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“Okay.” As the students responded, they closed their textbooks. After gathering her things, Elise moved to leave the classroom, but the Math teacher, Mr. Winfrey, stopped her when she walked to the corridor. “Miss Sinclair, I know you have a strong foundation, but you’re really taking too many days off this semester. If you have trouble catching up, just come to me for guidance as soon as possible. The finals are just around the corner, and I hope you can ace the tests like you always do.” Elise could clearly feel the teacher’s expectations of her. “Thank you, Mr. Winfrey. I will do my best.”

Seeing her reaction, he stopped nagging, but before leaving, he still tried to persuade her to focus on her studies. “If you don’t understand anything at all, just come to me. Don’t be shy, okay?” Elise responded with a smile. “Got it. Thank you, Mr. Winfrey.” With that, Elise waved and left while Mr. Winfrey watched her go, then sighed. *I’ve been teaching for ages, but Elise here is one of a kind. She’s a Math genius. If she dedicates herself to Math, the field will benefit greatly from her insight.* Elise, of course, didn’t know her teacher’s thoughts. When she went home, she saw Danny obediently revising his studies.

Elise raised an eyebrow as she asked, “So, how confident are you this time?” Danny nodded. “Probably won’t be too big of a problem, but there’s still a long way to go before I can surpass you.” Elise encouraged him instead. “You’re not in competition with me; you’re in competition with yourself. You’ll do fine as long as you’re improving.” Danny looked up at her. “Don’t worry, Boss! I’ll work extra hard and surpass you as soon as I can.” “Sure. All the best.” Elise then asked, “Anything you don’t understand today?” A light chuckle later, he handed her the workbook.

“I’m wondering about this question, actually.” Elise gave it a look, and the solution came clearly and easily to her. She worked on the problem with Danny, and the two were so focused that they didn’t notice Alexander entering the scene and standing in a spot near them. “It’s more or less like this, and you’ll get square root of 3 in the end. You can try solving it on your own again,” Elise said, putting down the pencil. It was only then when she looked up to see Alexander, whose presence came as a slight surprise. “When did you get back?” Alexander walked over.

“I just arrived.” Then he peeked at their calculations. “I heard that both of you will be having your finals soon, so surely it means that winter break is not far off? Do you have any plans?” He looked at Elise, who smiled as she replied, “I’ll go home for winter break and spend the rest of the year with my grandparents. I’ll come back when school reopens next year.” “Boss, you can’t do that! You promised to play games with me if I scored the top 3, so if you return to your hometown, the network there won’t be good enough to play games!” Elise replied, “Nah, the network there is pretty nice, so we won’t have such problems.

Also, as long as you get in the top 3, I’ll gladly play games with you, even if I have to use up all my mobile data.” Pleased by her reply, Danny grinned. “That’s more

like it." On the other hand, Alexander put on a sour face. If Elise was going home, then he wouldn't be able to see her for a long while. At that thought, Alexander found his heart filled with longing. He even wished to go with Elise, and as soon as the idea entered his mind, he seemed to have thought of something so brilliant his eyes even sparkled a little. "You guys continue. I'm going up."

With that, Alexander went up the stairs and gave Cameron a call. The day before the exams, Danny did his revisions well into the night, whereas Elise kept to her daily routine and went to sleep early as usual. The next morning, Elise woke up feeling refreshed, and Danny managed to get up on time as well. The latter was even reading a Chinese magazine as he ate his breakfast. "Morning, Boss." Danny greeted Elise, who was surprised to see him in such high spirits. Elise hastily asked, "Are you on drugs or something? How are you so awake?"

Danny smiled mysteriously as he said, "I didn't take any drugs, Boss, but would you like some freshly ground coffee?" Elise nodded, and Stella immediately understood the assignment. A cup of freshly ground coffee soon appeared in front of Elise. "Miss Elise, this coffee is freshly brewed. Do have a try." "Thank you, Stella. It's been a while since I've last had such good coffee." With that, Elise took a sip. The pleasant smell of the coffee instantly filled her mouth, and her taste buds were extremely satisfied. "Boss, I'm already done with breakfast, so I'm going to school first."

Danny put down his spoon and rushed out. Stella couldn't help but praise him. "Young Master Danny has been so hardworking lately! He would do his homework as soon as he got home, and he would also study Chinese vocabulary every morning. I wonder what caused him to change so much. This has never happened before!" Elise was pleased to know that Danny had the will and perseverance in him, and she knew he would have a bright future ahead of him. "Stella, I'm done with breakfast as well. I'm going to school now." Elise was about to leave when she bumped into Alexander, who was just descending the stairs.

"I'll give you a ride." Alexander obviously hadn't had breakfast before he took Elise to school. Hence, she gave him a reminder before she got out of his car when they reached the school compounds. "Breakfasts are important. Remember to eat on time." Alexander had no care for such things, but he subconsciously replied, "All right. All the best for your finals." Elise waved at him, then walked toward the school. For some reason, Alexander actually went to a breakfast joint and ordered a breakfast wrap. As he looked at the delicious food in front of him, his mood was instantly lifted, and even his eyebrows relaxed into a gentle expression.

Ashlyn hadn't seen Alexander in forever. Ever since she was used as a pawn in an arranged marriage, she no longer had the right to stay close to Alexander. Still, she kept learning about him by word of mouth, and she knew that even when she was engaged to another person, her heart belonged to Alexander only. However, she never thought that she would bump into him on her way to get breakfast.

Alexander also seemed to be in a good mood; he was even smiling at the food. Ashlyn swore she had never seen Alexander so happy in all the years she had known him. He was always so stern and unsmiling, so she never thought a day would come when she would be able to witness him smiling like that.

Ashlyn couldn't help but walk toward him. "Long time no see, Alexander!" Hearing that, Alexander immediately dropped his smile, and his usual coldness took its place. He even thought that Ashlyn's appearance caused him to lose his appetite. "Miss Lawson, we're not that familiar with each other, are we?"

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Ashlyn felt awkward, but she still bit the bullet and tried to convince Alexander. "We grew up together, Alexander. Even if we can't be lovers, we can still be friends, right?" Alexander replied coldly, "Sorry, but I beg to differ." With that, Alexander stood up. He had lost the mood for breakfast, so he signaled for the waiter. "Please put these in takeaway containers. Thank you." After completing his task, the waiter passed the containers to Alexander. "Here you are, mister." Alexander took the containers and left, for he had no intention of talking to Ashlyn. The lady, however, didn't give up and ran after him. "Alexander, I was foolish and did horrible things. I'm sorry, and I've already repented! Please, can you forget the past and pretend that it never happened? Can we still be friends like before?" Alexander was growing more irritated by the second. "Are you out of your mind? You'd better see a doctor and get your delusional tendencies checked." Instantly, Ashlyn went pale in the face. Alexander's words had dragged her harshly out of her ideal state. She thought that if they reached an understanding, they could pretend that the past never happened, then everything would go back to how they were before.

