kidnappers. Seeing that it was now safe outside, Count Nasi and Lady Marie—who was in charge of the kids—exited the manor.

"Lord Nazelbart, Lady Agnes, you have our deepest gratitude for everything you did today."

"No, no, don't mention it."

With the de facto head of the former queen's faction under arrest, it was unlikely the others would make any big moves for the time being. There was no leader to take Lord Davier's place, so Ralph should be safer than before.

Lord Nazel looked at Lord Davier—who couldn't move on his own and needed help from the soldiers—and started mumbling.

"Davier was a formidable foe, but I feel sorry for him. Despite hating conflict, he had to take command of the faction in his parents' place. I won't forgive him for kidnapping Agnes, though."

“You say he hates conflict? That may be true. When he abducted me, it seemed that he made sure to spare my life. What will happen to him now?”

“King Bertrand will be the one to decide that, so I can’t really say.”

“Yes, I guess you’re right.”

As we were talking, Lord Nazel suddenly looked like he noticed something, turned around in a panic, and hugged me tight.

“Agnes! Watch out!”

“Huh?”

I suddenly felt an impact travel to my body through Lord Nazel, and he fell to his knees right after. When I searched for the cause, I saw a sword piercing his back. One of Lord Davier’s subordinates stood behind him, tightly gripping the sword’s handle.

“I won’t allow this! I won’t accept it! His Grace would never lose! He’s always perfect and shows us the right way!” He was the same person who’d been by Lord Davier’s side when I’d been abducted. His eyes were somewhat hollow and he seemed to be behaving erratically. “He is the one who will lead this country! It couldn’t be anyone but him!”

Lord Davier—supported by our soldiers—was the one to pacify the man.

“Stop it. The fight is already over. I was defeated by Nazelbart—the outcome has already been decided.”

“Not yet! Nazelbart and everyone else can die here! By my hand! So—”

“Can you take Princess Mia’s son, Ralph, under the current circumstances?”

“I can! I will eliminate anyone I need to: Count and Countess Nasi, Nazelbart, and everyone else! So you should take command and—”

“Our military strength is currently equal, but as you can see, I can no longer move, and I’m also out of mana. And once the kidnapping in the capital is taken care of, King Bertrand will most likely send reinforcements. In fact, Prince Leonardo may already be on the way. Nazelbart could also request additional aid from

Sutrena."

"I-I will also call for reinforcements! If we gather up all of our faction's forces..."

"Haaah... If we were going to ask for reinforcements, we'd have done so already. Because if we did, it would mean an all-out civil war for the throne."

"Then so be it! Let there be war! We will surely come out on top!"

"How can you be so certain? What's the point in dragging so many citizens into a fight for the throne without guaranteed prospects for victory?"

"Who cares about that?! Even if many perish, the citizens will quickly multiply again. What's more important is that at this rate, our faction will have no future! So, we should only be thinking about how to win against the current king's faction right now!"

Lord Davier let out a long sigh.

"There are many things you seem to be mistaken about from the very start. Whether it's the former queen's faction or the current king's faction, we would be putting the cart before the horse if we involved the people we're supposed to protect in a bloody conflict born purely from our own self-interest. To begin with, most people don't care which one of us gets closer to the throne. But they would agree that they don't wish to be conscripted for the royal struggle against their will, or to lose their livelihoods as a consequence of the war."

"They're just puny, ignorant people who are so blinded by what's right in front of them that they can't see the greater picture. They will be right on board if you hire some reporter like the other day and stir up their sense of danger. Isn't that right, Your Grace?"

Lord Davier sighed again when his words didn't make it through to his subordinate and looked straight at him.

"Then if you're going to say all that, stand at the forefront and take command yourself. I've already been captured, and the wounds I suffered when I fell from my mountbeast have rendered me unable to move. Besides...I'm just tired."

When Lord Davier said he was tired, it really felt like those words summed it all up.

After showing a moment's hesitation, Lord Davier's subordinate accepted taking command and tried ordering the troops in his master's place. But as the outcome had already been decided, no one listened to his orders for a counterattack.

"Why?! Why won't you move?! You imbeciles! Have you switched over to the king's side?!"

No, I was sure that wasn't the case. Although the soldiers of the former queen's faction were being paid to do this, they were still people of Desnim in the broad meaning of the term. They wouldn't entrust their lives to and blindly follow someone who only viewed them as objects. Count Nasi's soldiers went to capture Lord Davier's subordinate, whose frustrated screams filled the garden.

At the moment, though, my highest priority was Lord Nazel's emergency treatment.

"Lord Nazel! Are you all right?!"

His black jacket had grown damp, and I could tell that he was losing a lot of blood. I wanted to check on his wound while moving him as little as possible, so I took off his jacket and saw that his shirt was dyed crimson. The wound itself wasn't too deep, but the surrounding flesh was bloodied and had begun to swell and turn purple.

"Lord Nazel?! This must hurt a lot. I'm so sorry, this only happened because you protected me..."

"I'm...okay," Lord Nazel objected meekly.

"You most certainly are not!" I fired back, sounding like I was on the verge of tears.

"That color probably means poison!" Count Nasi cried and hurried off to arrange medical assistance. We were in a race against time.

Will we make it? What else can we do?

My absolute reinforcement could be used on people to make their bodies harder and stronger. Those under the effects of my magic were unaffected by impacts, and they were less likely to receive serious injuries. Lord Nazel's cut would normally be a deeper and more serious injury. It was a miracle that he'd come away with such a minor wound. But my absolute reinforcement could only increase the skin's hardness and such; it had no effect on poison. That was

why Lord Nazel was struggling so much.

I hadn't anticipated poison back when I used my magic on him.

We had Lord Nazel lean against a wall while Torre—who knew how to administer first aid for poison—cleaned his wound. Our mountbeasts were also nervously watching the situation from afar. They could tell that Lord Nazel was in critical condition.

"Please hold out until the doctor gets here." I prayed next to Lord Nazel, but his face grew paler and paler. His breathing was ragged, and he gradually lost the ability to speak. The doctor was still nowhere in sight.

