

Extraordinary 741

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Oh, dear... How will I ever carry myself in front of others after this? If everyone in my social circle is going to give me strange looks from now on, then I might as well kill myself right here and now!

Sisley tried her best to suppress her anger and said in the most casual tone possible, "Come on now, Ms. Canter... There's no need for such harsh words, is there? They're still young, and young people make mistakes every now and then!"

Sisley then shifted her gaze toward Mary as she continued with a forced smile, "If I recall, Penelope made a mistake too back at the hospital!"

Both of them are more or less the same, so what she did is basically the pot calling the kettle black! Penelope's reputation at the hospital is just as bad, if not worse!

No one had dared talk back to Mary like that since her return to the Count's Mansion, so she got really triggered upon hearing that.

"You..."

"Am I wrong?" Sisley sneered.

Mary's face was livid with rage as she pursed her rosy lips and said, "You're not wrong, but Penelope is now the princess of the Count's Mansion. Just so you know, Ryan was the one who invited Mr. Powell! From what I've heard, Mr. Powell wants to have a duet with him on stage! Ryan might just become the next president of the International Piano Association!"

Thinking she had reestablished her dominance when she saw Sisley's expression turn gloomy again, Mary flashed her a smug grin.

Before their little argument could escalate any further, Ashlyn grabbed the microphone and stood in the center of the stage. The spotlight shining on her highlighted her delicate facial features, causing the crowd to go silent as they were captivated by her dazzling beauty.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure you have all come here today in hopes of enjoying an exciting piano competition. I am terribly sorry to have ruined the mood with that humiliating incident that resulted from my personal affairs. As a token of apology, I have decided to perform a song for all of you," she said in fluent French and bowed sincerely before handing the microphone back to the host.

With everyone's gaze fixated on her, Ashlyn turned around and made her way toward the piano.

"Oh, my goodness! Is Ms. Saunders actually going to perform live? She never does that!"

"I never thought I'd get the chance to see Ms. Saunders perform! This is probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

What the... This isn't a part of the plan! Mr. Powell is supposed to perform a duet with his friend instead! Ms. Saunders sure is ridiculously unpredictable! The host thought to himself in shock.

Everyone was holding their breath in anticipation as Ashlyn gracefully placed her slender fingers over the piano's keyboard.

Both Caleb and Ryan leaped to their feet when she hit the first note.

"T-This is..."

"English Country-Tunes by Michael Finnissy!"

With her back toward them, Ashlyn closed her eyes and leaned slightly forward as she continued playing the piano.

Unlike the other contestants from earlier, she was completely relaxed as she lost herself in the pleasures and satisfaction that music brought her.

It wouldn't even be an understatement to say that she was truly enjoying music with a burning passion.

Some of the more hardcore music enthusiasts in the audience, too, recognized the song she was playing.

"That's English Country-Tunes! It was composed by Michael Finnissy in England over thirty years ago! I hear it's been labeled as the most difficult song to play on the piano!"

"If I recall correctly, it contains parts with over three hundred notes in a single bar! You'd need to make use of both your fingers and your elbows when playing this song!"

"This song is way too difficult!"

Despite what they were saying, Ashlyn's fingers continued to dance gracefully over the piano's keyboard like it was the easiest thing in the world.

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As Ashlyn rapidly dished out the notes like crazy, the cameraman decided to focus on her hands.

Everyone watched in awe as they saw Ashlyn's slender fingers dancing across the piano like countless butterflies.

It was so visually and audibly stunning that they had completely forgotten about the unpleasant incidents that took place earlier.

The audience was so captivated by Ashlyn's enchanting performance that they wished they could have an encore when it ended a few minutes later.

Having completed her performance, Ashlyn gracefully stepped away from the piano and bowed at the audience once more before returning to her seat.

To everyone's surprise, Caleb got off his chair and made his way toward her.

"Ashlyn, my friend! It has been so long since I last saw you! As always, your beauty never fails to dazzle us!" he exclaimed with a huge smile as he reached out and hugged her.

He didn't have a chance to talk to her that entire evening, so he took the first chance he got and expressed all of his thoughts in one go.

Unbeknownst to him, however, a certain someone's expression turned gloomy instantly after seeing him hug her on stage.

Ashlyn quickly let go of him and said, "You really startled me with your sudden act of enthusiasm, Mr. Powell!"