However, she totally forgot how filthy her actions were, and she should be embarrassed to approach Alexander out of nowhere. "I'm sorry, I—" Alexander didn't have time for her explanations, so he simply got into his car and drove away. Left behind, Ashlyn was frustrated. *Why? Dang it! I don't get how things turned out this way. We weren't like this before. He used to be nice and polite to me, though I need to admit that we weren't particularly close. But hey, he was still alright. His attitude now, though?! Hmph!* He refused to talk to her any more than necessary! *When did the change happen?* Ashlyn recalled Elise's arrival, and she clenched her fists. She seemed to have found the reason. *It all happened because of Elise...* "That cunning woman!" Ashlyn shouted. *Elise must have done something to cause Alexander to hate me so much.* By now, Ashlyn had completely come to hate Elise, and she swore that she would have her revenge one day. However, Elise had no idea what happened, for she had just entered the exam hall to prepare for the exams. There were 4 subjects to be tested in the finals, including languages and Math. After the 2-day finals, the winter break was finally upon them. After returning to the Griffith Residence, Elise immediately went upstairs. Danny followed suit, and when his bag hit the floor, he was already starting up a game in his room. Even from a distance away, Elise could hear the gaming sounds coming from his room. Elise shut the door to her room in order to block off the noise, and then she called Laura up. "Grandma, I'll be going back after 2 days to spend my break with you—" Before Elise could finish, Laura hastily said, "Ellie, you don't have to come back. I'm on vacation with your grandpa, and we won't be back until next year." This time, it was Elise's turn to be stunned. "When did you go? Why didn't you tell me?" Promptly, her grandmother responded by saying, "It's sort of a last-minute decision, so we didn't inform you beforehand. You can

just spend the break in Athesea, all right? You don't have to come home." Hearing that, Elise could only sigh helplessly. "All right, then. Take care out there and come home soon." After Laura hung up, Robin immediately asked her, "She didn't notice, right?" Laura grinned in satisfaction. "You know who I am. She wouldn't notice at all. Ellie definitely wouldn't expect us to arrive in Athesea in 2 days. She'll be so surprised when she sees us!" Robin said admiringly, "I never thought that Alex would arrange these things so well. There shouldn't be much cause for worry if they get together in the future." Laura agreed, wholly satisfied with Alexander. "But he also said that they would get engaged first, then they can take it slow with the wedding. No matter what, this grandson-in-law won't be going anywhere, so our little Ellie is finally settling down." They exchanged happy smiles, and they could see their reflections in each other's eyes.

Meanwhile, Elise was a little deflated. Her grandparents didn't even tell her that they were going on a vacation, but she had already told the Griffiths that she would be going home for the break. Now that she couldn't go back anymore, this situation was kind of embarrassing for her. Still, Elise didn't overthink about it. It was the holidays, so she had time to help search for news on Mikayla. Oddly, all traces indicated that Mikayla had returned to the country, but she still hadn't come home after so long, nor did she contact her family. Elise's expression went dark, after which she turned on her computer. 'Jamie, are all the holes in Skynet System fixed?' Elise sent Jamie a message, and she soon received a reply. 'All patched up. Do you want to use it, Boss?' Elise replied with a simple 'yes' then continued, 'I'm looking for someone, and I'm wondering if Skynet can help me find them sooner.' Seeing Elise's request, Jamie quickly asked, 'Who are you looking for, Boss? Just send me their info, and Skynet will be able to track them down within a day.' Immediately, Elise sent over Mikayla's information. 'Notify me as soon as you find any news on her.' Jamie responded with an 'ok' emoji. Then he proceeded to scour for information on Mikayla with Skynet. Elise took a deep breath and hoped that they would have news on Mikayla soon. Elise thought that Mikayla would be found quickly with the aid of Skynet, but 3 days had passed without any new information. It was as if Mikayla had disappeared; they couldn't find any traces of her. 'Boss, is someone trying to hide her tracks?' Elise thought long and hard. *Who else in this world could have such talent and skill?* As she was racking her brains, a knock sounded on her door, and she was brought back to reality. She thought that it must be Stella, so she said casually, "Is anything the matter, Stella?" Elise didn't get an answer as she expected. Stunned and a little curious, Elise got up to open the door, only to be dumbfounded the next moment. "Grandpa! Grandma! Why are you here?" Laura stretched out her arms in welcome. "My darling Ellie! Let me have a good look at you! Look how much you've grown!" Undoubtedly, the young lady was surprised. "Grandma, weren't you on vacation? Why are you suddenly back?" It was an awkward question, and Laura didn't know how to answer it, so she let Robin do the talking. Robin could only chuckle out of awkwardness. "Hah! We were tired, so we came back." Elise wasn't one to be easily deceived. *Something is fishy indeed.* "Really?" she asked, and Laura could only nod in reply. Elise quickly dropped her suspicions because she was simply too glad to see her grandparents. "I've missed you so much, Grandma." Elise took Laura's arm tightly in hers, and Laura didn't know what to do with her. "You're a big girl now. Why are you still acting like a child?" The young lady replied by pulling a funny face. "No matter how old I get, I just want to be a little girl in your eyes, Grandma." Won over by her granddaughter's cheeky reply, Laura caressed her head lovingly. "You have a way with words, don't you?"

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As they talked, Elise helped Laura into her room. Robin, on the other hand, said that he wanted to get some tea, so he went downstairs. The door had just closed when Laura said to Elise in a serious tone, "Ellie, we already know about you and Alex." For a moment, Elise was stunned, but soon she curved her lips into a smile. "Then are you here to attend our engagement party?" Laura took Elise's hand. "Ellie, be honest with me. Do you really want this?"

Your grandpa and I do think that Alex is a fine guy, but your thoughts are also important to me. If you don't like him that much, you don't have to force yourself." Elise knew that her grandparents were the nicest people in the world to her. "Don't worry, Grandma. I agreed to the engagement exactly because I like him. As for the wedding, I'm still too young to be legally married, so we'll wait another 2 years to make a decision." Hearing Elise's words, Laura could finally let go of the burdens in her heart. "As long as you're happy with it, I'll give you all my support.

Still, time goes by too fast, doesn't it? Just in the blink of an eye, my dear Ellie is already getting married..." Laura caressed Elise's hair, her voice taking on a melancholic tone. Elise leaned against her. "Grandma, I'll be fine..." "Yes, I believe you will." The two chatted for a bit, then Elise got Laura to her own room. Then, as soon as Elise turned around, she realized that Alexander was standing just behind her. "You... You're back?" Alexander looked at her, then asked, "Have they settled down?" Elise nodded. "It's been a tiring journey for them. They're already asleep." "Good. Just tell Stella if they have any needs. The new year is coming soon, so it's nice to have more people around. The more, the merrier, yes?"

Elise looked up into his eyes. "Are you the one who took them here?" Elise had already guessed it somehow, but she still asked for confirmation. As expected, Alexander nodded. "You seem lonely here, so they're glad to come and accompany you." Warmth spread throughout Elise's chest. "Thank you!" Those were just two simple words, but Alexander could feel something weird welling up in him. He walked to Elise and stopped mere inches away from her. "We don't have to be so polite around each other. They are your grandparents and also mine as well.

We're all family." Elise blinked as her heart raced. She watched as Alexander leaned in, his face getting closer to hers. She reached out subconsciously to block his advancements. "I... I'm going back to my room." With that, she escaped without waiting for Alexander's reply. She closed the door behind her as soon as she entered her room. Her heart was still beating rapidly as she recalled the scene just seconds ago. *Alexander was trying to kiss me!* Elise put a hand to her chest in relief. She was glad that she ran away in time, but still, she could feel a slight sense of regret buried inside. *Admit it, Elise. You're looking forward to it too, but you just didn't want to face it.* That night, Elise tossed and turned in her bed, unable to sleep.

She kept thinking of that moment when Alexander was leaning in to kiss her. It wasn't until past midnight when Elise finally nodded off to sleep, and she only woke up near midday. "Boss, quick, get up!" Danny was rapping on the door. Elise turned around, annoyed. "Go away. Give me five more minutes." However, Danny could barely contain his emotions. The results for the finals were released that morning, and he was overjoyed as he saw his results on his phone. He actually got third place in the test, so he refused to leave as told. "Boss, get up! Results for the finals are out!"

Elise only wanted to cover her ears with her pillow. Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore, so she sat up on the bed, then walked over and opened the door. "Quit yapping this early in the morning!" Seeing Elise's sleepy look, Danny immediately said, "Boss, it's almost noon..." If Elise wasn't awake before, she was now. Danny's words had jolted her awake. "What? Almost noon?" Danny nodded in confirmation. Elise turned around and closed the door, keeping the boy outside. Danny could only swallow the words he was about to say. "Boss, get ready quick, okay? I'll wait for you downstairs."

Elise looked at the time and realized that it was already 11 am. After a quick washing up, she went down the stairs to see Laura and Robin reading newspapers in the living room. She immediately rushed up to them and grabbed Laura's arm. "Good morning, Grandma!" Laura put the newspapers away. "It's not morning anymore, darling. It's almost noon." Elise grinned, albeit a little embarrassed. "Sorry, I overslept." "Go get something to eat. Breakfasts are important, right?" Elise quickly straightened up. "Got it, Grandma. I'm going now." "Boss, quick, check the results! They're out!"