If this goes on... A thought full of despair ran through my mind—a hopeless future I couldn't dismiss as impossible. *No, I'd* never *want that to happen.* I should try everything I could right now. Even if it was completely absurd or didn't end up making any sense. I clutched the weary Lord Nazel's hand and kept calling out to him.

"Please don't die!" I wanted to buy even a little bit more time. "Get stronger and healthier!" I called in a trembling voice, barely holding back the tears, and used my magic on him again and again. I kept calling to him, just like the time I'd revived the withered seedlings during our first days in Sutrena. Though I knew that since Lord Nazel was human, things this time wouldn't go just like they had with the violaberry trees.

"Get strong enough that you don't lose to the poison. Please!" I continued using my magic over and over and over again, but there was no change. Nevertheless, I didn't give up and kept at it, until I suddenly felt the mana from my entire body being sucked away. "Ugh! What's...happening?" I had a really high amount of mana, yet I felt like it was running out and I was about to collapse. But in contrast to my worsening condition, Lord Nazel's complexion had started slowly improving.

"Could this mean..." That my magic was working? I hadn't ended up in a state like this before, so I had no idea.

While my head was feeling fuzzy, Torre, who'd been watching over us right next to me, took another look at the wound.

"Lord Nazelbart's injury has disappeared!" he shouted in surprise. It seemed that something had happened in Lord Nazel's body as a

result of me using up every bit of my mana.

The poison—what about the poison? I scolded myself for being about to pass out, pulled myself together, and carefully examined Lord Nazel. When his amber eyes opened, I gulped.

"Mm... Agnes. The pain suddenly went away. Did you do something?" It looked like he'd completely regained consciousness.

Oh, thank goodness... Lord Nazel was getting livelier and now spoke just like he did before being stabbed. That fact alone filled my heart with joy, and tears welled up in my eyes.

"I used my magic to make you stronger and healthier, just like our violaberry trees," I replied with tears in my eyes, mustering every bit of my willpower to smile widely at him.

"I see, so I got the same treatment as the violaberry trees... I'm glad I didn't turn as large as they did." Lord Nazel flashed me a warm smile back.

Torre was bawling his eyes out without caring what anyone around us thought.

"Thank you, Agnes. You really are the best wife in the world." Lord Nazel remained seated, leaning against the wall as he hugged me and gave me a kiss.



"But just which part of you did my magic make stronger?"

"I think you were unconsciously reinforcing different parts at once. It was probably something like my recovery rate, my autoimmunity, and...my vitality, I guess?"

I did use my magic unconsciously, so I really had no idea at all.

"I see, so my magic has that power too." It seemed that my absolute reinforcement still had many unknown traits.

While I was tending to Lord Nazel, most of the invaders were taken away, including Lord Davier and his close subordinate, and our allied soldiers started coming and going in a hurry.

"Just in case, please wait for the doctor here and get examined, Lord Nazel. I'll head to the gate and help out." There were many things to deal with now that everything was over, like thanking the soldiers or treating the wounded. Lady Marie had also gotten to work.

"Don't, Agnes. You're looking unwell." Lord Nazel swiftly grabbed my arm as I was about to run off. He was as observant and quick to act as always.

He seems to be back to his usual self. I felt a sense of relief and remained trapped here for a while, captured by Lord Nazel.

Soldiers and maids rushed all over the place. Many people came and went through the garden as we sat here. Suddenly, a woman with a hat pulled over her eyes ran through the crowd. She didn't seem to be one of the servants, but no one else noticed her amid all the disorder.

Is she Lady Marie's acquaintance? But she feels a bit suspicious. I cautiously observed the woman and noticed that she was gripping a sharp object that glittered silver. *Huh?!* I instinctively stood up and positioned myself between the woman and Lord Nazel—I didn't want him to get stabbed again. *Aren't there way too many people recklessly waving blades around today?!*

The woman grinned ominously when she saw Lord Nazel and me. The next moment, she gesticulated fervently with her knife and started shouting.

"I found one of you wretches! But not *him*! Where is he?! You know, don't you?!"

Lord Nazel and I exchanged confused glances, but the woman remained unfazed.

"Everything's *your* fault! You nobles tore our family apart...and completely ruined my life! Bring out that blue-haired guy! You guys know each other, right?! I saw him here! Bring him out *now*!" The woman's voice was awfully loud. I felt like I'd heard it before.

Could she be... I kept covering Lord Nazel as I pointed at the woman and shouted her true identity.

"You're the escaped reporter!"

But my voice didn't reach the deranged woman. She didn't respond to me; it seemed we wouldn't be able to hold a conversation.

"Uwaaaaargh! Bring him ouuut!" She charged at us while screaming louder than even Ralph, and a nearby soldier hurried to grab her from behind. As her hat fell to the ground, it revealed Olce, just as I'd expected. Her eyes were bloodshot and her gaze was completely unfocused. "Let go of me! Damn you! Bring that guy out here! Graaah!" The knife slipped from the struggling woman's hand and flew through the air toward Lord Nazel and me.

"Eep!" I squeaked in fear, but before the weapon could reach me, Lord Nazel stood up and easily caught it. It looked like he'd completely recovered thanks to my absolute reinforcement.

"So you showed your face again... You really are one nasty woman. You're probably talking about Davier, aren't you? But he's already been arrested, and the same will happen to you again too," Lord Nazel said.

"This isn't my fault! Not one bit! *He's* to blame for everything! That accursed nobleman!!!"

"You hurt people in pursuit of status and fame, and unjustly lay the blame on others when you get caught. You also destroyed the lives of people here in the County of Nasi. You're a grown woman, so you need to take some responsibility for the actions you choose to take. Take her away." At Lord Nazel's command, the soldier took Olce to the same place as Lord Davier's men.

"Um, Lord Nazel, was your hand injured?"

"Hmm? No, not even a scratch." He opened his hand and showed

me. Just like he said, there wasn't even a tiny injury on it; he'd caught the blade flawlessly.

Lady Marie came running over, as she must have received news of the incident and wanted to come check on us.

