

“Young Master? What did you say?”

Dahlia tilted her head slightly with a puzzled expression on her face. Isaac shook his head softly saying it was nothing.

“You’ve said that your sister’s at the poverty center. How long has it been since you’ve last met her?”

“I haven’t seen her since I entered the residence of Baroness McFon...so it’s been over a year.”

The day that she left the poverty center all by herself.

Both waved their arms in farewell incessantly until each other’s silhouettes became tiny dots.

At that time, she held back her tears, as she thought they would be able to meet again soon.

Even the crybaby Laurel smiled brightly on that day, pretending to be mature.

Dahlia knew that it was that child’s consideration for her.

Although it has been a year, her heart still ached. But, the thought that she’ll see Laurel soon diluted her sadness. Dahlia continued to speak cheerfully, as she fiddled with the window latch.

“She kept boasting that she had grown taller, and each letter only talked about her height. I’m short so I thought Laurel would be the same... I am looking forward to seeing how much she has grown. If we meet, we’ll chatter about it all day, and I don’t know if we’ll be able to sleep on time.”

“You must be very happy to meet her after a long time. Dahlia, you’ve been smiling for a while now.”

“Ah... is that so?”

‘It’s embarrassing that it’s so obvious when I’m in a good mood,’

Dahlia smiled awkwardly while rubbing her cheeks.

An untainted, brilliant smile that shone brighter in the afternoon sun.

“Dahlia. Reach out your hand.”

Isaac, who was staring at her quietly, took something from his inner chest pocket and handed it to Dahlia.

Dahlia, who had taken the object from him without much thought, realized that there was a sparking gold coin in her palm and widened her eyes.

It was a gold coin.

It was a large amount of money, amounting to the salary she would receive after working for ten months.

Before Dahlia asked what this was, Isaac laid his hand under hers and folded her hand into a round fist.

"It's vacation pay. Have a nice vacation, and if you have some money left, could you get me a book? I've almost finished with the books in the mansion, so there's nothing worth reading."

"That's... It's still too much money, Young Master. How many books can I buy with this amount of money?"

"In any case, I would only be staying in the mansion, so I have no use for it. After your vacation, tell me about what you ate, and what you bought."

"Nowadays, listening to your stories amuses me. Take it for my benefit, okay?"

Through his soft smile, bitterness was evident at being unable to leave the mansion. As if he was trying to get rid of her hesitation, Isaac gripped her hand tightly again.

"If it's really alright... I'll accept it with gratitude for the time being."

After hesitating for a while, Dahlia could not refuse, and took the gold coin carefully. She was reluctant because it was too much money, but the fact that she didn't have any extra money made even the train ticket a big burden, so at the unexpected gain, she was very happy.

The guilt of leaving the Young Master behind, all alone, still haunted her, but upon deeper consideration, staying with him wouldn't make it any better.

Even if something happened, what can a maid such as herself do? No, offering to help would have been very disrespectful towards Isaac.

And it can't be... What could happen?

'Dahlia, it will be fine', she brainwashed herself as she fiddled with the innocent gold coin.

The sound of gold coins and random items colliding against each other in her pocket, akin to the sound of the pieces of her shattered conscience rubbing against each other.

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Farmers flocked to the wheat fields one after another after the autumn harvest. Old scarecrows that had fulfilled their roles were on fire everywhere, and young innocent children ran through the fields, shouting.

With the end of Sabbath, which marks the end of the year, December came, and the time for vacation finally began.

"Oh, it's appearing slowly."

Dahlia, who was lying on a straw pile, sat up. Flattened straw scattered under the rattling carriage.

After a journey of eight hours by train and twenty minutes by carriage, the brown roof of the poverty center could be seen in the distance. The protruding dark gray chimney had white bricks sparsely inserted within, seemingly repaired not too long ago.

It was a long journey, but she wasn't tired. She sent a telegram before she departed, but will Laurel be there to pick her up?

After thanking the farmer for the ride, she jumped out of the wagon. Within the suitcase she was carrying, candy and stuffed animals for the children rattled.

As she drew closer, the old signboard that read 'Turan Refugee Center' increased in size. Similarly, the small dot crouching underneath the sign grew.

When the distance lessened to the point where faces could be recognised, the girl who was piling up on the stones under the sign jumped up and ran towards Dahlia.

"Sister!"

The strength that was used to hug her waist was stronger than it was in the past.

Dahlia looked down at the child who was exhaling wildly. The girl that ran over with her dark brown hair fluttering, was taller and skinnier than the last time she had seen her.

While she was trying to control her trembling voice, Dahlia ran a hand through the girl's short hair gently.

"Laurel, didn't your sister say that you shouldn't run? What will happen if your cough worsens?"

