

Akako

Illust. by Hazuki Futaba



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The Reincarnated Villainess Won't Seek Revenge Volume 2

Akako

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TENSEI SHITA AKUYAKU REIJO WA FUKUSHUU WO NOZOMANAI Volume 2

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"When I was young, I dreamed of dancing with Rosemary when I grew up," Reynaldo said, changing the subject.

"Rosemary felt the same way."

Reynaldo looked down at me, responding with a smile. His jade eyes—which I remembered from my past life—sparkled. "I'm happy that we can dance together, Mary."

The Reincarnated Villainess Won't Seek Revenge 2



Reynaldo Rose

Albert McClain

Mary Edigma

I looked at Rosemary's name inscribed on the stone monument. The casket was buried deep within the memorial. After the burial, a priest would offer his prayers, and the soul of the deceased would return to Heaven. According to our scriptures, at least.

Chapter Five: The Coronation

SOLEMN music echoed throughout the palace. As the doors to the audience chamber opened, a group of knights marched into the room in formation, their swords held aloft. Despite their slow gaits, a dignified air enveloped the men as they advanced.

After the knights entered, Reynaldo followed, bedecked in formal attire. His slightly overgrown, golden bangs were brushed back and sparkled in the light. He also wore ornaments that he usually forewent. His black cloak—made from thick fabric—befitted his rank as a duke, and the cuffs of his long sleeves sported intricate embroidery. The young ladies in the vicinity gasped at his beauty, for he looked as if he'd stepped out of a painting.

Finally, Prince Rizel entered alone at the center of the line, his gait relaxed. During today's coronation, he would become King Rizel. In contrast to Reynaldo, he wore white garments befitting the royal family. His long, red cape was formal attire worn only by the king. His springy hair was straightened, falling down to his shoulders.

My heart leapt. Even as Rosemary, I'd rarely seen such a beautiful sight. Rizel's clothes were embroidered with golden threads, and each time he took a step, they sparkled in the chandelier's light. He carried a staff in imitation of our almighty God. This staff—its bell ringing with each step—was only used during major ceremonies in our nation, such as this coronation. The clear, beautiful sound of the bell overlapped with the music flowing from the audience chamber.

Once Prince Rizel entered, a line of ministers came in, moving to the seats prepared for them. While Prince Rizel stood at the front of the audience chamber, Prime Minister Reynaldo and the head cardinal carried the crown over. Unable to touch the crown directly, both wore gloves. The resounding music grew quieter, signaling the beginning of the ceremony.

While the head cardinal offered his prayers, Reynaldo lifted the crown gently in black-gloved hands, pointing it towards Prince Rizer. The prince bent one knee and lowered his head. As he did so, his long, red hair swayed around his shoulders.

“May the Dirésias Kingdom ever prosper,” Reynaldo proclaimed, placing the crown atop the prince’s head.

And thus, King Rizer was born.

My name is Mary Edigma, and despite my low stature, I’d been allowed to participate in this miraculous coronation.



A little over a month after King Grey’s condemnation, the coronation was carried out urgently. Though the speed of this turnaround surprised me, only citizens of our nation participated in the ceremony. Foreign dignitaries would be invited to a diplomatic event on a different occasion.

Usually, only the king’s relatives and government personnel could attend coronations. Yet, despite my humble background, I’d been let through the doors. Yes, I might’ve been wildly out of place, but ultimately, I attended at the behest of both Reynaldo and Prince Rizer. At first, I recoiled at the grandeur of the event. However, once the ceremony ended, I was glad to have participated.

Relief washed over me when I saw King Rizer’s splendid form. *The Dirésias Kingdom will finally be at peace*, I thought. Now that Rizer was king, I probably wouldn’t be able to speak with him again. Even so, I still felt grateful to him.

Incidentally, many people at the coronation had shown an interest in me. The daughter of a baron wasn’t worthy of attending such an event after all. Furthermore, Reynaldo favored me with an uncharacteristic smile before the ceremony ended. As a result, several strange rumors spread around me.

“She must have Duke Rose’s favor,” some theorized.

“Or perhaps she’s Lady Rosemary’s illegitimate child,” others postulated.

All that aside, the ceremony hadn’t ended with the coronation. A ball would take place in the evening, which Reynaldo had asked me to attend as well.

Since I'd come to the palace to work as a handmaid, I hadn't brought any extravagant dresses. Thus, I'd considered declining his invitation, but because Reynaldo had already ordered me a dress for the ball, I had no choice but to attend. Speaking of which, he also gave me a dress for the coronation. How much money had he spent on these two dresses? The very idea frightened me, so I accepted them without saying anything. Still, they must have cost half a year's worth of taxes from Edigma.

Reynaldo—never one to miss an opportunity—offered to escort me to the ball. However, as one of the organizers, he wouldn't have any free time. I'd politely declined and, similar to my debutante, asked my brother Stanley to escort me instead.

As someone who worked in the castle, Stanley had been invited to the ball as well. When I asked him to escort me, he seemed dissatisfied but reluctantly agreed. I felt guilty, but he'd told me not to worry about it, as he hadn't planned to invite anyone he liked.

Um, how am I not supposed to worry?

Since Albert would be on castle guard duty during the ball, he would be busy, too. He was an organizer as well. Not long ago, the subject of the ball came up between us. "Who are you asking to escort you?" he'd inquired. When I'd answered "Stanley," he'd looked relieved. I couldn't get his expression out of my head.

Once the coronation ended, the attendees were led into individual rooms where we could change clothes for the ball. Despite my low standing, I was in one as well. Naturally, it was small compared to the others, but considering my status, it was more than enough space.

After changing into a dress woven from fine silk, I looked in the mirror, wondering what to do with my hair. Since the dress was lightly adorned with roses, I considered using a matching ornament.

Reynaldo gave me a dress decorated with roses? No surprises there.

Apart from the dresses, Reynaldo had also gifted me several other accessories. Looking them over, I chose a hair ornament decorated with roses. I chose to overlook how much these numerous presents must have cost.

Ignorance was bliss and all that.

I double-checked my makeup while waiting, but with nothing else to do, I gazed out the window. Unlike the other noblewomen, I didn't have any handmaids, which left me with too much time. Thus, I exited my room. Other guests were killing time in the lounge or garden while the ballroom was being prepared. I looked for Stanley among them. Since he was my chaperone, I needed to pin down his location. Instead of finding Stanley, I ran into Albert in a splendid chivalric uniform.