For some reason, Mary had a bad feeling in her gut when she saw that.

"Mom, I thought Uncle Ryan is supposed to be his friend?" Penelope whispered into her ear.

"I'm not too sure myself..." Mary replied as beads of sweat started trickling down her forehead.

Still holding on to Ashlyn's hand, Caleb turned to face the crowd and announced proudly, "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce my good friend, Ashlyn Berry! She is truly a musical genius musician! Not only is she able to play the piano superbly well, but she is also able to compose her own songs! Oh, she can also play the harp and—"

"Mr. Powell, this is an international piano competition, so how about we end the introduction here and get off the stage?" Ashlyn cut him off coldly, her cold and calm demeanor forming a huge contrast with his enthusiastic and passionate personality.

Caleb was practically beaming with excitement as he shouted, "No way! I must seize this rare opportunity to fulfill a dream I've had for a really long time! As the president of the International Piano Association, I hereby invite you to perform a duet with me with the whole world as our witness!"

What the... Didn't Mr. Powell say he only came because of Ryan? I've been going around telling everyone about this! Oh, no... How will I face those people now?

Mary thought to herself upon hearing that.

Penelope, too, went completely pale as she had bragged about it to Jenny and Hera a lot.

"I thought you said he came here because of your uncle? How did it end up becoming Ashlyn instead?" Jenny asked with confusion written all over her face.

"I don't know! Maybe he liked how well she played or something!" Penelope exclaimed in frustration.

Of course, Jenny could tell that Caleb had come because of Ashlyn and not Ryan.

Even so, she kept those thoughts to herself and maintained a straight face as she shifted her gaze back toward the stage.

After sitting next to each other at the piano, Caleb asked with a smile, "Can you play Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3?" Despite being a middle-aged man, he still looked as elegant as ever.

Ashlyn arched an eyebrow at him as she replied, "Yes, I can."

Her confidence was exactly what Caleb liked the most about her.

The two of them then raised their hands and began hitting their respective keys in perfect sync.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 expressed the determination and strong will to survive of the people of Remdik. It was something that only true music enthusiasts would be able to appreciate.

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Even Sergei Rachmaninoff himself described that piece as one of the most technically challenging ones in the world when he performed it solo in New York.

A famous musician once compared the piece's physical demands to shoveling ten tons of coal, which showed just how challenging it really was.

Even so, the two world-class pianists had brought the magnificent piece to life together rather effortlessly.

It was such a breathtaking sight to behold that every single person in the audience fell silent in shock and awe.

Although the two of them had never rehearsed nor performed a duet before, their movements were perfectly synchronized with each other. It was as if all four of their hands were moving as a single unit.

Together, they were able to bring out the vigor and spirit of the piece with utmost perfection.

Ashlyn's solo performance earlier was amazing enough as it were, but this duet with Caleb truly shocked everyone to the core.

Given how rare of an opportunity it was to have two world-class pianists perform together like this, all eyes were on them the whole time.

No one wanted to miss out on a single exciting moment.

Ryan's eyes were filled with disbelief as he sat there in his seat and watched the entire performance.

I had always thought of myself as the top pianist in Maredania, but these two are on a whole different level! Ashlyn in particular has surprised me the most! Even someone as talented as Charlotte is nothing compared to her! Now I see what Caleb meant when he said I'm the second most talented person he has ever met! That's because he has long since known how terrifyingly skilled and talented Ashlyn is! She truly is a world-class pianist!

Everyone held their breaths in absolute awe as they focused on enjoying the piece to the fullest.

Finally, Ashlyn and Caleb ended their duet by hitting the last key in perfect sync.

As if he had just crossed off the final item on his bucket list, Caleb stood up and shook Ashlyn's hand as he thanked her profusely, "Thank you, Ashlyn! Thank you so much for helping me complete my dream!"

"It is an honor for me to perform alongside you, Mr. Powell," Ashlyn replied politely.

"No, the honor is mine!"

Caleb then turned toward the audience as he continued proudly, "I first got to know Ashlyn four years ago. She was still a very young girl at the time, but she was extraordinarily talented at playing the piano! I made a decision back then, and my decision hasn't changed at all now that I meet her again four years later!"

Ashlyn frowned as she had a feeling that Caleb was about to make a shocking announcement of some sort.

