AUTHOR:
AGEHA SAKURA
ILLUSTRATOR:
KURODEKO



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LADY BUMPKIN AND HER LORD VILLAIN


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Prologue

Far to the southwest of Desnim, a gentle, pale moon quietly illuminated a dry meadow. Inside a nearby castle, people conducted advanced magical research. Even though night had already fallen, the lights were still on in one of the research towers, and the researchers continued busily running around. Their research focused exclusively on the saint, and they traveled to places where it was said she had been sighted to gather information on her.

There was one black-clad young man among them who didn't look like a researcher at all; he was indifferently reading out a report in front of his boss.

"According to historical researchers, the latest eyewitness reports were documented in the neighboring country of Polpystan. The information on the saint found in those documents wasn't much different from what is widely known about her. It was written that her magic incorporated recovery, purification, barriers, and so on." This was the information the group had gathered through an undercover investigation, though not by this young man.

"I see. So there is no new information." After the young man was finished, his boss pondered the report with a hand on his cheek. Although he was the boss, he was only a few years older. He was the son of a prestigious family and had light brown skin and glossy black hair. He glanced back at the young man in black clothes and asked another question. "What about the man recently discovered in Desnim who's said to possess magic similar to the saint?"

"You mean the user of sacred magic—Robin, was it? I haven't seen it firsthand, so I can't say this with confidence, but his magic apparently really is saintlike. However, the details of his magic are still unknown. The king was also interested in it."

"We ought to confirm the facts."

The young man scowled upon seeing the smile on his boss's face.

This is why I hate *people who don't go out into the field. He just keeps giving orders while messing around in his ivory tower, all nice and cozy, and has no idea how much trouble going to Desnim really is. He probably only knows the itinerary of the trip from documents or books.*

Still, there was no way around it. His boss's social status really did make it difficult for him to go out. The boss's handsome profile, illuminated by the light coming from the candlesticks, showed no sign that he cared about the younger man's grievances.

"Now hold on, isn't Desnim really far from here? And to get there, I'd have to go through Polpystan, which could be dicey given that relations between our countries are currently a bit strained."

"But I still think there's merit in going to Desnim. You can either take a detour around Polpystan or follow the river that borders Polpystan and Desnim and continue along the mountains to the east."

His boss was essentially ordering him to go investigate. The younger man bit his lip in frustration.

"Yeah, yeah. I don't have the right to refuse anyway, do I?"

"It's an important duty. If a saint has appeared, we might be able to use them to weaken Polpystan, just like the saint of legend once did to our own country."

The younger man wasn't really concerned about a story from centuries ago. Polpystan wasn't a country so valuable that it was worth going to so much trouble to acquire it. It had once been a plentiful land, but half of it was desert now, while the other half faced problems with bad harvests. But his boss didn't care about any of that.

The younger man heaved a short sigh and left to prepare for his journey.

Chapter 1: Madam Bumpkin Enters Her Third Year in Sutrena

Filtered through the green leaves, warm sunlight gently poured down on Sutrena. I was sitting down and resting under the shade of a tree in my garden. As I quietly stared up at the sky, I took a deep breath.

"Aah, what a relaxing view. You can only see this during the dry season."

I'd left a basket filled with light snacks at the roots of the large tree. It had neatly arranged tuber sandwiches made by our chef, Mather, and they looked absolutely delicious. They were her latest creation, using tuber paste between two slices of white bread made from a new variety of wheat we'd recently started cultivating in Sutrena. I gently reached for one of the sandwiches and started chewing on it. The tuber's rich flavor spread all across my tongue, while the bread was soft and springy.

"Mm! It's delicious. Mather's tuber dishes are always amazing. I could eat a million of them." With my appetite stimulated, I quickly went for another sandwich, then another... The sweet potato sandwich with butter and sugar tasted divine when combined with cream, while the potato sandwich with black pepper had amber grilled onions mixed with the mashed potatoes. The yam sandwich used spices imported from Polpystan and was fried and fragrant, making it perfect in every single way.

Polpystan was right across the border, and Queen Latriche and I were on great terms, so Sutrena and Polpystan had recently opened their borders to each other for trade. Before, Polpystani trade goods could have only been obtained in Desnim's capital, but now they were also available in Sutrena. Thanks to that, our territory was more prosperous than before.

I finished the sandwiches in the blink of an eye. I shut the lid of the basket—which was woven from plants native to Sutrena—and put it back next to me, then drank some herbal tea from my canteen. This now marked my third year in Sutrena, and I'd completely gotten used to life here.

I gently rubbed my still-inconspicuous belly.

I barely get morning sickness anymore. Things are going well.

Our baby was quickly growing, and I would soon be entering my fourth month of pregnancy. Everyone in Sutrena, from Mister Henry to our estate's maids, kept telling me to do nothing but rest. I thought they were all exaggerating, but Lord Nazel and Kelly were just as adamant about it. And so I was enjoying some quiet relaxation for the first time in a while since returning to Sutrena. A short distance from me, Dunk was drinking from the clear fountain, while Geni was napping in front of a flower bed lined with big crimson flowers.

"I've gotten sleepy too," I said with a yawn. "Maybe I should take a little nap..."

"You'll catch a cold if you sleep there."

As I was dozing off, I saw a shadow appear in front of me and heard a gentle voice from above. I could tell who it was even without raising my head.

"Welcome home, Lord Nazel. Thank you for your hard work today." When I opened my eyes, I saw him leaning over and looking into my eyes. His handsome face was really close. As he was much closer than I'd expected, my cheeks flushed crimson, and I blinked in surprise.



"I'm home, Agnes."

"Um, er, Lord Na— Mnh?!" While I was still feeling bashful, Lord Nazel placed his hand around my back, embraced me tightly, and stole a kiss from me. My drowsiness was blown away in a second. "Ah! Wai— Mm!" I was really shaken up, but Lord Nazel did things his way like usual and didn't seem to care at all. "Mh! Mnh!" I was so overwhelmed that I went red-faced and closed my eyes, but Lord Nazel was still merciless. He sighed.

"Open your mouth, will you?"

"No, stop it. Not out he— Fgh?!"

Lord Nazel placed one hand on my cheek and kept kissing me deeper and deeper. After a short pause, he slowly moved his lips away from mine.

"Heh heh, it's adorable how you're always shy no matter how much time passes, Agnes. You seem fully awake now, so let's head back to the manor. There's something I'd like to show you." Lord Nazel took both my hands in his and helped me stand up, and then with his free hand he picked up both the now-empty sandwich basket and my canteen filled with herbal tea before walking across the garden.

We crossed a path surrounded by large flowers, which were in full bloom thanks to the dry season, and arrived at the kitchen's rear entrance. Lately, we often used this entrance to come and go from the kitchen. We quickly went inside and came across Mather getting dinner ready. The entire room was filled with the aroma of vegetable broth—no doubt meant for soup—and the assistant maids were peeling a large number of potatoes. Did this unique, refreshing aroma belong to some kind of herb?

"Thank you for the tuber sandwiches, Mather. They were delicious. The same goes for the herbal tea."

Mather smiled as she accepted the empty basket from Lord Nazel.

"I'm glad you enjoyed them. Please look forward to my next creations."

"Yes, I'll be eagerly waiting to try them out." My appetite had been ravenous lately, so I really meant that.

I followed after Lord Nazel as he left the kitchen and headed

toward his laboratory in the depths of our manor.

"Um, Lord Nazel? You don't need to hold me so closely. I can still walk just fine." He had been overly attentive to me ever since learning of my pregnancy.

"I'm worried. The very thought of something happening to you or the baby makes me shudder."

"Hmm, aren't you worrying a bit too much, though?"

Once we arrived at the laboratory, I saw some light brown, bumpy tubers arranged on the front desk. They were of various sizes and were a bit misshapen.

"Lord Nazel, these are..."

"Sunchokes, yes. I had them imported from a country to the east in order to study them."

Various fruits and vegetables were being stored in this room, including these sunchokes. They were very resilient tubers, but even then, it had been impossible to cultivate them in their current form in Sutrena. We were currently trying to cultivate them in specific fields using both Lord Nazel's magic and my own.

"So, what about the sunchokes?"

"I succeeded in some new selective breeding, so I'd like to hear your opinion." Lord Nazel pointed at a somewhat large planter in a corner of the room. Sunchokes with thick leaves and cute yellow flowers were planted in it. While sunchokes were tubers, they actually didn't belong to the potato family, but to the family of a flower called chrysanthemum that bloomed in the East. "These sunchokes are planted in local soil, but they're growing properly even without your magic. I recently planted some seeds, and those sunchokes grew normally."

"Wow... So that's actually possible." Lord Nazel and I stood side by side observing the sunchokes, and also looked at each other with smiles on our faces. Back when we'd arrived, no crops could be grown in Sutrena. I would occasionally see some plants growing by themselves, but they were all wild species that had grown by chance —it was impossible to cultivate them.

It was always so distressing. I believed that the common folk of Sutrena and Mister Henry and everyone else at the fortress felt the

same way. *Lord Nazel is constantly racking his brain over improving the seedlings.* Up until now, Lord Nazel had been using his magic to grow resilient seedlings suitable for Sutrena's soil, and I had been going from place to place using my reinforcement magic on them, so we'd somehow managed to grow crops here.

Relying on crops that can only grow thanks to the combination of our two magics is really risky. But Lord Nazel's research had finally borne fruit, giving birth to a breed of sunchoke the people could cultivate normally, even without any help from our magic. This was without a doubt a historical breakthrough for Sutrena.

"Congratulations, Lord Nazel! Our people will be able to freely grow crops even without the aid of magic!"

He smiled at me fondly. His every gesture was charming, and he still made my heart skip a beat even years into our marriage.

"Thank you, Agnes. But there are also things we need to be careful of when planting crops that are tough enough to survive without magic."

"Like what?"

"It's well-known in the East that sunchokes have a history of being so hardy that they essentially turn into weeds, and that's just the natural strains, not our improved variety. Sunchokes improved through magic will infinitely multiply if planted in rich soil, so we must restrict their cultivation to places with poor soil where crops don't normally grow, like Sutrena."

"That sounds serious. We need to make sure everyone is aware of this." I believed that only Sutrena would need such a powerful tuber at the moment. Other places could grow vegetables normally.

"The sunchokes were my first success, but I want to continue increasing the number of vegetables we can grow without magic in the same way. This will also decrease the burden on you."

I can't go out much when I'm pregnant like now. The method we'd used up to now was inefficient, so Lord Nazel's invention was groundbreaking. I was looking forward to all the wonderful tuber fields we'd see cropping up.

"It's great that everyone will be able to cultivate tubers even without me. Sunchokes can also make delicious tea. You cut them

into thin slices, dry them, roast them, then add hot water."

"You sure know a lot about tuber cuisine, Agnes."

"Mather told me that even pregnant women can drink sunchoke tea. Sunchokes can also be used in cooking, and Dunk is happy to eat them." She was a manabeast with a big appetite who loved tubers, especially sunchokes.

During all my excitement, Lord Nazel suddenly started looking at my belly. It was the gentle, warm, and soft gaze that he always had when discussing private matters.

"Say, Agnes? Are you feeling all right? You aren't overworking yourself, are you?"

"I'm fine. Everyone is kind, so I'm never in a situation where I have to push myself." The baby in my belly would come out around half a year from now. When I thought about that day, I was filled with anticipation, but also a bit of fear. This would be my first time giving birth, after all.

Those with experience have told me that whatever will be, will be. Kelly had already prepared a large number of baby clothes, and the maids were enthusiastically putting together all the essentials for the baby. *I'll do my best.* There was a bit of pressure, but this was another important duty for a margravine, so I'd see this through properly for everyone's sake.

"Come to think of it, have we decided on the baby's wet nurse yet?" I asked Lord Nazel the question that suddenly popped into my mind.

Desnim's noblewomen commonly employed a wet nurse to help with child-rearing. Since noblewomen were busy with work and social obligations, they couldn't attend to their baby at all times, so a trustworthy woman was appointed as a wet nurse to be by the baby's side.

Sutrena had been the center of attention lately, and many people approached us with all kinds of intentions. Lord Nazel had told me that some of them might have ulterior motives or evil intentions.

We can't accept anyone unless we're completely sure of their background. Our household's plan was to welcome a woman who'd given birth around the same time as me, and whose background

was as impeccable as possible, but we still hadn't come to a decision.

"We're still taking applications for a wet nurse, and I'll also be searching myself, so you don't need to worry about it, Agnes." Lord Nazel scooped my hair up and gave me a kiss. "It's still a long way off, but you shouldn't push yourself until then."

"Of course!" I was extremely lively and sturdy so far. Lord Nazel's overprotective rules were excessive, so I was determined to move around moderately for my body's sake. *I'll enter the stable stage of my pregnancy soon, so I think I should exercise.* The problem was how I would get around Lord Nazel's declaration that I should stay in bed—I didn't think I could convince him through discussion.

"What are you thinking, Agnes?"

"Huh?!" I replied with a start. Lord Nazel was looking at me with a pressuring smile, like he could tell what I'd just been thinking. "Nothing," I replied evasively in a monotone.

After a short pause, Lord Nazel returned to his gentle smile.

"I see. Let's leave it at that, then." Perhaps he'd seen through everything. He leaned closer and gave me a forceful hug from behind and also grabbed my hands tightly. "You're always adorable, so even though I know I'm being overprotective, I can't help but want to stop you from leaving the house. There's also the matter of your magic."

My magic, absolute reinforcement, could make my target stronger in all sorts of ways, depending on my intention and mental image.

"Not only can it make things stronger, it can also accelerate healing. What a mysterious magic," I said in agreement.

"I think that depending on your imagination, it can 'reinforce' even more things, and in many different ways."

"I'm sorry to betray your expectations, but I'm not someone with a very rich imagination."

"No, I think it's rich enough."

I honestly couldn't agree with him. Lord Nazel had a very high opinion of me. Cultivating a strong imagination had been next to impossible inside the House of Evantail, which had been dominated by strict, antiquated rules.

"At the Nasi estate, you brought me back from near death. There was also that first time with the seedlings when you performed a miracle on those weakened fruit trees. Those aren't normal uses of 'reinforcement.'"

"That's only because I was desperate in those particular circumstances."

"I think that's what's so incredible about you."

Getting lauded again for the behavior that was natural to me made me bashful.

"You praise me far too much, Lord Nazel..." When he told me that kind of stuff straight to my face, I still didn't know how to react and turned beet red.

"You're my dearest wife, my pride and joy." This time, my husband started kissing me all over. Even now that we had a kid on the way, his affection showed no signs of stopping.

"Gosh, you're saying that kind of stuff again."

"I can't help it when it's the truth," he said with a smile.

I felt showered in my husband's sweet and relentless love. I was flustered, but this was like a form of comfort for him, so I ended up going along with it. After all, although the state of Sutrena had greatly improved, Lord Nazel was still as busy as ever. The reason was that the territory under his control had increased after Lord Davier's rebellion. The land he'd been given was in better shape than Sutrena, but it had a surprising shortage of administrative personnel. I still had the fresh memory of being greatly perplexed at this development, wondering how things had turned out that way.

Lord Nazel's new territory had once been run by a nobleman who'd been part of the former queen's faction and had led the charge in the rebellion. His sycophants had held the majority of important posts, but after the suppression of the rebellion, everyone involved had been arrested, and all of those sycophants had been purged, leading to a staffing shortage. Among the former queen's faction, those who didn't have any particular attachment to the queen and had just been acting out of force of habit or obligation had been left alone, but most of the faction's members had still been arrested or kicked out of key positions, which put a lot of pressure

on the new administrator—Lord Nazel.

He was busy traveling every day, flying back and forth from place to place. Strangely enough, the new territory—with its mountain of problems—had welcomed him with open arms. His track record of revitalizing Sutrena proved he was reliable, so the upright government officials in the new territory had been glad to see him. They'd revealed that they'd always been busy cleaning up after the other government personnel, who'd never done any work. Even though the majority of the staff were now gone, it seemed that the remaining ones were still only about as busy as before all their counterparts had been sacked. Mister Henry, who'd accompanied Lord Nazel there, had told me that Lord Nazel had had a faraway look on his face when he'd first learned those facts.

Mister Henry was actually scheduled to visit our estate today. After I discussed it with Lord Nazel, we'd decided that this was the perfect time to talk to him about the sunchokes. He arrived right on time, carrying a large stack of documents, and we started telling him about the new sunchoke variety.

Um, Mister Henry, those documents are completely hiding your face. I asked a nearby servant to take the documents to Lord Nazel's room. I could have carried them myself, but Lord Nazel had strictly prohibited me from lifting anything heavy.

Lord Nazel led Mister Henry to the dining room and repeated everything he'd told me earlier. We used to talk with Mister Henry in the drawing room, but now that we knew each other better, we'd often take him to the dining room or Lord Nazel's workroom. He was especially fond of the dining room, perhaps because only a single wall separated it from the kitchen. He and our chef Mather were fellow gourmets who often exchanged information about delicious food. Apparently, Mister Henry mainly told her about his favorite restaurants in town, while Mather told him about the new dishes she'd devised herself.

Lord Nazel sat in one of the dining room's chairs as he placed several sunchokes in front of Mister Henry; they were just some of the many he'd harvested during his experiment.

"I finally made a crop that can grow normally in Sutrena's soil."

Mister Henry had looked exhausted from carrying all those documents, but hearing that made his eyes sparkle, like he'd just been revived. He always displayed his joy openly whenever he heard good news like this. And every time Lord Nazel saw his subordinate's bright face, he seemed happy, as if he found his job rewarding. I was also delighted to see him find pleasure in his work.

"These seed sunchokes will grow even without any magic from me or Agnes."

Mister Henry gently reached for one of the sunchokes and observed it closely.

"I see. Growing sunchokes in Sutrena's soil, huh? I was already aware of your research, but this really is like a dream come true. This land will improve significantly thanks to these crops," Mister Henry said as he shook with excitement.

Lord Nazel nodded deeply in response.

"Yes, let's make it a better place. We're going to change Sutrena."

Mister Henry looked into Lord Nazel's eyes and nodded firmly.

"Then I'll gather the agricultural staff and head to the fields soon." Mister Henry was referring to government officials at the fortress who were involved in work related to agriculture. The fortress had various divisions, like the aforementioned agricultural one, and one focused on manabeast extermination.

"Great. Would you like to see the trial crop first? I have some sunchokes currently growing in my laboratory."

"I'd love to."

Lord Nazel and Mister Henry headed to the laboratory, and I followed after them. In order to ensure that the new variety of sunchoke wouldn't affect the other crops, we would be building a field exclusively for them, far from our normal fields. I'd heard that if even one tuber was left in the ground, it could quickly overrun the field.

As soon as the door to the laboratory opened, the nearby planter with the sunchokes and their lovely yellow flowers came into view.

"Ooh, look at these..." Mister Henry pushed his glasses up, squatted, and started curiously observing the sunchokes. "A crop that can bear fruit in this land with just ordinary care is simply

perfect. Letting regular people grow crops like normal in this land is a huge step forward. We owe Lord Nazelbart a great deal for developing this new strain."

"I'm happy to hear you say that. I hope that one day Sutrena will become a place with regular agriculture that doesn't need any help from my magic."

I was deeply moved as I listened to their conversation.

"Oh, yes." Lord Nazel suddenly turned to Mister Henry. "There's something I'd like to ask you."

Mister Henry, still crouched in front of the planter, looked serious and puzzled at the same time as he stared up at Lord Nazel.

"I've been searching for a wet nurse for quite some time, but I can't find anyone who meets my criteria. I'm a cautious man, so I'm looking for someone trustworthy with a flawless background. Would you happen to have any good recommendations?"

"I understand. If you want someone trustworthy, a woman very close to me comes to mind."

"Wait, really?" Lord Nazel bent forward in curiosity.

"I'll subtly ask her if she's interested in becoming a wet nurse."

"Thank you, Henry. I'm glad I asked you." Lord Nazel's eyes sparkled.

"Thank you, Mister Henry," I said, joining in. "If it's someone you trust, I can entrust my child to her with peace of mind."

"Please, no need to thank me. She's about to give birth to her third child, but she has no experience as a wet nurse. She may not be ideal for the position."

"I can ask the maids if she needs any help. We'd be grateful if she could consider the offer." That woman surely had her own circumstances, so I didn't want to push her into taking care of my baby too. We would await further communication from Mister Henry on the topic.

"Incidentally, can the staffing shortage be resolved?" Lord Nazel asked, moving on to the next topic.

"It's still difficult. If we continue resorting to stopgap measures, things might turn out okay for now, but we'll eventually reach a dead end. I will continue recruiting more personnel."

"I'll consider other options too. I'm sorry for making you go through all that trouble."

"No, no, compared to how things were before you arrived, I actually have hope now. All the effort is worth it." Mister Henry pushed his glasses up and smiled faintly. He was reliable and always helped us out.

There was a lack of manpower to govern the new territory. Even besides the low population of Sutrena, there were other complicated reasons for our lack of resources. This newest addition wasn't the first new territory to be entrusted to Lord Nazel's management.

There's Zazame, where Count Appo was arrested for the attempted assassination of Lord Nazel, as well as Hihime, whose viscount was involved in former High Priest Lubhuta's crimes. These two lands were also currently under Sutrena's management. There just weren't enough people to spare for all the work. *Is there anything I can help with?* I thought my hardest, but nothing immediately came to mind. I decided to keep searching for a good suggestion.

Early the next morning , the fortress's agricultural staff gathered at our estate. Lord Nazel led them to our new sunchoke field. After Mister Henry had left the previous day, Lord Nazel had planted some of the sunchokes in their own field, which he'd made by remodeling a flower bed. I quietly watched over all of them from the living room's bay window. It looked like the agricultural staff were zealously surveying the sunchoke field and documenting everything.

The bloomed sunchokes from the laboratory yesterday were now ready to be harvested, so I thought I would have them cooked and served to everyone later. I immediately went to talk to Mather in the kitchen, and today's lunch became a dish full of sunchoke. The agricultural staff loved the food and returned to the fortress, but Lord Nazel stayed at the manor to finish paperwork. I went to his workroom to bring my hardworking husband some sunchoke tea.

"You did great today, Lord Nazel. Please take a short break."

There was a veritable mountain of documents stacked atop his desk, including the ones Mister Henry had brought yesterday. There was no way he could finish all that in a single day.

There isn't even any space for me to put down the tea. I had no choice but to place the cup on a nearby table for now.

"Oh, thank you, Agnes." Lord Nazel peeked out from a gap in the documents.

"There sure are a lot of documents. Are they related to the new territory?"

"You're spot-on. It's paperwork that can't be entrusted to just anyone. I wish we could get more people who can deal with sensitive matters, other than Henry and I... The temporary measures we're taking at the moment will eventually fall apart." It seemed that the manpower shortage was a serious problem.

"U-Um, is there anything I can help you with?" Though I offered my help, I was an amateur when it came to paperwork. I could probably only deal with very simple ones.

"Your sentiment is more than enough." Lord Nazel got out of his chair and walked over to the table. "I might have to stay over in the new territory for a while... I really don't want to be away from home, though..." Lord Nazel looked toward the ceiling with one hand on his brow—it seemed that he hadn't expected it to come to this.

"You'll have to temporarily move?! Are things that grave over there?!" Our conversation took an unexpected turn and I felt terribly shaken.

I don't want Lord Nazel to have to leave here either. But we'd need to somehow supplement our lacking personnel to avoid that possibility.

"We can't simply dispatch more people—I believe we need to make some fundamental changes. Work has somehow been progressing so far, but it's clear that we're going to need even more people from now on. But we don't even have enough recruiters, the most crucial part."

The situation was alarming. I racked my brain to think of anyone who could be of help.

"Oh, come to think of it, Paul will be graduating school soon. I won't know for certain unless I ask him personally, but how about getting him to help out?"

"That would be a great help," Lord Nazel replied with a beaming

smile. “We’ll first need to make sure he wants to do it, though.”

After our parents’ incarceration, Paul had gone to study abroad in Polpystan thanks to Queen Latriche’s help. Polpystan was her birthplace and bordered Desnim to the south. Sutrena was right next to the border, and crossing the river to the south would take you to Polpystan. Paul’s school was on the northern side of the country, so it was surprisingly close to our estate.

“Speaking of Paul’s graduation, before I got pregnant, I received a letter from his school regarding his graduation exam, and I replied that I’d attend.” At Paul’s school, guardians could apparently observe the graduation exam every year. It was the school’s policy to allow guardians to observe the students’ growth. “A detailed invitation arrived the other day, which reminded me of the exam. But I don’t know what I should do now that I’m expecting.” I hadn’t expected that I’d become pregnant, so I’d simply replied positively about attending.

“That’s right, you mentioned that before. Do you intend to go in your current condition, Agnes?”

“I already said that I’d go, and there haven’t been any changes in my body lately. Polpystan is really close, so I’d really like to go.” I tried to laugh it off, but Lord Nazel’s gaze still stung a bit. However, I’d barely left the estate lately, so I really wanted to go somewhere. Back when I’d lived at the House of Evantail, I’d been fine even when I stayed home all the time, but I’d always been busy with something ever since coming to Sutrena, so when there was absolutely nothing for me to do, I felt all the more restless.

“It’s true that Polpystan is much closer than the capital...”

“Paul’s school is on the side of the country closest to Sutrena. I’ll only be going to observe his exam, so may I?” Paul’s exam fell right in the middle of my pregnancy’s stable period. Making the trip wasn’t out of the question for me. During the stable period, my body’s volatile condition and the morning sickness that I’d experienced during the early days of my pregnancy would subside.

When Lord Nazel realized all that, he became visibly worried.

“If you say you want to go no matter what... Well, at least a mountbeast will shake much less than a carriage. I’ll need to warn

Geni in advance to avoid doing any midair rotations." He looked apprehensive, but it seemed that he'd make the arrangements for my trip.

I quietly observed Lord Nazel. At the end of the day, he was always soft on me.

"I'm worried about your health, but I don't want to keep you inside all the time and stress you out. So I'll let you go, under the condition that you absolutely won't push yourself too much. And I'll go with you, of course."

"Thank you, Lord Nazel!" I reflexively jumped in for a hug. Lord Nazel was surprised for a moment, but he happily hugged me back.



"But wait, aren't you busy with your duties?"

"I'll be fine as long as I finish my future work in advance. I've already finished this year's manabeast countermeasures, and I'm always busy anyway. Besides, if I go with you, I might get a chance to try to recruit students besides Paul who look talented." I felt worried because I could sense the desperation in Lord Nazel's voice; I wished I could be of help to him too. "In any case, you're really good at pulling my strings, Agnes. I'm certainly all for it, but...don't do this to just anyone, okay?"

I suddenly realized what I had been doing and blushed as I tried to move away from Lord Nazel.

"You have to take responsibility for your own actions, right? Are you just going to leave me like this? How heartless," he smoothly whispered into my ear, making my heart beat like a drum. "Well, Agnes?"

"I-I..."

Lord Nazel pushed my jaw up, bringing me face-to-face with his amber eyes. I was utterly lost and left flapping my mouth like a fish, but he soon sealed it with his.

Mmnh!

After the profusely sticky kiss, Lord Nazel flashed me a seductive smile and reluctantly parted from me.

"I shouldn't push you too far during your pregnancy." I felt relieved for a moment, until he added, "But just kisses should be fine no matter how many I give you, right?" That comment convinced me that all of my morning plans were now obsolete.

***

Thanks to Lord Nazel, I could go observe Paul's graduation exam. While this was good news for me, I felt bad that this would end up making him twice as busy, so I wanted to avoid burdening him as much as possible. I decided to send more talented young ladies from the estate to help at the fortress.

Our estate was a shelter for young noblewomen who'd been kicked out by their families or had decided to run away from home.

Many of Desnim's noble houses abused their daughters in the name of tradition. Those houses didn't have values as outlandish as those promoted in the House of Evantail. They simply considered women as mere objects to be married off and to bear children. These days, we not only had noblewomen come seeking shelter, but young noblemen and commoners too.

In the past, I'd also been all alone with nowhere to go, but Lord Nazel had readily taken me in. That was why I now invited ladies in unfortunate situations to our estate and offered them protection. The women who came all the way to Sutrena were fully resolved to live their lives as commoners. Many of them had wanted to work, so we'd had them start helping around the estate, which led them to become excellent maids. Some of them had received a proper education, despite their complicated family backgrounds, so they had been sent to help at the fortress. Their diligence had been recognized, and some of them excelled as fortress staff to this day, while others ended up falling in love with other fortress employees and were now happily married.

After graduating from being our maids, some women started their own businesses, some became interested in farming, others became manabeast exterminators, and so on. Each followed their own path after leaving the estate and becoming independent; I hoped I had been even a little help to them.

We've taken in some people recently. We've also gotten more commoners, so the number of maids will be getting too high again soon. It would be nice if we could get them to move to government work. Many of the people who'd escaped to our estate had faced abuse at their homes, and only a few of them had undergone a proper education. *Some are also too sheltered to adapt to society in their current state.* Whenever the few educated ladies or I had the time, we would teach the others reading and writing, math, and the fundamentals of town life, but that knowledge was insufficient for them to tackle government work. While they also learned many things as they worked, they needed much more than that.

Desnim had a high literacy rate compared to other countries. In the capital, which had a high percentage of merchants, even

commoners could read the newspaper. They were taught how to read and write either by their parents or by private tutors. But things were different in rural areas like Sutrena—more than a few people were unable to read. Many people could do simple calculations with the money they used in their everyday lives, but very few outside those who ran some kind of business could read. They could still manage even without knowing how; that was Sutrena. That was why the number of government officials was low relative to the scale of the territory. Most people gave up right from the get-go, thinking that getting into government work was impossible for them.

Hmm? Wait... Doesn't this mean that anyone could become a government official as long as they're taught how to read, write, and do math, along with whatever other knowledge is necessary for their position?

They wouldn't become the assets Lord Nazel needed immediately, but there was a limit to how many people we could gather at the moment. It wasn't just about quantity but quality too. Wouldn't the most reliable way to get new staff be to educate and produce them ourselves?

But how do we mold people into capable government officials? It was unrealistic to expect the people of Sutrena to hire private tutors. To begin with, it was doubtful whether many private tutors even lived here. *Even if we had the educated young ladies act as private tutors, their numbers are limited... Ah!* I suddenly remembered Paul's school. *That's right, couldn't we build a school in Sutrena? I'll try asking Lord Nazel.*

He was currently in the manor, so I immediately told him my idea and earned a favorable response.

"That's a good idea. Great job, Agnes." He might have just said that to be nice to me as usual, so I couldn't rely on it too much, but I thought he seemed genuinely interested. "It would be best to bring this up with His Majesty; this school would be the first such institution in Desnim. There's also our trip to Polpystan to discuss."

Lord Nazel wrote a letter to King Bertrand and immediately sent it through mountbeast express post. The use of mountbeasts had advanced recently, and they were now being used to deliver letters

and packages; the shipping charges were really high, though.

A few days after Lord Nazel had sent the letter, Prince Leonardo visited Sutrena. The royals were apparently being considerate of me since I couldn't go all the way to the capital on account of my pregnancy. Queen Latriche was also pregnant at the moment, so it seemed that they also had their share of troubles. From what I'd heard, she'd attended school in Polpystan before coming to Desnim. However, neither of us was currently in a position where we could afford to push ourselves. Once she safely gave birth, I thought I'd try to find an opportunity to ask her for advice on the school.

Prince Leonardo had grown a little, turning into a more mature young man than before.

"It's been a while, Nazelbart. My sister-in-law was acting up because she wanted to come, but my brother used all of his power—literally—to stop her. I was available, so I came instead." Perhaps it was because he'd become the king's support, or perhaps because he'd had no choice, but Prince Leonardo was now much more active in government affairs. His passive disposition of doing nothing was changing for the better. "Regarding the construction of a school to train government officials in Sutrena, both my brother and sister-in-law are in favor. They also feel indebted to you after the incident with Davier, because they foisted a territory they didn't know what to do with on you."

"Yes, the lack of manpower is certainly a big problem," Lord Nazel made a rare snide remark. He must have had a grudge swirling inside him about the possibility of having to move away for work.

Prince Leonardo must have thought he was in a tough spot, because he quickly averted his eyes and changed the subject.

"Oh yes, I was asked to deliver another message, about your trip to Polpystan. It concerns Lady Agnes's magic." The only people in the capital who knew about my absolute reinforcement were King Bertrand, Queen Latriche, and Prince Leonardo. "Polpystan has documents about the saint of old." When he said that, both Lord Nazel and I looked up in surprise. "Only the Polpystani royal family possesses this information, but the saint of the past was apparently Polpystani. The documents about her are kept in the research facility

of the school Lady Agnes's brother goes to. If Latriche gets in contact with the school, you two should be able to peruse those records."

"Are you aware of those documents' contents, Your Highness?" Lord Nazel asked.

"I've only heard about what's written in them—I haven't seen the originals. The information is only disclosed to individuals who've gotten permission after following the necessary procedures, but I don't think there's a high chance of them containing anything important. That said, if you're lucky, they might include a hint about Lady Agnes's magic."

"Thank you very much. If the documents are in Paul's school, this will be the perfect opportunity. We'll take a look once we're there."

I nervously listened to the rest of their conversation. Prince Leonardo told us what he personally knew about the saint. She'd possessed a magic known as healing, which apparently bore some resemblance to the magic I'd used to save Lord Nazel's life.

But the saint could also use purification magic, right? My absolute reinforcement was nothing like purification, so I felt that they were completely different. I personally believed that the saint's magic was closer to Robin's magic than mine.

"Furthermore, Polpystan has been struggling with poor harvests these past few years. My sister-in-law said she'd like you two to help out, since you were the ones who improved the food situation in Sutrena."

Lord Nazel switched to his work mode when it came to the farming problem and gave an indifferent reply. "We're going to lend a helping hand if there's anything we can do."