"Sir Albert," I greeted. "Are you on patrol?"

"Hello, Mary. I am, indeed. What are you doing?"

"Looking for Stanley."

I'd settled on calling him Sir Albert rather than Sir McClain. For a while, I addressed him without a title due to Rosemary's influence, but on reflection, I changed my mind due to his high rank. Conversely, Albert had complained about it, so we compromised. In public, I would call him Sir Albert. In private, I would address him without a title. Reynaldo had made the same request. That embarrassed me. It was like a promise between lovers. Regardless, they'd worn me down.

At the same time, I'd convinced them to call me Lady Mary or just Mary. Much to my displeasure, that still drew odd looks from our surroundings.

Having seen my brother, Albert pointed a short distance away. "Lord Stanley was in the smoking room a little while ago. But more importantly..." He stared at me, having difficulty expressing himself. When his cheeks reddened, I guessed what he wanted to say.

I pulled up the hem of my dress and performed a light curtsy. "Do I look the part of a lovely young noblewoman?"

"Very much so," Albert responded with a gentle smile.

This was the greatest possible compliment from Albert, who had no gift for empty flattery. Consequently, my cheeks flushed from happiness.

"Your outfit looks splendid on you as well," I said. "Although the military

fatigues you usually wear are wonderful, too.”

“This getup is too constricting for actual duty, though.”

While Albert still wore a sword, his ceremonial uniform had far more decorations than his fatigues. It couldn’t be worn into battle. Rather, it had a refinement and splendor suited for ceremonies.

Furthermore, Albert—the high commander of the chivalric order—would soon have a peerage conferred on him. As such, curious onlookers stared at him. Simply speaking to him subjected me to thorny glares from men and women alike.

“Which do you prefer?” Albert asked shyly. “My ceremonial uniform or my fatigues?”

My eyes widened. Albert never seemed interested in appearances or dress. It was unusual for him to ask.

I studied Albert, recalling what he usually looked like. “To be honest, I prefer your regular fatigues.”

“Me too,” Albert responded with a laugh.

Though Albert looked handsome in his ceremonial uniform, watching him perform his knightly duties filled me with pride. That made him all the more dashing.

“Oh, there’s Lord Stanley now,” Albert said.

Following his gaze, I spotted my brother, who’d left the smoking room and was approaching us.

Albert raised his hand lightly in farewell. “Well then, I’ll see you later.”

He returned to his patrol. A moment later, Stanley took his place. After watching Albert go, he turned back to examine me.

“You’re really something else, aren’t you?” he asked.

I furrowed my brow at this unexpected remark. “Where’s this coming from all of a sudden?”

“This is the first time I’ve seen that workhorse of a high commander stop to

chat while on the clock,” Stanley replied nonchalantly. “He was probably concerned about you being alone, so he stayed with you until I arrived. The effect you have on him is pretty crazy, y’know?”

Now that he mentions it, I suppose so.

Despite being on guard duty for this event, Albert took time to look out for me.

“That aside, everyone’s glaring daggers at us,” Stanley noted.

Everyone was watching us curiously. After expressing his displeasure at this fact, Stanley led me away from the garden. All the while, I gazed at Albert from afar as he performed his duties.

Once inside the castle, a steward led us to the ballroom. A baron’s house would be near the last on the list to be announced. Thus, we stood and watched for a long time as the names of high-ranking nobles were called. While I passed the time by observing people, I met the gazes of the knights on guard duty. During my time as a handmaid for the chivalric order, I’d often spoken to some of them. Whenever I spotted such a person, I greeted them with a smile.

As Stanley and I whiled away the time, our turn finally arrived.

“Introducing Baron Stanley Edigma and his sister, Lady Mary Edigma!” the announcer cried.

Upon hearing our names, Stanley escorted me into the ballroom. The resplendent light of the chandelier dazzled my eyes. Somehow, I fixed a smile on my face and continued walking. The first thing I saw was King Rizel sitting atop his throne on a platform. He cut a fine figure, indeed. Reynaldo stood close to the throne. He’d changed from his ceremonial attire into an outfit more suited for a ball. It looked nice on him, partly due to his height. His beauty was nigh statuesque.

Miraculously, I entered the ballroom without tripping. After receiving drinks, Stanley and I waited for the event to begin.

Once everyone had filed into the ballroom, King Rizel stood from his throne and raised his glass. “I am most grateful to have been crowned with everyone watching over me. May good fortune smile upon all of you.”

As King Rizel offered a toast, I also raised my glass. Lively music filled the ballroom. Soon, emotions overwhelmed me. Not by the music, the dazzling ornaments, or the gowns. Rather, the many spreads of food throughout the ballroom nearly moved me to tears. Everything looked so scrumptious that my mouth watered.

Instead of dancing, Stanley and I chowed down on the lavish food together. Without a doubt, we were our father's children. He knew a thing or two about fine dining, after all.

"Is this shrimp meunière from the Tours region?" I asked. "I never expected to eat it so fresh."

"The shrimp were caught alive, delivered to the castle, and cooked just in time," Stanley explained. "Wait, Mary, what did you just gobble down?"

"A salad wrap. It was delightful."

The sight of two siblings choosing to gorge themselves rather than socialize probably stuck out like a sore thumb, but, at the time, Stanley and I were none the wiser.

The music changed, and the king led the first dance. His partner was a relative of his who'd married outside the nobility despite her station. Choosing to dance with a married woman was a wise move on King Rizel's part.

Once the first dance had ended, other attendees followed suit throughout the ballroom.

"Do you have someone to dance with?" I asked Stanley.

My brother glared at me over a glass of champagne. "Of course. In fact, I have a whole list of women waiting for their turn."

I couldn't tell if he was lying.

"What about you?" Stanley asked. "Do you want to dance with me?"

"Hmm..."

As I considered accepting my brother's invitation, I noticed Reynaldo approaching us. It was all too obvious. He was making a beeline in our direction.

“Mary,” he greeted me in a cheerful voice.

Since there were onlookers all around us, we exchanged hasty bows.

“You look radiant tonight,” Reynaldo said.

“Well, I owe everything to the duke who gave me this dress and the accessories,” I replied. “Thank you very much.”

“May I accept repayment in the form of a dance?”

Reynaldo, inviting me to dance? I never thought I’d live to see the day. Rosemary only had memories of him as a young boy. Even so, I smiled despite my surprise.

“With pleasure,” I answered.