Danny reminded her excitedly. Seeing his antics, Elise could already guess that he did well. "How did you fare?" Danny was beaming as he showed her three fingers. "I got third place in class!" Elise smiled in return. "Not bad. It's a great improvement." Without wasting a moment, Danny went up to her. "Then you'll keep your promise tonight, right? You'll play games with me?" Elise nodded. "Sure. Tonight it is, then." Danny was elated to know that Elise was a woman of her word. "Nice! I'll get KK and the others, and we'll sweep the floor tonight!" "Sure!"

That night after dinner, Elise went back to her room. She was chilling on the couch with her phone in hand when KK sent a message to the group chat. KK: 'When are we starting?' Danny: 'In a bit. Wait for me.' Elise: 'Tell me when you're online.' Danny: 'Ok.' After seeing the reply, Elise exited the group chat and scrolled Twitter for a while. Within half an hour, Danny was already online. 'Boss, get online now. We're starting.' Elise replied with an 'okay'. She pulled up the game screen. This time, she found her main account, and she logged in to see her inbox filled with private messages.

She frowned and skimmed through them. They were all messages from players asking when she would return. At the same time, the group chat was in a frenzy. KK sent a message first, saying, 'OMG, guess what I just saw! I just logged in and saw that Ellimane is online! Right now!'

Danny: 'I saw it too! And Ellimane rarely gets online! What a rare occasion!' KK: 'I wish we could play with Ellimane! I could die happy!' Danny: 'I hope so too, but Ellimane is way out of our league. We're just normal players ...' Danny had just

sent his message when he saw a notification on his game interface, stating, 'Ellimane invited you for a game.' Danny's hands trembled. He thought his eyes must be playing tricks on him, and he subconsciously rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

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Danny: 'Ellimane invited me to join a game...' When Danny sent the message, even his breathing turned uneven. He quickly accepted the invitation, fearing that he might miss out. Seeing the message, KK thought that Danny was joking. He was about to reply when the same notification popped up on his game interface: 'Ellimane invited you for a game.' Instantly, KK went nuts, and he was way beyond excited as he texted Danny back. 'Ellimane also invited me!' With that, KK straightaway entered the game, and three characters soon appeared on the screen. They were Danny, KK, and Ellimane!

Seeing his idol, KK was the first to move forward. 'Ellimane, I'm so happy to see you! I never thought that you would invite me for a game! Don't worry. I'll do my best not to drag you down.' Elise was speechless at KK's torrent of messages but responded to him, regardless. 'Don't be so nervous. It's not our first time playing together.' It was KK's turn to be surprised. Danny also stared at the words on the screen in disbelief.

He felt that he had missed something huge. "Ellimane, have we played together before?" Danny couldn't help but ask. Elise found Danny's behavior funny, but she didn't hide the secret for long. "Come on, Danny Griffith. It's me!" Danny was startled as he read the six words. He was even surprised that he had linked Ellimane to Elise subconsciously. He stared at the screen in disbelief, his hands trembling as he asked, 'Who... Who are you? How did you know my real name?' 'Elise Sinclair!' She didn't bother to explain and merely replied to him with her name.

This time, Danny threw his phone away in shock, then he quickly got up and walked toward Elise's room. He didn't even bother knocking as he opened the door and walked in. The first thing he saw was Elise lazing on the couch. When she saw the intruder, she waved her phone at him. "What's wrong? Let's start the game!" Danny hastily walked forward and snatched Elise's phone. When he saw her player ID, his eyes grew as wide as saucers. "You... You... You're actually Ellimane?!" Elise grinned. "What, do I not look the part?" Danny felt his legs give way, and he almost fell over.

He started recalling snippets of his interactions with Elise concerning the game. Elise was supposedly a newbie when they last played together, but her skills far surpassed his, so it would make sense that she was already skilled at the game, but she had simply used a new account to play with him. Also, it was no wonder that she looked so calm when he ranted about Ellimane to her. He thought she wasn't interested, but that was only because she was Ellimane herself. Danny immediately fell to his knees. "Boss, I'm so glad I'm your underling." Seeing him act like that, Elise quickly said, "Come on, get up."

I have nothing to give you, even if you do this." Danny stood up in glee. "Wait for me, boss. I'll take my phone here so we can play together." With that, Danny ran out. As soon as the door closed, he jumped up and down in excitement, shouting, "Yes! Yes!" Alexander was passing by when he saw Danny, so he asked, "What happened?" Hastily, Danny gathered himself and feigned calmness. "Nothing, I just wanted to play games with Boss."

Alexander thought that Danny was brushing him off, so he wanted to say something, but Danny had already left. Danny came back soon enough and walked right into Elise's room. He looked like a smitten fan as he said, "Boss, let's start now. Please carry me!" Elise was speechless. Meanwhile, KK was so overcome by emotions that he could barely function. He kept spamming Danny with messages. 'I literally cannot! I feel so nervous every time I see Ellimane. I know I will mess up!' Danny looked at Elise, then replied calmly, 'It's fine. Just do your best for the game, and you'll be fine.'

Ellimane is an ordinary person, just like us.' KK took a deep breath to calm himself, then asked, 'Right, where's your Boss? We were going to play together, right? Why isn't she online?' With that, KK pinged Elise in the group chat. Danny wasn't quite willing to break the news to KK just yet, so he made up a quick excuse, 'Boss won't be coming today. We'll just play with Ellimane today.' KK didn't think too much as he hastily followed Ellimane into the game.

Danny caught up as well, and they formed a team of three. Then, they were quickly matched with another group of players. Due to Ellimane's sudden return, the players in the game were already in a frenzy, and they all poured in to watch the match. Soon, the match had gained more than 10,000 viewers, hence proving Ellimane's massive influence. However, Elise didn't care much. She had agreed to play with Danny, so she would give it her all. 3 matches down, and they were still winning by a large margin. Danny, on the other hand, was in awe as he exclaimed, "You're awesome, Boss!"

Elise kept her eyes focused on the screen as she replied, "Watch your back. Surprise attack incoming." Danny was nonchalant. "It's fine. With Boss around, I'll be alright." However, as soon as he finished talking, Danny's character was slashed by the opponent. He immediately lost a third of his HP, also losing his nonchalance at the same time. "Boss, why didn't you help me?" Elise didn't even raise her head. "Play properly and focus on the game."

Danny knew right away that Elise was doing it on purpose. He was a revengeful person, so he immediately countered the opponent in the game, and he soon finished them off, after which he put down his phone in glee. "How's that, Boss? My skills aren't too bad, are they?" Elise was calm as she replied, "Not bad." Danny took it as the best encouragement ever. "Boss, with your encouragement, I'll keep working hard and catch up to you in the future!" *Is it me or is this boy here a bit adorable today?* "I wonder why I've never seen such an adorable side to you before."

Hearing her words, Danny moved closer and acted cutesy as he said, "Then, Boss, do you like adorkable underlings like me?" Elise didn't know what to say, but she didn't forget to reach out and slap his head. "I've already done my part of the deal. Don't bug me to play with you anymore, okay?" Danny immediately put on a

pitiful look. "Boss, we've only played one round! Look how hard I've worked and how much I've improved!

Another round, please?" Considering his plea, Elise could only shake her head in exasperation. At the same time, countless private messages were flooding her inbox, all from other players. Elise didn't bother replying to the messages as she said, "I'm going offline now. We'll play together next time."

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With a heavy heart, Danny reluctantly agreed with Elise. "Alright, play with me again next time." After Elise went offline, she immediately put the fun moment she just had with Danny behind her since it was nothing more than just a game to her. However, to everyone's surprise, some of the players who were onlooking recorded clips of their gameplay. The hashtag #Ellimane'sReturn went viral, and because of the hashtag's popularity, Danny and KK's in-game ID received endless friend requests. The next day, Danny realized their gameplay had become the most trending video on the internet.

