

# Deer Little Maid, Chapter 01

“The Marquise is ready for you, sir.”

Silence came in answer. Sana glanced up to see who the guard was talking to, but the hall was empty except for him and the two girls seated on the bench opposite him. One, a slender brunette, was bouncing her knees together, staring at her clasped hands as if in silent prayer. The other, a very pale redhead, was sitting very still and studying the floor.

She wore a tight woolen scarf like his. Sana wondered if she was from the countryside, too.

“Sir.”

Sana’s ears pricked up. He blinked at the guard. “Oh! Um, me?”

‘Sir’ was new. ‘Sir’ was very new. Nobody in the forest ruins called anyone ‘sir’.

“That’s right.” The guard nodded, gesturing to the doorway. “She is waiting.”

Sana nodded shakily. Applicants really got to meet with the Lady herself? Not a majordomo or—or head servant, or something? Nobody else was acting surprised, so apparently this was just how things worked here, but the faun’s tail was wagging was racing with sudden added nerves.

The guards’ last words registered a little late. *She is waiting.*

Sana’s ears flicked. He sprang to his feet with an awkward clatter of hooves and smiled. “Right, sorry! I mean, thank you!”

He trotted over to the indicated door and, after brushing his smallish antlers to be sure no debris was caught on them, opened it. He entered immediately; any further delay would only worsen his nerves.

Sana found that the interview office was drab, cold, and dark. It couldn’t possibly be the Marquise’s normal place of work. Its fireplace was gray and unused, devoid even of ash. Only a singular wall lamp provided illumination, and its flickering light lent the chamber an uneasy quality, with rippling shadows that made edges blurry and half-formed. It felt like a space that hadn’t fully decided whether it was real or just the backdrop for someone’s dream.

But when Sana’s eyes fell on her, he went very still, and he knew that nothing like her could be a dream.

The Marquise was beautiful in a way he hadn't realized was beautiful until now. She wore a spell of loveliness he hadn't known could be cast. The Marquise was tall and fair, almost porcelain-pale, with a healthy pink primrose flush flickering upon her cheeks. Deep violet painted her lips, the kind of rich twilight hue that could cost more than a year's work in the fields to reproduce. Her long white hair was pulled up by a pair of dark pins into a loose bun, from which its remainder spilled down to her shoulders, elegant whorling ringlets that glittered like frost-kissed spiderwebs. Her dark blue gown pulled in sharply at the waist, with a low-cut neckline that seemed to demand stares. He had to remind himself to look away, and tried to focus on her eyes.

The Marquise's eyes seemed to mirror the lamplight, pools of smoldering orange cinders that seemed to drink him in at a glance. For a moment, he felt impossibly small beneath that gaze, and his heart beat a little faster, and he thought of the time he'd locked eyes with an old hunting cat prowling the shadows around the farmhouse.

He barely registered the door shutting behind him. For a moment, the only sound Sana could hear was his own shallow breathing.

The Marquise's eyes held him firmly. He saw her lips quirk.

"Sana," she said, and he felt some sort of tether snap, and he could move again. Her head slowly tilted to the side. She slow-blinked. "You're rather slight for a faun, aren't you?"

"N-No, ma'am." He felt heat rising in his breast. "I mean, most fauns are... quite short, actually, ma'am. The taller fauns are usually found farther north. Ma'am. Mistress. Um."

"Lady Alice will do. Or 'my lady'." Her eyes sparkled. "We aren't employing you yet, are we?"

"N-No, m—Lady Alice." Sana shifted from side to side, hooves clattering slightly against the stone tile floor. "Although I... certainly hope that that might change!" He managed a shy smile.

Lady Alice rested her chin upon steepled fingers, regarding him intently.

She smiled and pointed one finger towards the chair. "Sit."

Sana almost knocked over the chair in his hurry to obey, plopping down on the chair and folding his hands in his lap. As an afterthought, he made himself sit up very straight, heart racing.

"So, Sana," she murmured, lowering one hand to brush painted red nails over the documents he'd given the doorman, "you're from the country, I take it?"