I placed my hand atop Reynaldo’s white-gloved palm, letting him lead me into the middle of the hall. While I placed my hands on his shoulders, his long fingers wrapped around my waist. Music played, and we danced in time with the rhythm.

“Who was the first person you ever danced with?” Reynaldo whispered into my ear.

“Stanley,” I replied. “There weren’t many boys my age in the countryside.”

“Did no one approach you during your debutante?”

“Not a single person.”

I refrained from telling him why. During my debutante, everyone witnessed me boldly saving a young lady from being bullied. Likewise, my dress—which I’d put an unusual amount of effort into—had caused an uproar. For these two reasons, Stanley and I had beat a hasty retreat from the venue.

A single time Reynaldo guided me lightly through a turn was enough to make his skill as a dancer evident. My dress—his gift—sparkled in the ballroom’s light.

“To think you can dance so well,” I said. “Rosemary would be surprised.”

“Speaking of Rosemary...” Reynaldo trailed off.

“I still don’t feel her presence. Not at all like I did during the coup.”

When Rosemary freed Reynaldo from his vengeance, her emotions completely overtook me. Now, I couldn't feel them at all. I still possessed Rosemary's memories, but the sensation of having *become her* only occurred during the coup. Every so often, Reynaldo asked after her, hoping to reunite with his actual sister. Unfortunately, I couldn't provide him with the answer he desired.

In my honest opinion, any reunion would prove difficult. Back when Rosemary's consciousness overtook mine, I'd learned her position on the dead meddling in mortal affairs. Furthermore, she wholeheartedly desired for Reynaldo and Albert to move on from the past. Even if Rosemary's consciousness overran me again, I couldn't imagine her wanting to speak with them. She respected my autonomy as a person who existed in the present.

The coup must have been a special occasion.

I understood Rosemary's feelings well, as she was my past self. Yet, because this was difficult to explain, I always ended up equivocating.

"When I was young, I dreamed of dancing with Rosemary when I grew up," Reynaldo said, changing the subject.

"Rosemary felt the same way."

Reynaldo looked down at me, responding with a smile. His jade eyes—which I remembered from my past life—sparkled. "I'm happy that we can dance together, Mary."

After our dance ended, Reynaldo excused himself to return to work. Thus, we parted ways.

Afterward, a great many women invited him to dance, but he turned them all down. As the only woman Reynaldo had danced with, the curious glances in my direction multiplied. Unable to bear the attention, I fled to the garden.

A short distance from the ballroom, I could still hear the orchestra, albeit indistinctly. Night had already fallen. Faint starlight twinkled overhead. Despite the warm season, few people were in the garden, perhaps fearful of catching a cold in the night breeze.

I sat on a bench in the garden square since lingering in a place with so few

people could be dangerous. From here, I could quickly return to the venue, and I wasn't out of sight. Though I doubted something would happen at a royal ball, dimly lit places were perfect for clandestine rendezvous. For this reason, women were taught to avoid sparsely populated areas as much as possible.

Perhaps the crowds had stressed me out, but as I gazed quietly at the night sky, my nerves began to settle.

"Lady Edigma," a voice suddenly called out to me.

Turning in the direction of the speaker, I found an unfamiliar man.

"If you don't mind, may I join you?" he asked.

When he approached faster than I could give permission, I stood up from the bench. "I was just taking a short break, but I'll be returning to the ballroom soon. My brother is waiting for me."

To be honest, Stanley was currently dancing with a young lady I vaguely recognized. I caught a glimpse of them before leaving the ballroom. Nevertheless, I brought up my brother to scare the man away.

"May I please have a moment of your time?" he pressed.

As I'd feared, he refused to back down. Still, I had no intention of acting friendly with a man who refused to introduce himself. I prepared myself to give an even harsher answer.

"What's going on here?" a familiar voice called out.

Albert stood a short distance away, glaring at the other man. The high commander had a reputation for being able to kill another person just by glowering. Underneath Albert's withering gaze, the other man stiffened, the blood draining from his face. I couldn't blame him. When I imagined being on the opposite end of that glare, unbidden sympathy welled up within me.

"I, um, simply approached Lady Edigma because I wanted to talk to her..." the man hedged.

I looked at him, surprised. Continuing the conversation while being subjected to such a blood-curdling glare must have taken a lot of nerve. Albert glared at the man again before returning his gaze to me in a show of concern.

"I see," Albert said. "Still, I would like to avoid any trouble occurring in these dimly lit areas. If you would, please return to the ballroom."

"U-Understood..." the man stammered.

Somewhat relieved, he turned my way, perhaps hoping I would return to the hall with him.

"Lady Mary," Albert suddenly called me.

I looked up at him. Though his gaze remained stern, he wore a gentle expression when looking at me. "If it's not too much trouble, would you allow me to escort you?" he asked.

"Huh...?" I asked. "Oh, um, okay."

Albert held out his hand faster than the other man, and without thinking, I took it. Feeling sorry for the man who'd approached me, I tried to bid him farewell. However, Albert pulled me forward with so much momentum that I missed the opportunity. I struggled to keep up with him as he sped across the garden at a brisk pace. Before long, the other man had faded into the distance. Even then, Albert didn't stop. As we moved through the garden, the music from the ballroom grew increasingly faint.

"Sir Albert?" I asked, worried about his strange behavior.

He came to such a sudden halt that I couldn't stop. My face bumped into his body. "Oh, I'm sorry," Albert apologized. "Are you all right?"

When Albert studied me worriedly, he looked like his usual self again. That filled me with relief.

"Yes, I'm all right," I replied while smiling at him. He still seemed fretful. "Thank you for stepping in back there." I expressed my gratitude since I hadn't known how to deal with the rather pushy man from earlier.

With a softened expression, Albert looked every inch the dignified high commander. When he interrupted my earlier conversation, he seemed different, which caused my heart to flutter abnormally. Had this been due to the unusual setting? Or because he'd been gazing at me in the dim lighting?

Albert was dressed in more formal attire than usual, and when he smiled at

me, faint crow's feet formed around the corners of his eyes. He looked incredibly happy.

"I'm glad nothing happened," Albert said. "But do be careful. Some people can get rowdy during these events. Would you mind staying by your brother's side for the rest of the night?"

Albert used his long fingers to fix my bangs, which were apparently somewhat disheveled. The places he touched left traces of heat.

"Stanley's tryst seems to be keeping him occupied," I said, bowing my head to hide my flushed cheeks. "I'm considering going home by myself once I've calmed down."