She turned around and prepared to head down the stage, but Caleb grabbed her arm from behind and announced to the world, "As the president of the International Piano Association, I hereby announce that I will pass my position down to Ashlyn a year from now!"

Ashlyn froze upon hearing that, and everyone else present at the scene lost their minds instantly.

What? That would mean she would be the youngest president the Piano Association would ever have!

Even Ryan had a look of bewilderment all over his face as he stared at Caleb.

What's going on here? Didn't he come here because of Ryan? Wasn't he going to pass his position down to Ryan? How did it become Ashlyn instead?

Mary was livid with rage at the thought of that.

"Mom! Mom! Why is Ashlyn the one who will inherit Mr. Powell's position? Do you think he has made some kind of mistake?" Penelope asked anxiously while shaking her arm.

She had bragged to all of the contestants that Caleb had only shown up because of her uncle, so she didn't know how she would face them later on.

Both Mary and Penelope felt so embarrassed that they wished the ground would open up and swallow them whole.

However, they had forgotten one very important detail. Ryan had never once told them in person that Caleb came over because of him.

The idea of Caleb coming because of Ryan was purely an assumption that most people came up with, and the two of them believed it to be true.

Unable to contain their vanity, both Mary and Penelope tried really hard to brag about it to as many people as possible.

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The mother and daughter pair never expected an outcome like this.

Penelope's face was flushed red from the humiliation, and her fingers gripped her sleeves tightly. She wished she could've hidden her face then.

Mary was embarrassed too.

The more ashamed she was, the more she grew jealous of Ashlyn. Why is Ashlyn on the receiving end of everything good?

Why do Penelope and I have to work so hard to even get some recognition from the Court's Mansion while Ashlyn becomes the heir of the president of the Piano Association just like that?

I schemed and plotted for my daughter's sake, but even Ryan the Piano Prince couldn't be compared to Ashlyn in the end?

Mary was going crazy.

Lucas sat at the very front, watching the debacle with disdain.

Well, I guess Mr. Powell does indeed have a good taste to choose Ashlyn as his heir.

With a glance at Ashlyn, he finally understood why his main personality loved her so deeply.

Netizen watching the competition via the broadcasting platform was stunned at the turn of events.

They began to share the news on Twitter.

“Oh my gosh! Ashlyn is Mr. Powell's heir!”

“It's unbelievable that H Nation could have such an amazing heir.”

“Say, didn't Penelope say her uncle will be the heir?”

“Even though her uncle is handsome, I still like Ashlyn more.”

“She's so awesome!”

The audience at the scene was staring at the stage with wide eyes.

Hera was still stunned. President... Ashley is going to be the future president?

At that moment, she felt the gap between her and Ashlyn had turned into a gulf.

She felt like a clown still rooted in place while Ashlyn was already someone others looked to for inspiration.

Olivia wrapped her arms around Charlotte excitedly. “That's great! My idol will become the president's heir!”

Charlotte pushed her away shyly. “Don't hug me so tightly.”

Her chest was feeling stuffy from the woman's steely grip.

The rejection was like a bucket of cold water dumped over Olivia's head. Quickly snapping out of her joy, she spoke in an awkward yet arrogant tone. “Hmmp! Do you think I wanted to hug you? You're skinny as a bean pole.”

Fae reached for James' hand excitedly. “Ashlyn is always giving us surprises.”

James patted her hand gently. “Well, she deserves it.”

He added after a brief silence, "Lottie deserves everything too."

These two has always made us worry.

With tears swimming in Fae's eyes, she nodded. "Yeah."

Twitter was in an uproar. The tweets about the piano competition began trending one after another.

There were so many tweets that netizens didn't even know where to start reading to get the full story.

After the competition ended, Ashlyn left her seat on the judging committee and followed the others out.

Right outside was the theater's hall.

She noticed everyone was waiting for her there. Lucas, Joseph, Charlotte, Olivia, Fae, James, Jared, Jonathan, Harrison, Anderson, Luigi, and the rest of the subordinates.

All of them were there.

Ashlyn was taken aback briefly by the turnout and walked up to them when she felt a gust of wind coming toward her back.

Feeling the danger, she dodged the attack in one agile movement.

As a result, Mary tripped and fell to the ground.