Since Prince Leonardo had come all the way to Sutrena, we treated him to many tuber dishes, and he spent a few pleasant days here.

"I don't want to go back. My brother will only push more work onto me once I return," he lamented as he got on his mountbeast and flew away.

Chapter 2: Madam Bumpkin Visits Polpystan

One month later, we left Sutrena and headed to the Duchy of Masroono in the northern part of Polpystan. Geni safely landed at the mountbeast station in front of the national school, and we entrusted him to the person in charge of the mountbeasts, who must have been informed of our arrival in advance. Polpystan was ahead of Desnim in adopting the use of mountbeasts all across the country. Kelly and Torre also waited behind us after dismounting from their pegasi.

I took a look around me and heaved a sigh of astonishment as I took in the brand-new scenery.

"So this is Polpystan."

The dry wind felt refreshing, and the sunlight blazing down from the blue sky was a little stronger than it was in Sutrena. The climate was similar, but Polpystan experienced less rainfall and had vast reddish-brown mountains covered in hard soil. The soil was reddish because it contained high amounts of iron, and many crops resilient to dehydration grew on it. The Duchy of Masroono had the country's second largest city after the capital, and perhaps the inhabitants were affluent, because I could see many large, extravagant buildings. They were lined up in a row and built clinging to the cliffs.

It's only natural since the mountains are nearby, but there are many hilly roads.

The Duchy of Masroono was right between Sutrena and the capital of Polpystan. The duchess apparently cared deeply about education and training, so the duke had listened to her and built a school here. As a result, he'd become the school's first chairman. Incidentally, the current chairman, who also shared the duchess's ideals, was the second prince; in other words, he was one of Queen

Latriche's older brothers. Paul had managed to enroll here thanks to these two siblings' help.

Paul went to Masroono National School, an all-boys school and one of Polpystan's two elite schools. Anyone could enroll regardless of age or social standing, as long as they passed the entrance examination, but because of tuition fees and living expenses, most students were young boys around Paul's age from wealthy families. Fortunately, Lord Nazel was covering Paul's school expenses. His school provided three years of advanced education and training. It was also equipped with all kinds of research institutes, and after they graduated, students who wished could receive technical training in a variety of fields. But there were also many students who had to assume headship of their houses or otherwise had their path after graduation decided by their parents.

The second of the two elite schools was Royal Buren Academy, a coed school. Only nobles could enroll and they had to start from early childhood, which was why Paul had been unable to go there.

Unlike Desnim, which mainly focuses on private tutors, Polpystan also puts effort into its school education.

Of course, there were many noble children who were taught by private tutors and also went to school on top of that. Some Desnim nobles ridiculed Polpystan as a barbarous nation, but the people here valued academics. I'd also heard that there were talks of constructing a girls' school in the Duchy of Masroono in the future.

Desnim might actually be the one lagging behind in girls' education.

Polpystan had a truly different national character from Desnim, so I understood why Queen Latriche had had a hard time acclimating to our country. She'd apparently studied at the Royal Buren Academy.

Going to school, huh? Sounds nice. I feel envious.

I'd been continuously treated harshly by my private tutors at the House of Evantail, so an environment where you could freely learn was something I envied a bit. *I also want Sutrena to have schools where anyone can go and learn useful things for their future.* I hoped that we would eventually have not just a school for government officials, but also ones to train specialists in different

fields.

A school for training artisans sounds lovely. Most of Sutrena's residents were involved in ranching, agriculture, or foraging. At the moment, only children born into a family of artisans could become artisans themselves. There were some lucky cases where people could learn trades by working as apprentices, but not everyone could apprentice for the trade they wanted. Sutrena had plans to develop all kinds of industries in the future, so it would be best if we increased the number of artisans now.

I'd also like schools adults can attend too. The schools could also refer students to understaffed workplaces. There were many people willing to study even as adults, including the noble ladies who came to our estate. Sutrena had a chronic lack of people with specialized knowledge and advanced skills, so if our people were to deepen their learning, our territory would surely improve. In any case, research was the crucial first step. *For now, I'll observe Paul's school closely and learn everything I can. There are many things I can't understand just by hearing about them.*

Many thoughts were swirling inside my head as I left the mountbeast station and looked around the city, when Lord Nazel softly took my hand.

"I wouldn't want you falling down, so let's walk slowly together, Agnes."

"Th-Thank you, Lord Nazel."

Ever the gentleman, he walked carefully while being considerate of me. Kelly and Torre were watching over us from behind as Lord Nazel and I walked through the city side by side to head toward Paul's school. The stone buildings occupying the majority of the city bore some similarities to Sutrena's public buildings, but the buildings here were colorful and pleasant to the eye.

"Oh, there's a food cart with steamed tubers over there. And they're selling a mysterious herb over there..." I restlessly looked all around me.

Lord Nazel observed my every action with a gentle smile.

"How about stopping by on our way back, Agnes?"

"Really?!" I was convinced he'd be against it since his number

one priority was for me to rest.

"Of course. This is also a trip for you to relax. If you'd like to be incognito, we can go out again later." It seemed that going shopping around the city was fine.

"Thank you so much!" My heart was filled with joy. "I'm certainly interested in the stores, and in the city itself too. It's quite the lively place, just as you'd expect from Polpystan's second-largest city." The capital had the highest population, but we had no plans to visit it during this trip.

"Did you study up on Polpystan? You're so hardworking and adorable."

"W-Well, there's still much I don't know about foreign countries or other territories..." I mumbled, trying to downplay his compliment.

"It's fine, just take your time learning. And if you don't want to learn, you can just leave things as is and not push yourself." Lord Nazel's words were awfully sweet.

After we walked for a while, we spotted the massive school gate, which was about as tall as a two-story building. Even looking at it, I could feel the dignity possessed by a prestigious school in Polpystan.

"Kelly, Torre, there's a room for handmaidens and guards, so you two wait there. If you get bored, you can also explore the city until it's time for us to leave," Lord Nazel told them.

Many children of nobles went to this school, so if they all brought along their servants, guards, and so on with them, the grounds would become far too crowded. Therefore, it was recommended to have attendants stand by in a nearby designated room. In exchange, the school employed its own guard personnel to ensure security within school grounds.

"Understood, Lord Nazelbart." Kelly and Torre both agreed—the former nonchalantly, the latter vigorously—and we parted ways with them right after crossing the school's gate.

Lord Nazel and I headed deeper into the school building. There were flowers and trees planted inside the school, creating a natural atmosphere even indoors. I liked this kind of ambience.

"We aren't going that way, Agnes." Lord Nazel hugged me tightly from behind to stop me, making me stumble a bit. It looked like I'd

been headed in the wrong direction.

"Thank you, Lord Nazel. I'm so embarrassed..."

"This school is so vast that you could easily get lost." Lord Nazel whispered into my ear with a seductive voice, making my heart race.

"Urk..."

I was already not confident in my sense of direction, and since this was such a large school, there was a real danger of getting lost. I quietly let Lord Nazel lead me by the hand down the corridor with colorful tiles. Our destination was the midsized training area located in the heart of the school. Paul's class was scheduled to hold a public exercise there today. Although it wasn't time for his graduation exam yet, this was the best opportunity to see what he was normally like. On our way there, I kept observing everything around me. The novel scenery was truly stimulating.

According to the latest letter we'd received from the school, our guide would apparently be Duke Masroono himself, the first chairman. Since we'd contacted the school beforehand, he called out to us in a cheerful voice once he saw us walking inside the school. Moreover, it seemed that he and Lord Nazel knew each other.

"It's been a while, Nazelbart. Or should I call you Margrave Florescruz now? This is your first visit since you came here as part of a delegation for your prince consort duties. I'm sorry that the school's current chairman is away on business when you've finally come to Polpystan again. Some time ago, many signs of unknown manabeasts were discovered close to the school, so he left to confirm that everything's safe." Apparently, the current chairman was originally supposed to be our guide, but he'd needed to leave because manabeasts had been spotted nearby, so the duke, his relative, had taken his place. "Though I mentioned manabeasts, there's no cause for alarm. They are seen often around these parts, and most of them are small, harmless ones. The safety of the people is our highest priority, so we thoroughly check every time."

Lord Nazel was acknowledged even in neighboring countries, and he'd also been involved in diplomacy during his time as a prince consort candidate. That seemed to be how he'd come to know the duke.

Lord Nazel really is incredible. He can do anything.

Duke Masroono was a dandy and stylish middle-aged man with tanned skin. He seemed to be a proactive person and would sometimes show up at school to interact with the students. He was alone today, but he apparently sometimes came together with his wife.

"Pardon my late greeting, Lady Agnes. It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too, Your Grace. It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all mine. The school has many rest areas, so please feel free to use them."

"Thank you very much." Both the chairman and the duke must have known about my pregnancy and were likely being considerate. I was brimming with energy at the moment, but it was reassuring to know there were places I could rest.

Duke Masroono started talking about my brother next.

"Paul is a serious student who is excelling at this school. It's rare to see youngsters as straightforward as him these days. He diligently works out every day. He also actively supported other students during exams." The duke would visit the school often, and it seemed that he'd learned about Paul.

"Um, is Paul getting along with everyone else?"

"Yes, of course. This school is full of unique students, but he's completely fitted in. It looks like he's even made a really close friend."

"Thank goodness..." The House of Evantail was a very peculiar house, so Paul and I had never had anyone we could call a friend. I was delighted that a change in environment had resulted in both Paul and me making friends.

"We'll be reaching the training area soon. Paul's class is scheduled to hold practice matches there today. They will be hand-to-hand fights with no weapons allowed, in teams of two against two. The use of magic is allowed as long as it doesn't involve direct attacks. Incidentally, the rules of the matches change every day, so there are days that allow the use of weapons, and others when offensive magic is permitted. There will be many guardians watching today, so

we took safety into account when choosing the rules."

Polpystan was a country that valued military prowess and valor. Because of its culture, military principles were also included in the school's classes. Today's lesson was apparently one of them.

After we passed through a courtyard lined with pillars that looked like works of art, the training area came into view. It resembled a small plaza, with a beautiful lawn that was perfectly maintained and clear of obstructions.

Wow... There was an elevated area farther to the back with chairs lined up so that everything was visible. That seemed to be the guardians' seating area.

"Paul's class consists of twenty students. They will be gathering in the training area along with their guardians."

Just like the duke said, the seats to the back already had many people—who I assumed were the students' guardians—sitting here and there. Students in sportswear shuffled out of the school building and started warming up.

Where is Paul? I restlessly looked all around me, until I noticed a remarkably muscular student walking alongside his friend. *There he is! It's Paul! He's gotten even manlier!* Paul had gotten even taller since I'd seen him during my wedding ceremony, and was now a brawny, masculine boy. *He's turning fourteen this year. His growth is still impressive, though. But are ordinary fourteen-year-olds so well-built?* Paul's physique stood out even among his classmates. The feeble boy with a mushroom haircut and only a carrier pigeon for a friend was gone now. The House of Evantail had always been a family with sturdy bodies, mine included. Otherwise, I couldn't have worn those heavy dresses every single day. Paul, in particular, had taken after our tall mother and now easily surpassed me in height.

A slender student—Paul's complete opposite—stood next to him. The two of them looked like they were on great terms, and the sight almost made me cry tears of joy. *I'd like to say hello to his friend later.*

Duke Masroono led us to the seating area. A wide seat had been prepared at the far back, and Lord Nazel showed his consideration by having me sit there.

A short time later, two teachers appeared, and Paul's class finally began its lesson. The training area was marked by four lines forming a square; the matches would apparently take place inside it. The teachers explained that stepping outside the lines would make a student out of bounds and thus count as a defeat. Just like Duke Masroono had told us earlier, the practice matches would be two-on-two, and it seemed that Paul would be pairing up with his friend. The two of them looked like they were holding some kind of strategy meeting. But Paul's magic was levitation and couldn't reach particularly high... It was unsuitable for combat.

As I watched attentively to see how things would play out, the first match was already starting. The audience was filled with passionate cheering; the students' parents were serious about this. As soon as the signal to begin was given, one student took a deep breath and exhaled, making his enemies stumble as they were buffeted by the wind; that seemed to be his magic.

"That's a type of magic called long breath. I've heard that it allows its user to inhale and exhale with more force than regular people," Lord Nazel explained while I was watching with great interest.

As the enemy team was being pushed back, one of them dissolved into some kind of gooey substance and stuck to the ground, shielding his teammate. The second one became smaller and reduced the burden on his ally.

"That boy's magic is adhesion, while the other one's is self-shrinking. That's how they avoided getting knocked out of bounds." Duke Masroono was the one to offer me an explanation this time.

The two students continued clinging to the ground while slowly oozing toward the enemy team. The last student, who hadn't done anything up to now, then sprang to action. He started swelling up like a balloon and tried to force out everyone except himself.

"His magic is called expansion," Duke Masroono remarked.

Although the boy had become inflated, he ended up sticking to the two boys who were glued to the ground, and the training area devolved into chaos. The fight remained even for a while, but eventually, the balloon deflated and the adhesion came undone,

likely because they'd both run out of mana, and the last student blew everyone away with his long breath magic. As a result, the three of them were knocked out of bounds, leaving only the long breath user behind.

"Match!" the teacher in charge shouted, concluding the bout.

"It was a good match." Both Lord Nazel and I applauded the hardworking students.

"The matchups are decided by drawing lots, so some aspects depend on the compatibility between students, but this match was equal." Duke Masroono also gave a round of applause.

To my surprise, it was Paul's turn next.

Good luck, Paul! As I cheered him on in my head, one of the guardians sitting nearby suddenly stood up. He was a muscular middle-aged man and seemed strong; he was probably a student's father. He looked at the training area with bloodshot eyes and cheered louder than anyone else.

"Gooo, Ryuk! It's time to show everyone the might of our House of Simble, the country's foremost knights!" His voice was remarkably loud and echoed across the entire training area, making everyone turn their heads at once to see who it belonged to. He didn't really seem to care about the attention, though.

The way he said "our House" reminds me of a certain old-fashioned family. The image of my imprisoned parents surfaced in my mind, but I shook my head and cleared it away.

It seemed that the overzealous parent was cheering for Paul's teammate. The boy's face had turned red in embarrassment; I couldn't blame him.

I understand exactly how you feel, kid. He's incredibly embarrassing. Paul, who most likely felt the same way I did, looked worried as he comforted the boy who was troubled by his family's excessive support. *Paul has really grown up. He's such a kind boy now.* My brother's transformation once again filled me with joy.

The teacher finally gave the signal, and the match started. The enemy team charged straight at Paul and his teammate. One of them attacked while revolving his body at a high speed, like the foreign toy known as a spinning top. I felt anxious as I watched the

match. Paul's teammate was pale and trembling as he grew stiff—literally. It seemed that he was using his magic to harden his body, creating some kind of shield-like barrier in front of him.

Oh, what an unusual magic.

The barrier knocked the student who'd charged in like a spinning top out of bounds. There was already only one enemy left.

"Whoaaaaa! Graaaaah!" the boy's father bellowed. I thought he was happy about his son's success, but what he said next was, "What a pathetic, cowardly counter! Men have to be assertive and charge in themselves! Don't close your eyes! Look at your enemy!" He seemed to be lamenting his son's cowardice.

How strict. There are all kinds of parents in this world, huh? I felt another wave of sympathy for the boy and continued watching over Paul.

Paul gently rose from the ground and started levitating. He eventually started flying around inside the training area's square at an extremely high speed; I was shocked at the sight.



Both his altitude and speed are now incomparably higher than before. I can't believe he can fly so nimbly now. But he had a very peculiar flying style: his arms were stretched straight and stuck to his body, and his legs were pressed tightly together. But his hands were slightly curved outward, from his wrists to his fingertips. He was like a penguin, a legendary bird that lived in a faraway frigid country. *Is he...doing that unconsciously? How unusual.* I didn't hear anyone expressing concern about the way Paul moved, so I decided not to worry about it either.

Paul, accustomed to his curious flying style, flew around and elegantly toyed with the remaining enemy, like a fairy from a storybook. Paul's teammate didn't seem like the type to assertively attack, and instead stood still with his magic at the ready, waiting for his partner's move. Close to us, the boy's parents started shouting angrily again.

"Be more aggressive!" But the boy remained still.

The remaining enemy used magic to make his nails grow longer and went after Paul with his sharp weapons. Actual weapons were banned, but nails were apparently fine since they were a natural part of the human body.

Ah! Watch out!

But Paul splendidly flew about and easily evaded his opponent's attacks. He then maneuvered behind the other boy and vigorously thrust his palms forward one after the other.

"Take that, and that, and that, and that!" It was a powerful, magnificent series of open palm strikes.

"Aaargh!" Paul's opponent was quickly pushed out of bounds, making the match a complete victory for Paul's team.

Paul returned triumphantly to his other classmates, who gave him a warm reception.

"You were incredible, Mister Paul!"

"Way to go, Mister Paul!"

"What splendid muscles!"

It seemed that some of his classmates called him "mister," despite the fact that they were all the same age or even a bit older than him.

Aren't they all looking at Paul with sparkling eyes?

Paul's teammate also ran up to him and gave him a friendly shoulder hug.

"That was amazing, Paul. Your palm strikes sealed the match!"

"You also did an excellent job, Ryuk. You used the perfect timing to knock your opponent outside with your magic."

"I did my best to protect myself. I was just guarding without a specific plan in mind."

The rest of the students also had their matches in order, and the time for us to observe them came to an end. Lord Nazel and I left our seats to congratulate Paul. He knew that we would be visiting today and had sent us a letter to get in touch in advance. As we left the guardians' seating area and headed toward the center of the training area where all the students were, Paul noticed us too.

"Elder brother, elder sister!" Paul waved and smiled at us, exposing his sparkling white teeth. He seemed happy that his beloved Lord Nazel was here.

"That was a magnificent match, Paul. The palm strikes at the end were especially great," Lord Nazel said.

"Thank you very much! It's all thanks to my daily muscle training!" Paul looked absolutely delighted. He took to Lord Nazel more than he did to me. He had also apparently kept up the exercise regimen Torre had taught him. "Congratulations on your pregnancy, elder sister."

"Th-Thank you."

"I imagine you'll be fine since your husband is also here, but please try not to push yourself too much." I nodded in agreement to Paul's words; he was growing into quite the reliable young man. "Is Miss Kelly doing all right?"

"Yes, she's doing great. She's in the waiting room at the moment. She's usually with me, so you can come visit us at the inn. Torre has also come with us." I nonchalantly offered a helping hand to my brother's love.

Behind his glasses, Paul's eyes sparkled with joy.

"That reminds me, have you decided what to do after graduation, Paul?" Lord Nazel asked.

Paul looked up at him and shook his head.

"No, not yet. I became a commoner after our parents' arrest. During my time studying here, Queen Latriche told me that she'd like me to return to Desnim and support His Majesty, but as a commoner, it's difficult for me to get close to the royal family. So I'm thinking of ways to support the royal family from the sidelines."

"I see; that's a wonderful objective." Lord Nazel gently praised Paul with a smile.

Paul had a clear grasp on his current circumstances. After the House of Evantail's demise, I remained the Margravine of Sutrena thanks to my marriage to Lord Nazel. However, the other members of the House of Evantail had been stripped of their noble status and were now considered commoners.

"Then how about you come to Sutrena and help me out? Fortunately, most of our government officials are commoners. Supporting one territory will strengthen the country as a whole, leading to support for His Majesty as well." Lord Nazel was a good recruiter, and it seemed that Paul found some hope in his words. I silently watched the events unfold.

"Elder brother..." Lord Nazel's words deeply moved him, his eyes welling up with tears. "Very well. I will actively consider your proposition."

"Thank you. No matter what path you choose, you will still be my precious brother-in-law. You can always rely on me." Lord Nazel and Paul shook hands.

The cheerful atmosphere was broken when we heard an angry voice shouting nearby.

"Ryuk! You're utterly pathetic! What was that humiliating display in front of such a crowd during the match?!"

I turned my head and saw the same man from earlier angrily shouting at Paul's teammate. When he noticed us looking over at him in surprise, he addressed us with a hint of embarrassment.

"Ahem, my apologies. Esteemed Mister Paul here is a truly talented boy. He possesses bravery and assertiveness, virtues truly befitting of a knight. In comparison, my son's pathetic fighting style makes me sigh in disappointment." We could do nothing but listen to

the man. "Pardon my late introduction. I'm Viscount Moraln Simble, head of the House of Simble. This is my third son, Ryuk Simble. Our house has produced generation after generation of knights, but Ryuk alone is unlike his older brothers and has grown up to be a coward. I enrolled him into this school to try and do something about it, but there doesn't seem to be much change."

"I see..." I had no idea what to say, so I just gave a noncommittal reply. *Poor boy.*

Ryuk was hanging his head with a downcast expression. He'd managed to knock one opponent out of bounds, so I assumed he'd done well, but that was apparently not enough for Viscount Simble. A military family seemed to have strict standards.

I feel so sorry for him. His hard work went unrecognized. Besides, if he dislikes fighting, there are many other paths he can follow. People couldn't choose the family they're born into. Being forced to follow your family's rules, unable to escape, was truly painful. I knew that fully well because of my life as Lady Bumpkin. Watching Ryuk made me think of my past self. *I want to do something to help him, but I doubt censuring Viscount Simble here will accomplish much. Isn't there anything I can do?* I was Paul's older sister, but at the same time the Margravine of Sutrena. I also had to consider the negative impact on Desnim if I were to emotionally reprimand the House of Simble's policies.

After Viscount Simble was done scolding his son, he promptly left the training area. The students lived in a dormitory, so Ryuk stayed here. Duke Masroono watched everything from a short distance. He had a troubled smile as he looked at Viscount Simble and went to support the dejected Ryuk.

Duke Masroono really cares about the students.

Since today's lesson had been open for observation, the students were free after training. The students gathered around Lord Nazel, their eyes sparkling with excitement; perhaps they'd heard tales of his bravery. Lord Nazel and I were puzzled, until Duke Masroono returned from Ryuk's side to offer an explanation.

"Nazelbart's great exploits are famous even here. If you don't mind, could you have a match with them?"

Lord Nazel was a bit bewildered, but he nodded.

"That's fine by me..."

The students looked delighted as they took him to the location of the earlier matches. The duke and I were left behind and simply watched over them. Lord Nazel held a practice match with the students, just like the ones they'd held earlier. He was fighting alone against many at once, but still had an overwhelming advantage.

Oh, Paul also went to join the match. I felt a warm sensation as I looked at them.

A short time later, a teacher came to inform Duke Masroono of some kind of business.

"What?! I'll head there at once!" From what I could hear, it was some kind of emergency. The duke appeared uncharacteristically worried. "My apologies, Lady Agnes, but I need to step away for a moment."

"Please don't worry about me." I sent him off with a smile and turned to look back at Lord Nazel and the students. As usual, he was killing it. Paul unleashed a series of palm strikes from midair, but Lord Nazel dodged them effortlessly, which led to Paul flying out of bounds. His excessive momentum became his own downfall. *Oh my...*

As I sat by myself, the students who'd been defeated by Lord Nazel ran up to me this time.

"You're also strong, right, Lady Agnes?!"

"Hmm? Just where did that piece of misinformation come from?" I wasn't particularly strong; I thought I was just an ordinary woman.

"Paul told us. He said that you can throw tubers with magnificent strength."

Whaaat?! Pauuul! I had no idea what could have possessed him to say such a thing. Since Paul and I lived far apart, the only contact we had with each other was the occasional letter. It seemed that he'd weirdly interpreted one of the letters I'd sent to catch up.

"Um, Lady Agnes? Would you mind having a match with us?" The students made an unthinkable request. If one thought about it rationally, there was no way I could spar with young boys who trained hard daily.

"Um, well... I'm pregnant at the moment, so I can't participate in a fierce match like the earlier ones."

"Then how about arm wrestling? Paul told us that your magic is matter reinforcement. You may use it if it will be useful during the match."

"I'm not really that strong even if I use my magic, though," I reminded them, but the students said it wasn't a problem. Left with no other choice, I decided to hold arm wrestling matches with them. One of them brought a table for us to use.

Although my body is magically reinforced, I'm sure they'll give up once they realize I'm not all that strong. These boys were still around Paul's age, but they trained their bodies daily. I was certain they all possessed incredible physical strength.

I first sat opposite a student, we each placed one arm on the table, and joined hands. Another student who stood next to us gave the signal to start.

"All right, ready, go!"

In accordance with the rules, I put all my strength in my arm as soon as we started. If I was going to do this, I'd be serious about it. *And there!* The next moment, I heard a loud thud and my opponent's arm slammed against the table.

"Huh...?" I stood still and stared at my arm. *Hmm? What? Did I just beat a student of Masroono National School?* How strange. I really was just an ordinary margravine... I routinely reinforced my body with magic by imagining it getting stronger. Perhaps...that had also increased my physical strength considerably. *My absolute reinforcement's effects are still shrouded in mystery.*

The students made a commotion around me after seeing me overwhelm my opponent.

"Mister Paul's sister is really something else! I-I'm in awe!"

"They really are siblings! Do they have the same strengths?!"

"We can't underestimate Desnim! Are all the people there this strong?!"

In a similar way, I defeated every student who challenged me. Lord Nazel's practice match ended around the same time and he came next to me looking surprised.

"Did you beat all of them, Agnes?!"

"Eh heh heh, yes." The students around us gave me grand applause and sang praises of my strength. It was a bit embarrassing.

"Lord Nazelbart, Lady Agnes did a magnificent job. You two are great warriors worthy of our respect!"

"Warriors?!" Although it was never our intention, the two of us found ourselves lauded by the students of a country that valued military prowess.

Around that time, Duke Masroono finally returned. It seemed like the problem had been resolved.

"Dear me, I apologize for taking so long. Did anything happen during my absence?"

Lord Nazel and I exchanged glances and chuckled, then told the duke that we'd enjoyed interacting with the students. The duke looked relieved.

After our fulfilling school visit was over, we headed back to our inn. Our lodging was really close to the school, so we could get there on foot. Walking was a good form of exercise for me, and I strolled along together with Lord Nazel. Kelly and Torre had also rejoined us. However, Lord Nazel was acting kind of strange as he walked next to me. He looked the same as usual, but his expression said he was thinking seriously about something.

"Um, Lord Nazel? Is there something troubling you?"

"It's nothing... No, I suppose there is something after all." After looking like he was deep in thought again for a moment, he turned to me gravely. Seeing his concerned face filled my heart with unease, but what he said next was totally unexpected. "Agnes. I think holding hands with the opposite sex so casually is improper."

"Huh?! Whose hand?" My voice cracked in response to his wild statement. I collected myself and asked Lord Nazel again. "Are you perhaps referring to the arm wrestling matches I had with the students earlier?"

Lord Nazel maintained his serious expression and didn't say anything; it looked like I had been right on the mark. He'd been getting jealous an awful lot lately, but it was good that he was

showing his true self.

"I know it's immature of me to act like this when it comes to kids, but I was a bit worried. I even finished my practice match as quickly as possible." That was apparently why Lord Nazel had returned just as my arm wrestling matches concluded. "Polpystan is a country that's very open about romance, so I was worried even if they were only boys." Just like Lord Nazel said, it was apparently part of the culture for Polpystani nobles to have mistresses besides their wives; of course, that didn't apply to everyone. "I'm sorry for being such a restless husband."

"That's quite all right. You're the only husband I love, Lord Nazel." I hated making him worry, so I made sure to emphasize that. I didn't want my beloved feeling anxious.

"Agnes..."

"I love you, Lord Nazel."

"I also love you dearly, Agnes."

"Lord Nazel!"

As the two of us joined hands, Torre poked Lord Nazel's shoulder.

"Excuse me, you two. I'm sorry to rain on your parade, but you're drawing an awful lot of attention from the passersby," he said awkwardly as he looked around us.

We'd passed through the school gate and were on our way to the city, but there was pedestrian traffic here. I quietly observed my surroundings and realized that we were indeed the center of attention.

This is so embarrassing... We started walking in a hurry and left this place.

***

After Paul saw Nazelbart and Agnes off, he headed back to his dormitory.

I'm glad I managed to do well in front of them. The two of them must have been worried about him studying abroad alone. He'd be satisfied if showing them the fruits of his training had eased their minds even a little.

All right, what should I do now that they've left? Today's lesson had been intended to show off the students' progress, so the rest of their time was free. Paul thought he'd return to his room for now, when he heard the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching from behind him.

"Paul! Wait up!" Ryuk Simble, his classmate, was running after him. He'd been Paul's teammate for today's practice match and was also a friend he got along with particularly well in his class. He was the third son to the House of Simble, a family that had produced countless skilled knights, so his father naturally expected him to become a high-ranking member of the knights. Ryuk's magic, great shield, could deflect anything, so it was said to be highly suited for combat, and he also had great potential himself.

However... *However*, Ryuk was the biggest coward Paul had ever met. Because of his overly cautious nature, he wasn't making the best use of his excellent ability in his current environment. Ryuk wouldn't willingly step forward and mainly used his ability to protect himself during training; that was the reason his father had been reprimanding him earlier.

But each person is suited for different things and has their own likes and dislikes. Ryuk was clearly not suited to be a knight. He might have had the talent for it, but he hated conflict. Paul was keenly aware of the pain of having a parent force an undesirable lifestyle onto their child. *I want to do something to help him, but I'm just a commoner right now. Even if I complained to Viscount Simble, I doubt he'd listen to me.*

Ryuk moved next to Paul and picked up his pace to match Paul's long stride.

"You sure are popular, Paul."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm saying that you won't have any trouble finding employment. Lord Nazelbart tried to recruit you earlier, and my father is also saying he'd like you to join the knights." Ryuk had apparently heard Paul's earlier conversation.

"Your father's a commander in the Polpystani Royal Knights, right? He has a really muscular, toned body." Paul looked spellbound

as he recalled the biceps Ryuk's father had. Paul also wanted to become like that soon. He trained every day, but his goal was to be like Torre, a man who boasted unmatched strength in Desnim. Although Paul had grown taller and more muscular, he was still nowhere near Torre's level.

"Enough about my father's muscles. Say, is that job in Sutrena related to domestic affairs?"

"Most likely. He mentioned government officials."

"I see," Ryuk muttered before cutting in front of Paul and looking at him with a serious expression. "Hey, Paul? I have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"Could you ask your brother-in-law to also hire me in Sutrena? As things are, my father will toss me into the knights. I don't want to go through the same hellish training I did as a kid." Whatever he was remembering, Ryuk shut his eyes and held his head in an exaggerated manner. He must have gone through a truly harsh experience.

Paul had already wanted to help out Ryuk. Putting in a good word for his friend with his brother-in-law was something that he could do even as he was now.

"I don't mind. You're smart, so my brother-in-law might welcome you with open arms."

"Whoa! Thanks, Paul!" Ryuk embraced Paul, who then shoved him away.

"I gave it some thought while I was walking, and I think I'll also accept my brother-in-law's proposition. This is the perfect chance, so how about we go talk to him together? He should be staying at an inn in the city." Paul was in high spirits that he might be able to help his friend with similar circumstances to his own.

Chapter 3: Madam Bumpkin Gets Lost

Polpystan's climate was very similar to Sutrena's, especially in the Duchy of Masroono here in Polpystan's northern region. The city was full of people, sweltering under the dry-season sun relentlessly shining down upon the land. Because of the high population, it was much busier compared to rural Sutrena.

I was in the middle of the city, standing alone on a street corner and restlessly looking around me, thoroughly befuddled. I'd carelessly gotten lost en route to our lodging. I'd been pushed around by the crowd in the main street, so I'd let go of Lord Nazel's hand, and before I knew it, I'd been swept away and ended up alone. I kept looking around but didn't see Lord Nazel and the others anywhere.

Will we meet up if I head directly to the inn? But I feel like I'll get swept away again if I rush into this crowd. I don't know this city at all, so I should avoid anything dangerous. If I waited a little, the crowd would probably diminish, but if I took too long, I might worry Lord Nazel and the others. *Should I act quickly? I'd better head to the inn we'll be staying at to meet up with the others. I think it was this way.*

But as I was about to start walking, I heard a man's high-pitched scream nearby.

"Aaah! A pickpocket!" Since we were in a crowded area, it seemed that a thief had been hiding among the passersby.

Looks like you have them in every country.

The person who seemed to be the pickpocket had apparently stolen the man's wallet and was now running in my direction. This unexpected development left me flustered.

Eep, he's coming this way! Oh no, I have to stop the thief. But...

Oh, that's right! I suddenly remembered the taros I kept hidden in my pocket in case of an emergency. The bushy, small, pink taros covered in fuzz were a popular thrown weapon—albeit mainly for Furla and me.

"Oh no, um... Here goes!" I was half panicking as I stuffed my hand into my pocket, gripped one taro, held it aloft, and tossed it forward. The taro blazed straight toward the pickpocket and hit him in the brow, knocking him out. I'd recently gotten better at controlling my tuber throws.

Did I put a bit too much strength into it? The people around me were astir. *Oh dear, what if this was excessive for self-defense and causes an international incident?* I'd feel terrible for Lord Nazel if I ended up getting arrested for throwing a taro. *Should I run away?*

As I scrambled around in confusion, completely lost, I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. It was so sudden that it made me jump in surprise. I turned around and saw an unfamiliar man standing with one hand against a wall. He was wearing gorgeous, high-quality Polpystani clothes and had medium-length hair that reached down to his shoulders. His hair was light purple, a hue I felt like I'd seen before. His bangs were covering one of his eyes. I had no idea what to do before his elegant, friendly smile.

"Excuse me, who might you be?" I asked stiffly. I couldn't discern his intention, so I remained vigilant around him.

Perhaps the man noticed how tense my reaction was, because he waved his hands in front of him reassuringly.

"Don't worry, I'm on your side," he said and leaned forward, making me flinch; he was a bit too close.

Someone suddenly showing up and claiming to be your ally was incredibly sketchy, and there was no way to tell if they were truly a friend during your first meeting. Unless you could read people's emotions through magic like Kelly, you should always be suspicious.

