

The girl on stage had defined, exquisite features and flawless looks on that most perfectly oval-shaped face to go with her almost nine-head tall frame. Her package practically reduced Shandie beside her to a figurative ugly-duckling.

Never mind the ugly-duckling, even ordinary swans would be put to shame before the real swan-princess.

Most significantly was the fact that she wore no make-up. There was no telling how breathtaking she would be if she had put some color on, as a girl like her could overshadow even the female stars in the beauty-laden entertainment industry.

No one dislikes beautiful women. Not even the girls present at the ceremony whose eyes glistened in awe.

By just standing there, Arielle was that brightest light who condemned Shandie to a mere wallflower, drawing away all the attention that ought to have belonged to the latter without exception.

Vinson's eyes, too, were riveted as well, as if everyone else had become non-existent to him.

The manner in which Shandie's eyes reddened in jealousy did not elude Arielle. The former's rage and anguish were exactly what she wanted, but she quickly averted her gaze and

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walked right up to Vinson. "Why did you...".

Then, Vinson interjected, "I haven't decided whether to marry you, so consider this a little forwarding of *interest*."

Arielle was stumped, as she wondered whether it was solely for the payment of interest that he decided to hand such a critical endorsement role to her.

She had no idea what was going on inside Vinson's head, but she felt that that role would be worth taking up just to see Cindy and Shandie throw a fit.

Vinson took up the microphone. "As you may understand, Soir Coffee has always picked the winner of the coffee competition to be our spokesperson, but I've decided that this year, we'll only choose the one whose image best represents our brand. That, I feel, belongs to Ms. Moore. So, why don't you come forward and say a few words to all our friends out there?"

Arielle took over from Vinson and was about to speak when someone rushed out and snatched the microphone from her.

"I won't stand for this!"

When Arielle reflexively turned around, her gaze collided head-along into Shandie's, whose reaction came as no surprise to her.

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Arielle's brows perked up, questioningly. "What are you doing, Shandie?"

Shandie ignored her and addressed the crowd directly instead. "The brand ambassador of the coffee shop has always been selected from amongst those who have proved themselves to be the most proficient at latte art. How could someone with no knowledge of it was chosen this year? This is just unacceptable!"

Cindy was the first to take to her feet.

"That's right, Mr. Nightshire! Your decision is too arbitrary and unprecedented, and we should have been informed even if you wish to make an exception to this. How can you have a country girl who isn't even a coffee drinker become your brand ambassador?"

Cindy's words had the entire hall uproarious.

"A girl from the countryside? This chosen ambassador can't carry the image of an international chain like Soir Coffee!"

"Disregarding the fact that she's from the country, but not even a coffee drinker? That's a little too much."

Emboldened by the supportive crowd, Shandie spoke into the microphone again, "Don't tell us that you've seduced your way into this role, Arielle?"

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Arielle's dagger-like icy stare gave Shandie quite a fright, while Vinson's even colder glare unnerved the latter so much that she dared not even look at him twice.

She took a deep drawl and a moment to collect herself before she continued, "Otherwise, kindly explain to us how someone who doesn't even drink coffee managed to snag this endorsement role."

"Who told you that I don't drink coffee?" Arielle retorted calmly.

That drew a sneer from Shandie. "Then, do you dare accept my challenge? If you could beat me at latte art, then I'd willingly give up the role of brand ambassador to you!"



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Vinson wanted to speak up but Arielle shot him a look before she replied with a meaningful smile, "Very well. Challenge accepted!"

Shandie was momentarily taken aback but recovered quickly with a smirk. "Good! Let's do it. Right here, right now!"

Cindy was not idling away in the gallery either as she went over to hash things out swiftly with the organizers, after which two coffee tables were moved onstage and equipped properly.

Vinson looked a tad apprehensively at Arielle who remained silent throughout.

Once the host saw that both of them are ready, he said, "Ladies, you may begin."

Shandie burst into action the moment his voice trailed off.

The first step to creating latte art was, of course, to prepare the espresso which had to be hand-brewed by the participants themselves.

The assiduous Shandie weighed up fifteen grams of coffee beans and fed them into the grinder with tremendous refinement.

She was surprised to see Arielle appearing quite competent when she stole a glance over, as though the latter actually knew what she was doing.

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Arielle had fluidly set up the paper filter inside the filter holder before she raised the kettle to pour the boiling water in, clockwise and in a circular movement.

Shandie was unable to contain herself when she observed that, noting that this was something only professional brewers would know. Pouring clockwise would allow for the filter to adhere better to the holder, and at the same time, eliminate the starchy taste from the paper and warm up the receptacle. The resultant would be a much more flavorful cuppa.

It was easy to tell from Arielle's understanding of this coupled with her deft gestures that she knew how to make coffee.

How can it be possible for this country girl to know how to brew?

In spite of her certainty that she was not hallucinating, Shandie was completely bamboozled.