"It seems that Lord Nazelbart has thoroughly regained his vigor. I thought so earlier as well, but your magic is truly incredible, Lady Agnes," she whispered. "The magic you used to heal Lord Nazelbart should definitely be kept a secret. It's comparable to the powers of the saint of legend. Fortunately, the only ones present at the time were you two, me, and a handful of soldiers."

According to a story I'd heard, there'd once been a woman long ago whose magic could heal people's injuries. No one with such a convenient magic had appeared before or after her, and she'd come to be called the legendary saint.

I don't really think my magic is the same as such an incredible person's, though.

However, Lord Nazel looked at Lady Marie's serious expression and quietly nodded back at her.

"Thank you, Lady Nasi. It's truly helpful to hear that from you." I got the feeling that they'd reached some kind of agreement.

A long time later, Count Nasi arrived with the doctor. We lied about my magic, so Lord Nazel's diagnosis ended up being that he'd been shocked by the impact of the attack and temporarily lost consciousness.

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King Bertrand and Queen Latriche were worried about us, so now that the events in the County of Nasi had come to a close, we decided to head to the capital first. I got on Geni and Lord Nazel supported me from behind. Dunk freely ran across the sky.

"Are you okay, Agnes? Are you tired? You were kidnapped, came here straight from the capital to help, used a lot of magic, then kept moving around even when I tried to stop you."

"I'm perfectly fine! I felt a bit anemic after expending so much mana, but I'm back to normal now! My sturdiness is one of my

greatest merits!”

“I *really* want to lock you up somewhere...”

“Lord Nazel, you’re saying some disturbing things again.”

When we arrived in the capital, we were called to meet with King Bertrand and Queen Latriche, who told us about the details of the kidnapping.

“After that, Latriche and I headed straight through the forest like Lady Agnes told us, where we soon discovered a building. There were soldiers searching for Lady Agnes around it, and we could hear some women’s irritated shrieks from the upper floor, ordering the soldiers to hurry up and capture Lady Agnes. They gave us the perfect evidence before our investigation even really began...” King Bertrand explained with a dumbfounded expression.

Queen Latriche picked up from where he left off.

“So Bert and I broke through the outside soldiers and headed toward that voice. We found the kidnapped women freely walking about the building, getting ready to return home. The soldiers were following their orders and tried to stop the women from leaving, but the three marchionesses threatened them with their authority and forced the men to obey them, saying things like ‘We won’t be responsible for what happens to you later!’”

“When the women noticed that Latriche and I were there, they all panicked and started trying to blame each other. The marchionesses were even absurd enough to say that Lady Agnes was the mastermind. Even when we told them that she was currently under our protection, they made laughable claims, like saying it was a trap or all part of her nefarious plan, and kept making a fuss.”

Queen Latriche groaned with a pained expression, as if to agree with him.

“Most of the kidnapped women are opportunists who follow the strongest party, but they were getting more and more stressed under the oppression of the three marchionesses. As soon as Bert proved Lady Agnes’s innocence, they said that the three marchionesses who were blaming Lady Agnes were the actual culprits, and they all rushed to take back their words and instead claimed that they were being tricked by the marchionesses. People

like them, who never stand at the front and easily change their words and behavior depending on the situation, are truly terrifying. You can't trust them one bit."

"Exactly. The mindset that they aren't to blame since they only did what they were told is also wrong. Although the conspicuous people who represent the group and advocate their opinions are more easily heard under normal circumstances, when push comes to shove, they are more likely to receive the brunt of the criticism from those around them. Women like them deliberately avoid being in that position and only reap the benefits, but when anything goes wrong, they are quick to abandon the one in charge and criticize them behind their backs... In any case, we have captured every soldier and noblewoman who was there."

When King Bertrand finished, Queen Latriche had a somewhat sullen look on her face. But that was only natural; every last one of her tea party guests had been arrested.

"Since so many high-ranking noblewomen were arrested all at once, the power dynamics among the women of high society will change," King Bertrand continued. He also explained that the marchionesses who were assertively supporting Lord Davier would be sent to the Convent, while the opportunists would be completely banned from high society. "Now, as for Davier, he will be exiled to Peppel Island, just like my sister. His achievements so far have been great, even though he was part of the former queen's faction, but I can't simply pardon a rebel."

Peppel Island was an isolated location that was said to be impossible to escape. The country sent a ship there once per month for reconnaissance and to provide the exiles with provisions, but it was only possible to come and go from the island via a special ship manned by someone who possessed magic specialized for sailing.

"Isn't it dangerous to send him to the same island as the former queen and Princess Mia? The three of them might conspire together," Lord Nazel said.

King Bertrand shook his head in response.

"You must have also noticed it, at least a little: Davier doesn't *want* to come back. To begin with, he's always preferred a quiet life.

Although it was inevitable given his position, he must have been sick and tired of the pressure from everyone around him. When his verdict was delivered, he said that he wanted to focus on researching small animals on the island from now on. According to the reports we've received, Mia has also settled down lately, and is apparently manufacturing things along with the island's youngsters, as well as teaching the locals how to read and write. Incidentally, the queen is isolated even on the island and is in no position to influence anyone. I hear she's also doubled in weight."

It sounded like Princess Mia had changed for the better.

"The former queen might raise a fuss, but she can't do anything on her own. Davier probably won't associate with her either," King Bertrand continued. Since Lord Davier's magic could only control small creatures, he couldn't cross the stormy ocean. "The real problem lies with the people who were propping Davier up. Some of them were punished during this incident, but others fled the country. Those nobles have escaped punishment, but the fact remains that they are guilty of having sneakily caused all sorts of trouble behind Davier's back. According to one of our most recent investigations, these supporters were apparently the ones responsible for devastating the town in the County of Nasi during the second attempt to kidnap Ralph. And yet, they foisted all of the responsibility on Davier and turned tail. I understand why he'd rather confine himself to the island."

Olce was actually a lot like those nobles who'd pressured Davier; they all just treated him as a scapegoat for their own deeds. She'd been arrested during the turmoil and was due to receive a heavy punishment, as she'd escaped from jail and committed more crimes. Even now, she was still kicking up a storm and blaming everything on Davier.

"There's no longer anyone to bring the former queen's faction together. Ralph might've been used as a puppet if Davier were still here, but the others don't have the clout to make him the king."