"Hey, police! Here, this way! The culprit is lying down here!" But my suspicion seemed to be needless as the man called the city's law enforcers over. It looked like he really intended to help me out. The police arrested the pickpocket and took him away; case closed.

"Thank you very much. I really appreciate your help." I decided to

leave after expressing my gratitude because the attention I was drawing was making me uncomfortable.

But the man softly placed a hand on my shoulder and stopped me.

"Please wait. The streets are really convoluted around here. I'd be too embarrassed to face my sister or Margrave Florescruz if I let you get lost here."

"Do you know Lord Nazel or me?" His unexpected words made me stop in my tracks. Lord Nazel presently ruled over Sutrena and held the position of margrave, so he was referred to as Margrave Florescruz in diplomatic contexts. Since the man used Lord Nazel's proper title, he could actually be an incognito noble.

"You don't need to be on guard. My sister informed me of your visit in advance, so I know who you are. When I spotted you two in the city, I wanted to talk to you, but you were separated from the rest of your group. I thought I couldn't leave you on your own, so I chased after you."

"Your sister told you?" I cocked my head in confusion; I couldn't quite understand what the man meant.

"Oh, I've yet to introduce myself. I'm Valen Polpystan, chairman of Masroono National School. I had an urgent matter to attend to, so I apologize that our meeting happened under such circumstances."

"You're the school's chairman?!" He was the very chairman who'd been unable to come greet us because of some urgent business. "It's nice to meet you, Mister Chairman. I appreciate everything you've done for Paul so far!" I hurried to greet him. From what I knew, he was the school's chairman, but also a member of the royal family—one of Queen Latriche's older brothers.



"Ah ha ha, 'Mister Chairman'? You don't need to call me that. Your brother is a serious, exemplary student."

"Thank you very much, Your Highness." When I thanked him, Prince Valen smiled at me meaningfully. "Wh-What is it?" I got flustered, wondering if I'd done anything disrespectful.

"Lady Agnes, you're a good kid, just like your brother. Thank you for treating my sister well in Desnim. I had worried Latriche would struggle to adjust to Desnim because of her personality." His concern was valid—it was true she struggled to fit in. "Although she has a political marriage with the first prince, she'd been unable to have kids until recently, partly because of everything regarding the former queen, which had always made her uncomfortable. We regretted marrying off our precious sister to Desnim. But I'm glad she was able to make a friend like you."

Lord Nazel had once told me that members of Polpystan's royal family loved each other strongly.

I'm glad nothing has happened to Queen Latriche so far. In multiple senses. In the unlikely event that something bad happened to her, her family might retaliate against Desnim.

The former queen had intended for Princess Mia to succeed the throne, so if Queen Latriche had gotten pregnant, the former queen would have surely used any means at her disposal to get rid of the baby. Depending on the circumstances, there was a chance Queen Latriche herself might have been hurt.

Despite appearances, King Bertrand played his cards extremely well. Now that Queen Latriche had safely taken the throne, there was less fear of Desnim receiving retaliation from Polpystan.

"So when I heard that you'd be visiting our country, I really wanted to thank you personally. I'm glad we could meet."

"Oh no, Queen Latriche is actually the one who's helped me a great deal. She's the one who helped Paul come study here, and she also taught me self-defense. Recently, she asked me if I'd like to try taking swordsmanship lessons. Lord Nazel—my husband said no because it would be dangerous, though. He said that it would be fine for me to practice using a yam instead of a sword."

"Self-defense and swordsmanship, huh? Sounds like Latriche is as

active as usual— Wait, what was that about a yam?”

His question made me gasp in realization. I’d acted like I was talking to someone from Sutrena, but I was in Polpystan at the moment. No one here used reinforced yams as weapons, canes, or torture implements.

“Um, let’s see. I make yams harder with my magic and use them like clubs.” I briefly explained the relationship between my matter reinforcement magic and yams to Prince Valen. My real magic, absolute reinforcement, was a secret, so I kept quiet about it.

“Huh, so that kind of magic exists. How rare and convenient. Was that pink object you threw earlier also some kind of tuber?”

“That was a pink taro.”

“Turning tubers into weapons, huh? Your magic’s incredible, Lady Agnes. It may actually be highly compatible with my magic,” Prince Valen said with a smile.

“Is that so?”

Just like he said, magic had all sorts of different compatibilities. For example, when my absolute reinforcement and Lord Nazel’s vegetation were combined, we could stimulate the growth of plants or create plant residences. Combining compatible magic could give birth to new phenomena.

“If it’s all right, may I ask what your magic is, Your Highness?”

“Sure, it’s not exactly the kind I’d need to keep hidden. My magic is called metalworking. Just like the name implies, it can create anything out of metal, but I need to have the raw materials beforehand.”

“That sounds incredibly convenient, not to mention unusual.” By freely manipulating metal, he could create all sorts of tools. Polpystan had many mines, so he wouldn’t lack for components.

“Say, Lady Agnes, how about we take this chance and try mixing our magics? I have a metal item that I just created and would like you to reinforce it.” Prince Valen drew the shortsword he was wearing at his hip. “Could you enchant this sword?”

“Yes, of course.” Making this shortsword a little more durable was a simple task. I chanted for it to get stronger and used my magic to reinforce it. *It looks just like before, but it should be harder now.*

Prince Valen fixed his eyes on the shortsword, then gave out a cry as he suddenly crouched and thrust it into the stone pavement. His abrupt behavior surprised me. The weapon smoothly tore into the stone and bored into the ground underneath.

"Incredible. Your matter reinforcement is quite potent. Just as I expected, it works well with my magic." Prince Valen grinned broadly.

The shortsword I'd reinforced today would later be called a holy sword and become one of Polpystan's national treasures, but that's a story for another time.

After we were more or less done talking about magic, Prince Valen started guiding me to my inn. Along the way, he told me the reason for his absence earlier today.

"There was a sudden manabeast outbreak in a nearby rural area, and I've been busy dealing with the problem for some time. It's a big issue because the fields became empty overnight." Apparently, all of the crops growing there had just disappeared one day.

"Were the crops damaged by manabeasts? Or perhaps..."

"We're currently investigating the cause. There were also some places with withered crops, so I don't think manabeasts are entirely to blame. It would be fine if the damage was limited to around here, but terrible if it spread and significantly affected the country's food supply." Polpystan had many desert regions, so it was prone to food shortages. At the moment, whenever there was a bad harvest, it imported food from Desnim and managed to pull through.

"You mentioned withered crops. I feel like I've heard of something similar." It was almost like the barren land of Sutrena.

Oh, that's right! I rummaged through my pockets. Besides the pink taros, I also had the sunchokes Lord Nazel had developed. *They're a very durable breed that grows fast and can even survive in a wasteland, so they might be useful to Prince Valen. But I'll have to discuss it with Lord Nazel first.* Since these were special sunchokes that could even grow in Sutrena, there was a high chance they could also grow in Polpystan.

As many thoughts ran through my mind, Prince Valen continued talking.

"I've heard rumors about Sutrena. It's apparently a barren land where no kind of crops will take root."

I nodded in response. "Yes, we'd love to figure out why it's like that. We still don't know the exact reason."

As we continued our discussion, we eventually arrived at my lodging. It was a historic inn with a red roof and luxurious construction, and it was used by Polpystan's royalty and nobility whenever they visited the Duchy of Masroono. It seemed that during graduation exam season, like now, many people involved with the school stayed here.

"Thank you very much for seeing me all the way here, Your Highness."

"Oh please, being with you was a pleasure, Lady Agnes. I'd like to talk with you again."

As we stood in front of the entrance, the large front door opened and Lord Nazel peeked out from inside.

"Agnes! Thank goodness you're all right."

"Lord Nazel! You really were waiting for me here." I wasn't allowed to run while pregnant, so I approached him while walking as fast as I could.

"I thought it would be terrible if we missed each other. I was about to contact the inn staff and request a police search for you, but I saw you from the window before that and came down."

"I apologize for causing you to worry. Prince Valen was kind enough to guide me here."

Lord Nazel turned to look at Prince Valen and gave him a polite, businesslike greeting.

"You have my sincerest gratitude for escorting my wife here, Your Highness."

"Don't worry about it," Prince Valen replied with a smile. "I need to apologize for being unable to show you around the school. I happened to run into Lady Agnes in the city and brought her here since she looked lost. She's a very interesting lady, just like my sister Latriche told me. I've also been wanting to talk to you, Lord Florescruz."

"I'm beyond honored. Please call me Nazelbart."

"All right. It's nice to meet you, Nazelbart."

"Please allow me to thank you in some way."

I gave a deep nod. Without Prince Valen, I'd have stayed lost or gotten arrested for throwing that taro.

"All right, Nazelbart. Can we talk a bit now?"

"Yes. Please come inside."

We welcomed in Prince Valen and the inn staff prepared a special room for us to talk. We sat on the sofas opposite each other in a room with luxurious tapestries hanging on the stone walls. I'd never had the opportunity to formally talk to a foreigner like this before. Polpystan's culture differed from Desnim's, and Prince Valen was a very frank person. However, he was still royalty, and I was conscious of this being a diplomatic conversation between countries.

"Nazelbart. There's something I'd seriously like to discuss with you."

"What is it?" Lord Nazel waited for Prince Valen to continue without showing the slightest hint of caution.

"Could you covertly help solve my country's manabeast and food problems?" His request was straight to the point.

"What specifically could we help with, Your Highness?"

"You might have already heard this, but our country has been plagued by bad harvests for the past few years. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the amount of fertile land is decreasing."

Polpystan's climate was very similar to Sutrena's. The northern part of the country was split between a dry season and a wet season, while the southern region was dry year-round. Although there was a limit to what kind of plants could grow in the south, it wasn't as bad as in Sutrena where *nothing* would grow no matter what they planted.

"Do you know the reason behind the bad harvests?"

"No. We're looking into it, but there's no clear answer. The affected locations are also widely distributed. Crops will simply vanish in an area one day, and afterward any seedlings planted there will quickly wither."

Lord Nazel discreetly turned his eyes toward me. I realized what he wanted to tell me and silently nodded.

This phenomenon of seedlings withering is just like what happens in Sutrena. Perhaps it was wrong to lump this place together with Sutrena, where crops didn't grow at all in the first place, but what was happening here was the exact same thing. *It's possible that something similar happened in Sutrena in the past...* If so, solving Prince Valen's problem might become the first step in solving the problem with Sutrena's soil.

I turned to look at Lord Nazel next to me.

"Lord Nazel..."

"Yes. That's right, Agnes." It looked like he perfectly realized what I wanted to tell him. "Your Highness, if it's all right with you, we will help you resolve the problem to the best of our ability. And it's possible that my newly developed crop will help alleviate your worries."

I realized what Lord Nazel was referring to and quickly took out a sunchoke I was carrying in my pocket. He smiled when he saw the plant.

"You were carrying *that* in addition to the taros for self-defense?"

"Eh heh heh, I thought it might come in handy." And it did, right this moment. I placed the sunchoke on the table so that Prince Valen could see it more clearly.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a crop I developed that can grow even in soil otherwise unfit for farming. I also plan to improve other crops, but the sunchokes are my first success. These are easier to grow than ordinary sunchokes and managed to survive even in Sutrena's soil," Lord Nazel replied.

"I see; how interesting."

"These sunchokes have a flaw: if they are planted in fertile soil, they overgrow and destroy other crops. But they're safe when planted in specific locations and managed closely. We only have a few of them with us, but there are plenty of seed sunchokes back in Sutrena that we could ship to you. They normally grow better in areas with poor drainage, but since this is an improved variety, I think they might be able to barely grow in the northern part of Polpystan."

"You're a good businessman, Nazelbart."

"No, no, you flatter me too much. Incidentally, these sunchokes grow to maturity in about two days, so I think it would be best if we first try growing them in an affected area before deciding on a further course of action."

Prince Valen froze on the spot.

"Huh...? Did you say *two days*?" He was looking at us with a truly baffled expression.

"Yes, these sunchokes can be harvested after two days." I affirmed Lord Nazel's previous statement.

"That...can't be true. We also cultivate sunchokes in Polpystan, but it normally takes around five months until they can be harvested."

"It's because this is an improved variety Lord Nazel made. This is something only he can do thanks to his vegetation magic. Tubers won't grow in Sutrena if they aren't at least this hardy. Ah, please take care as we haven't yet overcome the issue of repeated cultivation damage."

If the same crop was planted in the same place repeatedly, it would lead to diseases and vermin, making it more difficult for the crop to grow—that was what repeated cultivation damage referred to. There were various methods to prevent that, like planting different crops every time, using appropriate fertilizer, or adding organic matter to increase the number of microorganisms in the soil. I'd also heard that if you persistently planted the same crop over and over again, you would eventually see an increase in germs that ate pathogens and insects that ate vermin, leading to the crop itself actually thriving. But since we currently had to produce food as quickly as possible, one of the former methods seemed more appropriate.

For some reason, Prince Valen had a distant look in his eyes. He resembled Queen Latriche whenever she heard our various reports on Sutrena.

They're siblings, all right.

As I gave him an even more detailed explanation, his eyes looked farther and farther into the distance.

"When crops are imported during times of bad harvest, we tend to be taken advantage of, which leads to a sharp increase in prices. As a result, poor people can't get their hands on food. If these sunchokes are truly what you've described, they will bring salvation to the lower class. I'd like to confirm whether they can grow in Polpystan's soil or not. If it's all right, I'd like to buy these sunchokes from you, Nazelbart."

Lord Nazel agreed with an elegant nod.

"Thank you, your help is greatly appreciated. I'd like to contact you later for more details. Will your stay here be long enough for that?" Prince Valen asked.

"Yes, it will be all right. We intend to stay here through Masroono National School's graduation exam."

"I'm glad to hear that," Prince Valen said with a happy nod. "The graduation exam is a popular event, so a large number of guardians will be gathering. The city will be bustling with activity. I hope you both look forward to it."

I felt excited just hearing about it.

Though it might not be all that fun for the students. Still, Paul was a diligent student, so I was certain he'd graduate with no issue; I wasn't worried about him failing.

Afterward, Prince Valen told us his general plans for the future, then returned to the school because he had a lot of work to do. He apparently served as both the school's chairman and the second prince.

"Phew. Prince Valen is gone now. Good work, Lord Nazel. Let's take a little break."

"Yes, let's. You must also be tired from traveling and getting lost."

Our inn was a large, two-story building. It looked like our room was the largest one on the upper floor. Lord Nazel supported me as I slowly climbed the stairs.

"Are you all right, Agnes?"

"As I'm always telling you, I can at least go up the stairs with no problem. It's better if I get a little exercise too."

"But the stairs here are steeper than the ones in our manor."

"Yes, but only a little bit."

After safely climbing the stairs, I headed straight to our room. Lord Nazel led me through the door into the bright space.

"Wow, the window overlooks the street." Beyond the cream-colored curtains, I could see a large, wide street with buildings on both sides that had stores on their ground floors. I ran over to the window.

"Calm down, Agnes." Lord Nazel's overprotectiveness was going strong even here, but I had the feeling he was just a little different than usual. Was it because he'd entered his business mode during his conversation with Prince Valen? I was concerned, so I decided to ask him directly.

"Lord Nazel, was there anything that worried you during the earlier conversation?"

"Not really. Why do you ask?"

"I feel like you're acting a little stiffer than usual."

"I see... You don't need to worry, it's just my usual jealousy."

"You're jealous? Of Prince Valen, by any chance?"

"My husband's intuition tells me that he's taken a liking to you. If he wants you, I'll have to stand against foreign royalty. For the record, I have absolutely no intention of handing you over."

This was entirely a misunderstanding on Lord Nazel's part. In the first place, Lord Valen would never make a move on a married woman; he no doubt abided by the high ethical standards one expected of an educator. But I was truly happy to hear how much my husband treasured me.

"Nothing like that is actually going to happen, of course, and I don't doubt you for a moment, Agnes."

"Yes, you're the only one for me, Lord Nazel." I moved closer and surrendered myself to him; he happily embraced me in response.

"Agnes..."

"Lord Nazel..."

We stared into each other's eyes and brought our lips together. Lord Nazel's kisses always filled me with joy. The moment our lips parted, there was a knock on the door. He cleared his throat and reluctantly replied.

"Who is it?" he asked. From the other side of the door, one of the

inn staff told him that we had visitors. “Agnes, it sounds like Paul and his friend have come to see us. It hasn’t been long since we talked to him. I wonder what they want.”

“I have no idea either.”

We summoned Paul and his friend to our room while feeling a bit puzzled. Each suite in this inn was divided between a bedroom and a sitting room, so we could entertain guests here. A short time later, Paul and his friend timidly entered.

Oh, that’s the boy who fought alongside Paul during the match. His name was...Ryuk, right? Viscount Simble had introduced him, so I remembered him.

We had the two of them sit on a sofa and Paul started talking.

“Excuse me, elder brother. This is about what we discussed earlier. Please let me work in Sutrena!”

“Huh?”

“I think taking up employment in Sutrena is the best option for me at the moment. I’ll be able to help you out and learn all kinds of things. I might also end up helping Queen Latriche too.”

Although Lord Nazel seemed surprised at my brother’s words, his expression softened.

“Are you sure you want to accept right away?”

“Yes! I don’t go back on my word.”

After thinking for a moment, Lord Nazel happily accepted Paul’s request.

“Thank you, Paul. Your help will be greatly appreciated.” Lord Nazel was talking straight from the heart.

“There’s one more thing I’d like to ask... Could you also hire my friend, Ryuk?” Paul asked with a serious expression.

“Viscount Simble’s son?”

“Yes. Ryuk is the third son of the House of Simble, a distinguished military family, but he hates fighting. He’d rather be a government official than a knight. His grades in written examinations are among the very best in our class. I’m sure he’ll be of great use to you, elder brother!”

“I’d happily welcome him, but what would Viscount Simble think?” Lord Nazel asked.

Paul looked down and stayed silent. His reaction told us everything we needed to know. Next, Ryuk opened his mouth shyly.

"My father will be dissatisfied with my decision. He wants me to become one of Polpystan's knights. But I'm a coward despite being born into the House of Simble... I absolutely despise conflict. I find even the school's training downright terrifying," Ryuk pleaded desperately with a shaking voice. Simply looking at him was enough to make it clear just how grave his circumstances were.

Lord Nazel and I listened to him earnestly.

"I beg you, esteemed Lord Florescruz!"

"Please, elder brother!" Paul added.

Lord Nazel wore a stern expression in response to their requests, and after a short pause nodded his head.

"I understand your point. Ryuk, if you're prepared to leave your country, I have every intention of employing you in Sutrena."

"Th-Thank you so much!" Ryuk repeatedly bowed his head. His eyes were filled with a bright light, unlike before. Paul and Ryuk were looking at each other happily.



"Thank goodness. But the real problem will be convincing Viscount Simble," I said, feeling worried.

"That won't be a problem," Lord Nazel said with a smile. His statements were always reassuring. "After you graduate, you'll be hired first as apprentices. Your positions after that will be decided based on what's more suitable for you."

"Yes! I'm willing to do anything that doesn't involve combat!" The thought of Lord Nazel persuading his father seemed to restore Ryuk's vigor. "Oh, that's right. Our graduation exam is coming up soon. Please come watch it if you'd like. I was feeling dejected because my father will also come, but I feel like I can get through this now that my future path is decided!"

"Yes, we'll come watch."

"All right!"

Paul and Ryuk left the inn overjoyed and went back to school. I naturally felt peaceful thanks to the charming scene. I cheered Ryuk on in my heart, hoping that he wouldn't give in to his family's rules and would instead live his life the way that was the most comfortable for him.

***

The next day, Lord Nazel and I got changed into discreet outfits and headed out into the city early in the morning. We'd go sightseeing to all the places we hadn't looked around yesterday.

"I heard that the city's busiest from noon to evening, so we should be fine at the moment."

"Yes. Do you have anywhere you'd like to go, Lord Nazel?"

"Me? My plan was to go wherever you wanted to go, Agnes."

Lord Nazel was a wonderful husband who put me first no matter what, so from time to time, I wanted to choose destinations he wanted to go to. I always thought that even he needed some recreation.

"We've finally come all the way to Polpystan, so let's go visit what you want to see! Doesn't anything come to mind?"

"Then...I want to see plants native to Polpystan. I've had some

kinds delivered to me, but I'd like to see if there are any other good ones. I've already gotten permission to take the plants across the border, just in case." As usual, Lord Nazel hadn't overlooked a thing.

"Let's go then! We can go to a florist, seed store, plant nursery, or a gardening store. I can't wait!" Masroono National School was located in a big city, so there should be some plant-related stores if we checked around.

It was still cool outside as Lord Nazel and I walked alongside each other on the mostly empty main street. It looked like all the stores along the street had just opened, as the employees were putting up signboards at the entrances and calling customers inside.

"That store sells hair ornaments that I think would look great on you, Agnes. That store over there also has a great selection—"

"Lord Nazel, let's go peruse plants today, not accessories."

"I do want to shop for plants as well, but even more than that, I want to see you dressed up. It's quite the conundrum."

"No, it isn't. You keep showering me with gifts, Lord Nazel. Please buy something for yourself this time."

Lord Nazel wore an expression that said he didn't quite agree, but I pulled him by the hand and kept moving forward. We asked people for directions to a florist, then walked down a narrow street lined with brown walls and up a narrow, helical staircase that encircled a building. After passing through an alley brimming with hints of daily life, we arrived at the top of a hill.

"Wow, what a great view," I said.

The strong wind made a lot of noise as it blew all around us. There was a flower shop at the front of a plaza with few people walking around. The colorful flowers displayed at the front of the store really caught my attention.

"It seems we made it without incident," Lord Nazel said.

"Yes. I was a bit anxious since the path to get here was so complex." I moved closer to the store and took a peek inside. "It looks like they sell seedlings and shrubs in addition to flowers. This is perfect." They also had gardening tools, fertilizer, and even soil.

"They have seeds and bulbs too." It looked like Lord Nazel had also grown interested and started seriously shopping.

And so the two of us entered the building together. The store's interior was like a cave covered in greenery, and it was decorated with flowers everywhere. The sight made me feel like I'd wandered deep into a fairy-tale forest.

"What a lovely place. Wow, there are flowers blooming on the ceiling too." I moved forward in high spirits until the roof was gone and we stepped out into the courtyard. "The fruit tree section is next. Oh, a violaberry tree."

"There's also a palm tree. It's really tall."

We found the vegetable seedling section farther to the back. A corner of the store had been turned into a vegetable garden. Flowers and vegetables were planted in it side by side. They looked pretty elegant.

"Companion planting, I see," Lord Nazel said.

"I saw these in a field guide back at the manor. That flower is an insect-repelling herb. This flower eliminates pathogens inside the soil. If you plant those two vegetables together, their growth is promoted."

"You're very studious, Agnes."

Two cats were sleeping on the fence next to the vegetable garden. Were they the owner's pets? There was a pond a short distance away with underwater flowers growing in it. This was a truly large flower store. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a small botanic garden instead of a store.

"There are also ducks," I pointed out. The ducks came out of the water one by one, shaking their tails to dry themselves. I loved animals, so the adorable sight made me feel all warm and fuzzy.

"I believe the very back is the section for cut flowers. There are some pretty ones that would look perfect on you, Agnes."

"Let's buy plants for your research first, Lord Nazel," I interjected to make him give up on the idea. Otherwise, he'd buy every last cut flower and adorn me with them. I was happy that he was thinking of me, but I wanted us to prioritize his goal right now.

As we wandered around and chatted, a beautifully dressed clerk who was around my mother's age approached from the back of the store.

"Oh my, welcome," she greeted us. Since Lord Nazel and I were incognito, she didn't realize who we were and treated us normally.

"Hello. This is a wonderful store," I replied.

The woman smiled happily and said, "Thank you for your kind words. I love plants, you see, and opened this store as a hobby. I enjoy working here with my parents. Where are you two visiting from?" When I told her that we'd come from Sutrena, she blinked in surprise. "My, you've come from abroad? Welcome to Margaret's Flowers. We have a café in the back. Would you like some tea?"

Just like the clerk suggested, we decided to have some tea and cake. We passed through a room with cut flowers, into a narrow passage, and arrived at a terrace at the back. Tea tables were lined up under a large pergola covered in small yellow-green fruit.

"People tend to think that Polpystan isn't blessed with much vegetation because of its many arid regions, but the north has places with greenery that rival Desnim." The woman smiled as she brought us a refill for our herbal tea.

"It's fantastic," I replied. It seemed that many of the kinds of plants gathered here grew in places like those. I stuffed my cheeks with some soft, fluffy carrot cake. "Mm! It's delicious!" The simple taste of the carrot cake and herbal tea we were served combined with the store's atmosphere to soothe and calm me. Small colorful birds flew above us, freely picking at the fruit.

"I'm happy to hear that. Would you like to try our prototype gobo cake?"

"May we?!"

"Of course. Could you tell me what you think of it?"

"Certainly!"

We also had some gobo cake after the carrot cake. Both had a subtle vegetable flavor and strong cake-like texture. It seemed that they'd been designed to be desserts that were easy to eat. Lord Nazel also seemed to like the cakes, as he'd finished both of his slices. We spent a relaxing afternoon as a couple for the first time in a while. After finishing our tea and cake, we bought some seeds and seedlings and decided to leave the store.

"Look, there are chickens fenced in at the back," I said.

"You're right."

"Chickens are so nice. If we had freshly laid eggs, it would broaden our repertoire of tuber dishes."

"Let's look into it once we're home. Tell me if there are any other animals you're interested in."

"Thank you very much, Lord Nazel."

Our bags were full of our purchases and would be delivered to Sutrena's borders via mountbeast postal service.

"I'll write a letter to Henry to have him send someone to collect our delivery. How should I improve the seedlings this time?" Lord Nazel looked a bit happy after obtaining the plants he'd wanted.

Does Lord Nazel actually enjoy working on seedlings? He often holed himself up in his laboratory, but I always thought it was purely for work. Although he'd started showing his feelings more often, I felt that he still wasn't very assertive. *I have to become a more dependable wife for him.* With the gobo cake I'd received as a souvenir in one hand, I held a new determination in my heart.

The clerk came to the front of the store to see us off. I felt nice and relaxed as we finally left, but as we went down the hill, a familiar person suddenly appeared below us.

"Well, well, if it isn't Nazelbart and Lady Agnes. What a coincidence," Duke Masroono greeted us.

"Your Grace?!"

"Heh heh, I also go incognito from time to time." For some reason, the duke headed to the flower store as if he were very familiar with it and started having a friendly chat with the clerk.

Is he a regular? The two of them looked like they got along well.

When the duke noticed us eyeing them curiously, he turned to speak to us.

"Oh, she's one of my mistresses." He smiled in amusement at our open surprise. It was customary for Polpystani nobles, both men and women, to have additional lovers even if they were married. In this country, it was considered natural for the powerful to have multiple partners.

So what I read in those books is true. Apparently, it wasn't that uncommon for both husband and wife to each have their own lover.

The duke had brought up his mistress like it was completely ordinary, but Lord Nazel and I had our reservations since we were foreigners.

"This store is a product of her hobby, but it's also a space where tired people can come to relax. That's why I'm supporting her." It would have been difficult for a commoner single woman to open a large flower store in this location. Furthermore, no matter how much she loved plants, it would be hard to maintain a store of that size with only a few people. "As for the other employees, I've hired gardening specialists. Their man power and expertise is necessary." The duke seemed somewhat proud. "She gets the store of her dreams, and I get a place to relax. It's a win-win relationship."

"That's...certainly one way to look at it." If the two of them were fine with it, I had no intention of criticizing a foreign country's culture. I glanced at the two of them with conflicted emotions.

"I heard you two met Valen after watching the practice matches," the duke continued. "My nephew must have been happy to meet you, because he immediately reported it to me. Thank you so much for the advice you gave him. This is outside my area of expertise, so I can't help much with the investigation. I'll lend you a hand if you ever need any assistance, though, so don't hesitate to ask." The duke then cheerfully told the clerk that he'd like to drink some herbal tea. "Oh yes, the students' graduation exam will also be held soon, so if your schedule permits it, please drop by to chat with Valen again if it's not too much trouble. My nephew is quite a busy man. He's the most skilled among his siblings, so he has all kinds of work foisted on him."

I nodded in response to Duke Masroono and exchanged glances with Lord Nazel.

***

A few days later, Lord Nazel and I visited Prince Valen at Masroono National School. We wanted to take a look around the nearby fields to see how the sunchokes we'd given him were growing. Lord Nazel was worried about my health, but I'd get bored

staying at the inn by myself, so I'd asked him to bring me along.

Prince Valen had been going around from place to place lately to investigate the bad harvests and come up with countermeasures, but he was still usually at school. He apparently liked his position as the school's chairman. He was usually in his office on the top floor, but he'd come down to the first floor today out of consideration for my condition. He was wearing light clothing that was easy to move in, as we would be going out soon.

"Hello, you two. Thank you for coming! We planted the sunchokes you gave us in a barren field and got a splendid harvest just the other day. I don't know how to thank you." Prince Valen happily went on and on.

It seemed that the sunchoke cultivation had gone well. Lord Nazel looked a little relieved as he replied in a calm tone.

"I'm glad they could be of use." A food source had been secured for now, even though it was strictly tubers.

"Lady Agnes, we'll be going to observe the fields now. Are you feeling all right? You could go rest in my room." Prince Valen was yet again right next to me. I bent back a little as he kept moving closer.

"I'm watching my wife so she's fine, Your Highness. We aren't going on a long trip, and she wanted to come herself." Lord Nazel pulled my arm and hid me behind him to protect me.

"All right, let's get going then." Prince Valen blinked at Lord Nazel's overprotective reaction, but he didn't seem particularly bothered and mounted his pegasus.

Lord Nazel and I also got on Geni and headed to the closest fields that had been suffering from a bad harvest. The sun was a bit strong, but the weather was nice and warm.

"Tell me right away if you feel unwell, Agnes."

"All right."

The fields we were headed to were in a village near the school, so we arrived in the blink of an eye. The simple village had buildings with the same colorful walls as the ones in the city. Outside the village, we saw rows of completely empty fields. I climbed down a plant Lord Nazel created and safely reached the ground, then took a look around me.

"There isn't even a single blade of grass growing here, let alone any crops," I said.

"Indeed. This scene is quite different from Sutrena, where quite a few inedible plants grow," Lord Nazel replied.

Prince Valen had landed in front of us and looked at the fields with a heartbroken expression. He seemed like a prince who really cared for his people, considering how he'd come to the scene to personally try and find a solution to the food problem. He started explaining the situation here to us.

"These were originally carrot fields, but they're in this terrible state now. The field where we planted Nazelbart's sunchokes is over there."

We silently followed after Prince Valen. A little later, we saw a single field with crops.

"This is the field of the family who's helping with the sunchoke experiment," the prince explained. The field stood out like a sore thumb when it was surrounded by empty land.

"Oh, there are many sunchokes with withered stalks. It's already time to harvest them." On closer examination, I noticed a family—likely the field's owners—digging up the tubers. Baskets casually left on the ground were packed with freshly collected sunchokes. *They really can be harvested even in Polpystan's fields. Thank goodness.* I looked up at Lord Nazel with a smile.

"Ah! Agnes, you mustn't show Prince Valen that expression. You're so adorable he'll want to take you home with him." Lord Nazel put his hands around me to hide my face.

"Gosh, nothing like that will happen. Let's go look at the tubers." I pulled Lord Nazel by the arm and headed to the sunchoke field. The harvested sunchokes would apparently be distributed to the villagers who wanted to cultivate them in their own fields. Prince Valen also had plans to spread the sunchokes to other villages too.

After we finished inspecting the field, we headed home with a sense of fulfillment.

"I hope we can quickly find out why the fields became barren," I told Lord Nazel, who was sitting behind me on Geni on our way back.

"So do I. The circumstances here are a little different from in Sutrena, but I'd like them to find a hint toward the solution. Once we're home, I'll need to put more effort into improving crops besides the sunchokes."

"Eating sunchokes every day would lead to an unbalanced diet, after all. But please take care not to overwork yourself, Lord Nazel. I'll be sad if you push yourself too much and end up getting sick."

"Oh, Agnes. You're so cute, I love you! I want to cherish you, take you away, and lock you up—right now."

"Your statements are becoming more and more unsettling, Lord Nazel..."

Lord Nazel suddenly came to his senses and hugged me tight as we kept soaring through the sky.

I hadn't been able to visit our fields much ever since becoming pregnant, so today was a nice and refreshing day when I got to look at another country's tuber field.

***

Time passed by in a flash and it was finally the day of Paul's graduation exam. I'd been feeling restless since morning.

"Paul will be fine, Agnes. So will Ryuk."

"I guess you're right. Paul has always tackled everything seriously." I took Lord Nazel's hand and we headed to Paul's school. The graduation exam would take place on a small, rocky mountain behind Masroono National School, which was apparently often used for magic training. The students would walk to the exam location, while the guardians would be transported by mountbeasts the school was raising.

It was awfully windy atop the mountain. The students were gathered on a narrow, flat area between two sharp peaks and chatted nervously. There was also a waiting area set up for us guardians in a corner of the flat ground, with chairs kindly provided.

Oh, the wider seat over there has "priority seating" written on it. Since I was pregnant, Lord Nazel urged me to sit there. Perhaps Prince Valen had prepared it out of consideration for me since he

knew I was expecting. They took perfect care of us guardians. Ryuk's father was sitting in the ordinary seats. It looked like he'd also been staying in the Duchy of Masroono all this time.

"Whoaaa! Ryuk! Don't put up such a miserable fight!" The sight of a stern man loudly shouting with both hands in the air stood out, and he drew a lot of attention from the other guardians too.

He's full of energy today as well. His voice is loud enough to be a match for Torre's.

Ryuk looked embarrassed as he hid in his friend's shadow and cringed. Poor boy. As I worried about him, I felt someone standing behind me.