Isn't Arielle from the countryside?

Shandie remained stumped for some time before she pinched herself hard and turned her focus back to the task at hand.

Brew it! Even if Arielle knows how to make coffee, will she be able to do latte art?

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Shandie took a deep drawl in a bid to settle herself and resume her own work.

Traditional pour-over coffee required two infusions of water, after which an aromatic cup would be ready.

Shandie quietly chuckled when she saw Arielle still awaiting her second infusion while she herself was already done, and dismissed Arielle's knowledge as something the latter must have picked up from a stint at a coffee shop.

Shortly after, Arielle completed her brewing as well, and in response, the host communicated that they could both proceed with the creation of their latte art.

Compared to brewing, the latte art was the real litmus test.

The creation of latte art required the use of whole milk, and each person needed to conceive their theme before they began.

Maintaining an elegant smile, Shandie was first to speak, "My chosen theme is: *A Snow-Covered Cottage in Freezing Weather...*"

When the microphone came to Arielle, she paused before replying staidly, "Mine will be: *The Bloom of a Thousand Pear-Flowers Ushered Forth by the Night Breeze of Spring.*"

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Shandie twitched her lips upon hearing Arielle similarly reciting a verse from classical poetry.

*Is this little b*tch trying to be pedantic like me?
How*

many years did she spend in school?

*I am, of course, an arts graduate from the
University of Avenport.*

Shandie scoffed at the thought of Arielle's proposed theme in the assumption that the latter was only going to put together a few pear-flowers, and went on to concentrate on shaping out her own designs with the whole milk.

First, Shandie covered the top of the coffee with froth from the whole milk, and then employed the use of latte art pen to tease out a snow-capped mountain and a little wooden house upon it.

At a glance, it did foster the feel of *A Snow-Covered Cottage in Freezing Weather*.



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When Shandie's swiftly realized theme was flashed on the screen, it drew gasps of astonishment.

"This artistic conception is pretty good. If this cup of coffee were to be offered in a coffee shop, surely it could fetch a good twenty?"

"This isn't coffee art, but art itself!"

"No wonder Crown Coffee Academy has the reputation of being the best place to learn the techniques of brewing!"

Cindy was extremely pleased at the reactions received, and was proud that the daughter she painstakingly nurtured had not let her down.

Shandie quietly began to grow in her complacency as she was able to listen in to the discussions taking place and praise lavished upon her off-stage.

She just knew that she would be the one to come up on top!

Her theme was secretly conceived by a famous designer, and one which she had spent a week practicing at home. There was none who could rival her work in terms of visual impact.

She could just imagine the legions of fans she would be able to garner when the video was posted onto the blog, and all before she even starred in any movie.

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On top of that, Vinson would also be mighty impressed, making her a winner in both love and her professional life!

The more Shandie thought about it, the more her delight grew. She then needed to pinch her own thigh in order to stop herself from laughing aloud.

Of course, she had not forgotten about Arielle, who was still busying away.

Shandie thought that though Arielle's *Bloom of a Thousand Pear-Flowers* did showcase a considerable degree of skill, its few pear-trees with budding blossoms nonetheless paled in contrast to her own creation.

When Arielle was finally done, she raised a hand and asked the host, "Could you do me a favor here?"

The host immediately went over.

Shandie sneered inside: *Sensationalist much!*

Never mind getting the host to help, Shandie deemed that her opponent had no chance of beating her even with Vinson's backing. As this was an open challenge witnessed by the masses, there was no way she would be able to pull strings here.

By this time, the host was already next to Arielle. "May I know if there's anything that

you'd like me to do?"

Arielle turned to the big screen behind her which was now focused over her coffee, and decided that the timing was right.

"Do you mind lending me the script you have in your hand?"

"Certainly," replied the host who was happy to assent to a beautiful woman's request, and generously passed his own script along.

To the side, Shandie appeared even more disdainful when she saw Arielle's design on the big screen.

So you drew up some nice looking pear-flowers?

Big deal.

She wondered what other tricks Arielle might be up to, but remained skeptical as to whether it would make any difference to the outcome.

Arielle reached out to receive the script from the host and at the same time, sought out the angle she wanted. Once she got a handle on the amount of force she wanted to apply behind it, she started to fan at the coffee with the script in hand.

Shandie was dumbstruck.

How could you fan at the latte art?

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Wouldn't that mess up your original drawing?

You're an ignorant country girl after all! What a joke!

While Shandie ridiculed away at Arielle inside, an astonishing sequence was unveiled in the next instant as the buds on the pear-trees seemed to bloom under Arielle's steady fanning.

Then, a few blossoms appeared to detach from the *branches* and scatter upon the ground below.

With that, Arielle stopped fanning and extended a bow to the audience and guests. "This is my work: *The Bloom of a Thousand Pear-Flowers Ushered Forth by the Night Breeze of Spring*. Thank you for watching."



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