Thus, he excitedly showed it to Elise. "Boss, you're now the most searched person on the internet." "What?" Elise frowned in confusion. "Someone posted a video of our gameplay walkthrough on the internet, and it's gone viral." Danny forwarded the link with a reply. Upon taking a quick glimpse at it, Elise complained in response. "Man! I shouldn't have played the game with you guys using my existing account." Danny chuckled.

"Boss, how was I supposed to know your true identity if you hadn't used your actual account to play with us? Furthermore, I wish everyone knows you're my boss because everyone is going to be so envious of me." While Elise shrugged her shoulders helplessly, Danny immediately acted like he was her little fan and asked, "When are you going to play with me again, Boss? Can I play with you again next time? Please let me know if there is anything you need, Boss. I'll get it arranged right away!" Elise then interrupted his speech. "Alright, my grandpa and grandma will be here in a few days, so please keep them company for me.

Thus, our game will have to wait for the time being." Knowing what Elise was implying, Danny gave her an 'okay' gesture as an agreement. "No problem, Boss. I'm free anyway, so I can definitely show them around." In the meantime, Alexander was slowly approaching the unsuspecting duo just when Danny was finishing his words. Then, he knitted his eyebrows and looked at Danny and Elise, feeling as if the two of them had grown a lot closer recently.

For that, he couldn't help but feel slightly jealous about it, but since Danny was his brother, he decided to say nothing about it. Instead, he suggested something else. "Would you like to take Grandpa and Grandma out? It's the holiday season now, so why don't you tag along?" As Elise was about to say something, Danny beat her to it and responded. "Sure, Alexander. Let's go." Alexander turned his attention to Elise. "What about you?"

Well, I could take this opportunity to show my grandparents around Athesea. The more, the merrier anyway. At the thought of that, Elise replied affirmatively, "Sure." Alexander then said, "Alright then, I'll get Cameron to arrange everything. We'll be ready to set out in the afternoon." Later that afternoon, Alexander took everyone, along with Laura and Robin, out. For the next two days, they visited almost every famous landmark in Athesea with Alexander, who showed them around like a tour guide. With Alexander's clear explanation about all the places they visited, Laura and Robin were especially satisfied with him.

In fact, they reckoned he was a perfect match with Elise, and with that, they were looking forward to his marriage with Elise. On New Year's Eve, the Griffith Family was busy decorating their home with beautiful lamps and flowers. Not long after that, the Griffith Residence was seen with a new and refreshing look. At dinnertime, everyone sat around the table as Laura took her gifts from her bag. "Everybody listen up! It's the new year, and each of you is going to get a present. May every one of you have a wonderful year ahead." Danny, who loved presents, accepted his gift with excitement.

"Thank you, Grandma." Soon, Laura gave another present to Jack and said, "Come here, boy." Meanwhile, Jack fixed his gaze on the gift, wondering how long it had been since the last time he ever received a present. After a brief hesitation, he took the gift and said, "Thank you, Grandma." "You're welcome. We're all a family anyway, so I want you both to be happy." Elise leaned closer and seized Laura's arm in a coy manner. "Grandma, as your granddaughter, shouldn't I be receiving a big gift?" Laura poked Elise's head with her finger. "Silly girl! What makes you think I'll forget you?"

Soon, she presented another gift to her granddaughter. "Here. I prepared this a long time ago." "Thank you, Grandma!" Elise happily exclaimed. Laura helplessly shook her head. "Oh, my girl! When are you ever going to grow up?" Despite those words, the old lady's eyes were filled with love and affection. Then, she reached for her gift and gave it to Alexander. "This is for you, Alexander! I hope you and Elise can live a happy life forever together."

Upon hearing the old lady's words, Elise felt her face blush as she became embarrassed. In the meantime, Alexander took the gift and sincerely expressed his gratitude. "Thanks, Grandma." Laura nodded her head satisfactorily. "Good! Good! Let's celebrate the night and get ready for New Year's Day!" As everyone raised their glasses and filled the parlor with happy laughter, the lively vibe was accompanied by some uplifting New Year's music on the television, making the atmosphere feel even more heartwarming.

After dinner, Mrs. Lester proceeded to clean the dishes while Elise watched some New Year festival shows on the TV. In the meantime, Jack appeared to be a little distracted, sitting on the couch as he stared blankly ahead of him. On the other hand, Danny was busy texting his friends to wish them a happy new year while Alexander stood in the corner and observed everyone quietly. *When Grandpa was still around, we had quite a number of heartwarming moments like this one as well. He may be gone now, but I'm grateful that I managed to keep this family together.*

At the thought of that, Alexander smiled from ear to ear charmingly, whereupon he made his way toward the parlor and sat down beside Elise. At that moment, they were watching an entertaining talk show as Elise was seen laughing out loud

with her grandmother. "This actor looks familiar. What's his name already...?" Laura fixed her gaze on the actor on the TV in bewilderment until Elise reminded her. "It's Floyd Willis." Laura's smile grew even wider when she heard the name. "I think that's the name I was trying to recall, but anyway, he seems pretty good."

"He is still filming now, Grandma, and his movie is showing on New Year's Day." "Really? Let's watch it then." Elise nodded and said, "Sure, I'll take you there tomorrow." Soon, Laura took a look at the clock on the wall and shifted her gaze to Alexander and Elise. *Well, I suppose this young couple could use a little time and privacy for themselves.* At the thought of that, the old lady winked at Robin as she pretended to yawn. "I'm getting tired, Elise."

The years are catching up with me, and I can't stay up late as I used to. So, your grandpa and I are going to bed now." Elise then looked at the time, only to realize it was just 10 PM. However, she didn't say anything much but instead stood up and said, "I'll walk you back to your room." Upon walking her grandparents back to the room, Elise returned to the parlor, where she saw no one else but Alexander. Surprised and confused, she asked, "Where are the rest?"

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"Jack has something going on, and Danny is out as well," Alexander explained. *Oh, but...* Elise was about to word her excuses when Alexander followed up quickly with, "Why don't you sit down and watch some television with me?" She took on the invitation with obvious reluctance, but the next moment, even as her eyes were fixed on the television screen, her mind had already wandered somewhere else. Time ticked by slowly, and when the clock struck 11.30PM, Alexander turned to look at her. "We'll set off the fireworks and firecrackers in the backyard later; do you want to come along with me?" She snapped out of her thoughts and asked blearily, "Wait, is it time already?" "Another half-hour to go," he replied. "Oh," she muttered. "Then we should probably make our way over now." They sauntered over to the backyard where the fireworks and firecrackers had been readied for the new year celebration. Alexander went about arranging them, laying down the lead-in wires as he said, "We'll set them off as soon as the clock strikes midnight." Elise hummed in response. Just then, seemingly by magic, Alexander produced a simple envelope and handed it to her, saying, "Here, it's a gift for you."

She stared at the envelope, which was bulging with what was presumably cash, and asked in astonishment, "F-For me?" With a trace of impatience, he shoved it into her hands. "Just take it, will you? I've never had to think about getting gifts for girls, and I won't have you turning down my kind gesture." She sputtered when she heard this, then caught herself and quickly accepted the envelope. She tested the weight of it and thought the amount was more than generous. "Haven't you ever dated a girl before this?" she asked without thinking and instantly regretted it.

She wanted nothing more than to bite off her own tongue; the topic of exes was taboo in relationships, and she should have known better than to ask about it. Trying to save herself, she added, "Don't get me wrong. I didn't mean it that way." To her surprise, Alexander answered nonchalantly, "Hmm... I did date a girl once, but that only lasted half a month." He kept his reply brief and final. Judging from how unruffled he looked, it seemed as if his past relationship had no effect on him whatsoever. However, Elise could only dream of mirroring his calm demeanor.

He might be unaffected, but he's my first love! She noted sourly how her inexperience put her at a disadvantage in their dynamics. "Oh, so what was she like? Was she pretty?" She did not notice how jealousy had worked its way into her tone when she asked this. Alexander, too, was surprisingly oblivious to how pointed her question came off. "I don't really remember," he confessed plainly. Elise was clearly pleased with his answer, and the spike of jealousy she had felt now receded.