"Greetings, Lady Agnes."

I slowly turned around and saw Prince Valen leaning against a nearby rock face, looking down at me.

"Oh, greetings, Your Highness. We haven't met since the field inspection."

Prince Valen was smiling brightly. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought that he was even closer than usual. He was so close that I felt like I would touch him if I moved even a little. I'd heard that the people here were very broad-minded, so perhaps it was just a cultural difference with Desnim.

"Excuse me, isn't the exam starting soon?" Lord Nazel probably sensed my unease and distracted Prince Valen.

"You're right. As long as there are no major problems, a diligent student like Paul should pass. As the chairman, I'm happy we got such an excellent student. Time for me to go to the students." After he finished talking to us, Prince Valen headed for the center of the exam venue.

I turned to see Lord Nazel making a sullen expression.

"I really need to be cautious of Prince Valen. He's far too close to you." It looked like he was thinking the same thing as I was.

"A smaller sense of personal space might be part of Polpystani culture."

"Even other Polpystanis don't get *that* close. Prince Valen doesn't approach me that much either... If this behavior continues, I'll have to raise an objection, even if he is foreign royalty." Lord Nazel had a

threatening air about him as he stood next to me and fixed his sharp gaze on the prince.

Under Prince Valen's instructions, the teachers gave orders to the students taking the exam, who started moving around. We could also hear the voice of the teacher who was explaining how things would progress.

"Masroono National School's graduation exam shall now commence! The students will form pairs and search for the palm-sized coins hidden on this mountain. The pair with the most coins within the time limit will be awarded the highest score. However, there are fewer coins than exam participants. If there's a dispute, settle it with force! Only the strong will survive!"

It was a really bold exam, typical of Polpystan. Paul teamed up with Ryuk again. They seemed to get along well.

The teacher continued the explanation.

"All the guardians gathered here today will be able to watch through the image I have projected onto this boulder with my magic. My projection magic allows me to project the scenery of predetermined locations onto another area. There are only two designated locations, so just the students passing through them will be displayed, but many coins are hidden around there, so you should be able to see many students."

It was an unusual magic I was hearing about for the first time, but it sounded very convenient. I thought that Father Emilio, a magic appraisal enthusiast, would be thrilled to hear about it.

I stared at the image the teacher had projected onto the large boulder. A short time after the exam started, students started appearing on it here and there.

"Oh, it's Paul!" My brother with his unique flying style was projected clearly on the boulder's surface. *Good luck, Paul.* I cheered him on in my head.

Paul's magic was levitation, while Ryuk's was great shield. Paul's would be useful in searching for the coins, while Ryuk's would help them in a fight.

"I'm sure Paul will be just fine, Agnes. He's grown steadily."

I nodded in response to Lord Nazel's kind words.

"Yes, I'm going to believe in my brother."

A grand scramble for coins was taking place on the projected image.

"Gooo, Ryuk! Why are you being so timid?!" As usual, Ryuk's father was being loud all by himself.

Paul steadily knocked the other pairs of students away with brute strength and continued gathering coins. Then, something strange appeared on one part of the projected image.

"Hmm? What are those?" I wondered. They were some kind of medium-sized, insectoid manabeasts.

There was a commotion among the guardians.

"What's with those manabeasts? They appeared out of nowhere."

"Are the kids all right?!"

As the parents flew into a state of unrest, the teachers also panicked at the manabeasts' intrusion.

"Only small, docile manabeasts are supposed to live on this mountain... The appearance of beasts like those is outside expectations. We must immediately notify the students that the exam is suspended and go to their aid!"

I could hear a very troubling conversation. *This might be dangerous.*

The chairman gave swift instructions to the teachers, and they hastily took action.

"We'd like to ask any guardians who can cooperate to work together with the teachers to rescue the students. I think the students can manage to a certain extent, but still..."

Lord Nazel, Ryuk's father, and several other people boasting of their prowess came forward and went to help the students. The situation had turned chaotic, and I got up from my seat feeling flustered.

I want to grab some yams and go smack those insects, but there's a second life inside me now. Not to mention it would be awfully difficult to navigate the mountain in my condition.

Even if I decided to go, I would only end up holding everyone else back. Lord Nazel had been thinking the same. Before he left to help Paul and the other students, he thoroughly urged me to stay

here and keep myself safe. His words were even more of a reason for me to stay put.

I hate that I can't do anything despite being so worried. I wanted to help at least a little bit, so I secretly used my reinforcement magic on the other guardians around me. To keep this under wraps, I planned to undo it once everything was over.

The powerful Lord Nazel will be there, so the students will definitely be safe...right? After all, he was unimaginably skilled. Besides, they had Viscount Simble, a knight, and the students who trained daily. *I'll believe in them and wait.* I sat down, feeling distressed, and stared at the image projected onto the boulder.

***

Paul stuffed several coins into his bag and eagerly awaited the signal for the exam to be over. He'd already achieved his objective. All he had to do now was protect his coins from the other students.

Miss Kelly should also be coming today. I have to show her my good side.

Paul's teammate, Ryuk, was atop a steep cliff, using his great shield magic to defend against the students coming to steal their coins. The attacking students got hit by Ryuk's magic and were blown away.

"Oh no... Our guardians are watching the exam, right? My father will definitely scold me for being useless later."

"You're far from useless, Ryuk. Viscount Simble just doesn't understand your value."

There were no more students attacking them, so Paul floated around in search of more coins. He'd already gathered enough for them to pass the exam, but if possible, he wanted to gather the most coins and get excellent grades, rather than just hunker down and protect the coins he currently had. His magic was really useful in places with poor footing, like cliffs. Thanks to it, Paul and Ryuk had a great start to their collecting efforts before the other students had gathered any.

If I got poor grades, I'd be too ashamed to meet Queen Latriche

after my graduation. I'll graduate at the top of my class! The queen of his homeland had shown Paul a new path when he'd had nowhere to go. *In the past, my heart couldn't keep up with the way I felt about my sister or the changes in my circumstances. I am the person I am today because I was given time to be on my own abroad.* Paul had gotten to learn the world outside the House of Evantail and had grown stronger in both body and mind; he wasn't the same as in the past anymore. He was eager to repay the favor he owed Latriche, even if only by a little bit.

Around halfway through the exam, something strange happened across the entire mountain. One of the students gathering coins below suddenly screamed. His tense voice conveyed the gravity of the situation.

"What's going on?" Paul looked in the direction of the scream.

"I don't know. But I feel like something terrible is about to happen." Ryuk felt ominous signs and started trembling as he activated his great shield magic.

"Manabeasts!"

"There are insectoid manabeasts, each about as big as a kid! They're aggressive!"

Some other students who'd gone to check in on the situation earlier shouted out this information. Paul and the rest who heard them grew tense.

"The exam is suspended for now! Let's all deal with the manabeasts together!" Paul shouted, and the others agreed with him. "We'll all go where the manabeasts appeared! Those who can use magic to communicate, please let the teachers know!" It would have been great if the manabeasts had shown up on the projection, but there was a chance they had gone unnoticed. The students had to be as cautious as possible. "Let's go, Ryuk!"

"O-Okay."

Paul held the reluctant Ryuk in his strong arms and started floating down the cliff.

"Don't worry, we'll definitely protect everyone with our strength!"

If luck was on their side, Paul's brother-in-law and Ryuk's father, both of whom were in the audience, would come help them. Even in

the worst-case scenario, they'd just need to buy time until help arrived.

Paul continued flying and eventually arrived above the place the manabeasts had appeared.

"There they are!"

The students who'd arrived earlier were already working on exterminating the manabeasts. Just like the initial report claimed, the insectoid manabeasts were about as big as a ten-year-old kid and were attacking the nearby students. They looked like black grasshoppers, but clearly much larger.

"Ryuk, do you know what kind of manabeast those are? I've never seen anything like them," Paul asked. He'd learned about Polpystan's most ubiquitous manabeasts in class, but he hadn't been taught about all the rarer species. The manabeasts before him were a kind he'd never seen in Desnim either.

"No, I don't recognize them. They might be similar to manabeasts called big hoppers. They appear in central Polpystan and damage vegetables—they're a farmer's worst enemy. But we're in the north, and I feel like their color is a little different. But there sure are a lot of them."

"Just where did they come from? We visit this place frequently for training and lessons, but there have only ever been small, harmless manabeasts here."

These manabeasts continued swarming the place.

"Black with fluorescent orange stripes here and there. Much more grotesque than the big hoppers you'd usually see, which are normally green," Ryuk muttered. Moreover, these manabeasts seemed highly aggressive and many of them were attacking the students.

"I don't like bugs, but I can't sit back and do nothing. We're taking them down, Ryuk!" Paul charged into the big hopper swarm while still carrying Ryuk, who started screaming.

"Eeeeek! I can't do this! They're big and scary!"

"I'll carry you there, so please use your great shield!"

"G-Got it!"

Paul continued his charge toward the big hoppers. Even without

Ryuk doing anything else, his great shield blew away the manabeasts just by bumping into them; it was truly convenient magic.

"Whoaaa!" Ryuk kept his eyes shut and screamed for dear life. "Bugs are gross! Manabeasts are scary! Nooo! Aaaaah!"

"Be strong, Ryuk! You're the only one I can rely on!"

"Pauuul... I caaan't..." Despite Ryuk's complaining, his great shield offensive rapidly reduced the manabeasts' numbers. The other students gradually gathered and worked together to somehow get things back in order.

"All right, let's keep at it a little longer. Help is sure to arrive soon!" Paul encouraged his fellow examinees. And just like he said, their teachers came rushing to their aid from the top of the cliff. Their school's teachers boasted great strength, and they weren't even the only reinforcements.

"Elder brother!" Paul could also see Nazelbart—the most reliable person there—behind the teachers. At that moment, Paul became convinced that they'd manage to safely exterminate the manabeasts. "Just a little more, Ryuk. Trustworthy help has arrived."

"Urk, my father's also here... I wanna go home..."

It seemed that Viscount Simble was also vigorously rushing in along with Nazelbart. Paul could even hear his war cry. But while Paul was distracted, a student close to him was attacked by a big hopper.

"Ah! Watch out!" Paul rushed to help, but he couldn't make it in time. The manabeast was only a hair's breadth away from the student when plants suddenly sprouted from the ground and repelled the big hopper; Nazelbart's magic had saved the boy. "Way to go, elder brother!" Paul felt excited as he cheered Nazelbart on.

Big hoppers were knocked away by plants and crashed into the rocks, further reducing their numbers. But then, one of them took a surprising course of action: It started gnawing on Nazelbart's plants. Instead of fighting back, it just gobbled up the plants.

The students made a stir before this bizarre scene.

"What the heck, it's eating the magic?! What's going on with these things?" Ryuk was creeped out by the big hopper.

"Rather than the magic itself, it's simply eating the plants, isn't it?" Paul, on the other hand, observed the situation calmly.

Perhaps following the first one's example, the other big hoppers also started eating the plants created by Nazelbart's magic.

"Ah! Look at that!" Paul said.

The big hoppers who'd eaten the plants began to emit purple mana. Although all manabeasts possessed mana, there were many kinds that could barely use it. However, it wasn't too uncommon for excess mana to glow like this or have other effects; the same was probably true for these big hoppers. Most of the changes mana caused in manabeasts weren't all that impactful, like making their bodies shine or slightly affecting their surroundings.

However, there are many of these big hoppers gathered here, and they're different from other manabeasts, Paul thought.

As the manabeasts emitted purple mana, the ground around them also took on the same color. The purple rapidly expanded outward.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Paul. I've never seen anything like this happen before..." Ryuk said.

Paul hesitated about what he should do when faced with the manabeasts' strange light.

Is the purple a bad thing? Is it okay to ram Ryuk into it?

Nazelbart, who'd been in the rear, gently descended and stood next to Paul. He always looked elegant no matter what he did. Paul felt a great sense of security just being next to him.

"I'm glad you two are safe. At any rate, this is the first time I've seen my magic eaten... I guess I have a poor affinity with these manabeasts."

"What's going on, elder brother? The purple on the ground is spreading."

The mana flowing out of the big hoppers eroded more and more of the ground and started killing the flowers growing on the cliff. It was like poison was pouring out. Nazelbart's eyes opened wide when he saw that, like he'd just realized something.

"Yes, the mana's effect on the ground is spreading out. Could this phenomenon be...?" Nazelbart trailed off.

"Did you figure something out?" Paul asked.

"I can't be entirely sure yet. Paul, we're taking down these manabeasts. If this swarm makes it to the city, the people will be in great danger."

"Yes, elder brother! Let's go, Ryuk!"

"Nooooo!" Ryuk—still in Paul's arms—screamed as he once again used his great shield magic and they charged into the manabeast swarm.

Nazelbart switched to using carnivorous plants and drove back the big hoppers.

After a short time, they rid the area of the manabeasts, and the exhausted students collapsed atop the mountain. The teachers who'd rushed to help started checking for any injured. There were students with scratches and grazes, but none of them were severely injured. Paul felt relieved to hear that.

In any case, I'm glad we managed to avoid a catastrophe, Paul thought. But it looked like he'd have to retake the exam. It was unfortunate, but understandable. He was also concerned about his brother-in-law, who'd had a sullen expression ever since he'd realized something from observing the manabeasts.

***

While the teachers and Lord Nazel went to help the students taking the exam, I anxiously waited for them to return as I sat in my priority seat. Fortunately, there were no manabeasts here. The projection magic was still active, so I could watch everything taking place from my seat. All of the guardians were watching the projected image with worry. We all felt exactly the same. All of us who'd stayed back here could only pray for their safety.

Ah, I just caught a glance of Lord Nazel and the students. However, the projection magic was slightly out of alignment, so I quickly lost sight of them, but I could still hear them. *Was that Ryuk's scream just now?* I only had sound to go off of, but it seemed like the manabeasts were being driven back by everyone's magic. Eventually I could only hear Ryuk's screams and the cries of the

manabeasts. *Thank goodness, everyone seems to be all right.* I had faith in Lord Nazel's strength, but there was always a small chance of something going wrong. After Lord Nazel had been stabbed during Lord Davier's rebellion, I'd become even more worried for his safety.

As I was intently watching the projected image, a woman sitting close to me screamed and fell out of her chair.

"Eeeeek! M-Ma—"

"Huh?"

"Manabeast!"

As I looked toward the woman in surprise, I saw one green insectoid manabeast a short distance from her. It was about the same size as a teenager and much bigger than the pests that plagued fields.

What kind of manabeast is that? It looks like a giant grasshopper. Oh, there's another one! And even more!

When I checked my surroundings, I saw a swarm of manabeasts gathering on the flat area, and they started devouring the flowers and other plants growing here and there on this rocky mountain.

"They're big hoppers! Don't worry, they're herbivorous and docile. They're timid, so they'll disperse soon." A nearby guardian kindly shouted an explanation about them.

"Oh, what a relief," the earlier woman said, now calmer.

"They appear in my territory too. It's a rural part of Polpystan with lots of nature."

I listened to their conversation while observing the manabeasts, when I suddenly felt like something was out of place with this scene.

"Hmm? It seems like the manabeasts are changing color." The manabeasts had been green at the start, but their bodies were gradually growing black. *Is that a trait of their species? But something seems strange about this. It feels kind of ominous.*

Torre and Kelly, who were supposed to be in the distant waiting area, also seemed to have sensed that something was off, because they approached me looking anxious. They even had their mountbeasts ready.

"What's wrong, you two?"

“Let’s head back to the school for now, Lady Agnes,” Kelly said in a tense voice.

Torre gave the manabeasts a sidelong glance and agreed with Kelly.

“Lady Agnes, I’m sure you’re worried about what’s going on with the exam, but Lord Nazelbart is powerful, so he’ll definitely be all right. But the same isn’t true for you. These manabeasts are probably the same kind Mister Paul and the others are fighting. Let’s evacuate at once.”

Kelly nodded in agreement with Torre.

“A-All right,” I replied.

“It looks like the other guardians aren’t alarmed, but they really should be more cautious right now.”

“I’ll also inform the others of the danger. Everyone! These manabeasts are dangerous, so we should evacu—” As I was turning around to advise the others to evacuate as well, I heard screams.

“Eeeeek!”

“Waaagh!”

I turned toward the voices in a panic and saw that one of the manabeasts, its body now pitch-black, had jumped on top of a man and attacked him. It didn’t look like it was trying to eat him; it was simply attacking anyone in sight.

“Ah! T-Torre! Go save him!”

“Understood, Lady Agnes!”

For now, I asked the strong Torre to go rescue the man. In the meanwhile, Kelly urged me to move somewhere far from here.

“This way, Lady Agnes.” As Kelly suggested, we mounted a pegasus and took to the sky, distancing ourselves from the manabeasts.

“Everyone, it’s dangerous here! Get on your mountbeasts and head back to the school! Hurry!”

The other guardians quickly started bustling around and all headed to their mountbeasts.

“Whoaaa!” Torre drew his sword and slashed at the manabeast attacking the man. With the insectoid defeated, the man crawled out from underneath it.

I kept calling out to everyone and also ordered Torre to fall back.

"Gaaah! Retreat, retreat!" All the guardians made it to the outdoor mountbeast station. However, everyone scrambled to get on the mountbeasts parked on the level ground first, so the station was terribly crowded. It looked like they'd have trouble taking off. Amid the panic, a woman—different from the one who'd screamed earlier—was knocked aside and fell over. A manabeast that had been chasing the guardians went after her.

"Watch out!" Still atop the pegasus, I immediately threw one of the pink taros I kept in my pocket for self-defense. "Take that!" The fuzzy taro whooshed through the air, hit the manabeast directly, then fell to the ground. The beast screamed as it collapsed; the woman it had attacked was now safe. She staggered toward her manabeast and reached it without further incident.

"I-I did it."

But as soon as my thrown taro hit the ground, the manabeasts' eyes lit up, and they all gathered around it to try to eat it; they even started fighting among themselves. The reinforced taro was probably too hard for them as they seemed to be struggling to bite into it. In the end, one of them decided it was impossible to chew the taro and simply swallowed it whole.

"Oh, it got eaten..." That manabeast was certainly strange, eating that hard taro as if obsessed with it. Moreover, the manabeast started shining purple after it finished eating it. "What even is that manabeast? I've never seen anything like it."

"Let's leave quickly, Lady Agnes. I don't know much about these manabeasts, but they have wings, so it could be dangerous for us if they can fly."

"Y-Yes, you're right." Kelly and I rode the pegasus straight back to the Masroono National School building. Maybe the manabeasts couldn't fly, or maybe they weren't particularly interested in humans, but none of them chased after us. *Their behavioral principles are unclear.* But if they were left alone, I could easily imagine them getting here eventually. The students would be in danger if that happened. *I need to do something.* I was an outsider, but I was also Paul's guardian. Wasn't there anything I could do?

I anxiously waited several hours for Lord Nazel to return, and he finally got back.

"I heard what happened, Agnes! You were attacked by manabeasts?"

"Torre and Kelly came to save me, so I'm doing fine. All of the other guardians are safe too."

"I see..." Lord Nazel carefully checked to confirm I was all right, then started talking to Prince Valen, who'd arrived after confirming the students' safety.

Prince Valen looked tired since he had also been active at the scene, leading the students and such. The appearance of the manabeasts must have been unexpected for him too. He walked toward me with a grim expression.

"I never thought the graduation exam would turn into such a mess... I deeply apologize for exposing you to danger, Lady Agnes," he said as he continued approaching me.

He was *really* close this time too. I noticed Lord Nazel's eyes light up, so I casually took a step back to distance myself from Prince Valen.

"There's nothing to apologize for. This incident was completely unpredictable. In any case, while I was looking at the manabeasts earlier, I noticed that their mana seemed to be causing plants to wither and die. And this was the first time I saw a manabeast eat the plants I created with my magic. If I'm not mistaken, you said those were big hoppers, but those are supposed to be docile, herbivorous manabeasts..." Lord Nazel said.

"Yes, it's exactly as you said, Nazelbart. Ordinary big hoppers are green and docile. That was also my first time seeing those black ones. Both their color and behavior were different, so perhaps those weren't ordinary big hoppers."

As I listened to their conversation, I suddenly had a realization.

"Excuse me!" I exclaimed. "Those manabeasts changed color halfway through! They went from green to black!"

When I mentioned what I'd seen back at the mountain, both of them turned to look at me.

"They changed color?"

"Um, yes. I read this in a field guide before, but they might be the same as grasshoppers in Sutrena. They look similar too."

"So you mean it could be a polyphenic trait?" Lord Nazel asked me as I was forming my hypothesis.

"That's right. I think their color changes based on their population density. Only one showed up at the start, and it was green, but as their numbers grew, they turned black." Normally, grasshoppers were green and timid. But as their population increased, their color darkened, and with higher numbers they also became aggressive. Perhaps something similar happened to the manabeasts' color too.

"I see. So manabeasts can also exhibit polyphenism. Your Highness, do the green big hoppers that originally inhabited Polpystan make plants wither?" Lord Nazel asked.

"No, I've never heard of anything like that. Big hoppers can be found in Polpystan, but they're really docile creatures that only occasionally damage fields. They run away the moment they see people. Although they possess mana since they're manabeasts, it's only inside their bodies and doesn't have any particular effect on their surroundings."

"In that case, their nature might have changed because of polyphenism. Or it could have been because they ate the plants I made with my magic."

"Even the manabeasts who didn't eat your plants were shining purple, so I think the former possibility is more likely. I'll summon manabeast experts right away to consult with. I hate to ask, Lord Florescruz, but could you lend us your aid?"

"Of course. I already promised to help when it comes to the crops. This incident may be related to the bad harvests. After all, during the attack, plants withered wherever the ground turned purple."

The experts gathered quickly and discussions about the big hoppers began. Fortunately, Masroono National School's laboratory had many manabeast experts, and Lord Nazel and I were permitted to join them. This was apparently the first time polyphenism had been observed in big hoppers, so an investigation on the topic would begin immediately.

Once the discussions were over, Lord Nazel and I left the school and headed to our inn in a big carriage. Kelly was sitting next to me, and Torre was in the driver's seat. Thanks to Lord Nazel and everyone else defending against the big hoppers on the mountain, the city hadn't suffered any damage from them. Most people were probably unaware of what had taken place during the graduation exam. The scenery around us was peaceful. Seeing everyone going about their daily lives like normal filled me with relief, even though the current situation only concerned a neighboring country.

"This was an exhausting day, but I'm glad to see everyone safe. Good work out there, Lord Nazel."

"Same to you, Agnes. I was terrified when I heard that manabeasts appeared at the guardians' seating area. I'm truly glad Torre and Kelly were there."

"Yes, I'm also grateful to the two of them. At any rate, we were only supposed to go watch Paul's exam, but things turned into quite the mess. But we can't just turn a blind eye to the damage manabeasts are causing in Polpystan." Big hoppers apparently normally lived in central Polpystan, so if they'd spread here, then something similar could be taking place elsewhere too.

According to Lord Nazel and Prince Valen, the mana leaking out of the black big hoppers made plants wither, right? That's worrying. We had to keep a close eye on not only the damage that had occurred this time, but also on similar incidents that might occur in the future. Lord Nazel speculated that the big hoppers from central Polpystan had migrated to the north in search of food. These creatures did indeed have voracious appetites and had even tried to eat my reinforced pink taro.

The damage from the poor harvests is spreading from the center of the country to the north. If it continues in this direction, it will leave Polpystan and reach Sutrena, the southernmost part of Desnim. Sutrena was finally recovering from its longtime food shortage. It would be a disaster if big hoppers caused damage there. Moreover, the area north of Sutrena was ordinary, fertile land. If the soil infertility ever spread that far, we would no longer be in any position to assist Polpystan with food.

It seemed that Lord Nazel had realized what I was thinking; he nodded at me seriously.

"Yes, Polpystan and Desnim are neighbors. There's no guarantee the damage won't extend to us too."

I bit my lip as it sank in that this really was the case.

"There's also one more concerning point," Lord Nazel continued. "Isn't this phenomenon by which crops stop growing in certain areas similar to Sutrena?"

I gasped at that.

"Does that mean that something similar occurred in Sutrena in the past?"

"It's purely conjecture at this point..." Despite saying that, Lord Nazel's handsome face was downcast.

"If we don't take any countermeasures, Polpystan might end up like Sutrena. Many people will suffer if they become unable to grow crops here."

"Indeed. The fruits and vegetables you and I produce could still grow, but then you'd have to come all the way here to use your magic. At the moment, only sunchokes can grow without any help from us."

"And the more I use my magic, the higher the risk of people talking about it. At the moment, you, King Bertrand, and Emilio all believe that it's better if it's kept secret, right?"

Lord Nazel nodded with a grave air about him.

"Let's take care of the manabeast problem quickly so you don't have to use a lot of your magic."

"Yes!"

We had arrived at our inn during our conversation, so we alighted from the carriage and headed into our room. The inn staff had tidied everything up nicely.

"Nevertheless, it looked like Prince Valen had his eye on you again. Goodness, Polpystan's culture is giving me a headache," Lord Nazel said.

"He's always really close to me, but is that really his intention? If I remember correctly, he's single, so I think he'd be able to find a fiancée easily without going out of his way to approach a married

woman.”

“It’s because you’re adorable. Most men would fall for you in a heartbeat.”

“In a heartbeat?” Lord Nazel was always quick to say things like that. I got embarrassed and fidgeted as I shrank into myself.

“It’s also adorable how you never get used to being complimented.”

No matter what I said, Lord Nazel didn’t change—even though he was sober at the moment.

“Come here, Agnes.” He walked across the room and sat on the edge of the bed, then beckoned me over. When I moved next to him like he asked, he embraced me with practiced ease. I leaned my back against him and clung to his body. “I’m sorry for being so on edge when it comes to you.”

“No, the same goes for me.”

“So you’d get jealous if the roles were reversed?”

“Of course!” I replied enthusiastically.

“I’m happy to hear that but also a bit embarrassed. I’m wholly devoted to you, Agnes.”

“And as I always say, I’m wholly devoted to you, Lord Nazel.”

“Thank you.” Lord Nazel caressed my hair gently as he talked to me. “On another topic, we’ll likely hear from Prince Valen within the next few days, and a full-scale investigation will begin. You stay here and rest, Agnes. You can go out with Kelly and Torre if you’d like.”

“I-I’ll also join the investigation with—”

“No, it will be dangerous. You saw those manabeasts on the mountain. I won’t be able to focus on my work if I’m worried something might happen to you while you’re pregnant.”

It would be an issue if Lord Nazel couldn’t do his best in the investigation. He was prone to worry, so he had a point here. I understood that what he’d told me was correct, but I still felt vexed that I wouldn’t be of any help at all.

Lord Nazel gently looked down at my belly.

“I want to protect you and the baby. It’s still some time until the birth, but I can’t wait. Will it be a boy or a girl?”

“In either case, I hope they’ll be kind like you.”

"I'd rather they be more like you," Lord Nazel replied after a pause.

Our child wasn't moving yet, but my belly was steadily getting bigger.

"It's a strange feeling." I gently closed my eyes as I leaned against Lord Nazel. *I feel an amazing sense of security.* I was happy to be alongside him and our child.

"That's why you'll stay here, Agnes." While I was lost in thought, Lord Nazel shrewdly got his way. My husband was very cunning in that regard.

"Ah... I won't join the investigation, but please tell me what you find out."

"Of course."

And so, I ended up folding, and it was decided that only Lord Nazel would join the investigation in person.

***

On the first day of the big hopper investigation, Kelly and I were looking at the outside scenery from my inn room. Lord Nazel had already left with the investigation team.

"Hmm... Just as I expected, I have nothing to do."

"Then would you like us to go out, Lady Agnes?" I had no idea when she'd gotten them, but Kelly was browsing through the latest Polpystani maternity dresses. They were probably street clothes. "Heh... Heh heh heh, this one, that one, and that one over there would all look great on you, Lady Agnes. I got some good shopping done. I'd love for you to pick one out yourself."

"You're the one with the savvier fashion sense, Kelly. It's better if I leave it up to you." I'd been brought up following the House of Evantail's traditions, so my fashion sense had been neglected for the longest time and was now pretty much rusted. Ever since moving to Sutrena, I'd sometimes choose what to wear on my own, but I was nowhere near Kelly's level. "Polpystani clothes sure are sparkly."

"They have beads attached. And the fabric is generally made of thin layers."

“I see.” I studied the dress Kelly was holding. The smooth fabric was see-through, but it covered the skin when layered. “It’s a bit sexy.”

“I think Lord Nazelbart would like it.”

“Yes, he might...” He was delighted by the strangest things, after all—like me dressing as a maid or calling him “instructor.” I kept staring at the dress while recalling various past events.

“This is a rare chance, so how about you try this one, Lady Agnes?”



“Huh?” Although Kelly had only framed it as a suggestion, she quietly looked eager for me to wear the dress. “All right, I’ll go with that one.” It seemed fun, so I asked her to help me get changed. In the end, I perfectly resembled a Polpystani citizen; Kelly seemed satisfied too. “How about I head out now that I’ve gotten changed? There’s actually somewhere I’d like to go.”

“I shall accompany you. Where do you plan on heading?”

“I’d like to go to Masroono National School. They have a manabeast laboratory there, and it looks like it will be working together with Lord Nazel and the others on this investigation. I can’t go where the manabeasts show up, but I can talk to people at the laboratory. I’d like to share information about Sutrena’s crop situation and ask if it would be of any help in their research.” They might have been able to make some kind of breakthrough using what we’ve learned. And if I was lucky, I could learn something about the saint. Finally, seeing the laboratory with my own eyes would be a helpful reference for building a school in Sutrena. It was killing three birds with one stone.

“I see. Understood, Lady Agnes.”

“Yesterday I talked to Prince Valen after everything was resolved, and he told me that it was fine for me to visit the school whenever.”

“Hmm, I can sense some faint ulterior motives. You need to be careful.”

“So you also think that. Even if you’re right, Prince Valen is on the investigation with Lord Nazel, so it will be all right.”

“No, it’s said that Polpystanis are uninhibited in terms of love. The laboratory should have many Polpystani men. We must eliminate all who approach Lady Agnes.”

“That’s too extreme...” But that also meant that Kelly, a cool, beautiful woman, might be approached too. She was popular with the opposite sex, especially younger men. “Be careful too, Kelly. If anyone pushy tries to court you, I’ll throw a tuber at them and drive them away.”

“How dependable, Lady Agnes.”

“Torre will also be with us, so I’m sure everything will turn out fine.” We braced ourselves and headed to Masroono National School.

The various laboratories where teachers or alumni did research were located in a tall building next to the main school building. These labs were said to be the most prominent academic institutions in Polpystan.

As we were on our way to the manabeast laboratory, a familiar person appeared ahead: Paul's friend Ryuk came running toward us.

"Lady Agnes!"

"Oh, hello, Ryuk. Do you also have business at a laboratory?"

"Yes, I love historical research. I'm still a student here, but I have special permission to visit the history laboratory."

Ryuk seemed to be a brilliant, hardworking student, and he'd been invited to participate in studies at this particular laboratory. Receiving an invitation while still enrolled in the school was an extremely great honor. Although his father had turned the offer down, Ryuk's love for research had remained undeterred and he currently researched Polpystan's local history at the history laboratory.

"I can show you inside if you'd like. The building is split up into many laboratories, so it's rather complex," he said.

"Thank you. Then could you please take us to the manabeast laboratory?"

"It would be my pleasure." We followed Ryuk into the building. It was so quiet inside that I got the illusion of being lost in a separate space cut off from the rest of the world. We went up a steep spiral staircase and arrived at an open area with several doors lined up ahead of us. "The manabeast laboratory is over there. It's the second door from the right."

We continued as Ryuk instructed and knocked on the pure white door. A researcher appeared on the other side and kindly showed us in. The board chairman had apparently notified them of our visit in advance, and we were welcomed awfully politely. There were five manabeast researchers in total. All of them were thin, smart-looking people dressed in white robes.

"Thank you for having me here today. To begin with, I have something to share that could be related to the recent discovery." All the researchers listened to me quietly and seriously as I started

talking about Sutrena's barren soil in detail. "Therefore, I'd like to look into the common points between Sutrena's situation and this incident. I hope nothing is wrong, but on the off chance that we're dealing with the same phenomenon, Polpystan could be in danger of turning into a land where crops barely grow, just like Sutrena. This is only a hypothesis on my part, though."

Sutrena had been a barren land for a long time. Specifically, only the edible crops wouldn't grow—it was rather strange for a natural phenomenon. But if mana was causing this problem, it could explain this curious phenomenon...possibly. In any case, there were several experts present, so I believed this was a good chance to investigate.

"It looks like there's room to test your theory, Lady Agnes," one of the researchers said while pushing up a pair of square, silver-rimmed glasses. "We tested soil collected from the mountain and detected a poison that prevented crops from growing inside it. Soil samples from other affected areas contained the same component. It seems that the poison kills entire plants."

"It would take over a century for the poison to be neutralized. In Sutrena's case, it could be that only resilient plants like weeds have been able to grow during that time," a different researcher explained in detail.

"We detected strong acidic components. They seem to be the result of the hoppers eating plants in their polyphenic state. Soil from the affected areas seems to bear similarities to soil collected from Sutrena in the past. Anything further than that is yet unclear."

All of this information was from yesterday and today, so it seemed that their investigation had only reached that stage for now.

"Um, what if you looked at this from a historical angle?" The suggestion came from Ryuk, who'd been listening quietly so far. "There could be documents that contain some sort of clue."

I nodded at Ryuk, and we headed to the history laboratory next. On the way there, the researchers looked at Kelly passionately, but she ignored all of them as if it were nothing. Though there was a high chance that she wasn't doing it intentionally and had honestly not noticed.

"Lady Agnes, this is the history laboratory I owe a lot to." Thanks

to Ryuk's introduction, we were able to enter easily even though this laboratory hadn't been notified of our visit.

Dusty old books lined the shelves along the walls. The researchers each looked busy with their own research.