“Y-Yes, Lady Alice.” He nodded eagerly, pointing to the most intact document. “But that letter was written to recommend me by, um, a very respected vintner in the area.” Lady Alice had no way of knowing the vintner was his aunt. “And I can work very hard, m—m’lady!”

“Oh?” She raised one dark, perfectly-sculpted brow. “How hard?”

“Um.” She was so beautiful. Lady Alice didn’t exactly have the kind of beauty that made people fall in lust or in love. It was more like the kind of beauty that made people fall on their knees and *worship*. Sana already hadn’t been around many pretty girls, but he’d never had to deal with women this pretty, this refined, this untouchably gorgeous. Her eyes hadn’t left his. He felt horribly hot, despite the room’s chill. He could only pray the heat hadn’t reached his cheeks yet; with his plump cheeks and pale freckles, any blush always showed up vivid as a wound. “Y-Yes. I mean, very hard, Mistress! I’ll do whatever you need. Whatever it takes. And I-I’m a quick learner, Mistress, I promise—!”

“Oh, I can see!” Her eyes glinted. “Why, you’re even learning to address me as though you’ve already got the job, aren’t you?”

Sana blinked. His tail flicked. “O-Oh.” He squirmed in his seat, looking down at his hands. “Right, s-sorry, Mi—I mean, Lady Alice, um—”

“No.”

Sana’s eyes returned to Lady Alice’s. He licked his lips.

“My housekeepers are worked very hard, Sana.” The fire in Lady Alice’s eyes seemed to have gotten brighter. He knew they were just reflecting the lamplight, though. Her voice, which had briefly gone faint, was loud and clear once more. “My castle runs with a small staff, which means my servants must work twice as hard.”

He nodded slightly. “Yes, Mistress! My au—I mean, the vintner, um, I had to do most of the work, since it was just me and my...” He felt the shy need to look away from Lady Alice’s gaze, but he knew she wanted his eye contact—he needed to show he could handle it! “... my...”

“My staff are loyal,” Lady Alice purred, cutting him off (to his intense relief), “and highly devoted to my service. They learn how to please me and do everything in their power to do so. I’m sure it isn’t easy. I can be difficult to please.” Her eyes crinkled as if with laughter, but she didn’t laugh. In fact, Sana realized he’d barely seen her part her lips at all. Although she was speaking, wasn’t she? So... “In turn, I take very good care of them, and they are well-rewarded. You’re from the country, aren’t you?”

Sana felt a strange vertigo taking hold. He felt himself nodding; the vertigo immediately faded. He gave a weak smile. “Yes, Mistress, um...”

"I know the countryside of the Thirty-First District can be perilous." Lady Alice's brow knit with concern. Her eyes were wells of sympathy; Sana felt strangely drawn towards them. He'd never seen such kindness, such care... "The ghosts. The feral dead. You poor thing."

"Nn. Mm-hm." Sana nodded again before the dizziness could return. "Yeah, um..." He bit his lip. He'd been hoping not to talk about that. "M-My, um, mother was taken in when I was young. My elder sister a year ago. Ghosts, and... worse things..."

"How *awful*. And you're..."

Sana licked his lips. He knew what she was asking, and this was another thing he'd hoped to lie about, but her eyes implored him, eased him, and he knew he mustn't lie... "T-Twenty, ma'am."

"So *young*. My poor little deer." She shook her head slowly. He felt his head slightly following her motions, and had to consciously make himself stop. He was tired after a long journey, that was all. He was tired, and something about the flickering lights, the brightness of her eyes... the darkness of the room, the softness of her voice...

Her voice.

Lady Alice's voice was remarkably pretty. It was hard to describe in terms of sounds—high pitch or low pitch, husky or sweet. It was just... *present*. Intimate. As if there was no way not to hear it, as if it was purred right into his ear, just for him. It felt harder to hear her when he looked away from her eyes—he'd vaguely noticed that on the 'No.' earlier—but that was probably him being sleepy and having trouble focusing. Her eyes helped him focus.

Helped him focus on her... voice...

"... let that happen to you," she was saying, setting the papers aside. "You would, of course, be perfectly safe at my estate. We know how to keep those silly shades out." She smiled tenderly, laughter in her voice.

Sana giggled slightly. "R-Right! Of course."