"Argh! It hurts! Ashlyn, why did you push me?"

She knelt on the floor and looked up at Ashlyn with a wronged and resigned expression. "Even though your father is in jail right now, I'm still your stepmother. You still need to address me respectfully as your elder even if we're strangers. I know you hate me, but that's not a reason for you to push me intentionally."

Penelope glared at Ashlyn with wide eyes. "Ashlyn, how could you treat my mom so harshly? We haven't met in so long. Do you truly feel nothing for my mom and me?"

Ashlyn felt her temper spiked at the mother and daughter antics.

Ugh, why did I have to bump into the shameless mother-and-daughter duo? Didn't the rumors say they had already departed for Maredania? Shouldn't they have just stayed obediently overseas? Why did they have to return and disgust others? First, Penelope accused me of stealing her necklace. And now, Mary's accusing me of pushing her?

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“Ms. Canter was the one who wanted to push Ashlyn, but Ashlyn managed to avoid it. In the end, it was Ms. Canter who fell on her own. So how could both of you simply accuse others?”

Fae was infuriated every time the duo appeared in her line of sight.

My heart ached for Ashlyn for her past of having to stay with these two terrible people.

Gritting her teeth, Fae tried her best to restrain herself in order not to start hurling curses at Mary. She kept reminding herself to uphold her dignity as the mayor's wife.

A person like her should be criticized. She should be treated like the rat she was where everyone would chase her away.

“Oh, isn't this Mrs. Field? The endearing way you're calling Ashlyn almost made me assume that she was your daughter-in-law.” Mary cast an unfriendly glance at Fae, but her gaze lingered on the handsome Joseph.

The entire world knew that Ashlyn was Mrs. Nolan, so when Mary put it that way, she made it seem like Ashlyn was a dishonest woman who had her claws hooked into the Field family.

Ashlyn laughed, surprised that Mary could twist the truth to that extent. “Mary, Penelope, since you're both back in Lake City, I don't mind welcoming you. However, if you're here to cause trouble, don't blame me for taking action.”

She scoffed and continued, “Should we look at the surveillance cameras' footage? The surveillance cameras must have recorded the true situation. As for whether I'm the one who pushed you or you're the one who pushed me, the footage will show.”

Mary's expression stiffened and she reached for Penelope. Seeing her mother's outstretched hand, Penelope pulled her to a stand.

Everyone watched as Mary patted off the nonexistent dust on her clothing. “Forget it. I'm a generous person, so I'll let you off this time.”

Ashlyn simply ignored her and was about to greet Fae when someone else called out to her. “My friend!”

It was Caleb.

The ever-elegant Caleb was a one-eighty from his usual character and had a fawning smile on his face at the moment. He looked just like a senior that was proud of his junior.

Mary's face blanched when she saw Caleb approaching.

Penelope, too, felt her cheeks burn.

Fae and the rest waited for Ashlyn because they had already discussed having dinner at the Imperial Hotel.

When they saw Caleb acting friendly with Ashlyn, they were baffled. They thought he merely admired Ashlyn's talent, but the situation showed there was probably something more at play here.

I don't think he admires Ashlyn for her talents only, it's more he treats her like his favorite student.

Caleb liked Ashlyn a lot. He had been searching for her for a long while. After meeting her a few years prior, she left a lasting impression on him. He even pleaded with Ashlyn to learn piano from him which she agreed and took lessons for about a month.

However, he was firmly rejected when he suggested for her to be his heir.

As such, when he heard that she was in Lake City, he immediately made his way there.

After all, he couldn't possibly waste another opportunity to talk to Ashlyn.

"It's already late and dark outside. How about I treat you to dinner?" Caleb asked Ashlyn kindly.

Ashlyn's gaze landed on the others waiting behind her. "Sorry, but I'm not free at the moment."

Following her line of sight, Caleb noticed Fae, James, Lucas, and the others.

Different from the cold and arrogant persona as rumored, he asked with a kind and friendly tone, "Are these your friends and family? Oh, I see another genius among them."

Ashlyn nodded. "Yes."

Caleb quickly went up to greet Fae, Lucas, and the rest. He looked completely different from a while ago when he came down from the plane and arrived at the competition venue.

With a gentle tone, he introduced himself, "I thank you all for the care you've extended to my friend here. It's great to meet all of you. I'm Ashlyn's piano mentor." His introduction had everyone's jaws dropped.