"By yourself?" Albert repeated.

"Yes. I was thinking of taking a rental carriage."

Even before all this, I'd considered leaving for the night. If I stayed any longer, I would have to suffer everyone's curious glances, or someone might approach me again. I'd already eaten my fill of tasty food. Now was as good a time as any to retire for the evening.

"Well then, I'll accompany you to the front gate." Albert placed a hand on my waist to guide me.

Wait a second.

"Sir Albert, aren't you on duty right now?" I asked.

Letting the kingdom's valuable high commander escort me would be an honor, but I couldn't allow it.

"It's no problem," Albert replied most problematically as he led me toward the front gate.

A moment later, the song echoing from the ballroom changed. It was a famous dance tune.

"Ah," Albert said. "Rosemary often practiced dancing to this song."

"You remembered?"

"Of course."

The song was a fundamental dance composition intended for beginners to intermediate practitioners. It was often played at debutantes, and Rosemary practiced dancing to it on many occasions. Furthermore, her dance partner had been the knight standing in front of me right now.

Back then, Albert was unrefined and only skilled with a sword. I smiled as I remembered Rosemary forcing him to be her partner. Suddenly, I grew curious about how Albert had matured as a dancer since his youth.

“Would you like to dance with me?” I asked, holding out my hand.

At first, Albert’s eyes widened, but then he smiled. After taking my hand, he placed his other hand on my waist, and we danced. Without hesitation, he led me through the basic steps and unexaggerated turns. Despite our height difference, I felt no sense of discomfort.

“You’re quite talented,” I said. “Based on Rosemary’s memories, you were a lot clumsier back in the day, Sir Albert... Um, Albert.”

When I addressed Albert with a title, he looked at me reproachfully, forcing me to correct myself.

“I’ve practiced since then,” he revealed. “But I’m still clumsy.”

I giggled at his honesty. He still seemed unaccustomed to high society.

“You’re a skilled dancer yourself,” he complimented me.

“Truly?” I asked, not concealing my happiness at his praise. “I’ve only danced with Stanley and my father, so I don’t know for myself.”

“I saw you dancing with Duke Reynaldo a little while ago. You were very...”

“Yes?”

I waited for him to finish his thought, but he went silent. During that time, the song ended, and another dance tune began. Though we stopped moving to the rhythm, Albert continued holding me close to him by the waist. As we stared into each other’s eyes, I could tell he wanted to say something to me. I waited for him to speak, but no words escaped his lips.

“I’ll escort you to the front gate.”

That was all he eventually said.

Most of the carriages lined up at the front gate belonged to nobles, but there were also rental carriages. These had been prepared for guests such as my brother and me, who were going home separately despite having come as a family.

Since other guests were waiting for carriages, I gave my name to the coach receptionist and stood at one corner of the front gate. Albert stayed with me while I waited for my name to be called.

“Are you okay with taking time away from your job?” I asked.

“I’ve entrusted all guard duties to my subordinate knights,” he answered. “I’m simply supervising them. If there’s a problem, I’ll take action. Waiting with you shouldn’t cause any issues. Speaking of which, did you talk to any of the knights during the ball?”

“Only a little. I greeted those I met inside the venue.”

“They’re all hoping for your return.”

With Nicky having gone back home, the chivalric order was once again lamenting their lack of handmaids. According to all the knights I’d spoken to tonight, they were calling for new employees or my return. That made me very happy. Part of me longed to return to my life in Edigma, but if the knights needed me, I wanted to work for them as well.

However, I could say the same for working as a handmaid in Rose. While staying in Stanley’s home, I received a polite letter from Lieber—a butler for the Rose Duchy. Rather than scolding me for my sudden disappearance, he showed concern for my well-being.

Apparently, Reynaldo had sent a letter to explain the situation, but I’d still sent my own letter of apology. Since then, Lieber and I have written to each other regularly. While he’d expressed his worries about Reynaldo’s prolonged absence, he’d also written about missing me. His thoughtfulness made my heart ache.

I wanted to visit Rose at least once to apologize, which I’d expressed to Reynaldo. To this, he’d promised to take me once the coronation had ended

and he'd finished his top-priority work. Whenever the time came, I would probably go with him.

"And afterward, you can stay in Rose for as long as you like," he'd said, attempting to woo me. I responded with a strained smile, feeling torn.

Did I want to return home, work for the chivalric order, or work for the Rose Duchy? As the new prime minister, Reynaldo told me to choose whichever option I wanted. "Don't worry about the number of jobs you've been bouncing between," he'd said. "Choose whichever one suits your fancy."

In terms of workplace environment and payment, both jobs seem wonderful...

As of right now, I couldn't choose so easily.

While I loved Edigma and longed for a peaceful life, being a handmaid for the knights I so admired had been fun. I didn't dislike Rose, either, despite it being a distant land to the far north. Furthermore, I could work with Lieber and the other servants who'd treated me so well. Oh, and the food there was delicious.

Both Stanley and Father told me to do whatever I preferred. Before, I'd been considering the future of the barony, but when I brought this up to Stanley, he scolded me. "I'll take care of everything there," he'd said. "So do whatever you want."

My brother had an awkward sort of kindness.

"What's wrong?" Albert asked.

He spoke with concern. Perhaps I'd been letting my worries show while waiting for the carriage.

"I was thinking about the future," I replied.

"The future...?"

"That's right. I was wondering whether I should return to Edigma or remain in the palace and work for the knights. Or perhaps I could return to Rose with Duke Reynaldo and work there."

I decided to be honest. I could use his advice since this matter concerned him as well.

“Where do you most want to be?” he asked.

“Good question. All of them are appealing, but...to be honest, I’m also worried about something other than work.”

“What’s that?”

It was somewhat embarrassing, but after a moment’s hesitation, I decided to continue being honest.

“Well, I need to start thinking about marriage at my age,” I said. “So I’m wondering—what’s the best decision to make while taking that into consideration?”

Yes. Right now, the idea of marriage was causing me more grief than deciding on a job. Eighteen was the perfect age to tie the knot, after all. Stanley told me not to worry about producing an heir, but if an unmarried woman planned to work for a long time, she needed to think about finding a husband.

“If I married someone in Rose, I would probably end up living there,” I speculated. “The thought of being so far away from Edigma makes me feel lonely.”

Albert remained silent at that.