"Okay, come on, we have to start lighting the fireworks." He glanced at his watch and saw that there were two minutes left until midnight. "Okay, get ready," he announced, then clicked the lighter and set the flame to the lead-in wire. In a matter of seconds, a loud crackling sound filled the backyard, after which came the thundering boom as the fireworks shot upward and lit up the night sky with glorious technicolor. Elise and Alexander stood side-by-side; there was a quiet togetherness to them as they tipped their heads up to watch the firework show. When the festive show came to an end, she glanced at Alexander and said with a small smile, "Happy New Year."

He reached out and drew her into his arms, then muttered close to her ear, "Happy New Year." After what felt like a long embrace, they released each other. "We should get some rest; plenty of visiting to do tomorrow." With that, he took Elise by the hand and led her back into the house, whereupon they returned to their individual bedrooms. They slept soundly that night and had sweet dreams that lasted them until dawn. Elise woke up early the next morning.

It was a whole new year, and the morning air was thick with festive cheer. She donned a bright red coat and made her way downstairs, thereafter greeting the elders cheerily, "Happy New Year, Grandpa and Grandma!" Then, Stella came into the dining room with a tray of freshly made Berliners, which were doughnuts filled with sweet jam. "Miss Ellie, have a Berliner! They're supposedly meant to bring in good luck for the new year."

Elise had only just taken one and thanked Stella for it when her phone rang. She picked up the call and blanched when she heard what was said on the other line. Meanwhile, having just come downstairs, Alexander saw the look on her face and demanded urgently, "What's wrong?" She put down her Berliner and immediately headed out of the door, throwing a hasty "Grandma, I have to get going now, and I won't be back till late!" over her shoulder. At the sight of this, Alexander grew worried and chased after her.

"Where are you going, Elise?" It was only then that she said hurriedly, "Mikayla's back, and I have to go see her." Upon hearing this, he grabbed his car keys and offered, "I'll drive you over; get in the car." Not wanting to waste another minute, Elise got into the car as told, and Alexander sped toward Mikayla's house.

Presently, a crowd had gathered around Mikayla at her house, and one after another, they pestered her as delicately as they could. "Mikayla, have you no recollection of me at all? I'm Mom."

"And I'm Dad! Don't you remember?" Mikayla looked around at these people who claimed to be her family, but her mind continued to draw a blank as she shook her head, bewildered and frustrated. The crowd sighed in resignation, and Mikayla's mother was the only one who took her hand tearfully. "It's okay; it doesn't matter if you don't remember us, as long as you're back home safe and sound." Mikayla bristled at the crying woman holding her hand. For some reason, she was getting irritated by the waterworks, and she pulled away brusquely as she snapped, "Can you please just stop crying?"

She assessed the crowd dubiously and asked, "Are you all really my family?" However, the question had only just rolled off Mikayla's tongue when Elise walked up to her. Having heard this, Elise felt her heart leap to her throat. She marched through the crowd and called out hesitantly, "Mikayla?" When Elise saw Mikayla standing unscathed before her, she became overwhelmed with relief. She rushed forward and pulled the other girl into her arms, murmuring, "You're finally home, Mikayla."

Her enthusiasm was met with a stiff and somewhat helpless reaction on Mikayla's part. "I... I don't actually know who you are, so could you let go of me for a bit?" Stunned, Elise untangled her arms slowly and gaped at Mikayla, dumbfoundedly. "What did you just say, Mikayla? What do you mean you don't know me?"

The surrounding family heaved long sighs, and Elise was dumbfounded. Mikayla's mother, on the other hand, could no longer hold back her tears. The droplets rolled down her cheeks, and she quickly reached for a tissue, clearly upset with her daughter's condition. Elise was completely astounded by how unexpected this all was. With her gaze fixed on Mikayla, she asked somberly, "Mikayla, do you really not know anyone here?"

The other girl nodded. "All I know is that I got sent here for some reason. These people are telling me they're my family, but I don't recall ever seeing them at all." The concept of amnesia was not foreign to Elise, but this was the first time she had seen someone close to her become a victim of it. *Did Mikayla suffer some kind of brain injury from the avalanche? Is that why she lost her memory?*

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Meanwhile, Jack had rushed over to Mikayla's house and caught her words in time. He stopped in his tracks when he came up to her, and there was an unreadable look in his eyes. When their gazes met, it was clear to see that she was utterly confused, and he could not see a trace of recognition registering on her face. "Oh, you're here," Elise said, drawing him from his thoughts. He turned to regard her with a look of askance. However, Elise was at a loss for an explanation, too. After hearing Elise sigh in frustration, Jack walked up to Mikayla and asked plaintively, "Don't you remember me?"

Mikayla's eyes searched his face, and with a shake of her head, she inquired, "Who are you?" Jack felt as if all the air had been sucked out of his lungs. He found himself answering without much thought. "A friend." Comprehension dawned on Mikayla. Then, her gaze flickered over to Elise as she pointed out, "I don't know why, but you're so familiar to me." "That's because we're best friends. We always will be," Elise said firmly, clasping Mikayla's hand in hers. Mikayla broke into a wide smile. "Really? That's so good to hear. I thought I had no friends at all, but as it turns out, I have both of you!"

"Mikayla..." Jack pressed his lips into a grim line, and when he tried to say something again, he paused. After a while, he added, "Get some rest. We'll drop by to see you another day." A little displeased by this, Mikayla asked in a somewhat withdrawn voice, "Are you really going to visit me again?" Elise hummed in affirmation. "We will, and we'll definitely help you recover your memory." Mikayla beamed and agreed to let them leave for now.

"Okay. I'll see you guys soon, then." Elise and Jack looked grim after they had left Mikayla's family home. Alexander, on the other hand, fell in step next to Elise, and he reached out to squeeze her hand as though giving her strength. "Any of you got an idea on how we're supposed to help her regain her memory?" Jack asked, looking uncertain. Elise pursed her lips and said, "I've read about amnesia on the internet once. Apparently, the condition affects each patient differently; where some regain their memory in a couple of days, others could take months or years.

Some never recover their memory at all." Jack lowered his gaze in despair. "I should have been with her in Switzerland. If I had, then maybe none of this would have happened." "All the what if's aside, we can't change what has already happened," Elise consoled. "Right now, all we can do is figure out a way to help Mikayla regain her memory." "I know what we can do," Jack said seriously. An idea popped into Elise's mind as well. After she and Jack had gone their separate ways, she gave Jamie a call while heading home. "Jamie, you know that expert you mentioned who deals with amnesiac cases?

Do you think you could get him to come to Athesea?" On the other line, Jamie was still groggy with sleep as he tossed in the warmth of his covers. "Hey, Boss, correct me if I'm wrong, but it's New Year's Day today, isn't it? Why are you looking for a doctor all of a sudden?" "A friend of mine has amnesia, and I'm trying to help her recover her memory," Elise explained. Jamie bolted upright in bed, suddenly wide awake.

"Your wish is my command, Boss. Don't you worry. I'll call up the doctor and arrange for him to come to Cittadel as soon as possible." "Thank you, Jamie." Elise hung up the call and stared out the window, still unsettled by how shocking her reunion with Mikayla had turned out to be. *You have to recover your memory soon, Mikayla*, she found herself praying. Back at the Griffith Residence, Elise and Alexander had only just stepped past the threshold and given their coats to the servants when Laura's voice rang out. "Ellie, have you and Alex returned at last?"

Hastily recomposing herself, Elise forced out a sweet smile and greeted, "Happy New Year, Grandma!" Laura came around the corner and grinned at the younger girl. "You little brat," she said affectionately. "Where did the both of you run off

to early in the morning? Did something happen?" Elise closed the distance between them and looped her arm through Laura's. "Whatever it was, it's already been settled. What did you and Grandpa get up to?"