Caleb was always under the spotlight no matter where he went, along with Ashlyn.

Even the city officials, the director of the theater, and the organizers of the piano competition were staring at them.

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Everyone at the scene was bewildered at the news.

Mentor? Ms. Saunders' mentor is Mr. Powell? Are our ears deceiving us? Did we hear it correctly? Ms. Saunders' mentor is the president of the Piano Association? Seriously?

But why does Ms. Saunders look so calm while Mr. Powell is looking at her with ingratiating and tolerance in his gaze? His adoration for her is overflowing.

Lucas didn't like Caleb, to begin with, but was dumbfounded too when he heard the introduction.

This world-renowned guy is actually Ashlyn's mentor?

Caleb had no idea about the bomb he just dropped in everyone's minds.

He continued speaking with a smile, "I pleaded with her so much and almost got to my knees for her to finally agree to learn piano from me for a month. She made leaps and bounds of improvement during that one month and mastered every skill other pianists needed years to master. It was an impressive sight, to say the least."

His expression turned dour. "I was aghast when she snuck away after that, so I'd been searching for her ever since. She's usually very cold and distant. So I'm sure she must have caused you all a lot of trouble. Tonight's dinner will be on me to show my gratitude to all of you for taking care of my friend."

Even though James and the rest were respected in the community and had experienced numerous circumstances, the current situation still had them flabbergasted.

Not just them, but the rest of the crowd, celebrities, the upper crust of Lake City, and even some audience who hadn't left yet were thunderstruck too.

They thought they were dreaming the whole thing up.

Does the president of the Piano Association have to use such a humble tone to treat them to a meal? He even accused Ashlyn of being cold and pleaded with her to take piano lessons from him?

If the chance was offered to others and not Ashlyn, they would've been on their knees with gratitude. They would've been ecstatic if it was the vice president, let alone the president.

Yet, Ashlyn needed Caleb to plead with her to learn?

Standing close by, Tinsor couldn't keep his calm any longer and slapped Winsor on his back. "Winsor, hurry up and pinch me. My goddess is way too awesome! I can't believe it!"

Winsor shot a death glare at him and smacked him on the head. "Shut up!"

So what if Mr. Powell is her mentor? My goddess deserved the best of everything in this world anyway.

Lucas narrowed his eyes at Caleb and said with a domineering tone, "Since you're her mentor, then you must be like a father to her."

I won't allow even a forty-something man to have any thoughts on pursuing Ashlyn.

After a brief shock, Caleb laughed. "You must be Mr. Nolan. You're domineering. I like it! Only a person like you can keep Ashlyn tethered."

His words soothed Lucas' ruffled feathers.

Ashlyn rubbed the spot between her brows resignedly. It doesn't matter the current Lucas is a new personality that is developed recently, he still has the same bossiness running through him as usual.

"It's already late. So let's go have dinner." Delight blossomed within Caleb, especially when he saw Ashlyn had so many friends and family with her. He was happy for her.

And here I thought she would be a loner with her character.

James was well aware that the world-renowned pianist was only treating them to dinner because of Ashlyn.

As the mayor of the city, he still had his dignity. With a smile, he said, "You're too generous, Mr. Powell. Since you've come to Lake City, we should be the ones treating you to dinner instead."

Caleb laughed heartily. "It's okay. Please let me do the honors instead."

He shook James' hand. "I can tell at first glance that you're a good bureaucrat that loves your citizens, and you must have treated Ashlyn well."

James had heard many flatteries over the years, but it was a first to hear such a straightforward compliment.

Being the humble man that he was, he replied, "You flatter me too much, Mr. Powell."

Soon after, Caleb started complimenting everyone he met gazes with.

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Caleb's silver tongue elicited a round of laughter from everyone.

It was a first for them to receive compliments from the high and mighty Mr. Powell.

Bursting with happiness, Caleb called, "Come on, let's go have dinner."

With that, the large group started filing out of the venue in a friendly atmosphere.

In contrast, Penelope and Mary felt as though they had been dipped in ice-cold water.

Many celebrities had wanted to treat Caleb to a meal, and many wealthy families had wanted to cotton up to him.

Yet, Caleb had ignored those invitations and insisted on having dinner with Ashlyn's bunch.