“Call me a daddy’s girl if you like, but I can’t bear the idea of being so far away from home,” I continued. “On the other hand, returning to Edigma would mean bringing my husband back to the countryside. Where would I even find such an eccentric man? Perhaps it would be better to marry someone from my hometown... But I’ve known everyone there since I was a child. I can’t imagine marrying any of them.”

At that moment, the coachman called my name. He’d finished preparing the carriage.

“Looks like my ride’s here,” I said, embarrassed about unloading my peculiar worries onto Albert.

With that, I hurried towards the carriage, told the coachman the location of Stanley’s home, and had him open the door for me. While the coachman grabbed the horse’s reins and prepared to drive, I looked up at Albert. Without

a word, he held out his hand and helped me into the carriage. Once I'd boarded the vehicle, I tried to let go of his hand to sit down. However, he didn't release his grip. Finding this strange, I studied Albert as he gazed at me from the carriage door.

"Thank you for everything today," I said.

After that, I tried to say goodnight and let go of his hand, but he interrupted me.

"Mary."

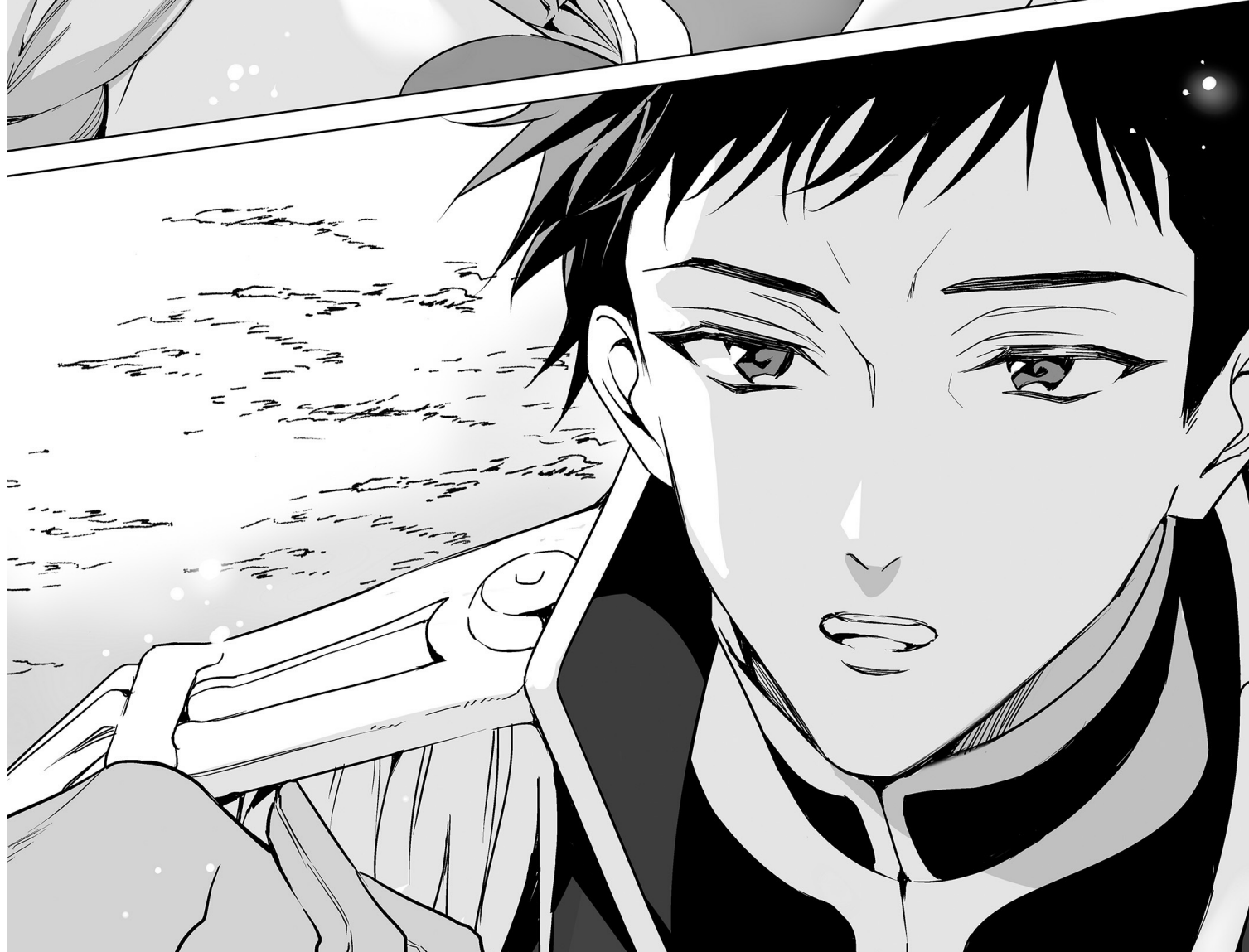
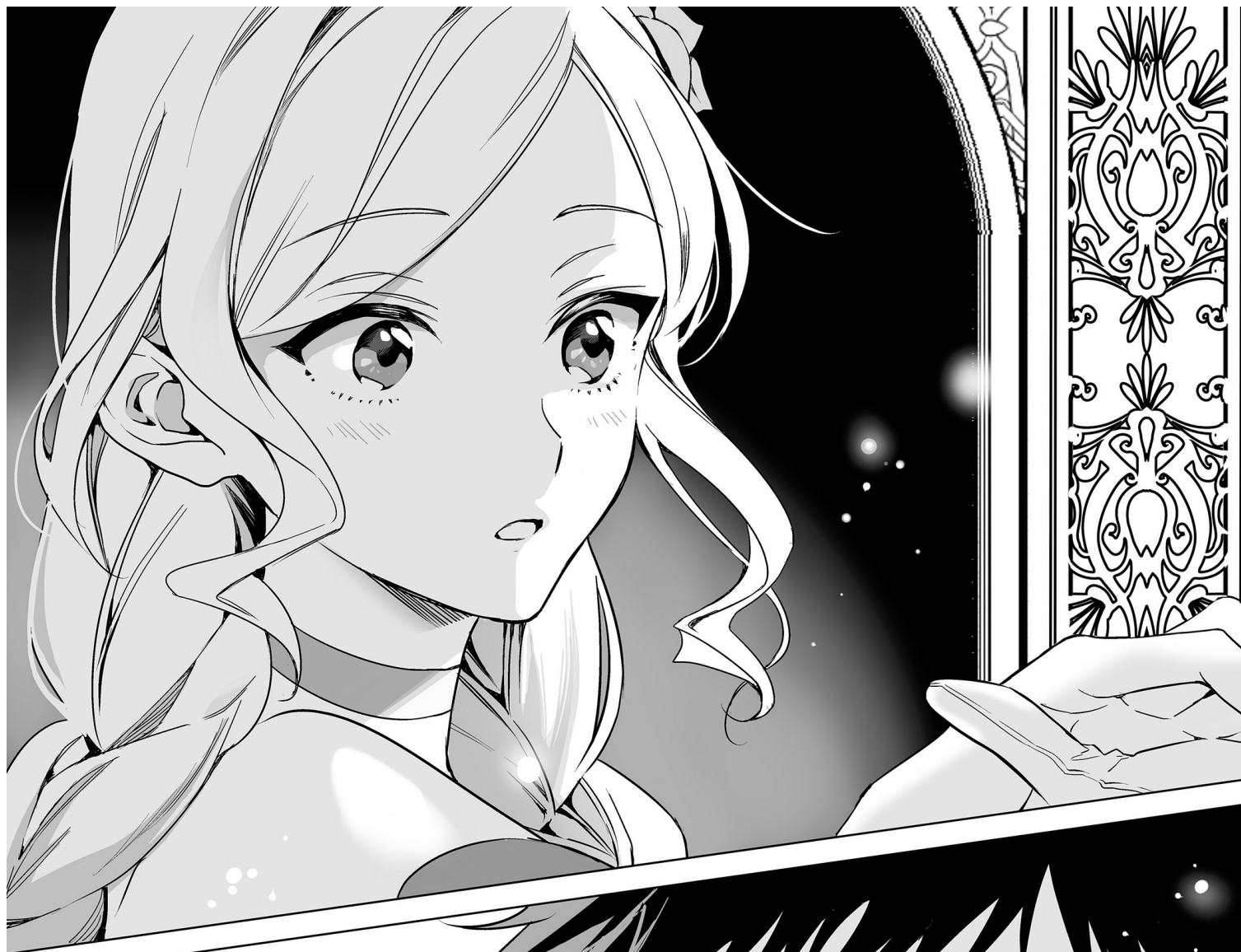
An all-too-serious look clouded his dark brown eyes.