'Silly shades'. That was a funny way to talk about the horrors that plagued the forests of Belledam. But maybe here, in cities like Starbridge where running water flowed freely, the dead really were just... silly shades. Lady Alice seemed so confident, so sure, so amused by the creatures. He smiled at her. Silly shades. As the mistress of the great mechanical causeway, of course she had total control of where the dead came and went.

It was why he needed a job here so badly. Here it was safe.

“Now, of course...” Lady Alice’s eyes seemed to gently tug his mind back to the conversation. “... since working for me can be such a commitment, I always hire new servants on a trial basis first. At the end of the trial, if I am pleased with their service and they are pleased with my employ, they will be invited to submit to a longer-term contract.”

“Oh!” Sana nodded. His little tail wagged slightly. “Th-That’s very fair!”

He’d seen the salary on offer. Even with just three months’ pay, he could afford to rent a place in the city and look for work elsewhere. But if he could earn that long-term contract...

The little reflected flames flickered and danced in those eyes. “If I am not pleased, or they are not... then they are, of course, expected to leave.”

Even though Sana still felt hot all over, he shivered a little. He nodded again. “I-I won’t let you down, Mistress! I-I mean—” In a wave of embarrassment, he broke her gaze and ducked his head. “If I get hired, I mean. I wouldn’t.”

“Mm.”

Dimly, Sana realized his heart was pounding. He wasn’t sure why, or how long it had been doing so. He *felt* calm. Unafraid. And still his heart was racing like he’d just been dropped from very high up. He wiggled, biting his lip, staring at his clasped hands.

She said something he didn’t quite hear. Her voice was faint, crackly, like static. He suddenly felt unbearably shy. He looked up high enough to watch her full, luscious lips, painted such a pretty, priceless hue, her cupid’s bow deep and enticing, promising the softest, sweetest of kisses as she said something else...

Sana only vaguely registered, a half-second late, that he hadn’t quite seen her pretty lips moving. Maybe he hadn’t heard her speaking at all.

Sana blinked rapidly. He felt funny. Dizzy. A little silly. He smiled nervously, tail flicking. Something felt... strange, but he couldn’t quite...

A cool hand touched his chin. She seemed to speak again, but again, he couldn’t make out the words.

Lady Alice’s fingertips lifted his head back up until his eyes once again met hers.

It was like being returned to a warm, cozy bed. Her eyes drew him in instantly, and his smile became more relaxed as the dizziness faded. His heart’s pounding slowly eased into a kind of happy fluttering as he gazed into those lovely crimson fires, and he supposed that maybe Lady Alice’s kind of beauty was the kind to make people fall in love, too.

“H-Hi,” the faun squeaked, imploring his tail to stop its wagging. “I-I mean... um...”

She smiled tenderly, patting his cheek. “Is everything okay, precious thing?”

“A-Ah.” He nodded dreamily. “Y-Yes, ma’am! Apologies, um, I’ve been on the road for three days, and... not a lot of safe times to, um...” He heard himself give another dizzied giggle. “...sleep...”

“Sleep,” she echoed, giving a slight sympathetic nod. “Well, we’ll give you plenty of time to sleep at the castle.” Her hand caressed his cheek, trailed down to under his chin, and then trailed lower, her slender fingers appearing to adjust his scarf slightly. “The work *is* hard, but the beds are warm and soft.”

“Soft,” he echoed slightly, lost to those deep, flickering eyes. That sounded so... nice. The world was so dark, and flickery, and a soft, warm bed would be...

Then her words clicked, and he half-blinked. “O-Oh. Oh! Um—then I, um, are you—”

“You’ll start tomorrow.” Her hand dropped away, just as he’d been starting to wonder why it was there. She tapped a piece of paper and slid it over. “The contract is for three months. Of course, you are free to leave at anytime, but you won’t be paid if you quit before the contracted date.” She shook her head, laughter in those eyes. “But you won’t quit, will you?”

“B-Before the...” Sana shook his head with a dazed smile. “No, ma’am. I’m no quitter!” Being forced to leave early, to head back home... “I-I won’t let you down!”