"The documents on soil and agriculture are over there." One of the busy researchers directed Ryuk to a shelf in the far back.

"Thank you," Ryuk replied.

We all started searching for any documents that looked relevant, but we couldn't quite find anything.

"Excuse me, um..." A researcher called out to us while we were at a loss. He was a drowsy-looking man with ruffled, straw-like hair. "I mainly research stone monuments and murals, but...I found an account similar to what you're talking about in this biography." The somewhat timid researcher pointed at a page of a certain book. The old, tattered biography was written on parchment instead of paper. The letters were faded and it was difficult to discern the details. "Look at this sketch instead of the letters. Doesn't it resemble a big hopper?"

There was a sketch of a black insect-like creature drawn on the parchment. It certainly did look like a big hopper after it had changed color.

"We thought this document was just a description of an insect, but something always felt ominous about the next page."

I turned to the next page as he instructed, and it was all purple; it was a bit scary. I felt an indescribable pressure from the purple paint smeared all over the page.

"This book has been restored to just how it was in the past, so I believe the contents and color are all correct," the researcher said.

"This is the same color that Lord Nazel said the ground turned," I said.

Ryuk nodded in confirmation.

"I saw it in person. The ground was dyed purple and all plants withered. It was just like this page..."

The next page showed barren land with no plants growing and people leaving the place.

"This book is from the southern part of Polpystan. That land is

currently a desert, but other documents say that until a century or so ago, it used to have the same climate as the north, with a dry and rainy season. There are actually some older people who have heard stories of that from their parents or grandparents." This would mean that this purple page depicted the reason parts of Polpystan had turned into a desert. "Until recently, I didn't understand what this page indicated. But when I heard what happened during the graduation exam, I thought maybe it was related."

I agreed with the researcher—the connection was quite possible. *In that case, perhaps Sutrena was a desert for a long time and has returned to normal to a certain extent.* In any case, once a land became barren, it wouldn't recover for quite some time.

"If this document is correct, we need to do something about the big hoppers... But exterminating such a massive number of manabeasts would be a colossal task," I said. Not only were there far too many of the black ones, they also appeared at unexpected places and times.

"I-I'll continue looking for similar books! If we reduce the big hoppers' population by a certain amount, they should go back to their normal green color." The timid researcher immediately started looking through other documents. The ancient documents in this room were apparently valuable items excavated from various locations.

"Then I'll let Lord Nazel know about this." He might be able to come up with a good solution. As for the information about the saint, I decided to ask them to show me another time. "Thank you for showing us the way, Ryuk. Thanks to you, we may be able to better understand the problem taking place in Polpystan at the moment. I couldn't have come to the history laboratory on my own."

"Please, you don't need to thank me. I owe a lot to you and your husband, Lady Agnes. Thank you again for helping me get a job after graduation. I absolutely *cannot* join the knights."

"Don't mention it. Once this problem is taken care of, we'll go persuade your father, so you don't need to worry about anything."

"Lady Agnes..."

I offered Ryuk a handshake, and he reached his hand toward

mine but quickly withdrew it. He looked nervous, his face bright red.

"No, um, I'm sorry. I grew up in an all-male household, so I'm not really used to touching women."

"Oh, I see." Perhaps it was good for him to have grown up like that, given the uninhibited culture of Polpystan.

"I'm so pathetic for being unable to touch women, aren't I? A nobleman is an adult only after courting many women. My father always asks me why I don't even have a single lover yet."

That educational policy seemed wrong to me.

"Hmm, that value is a bit hard to imagine in Desnim, where getting engaged and married to just one person is the norm. Everyone has their own preferences and values, but I'm fond of people who are devoted." Having an adulterous betrothed or spouse could make you nervous. It was sad to be in a relationship where you couldn't feel at ease together. "You're lovely enough just as you are. I'm also grateful that you're such a good friend to Paul. I'm also happy that we'll get someone so enthusiastic about research in Sutrena. If you want to continue researching Polpystani history, feel free to do so in Sutrena."

"No, I'd like to make Sutrena's local history my new research topic. I found it interesting just by hearing you talk about it."

"Really? I'd be happy if you looked into Sutrena's history, but you should do what you like without worrying about me."

"You're a kind person, Lady Agnes. I can see why Polpystani men like you."

"Huh...?" I didn't quite understand what Ryuk meant, so I looked at him in surprise. When he noticed my reaction, for some reason, he matched my astonishment.

"You haven't noticed? You're strong, cute, and kind, so you're really popular among my classmates. The chairman's fondness for you is obvious, and the former chairman also seems suspicious to me."

Eep! What Lord Nazel had told me sounded much more credible now. *When it comes to the students, I think they just enjoyed arm wrestling with me.* But I was concerned about the two adults—educators, no less—setting such a questionable example for the

youth.

"In any case, I'll discuss everything I learned today with Lord Nazel." We left the laboratory and returned to the inn. Lord Nazel had also just returned and we bumped into him in the lobby.

"I've returned, Agnes."

"Welcome back, Lord Nazel."

"What kind of clothes are those?"

"It's a Polpystani maternity dress."

"Oh, is that so? The beads are beautiful...but the fabric is see-through."

"There are overlapping layers, so you can't see my skin, right? Kelly spoke highly of the dress, and I also think it's cute."

"Yes, you certainly are really, *really* cute. But I feel like dressing like that will draw considerable attention from Polpystani men. I'm worried about you wearing it outside."

"Heh heh, don't worry. I visited the school's laboratories today, and everyone there was sensible."

"The laboratories, you say?"

"Yes, I went to ask if they knew anything about the big hoppers."

"Dressed like that? I'm glad you made it out safely." It seemed that Lord Nazel didn't trust what I was saying much.

"Did your investigation yield any results?"

"Yes, we found another swarm of big hoppers. We exterminated them since they're prone to attacking people, but my magic has the worst compatibility with them. They even tried to eat my carnivorous plants." Apparently, a fierce fight between manabeasts and plants had taken place, with each side trying to eat the other. I was relieved that Lord Nazel had made a safe return from all that chaos. "Will you tell me what you learned in detail? What happened at the laboratories?"

"While I was there, I looked into manabeasts and Polpystani history. There was actually an old book describing events similar to our current ones. Big hoppers and barren land really could be connected. The researchers are investigating that further at the moment."

"You're so reliable, Agnes."

Lord Nazel had praised me for my work! I was floating on cloud nine. *Yes! I was useful to Lord Nazel!* However, the problem hadn't been resolved yet. There were still many things we had to investigate and deal with.

"It looks like we'll conduct another large-scale big hopper extermination with the help of nearby soldiers and volunteering students." Apparently, there had been eyewitness reports of black big hoppers in other locations too.

"Even students are joining?! That means it's time for my reinforcement magic to shine."

"That's true, but it would be troubling if your real magic was discovered."

"But I don't want to put the students' lives at risk. I think it would be best if I secretly cast my magic on them, then secretly undo it, like I usually do. I did the same during the exam and it turned out fine."

"Be careful of Prince Valen and Duke Masroono. Those two look particularly sharp."

"Yes, I'll make sure I don't get caught!" My absolute reinforcement was a unique magic whose particulars we'd yet to identify. I was worried that I might be targeted because of my magic, so even in Desnim, I'd only disclosed it to my closest people, like Lord Nazel or King Bertrand.

"Your absolute reinforcement is apparently as powerful as the legendary saint's magic, so I'm sure people will be after it. It even brought me back from the brink of death."

I nodded in agreement with Lord Nazel. *I have to use my magic safely and discreetly.* I decided to accompany Lord Nazel to Masroono National School on the day they would leave for the manabeast extermination.

"All right, now that we've decided our general schedule...let's go to our room, Agnes."

"Hwah?"

"It's because you're hanging around me in that cute outfit." Lord Nazel had a refreshing smile, but was it just me, or was there something unsettling about this?

"Huh? Hey, please wait a second, Lord Nazel."

"Hmm? No, I'm not waiting."

And so, even during our trip, Lord Nazel dragged me to our room like usual.

Chapter 4: The Effects of Madam Bumpkin's Magic

It was raining on the day of the manabeast extermination. Underneath the thick, heavy clouds, Lord Nazel, the students, and I gathered in the schoolyard.

All right, now's the time! Reinforcement magic go! I secretly cast my magic on all the students present.

Paul and Ryuk were also here, both nervous. Ryuk had the air of someone who didn't want to be here, but his father had apparently ordered him to participate, whether he liked it or not. He looked unenthusiastic and somewhat dejected.

We're still dealing with the big hopper problem, so Viscount Simble hasn't been informed about Ryuk's future work plans yet. Once the manabeast extermination was over, we'd have the time for that.

"You stay inside the school building, Agnes. We'll split into groups and exterminate the manabeasts."

"Yes, Lord Nazel. Please be careful!"

Lord Nazel hugged me gently.

"I can't say if it's a good or bad thing, but the location I'll be headed to is nearby, so I'll be fine. Take care of yourself and don't worry about a thing," he said.

He gave me a peck on the cheek before he and the students got atop their mountbeasts and took flight. The students of Masroono National School could ride mountbeasts, after all. Incidentally, unlike the other students, Paul flew on his own with Ryuk in his arms.

Oh my, Paul has gotten even better at flying. He's faster now.

After seeing them off, I let out a short sigh and went back into the school building. Kelly and Torre, who'd also stayed behind, looked at me with concern.

"I can't shake off my anxiety, but I'll do what I can." After parting with Lord Nazel and the rest, I headed to the history laboratory to ask them the results of our recent discussion. I'd told them I'd be visiting in advance, so I could enter even without Ryuk this time.

"Greetings, Lady Agnes. We have finished looking into the matter at hand. There weren't any similar documents, but when we checked the materials we'd gathered from around Polpystan, we confirmed that the purple land depicts what is now southern Polpystan. It's currently a desert, but it's not like no plants at all can grow there. We hypothesized that the soil is recovering little by little."

"Oh, thank you so much. If the land can recover over time, the desert will also go back to normal eventually, right?"

"Yes, though it will likely take an extensive amount of time."

The researcher's assessment sounded reasonable. According to the hypothesis Lord Nazel and I had come up with, there was a high chance Sutrena had been in the same state in the past.

Our theory's becoming more and more credible. Plants could grow in Sutrena, but not crops. The soil had surely not recovered fully yet. It was overwhelming to imagine the many years or decades it would take until edible plants could grow there again.

"In any case, keeping the current big hopper outbreak at bay is the most sensible choice," the researcher said.

"I agree. I hope the damage doesn't spread any further." I anxiously looked through the window—it was still raining outside.

I left the laboratory and headed straight to the school's guest room, which had been prepared for me to stay in. It was close to the infirmary and was made to be friendly to pregnant women.

All right, on to the next task. I'd wondered if there was anything I could do while Lord Nazel was away, so I filled my idle time with work. After this, I had to borrow the school's drawing room to entertain some guests. Since Lord Nazel and I were visiting, Polpystani nobles were coming to greet us. My guests this time would be married Polpystani noblewomen. A letter seeking a meeting had been delivered by one of their representatives, and I'd diligently written them a reply back at the inn. My room at the inn would get cramped with multiple visitors, so I was glad that I could

borrow the school's large drawing room.

I took a deep breath and headed to the drawing room accompanied by Kelly and Torre. The spacious room had an elegant air about it, perfectly befitting a prestigious school. It had refined, floral-patterned sofas, luxurious furnishings, and high-class carpet. There was also nice scenery visible from the window.

Now then, time to start my job as the Margravine of Sutrena. It's time to make use of the social skills Lady Marie taught me. I slapped my cheeks to motivate myself and started getting ready to welcome my guests. I couldn't help but worry about Lord Nazel, but keeping myself busy was a good distraction.

When the time came, the noblewomen arrived at the school. Duchess Masroono was among them.

I'm so nervous!

I greeted them outside, then guided them to the drawing room. There were three of them, and they lived near the school. The greetings went well; all of them were older than me, but they were really nice. When they were seated, Kelly served them some black tea, but I got herbal tea since I was pregnant.

"Lady Agnes, after I read Latriche's letter, I wanted to meet you," said Duchess Noyer Masroono, the King of Polpystan's younger sister. She'd apparently always doted on her niece, Queen Latriche, and she'd been vehemently against sending her to Desnim.

"We haven't been able to meet recently since we're both pregnant, but she seems to be doing well according to her letters. Her health is fine and her belly is steadily growing bigger."

"I'm glad to hear that." Duchess Noyer was kind to me since I was Queen Latriche's friend. The other women imitated her, as she was higher ranking. "Incidentally, you wrote something intriguing in your letter replying to our visit. Are you really interested in the school, Lady Agnes?"

"Yes, I'd like to build one in Sutrena too. We have permission from King Bertrand."

"That's wonderful!" Since she had a deep interest in education, Duchess Noyer's eyes sparkled.

"Um, using Masroono National School as a reference, I'd first like

to build a school for training people to serve as government officials. After that, I'd like to build schools for artisans or schools that even adults can attend."

"Excellent!"

After listening to me, Duchess Noyer started telling me her thoughts on her own school and about its administration. It seemed that her husband had been appointed the first chairman for convenience, but she was the one with authority. The other two women were also interested in the school's management and joined the conversation. They were all apparently graduates of Royal Buren Academy.

Thanks to Duchess Noyer, it seems that this will turn out better than my socializing in Desnim. I was relieved from the bottom of my heart that this meeting was looking like it was going to end without causing Lord Nazel any trouble.

The conversation moved on from the school to Polpystan's recent state of affairs.

"Oh yes, did you hear? The country of Myzahn to the southwest is making suspicious moves."

"If I remember correctly, a new king succeeded the throne recently. The previous king was in favor of maintaining the status quo; it would be troubling if the new ruler is more aggressive."

All three of them were talented women who'd studied at Royal Buren Academy, so they were well-versed in matters of politics and the circumstances of foreign countries.

I listened carefully to their conversation. *It's unlikely that Myzahn will attack Desnim since Polpystan is between the two countries. I want to support Polpystan for the sake of Sutrena's peace.*

"People from Myzahn have been entering Polpystan without permission. It seems that they're investigating something. The food situation this year is concerning, and there's no end to our worries. We're grateful for Desnim's support." The women expressed their gratitude to me.

"No, no, this isn't your problem alone." If Polpystan fell, Desnim would be next.

"If only we had a saint like in the past."

"A saint, you say?"

"Yes, there's a legend that back when Myzahn attacked us many years ago, the saint of Polpystan drove them back."

"She did?"

"Indeed. The story isn't well-known, but luckily, there apparently was a saint in Polpystan at the time. I think documents about the saint are currently stored in a laboratory here at Masroono National School."

I'd been so busy, I hadn't looked into the saint yet, but the information about her was actually in this school. *And she even stopped Myzahn's invasion...* This new information made my desire to read about the saint grow more and more.

Duchess Noyer smiled pleasantly when she noticed my eagerness.

"Are you interested in the saint, Lady Agnes?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. I wonder what kind of magic she used."

"It certainly stokes one's curiosity, doesn't it? My husband keeps going on and on about the saint, though I can understand his desire for her to appear again."

Although our conversation about the saint was lively, I didn't learn anything further about her. Duchess Noyer was a nice person, so I was happy I got along with her.

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Nazelbart was atop Geni, flying through the cloudy sky toward an area likely to suffer damage from big hoppers. Valen, the second prince as well as the school's chairman, was flying near him. In Desnim, it was unthinkable for a member of royalty to participate in manabeast extermination, but the same wasn't true in Polpystan. In fact, the higher one's status, the better it was considered for them to take the initiative in achieving military exploits.

Their destination was an area dense in fields close to the school. Judging from the path the big hoppers had followed until now, that was the place most likely to be targeted next: a village surrounded by fields.

"Good grief, no matter how many we take down, they just appear in a different place. These manabeasts are such nuisances." Valen grimaced as he flew on his mountbeast.

According to what Nazelbart had been told, he should soon be able to see rocky mountains and fields ahead of him, but the scenery before his eyes was dyed pitch-black. Everything looked hazy...

No, that's not haze, it's... Some kind of black mass was moving.

"You have to be kidding me... Those are big hoppers. There's still so many of them left?!" Valen shouted.

There was a frighteningly large swarm of manabeasts ahead of them. It felt like every single big hopper in Polpystan must have gathered there. As they approached, they could hear the creatures' grating buzzing. And what was more...

"They're flying? They have long wings!" From what Nazelbart had heard, big hoppers could jump, but they should have been unable to fly. But judging from what he could see at the moment, the black variant could do just that.

The manabeast swarm started flying toward Masroono National School, where there were vast fields for research purposes. The swarm that had appeared on the mountain during the graduation exam would probably have eventually made its way there too. Nazelbart now realized that the big hoppers had appeared at the guardians' seating area because it had been on their way to the school.

Oh no! Agnes is at the school! Nazelbart once again felt uneasy. Big hoppers preferred crops over flowers. It was safe to assume that the fields at the extermination party's original destination had already been devoured.

"On our current course, we will collide with the manabeasts heading our way. Their final destination is probably the fields used by the school's laboratories for research," Nazelbart told Valen, the one in charge. Hopefully, no one at the school would carelessly go outside, but nobody had anticipated the big hoppers to be able to fly.

"We'll head back to Masroono National School while intercepting

the manabeasts!” Valen realized what Nazelbart was trying to say, so he instructed everyone following to change course.

Geni also sped off with Nazelbart on his back. At the same time, light rain started falling from the dark sky.

“Paul, Ryuk, would you like to ride with me on Geni?” Nazelbart called out to the two boys who were flying with magic, and they looked at him in surprise.

“Is it really okay, elder brother?”

“Yes, we need to hurry back to the school.”

Riding on a wyvern was faster than flying with magic. Paul and Ryuk both seemed uneasy for some reason as they got on Geni along with Nazelbart. A short time later, Paul looked deeply impressed.

“You’re really skilled at flying your mountbeast, elder brother. I’ve hated traveling via mountbeast ever since the first time I rode on one, but I don’t feel any discomfort today.”

“Is that so? Who did you ride with before, by the way?”

“With Queen Latriche. Her flying style was much rougher.”

“Ah...” Come to think of it, Nazelbart had heard that the queen’s flying was hazardous. “Sounds like your first flight was a disaster, but this is the norm.”

“In that case, I should also be able to get on a mountbeast.”

While they were caught up in conversation, the school came into view. Their formation spread out and got ready to intercept the manabeasts in front of the school and without letting a single one get inside.

Agnes and the others are inside the school. We have to take care of all the manabeasts here, Nazelbart thought.

The moment Valen gave the command, everyone rushed at the big hopper swarm while getting drenched by the rain. Paul and Ryuk got down from Geni and once again got ready to attack.

“Whoaaa!” Ryuk immediately charged forward, but a manabeast’s attack sent him flying, and his body violently crashed into the school building before he even had a chance to use his magic. However... “H-Huh? My body feels kind of hard. The manabeast that struck me looks more hurt than I am.” He was unharmed thanks to Agnes’s

magic.

"You don't need to push yourself, Ryuk. You should just prioritize protecting yourself with your magic," Nazelbart said.

Ryuk nodded in relief. Fortunately, his father was fighting big hoppers some distance away and hadn't noticed this conversation.

"Thank you, I'll follow your advice." Ryuk moved under the school building's shadow to hide from his father.

While confirming Ryuk's safety, Nazelbart created plants with his magic and fought against the big hoppers' invasion. *They really are a terrible match for me. My plants will get eaten up if I get careless.* It was frustrating that he couldn't exterminate the manabeasts as effortlessly as usual. Regardless, he continued taking down big hoppers while supporting the people around him.

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I suddenly thought that I heard the buzzing of insects and turned around. I was currently in a room with a high ceiling in the center of the Masroono National School building. I'd been wondering if there was anything I could do, so I'd just finished helping prepare the infirmary. Nothing had really changed in my surroundings; I was still surrounded by the same inorganic white walls.

Was it just my imagination? But something was bothering me, so I started moving from the center of the building toward the entrance; Kelly and Torre were also with me. When I casually looked through a window, I was dumbfounded at the bizarre scene that unfolded before my eyes.

"What is that? The rain? No, it's..." I could see a black mass of flapping wings restlessly moving around outside; it was a big hopper swarm. "They're flying?! I didn't know those manabeasts could do that!" I could see people amid the endless black. It looked like they were fighting the manabeasts. "What are so many big hoppers doing here? Is Lord Nazel all right?"

Feeling anxious, I went up the stairs and checked my surroundings through the top floor's window. I quickly noticed a conspicuous pink creature in the middle of all the black.

"Geni!" Lord Nazel was riding on him, but there were so many big hoppers that he was struggling to fight them off. Geni was also surrounded and having a hard time flying. *They're completely overwhelmed.* They were up against rampaging manabeasts, which was nothing like fighting human opponents. Moreover, the big hoppers were aiming at Lord Nazel's plants like they were ordinary food.

I need to do something. It would be awful if Lord Nazel and the others got hurt. However, there was only so much I could do. If I recklessly rushed in, I would only get hurt and cause more trouble for everyone.

In the meantime, the big hoppers' fierce offensive continued. I turned around toward Torre, who was guarding me nearby.

"Torre, I'll stay inside the school, so please go give Lord Nazel as much help as you can."

"Understood!" Torre immediately ran down the stairs, rushed outside, used his gigantification magic, and started fighting.

"Now, next up..." I looked at Lord Nazel's magical plants, which were being targeted by the big hoppers. "That's right, I should just reinforce Lord Nazel's plants like my tubers." I aimed at Lord Nazel who was on the other side of the window and activated my absolute reinforcement. "Get stronger!" Unfortunately, my magic didn't affect Lord Nazel but Paul, who happened to move forward at the worst moment. For the record, he didn't realize he was affected by my magic.

"Whoops... I missed, huh? One more time, get stronger!" I felt relieved as my magic actually reached Lord Nazel this time. "Let's use it on Torre as well while I'm at it. I'm worried about him since he can only use his gigantification for three minutes or so."

After finishing what I wanted to do, I quietly watched the battle unfold from indoors. This incident didn't only concern a foreign country. Sutrena was to the north of the land Duke Masroono ruled over. There was no guarantee that the big hoppers wouldn't eventually come to our home too.

It would be a disaster if we were swarmed by manabeasts just when we finally overcame the food shortage and the territory is

recovering.

When the reinforced Lord Nazel created more plants, he noticed the change in his magic. The big hoppers also looked confused, probably because the plants suddenly became harder and tougher. But Lord Nazel reacted perfectly to the sudden turn of events and defeated manabeast after manabeast with his reinforced plants. Paul was also flying so fast it was impossible to spot him with the naked eye. He left Geni and flew around him to support Lord Nazel.

Cleaning up after this fight looks like it's going to be difficult. The defeated big hoppers were already piling up on the ground and there was nowhere left to stand.

Torre joined up with Lord Nazel and Paul, giving birth to the most powerful trio. With both their bodies and magic reinforced, they showed no signs of stopping.

"Look, Kelly. The manabeasts are falling like raindrops."

"Oh my. I don't mind the rain, but I'm not particularly fond of insects."

"I guess you're right. I also hate vermin that damage fields. I don't want them completely ruining our vegetables."

Time passed as we talked and the big hoppers' numbers visibly decreased.

I can actually see around me now. And it looks like no one got seriously injured. As I was examining the situation, Kelly suddenly spoke to me.

"Lady Agnes, look at that!"

I turned my head and saw a particularly large manabeast attacking Lord Nazel and the rest.

"Do big hoppers have a boss in their swarm?" I asked.

"No, I have never heard anything of the sort."

"Perhaps this is a special case related to their polyphenism. Let's look into Sutrena's historical records once we're home. There are so many things we don't know."

Lord Nazel's group was fighting the big hoppers' boss.

"All right, then I'll also..." I held a tuber in one hand and opened the nearby window. I raised the pink taro high above my head and threw it at the manabeast I assumed was the swarm's boss. The

taro hit the big hopper head-on, then bounced off and fell to the ground.

I was left speechless for a moment. The big hopper didn't seem to be affected much by the impact, but it did react to the tuber itself. It tried to eat the reinforced pink taro, thinking it was food. Lord Nazel and the rest took advantage of the opening to attack, and the big hopper fell to the ground. This brought the extermination of the big hoppers near the school to a close. However, Lord Nazel noticed the tuber and started looking around in the school's direction, until he spotted me behind the window.

He's sharp... He might warn me against this behavior later, but all was well if he was safe.

Countless big hoppers lay piled up in front of the school, like a small black hill. Kelly and I hurried down the stairs at a reasonable pace to welcome Lord Nazel and the rest back. Kelly didn't want me running in my condition and would say something if I tried, after all. Meanwhile, Lord Nazel was running up the stairs as if he'd foreseen I would do this.

"Stop, Agnes! Please refrain from going up and down the stairs!"

"Welcome back, Lord Nazel. I'm so glad you weren't inju— Whoa!" He hugged me on the staircase landing. Kelly quietly refrained from getting in the way.

"You shouldn't have opened the window amid all that chaos. You would have been in great danger if a big hopper had gotten inside."

"The manabeasts are bigger than the window, so they couldn't really enter through it." Lord Nazel was always composed, but when it came to me, he was a bit prone to worrying too much. "In any case, that sure was a large swarm."

"There are apparently still big hoppers in various places, but it doesn't look like there will be this many from now on. I feel gloomy just thinking about cleaning up all the manabeasts we took down." Well, the Polpystani people would have to work hard on that. "Now, the problem is that while we were defeating the big hoppers, the mana that leaked from their bodies made the surrounding land barren... It seems that their mana overflows whenever they eat. They'd just finished devouring the fields at our destination earlier

today too.”

“It’s very unfortunate, even though there was nothing we could have done.”

“We did what we could. Now it’s up to the people here how they recover. Of course, Sutrena will help them in any way we can.”

“Yes. I’m glad everyone made it out safe today. Here’s a towel to dry yourself, Lord Nazel.” Now that things had calmed down a bit, I thought I’d let him rest, but he still wouldn’t let go of me.

“By the way, did you do something to my magic, Agnes?”

“Ah...” Lord Nazel was shrewd, so it looked like he’d realized I was responsible for the changes in his magic. “Well, you see, I tried reinforcing your magic as well, and that was the result.”

“Huh...” Lord Nazel came to an abrupt halt. “Your magic is truly unpredictable. After bringing someone back from the verge of death, you even reinforce magic itself.”

“I didn’t know whether it was possible or not until I tried it out.”

“But you did it.”

“Yes...”

While the two of us were talking, Prince Valen approached us. It looked like he’d been searching for Lord Nazel.

“I was looking for you since you suddenly disappeared, Nazelbart. Did you go straight to Lady Agnes’s side?”

“Yes, I was so worried about my dear wife that I couldn’t sit still.” Lord Nazel had a bright smile, but his eyes expressed the opposite emotion. He was clearly trying to keep Prince Valen in check.

Eep...

I couldn’t be sure whether Prince Valen was aware of the warning; he didn’t look like he’d noticed it.



"We'll take care of the disposal. You may rest, Nazelbart."

"I'll take you up on that offer, then."

Prince Valen nodded in response before he looked at Lord Nazel like he'd just remembered something.

"On another note, it looked like you all suddenly got a boost to your magic during the battle."

"You must have imagined it. We were just cornered and exerted more power than normal," Lord Nazel swiftly replied.

"I see. So that's what it was?" Prince Valen looked unconvinced, but he seemed to accept the explanation for now; he didn't inquire any further. "We let you go through a terrifying experience, Lady Agnes. As an apology, if there's anywhere you'd like to go sightseeing, I'd be more than happy to guide—"

"We're fine, thank you. You're busy with your duties as the chairman, right?" Lord Nazel answered instead of me.

"My, you're so harsh."

"You must surely understand why."

An odd silence fell between the two men. I hurried to say something to change the mood.

"Paul will be graduating soon, but please take care of him until then, Your Highness."

"Of course, leave it to me. He's your younger brother, so I'll properly look after him," Prince Valen promised cheerfully. It would probably be all right.

Afterward, we parted ways with Prince Valen and headed back to our inn. Torre went to return Geni to the stable, so he'd be joining us later.

"That reminds me, I had a talk with Duchess Masroono and some other noblewomen earlier today, and Polpystan's saint came up in the conversation. She apparently protected the country from Myzahn's invasion," I told Lord Nazel.

"Did you learn what the saint's magic was?" he asked.

"No, not yet... But it looks like there really are documents about her in a laboratory, so I'm planning on going to see them next chance I get."

"I'll also go with you when the time comes."

"Thank you." I then told Lord Nazel that Myzahn was once again making disturbing moves against Polpystan.

"I see. It sounds really credible if the duchess herself said so. We should also let King Bertrand know."

"I agree. I hope nothing bad happens." Polpystan was already in enough trouble because of all the chaos caused by the big hoppers. It was currently on friendly terms with Desnim, so Lord Nazel also seemed worried about the state of affairs here.

We eventually reached the inn's entrance. When we went inside, the employees were acting somewhat strange. They all looked perplexed as they busily ran around checking things.

"What's wrong?" Lord Nazel asked.

"Oh, Lord and Lady Florescruz. Something terrible has happened..." Apparently, a thief had entered our room.

"A thief, huh? Was anything stolen?"

"Nothing seems to be missing as far as we can see, but please check." It seemed that the culprit had escaped and had yet to be caught.

"All right, we'll check our luggage. This is all so disturbing." I looked up at Lord Nazel, who was frowning next to me. He seemed to be thinking about something different than I was.

"If there's no damage, perhaps the culprit had a different objective," he said.

"Like what?"

"This is just a hypothetical, so I don't know anything specific." It seemed like Lord Nazel was trying to reassure me, but I couldn't help but be worried when he looked so concerned.

"What kind of objective could it have been, for example?"

"Perhaps someone in Polpystan wants to send a 'message' to Sutrena. It could also have something to do with the big hoppers. Someone involved with Prince Valen and Duke Masroono might be behind the theft. It could even be related to Myzahn... It might be connected to the incident involving Davier—some of the nobles in the rebel faction escaped abroad after that."

"The last one is the scariest." I'd had enough of that conflict.

"Many who fled after that incident have already been caught, but

there are also several who are still missing. It's possible that those people hold a grudge against me and are targeting me. Was our location revealed because of the big hopper affair?"

I pursed my lips, not really knowing what I should say.

"The most important thing is to prevent any harm to you and the baby. Let's move to a different inn for now and also finish up our trip early."

"Yes, safety comes first."

"Just in case, let's strengthen security around Paul too. Being related to us might put a target on his back. Finally, we just need to speak with Viscount Simble before we go home."

"Right, we promised Ryuk we'd help him with his employment."

We'd have to give up looking into the saint's documents, but Ryuk was a different story. Even if we had to hurry back home, we couldn't simply abandon him. This was our final task here in Polpystan. Ryuk had an inquiring mind, so he'd surely be of help to Sutrena.

He'd do well as a government official, but we could also employ him as a school teacher. I still had hopes of founding a school.

The next day, we visited Viscount Simble at his lodging in the afternoon. There were other inns near Masroono National School where nobles would stay, and the viscount was in one of them. We'd contacted him yesterday about our plan to visit, but we hadn't told him what our business with him was, so he looked somewhat confused when he greeted us.

His reaction is understandable. We have no points in common besides the school.

The viscount showed us to a room where we could talk.

"We apologize for taking up your time, Lord Simble," Lord Nazel said.

"Please, there's no need to be so humble. I should be thanking you for your help the other day. The big hoppers are our country's problem, yet you even took part in their extermination. I'm both grateful and apologetic..." Viscount Simble sat on a sofa and scratched his head remorsefully.

"We should all help each other in times of need, Lord Simble,"

Lord Nazel replied pleasantly.

"I truly appreciate hearing that from you. Incidentally, you fought magnificently yesterday, Lord Florescruz. In particular, the magic you used at the end in front of the school was simply superb. I have never seen such powerful magic before!"

I felt a little awkward as I looked at Viscount Simble leaning forward in such excitement.

"I suppose it was a form of hysterical strength," Lord Nazel said with a laugh, covering up my absolute reinforcement.

Urk, I'm so sorry. I couldn't stand back doing nothing when I saw Lord Nazel being overwhelmed by the manabeasts...

After exchanging brief greetings, Lord Nazel moved on to the main reason for our visit.

"We came here today because we have something we'd like to ask of you, Lord Simble. It's about Ryuk." Lord Nazel explained Ryuk's own aspirations and our desire to take the boy in over at Sutrena.

That boy is full of potential. I want to let him walk the path he wishes.

However, Viscount Simble had a sullen expression.

"But you see, our house has produced knights for generations. We all live our lives by distinguishing ourselves in the military. Ryuk has been timid ever since he was little, and no amount of training has fixed that flaw." Even if they were related by blood, Ryuk's personality still dictated what he was best suited for. "Men are only true adults when they have sufficient military exploits. Joining the knights should toughen that feeble boy a bit."

"That will be hard for Ryuk. According to Agnes, he has excellent grades and talent as a researcher. And right now, he wants to find a job in Sutrena instead of being a knight."

The viscount looked shocked and slammed his hands against the table.

"But his great shield is a really powerful battle-oriented magic! It's a gift you can't get by simply wishing for it!"

It was true that as long as Ryuk had his great shield magic active in front of him, he could just knock his opponents away just by

bumping into them. That was how he'd actually passed his exam.

"He's blessed with such powerful magic yet says all that nonsense about not wanting to become a knight. He's just being spoiled."

It looked like convincing Viscount Simble was going to be an uphill battle. Lord Nazel had a very serious expression as he objected to the viscount.

"I also used to be in the knights, so I understand how useful rare magic can be. However, you should be aware of the danger of allies with low morale, Lord Simble. Having even one unmotivated knight in their ranks would put all of their allies—no, the entire unit at risk. I'm sorry to say this, but right now, I don't sense any desire from your son to work for the knights."

"Well..."

"If I were the one in charge of the knights, I would never recruit him."