What's wrong? I wondered, waiting for him to speak.

And then...

"Will you marry me?"

He proposed to me.



As Albert and I stared at each other in silence, the coachman called out, “The carriage is about to depart.”

What did he say just now?

As it dawned on me, my cheeks burned. Flustered, I let go of Albert’s hand. His face had turned an even brighter shade of red than mine. He clapped a hand over his mouth, shocked by his own words.

“Could you please close the door?” the coachman called out to Albert, who hadn’t moved away from the carriage.

Returning to his senses, Albert practically tripped over himself to close the door. As I met his eyes—wide with surprise—from outside the window, the carriage took off. His form grew increasingly small, fading into the distance. With my mind blank and my face still on fire, I watched him, dumbfounded. The carriage raced towards its destination, my thoughts in total disarray.

Before long, the rental carriage arrived at Stanley’s residence. After bolting into the house, I collapsed onto the bed of my borrowed room. I should have been more careful with my dress and accessories, but reason had gone out the window. Rolling around in bed, I attempted to calm my addled mind. Upon remembering Albert’s proposal, I buried my face in a pillow, writhing in figurative agony.

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I finally regained my composure around noon the next day. After seeing Stanley off to work, I went shopping to restock our ingredients.

As a baron’s family raised in the poor countryside, Stanley and I had been taught how to cook and clean for ourselves. We did this to save money rather than hire a handmaid. As a result, Stanley performed all his chores by himself while living in the capital. According to him, he ate out for most of his meals anyway. He’d only been returning home to eat lately because I’d been making dinner.

I prepared for my trip to town, grabbed a large basket for carrying home groceries, and headed outside. Using the key Stanley gave me, I locked the door and looked up at the clear sky. A fine day for an outing.

Since Stanley's residence was a fair distance from town, I had a long walk ahead of me. If I bought too many heavy groceries, I would have to use a cart. That hadn't been necessary as of yet, with only us two siblings living together.

As I strolled through town, many people gossiped about the new king. According to these discussions, Razel would review and partially reduce the previous regime's taxes. Furthermore, he was negotiating with multiple countries to improve trade deals, as he was well-known in foreign lands. Support for him was on the rise owing to these swift actions.

Thanks to his good looks, portraits of him were selling like hotcakes. In one such painting I spotted in town, he was wearing his formal attire from the coronation. He looked so dashing that I considered buying one for myself.

Alongside the painting of King Razel was a portrait of Reynaldo. From what I could tell, his portraits were also in high demand. They might as well have been actors.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw a portrait of Albert next to the others. Though I'd calmed down by going about my daily routine, my pulse started to race again. Albert looked much younger in this portrait, as it had been continually printed since he became high commander. Without thinking, I picked up the painting and stared at it.

My face is on fire.

"That portrait of High Commander McClain is a top seller," the shop assistant—a young boy—said. "Would you like to buy one?"

Smiling vaguely, I returned the portrait to its rightful place. Honestly, I did want it, but I couldn't imagine anything more embarrassing than someone finding it among my possessions.

As I considered leaving, someone called my name, compelling me to look around. With so many people in the vicinity, I couldn't tell where the voice had come from.

"Lady Edigma!"

Finally, I heard the voice calling to me from nearby. It belonged to Vice High Commander Phil Eva, whom I'd sometimes crossed paths with when working as

a handmaid for the chivalric order. At over forty years old, his brown hair was peppered with white. Perhaps due to his charming smile, he didn't give off the air of a vice commander. Famously, however, he was such a harsh drill instructor that many knights referred to him as the demonic vice commander.

Despite rumors painting him as frightening, he'd greeted me with a smile when we'd first met, as he did now. And though he wore a friendly face around the knights as well, he spoke to them in a completely different manner.

"Keep fighting until you can beat ten men in a sparring match!"

I'd often heard Sir Eva shout these words on the training grounds while grinning widely. This would always result in a chorus of dismayed cries from the knights. In any case, he was known for putting his subordinates through the wringer.

"Sir Eva," I said, bowing deeply. "It's been too long."

"It sure has," Sir Eva responded genially. "I've been looking up and down for you."

I cocked my head at that. "Did you need me for something?"

He didn't go all the way to Stanley's house, did he?