He felt like he’d already said that. But Lady Alice beamed, reaching over to pat his hand. He was holding a pen now. “Good. I know you won’t. You show... wonderful promise.”

His heart fluttered, and he blushed as he scribbled down the simple ‘X’. “Th-Thank you, ma’am!”

“Good~!” She took the paper, and her eyes suddenly released him, flashing to the door. “You’re hired. The doorman will show you the way onto the castle grounds, where you’ll speak with my... majordomo.” She leaned to the side, resting her cheek on a palm. “Welcome to my service.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Sana babbled, springing to his feet and practically prancing for the door. “Thank you, ma’am!”

The Marquise’s laughter followed him out. “Stay on the path, Sana, dear~”

Dimly, Sana realized this was the first time he’d actually heard Lady Alice laugh aloud. Her laugh was as lovely as the rest of her, rich and velvety and dripping with unspoken implications he didn’t quite

understand. Her voice, too, was beautiful, sweet and breathy and warm, like a sultry sigh exhaled into cold winter air. He wasn't sure why he hadn't noticed that before.

He swung the door open.

The guardsman looked almost startled to see him. Sana gave the man a big smile. "I'm hired!" he squealed, practically bouncing in place.

Belatedly, he remembered the other two applicants, and looked apologetically toward the pair. The girl in the scarf didn't meet his gaze. The other looked dazed, and nodded towards him. She had a strange smile, almost like she was trying to reassure him, but it wasn't quite that.

"Right." The doorman nodded and pointed down the hall. "Straight through there. Down the gardens. Stay on the—"

"Oh, Moscan," Lady Alice called, "send the second girl in."

'Moscan' looked up and nodded. "Yes, m'lady," he said, and nodded to the girl in the scarf. "The Marquise is ready for you, miss."

Sana blinked. Something about what Lady Alice had said seemed strange, and it took him a moment to realize—hadn't the posting said there would be only one job opening?

Maybe they had changed plans. Or maybe she was here for a different job. He tried to smile gently at the girl in the scarf as she got up and stumbled toward the office door. "She's not as scary as you expect," he whispered. "She's actually very kind."

The girl stared at him weakly, and he realized by the redness of her eyes that she had been crying. "She... kind?"

"Yes, miss!" He frowned, reaching up to give her shoulder a comforting squeeze. "There's nothing to worry about. Just be good and be honest, and everything will be fine." He turned and started trotting away. "Good luck!"

As he neared the far door, he dimly heard the guard telling the girl to take off her scarf before entering.

Then Sana was out the door, past the gatehouse, and on the grounds of Castle Lichenburr.

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The forests of Belledam had once been great cities, Sana knew. Out in the wild, evergreens and spear lichens rose from and between the ruins of buildings, brick and stone and iron devoured by moss and

muck and algae. To be good at climbing trees always, to some extent, meant being good at climbing the stone foundations that gave one access to the pines' lower branches, and at avoiding the glowpebbles that sometimes seemed to sneak into the old architecture.

Here in the city of Starbridge, the forests were mostly kept at bay or contained, and while he had seen some ancient-looking buildings—especially the bridge itself—he realized he had not seen many of the ruins he'd gotten used to. The gardens of Castle Lichenburr were full of them. Carefully-placed blocks and chunks of stone, pieces that had clearly been taken from elsewhere and brought here to be arranged in pleasing patterns. All very tidy and neat.

It was a little surreal. Like a mosaic made of dead kingdoms.

He walked slowly down the pristine trail. The trail itself was like the skeleton of a riverbed, countless smooth dark stones set into pale concrete. It wound through the beautiful gardens in slow, gentle curves, leading steadily towards the castle at the center of the grounds. Short, gnarled trees with narrow twisting trunks and thick, leafy branches leaned over the path like tired sentinels. He didn't recognize their species. They were not from the Thirty-First District.

Between the trees, and climbing up their trunks, rose the dark leaves and slender tendrils of a more familiar plant. Large pale orange-red flowers shaped like starlike trumpets blossomed all around him.

These were gloaming glories, flowers that bloomed in the brightest hours of the 'day' to reflect the crimson sky. They crawled over the branches and bloomed from the leafy canopies. One might have thought they were part of the very trees they were parasitizing. Each blooming flower pointed up towards the east.