I agreed with King Bertrand. The soldiers who'd raided Count Nasi's estate had listened to Lord Davier's orders but not his subordinate's. They must have been willing to obey Lord Davier

because he cared about his people, had been prepared to bear full responsibility for their actions, and was also highly capable.

And so, King Bertrand's position had further solidified. I also expected that Queen Latriche would be picked on less during future tea parties.

Although Lord Davier kidnapped me and stood against Lord Nazel, he was also very courteous to me. He wasn't such a bad person. I'm sure he'd make for a very trustworthy ally.

Things hadn't turned out that way, but I still wondered if perhaps there was a world where we could have worked together.

After resting at the palace for a few days, we were finally able to return to Sutrena.

Chapter 7: Madam Bumpkin and an Unexpected Blessing

After everything was over, we all returned to Sutrena and went back to our peaceful life. It was still the rainy season, and I was bathing with our mountbeasts—who'd worked really hard—in the pool again. I'd traveled to many places, but I still liked it the best here. Geni's latest favorite thing was splashing water around with his tail. Dunk was still busy gulping down the water and eating grass from all around the garden. She'd reduced the garden's weeds to half their number practically the moment we got back. Torre's pegasus had also started joining us in the pool recently, and the three mountbeasts all made merry inside the needlessly large pool. It could easily fit a few more of them, which would surely make for an incredible picture.

As I left the pool and wiped myself off, Lord Nazel arrived.

"You'll get cold if you stay in the water for too long, Agnes. Let's go inside."

"Eep!"

As usual, Lord Nazel picked me up and started carrying me into the manor. The mountbeasts could read the room and were uncharacteristically docile during moments like this.

"I was just in the pool! Your shirt will get wet if you hold me like that."

"It's fine; I'll take it off later," Lord Nazel said with a suggestive smile. We hadn't had much alone time together lately, so he got really clingy once we were back inside the manor.

"But yesterday we also— Mngh!" Even when I tried to come up with an excuse, he cut me off by closing my mouth with his. I could never beat him at this.

And so, Lord Nazel once again forcefully took me to our room—

our bedroom, to be exact—where he sat down on the sofa while still holding me. For some reason, there was freshly brewed tea on the table in front of us; Kelly had probably placed it there for us in advance. She was adept and fast at her job, as usual. I felt embarrassed sticking so close to Lord Nazel in just a swimsuit, so I started talking about something that suddenly came to me.

"O-Oh yes, it seems that konjac jelly has started becoming all the rage in the County of Nasi. Lady Marie has apparently been very busy."

"Yes, I've heard that there are people who travel all the way to Nasi just to buy it and try a bite. Money is moving around, which helps with the reconstruction efforts."

It was good that the reconstruction of Nasi was coming along briskly. I hoped they would continue to popularize konjac jelly. My thoughts turned to the tuber situation in our domain while I sipped warm tea.

"We have a tapioca fad happening here thanks to the people of Sutrena."

"Yes, I think it may be due to the influence of the 'Statue of the Margravine Stuffing Her Cheeks with Tapioca Dessert.' You're really popular with our people, Agnes."

I thought that Lord Nazel was exaggerating my popularity due to his personal bias, but I was happy that we were getting more local specialties.

"It's about time we get changed, Lord Nazel. Sutrena may be warm, but I'm still in my swimsuit, and your shirt is all wet." I tried to stand up so I could go and get changed, but Lord Nazel put more strength into his embrace. *Mrgh! I can't break free!* When I turned around, I saw that Lord Nazel had a bright, suggestive smile, clearly indicating that he was planning something. *It's the same smile he had earlier! Is it just me, or is there something disquieting afoot?*

As I struggled to get out of his arms, I heard a cheerful voice with a hint of laughter.

"Don't mind me. I already told you that I'd take it off later, didn't I?"

I finally realized what Lord Nazel meant and froze in place.

“H-Huuuh?! So...this is what you meant from the start? You’re so mean, Lord Nazel!” Now that I was perfectly aware of his intentions, I kept trying to escape, but...he captured me beautifully and took me to our bed.

That was how we lived together in harmony.

On another note, after the fate of Lord Davier and his subordinates was decided, Lord Nazel apparently made King Bertrand give him various things as reparation for everything. That included stuff like the territory of a nobleman of the former queen’s faction who’d been arrested for his crimes, and also Lord Davier’s purple wyvern. The young female wyvern was currently under Connie’s care. She was wary of Lord Nazel and me after the battle that had taken place, but she was a smart animal, so it seemed like she understood the situation. She couldn’t be left in the capital; Sutrena really was the safest place for her.

King Bertrand and Queen Latriche were completely outclassed by Lord Nazel. They apparently called him the “blackhearted margrave” in private.

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Today, I’d invited many noblewomen, including Lady Marie, to a garden party I was holding to highlight Sutrena’s growth. It had been half a year since the events involving Lord Davier, and King Bertrand’s mountbeast introduction program had commenced in earnest, so domestic travel had sped up dramatically. Sutrena was no longer considered so remote...or so I thought. The one minor problem in my life was that I seemed to be oddly lethargic lately.

We served vegetables from our field and also introduced tapioca to our guests; it had become highly popular. Everyone attending today was nice, unlike the meanie trio. I wished I could have welcomed Queen Latriche today, but she couldn’t make it for various reasons. Specifically, her pregnancy had been widely announced a short time ago. She was currently resting at the palace under King Bertrand’s watch.

“It seems that you haven’t been eating anything for some time,

Lady Agnes," Lady Marie suddenly pointed out during our conversation.

"Eh heh heh, my stomach has been feeling a bit upset lately, so I'm holding back on the food." I was telling the truth. Lately, I'd been feeling sluggish, my appetite had decreased, and my palate had changed.

When they heard my reply, the other women all exchanged glances and nodded at each other.

What's going on? It's like a silent conversation is taking place among them. I cocked my head in confusion.

Lady Marie addressed me again, having apparently been silently elected to serve as a sort of representative for everyone else.

"Please go visit the doctor, Lady Agnes."

"Huh? Oh, no, it's really not that bad. I feel fine."