"Not particularly," Sir Eva said. "I just wanted to have a short chat with you. Oh, are these portraits? There's even one of the high commander."

"Yes, and he looks so young."

"This must have been about five years ago. What a perfect opportunity! I'll buy one." Sir Eva withdrew a handful of change from his pocket, bought the portrait, and gave it to me for some reason. "A portrait of the high commander will serve you better than any good luck charm. Take good care of it, Lady Edigma."

"Um... What?"

"It really has been too long," Sir Eva remarked. "There's actually something I wanted to discuss with you. Would you mind if we had a drink over there? It would be rude of me to keep you standing while we talk."

"I don't mind. But, um..."

“My treat, of course! Well then, what would you like?”

Sir Eva asked me to pick one of the drinks lined up at the stall. Despite being unable to keep up with this sudden turn of events, I ordered apple juice.

Though Vice Commander Eva was around ten years older than High Commander Albert, he was friendlier and easier to talk to. During my time as a handmaid, he'd spoken to me fairly often, and he'd gotten along with Nicky particularly well. Perhaps they'd enjoyed similar conversations, considering they were both sociable.

Sir Eva seemed kind at first glance, but he was actually strict with his subordinates. Conversely, Albert seemed strict at first glance but was actually kind. Their mismatched personalities created favorable compatibility, which people admired.

After leading me to a rest space in the town square, Sir Eva pulled out a chair for me, taking his own seat a short distance away. He must not have ordered anything to drink for himself, seeing as his hands were empty.

“Um, Sir Eva, what did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“Straight to the point, eh?” he responded with a laugh. “To be quite honest, I have a favor to ask of you.”

Sir Eva turned in my direction, looking at me seriously. *What on earth is he going to say?* I wondered. My heart raced while I waited for him to continue.

“Lady Edigma,” he said.

“Yes?”

He bowed his head with such force that I feared for his neck. “I beg of you—please return to being a handmaid for the chivalric order!”

“You want me to come back...?”

“That’s correct,” Sir Eva confirmed with an emphatic nod. “After the coup, the number of handmaids in the palace returned to normal, but the chivalric order is still short on help. Not to mention, the high commander will soon receive his peerage. We’re incredibly busy!”

The mention of Albert caused my heart to flutter.

“With a new king, guard duties have also changed,” Sir Eva continued. “Our once venerable organization is so overloaded with work that we don’t even know where the laundry tubs are. Not only are we unable to take care of ourselves, but we’re even causing trouble for the high commander.”

“My, how awful...”

Though I hadn’t heard anything of the sort from Albert, Sir Eva wore a serious expression.

“At the very least, could you look after the high commander, as you did before?” he asked. “At this rate, I’m worried about him starving himself due to overworking.”

“Really?”

During my time as a handmaid for the chivalric order, Albert’s eating schedule seemed irregular. Worry gnawed at me.

“Really,” Sir Eva confirmed. “And since you’re no longer working for the Rose Duchy, I desperately wanted to ask this favor of you. We’ll provide you with a salary, of course! If the kingdom won’t provide the money, we’ll pay you with funds from our own coffers. So please return to your former position, Lady Edigma!”

He’s willing to go that far?

Flustered, I shook my head. “Please don’t worry about that. I received a severance payment from the kingdom a few days ago, so I have more than enough money. Besides, I’m not busy.”

Truly, I had too much time on my hands. Yet, when I asked Reynaldo and Albert if I could go home, they provided me with a variety of excuses not to.

“Queen Tia is still out there.”

“I want you to stay for my conferment ceremony.”

“Please stay until Rosemary is moved to her new gravesite.”

With my return home postponed indefinitely, I was grateful for this opportunity. Whiling away time at Stanley’s house didn’t suit me. Presumably, neither Albert nor Reynaldo would complain about me taking this job, as the

offer had come from Sir Eva rather than one of them.

Hopefully, I don't cringe in embarrassment every time I see Albert.

Nevertheless, I steeled myself and met Sir Eva's eye. "I understand. If you think I'm the right fit for the job, I'll help out."

Sir Eva looked as if the light of Heaven were shining down upon him. Breaking into a wide grin, he thanked me profusely, causing me to smile.

* * *

VICE High Commander Phil Eva was a commoner before becoming a knight. He was also a doting husband and a loving father. He'd told his family to expect him home around noon tomorrow, as he'd taken the night shift today. Currently, he was heading towards the chivalric order's barracks, considering taking a nap there until his shift began.

The king's coronation had turned into a ball, and the high commander was on duty. Phil was scheduled to take his place later in the evening, but his shift hadn't started yet. Even so, he spotted the honorable high commander racing towards the barracks.

"Commander?" Phil asked, cocking his head. "What's wrong?"

Usually, High Commander Albert carried out his duties with perfect composure. Despite being over ten years younger than Phil, he excelled at his job. Yet Albert didn't seem the least bit levelheaded or capable at that moment. His face was red as he sprinted towards the barracks like a racehorse.

"Had a little something to drink, did we?" Phil teased, since even a drop of alcohol could turn Albert's face crimson. "And while on duty, no less!"

Ignoring the jest, Albert grabbed Phil's shoulders. "I've really done it this time!"

As Albert let forth a shout of intense remorse, his grip caused Phil to sink into the ground.

Easy there!

Phil's shift wouldn't begin for another two hours. He would keep Albert company until then. After locking the door to one of the rooms in the barracks,

Albert explained the series of events leading up to the present.

“Huh?” Phil asked. “You *proposed*?”

Albert averted his gaze and nodded curtly, his face flushed. Even his ears were red.

“I had no intention of saying anything,” Albert said. “What the hell was I thinking...?”

The high commander hardly ever swore. He must have been in a great deal of turmoil. That aside, Phil didn’t need to ask who Albert had proposed to. It had been Mary Edigma—the baron’s daughter—who’d worked as a handmaid for the chivalric order.

She was of the women called to the palace for Crown Prince Rizel’s fiancée selection. Regardless, she worked for the knights, as she hadn’t been interested in the prince. Phil spoke about this with a young noblewoman he’d befriended named Nicky, who’d come to the chivalric order with Mary. According to Nicky, Mary harbored feelings for Albert.

Personally, Phil hadn’t gotten that impression when observing Mary. Though she seemed to *care* about Albert, those feelings didn’t appear to be romantic. On the other hand, Albert thought fondly of Mary, thanks to her hardworking nature.