The Field couple was also sought after. Others desperately wanted to know just one of them as it would make their career.

Olivia's mother, Mabel, cast Mary a taunting glance when she passed by her. "Ms. Canter, didn't you announce to everyone that Mr. Powell was here for Ryan?"

Unable to refute, Mary felt that Mabel had stripped her of her pride with that reminder.

Initially, everyone did assume Caleb came to the venue for Ryan and would elect him as the next president.

After all, Ryan was the world-renowned Piano Prince. He had good looks and an excellent background.

He was an eligible bachelor with a bright prospect from every angle.

Hence, everyone simply presumed Caleb was there for Ryan.

However, Mary had forgotten the most important point. Ryan had never mentioned if he was close with Caleb.

She was the one who had assumed they were close and thought of it as a fact.

She never expected that Caleb would come for Ashlyn's sake.

Mary was beyond furious. It could've been anyone else. Why must it be Ashlyn, that little b*tch!"

She was sitting offstage, so she had a front-row seat to their conversation.

I can't believe Mr. Powell is actually Ashlyn's mentor!

Mary could hear her ears ringing and her head buzzing as though bees were circling her.

Mr. Powell turns out to be Ashlyn's mentor and he even gave her piano lessons? Since when did Ashlyn know such a famous person?

Despite the exquisite makeup on Penelope's face, her face was as pale as a sheet.

Her nails almost broke the skin on her palm because of how hard she was clenching her fists. Her eyes were filled with disbelief.

What? Why is Mr. Powell so eager to have dinner with Ashlyn's bunch? What the heck is happening?

Mabel mocked, "I'll give you some advice, Ms. Canter. Don't start bragging before you're sure of what is happening. Otherwise, you'll be on the receiving end of humiliation, and others will only see you as a laughingstock."

Her remarks were like a slap across Mary's and Penelope's faces.

The admiration they received earlier from their bragging had now turned into stabs of humiliation.

Mary and Penelope were shamed right in the middle of the bustling theater's hall.

Their prides were left in tatters.

As they watched Caleb and Ashlyn leave happily, Mary suddenly rushed to Caleb's front and stopped him. The entire group paused in their path.

"Mr. Powell."

Caleb frowned at the middle-aged woman standing in front of him. This woman looks well taken care of, so she must be from a rich family.

With a confused look, he asked, "You are?"

Mary shot a glance at the beautiful girl standing beside Caleb and asked with urgency, "Mr. Powell, are you really Ashlyn's mentor? You're not lying, are you?"

Mr. Powell must have made a slip of his tongue. I'm sure he doesn't have anything to do with Ashlyn. After all, how can a little b*tch like Ashlyn be so lucky to be Mr. Powell's mentee?

Not only Mary but even Hera and Jenny were staring at Caleb with anticipation.

They were hoping he would deny his relationship with Ashlyn.

Especially Penelope. Her fists were clenched tightly as she stared pointedly at Caleb, afraid that she would miss any word from him.

Caleb was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and had met people from all walks of life.

Hence, he immediately realized that the middle-aged lady was no pushover.

She seems especially hostile to Linnie.

His initial friendly expression slipped as he asked icily, "Linnie, do you know this lady?"

Did he just call Ashlyn "Linnie?" Are they that close to each other?

Mary froze, and her breath caught in her throat.

Behind her, Penelope felt as though someone had punched her heart forcefully a few times. Her heart ached so much that she could barely breathe.

After all, she had just been humiliated in public.

Ashlyn's gaze swept over them before landing on Jenny and Hera, who were standing a distance away.

A mocking glint flashed across her eyes. "Of course I know them."

Massaging her brows, she replied impatiently, "They are my stepmother and stepsister. We used to stay under the same roof."

Everyone could not help but frown after hearing her explanation.

Oh, I see. The crowd who was watching the debacle was inwardly surprised.

Stepmothers were known for being evil, and Mary's reaction proved that she was not on good terms with Ashlyn.

Caleb's gaze darkened as he observed Mary and Penelope, who were all dressed up.

His gaze turned icy. There was even a tinge of anger in his countenance.

He knew that Ashlyn's family did not treat her well, but he had no idea her stepmother was this horrendous.

Linnie got bullied because no one would back her up. This is too much! Penelope is not even as pretty and elegant as Linnie! Ha! I can't believe they had the guts to demand to know if I'm Linnie's mentor. How could they ask that question in public? Are they fools?