"*Please* go visit the doctor even if you're fine!" Lady Marie urged me with an intimidating look, so I couldn't say anything in response. She exuded incredible pressure. "We also need to let Lord Nazelbart know." Before I knew it, my guests were making all kinds of decisions.

After the party was over, I decided to go visit my doctor. That same evening...

"You are pregnant. Congratulations."

...I found out that I was with child. The elderly doctor informed me with a cheerful smile, like it was nothing special. We wanted to avoid worrying those around us, so only Lord Nazel, the doctor, and I were present in the room to hear the examination results.

"So, I'll be...having a baby?"

"Yes."

Lord Nazel and I were frozen for a moment, but the doctor's words gradually made their way into our heads.

"Agnes..." Lord Nazel hugged me gently. He looked shocked, but was also unable to hide his joy. "I'm so happy. Thank you, Agnes."

I stood still and kept blinking as he enveloped me in his warmth. None of this felt real, and the facts had yet to sink in for me, but Lord Nazel was trembling with emotion, and I knew that he was telling the truth.

So it wasn't *just an upset stomach.*

After receiving the news of my pregnancy, we only told Kelly, Torre, and some of our maids. We would make a more general announcement later, once my condition had stabilized. Kelly was as delighted as if the news were her own. She had her usual blank expression, but her hands were restless, like she was thinking of holding the baby she had yet to meet.

"I will devote my best efforts to taking care of both you and your child, Lady Agnes. The parenting books are already perfectly prepared. I shall arrange for some children's clothing too."

Torre was also bellowing joyfully out in the garden.

The reality of my pregnancy slowly sank in as everyone around me congratulated me, and I hugged Lord Nazel with a wide smile on my face.



Side Story 1: A New Resident Arrives at Peppel Island

Mia was absentmindedly gazing at the wide blue sky. She was at the beach, sitting on the rugged rocks by the water's edge and dangling her sunburned legs over the water. She was wearing a hat made from woven plants that she'd received as a present from the girl who ran the island's tool shop. Large white birds cried out shrilly as they circled in the sky, aiming for the fish in the transparent water below.

I've gotten completely used to living here, she thought. One thing she'd noticed ever since coming here was that every day was long. Time passed slowly on this island.

"It's almost time for the ship from the mainland to arrive. I wonder if they will bring me the supplies I asked for this time." Every month, a ship visited the island to check on the islanders' circumstances, and also took the opportunity to bring various things, like supplies necessary for agriculture.

Mia stood up and quickly headed for the dock. By the time she arrived, the ship was already there, and the island's residents were gathered nearby. The gangplank had been lowered and people were disembarking the ship.

Oh, it looks like they've brought someone new. Another criminal?

It was probably someone who'd opposed Bertrand, so Mia approached the ship, curious to see who it was. Once she took a closer look at the criminal, she was shocked. A slender, fair-skinned, handsome young man with gray eyes and long blue hair that reached down to his back, was elegantly stepping onto the dock. He didn't suit this plain island in the slightest.

Huh?! What is he *doing here?* Mia was very familiar with this man. Since they were close in age, they'd met each other several

times as children, and had continued to have contact even as they grew up since he was the son of a house that was associated with the royal family. At one point, he'd also been a candidate to become Mia's fiancé, though that position had eventually gone to Nazelbart.

"Davier!"

When Mia called his name, the young man slowly raised his head.

"Your Highness."

"The fact that you're here can only mean you went up against Bertrand and lost, right? I'm sure you'd have been fine if you'd just kept your head down."

"My position didn't allow that. I'm truly ashamed."

Mia was thrilled to meet an acquaintance after such a long time. While she disliked Nazelbart for his seemingly effortless brilliance, she didn't mind the hardworking Davier. She considered him an ally who'd also continuously suffered from being compared to Nazelbart.

Davier looked over the island's scenery and took a quiet breath.

"This is a nice place," he said.

"In what way? It's just an empty, deserted island. The islanders are extremely rude too."

"But you look like you've gotten used to this island, Your Highness."

"Huh?" Mia followed Davier's gaze and turned to look behind her, where she saw the youngsters of the island who'd been hanging out with her often lately.

"What, what, did somethin' happen?" they asked as they curiously looked at Mia and Davier.

"Well, I have a lot of free time on my hands now. They're the descendants of criminals who met here in exile. They were born and raised on this island," Mia told Davier.

The friendly islanders rushed over to Mia and pressed her to introduce the newcomer to them.

"Haaah... He's Davier Addamsgomes. He's my childhood friend who so impressively got himself exiled."

The youngsters got all excited when they heard that introduction. There wasn't much entertainment on the island, so they found even tiny things tremendously fun.

“How impressive!” they murmured, parroting Mia while oblivious to her sarcasm.

“Welcome to Peppel Island. Nice to meet ya!”

They all quickly accepted Davier, since he was Mia’s friend. They weren’t the least bit cautious of him.

“My name is Davier. The pleasure is all mine.”

And so, the agreeable Davier quickly became friends with the island’s youngsters and took up residence in the vacant house filled with books that Mia occasionally visited.

The terrifying part started afterward. He won over the islanders in the blink of an eye and became liked by everyone, from children to the elderly. They willingly provided him with his everyday necessities, including his daily meals. The women yearned for him, the men and children respected him, and the elderly doted on him. It took only a few days for the islanders to accept Davier as an important member of the community. He received vastly more favorable treatment than Mia and her mother had; they’d once been hated by the majority of the island’s population and been treated as nuisances.

“Mrgh...” Mia grumbled in frustration.

Nonetheless, it didn’t seem that Davier was planning on manipulating the islanders for any kind of plan. He didn’t look like he had any lingering attachment to the capital either. He spent his time reading books, playing with the small animals he gathered with his magic, occasionally teaching the youngsters swordsmanship, and helping out with Mia’s crafts.

Mia couldn’t quite understand what Davier’s goal was, so one noon, she visited his home uninvited and asked him.

“Are you fine with things as they are? You seem like you’ve gotten awfully used to the island in only a short span of time.”

“Yes, everyone here is very nice. And am I fine with...what, exactly?”