They were seeking the dawn. It probably would have been dawn right now, were they not in the Lantern Districts.

The flowers' sweet nutty scent hung thick and heavy over the gardens. Normally he'd have expected to see bats and moths and bumble-owls filling this garden, but the whole place was strangely still.

Sana drew to a stop, looking around. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't see any animals at all. He knew it wasn't a wild forest, but even the greenhouses his aunt had kept usually had their share of moths, honeysuckles, and even the odd night-sprite. Were all city gardens this... lifeless?

He frowned.

"Are you lost, darling?"

Sana jumped with a panicked yelp. His hooves hit the ground in a stumbling clatter as he spun to face the speaker. He'd been *sure* he was alone—!

The speaker smiled at him, and for a split-second, Sana thought that Lady Alice had somehow gotten ahead of him. This new girl also had beautiful long white hair, but hers was perfectly straight, spilling down just past her shoulders as though someone had upended a bucket of moonlight over her head. A frilly white headpiece kept her hair back from her eyes. The girl was much shorter than Lady Alice, about his height, with very subtly softer features. Perhaps Lady Alice was like his aunt, and also employed family.

Her face, he noticed, was extremely pale, without Lady Alice's lively pink blush. Her eyes were a vivid, uncomplicated red. For a second, Sana couldn't even make out pupils.

But it was dark, Sana reminded himself quickly, trying to quell the instinctive fear within him. Dark, with only starlight and the distant dawn to light her. This girl was clearly no feral dead. She stood straight and proud, clad in a beautiful black-and-white dress of frills and lace, with a frilly white apron that didn't quite cover her cleavage and a skirt that ended just above the white-stockinged knees.

It was a maid dress. Not quite as scandalous as the kind he'd once seen in some... suggestive illustrations, but still extremely flattering. Sana felt his tail wagging a little as he quickly tore his gaze away from those stockings and that neckline and back to her eyes.

The speaker was still smiling at him. Her lips were a bright, healthy pink, and very... kissable.

He found himself smiling back shyly. His tail flicked.

Then he registered the question. "Oh! Oh, um, no, ma'am!"

"Miss." She raised an eyebrow. "Miss Charity."

"Miss Charity." He nodded sheepishly. "Lady Alice told me I was, um, hired. Are you the majordomo?"

Miss Charity's eyes sparkled with excitement. She leaned in slightly, touching his scarf. "Something like that. So *you* are who the Lady chose?"

She sounded a little surprised. Sana tried not to feel defensive, and tried even harder not to flinch as she drew his scarf back to expose his neck. He knew the scarf was probably a dead giveaway that he was from the country. "Y-Yes! I know I'm, um, new to the city, but I can work very hard, Miss Charity!"

He reached up hesitantly to brush her hand away. To his surprise, she instead took his hand in hers. Her hand was quite cold, but... it *was* autumn, after all.

"Can you?" she asked, taking a step closer. "What is your name, darling?"

“S-Sana.” Sana licked his lips, feeling his heartbeat quickening. Miss Charity was staring right into his eyes, and her gaze was almost as intense as Lady Alice’s.

“Sana.” Her voice was a liquid purr. Her fingers interlaced with his, and Sana felt his tail flicking rapidly. Sana wasn’t very experienced with women he wasn’t related to, and he *especially* wasn’t used to having a girl hold his hand like that. Where he came from, handholding was usually a thing reserved for courtship. Was this normal in the cities? His cheeks were getting hot again. “What a pretty name for such a pretty new hire~!”

“P-Pretty...?” Sana tried not to squirm, but his ears were pricked straight up in alertness, and he couldn’t get his little tail to stop wagging. “Um. Thank you, Miss Charity, but you... you do see that I’m a, um, boy, right?”

Sana did have to ask sometimes. He knew he had a delicate face. More embarrassing, though, were his antlers, which were much too small for a buck and sometimes created confusion.

He’d meant to ask more gracefully, of course, but he was very tired, and thinking of clever words felt like it took energy he just didn’t have. Especially when her eyes were sparkling like pools in starlight. Those eyes demanded all his focus.