His expression was wintry as he asked, "Ma'am, what do you want?"

The impatience in his voice was so evident that everyone instantly realized he found Mary annoying.

He was not about to spare her dignity.

"I-I just want to know how you got to know Ashlyn. She never even went overseas before, and she's just an ordinary person," Mary stammered.

She could not wait to hear Caleb talk about his relationship with Ashlyn.

Her curiosity got the better of her. Caleb's frosty expression scared the wits out of her, but she refused to give up.

Her gaze then landed on Ashlyn. "How could you be Mr. Powell's student? Stop spouting nonsense!"

Everyone bristled at how impudent Mary was.

James, especially, was already scowling in displeasure. "Ms. Canter, please watch your mouth. You're in your fifties, right? How could you say that? Don't you think you've gone overboard?" he chided.

Hearing the underlying meaning in his words, Mary could not stop her cheeks from turning scarlet.

Ashlyn was used to Mary and Penelope's brazen attitude.

They were greedy and materialistic hypocrites who looked like uncultured nouveau riche.

"He's my mentor, so there's no way he'll be someone else's mentor in this lifetime," came Ashlyn's calm answer.

Her lips curled up into a smirk, and the corner of her eyes raised in an arrogant manner.

She looked extremely haughty.

Upon hearing that, Caleb could not hide his delight. "Lynnie, are you finally admitting that I'm your mentor?" he asked earnestly.

He had been chasing after Ashlyn for some time, so hearing her affirmation made his heart leap up with joy. He could hardly contain his happiness.

Mary had never seen anyone as arrogant as Ashlyn. "How could you talk to me that way?" she instinctively retorted. "Is that how you treat an elder?"

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An icy look crossed Ashlyn's gorgeous face. Covering Mary in her frosty judgment, she responded, "Stop wasting your time here, Mary. Time to contain your vanity, okay?"

Mary got so furious that she nearly collapsed to the ground.

Her cheeks burned as she spluttered, “Y-You! How could you—”

“Enough! Mary, my wife and her mentor have nothing to do with you!”

Suddenly, a deep and assertive voice rang out beside Mary.

Lifting her head, Mary saw a strikingly handsome man standing before Ashlyn in a protective manner. His shoulders were broad enough to shield Ashlyn from all kinds of danger.

Lucas continued stonily, “I don't know where someone as old as you got the courage to question my wife and her mentor when you don't have the right to do so!”

His presence was so imposing that Mary instantly cowered back in fear.

“Mr. Nolan, Mr. Powell, I-I was just concerned about Ashlyn,” she protested.

Lucas snorted. “I can take care of her. That's none of your business. If you're that free, show your concern for your daughter. Stay away from Ashlyn!”

He pinned Penelope with a withering look that sent shivers down her spine.

Parting his lips, he continued sarcastically, “Look at her. People might think she's a celebrity waiting to walk the red carpet. Everyone attended this competition to listen to music, not to go from rags to riches overnight!”

His penetrating gaze shifted to Mary. “Ms. Canter, you can't even teach your daughter well, so please stay away from my wife,” he said, and there was a finality to his tone that warned Mary not to argue with him.

Everyone could not help but stare at Mary and Penelope. Tinsor and Blair even snickered out loud.

Poking Blair's waist, Tinsor commented, “Your brother has a sharp tongue, huh?”

Blair responded smugly, “He blessed us with his presence just to protect Ashlyn. He has to be skillful enough to do that!”

Indeed, Tinsor and Winsor's faces turned as dark as thunder.

Penelope's face was drained of color. She was insulted to the point that she wanted nothing more than to dig a hole and bury herself in it.

A wave of fury crashed through Mary, and she almost passed out. However, she had to blame herself for taking great care of herself, for she did not manage to faint in anger.

They had brought this upon themselves, and there was no one else to blame.

After saying his piece, Lucas ignored them outright. He turned to Ashlyn and asked softly, "Honey, should we grab a bite?"

It was pretty obvious how he adored and doted on Ashlyn.

Nevertheless, Ashlyn's response was to narrow her eyes.

This is his second personality. The rest could not see his eyes, but she was right in front of him and saw them clearly.

Their gazes locked.