“I feel like you could rally the islanders and get off this island, couldn’t you? If you bide your time, you could amass enough power to rival Bertrand—”

“That...sounds like a pain.” Davier put down the field guide on

farming tools he was reading, climbed onto the hammock he'd been given, and lay down. He no longer showed any traces that he'd once been the head of the House of Addamsgomes.

"So you aren't saying it's impossible."

"There are various ways I probably *could* do it...but I intend to spend my time peacefully on this island, where I can bid farewell to my responsibilities as a duke and all those nagging sycophants who pretended they were my allies. If you want to try something, you can do it on your own somewhere that has nothing to do with me."

Davier's excessively harsh remark left Mia momentarily speechless—she kept opening and closing her mouth, but no words came out.

"Are you truly fine with this? You were the head of the House of Addamsgomes, you know?"

"I've always been the indoor type. This carefree lifestyle is what I've yearned for. I hate high society, and I'm sick of people pushing me into a position of power right in the spotlight. Isn't the same true for you?"

"I..." Mia had also been arbitrarily judged by those around her, constantly compared to someone else, and praised by crowds with only ulterior motives; she really had been tired of that kind of life. That was why she'd vented her frustration by acting as unreasonably as she pleased at the palace. "Then I suppose you were happy to get sent to this island."

"Yes, this place is like paradise for me."

"Couldn't you have been sent to the Sempli Convent instead?"

Davier nodded in agreement.

"I'm truly relieved that didn't happen. That place has compulsory group activities that would get in the way of my wish for quiet seclusion. Going there also would have been a pain because the former high priest is there, and on top of that, I *really* don't want to see Robin."

"Oh, that chubby priest was arrested?" Mia was also acquainted with High Priest Lubhuta. She'd accommodated him on numerous occasions, and she was aware of his twisted fetish.

"He picked a fight with Nazelbart and caused his own downfall." Davier had a faraway look for a moment.

"That man *is* a total idiot," Mia groaned with a hand on her head. "Nevertheless, it's Nazelbart again, huh? That mere animated doll is truly detestable."

"About that, it seems like he's changed. He's completely taken with his wife, the former Lady Bumpkin. He's become truly selfish and human now. There are also rumors about him threatening your brothers..."

"I knew that he was getting along with Lady Bumpkin, but it makes me furious that he was the only one to find happiness."

Still lying on his hammock, Davier looked at the angry Mia and smiled. It was his genuine smile, different from the one he'd shown so many times in the capital.

"You seem much happier than you were back in the palace. You also seem to have made some friends," he said.

"Are you blind or something? How exactly are they my friends?"

"My eyes are perfectly fine. Oh yes, I almost forgot. Your son Ralph is doing great. I really wanted to have him meet you."

When Mia heard that, she could guess what kind of crime Davier had committed. He'd tried to make Ralph the king, himself the prime minister, and bring Mia back home as the king's mother. He really didn't need to do any of that, though.

"You're such a fool. I don't have any lingering attachments, and that boy has forgotten the face of the mother who never cared about him. If there's a reason someone as skilled as you lost in a power struggle, I'm sure it's that you're too emotional. You've always worried so much about others, and probably dug your own grave with your weird sense of virtue."

"That's none of your business." Davier muttered dismissively, then turned around to get into a sleeping position.

Side Story 2: A New Employee Joins the Fortress

One day, Connie was having lunch with his coworkers at the fortress cafeteria. The cafeteria was run by a married couple who'd lost their store in a manabeast rampage during last year's new moon. They used high-quality ingredients and the food was delicious, so the fortress staff liked this place.

"I heard that we're getting a new manabeast exterminator this year," one of Connie's coworkers said with sparkling eyes.

"Oh, that's great news. Manabeast extermination is a dangerous job, so it's a really unpopular position."

Connie kept eating as he also joined the conversation.

"Well, that's to be expected. There are only so many people with magic suited to taking down manabeasts. Better than having hindrances join."

"True. Master Henry will apparently introduce the newbie to us later."

"I can't wait."

When the time came, however, Connie's expectations were thoroughly betrayed. The person they were introduced to in Henry's room was unexpectedly familiar to him. She was a *young woman* with greenish hair tied in two pigtails, and she was adorned with an excess of frilly ribbons.

"Allow me to introduce you. This is Furla Hihime. She will be assigned to the manabeast extermination unit starting today," Henry said.

"I'm Furla! ☆ I passed the employment examination! ☆ My body is tough thanks to Lady Agnes's reinforcement, and I can use magic that makes things float. My special skill is doing the laundry. ☆"

Connie's coworkers couldn't take their eyes off Furla, but he

started feeling dizzy.

"Master Henry, can this woman *really* exterminate manabeasts? This job isn't some kind of game! I don't want some useless person coming along and putting our lives at risk! Besides, she says she's using Lady Agnes's magic. Doesn't that count as doping?!"

"I understand your concern, but she passed the fortress's physical fitness test even without Lady Agnes's magic. She apparently trained her body for about half a year by continuously carrying heavy laundry soaked in water," Henry replied.

"My senior maids praised me for being strong! ☆"

Faced with Furla's wide smile, Connie's coworkers—who were completely weak against women—blushed and stared blankly at her.

"Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud, Connie. We finally have a woman joining this all-male profession!"

"Yeah, this has never happened before."

Connie looked at Henry and whispered.

"Please only let her join on a probationary basis. If she turns out to be useless to us after a trial period, I'd like her to be moved to a different department."

Furla made a sad expression, and Connie's coworkers got upset, telling him things like "Don't make her cry, man," or "You're being too harsh, Connie." However, Connie was aware of Furla's true nature, so he realized that she was just acting and pointedly ignored them all.

"*Anyway*, I don't want to see her get hurt or even killed, so that's my demand," Connie said.

"Very well," Henry said with a nod after a brief period of thought. "However, if she successfully makes it through the trial period, she will indeed be officially appointed as a manabeast exterminator. And you'd better not do anything to try to sabotage her."

"Yes, sir," Connie replied after a pause. He was confident he wouldn't need to do anything to make her fail anyway. A former sheltered noblewoman like Furla wouldn't have a chance of keeping up during a manabeast extermination. "All right, then let's get to work. We received word of a location that has suffered damage from manabeasts."