"Hrm..." The viscount must have understood Lord Nazel's point well; his expression turned clearly sour. He was also perfectly aware of his son's lack of motivation.

"Participating in the knights half-heartedly would be fatal for Ryuk. Even during the big hopper extermination, I could sense that he was in peril."

"W-Well..." The viscount mumbled the same word as before. He actually understood that his son's personality made him painfully unsuited to being a knight, but he didn't want to admit that unfortunate truth because of his position and the exceptional magic Ryuk had been blessed with. Perhaps it was also a kind of parental love that he wanted his son to walk the same path as he had and help him on his way to becoming a knight.

But... Unfortunately for Viscount Simble, I thought it really was better for Ryuk to not join the knights; both for his sake and the sake of the people around him. We might be just one push away from getting the viscount's permission for Ryuk to pursue the work he wanted.

"If Ryuk decides he wants to join the Polpystani Royal Knights while he's in Sutrena, I will gladly send him back home. How about that?" Lord Nazel suggested, but the viscount only groaned in

response.

I quietly watched, waiting for the outcome. To Paul, Ryuk was a good friend. I was truly glad that my brother had made a friend besides his carrier pigeon. Perhaps it was a bit selfish of me, but I hoped that he'd continue to stay by my brother's side.

"Lord Simble, I'd also like to ask you the same. Ryuk should be able to demonstrate his ability even without being a knight. I'll accept the responsibility and look after him. He's my brother's precious friend, after all."

The viscount only grumbled. Did I manage to persuade him? I nervously waited for him to say something. He could be a little extreme, but he wasn't a completely unreasonable person like my parents. I didn't want to take Ryuk away without his guardian's consent.

Please give him permission.

A little while later, the viscount slowly stood up and nodded his head seriously.

"Very well. If you both say that you need my son that much, I will leave Ryuk in your care for the time being."

When I heard that, I raised my head and smiled.

"Thank you very much, Lord Simble!" Now, Ryuk could be accepted for an apprenticeship position in Sutrena. I was so happy that we got his father's approval.

"Incidentally, will you two be staying in the Duchy of Masroono until the graduation exam restarts?" the viscount asked.

"No, I think it will be difficult for us to be present," Lord Nazel replied.

The graduation exam had been postponed because of the big hoppers' appearance.

Under normal circumstances, I would have liked to stay and see Paul graduate with my own eyes.

However, since someone suspicious had broken into our inn room, we couldn't stay here for long.

It was also possible to stick around hoping to catch the culprit...but that approach was both dangerous and time-consuming. We didn't travel with many people this time. We'd come to a foreign

country, so there would have been problems if we'd brought along a large entourage. We'd had to limit ourselves to a fairly small number of guards and servants to avoid unnecessarily alarming the influential people of Polpystan.

"It's about time for work to start piling up back home, so unfortunately, it doesn't look like we'll be able to stay here until the graduation exam restarts," Lord Nazel said.

The viscount closed his eyes in a show of understanding.

"Right, I suppose you are busy. Sutrena is a large territory, after all."

"Yes. I recently got more land and we are hopelessly understaffed."

Because he was highly skilled, Lord Nazel had been entrusted with the management of a territory that had lost its ruler. It looked like Viscount Simble was aware of those circumstances, as he nodded with a serious expression.

"Mm-hmm, I hope my son can be of some help to you." The viscount slowly stood up from the sofa and bowed his head. "Lord Florescruz, Lady Agnes, please look after my son."

Even though he said harsh words to Ryuk, he cared deeply about him. That fact was very clear to us, so we braced ourselves, stood up, and looked him straight in the eyes.

"We will, Lord Simble." Lord Nazel and Viscount Simble shook hands firmly; I felt truly relieved.

"Thank you so much, Lord Simble." I thanked him again and explained how Ryuk would be treated from now on. We intended to take perfect care of him in Sutrena.

And so, we somehow managed to resolve the matter of Ryuk's employment amicably. We left Viscount Simble's inn and walked side by side back to our own; the two establishments were rather close to each other.

"Phew, I'm glad he approved of Ryuk's plans. Now we can proudly go tell him the news. It's all thanks to you, Lord Nazel," I said, feeling relieved.

"Your sincerity got through to him."

"Huh? Mine?" I hadn't really done much, but I was happy if my

words had been at least a little helpful. As I looked up at Lord Nazel, I could see the sun heading toward evening over his shoulder.

"There are many people here, so let's hold hands, Agnes."

As time went by, more people walked around in the city. It seemed that the predinner shopping rush hour had started, and the barkers in the nearby market were zealously trying to attract customers. It would be best if we quickly headed back to avoid getting caught up in the crowd.

"Sure. I'd hate getting lost again." Without any hesitation, I took the hand Lord Nazel had offered me. Touching his warm hand gave me peace of mind.

"Heh heh, you don't need to grip me that tightly, Agnes."

"Ah! I-It was spontaneous! What have I done?!" Perhaps I'd remembered the previous time I'd gotten lost, because I was desperately holding Lord Nazel's hand as tight as I could. I was so embarrassed.

"You're as red as a beet." I felt even more embarrassed when Lord Nazel pointed it out, but he looked happy throughout the whole thing.

"Ah, there's our inn."

"We're already here? If only it was a little farther away, just for today." Lord Nazel looked a little disappointed.

"If we stay out here any longer, the streets will become even more crowded." I felt the same as he did, though. "If it weren't for that...I would have also liked the inn to be a little farther away." I told Lord Nazel how I honestly felt and looked up at him. His cheeks were tinged red.

"Aah, you're so cute, Agnes. I want to take you away!" Lord Nazel hugged me tight in the middle of the street. I was surprised and hurried to calm him down.

"We're going back to the same place, so there's no point in taking me away, Lord Nazel. Please calm down!" We headed back to the inn in an entangled mess.

Once we were inside, the manager greeted us.

"Welcome back, Lord Florescruz, Lady Agnes."

"Greetings," Lord Nazel replied without letting me go. I was

terribly embarrassed, but the inn staff didn't look the least bit bothered.

"Excuse me, Lord Florescruz. Duke Masroono is in a room in the far back."

"The duke?" The elites of this country were very active despite their high status. "What business does he have here?"

"Maybe more big hoppers showed up," I suggested. Lord Nazel and I headed to the drawing room to meet the duke. "He could have simply sent a messenger. Perhaps he needs something else."

"Most likely."

When we opened the door of the room we were led to, Duke Masroono greeted us with a pleasant smile.

"I apologize for the sudden visit." The duke took out a handkerchief and wiped away his sweat. Was he the type to sweat easily? He looked a bit hot. "I thought I had to tell you what happened after the big hopper extermination." A messenger would have been plenty for the job, but it looked like Duke Masroono was the kind of person who wanted to do things himself. "Thanks to my nephew Valen's hard work, the massive number of big hopper carcasses were all incinerated a short while ago. Dead creatures don't produce mana, so there was no need to worry about polluting the soil when burning them." He also told us that the students had recovered their strength and were helping the chairman. "There are still big hoppers here and there, but apparently only normal green ones are being spotted at the moment, not black ones. According to the laboratory researchers, since their population has decreased, they shouldn't pose a problem even if we don't do anything about them."

Lord Nazel responded with a nod. "It's great to hear that. I'm sure the affected areas have much bigger problems."

"Thanks in part to your cooperation, few areas suffered damage. We will guarantee the livelihood of the people from now on. As the lord of this land, I truly thank you." Things were under control now, so both Lord Nazel and I were relieved. "Incidentally, I happened to hear something interesting about you two."

"Interesting how?" Lord Nazel and I cocked our heads in

confusion; we had no idea what the duke was talking about.

"Lady Agnes apparently possesses unusual magic."

I was shocked, but did my best not to let my unrest show, as did Lord Nazel.

How does Duke Masroono know that? No, it's too early to panic. I showed Prince Valen my "official" magic, so the duke might have just heard about my matter reinforcement. I cautiously looked at the duke to avoid letting anything slip.

"Do you remember the woman at the flower shop? Her magic is middle-ranking appraisal," the duke explained. "In Polpystan, people who possess appraisal magic don't need to work for the church. They can live their lives normally just as she does."

"I see..."

"The problem is that she looked at your magic—both of yours—without permission."

"But my magic is just matter reinforcement." To avoid arousing the duke's suspicion, I tried to remain levelheaded as I argued with him.

"That can't be right. She told me that Nazelbart's magic is vegetation, while Lady Agnes's magic is special reinforcement."

"Huh?" I blinked a few times when I heard that unfamiliar name for my magic. My magic was *absolute* reinforcement, but apparently the middle-ranking appraisal had only identified it as *special*.

What does that mean? Perhaps the old priest who'd given me a vague appraisal during my childhood had also been somewhat uncertain about it, so it was very likely that his judgment had been inaccurate. If even middle-ranking appraisal only viewed my magic as special reinforcement, it would have been much more difficult for a priest with low-ranking appraisal to properly discern its nature.

"You'd need someone with high-ranking appraisal to know the details, but magic with the word 'special' in its name is very rare, just like the magic once used by the saint," the duke explained.

"Excuse me?"

When Lord Nazel noticed my confusion, he immediately cut in.

"It's quite displeasing that you're probing into my wife without permission. Appraising someone's magic without their knowledge is

a breach of manners, isn't it?"

"I don't think the florist had any ill intentions, though. In any case, perhaps we should have a high-ranking appraiser take a look at Lady Agnes."

"My wife's magic has already been examined by a priest with potent high-ranking appraisal and we properly know what it is. It's just a somewhat powerful matter reinforcement. We don't have any problems, so you don't need to worry."

However, Duke Masroono wouldn't back down.

"After the graduation exam, I heard strange rumors at school regarding the big hopper extermination. Not only were the students just lightly injured, but strange things also took place, like manabeasts hurling themselves at the students but getting blown away and ending up injured instead."

Eek, I'm busted! Duke Masroono was quite sharp to make the connection to my magic from such unclear information.

"So, I have an earnest request for Lady Agnes..."

"We refuse," Lord Nazel interjected without a moment's delay. "We already have plans to return to Desnim, and Agnes is pregnant right now, so we can't push her too much. Not to mention that she already went through a lot of hardship during the big hopper incident."

"I'm...terribly sorry about that. The school is at fault for the trials you endured."

"If you're interested in special magic, we can have Robin from the Sempli Convent help you out. He isn't allowed to leave though, so you'll have to visit him there. I'm sure you will be able to get permission for that much. And it's not like Robin has anything better to do." The two of them had quite the history, so Lord Nazel's comments on Master Robin were scathing.

"Master Robin's magic is also very interesting. I've heard rumors that his powers are like the saint's." His magic was apparently well-known even abroad. The former queen's faction had spread word of his magic far and wide to prove their legitimacy, and it looked like it had even reached Polpystan.

"That's right; it might be similar to the magic of the saint that the

public gossips about. Robin's magic lacks sheer power, but he's troublesome because he's good at taking advantage of people's weaknesses and sneaking into the openings in their hearts. He captivates weak people, especially women, using the sweet words they want to hear. Robin's rotten personality and his magic are frighteningly compatible. He's a dangerous man who had to be locked up."

"Hmm... He *is* dangerous, but he could also be useful..." Duke Masroono nodded with a pensive expression. "Even so, I want to cling to the magic of the Polpystani saint of yore, if that will save our country. Unfortunately, the Sempli Convent is really far away from here, so going there to meet him will be difficult." Because of its inconvenient location, the Sempli Convent had become a destination for criminals.

"Agnes's magic can only reinforce objects, such as by making them harder. I don't know what kind of magic the Polpystani saint used, but I doubt they're much alike."

"Well, I've only read the old documents about the saint, but she could apparently heal the injured in seconds, erect enormous barriers, and purify poison."

"Barriers, huh? I see..." I started pondering as I listened to their conversation. The saint's magic was probably different from my absolute reinforcement. In my case, Father Emilio had said that my magic was made up of at least three different kinds. Apparently, "absolute" magic could expand its scope of possible uses depending on how its user interpreted its meaning.

But since all of my magic's effects seem to be related to reinforcement, I can't use it to erect a barrier...I think.

The Polpystani saint must have possessed several kinds of magic, just like Master Robin and I did. *But I'm no saint. I'm so glad our magic is different.* I was wondering what I would do if I became a prominent figure like her. The responsibility would be too heavy for me.

"But you're going home soon, I see. I really wanted you to meet the king and crown prince too," Duke Masroono said. The king was his brother-in-law, while the crown prince was his nephew.

"Well, Agnes is pregnant, but we determined it would be safe for her to make a short excursion to Polpystan purely for the personal reason of seeing Paul's school life," Lord Nazel explained.

"Is that so? What a pity." Despite his resigned words, Duke Masroono looked like he still hadn't given up on learning more about my magic. "Come to think of it, you two also helped us out with the sunchokes. Valen told me that they could harvest them incredibly quickly. Those tubers could grow even in the fields that had turned barren because of the big hoppers' mana, and they don't seem to be poisonous either."

Since the topic had moved on from magic, Lord Nazel looked interested in continuing the conversation.

"On the topic of the big hopper plague, we actually think something similar might have happened in Sutrena in the past, although no past documents remain to this day."

"I've heard of the situation in Sutrena. As you say, the possibility is quite high. It's quite close to the Duchy of Masroono too."

"Hopefully, the soil in Sutrena will return to normal someday, but if it was polluted by mana, the effect will last for a long time. Do you have any idea how long it's been since Sutrena became unable to grow any crops?"

"I think it's been at least a century—certainly more than a few decades. But it's not your problem alone. From now on, let's cooperate as lords of territories with barren land."

"Yes, I will gladly work with you on that. Please let me offer my help."

A smile formed on Duke Masroono's lips.

"I used to hear that you were emotionless and indifferently did your job, but you're a surprisingly approachable person." It looked like the duke could tell the difference between how Lord Nazel treated me and everyone else.

Though dumbfounded, Lord Nazel smiled faintly.

"It seems I'm no match for you, Your Grace."

I was glad that the conversation had become a bit calmer.

"We Polpystanis value family above all else. I quite like the way you treat Lady Agnes, Nazelbart."

I took a long, hard look at the duke. That was certainly true: Prince Valen cared about Queen Latriche, and the two siblings seemed to be on great terms.

"Let's talk again at a later opportunity. It seems that something dangerous is going on. You probably already have the information, and you must be worried about your dear Lady Agnes, right?"

By "something dangerous," was he perhaps referring to the thief that had broken into our inn room? I looked back and forth between Duke Masroono and Lord Nazel.

Is the thief connected to Polpystan in some way? Does the duke know something? I anxiously continued watching them.

"A short while ago, several suspicious outsiders started roaming around Polpystan. I've been wondering what to do about them," the duke said.

"May I ask for the details?" Lord Nazel's expression was somewhat stern.

"Sure. They most likely crossed the border from Desnim, but because they haven't been involved in any crimes so far, we can't officially do anything against them under Polpystani law." So the duke had apparently ordered his subordinates to discreetly investigate the situation. "However, they recently took problematic action for the first time. If you two lodge a formal complaint against them, we can immediately arrest them publicly. What will you do?"

I remembered what Lord Nazel had told me—the people who'd broken into our inn room could have been the few who'd escaped arrest during the incident with Lord Davier.

Are they targeting Lord Nazel this time, after having gone after little Ralph before? I wish they would just drop their unjustified resentment. Since they couldn't do as they pleased in Desnim, perhaps they were operating behind the scenes abroad and waiting for the right opportunity.

"What do you think, Lord Nazel?" I was reluctant to go home and simply let our own country's criminals do as they pleased here.

After spending a bit of time in thought, Lord Nazel addressed Duke Masroono.

"Your Grace, those people are Desnimer criminals. We would like

your help in apprehending them. We have our own knights ready, but your assistance would be greatly appreciated since you and your men are familiar with the land."

Duke Masroono smiled with satisfaction upon receiving Lord Nazel's official request.

"Please leave it to us. You are our sworn friends who helped save our territory. We will gladly offer our aid. We'll also be happy to do business with you on the sunchokes." Duke Masroono shrewdly added something extra at the end, but business involving the sunchokes would increase our revenue, so it was more than welcome. It would involve trading with a foreign country, but King Bertrand and Queen Latriche would surely give us permission.

Duke Masroono immediately started orchestrating a plan to capture the remnants of Lord Davier's rebellion. It was highly likely that they were still in this city.

"Just in case, I'd like you to take shelter in my estate, Lady Agnes. You're Nazelbart's biggest weakness."

"Very well, I don't want to get in his way. Thank you very much."

"Don't worry, my wife will also be there. You should be able to spend your time visiting with her. She's taken quite a liking to you, after all."

I'd had a meaningful conversation with Duchess Noyer last time we met. I was happy to know that she liked me.

"I'll take you up on your kind offer, then." We decided to accept the duke's proposition.

Chapter 5: Madam Bumpkin and the Duchess

The next day, Lord Nazel left as part of a group to investigate the remnants of the rebellion. Since it had been decided that I would stay at Duke Masroono's estate, his wife and I waited together for our husbands to return.

Duchess Noyer looked refined and approachable—typical traits of Polpystanis—and was also as straightforward as Queen Latriche. The two of us were having breakfast together. The plates were decorated with colorful Polpystani flowers and were filled with carefully seasoned dishes made from high-quality ingredients. The dishes were clearly made to entertain guests.

"Then my husband suggested that we plant tubers in our garden too. He said it would be a form of insurance in case of an emergency." Duchess Noyer apparently rarely had foreign guests, and she enthusiastically engaged in conversation.

"That sounds nice. We also have tubers growing in our garden. The mountbeasts love them too, so I highly recommend it."

"My, you have a field at your home, Lady Agnes?"

"Yes, we've planted vegetables and fruit trees too. I want to start raising chickens next, then ducks." Our garden was vast, so we still had plenty of space.

"That's wonderful. But talking about chickens and ducks...reminds me of that home-wrecker."

"Huh?!"

"Never mind, it's nothing. I'm sorry."

"It's fine..."

The "home-wrecker" had to be the florist. There were many birds in her flower shop. *Is Duchess Noyer perhaps wholly devoted to Duke Masroono? If so, she'd think poorly of him having a lover.*

As I was feeling perplexed, Duchess Noyer suddenly asked something truly surprising.

"Say, Lady Agnes, are you intimate with any men besides Lord Nazelbart?"

"Huh? No, of course not!" I nearly spat out the herbal tea I'd been drinking.

"Oh my, so it's true that Desnimers only love a single person. I'm so envious. In Polpystan, the number of one's lovers is a sign of strength and reliability." It seemed that Duchess Noyer was opposed to Polpystan's uninhibited romantic culture.

A while later, the servants brought us lunch.

"Heh heh, I'll be treating you to traditional Polpystani cuisine today, Lady Agnes."

A variety of dishes fragrant with southern spices was laid out before us.

"Wow, they smell amazing." We started our meal immediately. "Thank you for the meal." The appetizer consisted of meat and vegetables all dyed red. *Did they use paprika powder for the coloring? We may be able to do the same with tubers...* I tried one of the vegetables that had been cut into small pieces.

"Mmm?!" The flavor and the aroma of the spices were truly incredible...but also spicy! Apparently, the red powder wasn't paprika but chili powder. I rushed to drink some water.

"We Polpystanis love spicy foods. From the looks of it, I take it you aren't used to spicy cuisine, Lady Agnes."

"No, I'm not. Spicy food in Desnim is only about half as spicy as this."

"You get accustomed to it the more you eat it, you know."

I was able to stomach it since I'd only eaten a little, but having food like this every day seemed a bit hard.

"I see why Latriche likes you. I only have sons, and they're both independent by now, but having a daughter like you would have been absolutely lovely."

"Y-Your daughter..." At a glance, Duchess Noyer didn't look old enough to have kids my age, but apparently, she was around the same age as Queen Latriche's father, the King of Polpystan.

“Try this one next. It isn’t spicy, so you’ll be fine.”

We were served a dish that was a mix of vegetables and dried dates. When I heard that it wasn’t spicy, I eagerly dug in.

“Mm, it’s sweet... I love it.”

“I’m glad that it suits your tastes. Dates are grown on the boundary between the desert and regular soil. The other plate has pitayas.”

“Pitayas?”

“I believe you call them dragon fruits in Desnim. The cacti they’re harvested from grow in the north.”

I believed dragon fruits had been included among the seedlings Lord Nazel had bought before.

“Queen Latriche has told me that it’s a fruit native to Polpystan and it has become available in our markets ever since she married into the royal family.” But it was a luxury item, so nobles of the capital were usually the ones purchasing it.

“Among others, the cactus family also includes aloe, which can be turned into medicine, agave, which can be made into alcohol, and the Opuntioideae subfamily, whose fruits are edible.”

“Wow, that’s so interesting. I like tubers, but cacti are also fascinating.”

“Cacti typically grow in the desert, but in Polpystan, they only grow in the north and the central regions. Even cacti most likely can’t grow in our desert.” As Duchess Noyer spoke, I raised my head and looked at her. “My husband and my nephew Valen told me about the damage the big hoppers have caused. It’s surely those manabeasts’ fault that cacti don’t grow in the desert here. That’s why I’m truly grateful that you and your husband gave Valen that improved sunchoke variety.”

“Lord Nazel was the one who both made that variety and handed it over. I was worried whether the sunchokes would grow in land where Polpystan’s crops can’t survive, but I’m glad it all went well.”

“Valen was really enthusiastic about this. They’re repeatedly planting and harvesting the sunchokes, so their numbers are steadily increasing. In any case, you and Margrave Florescruz are really close, aren’t you?”

“Eh heh heh...” It seemed that Duchess Noyer realized something from our conversation.

“I envy you two. Polpystani men—no, the women too—are quite prone to adultery.”

“You don’t appear to be that kind of person, though.”

“Indeed. It’s frustrating, but I’m wholly devoted to my husband. That’s why I sometimes feel irritated at his frivolous behavior. I’d like to put him in his place one day.”

That last part sounded like it would be quite intense. I could see Duchess Noyer smiling with satisfaction.

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Nazelbart had started investigating the city along with Duke Masroono. They’d had their subordinates pick out suspicious people in advance, and the two of them were looking deeper into that information. Nazelbart thought that Duke Masroono was also working seriously, but then the latter suddenly said something preposterous.

“Do you have a lover, Nazelbart? Lady Agnes is certainly a charming woman, but a man who’s satisfied with just one woman will fall into ruin.”

“No, I don’t. That’s normal in Desnim—not that there aren’t any nobles there with multiple lovers...” The image of the former High Priest Lubhuta, a man Nazelbart had arrested, flashed through his mind. If he remembered correctly, the high priest had once kept around ten concubines, although there had been no mutual love among them; they’d all been young noblewomen he’d obtained through force.

According to Duke Masroono’s common sense, it was normal for a noble to have lovers, so he probably hadn’t meant any ill will. In fact, Nazelbart understood that the duke was only saying that with the best of intentions to someone younger. He understood it, but whether he shared that point of view was a different matter altogether. And he also couldn’t forgive the duke so casually having his eye on Agnes.

"I have no interest in any women besides Agnes."

"Oh, what a waste. Romance with other women is also nice. Still, I'm not going to push the issue."

Nazelbart was glad that the duke backed down quickly. Polpystanis were friendly and easy to get along with, but this was one part of their culture he found disagreeable.

"Now then, it seems that there were no people connected to Desnim in all of the places we've been to so far. Did they realize the danger and flee?" Nazelbart said. They'd been to quite a number of places but had found nothing, and were finally back near Duke Masroono's estate.

"Don't be so disheartened, Nazelbart. Perhaps these villains are afraid of my magic or yours and won't come out. We might be able to lure them out if we used some kind of bait, though."

Nazelbart realized the implication and gave the duke a look that could kill.

"You aren't suggesting we have Agnes get kidnapped, are you? I'm categorically against it." Nazelbart had absolutely no intention of using his dear wife as bait, not to mention she was pregnant at the moment. He was determined to firmly refuse that suggestion. And no offense to Duke Masroono, but Nazelbart didn't trust him completely. Their respective countries each had their own goals.

"I expected you'd say that. But if we can't use that method..."

As Duke Masroono groaned, another person joined their conversation.

"I'll act as bait!"

When Nazelbart turned around, he saw Paul in his casual clothes next to his friend Ryuk; the two boys were standing close to Nazelbart and the duke.

"Paul? What's the matter?" Nazelbart asked.

"I happened to see you and thought I'd greet you, when I heard you talking about using someone as bait. You were referring to my sister, right? In that case, how about I take her place?"

Nazelbart's eyes opened wide.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but that sounds kind of impossible. You aren't a woman."

"I beg to differ!" Paul shook his head and took off his glasses, revealing a charming face just like Agnes's.

"Ooh! Yes, this will definitely work! He has this soothing charm, just like Lady Agnes," Duke Masroono said.

Nazelbart found the duke's statement inexcusable.

So the duke really had his eye on Agnes... He's a dangerous man. I have to keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn't lay his hands on her. Nazelbart glared at Duke Masroono next to him, who awkwardly cleared his throat.

"Mm-hmm, yes. Lady Agnes is pregnant, so she's wearing loose clothes. Paul's muscles will be hidden by the clothing," the duke said.

"Thank you, Your Grace!"

Before Nazelbart knew what was happening, the conversation between Paul and the duke had progressed.

"Please wait a moment, Your Grace. Paul is still a fourteen-year-old student. I can't let him participate in something as dangerous as an undercover operation! Besides, our targets might not fall for it."

"Even if it doesn't work, we don't lose anything by trying. It will be great if they bite, and we'll just continue the investigation if they don't."

Nazelbart began to feel suspicious because of the duke's overbearing words. However, Paul looked happy to be of help, and his eyes sparkled.

"I'm a student of Masroono National School, so I'm going to be fine! I'll be graduating soon, and I'm going to be useful like a grown-up!"

"You can't, Paul."

"Elder brother, I'd like you to first see me cross-dressing and judge for yourself whether I can become my sister or not!"

"Huh?" Nazelbart was at a loss for words as he looked at Paul, who was brimming with confidence.

Ryuk interjected with an explanation.

"Um, when it comes to Paul's cross-dressing, he's known as a beauty among our classmates. No one said anything in front of Lady Agnes during her visit, but...it's an all-boys school, so many of the students long for female company."

Nazelbart had just heard something outrageous.

"I don't like always being the one helped out! I finally have a chance to be of use, so I can't simply give up here!" Paul said.

"Well said. I'm impressed, Paul. You make me proud as the founder of Masroono National School!" The duke showed no signs of backing down; it was giving Nazelbart a headache.

The tendency to act before worrying about the consequences was something that Queen Latriche—a Polpystani herself—also shared. She'd acted recklessly several times until now, like during the Lubhuta and Davier incidents.

"Please stay quiet, Your Grace," Nazelbart said. He didn't want to make Agnes's brother do anything dangerous. Paul had been sheltered until fairly recently, so even if he'd gotten stronger, Nazelbart doubted that the boy could defend himself like the queen.

"No, I think it's a good idea. We just need to prepare sufficient support to make sure Paul stays safe. Nazelbart, I'm sure your knights are excellent, but the same is also true for my subordinates. You can rely on them!" Duke Masroono wrapped up the conversation on his own and took Paul back to his estate; Nazelbart hurried after them.

Duke Masroono passed through the entrance and headed to the dining room where his wife probably was. Once they were all there, a surprising scene unfolded before them. Agnes and the duchess were preparing tuber cuisine in one side of the dining room.

Agnes looks so cute in an apron... Wait, no, what happened?!

The two women stood side by side and looked like they were getting along great. They were seasoning thinly sliced, deep-fried sunchokes. A variety of seasonings were lined up on the large table, likely prepared by the servants.

"You're adding too much chili powder, Your Grace."

"Heh heh, I think they'll turn out delicious if we take the spiciness to the limit."

"Eep!"

"What flavors are you trying out, Lady Agnes?"

"Butter with garlic—as well as salt and pepper. I'm covered in garlic."

"Those seem like they'd go well with alcohol."

It seemed that the women had already made several dishes, and the finished sunchoke products had been placed on plates. The friendly duo noticed that Nazelbart and the rest had returned and raised their heads.

"Oh, Lord Nazel. Good work on your investigation today."

"I'm back, Agnes. You look like you're doing something fun."

"When I mentioned sunchoke chips, Duchess Noyer was on board. We're cooking together. That being said, the estate's chefs are taking care of the deep-frying, so we're only adding the seasoning at the end. Would you like to try some?"

"Sure, I'll have a few." Nazelbart picked up a nearby chip and took a bite; it tasted of cheese and herbs.

"Oh, those look nice. I'll join in too." Duke Masroono leaned forward, picked up a chip—an extremely black one—and tossed it into his mouth. "Argh! I-It's so spicy!"

"Oh ho ho, that one was seasoned with black pepper, dear." The duke had apparently tried the duchess's work. Her chips were unusual colors, like bright red or pitch black, and had a dangerous smell.

"That was certainly a stimulating experience," the duke said.

Paul and Ryuk stood in one corner of the room, looking at the chips with keen interest.

"Come join us, you two," Nazelbart said.

Once they were called over, Paul and Ryuk happily ran up to the table.

"My, if it isn't Paul and Ryuk. Oh, these are my younger brother Paul and his friend Ryuk, Your Grace. They're students at Masroono National School," Agnes told the duchess.

Paul and Ryuk greeted the duchess together.

"My, oh my, how adorable. If you'd like, please try some sunchoke chips and tell us what you think."

The two boys happily reached out toward the chips but made sure to avoid the spicy-looking red and black ones.

"The garlic is out of this world!" Paul exclaimed.

Paul kept eating just the garlic-flavored chips Agnes had made,

while Ryuk seemed to prefer the sweet ones. As for Nazelbart, he simply preferred the salty ones.

After the lively food-tasting was over, Paul and the rest moved to the room that had been prepared for Agnes. Perhaps out of consideration for her pregnancy, she'd been given a guest room on the first floor. Once they were inside, Paul suddenly addressed Agnes.

"U-Um, could you please lend me some of your clothes, elder sister?"

"I don't mind, but why? Is one of your acquaintances pregnant?"

"No, that's not it! I— Mrgh!"

Nazelbart swiftly covered Paul's mouth. If he told Agnes the plan, it would only cause her needless worry. But in the meantime, Agnes had brought over a change of clothes from the back of the room. It was a maternity dress for everyday use.

"I can lend you this one if you're fine with it, Paul. Does the size fit?"

Once Paul saw the dress, he twisted his body and tried to escape from Nazelbart.

"Pwah! Th-Thank you, elder sister. I'll be taking that!" As soon as he said that, Paul started skillfully and smoothly undressing—somehow managing this feat while still in Nazelbart's grasp.

"Eek! What are you doing, Paul?! You can't undress here!" Agnes covered her face in a panic. Nobles never saw the opposite sex changing clothes, even if they were siblings.

"I apologize, but please let me get changed here, elder sister!" Though he was asking for permission, Paul was already in his underwear.

"Huh?! Wait, are you going to put my dress on?! What's going on?!"

"I'm going to become you!"

Utterly baffled by Paul's behavior, Agnes tried to stop him while he fervently strove to turn himself into her; the two siblings were at cross-purposes.



Kelly heard the commotion and appeared from the back of the room. She'd apparently grown up surrounded by younger brothers, so she was completely unfazed by Paul changing clothes right in front of her.

"Just what seems to be going on here?" Kelly asked.

Agnes started explaining the dire situation to Kelly, as if her salvation had just arrived.

"Kelly, Paul put on my maternity dress and started saying he's going to become me!" Agnes didn't know about the disguise plan, so she seemed to think that Paul just wanted to cross-dress.

"Oh dear, no, no, no..." It seemed that Kelly was also flustered after hearing Agnes's account, but she then pulled on Paul's arm and raised an eyebrow. "You think simply putting on a dress qualifies as cross-dressing? That this makes you Lady Agnes?! Please keep your jests in moderation. I won't accept such half-hearted cross-dressing."

Kelly took Paul's glasses and examined his face closely. His face quickly turned red; he'd had unrequited feelings for her for quite some time.

"Mm-hmm, I see. Then, Mister Paul, I will transform you into the perfect lady."

"Kelly?!" Agnes shouted.

It appeared that Paul had ignited Kelly's professional pride. Things had gotten rather complicated.

"Come this way, Mister Paul. I will make you look as similar to Lady Agnes as possible."

The blushing Paul beheld Kelly with sparkling eyes.

"Oh, Miss Kelly, you're so kind!"

Nazelbart doubted that Kelly had taken charge of Paul's disguise purely out of the kindness of her heart. Agnes's younger brother was likely a good guinea pig for her.

"Heh heh, heh heh heh... I could do this, or maybe that..."

Nazelbart could have objected to Paul's cross-dressing and put a damper on the highly motivated Kelly, but then he would've had to explain *why* he was against it, which would have meant that Agnes would have learned about the disguise plan. The kindhearted Agnes would surely hate the idea of her brother being in danger. She'd

definitely start talking about acting as bait herself. But Nazelbart would absolutely never let that happen—not in a million years.

Paul is muscular, and even Kelly's skill has its limits. He'll realize how reckless his plan is once he's actually dressed up. It might be a bit sneaky of me, but I should just let things take their course for now.

However, Nazelbart's expectations were spectacularly betrayed thanks to Paul's natural looks and Kelly's superb ability. After Kelly put Paul in a dress, applied his makeup, and put a wig on him, he actually looked like a beautiful woman. He had gently wavy silver hair, a maternity dress with padding around the stomach, flat shoes meant for safety and stability, classy accessories, and natural makeup. He shared some physical traits with his sister to begin with, so he now passed for a slightly larger Agnes from a distance. Someone who didn't know exactly what Agnes looked like would surely be fooled.

Kelly, you really don't *need to display your brilliance even in times like this,* Nazelbart thought.

After getting Kelly's help with everything, Paul had a very goofy smile, likely because he was happy to have gotten so much time alone with her.

"Thank you, Miss Kelly!"