He’d expected Miss Charity to look startled, or perhaps embarrassed. Instead, she laughed out loud, as if the question was impossible to take seriously. Something looked off about her smile. He wasn’t sure what. Her eyes held him in a vise grip and would not allow him to look. “Of course, Sana, darling! And a very pretty boy you are. I’m sure Her Ladyship chose well.”

Her eyes finally released him, drifting down to his hips. Sana flushed hot and reached back with his free hand to push his wagging tail down. “S-Sorry, Miss Charity,” he managed, as a wave of dizziness made him stumble. “Um, it’s... just nerves, that... happens sometimes.”

“Oh?” She turned away, skirt twirling. “That might create issues with your uniform~”

“Wh—uniform?” Oh. Of course it would be normal for servants in the city to wear uniforms. He felt silly even asking. “Right. Yes.”

“It’s a very cute tell, though~”

“Ah—” Sana sputtered as his tail wagged faster, but he didn’t have a chance to muster a reply before Miss Charity gave his hand a tug and he found himself being led onward.

“Come,” she said, not turning back. Her hand held his tightly. “To the castle, darling. We need to get you situated, don’t we?”

“Um!” Sana hurried after, trying not to think about how soft her hand felt, how nice her fingers felt entwined with his, or how her compliments sent excited heat flowing into his chest. Was the majordomo flirting with a new hire? Was *that* normal in the cities? “Yes, miss!”

He was glad she couldn’t see how her giggles made him blush.

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“And this is the foyer,” Miss Charity declared as the great double-doors swung shut behind them. “Guests and the Lady will come and go through here, but servants generally use a different door.”

They stood in a wide chamber, dimly-lit, the doorway flanked by tables bearing vases of colorful peacock feathers. The walls were covered in pretty patterned paper, painted with swirling abstract blues and greens and pale golds.

Four doors led deeper into the house, and farther in, a staircase rose up to the second level. A curious door was set into the wall next to it—not a normal door, but like a door to a cage set into the wall.

Sana looked around, feeling a strange tension taking hold of his muscles. Something about this place felt uneasy. Blues and indigos were precious pigments, he knew, but they also had the effect of making the room feel cold and unwelcoming. “Is it normally this empty?”

“Oh, don’t worry, darling.” Miss Charity smiled sweetly. “I’m taking you up to the servants’ chambers. You’ll have lots of company there.”

Sana swallowed. His eyes drifted over the doors as they passed each in turn, then fixated on the stairs—but to his confusion, Miss Charity was leading him straight to the cage door.

“Um!” He hesitated as they drew level with the dark iron bars, not quite pulling his hand away from hers. “A-Are we... why are we going into a cage?”

Miss Charity didn’t respond for a moment. Then she turned to him, eyes gleaming with amusement. They *were* awfully red, Sana thought... but was it just the reddish glow of the lamps?

“Do you think I’d put you in a cage, darling?” She pouted and raised her eyebrows innocently, lips playing towards a smile. “This is an elevator. They’re all the rage in the cities.”

Sana swallowed, looking at the strange switches next to the door. He’d heard of elevators. That had been what he was afraid of. “Aren’t those kind of... dangerous?”

“Only if you move around too much,” she murmured, tugging on his hand. He drifted unwillingly closer; she stood right between him and the door. “And you can be good, can’t you?”

“Wh—” Sana’s cheeks went hot, and he knew he was blushing bright red by her widening grin. More embarrassing by far was his tail’s frantic wagging. “I—what? I, um—”

Miss Charity reached up to pat his cheek, and at the touch, his words cut off.

“So flushed!” She giggled. “You’re quite a blushy little thing, aren’t you?”

“I—” Sana pressed his thighs together, trying hard to control a desperate desire to squirm. “It’s just, um—”

“It’s very flattering.” Again she cut him off without effort. Her hand cupped his cheek tenderly as she smiled up at him, her eyes gentle, reassuring. “I’d say it’s nothing to be embarrassed of, but if you being embarrassed is what gives your cheeks such pretty decoration, I wouldn’t want to *discourage* you.”

Sana blinked rapidly. He pulled away from her hand. “What?”