Connie and his coworkers took Furla along and headed to a mountain. A destroyer scorpion—a massive manabeast that possessed deadly venom—was said to have appeared there recently. These manabeasts typically inhabited the neighboring country of Polpystan, but they could sometimes be sighted in Sutrena too. They were ferocious and attacked humans and animals on sight, so the one on this mountain had to be exterminated to make sure that the people foraging for edible plants there weren't attacked.

The extermination team hiked around the mountain for a while, looking for somewhere the manabeast was likely to appear. Destroyer scorpions favored sandy areas. They would hide under the sand and lie in ambush for their prey.

Climbing a mountain should be difficult for a delicate noblewoman, Connie thought.

He turned around to see Furla *right behind him*.

"Eek!"

"Eh heh heh! ☆ You're so dashing while you work, Mister Connie."

For some unknown reason, she was keeping up with him easily. Perhaps sensing Connie's unspoken question, Furla started explaining with a wide smile.

"As a maid at the margrave's estate, I had to carry many sheets after they finished drying, all over that needlessly large manor. It's nice that I only have a little luggage with me today."

"You've gotta be kidding me..." Just how hard was a maid's job?!

Connie was completely unaware of Furla's ulterior motives and had underestimated her tenacity. She'd secretly trained hard during her maid job in order to become a manabeast exterminator.

The manabeast exterminators eventually reached their destination and started surveilling their surroundings. They were on a sandy river embankment with rocks scattered all around them.

"Watch out. Speak up right away if you get stung," Connie ordered. As he carefully examined the area, he suddenly saw the ground starting to rise. "There it is! Everyone, time to engage!"

At Connie's command, the exterminators all got ready to attack. First, a person carrying a net tossed it over the creature and used his gluing magic. His magic had the power to make any kind of

material adhesive; it was useful, but its range was short. Next, Connie used his fleetfoot magic to close in on the manabeast and used his hatchet to sever its venomous tail.

"Watch out for its fangs!" he shouted. As he said this, he noticed that for some reason, the burdensome Furla was now quite a distance behind him. Connie thought she must have been too paralyzed with fear to follow him into battle, until...

"Hup! ☆" Far away though she was, Furla picked up a rock and threw it straight at the destroyer scorpion.

Throwing a rock, and from all the way over there? It'll never even hit...

However, Connie's prediction was off. The rock quickly flew an impressively long distance and hit the destroyer scorpion right in the head. The manabeast moaned in pain and collapsed, kicking up a cloud of sand.

"What the—"

Furla seemed delighted by everyone's surprised reactions.

"Lady Agnes taught me how to throw rocks! We practiced together by throwing tubers. And since my magic can make things float, it's highly compatible with rock-throwing. That said, I don't have much mana, so I need to finish fights quickly."

Connie was slack-jawed. *What* the heck *are you doing, Lady Agnes?!* Moreover, the two women had apparently become friends when he wasn't looking. *Lady Agnes's ability to win people over is incredible!*

The other exterminators were breathlessly exchanging comments.

"We got an incredible newbie. Did you see how far that rock went? And yet she's so cute."

"Yeah, it flew ridiculously far. She's definitely going to be useful, and she's cute to boot."

"Her abilities are solid for a rear support position. And yeah, she really is cute."

And so, Furla was unanimously—bar Connie—appointed as the first woman among the manabeast exterminators. However, some of the male staff quarreled over her... Connie was a little worried that she might throw the manabeast exterminators into disarray.

Side Story 3: Meanwhile, at the Church

Emilio carried out his daily clerical duties in good spirits. Unlike in the capital, the work he did here was rewarding, and he was compensated accordingly. And above all else, his life together with Sonia was enjoyable to no end.

After quitting her job as a maid at Nazelbart's estate one day, Sonia showed up at the church with only a single bag in hand. She then obtained the qualifications of a priest, got permission from the church's headquarters, and voluntarily started working as a church clerk in Sutrena. Pretty much anyone with a certain level of education could qualify to become a priest, and Sonia did it all on her own. On top of that, she took care of most of the church's administrative work with frightening efficiency. The apprentice priests who'd been dispatched there to assist after the incident with Lubhuta were astonished by her competence. It lent credence to the rumors that she'd been running the Viscounty of Hihime all on her own. Watching over Sonia to make sure she wasn't working herself too hard had become part of Emilio's daily routine lately.

That reminds me, it seems that Miss Sonia's sister, Miss Furla, has started working at the fortress. That was honestly unexpected. In the past, at least, she hadn't been the kind of person who acted independently and proactively.

"But it's good that she changed for the better." Emilio came to a priestly conclusion and returned to his office, where he opened an envelope he'd just received from Nazelbart, the margrave of Sutrena. Every time he saw a plain, yet clearly high-quality envelope, his hands trembled in nervousness.

If I'm being perfectly honest, I'm on edge whenever I see a letter from him. But it's not anonymous this time, so it should be fine. As a

priest, Emilio offered counseling to people who sent their concerns anonymously. Nazelbart's letters were sometimes mixed in with the rest, but about seventy percent of their content was worthless. The remaining thirty percent was boasting about his wife.

Emilio timidly opened the envelope and started reading the letter, which talked about Agnes's new magic. His expression grew tense; this matter was to be kept top secret.

"Let's see, Lady Agnes's new magic is 'recovery rate and autoimmunity reinforcement.' Hold on... That's incredibly similar to the magic used by the saint of antiquity!" To be exact, according to historical records the saint's magic had been "recovery and rejuvenation."

This is dangerous... According to the letter, the only ones who knew about Agnes's magic were the woman herself, Nazelbart, and Countess Nasi, who'd witnessed the event. In other words, not even the king and queen had been told yet. The letter said that they would be informed at an appropriate time.

If this is all true, it could spell trouble. If there was a second coming of the saint, every country would take an interest in Agnes's magic and desperately covet her.

"If that happened..." Emilio could only imagine a future where Nazelbart was apoplectic. Making that man angry was a terrible idea.