"No need for that; I thoroughly enjoyed myself too. Since men's faces have a different shape than women's, I gave you a hairstyle that hides the lines around your face. You look just like a woman now." The proud Kelly had an aura of a job well done.

"You wanted to cross-dress, Paul?" Agnes asked.

"Yes!"

Agnes blinked repeatedly, looking simply confused.

"Have you perhaps always wanted to be a woman or something? I'm sorry I didn't notice until now. I'm on your side, Paul. I accept you no matter who you are. We'll prepare plenty of women's dresses for you from now on."

"No, um, I think you're misunderstanding something, elder sister."

Nazelbart started feeling guilty as the two siblings continued talking at cross-purposes.

“But you want to become a woman, don’t you?” Agnes asked.

Paul was visibly flustered.

“No, I don’t. I’m perfectly content being a man— Wait, that’s not the point here. I don’t actually want to cross-dress, just to disguise myself as you!”

“You’re making less and less sense. Just what on earth would you accomplish by disguising yourself as me?! Lord Nazel has also been acting strange for some time. Lord Nazel, do you know something about Paul’s disguise?” She stared intently at Nazelbart. “You’re definitely hiding something, aren’t you? Please be honest with me. If you stay quiet, I’m going to get the truth out of Paul and Ryuk instead.”

Ryuk, who’d been keeping a low profile next to a wall up to now, was taken aback when his name came up and turned to look toward Agnes. If she asked him anything, he’d most likely answer.

“I guess I’ll be spending some time in a different room than this secretive Lord Nazel.”

Nazelbart’s eyes went wide in shock.

“Kisses, hugs, and all other touching are off-limits,” she added.

“Aah! Wait, Agnes! Being unable to touch you will be far too harsh on me! I beg you, please reconsider!”

Paul and Ryuk looked at Nazelbart in shock. They appeared flustered, as this was their first time witnessing the usually calm Nazelbart in such an unexpected state of disarray.

“Elder brother? Have you lost your mind?”

“I had the impression that Margrave Florescruz was flawless.”

The two boys continued watching, but Kelly said that this was a matter between husband and wife and told them to turn around. However, Nazelbart couldn’t have cared less about his image at the moment.

“Agnes, if I tell you the truth, will you take back what you said earlier?”

“I feel uneasy when I don’t know what’s going on. I’m also worried about you, Lord Nazel. And please don’t forget that you have a prior offense. When you collapsed from that poisoned blade, I was truly terrified.”

"I'm sorry, Agnes. When you put it like that, I can't really argue." Nazelbart resolved himself anew. *It would be better for me to tell her myself rather than letting her learn from Ryuk or Paul.*

He decided to give an honest explanation about Paul's cross-dressing plan. Agnes realized that he'd caved and stood ready to listen.

"To tell you the truth," Nazelbart began, "the ones who broke into our inn room were apparently people involved in Davier's rebellion who fled abroad. They're looking for a chance to take revenge on me. Duke Masroono, who knew that in advance, came up with a plan to use you as bait to lure them out. After all, you're my biggest weakness." That was why Duke Masroono had thought of using Agnes to capture all of the perpetrators in one go. "However, I didn't want to approve of that strategy. Using you as bait would be unthinkable, not to mention that you're with child at the moment. There's no way I could throw you out in front of those criminals. Paul happened to be passing by and heard our conversation, so he considered disguising himself as you." Nazelbart hugged Agnes tightly, making sure to avoid putting any strain on her abdomen.

Paul, who was still turned around as Kelly had instructed, remained in the same position and agreed with Nazelbart.

"It's mostly just as he said. I'm also against using you as bait, elder sister. In your physical condition, you can't move as well as you like. Please don't do anything dangerous until you give birth; I really want to see the face of my nephew or niece." He was kind of mumbling the last part and it was difficult to hear him; he seemed embarrassed. "Anyway! I'll soon be a graduate of Masroono National School! Acting as bait is but a trivial matter!"

"You can't, Paul." Agnes disagreed with her brother in a strict voice.

"I see. From the start, I expected you to be against it, but I can't comply with your request. Thanks to your magic, both my body and magic are reinforced at the moment. It's unlikely that I will be in danger." Paul knew that Agnes's magic could reinforce people's bodies. And because of the recent manabeast extermination, he also knew that her magic could reinforce other people's magic too.

"In that case, I also have a really strong body since I've used my magic on myself."

"That's out of the question. We don't know what could happen to the baby if you take any damage." Although Paul still had his back turned, his voice alone plainly conveyed how serious he felt about this.

Both her brother and child were precious to Agnes, so she obviously didn't want either to come to harm. As she felt conflicted, Paul kept pressing her.

"If we let them get away now, they will attack you or your husband again in some other way. Miss Kelly and Mister Torre might get caught up in it too. You can't leave dangerous people like them alone."

"Paul..."

"I've said it again and again, but I'll be all right as I am now. Please believe in me."

"B-But acting as bait is dangerous..."

"Duke Masroono and my brother-in-law will mobilize their knights! Both groups are outstanding."

"True, the knights working under Lord Nazel are all exceptional."

During his time as a prince consort, Nazelbart had been part of the knights and traveled to many places, so he was well-informed on a variety of topics. Moreover, the knights he'd coached himself were stronger than average and were subjected to rigorous training.

"So you don't have anything to worry about. Please just wait here for everything to be resolved!"

Agnes listened to Paul, half convinced.

"E-Excuse me!" Suddenly, someone else spoke up: Ryuk, who was standing next to Paul. "I-I'll support Paul. We've always teamed up, so when it comes down to it, we'll work together!"

Nazelbart and the rest were surprised at Ryuk's assertiveness. They thought he was the type to stay away from any kind of conflict. Even now, when he'd suggested the idea himself, his face was pale, and his voice was shaking.

"I'm also a student of Masroono National School!"

Paul stared at his friend. "You don't need to force yourself, Ryuk.

This is Desnim's problem, so there's no reason for you to get involved as well."

"But I will soon be working in Sutrena, a part of Desnim. Margrave Florescruz kept his promise and had a talk with my father. So I want to help him this time. Besides, I don't want you to be in danger either."

"Ryuk!"

"Paul!"

What a wonderful friendship. The boys were somehow radiant, making everyone wonder if the true spirit of youth had manifested before them. However, Agnes still had a stern expression.

"This disguise plan is really dangerous. We're up against the kind of people who'd stab Lord Nazel without batting an eye."

"But like I said earlier, I'm being reinforced by your magic, elder sister."

"My magic reinforces people in order to prevent any damage to their bodies, but it can't deal with the unexpected. For example, even though it protected Lord Nazel from a cut recently, it couldn't stop the poison. I've changed my magic to also strengthen you against poison, but there's nothing I can do if another new threat arises."

"Before that happens, I'll defend with my great shield. My magic can stop everything as long as my mana lasts. While Paul will play the role of Lady Agnes, I will disguise myself as 'her' handmaiden!"

Now even Ryuk was saying he wanted to cross-dress; this was bad. Kelly had already gone to fetch a handmaiden disguise, her face full of motivation. She apparently had a wide variety of clothes available on a daily basis. She soon returned holding an outfit very similar to the one she was wearing right now.

"Please come and try on this handmaiden outfit, Mister Ryuk. I'll adjust the size later. I also need to apply makeup. And there should be a wig with a hair color similar to mine. And to have you two look even more like women, we'll need to remove some body hair."

"What?! Why?!" Paul and Ryuk had been raring to go until just a moment ago, but when they heard Kelly's last statement, they started getting flustered. But now that Kelly's passion had been

ignited, there was no one who could stop her. The two of them were blushing crimson as Kelly took them to the next room to complete their disguises. Agnes was still opposed to the idea, but it seemed that she also realized the risk of letting the culprits run free, so she didn't say anything more.

Several days later, the day that Paul and Ryuk's cross-dressing plan would be put into motion finally arrived.

***

After the plan was set, Lord Nazel got busy visiting various places. He was a perfectionist, so he was surely making careful preparations.

Early this morning, a large number of knights had come to the Masroono estate where we were staying with the duke and duchess. They were Lord Nazel's subordinates and the troops under Duke Masroono's command.

That's some heavy security.

Paul, who'd been entrusted with an important mission, was disguised to be my double. Thanks to Kelly's skills, he was even pulling off a maternity dress without looking out of place. And although Ryuk was a bit tall, he also looked like a handmaiden, similar to Kelly. But the two boys seemed to be feeling down.

"Ugh, my skin is so smooth. I had a lot of my hair shaved in all sorts of places. And here my goal was to have manly bristles like Mister Torre. But this is all for the sake of the mission," Paul complained.

"Ugh, I was exposed in my underwear in front of a woman. I can't be a groom anymore. I'll need Miss Kelly to take responsibility..." Ryuk added.

Paul and Ryuk were grumbling and were visibly depressed, and although Ryuk's final words were a bit concerning, it wasn't the time to think about that right now. I was unaware at the time that yet another member of the opposite sex was now in love with Kelly, and I went to see them all off, my concern about the plan evident. I would again be staying in the manor with Duchess Noyer, who'd

invited me to cook together once more.

What should we cook this time? As I happily wondered about my options, Lord Nazel put one hand around me.

"I'm going now, Agnes. I'd like a farewell kiss."

"L-Lord Nazel?! Everyone's staring."

"Yes, that's true. But in Desnim, it's normal for noblewomen to kiss their husbands goodbye to pray for their safety, right?"

"Apparently so, but..."

Since the House of Evantail had been a special case, I wasn't well-versed in the way normal couples should be. But since the well-informed Lord Nazel said so, it had to be true. I glanced around me, and when everyone was looking away, I kissed Lord Nazel, who then put his other arm around me too. I thought I would move away quickly, but I ended up getting captured, and Lord Nazel kept the kiss going.

Aren't you making this kiss a bit long, Lord Nazel? At this rate, everyone around us will notice! I started panicking, and just as I feared, I heard Duchess Noyer let out an "Oh my!" some distance away.

"In accordance with the Desnim way, I'm also going to give you a farewell kiss, dear," Duchess Noyer called out to her husband.

"Ha ha ha! It's hard being so popular." Duke Masroono was oblivious to a lot of things. From the corner of my eye, I could tell that his careless remark made his wife's eyebrow twitch.

Oh dear... As I was listening closely to the conversation between the duke and duchess, Lord Nazel's kiss suddenly went deeper.

"Mngh?!" I was no longer in any state to listen to them. *Lord Nazel! We're right in front of Paul and Ryuk! This intense kiss is setting a poor example of noble behavior!*

I struggled to break free, but his arms remained gently wrapped around me. After a short time, he finally parted his lips from mine and let me go. Paul and Ryuk were blushing as they looked at us.

We really were being watched!

Since Kelly and Torre were standing at a distance, they couldn't make the boys turn around.

As a way to get back at him even a little, I gave Lord Nazel a look

of protest as he was smiling at me with satisfaction.

"That kiss was too long, Lord Nazel."

"I'm sorry, but I was feeling lonely because you weren't focusing on our kiss, so I was unable to hold back."

"Urk... You're saying that kind of stuff again." I didn't feel like I could beat him in an argument. It was true that I'd been focusing my attention on the duke and duchess's conversation, but even so, it had been childish of Lord Nazel to do that. But as I was a slave to love, my heart wavered, and I ended up forgiving him just like usual.

When I glanced to the side, I saw that the duke and duchess had just finished kissing. From my point of view as a Desnimer, their relationship seemed very strange to me.

"Your Grace, it's almost time to depart," one of Duke Masroono's men told him.

"Whoops," the duke muttered in a hurry, raising his face, which had been focused on the duchess. "I'm sorry, but I need to leave now," he said, looking back at Duchess Noyer. "See you later, honey." He walked out of the manor with a smile and in high spirits.

"Please take care, Lord Nazel. And please look after Paul and Ryuk. I've thoroughly increased my reinforcement tenfold."

"Tenfold... Thank you, Agnes. I'll see you later." Lord Nazel hugged me and kissed me once more, then took Paul and Ryuk with him and headed to their destination.

"Now then... What are we cooking today, Your Grace?" I asked Duchess Noyer.

"Heh heh, I've prepared another veritable mountain of tubers today. Right this way," she said, pointing toward the garden, unconcerned about my puzzled expression. "Oh, we need to put aprons on first."

Just what were we going to make? I put on an apron like I was told, as did Kelly and Torre. The bright interior of the duke's manor had a rustic atmosphere, different from usual.

"That green apron suits you well, Lady Agnes."

"Thank you, Torre. Yours looks good on you too."

After we were done changing, the duchess took us to a corner of the garden, where we met a very unexpected person.

"Huh? Your Highness?" I exclaimed.

Prince Valen, who wasn't supposed to be here, was standing in front of a rose hedge. Furthermore, he was also wearing an apron.

"What's going on?" I asked with a questioning expression.

"Please run away from here right now, Lady Agnes," Duchess Noyer whispered to me.

"Huh?"

"It's dangerous here. You need to evacuate with Valen."

"What do you mean? If it's dangerous, you should also—"

"I'll be all right. I can assure you of my safety."

I felt uneasy, still unable to understand her intentions, when Prince Valen took my hand.

"My apologies, Lady Agnes. There isn't enough time."

"Find her!" Several male voices could be heard from the manor a moment after Prince Valen spoke to me.

"I'll explain the details later. It was all very sudden, so I apologize that this is the only way we can deal with the situation," Prince Valen said, earning a nod from me in response.

"Lady Agnes, please get on this wagon." Duchess Noyer pointed at a large wagon loaded with a massive quantity of tubers, and big enough for three people to comfortably ride it, with two pegasi hitched to it.

"Just what is all this?"

"Get on the wagon and escape. We must keep the pregnant lady safe. You should look like a tuber merchant wearing an apron, but I'll use my magic on you just to be absolutely safe." Duchess Noyer used some kind of magic on all of us. "I just cast my stealth magic on you. It makes your presence extremely faint. Unless you directly talk to someone, they won't notice you."

"So there's such convenient magic..."

"Yes, but it only lasts for a few hours. Now you are all inconspicuous merchants. Please get away safely. I'm sure everything will work out if you leave it to Valen."

"Thank you very much, Your Grace."

"Stay safe, Lady Agnes. A nobleman's wife must be brave at all times. I'm rooting for you from the bottom of my heart."

"Thank you. I'm off!"

And so the four of us disguised ourselves as discreet tuber merchants and quietly left the duke's estate. Torre took the driver's seat and took control of the two pegasi. Kelly, Prince Valen, and I got in the wagon along with the tubers. Our wagon rattled as it slowly moved forward. Not only were we disguised, but we also had the assistance of Duchess Noyer's magic, so we didn't stand out at all. It seemed like we could get away without really doing anything. Although our presence was faint thanks to the stealth magic, the people passing us by could more or less tell we were there and didn't bump into us. Duchess Noyer's magic was rather curious.

"Are you all right, Lady Agnes? I made sure to have soft cushions laid out, but do you feel any burden on your body?"

"Thank you, Your Highness. I'm comfortable at the moment. So can you tell me why all of this is happening?"

"Yes, there was a bit of an emergency. My aunt and I took action to prevent a rift between Desnim and Polpystan." Prince Valen's explanation was rather vague and didn't help me figure out what was going on. "To tell you the truth, my uncle Duke Masroono has his eye on you. Do you know that there is currently tension between Polpystan and Myzahn?"

"Yes, I heard about it from Duchess Noyer."

"My uncle has been feeling nervous about that situation for a while now. Despite appearances, he has a strong sense of responsibility. But he's prone to using anything available to him, and it seems that he's set his sights on your magic this time. For goodness' sake, what his lover did was *really* uncalled for."

"You're talking about the florist, right? If I remember correctly, her magic is appraisal."

"Exactly. They seem to have a mutually beneficial relationship, with her getting financial support, and my uncle getting an exclusive appraiser, but... This case is somewhat of a problem. To think they would involve a woman from another country." Prince Valen let out a long sigh. "Something's wrong with my uncle. 'Could Lady Agnes be a substitute for the saint of old?' he said. He's always had a tendency to charge ahead, but it seems that he's blundered this

time. No matter how much he's doing it to protect his own country, angering Desnim is a bad move. There's even a possibility we could get caught in a pincer attack between Desnim and Myzahn."

Yes, if Lord Nazel got seriously angry, he might actually do something like that. I could somehow imagine it.

"Therefore, I came to put a stop to my uncle's rash behavior. Incidentally, I've already told Nazelbart about this. However, my uncle's plans were only discovered this morning, so it was a very hurried discussion. I deliberately kept the truth from you to make sure that your behavior didn't give away the escape plan. I apologize."

"No, it's true that everything could show on my face... By the way, where are we headed now?"

"We're going to meet up with Nazelbart. My aunt told me to give my uncle an earful."

"Understood. Then I'll provide backup by throwing tubers."

"That sounds promising. I'll switch to the driver's seat now. Please don't hesitate to tell me if anything happens," Prince Valen said with a pleasant smile.

The narrow alleys, barely wide enough for a single carriage to pass through, were lined with buildings in bright colors and seemed quite lively. After leaving the alleys and advancing for a while, our wagon gradually slowed down and stopped on a street lined with warehouses. There was significantly less pedestrian traffic compared to earlier, and not a single sound could be heard in the area. I could see a cluster of old warehouses farther down a narrow alley.

"Are Lord Nazel and the others in a place like this? I feel worried," I said, looking around me.

"This is the warehouse district," Kelly informed me.

Unlike the thriving streets we'd passed earlier, this one felt deserted.

"Lord Nazelbart and the rest don't seem to be here. Are you certain this is the right place, Your Highness?" Torre ran up and down the street filled with warehouses, his head tilted in confusion.

"Please get on my pegasus, Lady Agnes. Let's survey the area from the sky," Prince Valen said.

"Huh? O-Okay." I stuffed several tubers into my pockets, climbed up behind Prince Valen, and we took to the skies. My view was filled with several flat warehouse roofs. "Wow, the warehouse district in the Duchy of Masroono is vast. Sutrena's warehouses are small and compact cabins, so this kind of view feels fresh to me."

Torre and Kelly got on the other pegasus and followed after us.

"Lady Agnes, people who look just like you and Miss Kelly have come out of a warehouse!" Torre said.

I saw our two look-alikes just emerging from the warehouse directly below us. *Those are Paul and Ryuk.* Duchess Noyer had used her magic on us and the pegasi, so the two below didn't notice us. They meandered down a narrow path between warehouses. *The knights are also on standby some distance away.* I could see all sorts of things clearly from the sky. Besides Paul, Ryuk, and the knights, there were also suspicious figures with their hair strangely standing up.

"There are some people there too," I said.

"Indeed, they're moving in a strange manner. They've split up into several groups of four and are approaching Paul and Ryuk to surround them," Kelly said as she bent forward on the pegasus behind me. "I sense intense malice from them, Lady Agnes." She'd apparently seen into their true motives with her magic.

"They really are targeting Paul disguised as me. They all have their hair standing up; is that some way of communicating their intentions?" I wondered.

"That hairstyle is called a mohawk—it's a popular fashion among young people in southern Polpystan. It used to be popular and seems to have recently come back into style. They must have jumped on the bandwagon to disguise themselves as Polpystani natives."

"You're incredible, Kelly! It's like you know everything!" I'd always worn "bumpkin fashion" all year round, so I was out of touch with the current trends; having Kelly with me was honestly a major help.

We surveilled the suspicious individuals from the sky as they gradually tightened their encirclement. Their clothing was a bit eccentric, but their movements were well trained and coordinated.

The knights hadn't acted yet, and there was no sight of Lord Nazel or Duke Masroono either. I wondered what was going on.

If Paul and Ryuk get in danger, I'll throw tubers to repulse the assailants.

As we descended on our pegasi, the suspicious people started making their move and finally made contact with Paul and Ryuk. When we got close enough to hear them, the suspicious men had already started talking to each other.

"Hey, this is that Lady Bumpkin woman, right?"

"No doubt about it. I heard that she's pregnant."

"Pretty tall for a woman, isn't she?"

Now that Paul had grown up, he was taller than me. Kelly had used her skills to hide his muscles, making him look like a woman, but obviously even she couldn't make him shorter.

What do we do if they figure it out? I was filled with anxiety and I watched things unfold. *Please get through this!*

Paul swiftly cut in, his tone tinged with a bit of fear but also firm.

"Who are you people?!" he said, his voice shaking; he was a great actor. Neither his voice nor the way he clung to Ryuk—who was playing the role of the handmaiden—felt out of place.

So he has that kind of acting talent.

Ryuk looked pale. He was probably genuinely scared, but in this situation, his fear was actually helpful in making the performance more believable.

"We can't tell you that. Anyway, you're coming with us. We got nothing personal against you, but it's an order from above. You'll be our hostage to make a deal with Nazelbart and the rest."

"Now, everyone!" Paul sent the signal to the knights with composure. Once they heard his command, they all jumped out of their hiding spots in unison.

"Whoa?! What's going on?! Dammit, are you sure you wanna do that? Don't you care what happens to Lady Agnes here?!"

But the "Agnes" in question—Paul dressed up as me—started attacking the villains with violent open palm strikes.

"Argh! This woman's strong!"

The scene devolved into chaos.

"Ah ha ha, just as you'd expect from a student of our school." Prince Valen sounded triumphant. Was he feeling proud as an educator?

The suspicious men—the remnants of Lord Davier's rebellion—were all arrested in the blink of an eye.

"Phew, we can relax for the time being. Now I just need to contact my brother-in-law," Paul remarked.

But the next moment, half of the knights started acting strange. They surrounded Paul and Ryuk and restrained the two of them.

"What's the meaning of this? Do you think there won't be consequences for this kind of action?" Paul remained ever composed.

"Our apologies, Mister Paul. You will become a hostage to make a deal with Lady Agnes. If we have you, she will have no choice but to listen to our orders."

"Y-You...! Are you allies of the criminals who attempted to spark a civil war in Desnim?!" Ryuk protested to the knights, his body trembling all the while.

I started to panic—until Prince Valen whispered into my ear, "Don't worry. Paul and Ryuk must have also heard everything from Nazelbart."

"So those two know about this? They're quite the actors, then."

The other half of the knights readied their swords to rescue Paul and Ryuk. Paul struggled and shook off the knight restraining him, then took to the sky—still looking like me.

"Whoaaaaa! All of our allies, charge! And please send reinforcements, elder brother!" As Paul gave a loud and clear order, one half of the knights moved in to protect him, while the other half turned against him.

Where's Lord Nazel? Duke Masroono wasn't anywhere to be seen either, so perhaps he was keeping Lord Nazel stuck somewhere. *In any case, I need to help Paul now!* In order to support my allies, I took reinforced tubers out of my pocket and held them at the ready; I'd borrowed them from the wagon.

"Take that! Begone, evildoers!" I took aim with the tubers from the sky and directly hit the villains and the knights helping them one

after the other. Kelly, who'd apparently also brought along some potatoes, threw them down from above; her aim was true.

Both enemies and allies were shaken when they saw the mysterious tubers suddenly falling from above. The situation became even more chaotic than before. But thanks to the effects of Duchess Noyer's magic, no one could perceive us.

"Wh-What?! Hard tubers are falling from the sky!"

"Where are they coming from?! Ouch!"

We mercilessly rained tubers down on the enemy. Eventually, Torre jumped down from his pegasus, gigantified himself with his magic, lifted the wagon, and rained the tubers down on the enemies. A chorus of screams ensued everywhere.

The power of a tuber downpour is really something else.

However, no one could detect the gigantified Torre. The duchess's stealth was apparently a very powerful magic.

"Bwa ha ha ha! Get mashed by tubers, fiends!" Torre soon got carried away, picking up some of the enemies and tossing them into the distance, but then...

"Ah! You...!" One of the men Torre had picked up became aware of his presence and started shouting.

"Silence!" Torre immediately threw the villain who was making a fuss. The man's screams gradually became fainter.

It seemed that the duchess's magic was about to wear off, as everyone else also noticed Torre.

"Who is that guy?! He's giant!"

"Were the tubers also his doing?!"

Paul stared in wonder when he noticed Torre.

"Mister Torre! You came to help us?!"

"Mister Paul! Everything will be fine now that I'm here!"

Paul howled a battle cry as he deployed his magic and sent several people flying. The enemy knights were defeated in the blink of an eye.

"Mister Torre, you might have heard the earlier conversation, but my sister is being targeted by Duke Masroono."

"I was informed about that earlier, so I already know! Lady Agnes is also safe! She escaped from the duke's estate!"

"Thank goodness. I'm relieved to know that she's safe."

"So where is Lord Nazelbart?"

"I think he's inside one of these warehouses with Duke Masroono at the moment. He was supposed to come out and help us, but he might have been held back."

"Hmm?!" When I heard Paul and Torre's conversation, I became worried about Lord Nazel. "Torre, let's go look for Lord Nazel. If he's together with Duke Masroono, he may be in danger," I said from the sky.

"Very well. Although I'm sure he's fine since it's Lord Nazelbart we're talking about. Mister Paul, which warehouse are the two of them inside?"

"That one over— Wait, elder sister?! Why are you here?!" It seemed that Paul could also perceive me now that the duchess's magic had grown weaker.

"Mister Paul, I already told you that Lady Agnes escaped from the duke's estate. We made it here thanks to the duchess's assistance. However, if Duke and Duchess Masroono had teamed up, things would have become much more complicated."

With Paul and Ryuk guiding the way, we headed to the warehouse where Lord Nazel was. Prince Valen, Kelly, and I approached from the sky, while Paul, Ryuk, and Torre—whose magic had now run out—approached on foot. Once we got close to the warehouse, we suddenly heard a deafening impact, and a large plant broke through the building's roof—this was Lord Nazel's magic.

Thank goodness. It looks like Lord Nazel is safe.

From the sky, we peeked through the hole in the ceiling and found Lord Nazel. It looked like this building was used to store food, with various vegetables scattered about. Many of them had probably fallen off the shelves because of the earlier impact. Amid thick clouds of dust, I traced the origin of the plant and found Lord Nazel; I was relieved to see him unhurt. As expected, Duke Masroono was facing him.

"You really were planning a trap for us, Your Grace. I think your methods are a bit too forceful," Lord Nazel said while glaring straight at the duke.

However, Duke Masroono replied with a completely calm expression.

"Please don't say such scandalous things, Nazelbart. I wanted to properly negotiate with you, but you refused, so you left me no other choice."

"How dare you use the fugitive criminals from Desnim who were after us to carry out this malicious plan!" Lord Nazel was awfully angry.

"Please don't get the wrong idea, all right? I was planning on capturing them properly later."

"What were you scheming by going after Agnes?"

"We urgently need the saint's power at the moment. We wanted Lady Agnes, who's very likely to be the saint, to help defend Polpystan with her magic."

"What a selfish reason. Just as I keep telling you, Agnes isn't the saint. Her matter reinforcement magic just lets her make objects tougher. Besides, if she really were the saint, there would be a huge uproar back in Desnim right now."

Despite what Lord Nazel was telling him, Duke Masroono continued turning a deaf ear to him—he was quite the difficult person.

"According to a middle-ranking appraiser, there's a high chance Lady Agnes possesses special magic. Wouldn't it be worth it to have a high-ranking appraiser take a look?! I want to see the results."

"Why are you so fixated on Agnes?"

"For the sake of my country. Our neighbor Myzahn has been engaging in secret maneuvers lately. If Polpystan becomes stronger, it will act as a bulwark against other countries. It should help you all in Desnim as well. Why don't we join forces?!"

"I do not wish to negotiate with someone who uses such high-handed methods. You also intended to go after Paul in order to use Agnes, right? Are you prepared to face retaliation from not only Sutrena but also Desnim itself?"

Neither Lord Nazel nor I wanted to make a big deal out of my magic. If the power of my absolute reinforcement became publicly known, people would start making contact with me in an attempt to

use me, not just from Desnim but from abroad too. Since we only wanted to live peacefully in Sutrena, that would be nothing more than trouble for us. I didn't want us to be plagued by new problems now that we'd finally apprehended all the people causing trouble for Lord Nazel.

"Unfortunately, my men have already been deployed to the estate. Lady Agnes is in my hands. Please give up, Nazelbart."

I felt uneasy when I heard that. *No, I'm right here.*

Fortunately, Lord Nazel wasn't particularly agitated by Duke Masroono's words, since he knew that I'd escaped from the estate.

"Things won't go as you want, Your Grace. I also have my allies."

"This is quite the predicament. Please accept my offer." While Duke Masroono's knights guarded the area around him, the duke closed the distance between himself and the indifferent, handsome Lord Nazel.

"I refuse."

While Lord Nazel and Duke Masroono were confronting each other, I saw Paul and the rest rushing into the warehouse.

"Elder brother! Just like you said, half of the knights betrayed us and attacked me! It looks like they were really planning on taking me hostage to use me in negotiations with my elder sister!"

"Yes, apparently so. Everything was Duke Masroono's plan. I'm sorry for not coming to help you right away—I was being held up here."

"It's all right, we're safe. More importantly, my e-elder sister..."

"Did something happen to Agnes?"

"My elder sister took tubers with her and is storming into here!"

"What?! I mean, I was planning on meeting up with her, but tubers?! She's doing something dangerous *again*?!" Lord Nazel had been trying his best to feign composure until now, but his mask had now come off.

"Mister Torre, Miss Kelly, and Prince Valen are also here." Since the duchess's magic had already worn off, Paul had been able to see all of us since earlier.

"How did it come to this?!" Lord Nazel didn't know that it was all thanks to Duchess Noyer. "So, where are Agnes and the rest right

now?”

As Lord Nazel asked that, the pegasus I was riding on stirred.

“Eep!” I yelped in surprise, which made Lord Nazel and the rest catch sight of me on the pegasus.

“Agnes?!”

“Eh heh heh...”

“Ugh! Your Highness, what were you thinking by bringing Agnes to a place like this?!” Lord Nazel swiftly used his vegetation magic and started defeating the remaining enemy knights. His speed put even ferocious manabeasts to shame.

“But this is the meeting place, isn’t it?” Prince Valen replied.

“Why did you bring her before the duke when there are safer locations?!” Lord Nazel was seriously angry and took care of the enemy knights in an instant. All of them were now lying on the floor.

“Just what is going on? Wasn’t Lady Agnes back at my estate?” It seemed that Duchess Noyer’s actions had been completely unforeseen to Duke Masroono too. In an unexpected turn of events, what the duchess had said about putting the duke in his place had come true.

“That’s enough, uncle. I know you’re anxious about the state of the world, but even considering that, weren’t you a bit rash this time?” Prince Valen said from above. The two of us then slowly descended to the ground.

“Wasn’t Agnes supposed to ride together with Kelly?” Lord Nazel stared at Prince Valen in protest.

Huh? Really?! I panicked atop the pegasus.

“Well, I’d rather ride behind Lady Agnes than her stern bodyguard,” Prince Valen said.

“I’d prefer if you didn’t get closer to my wife than necessary.” Lord Nazel seemed to be in a bad mood because of everything that had happened so far, but he still looked at me with gentle eyes.

“I’m sorry for keeping quiet about this, Agnes. We had to keep everything secret from Duke Masroono. He was being awfully pushy, so I suspected something was up, and this is what happened.” Perhaps Polpystanis weren’t cut out for these kinds of shady dealings.

Prince Valen got down from the pegasus and approached Duke Masroono.

"In any case, the plan was just to arrest the Desnimer criminal fugitives, but you made the problem much bigger, uncle. My aunt is quite furious, you know."

"Urk..."

"I don't know what kind of misconception you are operating under, but Lady Agnes's magic is matter reinforcement. Look." Prince Valen held the shortsword I'd previously reinforced and waved it around to show it off. He also used it to carve a hole into a nearby wall. "It's high-quality reinforcement that can even strengthen an ordinary blade to cut through walls. Now, let's just arrest the suspicious individuals and return to the Masroono estate." Prince Valen started taking charge of the situation.

Lord Nazel then seemed to come back to his senses and started walking, while also supporting me as if to protect me.

"Come ride with me in the carriage, Agnes. Let's discuss the details there, okay?"

H-Huh? For a moment, I thought I felt some pressure from him. *Was it just my imagination?*

Kelly, Torre, Paul, and Ryuk all started moving. I boarded the carriage that Lord Nazel and the disguised Paul had taken here. It was spacious and designed for pregnant women. The moment Lord Nazel sat down, he shut the door, and silence followed.

"I was a bit surprised earlier, Agnes."

"I'm sorry. I was just worried about you, Lord Nazel."

"You're carrying another life inside you, so you mustn't be reckless. Stress is bad both for the mother and the fetus."

"I'm doing fine, Lord Nazel..."

"Besides, I didn't want you riding a mountbeast while sticking close to Prince Valen."

"Ah..." I realized what the faint pressure he was giving off meant, and I froze in place. "N-No, that was most definitely not cheating, okay? It was just inevitable because of the state of emergency... We were just in a hurry so I ended up riding on the same pegasus as Prince Valen."

"Goodness, what was that prince doing in the middle of all that confusion? It was definitely premeditated." The pressure I felt from Lord Nazel increased.

P-Please let us arrive quickly! Things would probably still be tough once we arrived at the estate, but I was being exposed to so much pressure right now that I was at my limit.

"Agnes, my heart nearly stopped from the shock. Can you do something to reassure me?"

"Huh?" I said, unsure what he meant, when Lord Nazel leaned forward from the opposite seat, gently embraced me, and buried his face in my neck. *Eep! I can feel his breath on my skin and it tickles.*

I shifted only my gaze and looked out the window, where I saw the large sun sinking beyond the horizon. For a short time, I was stuck being fawned over to the fullest by Lord Nazel, who was feeling jealous of Prince Valen.

Just as night completely fell, our carriage safely arrived at Duke Masroono's estate. Lord Nazel alighted from the carriage first and held out his hand to me.

"Give me your hand, Agnes."

"O-Okay." Lord Nazel's touch felt incredibly gentle as he supported me, and my heart skipped a beat.