Lucas' eyes looked as devious as a wolf as he stared at her intently as though she was his prey.

Seeing that, Ashlyn could not help but put her guard up as she eyed him warily.

This "Lucas" loves to put up an act. The previous Lucas wasn't this obsessed with acting.

Ashlyn pursed her lips. If possible, she wanted nothing more than to push this man away even though he was gazing at her affectionately.

Look at the slyness in the depths of his eyes!

"Sure!" She flashed a smirk that was as devious as his. "This way!"

Without hesitation, Caleb told the others politely, "Come, let's go. Too many people tried to disrupt me from treating you to a meal."

Having said that, he strode away swiftly. Everyone else followed after him and ignored both Mary and Penelope.

Mary's chest was heaving in fury, and even the tips of her fingers were going numb.

She had just returned from Maredania but managed to humiliate herself at the theater. Obviously, she would become the laughingstock of her circles!

How will Penelope make friends in the upper-class society in Maredania?

Her gaze flitted around and landed on Ashlyn's beautiful face. She was simmering in jealousy.

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It was all the b*tch's fault!

Mary initially assumed she would be able to humiliate Ashlyn as she was now the count's daughter.

Alas, things did not turn out as desired.

Right then, Ryan stalked out of the theater to see Mary and Penelope wearing grim expressions. He heard the audience chattering among themselves.

“Oh, Ms. Canter must be mortified. Never mind if she used to spread rumors that Mr. Powell came here for Mr. Yates; she even claimed that Mr. Yates is the successor of the president! I can't believe she questioned Mr. Powell if he's Ashlyn's mentor. She's the daughter of a count, huh? How embarrassing.”

After learning what happened, Ryan scowled unhappily. An ominous black thundercloud of temper promptly settled over him as he marched over to Mary and Penelope.

“Ryan—”

Mary was about to greet him when he cut her off rudely, “If you came back to H Nation from Maredania just to humiliate yourself, I don't want to see you ever again!”

There goes the Count's Mansion's reputation! This is so embarrassing! First, she wrongly accused someone of stealing the necklace, and now she has the guts to question whether Mr. Powell is Ashlyn's mentor. She even spread rumors that I'm his successor. I've never even imagined that. How dare she cause trouble for us? Does she think I'm too free? Fools! They made me a laughingstock in the music industry!

Ryan's entire being was shaking in fury. Why do such vain fools exist in the Yates family? Our reputation that we work hard to build for hundreds of years has been destroyed in the blink of an eye no thanks to them.

“Go back to Maredania, now!” Ryan ordered as he pointed a finger at the door of the theater. His warning was so low that it was practically a growl.

“Ryan, someone just bullied me. Why are you yelling at me instead of helping me?” Mary protested.

How could Ryan side with that b*tch Ashlyn when he's my brother? I was so mortified. Shouldn't he comfort me or side with me? How could he yell at me in public and told me to get back to Maredania?

Her anger coiled in her stomach.

I would've left with Penelope if the Yates family wasn't that influential.

"We're siblings, right? But why are you treating Ashlyn better than Penelope?" she questioned.

The more Mary argued, the more she pitied herself and Penelope.

Sorrow rose in her heart as she added, "Back in the Berry family, Penelope and I were often bullied by her. She bullied us as she was born by the first wife, and she never saw me as an elder. You saw for yourself how she treated me rudely. Even a stranger gets treated better than me! Imagine our life back in Berry Residence. Are you going to be this harsh to us after we finally reunited with the Yates family?"

Having said that, Mary burst into noisy tears.

"If that's the case, and you don't think of me as your sibling, Penelope and I shall leave the Yates family. I thought I'd finally found a home, but I was so wrong..."

Penelope flung her arms around Mary. "Mom, perhaps Uncle Ryan got too angry. We were partially to blame, too. I don't want to leave Granny, Mom. She adores me, and I can't bear to leave her," she uttered sadly.

They hugged each other, crying their hearts out.

Seeing their reactions, everyone else could not help but sympathize with them.

Ryan felt an incoming headache.

No matter what, they were still part of the Yates family.

That would not change no matter how upset he was.

Taking a deep breath, he told his assistant, Percy Yates, "Percy, send them back to the hotel."

"Uncle Ryan, where are you going? Won't you come back with us?" Penelope blurted out when she saw him stalking away.