She lowered her hand. “Oh, I don’t mean anything untoward! I just mean it’s so rare I see so much *color* on such a pretty face. That’s not a bad thing.” She tugged on his hand again, pulling him even closer. His heart was starting to pound as he realized he was practically pinning her to the bars. “It’s important to look nice for the Lady, isn’t it? You want to, don’t you?”

*Look nice for the Lady.* She said it with such casual certainty.

Sana bit his lip. “Um, I...”

Was that actually why he’d been hired? Obviously he was here to do cleaning, but with his little experience, it *had* seemed strange. Did Lady Alice really just see him as decoration? Was that normal?

And... did he really mind that much? It was demeaning to have said out loud, but after all, a job was a job, and it *was* a little flattering, and...

... come to think of it, maybe he mostly just minded that Miss Charity had seemingly instantly clocked a certain little budding crush.

“It’s just a little... embarrassing,” he managed. “And I, um, I’m very tired, so I’d really like to...”

“Get to bed?” She tilted her head.

He nodded hesitantly. But over her shoulder, the elevator loomed, and he faltered back.

Charity pulled him right back in. Her eyes were inches from his now. They were... almost painful to look at.

No, not painful. They made him anxious, in a strange, instinctual way. They were so intense, burned so bright, glowed so red-hot. It was like staring into an inferno.

And yet he couldn't look away.

"It's perfectly safe," she whispered, caressing his cheek. "As Head Maid, I take good care of Lady Alice's servants while she's away, sweet Sana, and I think she wants *you* given special attention. I won't let anything happen to you."

He shivered. His heart was still pounding, but those words seemed to pour from those eyes with soothing resonance, echoing into his head and sinking in deep.

*I won't let anything happen to you.*

When had been the last time someone had said that to him with such certainty? When had been the last time someone had tried so hard to make him feel... safe?

"Come along, Sana." Charity blinked, her dark lashes briefly curtaining those eyes and leaving him dizzy. She slid the elevator door open with an audible grinding and stepped back. "Come inside with me."

"I'd... can't we, um..." His lips felt clumsy, and he was having trouble getting his tongue to obey him. The world sank and swam, swirled around those eyes like they were what all the heavens orbited. "S-Stairs..."

"Stare," she echoed softly, cupping his cheek with her cool hand. Her eyes seemed to almost have a swirling pattern to them. Spirals. Whirlpools of liquid fire that pulled him deeper into the smoldering heat...

He stared shyly, squirming in place, trying to remember what he'd just been saying. Stare. No, the stairs. The stairs, they could—could take those instead, so he wouldn't have to risk this ungainly contraption—risk being locked in such a tight space with Miss Charity, because something about her felt off even if he couldn't put his finger on it, and she was being so shamelessly flirty he felt like he was going to melt...

A metallic clatter jolted him from his thoughts.

He realized with a start that the elevator door had just shut behind him.

He was on the lift.

He blinked rapidly. Miss Charity had broken eye contact and was bending over to draw a pink paper screen down over the door. He tried not to notice how her dress didn't quite cover her panties when she bent over like that.

She straightened and gave him a sugary-sweet smile. He smiled back weakly. This elevator did not feel like it was designed to fit two people at once.

This meant there was nowhere to retreat to as she leaned in close.

"Up to the third floor," she said sweetly, reaching over to press two buttons. "You may want to grab onto something, darling."

"What?"

The elevator lurched beneath his feet, and reflexively, his grip tightened on Charity's hand. He stumbled, and Miss Charity's arm shot out to catch him around the waist as the elevator began to rise.

Sana froze stock-still, staring helplessly into Miss Charity's bright red eyes.

Her smile widened. There was something odd about that smile, but he couldn't quite name it, couldn't quite tear his eyes from hers to look closer...

"I should warn you, Sana, darling," the Head Maid cooed, giving his waist a little squeeze. "This old elevator can be terribly slow."

"Wh-Wh—" His hooves clattered nervously, trying to find any sort of balance that didn't depend on her.

"We just might..." Her eyes shone brighter, and something in that light seemed to form deep, bloodred spirals. "... be in here for a *while~*"

*TO BE CONTINUED.*