Next, Paul, Duke Masroono, Prince Valen, and the rest who'd come here on horseback gathered in front of the manor. For some reason, Duke Masroono was tied up with rope; Prince Valen was probably responsible. At the same time, the manor's door opened and Duchess Noyer gallantly walked outside.

Thank goodness, the duchess was also safe. When we made eye contact, she winked at me as if to tell me I'd done a good job.

I'd been worried that the manor might have been wrecked inside, but there were no signs of damage anywhere I looked.

"Welcome home. It seems everything was resolved safely."

"Yes, it was all thanks to you preparing our escape, Aunt Noyer," Prince Valen replied.

"Goodness gracious, this man ran wild without thinking of the consequences. What a troublesome husband!"

The tied up Duke Masroono was mumbling something, but since

a piece of cloth was also wrapped around his mouth, it was impossible to tell what he was saying.

"Because of you, our relationship with Desnim was almost ruined! Are you even listening to me?!"

"Brgh!"

"What do you think Latriche married into the Desnim royal family for?! Do you not care what happens to her over there?!" Duchess Noyer mercilessly stomped on Duke Masroono with the sharp, pointy heels of her shoes.

"Mgh!"

"Listen here. Just like you say, we need to be wary of Myzahn. I'd like to borrow a saint's power if one is out there. But didn't you think of the possibility of an angry Sutrena launching an all-out attack from behind because you were influenced by such uncertain information and took that forceful approach? Margrave Florescruz cherishes his wife above all else, so he's actually liable to do something like that. And also, I truly detest this method of threatening a woman to make her obey you!"

"Mrgh! Mngh!" Duke Masroono twitched when he was stepped on again.

Hmm? Doesn't the duke...look a little happy? I saw something I shouldn't have. Duchess Noyer was fierce.

"My aunt has ties to the royal family, so my uncle has always been under her thumb," Prince Valen said.

"Ah..." I could now understand the duke and duchess's relationship to a certain extent thanks to his explanation.

"Now then, if it's all right, I'd like to explain what happened this time in detail." It seemed that Prince Valen intended to give us a summary of the earlier events. "But before that...I suggest we take a short break first. Paul and Ryuk are still cross-dressing, so you should go and get changed."

"Y-Yes, Mister Chairman!"

To these two, it seemed that Prince Valen had a stronger impression as the school's chairman than as the second prince.

While Paul and Ryuk were getting changed, Lord Nazel urged me to my room. It was perfectly clean inside, and the duchess had likely

been kind enough to have the servants prepare drinks and snacks for us: grape juice and chips from Lord Nazel's new sunchoke variety.

None of them are red or black, so they shouldn't be spicy.

Kelly had borrowed a different room to get Paul and Ryuk out of their women's clothing, and Torre had accompanied them to help her out.

"You did great today, Agnes. You must be exhausted." Lord Nazel smiled and kissed me on the forehead as I drank some grape juice.

"S-So must you, Lord Nazel. Thank you for everything you did." The most exhausting part of today had actually been *this and that* on the carriage ride back, but I kept that to myself.

When I finished my drink, I returned the glass to the table and looked up at Lord Nazel.

"Lord Nazel... I apologize again for worrying you today."

"The most important thing is that you're safe and sound. I was a bit nervous, but you protected Paul and Ryuk splendidly."

"Hyuah?" I made some weird noise because of all my tension, but I feigned calmness as if nothing had happened.

Lord Nazel's lips relaxed a little and he had me sit on the nearby sofa.

"You shouldn't keep standing up. You must have pushed yourself today, so you should lie down. You're always really active."

"No, I feel perfectly fine, so I can stay like this."

"Come on, just relax." Lord Nazel's words overwhelmed me, so I ended up lying down on my side like he asked. "I'm the one who should apologize. I end up losing my composure whenever you're involved, no matter how many precautions you've taken."

"Lord Nazel..."

He knelt before the sofa I was lying down on and started slowly caressing my hair.

"You always act in ways beyond my expectations, and it keeps making me nervous."

"I'm sorry about that."

"But that's another great thing about you, Agnes." Then Lord Nazel told me about everything that had happened today, and that

had led up to this. “I didn’t completely trust Duke Masroono from the very start—ever since he started talking about your magic. No one who’s realized your value would simply drop the issue.”

“What about Prince Valen?”

“Just like Duchess Noyer, he was worried about Polpystan’s relationship with Sutrena deteriorating. He knew that I wouldn’t stay quiet if someone laid their hands on you. And since he doesn’t know the specifics of your magic, he had even less reason to want to stir up unnecessary trouble. He must care deeply about his sister.” Lord Nazel had a slightly cynical expression.

“So the people of Polpystan aren’t a monoculture.”

“Exactly. It seems that Duke Masroono wanted to use you, but Duchess Noyer and Prince Valen are more realistic. They understand my personality well. However, with your magic, it would be possible to create a large number of invincible knights impervious to injury. If they knew the truth about you, I’m sure that every country would desperately want to make you theirs.”

I had a high amount of mana, so I could actually do what Lord Nazel was saying. I could probably mass-produce indestructible weapons, armor, and ramparts too.

“Prince Valen seems to have noticed something after seeing your matter reinforcement firsthand and sensing something was off during the exam. So rather than trying to kidnap you, thereby antagonizing us, he must have decided to gain our favor and make us his allies. Well, that makes us even with the big hopper incident factored in.”

“That certainly leaves a better impression than trying to kidnap me.”

“That’s right. I’m glad Duchess Noyer was on our side this time. She seems to have taken a liking to you.”

“She can use an unusual stealth magic.”

“It’s one of the types of magic that’s said to be really convenient. In particular, if you use high-ranking stealth, even a very skilled person would be unable to notice you. The duchess’s magic is probably that powerful. Thank goodness she isn’t an assassin... Though my body is currently impervious to blades anyway.”

Ever since Lord Davier's rebellion, I'd applied multiple layers of my absolute reinforcement to Lord Nazel's body. At the moment, no blade could even scratch his skin.

"Even so, stealth is a slightly scary magic." We were lucky to have had the duchess on our side this time, but I shuddered when I imagined her as an enemy.

"Now then, I've told you the truth about what happened today. Prince Valen will soon be explaining things downstairs, but it's fine if you don't go."

"Ah, did you perhaps tell me everything with that goal in mind?"

"I just don't want to expose you to Prince Valen's passionate gaze." Lord Nazel smiled faintly; he'd planned this too.

Chapter 6: Madam Bumpkin and the Restored Land

The aftermath of the incident had been dealt with, and our slightly prolonged stay in Polpystan was drawing to a close. I followed Lord Nazel's instructions and spent my days leisurely in a different inn Prince Valen had arranged for us. This inn was also close to Masroono National School, so Paul and Ryuk sometimes came to hang out.

I feel like one of Paul's goals was probably to meet with Kelly. In fact, I think he was only using me as a pretext to see her... Lately, it seemed that not only Paul, but also Ryuk was conscious of Kelly. And he'd even been saying that he wasn't used to the opposite sex and all that. *Kelly sure is popular. Looks like yet another younger guy has become her captive.* However, she'd told me that she preferred older men and that she was currently focused solely on her work. The day Kelly awakened to romance might still be long ahead of us.

At the moment, she was practicing with Paul and Ryuk in order to refine her skills in making men look more feminine. She'd already improved compared to the time she'd made their drag disguises.

"All right, tomorrow is finally the day we leave the Duchy of Masroono." I was spending another day of rest at the inn alongside Lord Nazel. Our inn had a spacious outside garden where we could freely go for walks. It looked like Prince Valen, the one who'd arranged our accommodation, was being considerate of me because of my pregnancy.

After the recent events, Duke Masroono seemed to have given up on my magic. Duchess Noyer's punishment had apparently been effective. The duke had been brought to a halt for the time being, naturally by Prince Valen, but also by the King of Polpystan himself. It was unknown how things would develop from now on, but for

now, it was safe to say that we'd gotten over this problem.

My magic is different from the one possessed by the Polpystani saint of old. We can consider that knowledge alone a positive result of our trip. Based on the nature of their magic and the era they had appeared in, the saint in Desnim's stories and the saint of Polpystan were most likely the same person. Another saint had apparently appeared even before the Polpystani one, but no detailed records remained.

Polpystan would likely be in a hectic state from now on, as it had to take care of the restoration and repair of the areas damaged by the big hoppers, the Duchy of Masroono being the locale most affected.

The duchy produces the majority of Polpystan's food.

For the time being, Sutrena had shipped additional sunchoke seedlings, and would also export its surplus food to Polpystan. This was a positive for our territory since it would increase our income.

As I was lost in thought, I suddenly felt a nudging sensation in my belly and cried out. "Oh, the baby moved!"

"Really?!" Lord Nazel was already close to me, and swiftly drew nearer.

"Try touching it yourself."

When Lord Nazel gently touched my belly, the baby abruptly got quiet.

Huh...? Did it get surprised?

"It stopped moving." It would probably start moving again soon, so we decided not to worry too much about it.

"Lord Nazel, may I go for a walk?"

"I'll join you."

With Lord Nazel's support, I opened the glass door that faced the garden. The rooms of this inn were designed so that you could head outside directly. The inn's garden had also suffered damage because of the big hoppers, so some of the flowers had withered and were still being replaced. I walked up to the devastated area and came to a stop. The land affected by the manabeasts' mana was somewhat dyed purple.

"I thought the damage only made it impossible for crops to grow,

but it looks like flowers can’t survive either,” I said.

“The state Sutrena is in could mean that the soil has recovered to a certain extent, though it looks like it will still take time until it’s completely back to normal.”

As I stared at the empty land, I suddenly felt something moving in my belly.

“Oh, it feels like the baby moved again.” Moreover, the movement was a bit rough this time. Lord Nazel placed his hand on my belly, determined to feel it as well this time.

“You’re right. I can also tell.”

As we smiled at each other, the baby inside me also squirmed.



"In any case, looking at the withered land makes my heart ache."

"It will take centuries, perhaps longer, for the land to recover."

"I wish the land could become stronger too..." The moment I muttered that, something strange happened. The ground, turned barren by the big hoppers' poison, lost its purple color, and a single flower sprouted. "Oh, was that your magic, Lord Nazel?"

I asked the question thinking that he must have used his magic to make the plant grow, but Lord Nazel shook his head with a puzzled expression.

"No, that wasn't me."

"Huh? Then what just happened? It couldn't have been because I wished that the land could be stronger...could it?" As I spoke, several more small flowers popped up from the ground. The once purple part of the garden was now filled with flowers, like it had been restored to the flower bed it had once been.

"Agnes, the purple color has completely disappeared from the ground."

"You're right. But you aren't using your magic, right?"

"Could this mean...that you reinforced the soil?"

"That's absurd. Oh, but come to think of it, Father Emilio once told me that I can even reinforce the earth. I've never tried it though." The more I thought about it, the more I felt that there could be no other explanation. It was as if the soil had been purified.

"Anyway, let's go back, Agnes," Lord Nazel said after a short pause.

"Yes, Lord Nazel. We saw nothing." We decided to flee the scene for now. This was a power we shouldn't spread around carelessly.

As he walked away, Lord Nazel looked at my belly again.

"By the time the baby is born, the situation in the fields of Sutrena may have completely changed."

"Yes, I hope they can become bountiful." I started walking again as Lord Nazel took my hand.

"It would be a disaster if this turned into a big fuss, so for the time being, please only reinforce the soil in our estate's garden."

"Okay..."

The bright and gentle sun of Polpystan shone down on us as we

slowly walked together.

***

After that, Lord Nazel and I returned to Sutrena without incident.

Lord Nazel safely handed over the fugitives arrested in Polpystan to the capital of Desnim, and King Bertrand and Queen Latriche granted him the right to trade food with Polpystan. It seemed that the two of them had heard about what had taken place abroad.

We also received news that Paul and Ryuk had passed their new final exam, and at the top of their class no less. We'd also gotten letters from each of them addressed to Kelly, but she was the only one who didn't realize they were love letters. After their graduation, they decided to train under Mister Henry for now. After learning everything they needed for their jobs, they would likely be transferred to the recently added territory. I believed they would somehow make it through.

Letters from Prince Valen arrived occasionally too. Lord Nazel looked unhappy about them, saying that the prince had ulterior motives. I had no intention of ever cheating on him, but he was apparently still worried.

"Your feelings have nothing to do with his courtship behavior." He'd said something complicated again.

Prince Valen hasn't even courted me directly, so I don't think he's serious about it.

Lord Nazel was *extremely* prone to worrying. I thought about his daily overprotective behavior as I sat on the garden terrace and watched Geni and Dunk playing nearby, while a feeling of something almost like resignation to my fate filled me. The mountbeasts looked like they were having fun, but their game was also intense.

My belly was rapidly getting bigger, so I thought I'd spend some quiet time at the estate for the time being. It felt like a good idea to use everything I'd learned in Polpystan to work out a plan for the school here.

All in all, Princess Mia was incredible. She'd been pregnant under those tense circumstances but still remained strong. Hadn't she felt

uneasy at all? Thankfully, I could learn all sorts of things from corresponding with Queen Latriche, who'd gotten pregnant before me, so I felt a little reassured.

"There you are, Agnes." As I was relaxing, Lord Nazel came up to me after finishing his work. He'd been holed up in his laboratory until now, experimenting on how to create a new tuber variety.

"Did you make progress on improving the new tuber?"

"Yes. Will you help me accelerate their growth with your magic?"

"Of course."

Lord Nazel's plants could grow just fine on their own, but if I assisted with my magic, they would mature faster than normal. It was a great way to get results for his experiments quickly.

However, I need to limit my magic use to avoid affecting the results. If I wasn't careful, I could strengthen most plants to a point where they could grow like normal even here. Doing so in this case would disrupt the results of the experiment, since the whole point was to develop tubers that could grow on their own without magic. Therefore, I had to make sure my magic was as weak as possible—just barely enough to accelerate their growth—to avoid tampering with the experiment's results.

I could also reinforce the soil itself, which would avoid the need for improved plant varieties, but... If I suddenly reinforced all the soil across Sutrena, it would cause an uproar both inside and outside Desnim, so we needed to keep researching crops like before.

I left the terrace and went to the laboratory to check up on the new tubers Lord Nazel was experimenting on.

"These are...potatoes, right?"

"They are. They're planted in soil that I brought back from Polpystan—the kind that turned barren after it was exposed to the big hoppers' mana. If the potatoes manage to grow without incident, I'd like to ship them to Polpystan like the sunchokes. Their people would get sick of eating nothing but sunchokes."

"Shouldn't we move away from tubers?"

"Hmm, but tubers are the easiest crop to grow in Sutrena. They also have a long shelf life... Oh, would you like to experiment with soybeans too? I'm also preparing tomato seedlings at the moment."

"I'd love that!"

Lord Nazel actually loved tubers and didn't mind having tuber dishes for all three meals of the day, excluding konjac jelly. If it were left up to him, his improved vegetables that could grow in barren land might all end up being tubers. They were easy to grow, and mountbeasts also loved them, so it was probably still appropriate to prioritize them.

I feel bad for Polpystanis having to eat tubers every single day. You'd get tired of them no matter how many different kinds of chips you make.

As the two of us talked, I used my magic on the potatoes for the current experiment.

"Get stronger." In mere seconds, the potatoes started growing much faster. "Whoops, we need to disbud them before they bear fruit." After removing the excess buds, adding more soil, and applying magic again, the remaining leaves would grow big, bloom, and then gradually wither.

The leaves have turned yellow, so it should be possible to pull them out now. I grabbed the leaves and removed them with a "Heave-ho!"

"I'll take care of that, Agnes. You shouldn't be doing any manual labor." Lord Nazel came and stopped me, so I sat quietly in a corner of the room while he dug up the potatoes. He used a shovel to carefully push through the soil.

Lord Nazel is really skillful, refreshing, and smooth when he's digging up potatoes.

Perhaps noticing my passionate gaze, he turned around and smiled pleasantly at me.

The newly harvested potatoes would be checked to make sure they weren't poisonous, and if everything turned out okay, the next step would be beginning mass production.

"Then I think I'll deepen my knowledge of tuber dishes and spread the word about the tubers that can grow even without magic."

"You should rest, Agnes."

"Oh, yes..." I felt frustrated at not being more active, but our

adorable baby would be born in a few months, so I just had to be patient.

"If we increase the number of crops that can grow without your magic, the burden on you will be lightened. You aren't a saint, so you don't need to push yourself too hard."

Before I knew it, Lord Nazel had apparently shrewdly informed the Desnim palace that I had different magic from the Polpystani saint of old.

"I can rest easy for now." When I thought about the topic of reinforcing the earth, I wasn't exactly without worries at all, but... No, I wasn't a saint; I couldn't even create barriers. "Lord Nazel... Then even though he's lacking in power, Master Robin's magic might be closer to the saint's."

"I'd be *horrified* if that man was a saint."

According to a report we'd received the other day, Master Robin seemed to be leading a pure, righteous life at the Sempli Convent.

"It seems that he's been on good terms with the former High Priest Lubhuta recently," I said.

"I guess two fellow perverts can get along." Lord Nazel was strict when it came to those two. His antipathy toward Master Robin was expected, and he was angry at former High Priest Lubhuta because he'd been responsible for destroying our wedding venue. Lord Nazel had a great memory, so he was actually the type of person to hold grudges.

"Now then, the potato experiment is done for now, so come join me on my break."

"Um, I was taking a break just a little while ago. You spoil me too much, Lord Nazel."

"You need to rest more, Agnes."

"I'm resting too much and feel like I might turn into a couch potato..."

"While I like tubers, I like you more, so I'd be happy if you stayed the way you are." Lord Nazel chuckled as he drew his face closer to mine and kissed me for the umpteenth time today.

After that, I sat at the desk in my room and took out a notebook and pen from the top drawer. I was going to write down a plan for

the new school to be built in Sutrena.

I can't move much while I'm pregnant, but I can still handle this kind of work.

As a starting point, I wanted to let anyone who was interested take classes in a provisional school, and then hear their impressions. *A simple school would be better at first. If I remember correctly, some of our estate's maids have shown interest in participating.* At present, the educated former noblewomen worked to teach the uneducated ones how to read, write, and do arithmetic. Therefore, all of them had the foundation to attend a school to become government officials. Different schools—called elementary schools—would be built for those who couldn't attend the one for government officials.

Next up is the teachers. Some of our maids are educated, so I'll try approaching them. Government officials aren't prohibited from having side jobs, so perhaps I should try asking Paul and Ryuk too.

At any rate, the most important step was the first one. We'd borrow a room in the fortress to use as the school. It was big enough for about twenty people to take lessons. Mister Henry had reviewed the contents of the lessons and included the topics necessary for government officials. Our preparations were steadily progressing. The school's opening was still a long way off, but the preparatory discussions about construction would likely be finished by the time my child was born. I continued making plans while looking forward to that day.

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As a tepid wind blew in, Robin was glaring at the starry sky through the window in his room in the Sempli Convent. Though it was his room, he was sharing it. Inside that narrow space, some kind of high-pitched slapping sound could be heard. Robin frowned. After being forced to live a pure, righteous life of abstinence for the past few years, he felt his rage had reached its peak.

Lubhuta, who was similarly being forced into a life of abstinence and had a low boiling point, was also utterly enraged. He was more

hot-tempered than Robin. These days, he always carried a worn-out loincloth instead of a whip, which he used to strike rolled up habits instead of young, unmarried noblewomen. As his roommate, Robin was subjected to this eccentricity on a daily basis and had to constantly hear that slapping sound. He'd even begun losing hair from the stress of putting up with the former priest.

That damn demonic monk! "You're acquaintances, so sharing a room should be fine," my ass! If I knew this old man was such a freak, I would have refused at all costs... I mean, I did actually refuse! Robin's opinion had been completely ignored. *Every last thing is Nazelbart's fault! If I ever get out of here, I'll definitely get my revenge!*

As Robin glared with determination, the loincloth Lubhuta was swinging around slipped from his hands and flew straight into Robin's face. This was the worst day ever.

Damn you, Nazelbart! Robin blamed everything on Nazelbart—even things unrelated to him—and his resentment kept growing deeper and deeper.

"Agh, dammit, old man! Give it a rest already!"

"Please keep it down, Master Robin. This is the best part."

"You're the loud one here! Every single night without fail, you keep swinging that loincloth around!"

"It's a gentleman's etiquette."

"How are you a gentleman?! You're nothing but a pervert!"

As the two of them were arguing, there came a violent knock on the door.

"You two again?! Be quiet! It's already bedtime!" It was their senior monk who was on patrol duty. Robin and Lubhuta were being closely watched and guards came to their room every day.

"Agh, please, mister! Let me change rooms!"

"Go to sleep already!"

"Urk..." Robin had been enduring everything so far. He'd kept complaining but never took action.

Shit, if only I could use my magic. However, it had been sealed before he'd entered the Sempli Convent.

Some people possessed mana sealing magic. They were called

mana sealers and were managed independently by the country, like the appraisers were managed by the church. They usually stayed in the royal palace or detention facilities. They were apparently treated much better than even appraisers. Nonetheless, the power of an ordinary mana sealer was weak, so a single one couldn't seal someone else's magic on their own. Furthermore, they had to periodically reapply their sealing magic—typically annually—or the seal's effects would fade.

The time to reapply the seal on my magic is soon.

More prisoners would probably be sent to the Convent at some point.

Is there any way for me to escape? Several times in the past, Robin had tried to escape the Convent when he'd seen an opportunity, but he'd always been discovered by the demonic monk and brought back, then forced to participate in martial arts training wearing only a loincloth.

Though, my martial arts skills have improved...

After making sure the monk on patrol had left, Robin started getting ready to go to sleep. People had to get up incredibly early in the morning here. And then there was morning exercise, cleaning, cooking, and laundry! Robin and the other low-ranking people had to take care of all the chores. He'd learned the joy of a spoiled life during his time as the future prince consort, but he was still quite dexterous. Thanks to his experience growing up in a red-light district, he could take care of housework just fine, but that fact didn't make him the least bit happy!

I even have to look after this fool Lubhuta who can't do any housework at all. I'd rather still be taking care of the baby!

Robin, who hadn't actually taken care of a baby before, was strangely confident as far as babysitting was concerned.

Meanwhile, Lubhuta had fallen asleep and was now snoring loudly. He also talked and ground his teeth loudly in his sleep. Robin pushed his irritation to a corner of his mind and closed his eyes, when he suddenly heard footsteps again. It seemed that they were drawing closer to his room.

Did the sentry come to complain again? Robin got out of his plain

bed, put on his slippers, and walked across the wooden floor toward the door.

"What is it? I'm going to bed, all right?" he grumbled on his way there. But when Robin opened the door, the one standing before him wasn't a monk.

"Are you Robin?" asked the suspicious man with light blue hair poking out of a black hood. He looked to be around the same age as Robin, or perhaps younger.

"Who're you? I've never seen you here before. Are you a newcomer?"

The man shook his head with a faint smile. "I'm not a monk. I came to pick you up at a certain man's request."

"Who the heck are you talking about? I'm not easy enough to carelessly follow you after hearing that."

"How cold. And here I came all this distance from a foreign country after hearing the rumors about you. Perhaps you'll trust me after this." The suspicious man extended his hand toward Robin. A faint light shone from it and gently wrapped itself all around Robin's body.

"Whoa, the heck is this shady thing? I'm shining." However, Robin didn't really feel anything strange about his body, and the light vanished after a while. Even though he'd made some noise, Lubhuta was still sleeping like a log. "What did you do to little ol' me?"

"My magic is called release. I released the seal on your magic. You should be able to use your magic like normal now."

"Just what do you have to gain from doing that?" Robin was still feeling suspicious.

"If we come across anyone, I'd like you to help us escape. We're a small group, after all."

"That so? And you think I won't turn on you?"

"You have nothing to gain by doing that. Even if you were to capture us, nothing would change in your life. You won't be released and your everyday circumstances won't improve."

Robin started thinking—should he continue living in the Convent or take the risk and go along with this man's suggestion?

It seems my mana really is back...

Lubhuta was still asleep; there was no one to get in Robin's way.

"So, what will you do? It's almost time for us to make our escape."

"I... I..." After hesitating for a moment, Robin abruptly raised his head. "Take me with you. But if you're lying, I will retaliate accordingly. You're making a big mistake if you think my magic is harmless."

"That's fine by me. From that point on, it falls under the big shot's jurisdiction." The hooded man swiftly turned around. "Let's go, Robin. Our allies are waiting."

"Yeah, yeah." Robin didn't look behind him.

Side Story 1: The Younger Men's Battle

Kelly had been wondering about something recently: For some reason, the estate frequently received letters addressed to her.

I would understand if they were addressed to Lord Nazelbart or Lady Agnes, but me? Moreover, the senders were the fortress staff member Connie, Agnes's younger brother Paul, and his friend Ryuk. *Why are they all sending letters to me?* She didn't think she'd had that much contact with them. When it came to Ryuk, in particular, they'd only interacted when she'd helped him with his cross-dressing disguise in Polpystan.

Kelly had wondered if they were trying to use her as a way to get closer to Nazelbart, so she'd used her magic to peer into their hearts. However, all she'd felt was genuine goodwill, and a lot of it. Kelly's magic was fairly weak and could only get a rough estimate of other people's emotions, but she still felt that their affection was too great. She was getting increasingly confused.

It's certainly better for them to like me rather than hate me, but still...

Today, another three letters had arrived for Kelly, one each from the aforementioned three.

They're all adept at writing. I need to follow their examples. Desnim's literacy rate was high compared to that of other countries, and Kelly had learned how to read and write when Bertrand had picked her up. She could reply to them, but...

It's difficult to write letters almost every day like they do. Just where do they come up with all those different topics? With such thoughts in mind, Kelly picked up her pen.

***

A refined envelope, clearly sent by a woman, was delivered to the mailbox of the dormitory for single staff members where Connie lived. The corners of the white envelope were decorated with small flower designs in the same color.

Th-This is a letter from Miss Kelly! Connie immediately and carefully opened the envelope using a letter opener. Inside it was a refined, plain piece of writing paper. When he breathed in, there was a faint aroma. The letter's contents were a seasonal greeting and a simple report on recent events, but that was the wonderful thing about Kelly.

Miss Kelly! I love you! Simply looking at the words on the page made Connie's stress from work vanish. Recently, he'd been unable to relax because of a troublesome new recruit who'd kept following him around. *My senior colleagues have a soft spot for her, and before I knew it, I'd been put in charge of training her.*

In Connie's irrational daily life, Kelly was the only oasis for his heart. Although Kelly was popular among the fortress staff, the others hadn't sent her personal letters. Connie chuckled to himself, knowing that this was a privilege only for him, since he could come and go from the estate in order to give advice on caring for mountbeasts and run other errands.

***

A letter from Kelly arrived at Paul's student dormitory. Correspondence with Desnim was possible, although it took some time since it was a neighboring country.

Paul felt a sense of fulfillment just by looking at the plain envelope and letter combination—very typical of Kelly. The contents of the letter were also intellectual, again typical of her.

I love you, Miss Kelly! Paul had decided to confess his feelings to Kelly after becoming a full-fledged government official and growing into a man worthy of her. However, one problem had emerged. Paul glanced over to his roommate Ryuk. He was holding an envelope identical to the one Paul had received. *I-It couldn't be!*

Ryuk looked ecstatic as he held the envelope close to his chest.

"Hey, Ryuk, what's that letter?"

"Oh, this? It's from Miss Kelly. She's so dashing, isn't she? I admire her so much..."

I knew it! Paul was a little shocked. He had never expected that his best friend would fall for the same woman he had. *Ugh... I was vain to think that Miss Kelly might only be conscious of me. She still sees me like a little brother...not as a member of the opposite sex she's interested in. I need to become a more reliable man!*

Paul took out a pair of dumbbells from a wooden box in a corner of the room. *I'll become a handsome man like Mister Torre!*

And so, unbeknownst to Kelly, the curtains quietly opened on the boys' passionate, frustrating, and intense battle of love.

Side Story 2: The Tuber Festival

This year, the government officials at Sutrena's fortress were discussing putting on an event to liven up the territory. After suffering for several years, the lives of the people here had finally improved dramatically. It was decided to do something to provide entertainment for the people and promote the consumption of the territory's agricultural products. If they hosted some kind of event, people would visit from outside the territory too. It should also serve as good advertisement for the reborn Sutrena.

"And so, does anyone have a suggestion?" Nazelbart, the one running the meeting, broached the question to his officials.

Connie raised his hand.

"Yes! I'd like to hold a mountbeast race."

"That sounds interesting. However, preparing a racecourse requires money, time, and man power. If possible, I'd like to host this event by the end of this year. Logistical concerns aside, it's a good suggestion, so we should begin considering hosting a mountbeast race at some point."

Henry was the next one to raise his hand. "How about a festival where people can bring food?"

"That sounds good. What kind of food, exactly?"

"Let's see, we should choose some representative vegetables..."

"Let's go with tubers." At the margrave's word, it was decided that Sutrena's Tuber Festival would be held.

That day, after returning home, Nazelbart found his beloved wife in their spacious living room and told her about the festival.

"That's how we decided to hold a Tuber Festival."

Agnes, his pregnant wife, was sitting comfortably on the sofa, eagerly reading a book. Nazelbart looked over at the book and saw that its title was *Small Animals of the Frontier*. His wife loved all kinds of creatures, including both regular animals and manabeasts.

However, she didn't seem to be that fond of insects. She hadn't shown any particular interest in the big hoppers.

"My, a tuber festival? That sounds like lots of fun." Agnes's lovely face lit up when she heard about it.

I want to kidnap her and lock her up somewhere. But whenever he honestly told her that, Agnes got embarrassed and tried to run away. He loved that about her too, but right now, he wanted to talk to her normally. Nazelbart sat down next to Agnes.

"At the festival, there will be many stalls selling tuber cuisine native to Sutrena. We also plan to set up mountbeast stations to help host visitors from neighboring territories."

"That sounds wonderful. I wish I could go look around the stalls..." The festival would likely be crowded, so it would be dangerous for Agnes to go touring the stalls when she was in the middle of her pregnancy.

"We won't only hold the festival this year, so you'll have future opportunities to attend. Plus, I'll bring you trial versions of the tuber cuisine we'll be serving at the festival. Would you like to judge them together?"

"Gladly!"

The smile returned to Agnes's face, and Nazelbart felt relieved from the bottom of his heart. He wasn't particularly interested in anything except his wife. He reacted sensitively to her every action, and he felt shaken at even the smallest changes.

"How cute..." He unconsciously spoke what was on his mind; Agnes's cheeks instantly blushed in response.

She's so adorable it's making my heart ache... Nazelbart couldn't hold himself back and wrapped his arms around Agnes's back, making her cheeks turn an even deeper red.

"Lord Nazel?!"

Her flustered expression made his desire to protect her even stronger.

No, Agnes is pregnant right now, so I mustn't push her too much. Nazelbart drew on every bit of his reason and held himself back. *I'll put these feelings into a letter and send it to our church's counseling room. Emilio is in love with Miss Sonia, so I'm sure he'll understand*

how I feel.

Having arbitrarily recognized Emilio as a kindred soul, Nazelbart decided on his next course of action.

***

And so, it was finally the long-awaited big day...of sampling the food that would be in the Tuber Festival—the actual big event.

Agnes was currently in the eighth month of her pregnancy; her belly had grown considerably. Lately, she'd been asking the maids who had children about babies, and also studying about them on her own. The hardworking Agnes was lovely in all sorts of ways.

That day, the manor's dining room was filled with all kinds of tuber cuisine: steamed tubers, simmered tubers, potatoes with an aroma of butter, deep-fried taro, sweet potatoes...

"Wow! I'm so happy!" Agnes said.

"I tried adding a lot of the foods you like." Nazelbart's menu choices were full of self-interest, but the foods were actually popular, so there shouldn't be a problem.

"Thank you so much, Lord Nazel!"



Agnes had been craving sweets lately, perhaps because of the baby in her belly. Due to her condition, the only people in the dining room with her at the moment were Nazelbart, Kelly, and some servants she was relatively close to.

Agnes started leisurely eating. Of course, since eating only tubers would have led to unbalanced nutrition, her regular meals were made with balance in mind.

"Here, Lord Nazel. Open wide."

Nazelbart casually bit into the tuber Agnes offered him. Since he did it for her all the time, she had also learned this form of communication. Although it wasn't intentional, it was a good result. And so, their time passed peacefully. Nazelbart had been busy preparing for the festival on top of his regular work, but he felt truly glad that he'd decided to host it.

Afterword

I'm deeply grateful to you for purchasing volume 5 of *Lady Bumpkin and Her Lord Villain*! Thanks to all of your support, the *Lady Bumpkin* series has reached its fifth volume. I'm truly happy and thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Now then, volume 5 features a grown-up Paul. (I like the members of the House of Evantail, so they come up often, ha ha.) As depicted in Kurodeko's illustrations, he's grown into a strong, masculine young man, and I'm looking forward to his future. All the members of the Polpystan group are so cool, aren't they?!

I would also like to thank the editor who helped me a great deal with volume 5, everyone involved in the publishing of this book, and all of you, the readers.

Ageha Sakura


"Wow..."
In response, Lord Nazel smiled and gave me a peck on the brow.


Paul
Agnes's younger brother who's studying abroad in Polpystan. Excels in both magic and his studies.
Ryuk Simble
Paul's friend. Possesses great shield magic, but is timid and hates battle.
Valen Polpystan
The second prince of Polpystan. Also working as the chairman of Masroono National School.
Agnes Florescruz
The former "Lady Bumpkin" who lives on the frontier. She's being told to rest because of her pregnancy.
Nazelbart Florescruz
A young man who had his engagement with the former princess broken off. Agnes's husband, and increasingly overprotective during his wife's pregnancy.


"I'm wholly devoted to you, Agnes."
"And as I always say, I'm wholly devoted to you, Lord Nazel."

















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by Ageha Sakura

Translated by Vasileios Mousikidis Edited by Jonathan Engel

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