"What else? A bunch of friends came over to visit us for the new year, but that was all. By the way, your aunt called earlier and said that she'd be arriving in Athesea later. She wants you to pick her up from the airport." Surprised, Elise exclaimed, "I didn't know Aunt Cynthia was coming back!" "Well, she heard about your engagement to Alex and decided to rush back home." Without hesitation, Elise said, "When will her flight get here?"

"I'll pick her up from the airport." Laura had asked one of the maids to take note of the flight arrival time earlier, and now she handed the note to Elise. Glancing at the time scribbled on the paper, Elise noted how there were three hours before Cynthia's flight landed. That being said, she was beside herself with excitement and hurtled up the stairs to change out of her clothes, determined to leave for the airport right away. She would have barreled out the door if Alexander had not pulled her to a stop. "Hey, calm down. I'm going with you." She turned to grin at him, and when their eyes met, she quipped, "Thanks!"

He merely reached out to rub her head. "You don't have to thank me." They left the house, and Alexander drove to the airport. Cynthia's flight arrived just on time, and having waited with barely-concealed anticipation by the arrival terminal, Elise and Alexander soon caught a glimpse of the familiar figure sauntering toward them. Elise's arm shot upward, and she waved frenetically, shouting, "Aunt Cynthia!" Cynthia spotted her immediately and brisk-walked over, musing pensively, "Here I was thinking my disguise was foolproof until you saw right through it, munchkin."

Elise coquettishly linked arms with Cynthia. "That just means I know you too well, Aunt Cynthia." "You should have told me you were engaged, you infernal girl. You didn't even tell me you were in Switzerland the last time. I had to hear it from your grandmother, and she wasn't planning on letting it slip, either. What, are you conspiring to marry yourself off in secret or something?" Cynthia accused, glowering at her niece with mock exasperation. "Alexander and I were hoping to keep things simple, and we were going to tell you after the new year celebration," Elise explained.

Just then, Cynthia registered Alexander's presence, and upon a faint recollection of him, she said jokingly, "Ellie's been this way since she was a child. I certainly hope you're ready to put up with her for the rest of your life." Alexander was solemn as he answered, "I am, Aunt Cynthia." The three of them exited the airport and piled into the car, where Cynthia proceeded to strip off her disguise and reveal her pretty face. "Have you decided on a dress for the engagement party, Ellie?"

And what about the diamond ring?" Stumped, Elise shot a brief, awkward look at Alexander, then said quietly, "Aunt Cynthia, we haven't exactly gotten around to those just yet." Cynthia was taken aback by this. "But the big day is arriving soon! Why didn't you get around to these errands? Carelessness has no place in wedding planning, you know!" Alexander made a timely interjection.

"Aunt Cynthia, my brother Brendan is designing the dress personally, and as for the ring, our company has launched a collection this year which spotlights a one-of-a-kind pink diamond. I think it'd be perfect for Elise." "Oh," Cynthia mumbled. Then, after a moment of thought, she added, "Why didn't you let Elise design the dress? She was always rambling on about how she'd want to design her own wedding dress." Upon hearing this, Alexander frowned and asked Elise in bewilderment, "Do you actually know how to design wedding dresses?"

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Now that Elise was exposed, she could only mumble reluctantly, "I dabbled in it." At that point, Cynthia realized that she had had a foot-in-mouth moment. *Does this mean Alexander has no idea of Elise's alter ego?* Swallowing, she shot Elise a fleeting, apologetic look and quickly interjected with what she hoped was a dismissive tone, "That was just a thought. I mean, if I have to be brutally honest, Ellie's not good enough to come up with a brilliant design, so maybe it's for the best that you let a professional handle it." However, even as Cynthia said this, Alexander still held onto the previous statement on Elise's so-called 'dabbling' in wedding dress designing. When they pulled up at the Griffith Residence, Cynthia was so excited that she practically bolted out of the car and hurtled into Laura's arms. "Mommy, I've missed you so much!" The Griffith Residence was filled with raucous laughter and even better cheer now that Cynthia was home; Laura and Robin, in particular, seemed to have wide grins permanently fixed on their wizened faces.

The days went by without anyone really noticing them, and in the blink of an eye, everyone was into the sixth day of the new year. That morning, Alexander texted Elise. 'Come downstairs when you're done washing up. I'll be waiting for you by the cul-de-sac.' Elise blearily searched for her phone when she heard it chime with a new message. Upon reading Alexander's text, she felt all the sleep drain out of her, and she clambered out of bed toward the window. She pulled aside the curtain and immediately caught sight of Alexander standing by the yard.

What is he up to so early in the morning? Without wasting another second, she washed up and put on a fresh change of clothes, then went downstairs and into the front yard. "What's going on?" Alexander's gaze lingered on her briefly before he reached to open the car door for her. "Get in. There's someplace I need to show you." She stared at him warily, trying to figure out why he was being so mysterious. Nonetheless, she slid into the passenger seat, following which Alexander started the car and drove away from the curb. A few moments later, the car rolled to a stop outside Brendan's atelier.

As it turned out, the festive spirit of the new year's arrival did not dampen his workaholic tendencies, given how the atelier seemed to be bustling like it usually did. "Welcome. Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist at the front desk asked courteously. Alexander hummed in response. "I'm here to see Brendan. He's supposedly here." When the receptionist heard that they were looking for Brendan, she replied hurriedly, "Please wait here for a moment while I call Mr.

Griffith.” She had only just said this when Brendan walked out from the main atrium of the atelier.

“Alexander,” he greeted perfunctorily. His eyes slid over to where Elise stood mutely next to his brother, and while it was a little odd for him to think of her as his sister-in-law, he said nevertheless, “Hello, Elise. Come on in.” Elise stiffened at the slight awkwardness that came with Brendan addressing her, but Alexander did not miss a beat as he took her by the hand and guided her into the atelier. This was the first time she saw Brendan’s atelier in all its glory; the space was filled with rolls of fabric and various contraptions, and rows of mannequins donning multiple designs.

Brendan led them into his office and swiftly produced a design sketch for Elise’s perusal. “Take a look at these, Elise. These are all the initial designs I came up with for your wedding dress, and there’s even a ready-to-wear piece based on one of them. Just a quick glance will do and let me know if you want to make some tweaks for whichever piece you choose. Tell me in advance, though, so I can make the adjustments in time.”

He sounded pleasant and courteous enough, but he didn’t actually expect Elise to come up with any suggestion for changes to the design. After all, as far as he was concerned, she was a non-expert and couldn’t possibly weigh in on his work. “Hold up—all that mystery and suspense just so you can bring me here to take a look at my wedding dress designs?” Elise asked Alexander incredulously. Alexander eyed her steadily and said, “Your aunt did say that you have an affinity for stuff like this, so I figured it would be meaningful if you could have some input on the wedding dress design.”

For some reason, a surge of warmth coursed through her when she heard this, and she beamed at him as she quipped, “Thank you!” She pored over the design sketches eagerly. She had to admit that Brendan had a flair for designing. Where some of his designs were clearly imbued with elegance, others were a little quirky; there were no two designs that were the same, and Elise could see all the thought he had put behind them, not to mention his prowess. At last, her gaze fell upon one of the sketches and stayed there. “This one is pretty nice.” Brendan smiled.

“You have good taste, Elise. This wedding dress is practically tailor made for you; I thought about how you carry yourself and came up with the design, so it suits you best. The ready-to-wear piece I mentioned earlier happens to be based on this. I could show you if you’d like.” A little stunned by how he had so accurately guessed her preferences, Elise nodded and said, “Okay, let’s take a look.” With that, Brendan brought them to the atrium next door. A mannequin had been positioned in the center of the room, and a white tarp had been draped over it.

Brendan stepped up and proceeded to pull the tarp off, ceremoniously revealing the intricate and elegant dress beneath. Elise stared at the design sketch that had come to life before her, so moved by the flawless silhouette and the opulent material of the wonderfully made dress that she found herself at a complete loss for words. “Do you want to try it on, Elise?” She nodded numbly, and Brendan had one of his assistants bring her over to the fitting rooms. At that moment, Brendan and Alexander were the only two left in the room. With a rueful sigh, the former commented, “Elise’s figure is gorgeous enough that she’d carry the

dress well, but..." He trailed off, then added with a hesitant dry cough, "I think the make-up artist would need to put in a bit of arm grease to, uh, make her look pretty."