"How could you only arrive now? I have been waiting ever since morning, when your telegram arrived!"

Laurel nagged at her sister in between heavy breaths. Dahlia hugged her sister tightly as if she was responding to Laurel.

"You lied to me, saying that you'll run all the way here from Helman! Everyone knows that you came by train!" and burst out laughing. The two sisters slowly walked towards the poverty center while exchanging jokes on Laurel's dissatisfaction.

Laurel, whom she has not seen in a long time, has grown so much that it was unbelievable that she was only eight years old. Although she was worried that she might be sick as she was skinny, Laurel ate well, smiled happily, and ran vigorously.

After greeting the children and the director, it was already late in the evening. Dahlia went up to the attic with Laurel, and opened her bag, and brought out the candy, dolls, and wooden toys she had bought.

“Play with toys and share sweets with the other children. This is the lemon candy that Laurel likes, right? Your sister bought it at the station.”

“This candy is expensive. Sister, didn’t you spend too much money? You must have spent a lot of money to be able to buy all of this.”

The quick-witted Laurel looked at the candy worriedly. Dahlia shook her head and answered with a bright face.

“I told you, your sister is serving the Young Master at the mansion, didn’t I? After hearing that I was going on vacation, he gave me some pocket money. I bought those with that money.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Would your sister lie about something like this?”

Although she smiled as she spoke, she didn’t use the money Isaac gave her.

How could she use that huge amount of money to buy such trivial things? As such, Dahlia used almost all the emergency funds she had saved.

Even so, at the sight of Laurel's smiling face, Dahlia thought it didn't matter. Dahlia unwrapped the candy and shoved it into Laurel's mouth.

"You will be surprised to learn how nice the Young Master is. Normally, people of higher stature wouldn't bother talking to people like us."

"Yes."

"But Young Master seemed to enjoy listening to your sister. He asked to drink tea together, didn't ask me to do anything laborious, and specially set aside a snack for your sister to eat every day."

"Really?"

"Yes! How can he speak so gently... I was so surprised by his beautiful looks. The Young Lady was also very pretty, but I find that the Young Master is prettier. His eyes are so big, and have long eyebrows..."

"I know! You wrote about it often in letters. But he's a man, how pretty can he be?"

"No! Laurel, you'd be surprised if you saw him in person!"

With a blushing face, Dahlia began to explain in detail about how those black eyes were like a deer's, and how his bluish hair swayed softly as it fluttered in the wind.

Laurel looked at her sister with sleepy eyes, before pulling up her blanket and letting out a deep sigh.

“Sister. Do you like him?” Dahlia tilted her head as if she thought Laurel was talking about something else, but later realized what she meant and squeaked.

“This kid! What are you talking about? How can a person like me, to the Young Master... I only meant that he’s a pretty and nice person.”

“So what if you like him? My sister is pretty and talented, so even the noblemen would take a fancy to her, right?”

“...What, no!”

“Why not? Sister Jenny, who worked at a candy store, also became the bride of a Viscounty’s young master. My older sister is much prettier than Sister Jenny, so I’m sure the Young Master will like you too.”

At the name of Jenny, Dahlia’s face hardened.

Unlike the buoyant Laurel, Dahlia bowed her head with a frown on her face.

Jenny was older than Dahlia by two years, and also came from the same Turan poverty center. Every time the Belloch sisters passed by the candy store, Jenny would sneakily exit from the back door and give them candy.

Rumours spread about how Jenny fell in love with a young master from a Viscounty and rose in status as his bride, through word of mouth amongst girls dreaming of love.

However, the truth that Dahlia heard from the lady from the candy store was not as beautiful as those rumors.

“...That won't happen, so let's stop talking about it. It's too late, shall we go to bed now? I'm sleepy.”

Dahlia quickly removed the gifts from the bed, turned off the lamp and laid in bed.

Laurel, who was complaining about having to sleep so early, fell asleep in an instant, not knowing the extent of her tiredness. While hugging Laurel's small wriggling body tightly, Dahlia placed her one over her little sister.

Although she did feel exhausted due to the long journey, her head cleared up when Jenny's story came up in conversation.

Dahlia frowned as she looked out of the window at the obscured moon.

'How is Jenny living right now?'

“What do you mean being the bride of a young master from a Viscounty...”

Jenny, who disappeared with a bulging belly, apparently gave birth to a child in the slums west of Cerecopaltz. Although there wasn't any news of her since she disappeared after crossing the border...

The last postcard that was sent to Dahlia was stamped with the postmark of Anksi, a small city near the border.

Amongst the sensible girls, there was none that didn't know of Anksi. Poor children that roamed the streets like Dahlia, couldn't have not known about it.

Anksi is a brothel located in the lawless zone between the Republic and the Kingdom.

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