Okay, let's continue reading. Further on, the letter said that Nazelbart wanted Emilio to come to the estate and use his appraisal magic. He'd feel lonely being away from the church where Sonia was, but he was excited to be able to investigate new magic.

While Emilio was feeling enthused by what he'd just read, Sonia came into the room with tea.

"Here's some tea, Father Emilio. Please make sure you don't overwork yourself, okay?"

Emilio was deeply moved at how thoughtful Sonia was. *Aah! You're the best, Miss Sonia! A true goddess!* She was also highly popular with the apprentice priests.

"Let's have tea together, Miss Sonia."

"Of course."

Aah, this is bliss... Emilio grinned as their happy teatime started.

There were more than a few people who lived close to the church who mistook Emilio and Sonia for a married couple.

Once I gain a little more prestige...I'll definitely make that misunderstanding a reality. After all, not only was Sonia exceptionally skilled, but she also used to be part of a viscount family, so she felt far beyond Emilio's reach. He wanted to be at least a little more worthy of her before proposing.

Emilio secretly burned with that new resolution before his gently smiling goddess.

Afterword

You have my sincerest gratitude for picking up volume 4 of *Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain*. Thanks to all of you, the *Lady Bumpkin* series has reached its fourth installment, and I can't express enough gratitude for your support to all of my readers and the publishing staff.

In this volume, we finally have the introduction of Davier, the head of the second ducal house. I asked Kurodeko for an illustration to pair up with Nazelbart, and we got a wonderfully handsome design for Davier. Olce's illustration was also cute.

Agnes, the noble lady who was kicked out of her house with nowhere to go back in volume 1, gradually starts acting more like a margravine in volume 4. This time, she showed a rare sight of being shaken emotionally, but she's fundamentally a strong-willed woman, so I think she can overcome most obstacles.

While I was writing volume 4, the editor in charge gave me incredibly helpful advice, for which I'm terribly, terribly, terribly grateful. Again, thank you so much.

Finally, I'd like to mention that volume 1 of the *Lady Bumpkin* manga adaptation drawn by Narina Nanaura is now on sale. It's very interesting, so I'd be happy if you also gave it a go. I have a smile on my face every time I look over the manuscript.

Ageha Sakura

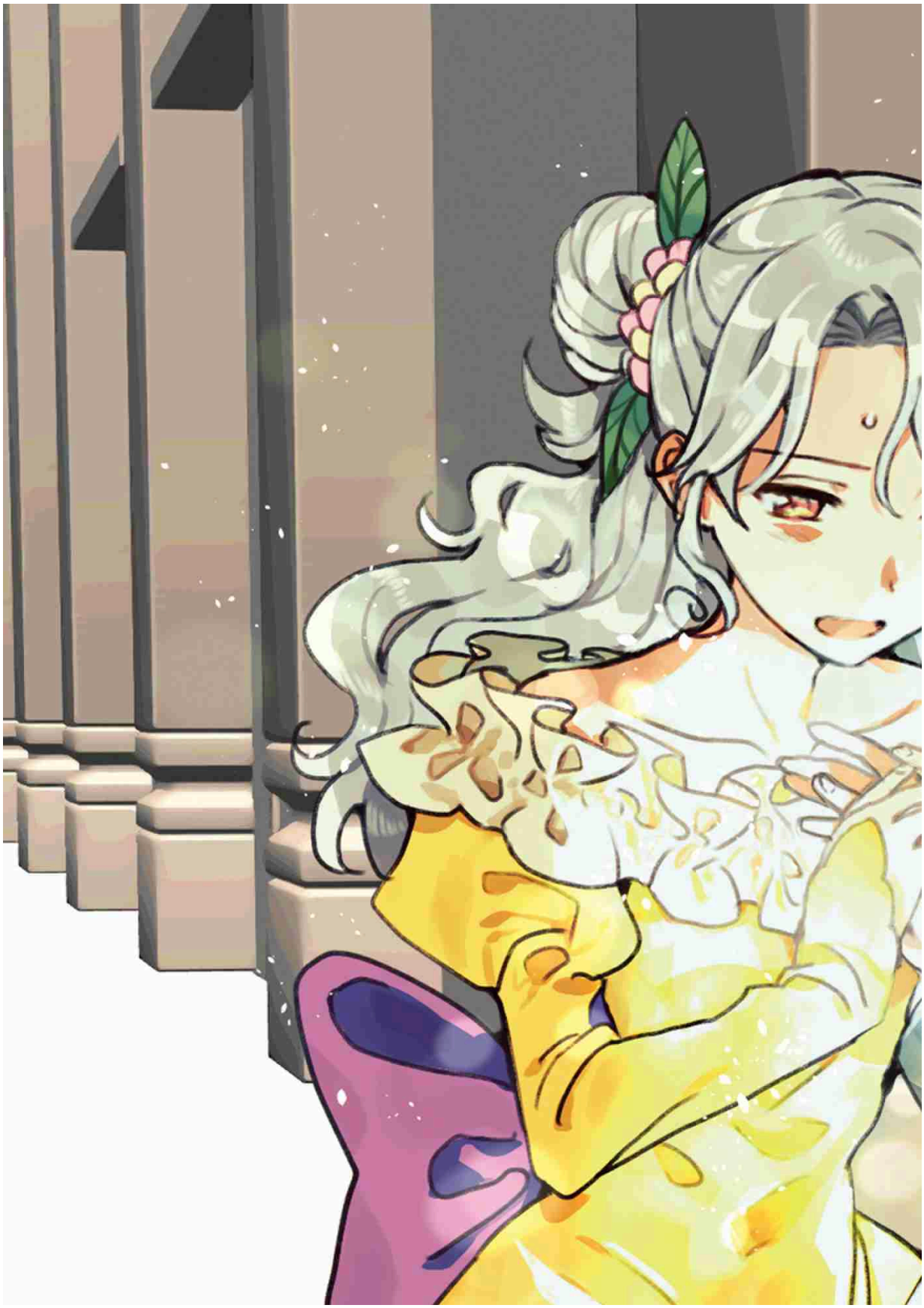
















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Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain: Volume 4
by Ageha Sakura

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by OVERLAP, Inc.
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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2025