Alexander's expression turned grim at this, and Brendan instantly knew that he had said something he shouldn't have when he felt the air around them grow cold. "Don't get angry, Alexander. For the record, I'm not trying to badmouth Elise in any way; I just think that women and vanity go hand-in-hand, and I'd hate to think that Elise would regret not looking pretty on her big day." The hostility went out of Alexander when he heard this, but he sounded stern as he said through gritted teeth, "Don't ever mention something like this again. I will not have you badmouthing my wife to my face, capiche?"

The love Alexander had for Elise, which belied his aggressive tone, made Brendan nod hastily. "Got it! Rest assured that I'll watch what I say from now on." He had never thought that Alexander would be so defensive of Elise. *He's not being serious, is he?* Meanwhile, in the fitting room, Elise had slipped into the luxurious dress and found that it really was made for her. The dress was perfect save for its weight, which felt like a tonne as it hung on her frame. It was almost as if she was wearing gravity itself, and breathing suddenly became laborious work.

She took in a deep breath and exited the fitting room, announcing, "Alexander, I'm done." When she came to a stop in front of Alexander, his eyes flashed with an approving gleam. The dress accentuated her figure, bringing out her curves and flattering her silhouette. She looked like a dream. Brendan was equally stunned as well. Despite his earlier remarks, he hadn't thought that Elise would look this good in the dress. "What, is there a problem?" Elise asked doubtfully when neither man said a word. Immediately, they snapped out of their thoughts, and Alexander was the first to break the silence.

"No, you look beautiful. The dress becomes you." Next to him, Brendan piped up in agreement, "You look gorgeous in the dress, Elise! You'll definitely wow the crowd at the engagement party if you show up in it." Elise, however, was still skeptical as she pressed, "Really? Do you guys really think so?"

The men nodded in unison, and she smiled brightly at their affirmation. She rather liked the dress and how splendid it was, but if she had to nitpick, the weight of it was pressing down on her ribcage and cutting off her circulation. More to the point, she had only put the dress on minutes ago, but a light sheen of sweat was already breaking out over the small of her back.

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"I think that the fabric of the dress could be better since it's weighing me down and extremely tight as well. I believe there may be ways to make it a lot more comfortable." As soon as these words tumbled out of Elise's mouth, Brendan's smile faded. He was a fashion designer, after all, and as far as an artist's ego was concerned, he couldn't stand having others criticize his work, especially one which he held with esteem. However, given that the present critic was Elise

herself, he suppressed his injured pride and asked with forced patience, "In that case, what fabric do you suggest we incorporate?"

Although Brendan sounded casual enough, there was a trace of disdain in his tone that seemingly implied that she had no right to comment on the making of the dress, given that she was not an expert. Elise, on the other hand, did not bridle at the hostility underlying his question, and instead replied mildly, "I personally think that a fiber-based tulle would be a better choice and there should be some adjustments to the skirt to make it weigh less. It might help with the aesthetics, too." At that moment, he was sure that the girl was besmirching his design.

While keeping his resentment at bay, he bit out, "Well then, since you've said so, I guess I'll just try to tweak the dress." With that, he gestured for his assistant to help her out of the dress. Upon sensing his disgruntlement, Elise quickly explained, "Don't get me wrong; I love your design and how beautiful it is. Whatever I said earlier was merely a suggestion." Brendan hummed curtly in response. "That's fine. If you think the dress needs some tweaking, then I'll just go along with it." Not wanting to further prod the bruise on his artist's esteem, she conceded and changed out of the dress, which was later taken away by his assistant.

Meanwhile, after having observed the slightly tense exchange, Alexander knew instantly that Brendan was very much offended by Elise's remarks. Fashion design was not his forte, but he understood Brendan's temperament and he was only too familiar with Brendan's intolerance toward any criticism about his work. "Brendan, I don't think it's a bad idea to make a few slight adjustments, but if you don't want to go along with it, why don't you let Elise take charge instead?"

Alexander placated while delicately selecting his words. Upon hearing that, Brendan's expression softened. He thought Elise was presumptuous to have nitpicked on his design when she wasn't even a fellow designer, but Alexander's words made sense. As such, he decided to allow her to tweak the dress as she saw fit. *Let's see if you can do what I do, Elise.* Brendan wanted her to know that fashion designing was no walk in the park. A hint of contempt sneaked into his voice as he drawled, "You know what?"

I think you're right, Alexander. Elise, if you have better ideas for the dress, then you're welcome to make all the adjustments as you please. There's no harm in trying, right?" When she heard it, Elise paused in thought and finally agreed, "Alright then, I'll give it a shot." Her response was beyond what Brendan had expected of her. He thought that she might become flustered and turn down his offer, but exasperation seized him when he saw how confident she looked.

How could a girl be so insubordinate and cocky at the same time? Let's just see how she fares at the end! With a strained composure, he added, "Then, I'll leave the dress to you, Elise. You can come to me if you need any help, or would you prefer I dispatch two assistants to lend you a helping hand?" A mild 'hmm' escaped her before she replied, "I think one assistant should suffice. I'll drop by tomorrow and start on the tweaking if that's alright with you." There was no hesitation in her words and her gaze was steady as she waited for him to say something, but he did not.

When she and Alexander made their way out of Brendan's office, they piled into the car. Alexander peered at her in the rearview mirror and pointed out, "You can do whatever you like with the dress and it won't matter if you mess up. I'll be there for you." It was the first time she had heard anyone making such promises to her. The five syllables strung together into a simple assurance, but it made her tingle with warmth nonetheless. *I'll be there for you.* As the words reverberated in her headspace, she smiled and responded, "You could have a little more faith in me, you know."

After all, I'd never do anything without first having the confidence that I could pull it off." There was something magnetic about her when she behaved this way and it tugged at Alexander's heartstrings. It was as if he had discovered the true reason behind his attraction for her; he could see the same stubbornness in her that he used to have back in the day. To that extent, they thrived in the same league. The next day, Elise showed up at the atelier alone. Unlike yesterday, everyone at the atelier was too preoccupied with their own work to notice her presence.

She paid no mind to this and found her way to Brendan's office, thereafter knocking cursorily on his door. "Come in." After having heard his disembodied voice, she pushed open the door. "What is it?" Brendan asked impassively as he looked up and when he saw her, he stiffened. "Oh, you're here." She nodded before asking, "I can get started on the dress right away. Where is it?" He gaped at her in surprise; he hadn't expected her to actually turn up, believing that she was nothing but a big talker at that time. Then again, he'd like to see how she was going to ruin the dress now that she was here.

"Come with me," he said as he rose from his seat. He led her down the hallway and when they came to a stop at the end, he declared, "You can work on the dress here. All the tools are in there and I'll have my assistant, Molly, lend you a hand." Elise thanked him and went through the door. She was immediately greeted by the sight of the dress, which hung on the mannequin's frame. As she walked toward it, she appraised the dress from all angles and began to sketch something on a piece of paper. Meanwhile, Brendan was cooped up in his office when Molly entered.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Griffith?" He gave a flippant wave of his hand and replied, "I need you to head over to Design Studio No.1 to assist with some adjustments. You can get whatever is needed from storage." She nodded. "Got it, Mr. Griffith." However, just as she was about to leave, he stopped her in her tracks. "Hold on. Make sure you watch every single tweak that girl makes to the dress, and let me know as soon as you spot a problem." "Yes. Mr. Griffith," she replied. "I'll get going now." In truth, Molly was a little taken aback by how eager Brendan seemed and she wondered what the big deal was.

When she arrived at Design Studio No.1 and caught sight of an average woman pawing around the dress that he had painstakingly made, Molly cried out, "Hey! What are you doing? You're probably new around here, but I should warn you not to touch anything that Mr. Griffith has personally designed—like that dress!" Elise frowned at the intrusion, but a sudden thought flashed in her mind as she asked, "Are you the assistant Brendan mentioned?" Astonishment colored Molly's face. *Did she just call Mr. Griffith by his first name? Who is she to have such audacity?*

Instantly, she understood that regardless of who the girl might be, the girl was not one to be trifled with. While Molly nodded, she answered hastily, "Yes, Mr. Griffith sent me over to assist you." "Oh," Elise responded. "Could you pass me the scissors, please?" In a show of obedience, Molly turned to grab the scissors before she handed it over to Elise without further delay.

"Here you go." After she took the sharp tool, Elise swept her gaze over the dress and there was not even a flicker of doubt that crossed her expression as she snipped away the inseam of the dress. Molly's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets as she gasped and stammered, "W-What in the world are you doing?"

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Molly thought, *No one in the atelier could be so daring as to lay a finger on Mr. Griffith's designs. This woman must be either crazy or fearless to actually cut a dress that he has made!* As she was oblivious to a stunned Molly's thoughts, Elise explained breezily, "The inseam isn't going to work, at least not with this fabric. I'll have to change it, so could you bring over something thin like gambiered silk gauze from the storage later? Just three feet of it will do." Molly had yet to recover from her initial shock of seeing someone boldly mutilate Brendan's creation and she was presently staring at Elise in disbelief. "Is something the matter?" Elise pressed indifferently when she heard no response from the assistant.

With that, Molly instantly snapped out of her daze and she was abruptly reminded of what Brendan had told her earlier. As she nodded profusely, she answered, "No, nothing at all! I'll get the fabric right away!" With that, she scurried out of the design studio. Now that the dress no longer had its former silhouette, Elise moved to the frontal section of its bodice and began to tweak it with needles and threads. By the time Molly returned with the roll of fabric, Elise was already done with the neckline of the dress. She took in the aftermath and was surprised to see that the dress looked better than it originally had.

"Miss Sinclair, I have the gambiered silk gauze you asked for," she announced tentatively. "Leave it aside for now," Elise responded as she kept the needles and threads before she reached for the scissors once more. After grabbing one section of the skirt in one hand, she swiftly cut it off. There was a finesse in her movements that Molly found mesmerizing and she did not dare to blink for fear that she would miss out on the slightest of details. "Can I have the ivory thread no.2 please?" Elise asked, breaking the silence that was otherwise filled by the sound of scissors on fabric. Molly quickly shook herself out of her reverie and passed the thread to Elise, who took it. Then, after she mapped out the lines, Elise started to sew.

Throughout the whole process, she hardly spoke a word, but she moved with a fluidity that seemed second nature to her. Molly had to take a break in between, but while she was in the lounge to get a glass of water, Brendan abruptly materialized next to her and asked, "How's it going in there?" His voice caused her to jump and she nearly choked on her water as she hurried to answer,

"Everything's going pretty well. There's been no mishap whatsoever." However, he probed, "Do you think I'd ask you about the process? I'm asking about the dress! How is it?"

Has it been destroyed beyond repair?" Molly couldn't understand why he would ask something as pointed as that. If she had to be honest, she had a distinct feeling that the dress would turn out better than it had been once Elise was done with the adjustments. Moreover, Elise had a unique way of sewing that belied the attention-to-detail she had for every stitch she made. Although Molly had been in this industry for a long time, she hadn't even encountered someone whose stitchwork could be compared to Elise. In fact, she was under the impression that Elise was a top fashion designer whom Brendan had hired, which was why she asked earnestly, "Where did you find Miss Sinclair, Mr. Griffith?"

Molly was only curious, but Brendan thought she was intimidated by Elise. As a result, he withheld the truth as he dismissed, "Oh, she's... just a friend. It doesn't matter; she's not a professional, so it won't be surprising if she ruined the dress." Affrontation registered on Molly's expression. *If Elise is doing so well without being a professional fashion designer, then where do I stand in this industry?* "Mr. Griffith, you might as well just stab me through the heart!" she exclaimed, looking wounded. He blinked at her in confusion. "Stab you through the heart? What are you talking about?"

She thought he was feigning innocence and drawled sourly, "Wow, Mr. Griffith, despite all my years of working as a fashion designer, I just realized that I can't even compete with a non-professional. I need a moment to calm down; excuse me while I nurse my injured pride to health." With that, she turned on her heels and marched out of the lounge, leaving Brendan shouting after her in bewilderment, "Hey, don't just walk off without explaining yourself!"

Alas, silence was all he received in return. He had a sudden realization that something was off and wondered whether Elise really had a skill or two up her sleeve. *So what if she does? Fashion design isn't like other fields; it takes time before one can fully perfect his or her techniques. What does Elise have that sets her apart?* At the thought of this, Brendan visibly brightened up. He didn't need to dwell on whether she had the skills or raw talent—at least not until she was done tweaking his original design for the dress. Meanwhile, Molly had returned to the design studio just as the silhouette of the dress was coming together under Elise's delicate handiwork.

When the dress was finally done, Molly gaped at it. Elise's design seemed to breathe new life into the dress; its refinement was as good as, if not, better than Brendan's craftsmanship. "Are you sure you're not a professional, Miss Sinclair?" Molly asked as her eyes widened. Elise pursed her lips thoughtfully before replying, "I guess you could say I'm an outsider to this industry." Molly was torn between laughing hysterically and breaking down in tears. *If an outsider like Elise could have such a Midas touch, what hope is there left for those in the industry like me?*

"Miss Sinclair, your talent in this is incredible," she praised with genuine awe. After another glance at the dress, Elise added, "I'm almost done with the silhouette of the dress, but there's one last detail I need to add. Will you help me?" Upon hearing this, Molly nodded keenly and the both of them started on

the last bit of sewing and tweaking on the dress. Where Elise was working on the stitches, Molly helped her to press the fabric on the mannequin and their team spirit was evident.

It wasn't until after the last stitch had been sewn into the dress that Elise rubbed her aching arm and announced, "We're finally done." Molly stretched luxuriously as well and quipped, "You really know your stuff, Miss Sinclair. I can't believe you managed to do all the adjustments in a day!" Elise straightened her posture and massaged her numb legs before she looked at the wall clock to see that it was close to 10:00PM. "Have we been here this long?"

"I didn't know it was already so late at night." She had only just said this when her stomach grumbled in protest, as though reminding her pointedly that she had skipped dinner. "It is getting rather late, Miss Sinclair. We can skedaddle now that we're done with the dress." Elise hummed in response. "Well then, should we grab a bite before we each head home?" Molly wanted to turn her down at first, but she didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to hang out with a top-notch designer. As such, she accepted the invitation with haste and said, "That's a great idea. I happen to know a nearby place that has recently opened and the food is decent. Let's go." With plans for supper in mind, both women draped a tarp over the finished dress and locked up the studio before they left.

They arrived at a nearby barbecue joint and as soon as they staked out a table, Molly ordered a few of her favorite dishes. "You can get whatever you like, Miss Sinclair. Dinner's on me tonight," she declared proudly, not wanting to come off as a Scrooge in front of Elise. Elise beamed at her. "In that case, I'll take you up on your offer." She took the menu and proceeded to order a couple of her own favorite dishes. Then, she handed the order chit to the owner of the barbecue joint.

"Do you drink, Miss Sinclair? Can't spell barbecue without beer, you know." She did miss the refreshing taste of beer and the enthusiasm that came with the idea of drinking a pint or two immediately seized her. "Sure, I'll have a bottle." Molly grinned and turned to inform the owner, "Hey, can we get two bottles of snow beer over here?" Upon seeing how at home Molly felt at the establishment, Elise couldn't help asking, "Are you a regular here?"

"Not really," Molly began. "I've been here a couple times with my colleagues, though. The owner here cooks up a tasty barbecue. You'll know what I mean after you take a bite later." "Well, I guess I'll find out for sure when the food comes." As soon as Elise said this, her phone rang in her pocket. She fished it out to see Alexander's name flashing on her screen and she quickly answered the call. "Where are you? You should be home by now." His distinct and pleasant voice spoke on the other line, and upon hearing it, she replied, "I'm at a barbecue joint. Would you like to come over?"