One day, Albert’s feelings shifted drastically. First, Prince Rizel began visiting Mary. This had merely been a rumor among the chivalric order, and thus, it hadn’t been credible. Yet, around that time, Albert’s behavior had changed. He showed more attachment to Mary than previously. At a glance, this might have seemed like an amicable master-servant relationship, but as Albert’s long-time friend, Phil knew the truth.

High Commander Albert had fallen in love with Lady Mary!

Confident in his belief, Phil relayed this to a trusted subordinate. Consequently, it became a widely discussed topic among the knights.

Later, something occurred, and Mary left to serve as a handmaid for the Rose Duchy. At this point, Albert’s melancholy was plain for everyone to see, not just Phil. That said, the country was in political turmoil at the time. A subsection of

knights had assumed the source of Albert's emotional distress to have been his involvement in the coup.

Incidentally, Phil cooperated with Albert to depose King Grey. When Albert approached him with the plan, Phil readily agreed, since he wanted to create a bright future for his beloved wife and daughter. As a result, a new king was installed, and the high commander would soon receive a peerage. The world had become a much more joyful place. So Phil needed to help Albert find happiness as well.

That being said...

"You really are clueless when it comes to love," Phil remarked.

Albert didn't respond.

"You're popular with women, but you have no idea how to handle them," Phil went on. "More than a few ladies have mistakenly thought you'd chosen them for a liaison and made a move."

Phil had known Albert since he was a young knight in the chivalric order. The high commander had been too serious for his own good since his youth.

After Albert became a full-fledged adult, the number of women who came onto him skyrocketed. Phil saw how Albert dealt with these women. To be frank, he'd been terrible at it. Some women misread his signals and barged into his house, expecting a one-night stand. Meanwhile, others tried to sell themselves as potential wives.

Indeed, Albert suffered many painfully embarrassing experiences, but as of late, no one had glimpsed any women in his presence. So, when Albert suddenly fell in love, everyone in the chivalric order was shocked. Phil himself was the most stunned.

"You skipped asking her on a date and went straight for a proposal?" Phil asked.

Albert groaned. "If only I could go back in time."

Phil increasingly pitied his dashing superior. "All right!" he cheered. "Leave everything to me, boss!"

“Say what?”

“I’ve been wanting to help you find a wife! And you know I always have your best interests at heart!”

As Albert listened to Phil’s excited chatter, he realized what he’d done. He’d been so distraught that perhaps he’d picked the wrong person to confide in. At the same time, Phil was a doting husband who’d married the love of his life. Albert didn’t know who to confide in, if not Phil. Furthermore, he couldn’t imagine anything worse happening than what he’d already done. What kind of fool proposed to a woman out of the blue?

Albert let out a heavy sigh. Mary’s appearance that night was burned into his mind. She’d radiated the beauty of a nighttime fairy bedecked in the most splendorous garments. As the reincarnation of Rosemary, she was the only woman to whom Albert would even consider pledging his loyalty.

Hearing her talk about marrying another man ignited his jealousy, compelling him to propose. Albert couldn’t think of another occasion in which his emotions had so gotten the best of him. The flush still hadn’t left his cheeks. He remained an emotional wreck even after his shift ended for the night.

* * *

“**SO**, that’s the decision you’ve made?”

When I told Reynaldo my plans to return to work tomorrow, those were the first words out of his mouth.

“Yes, it is,” I answered.

Once I’d agreed to work for the knights, Sir Eva quickly ran through the formalities. Shortly after, he visited Stanley’s house and explained the details.

“So long as the high commander gives his permission, there shouldn’t be any problems with me hiring a handmaid,” Sir Eva said. “Also, you’ve been given leave to start working tomorrow. No one’s ever been hired so quickly.”

“I can start working tomorrow, then,” I replied. “I don’t have any other plans.”

Sir Eva’s face broke into a wide grin. “Well then, I’ll see you tomorrow!”

I watched him race home, feeling like I’d weathered a hurricane. A little later,

Reynaldo visited, leading to the present.

“Hmm,” Reynaldo mused. “I see.”

I handed him a bowl of warm soup, unable to guess what he was thinking. Tonight’s dinner was vegetable soup, herb-grilled chicken, and homemade bread.

“Did something happen between you and Albert?” Reynaldo asked.

I dropped the bread. Flustered, I picked it up, dusted it off, and took it as my portion.

Oh, look—my face is on fire again.

“What do you mean by *something*?” I asked. I feigned composure, but someone as clever as Reynaldo probably saw right through me. Nevertheless, I continued my futile struggle.

Reynaldo studied me with a malicious gleam in his eyes. “What, indeed? Did he profess his love to you, for instance?”

“...No, he didn’t do anything like that.”

That was the truth. Sure, Albert had proposed to me, but he hadn’t professed a single word of love. We were talking about Rosemary’s childhood friend here. When I expressed my worries about outgrowing marriageable age, he probably proposed to me out of kindness. At least, that was the conclusion I came to after cooling down. I couldn’t imagine him popping the question right then and there for any other reason.

“Looks like I’m right on the mark,” Reynaldo said.

I frowned. “Why are you so sure something happened?”

After pouring Reynaldo a glass of the same wine I’d served a few days ago, I began preparing my own meal. Albert being absent due to working late was my one saving grace.

Reynaldo held up the wineglass, swirling the liquid inside. “I can only assume that Albert must have done something for Sir Eva to act like this. In all likelihood, Albert failed in his attempt to court you. Thus, Sir Eva lent a hand, feeling sorry for his boss. Albert has admirable subordinates, indeed. Thanks to

Sir Eva, I've lost you to the chivalric order."

My face flushed as I observed Reynaldo, whose expression was simultaneously bored and amused.

"And since this was your choice, I can't object," Reynaldo added.

"...Thank you for that."

As the prime minister, Reynaldo could do whatever he wanted with a single handmaid. His willingness to respect my wishes in spite of this brought a smile to my lips. That's why I expressed my gratitude.

"On another note, have you found Queen Tia yet?" I asked.

"Not a single trace of her. It's sickening how elusive she's been. Our search for her has been exhaustive, but we've run into unexpected trouble. She seems to have far more allies than we expected. Still, I hope to catch her as soon as possible."

Reynaldo's eyes darkened with a faint desire for revenge. Yes, Rosemary might have quelled the flames of vengeance burning within Reynaldo and Albert, but I understood their desire to settle past grudges all too well. I also wanted Queen Tia to make amends for her wrongdoings. Likewise, I wanted her to apologize and confess the truth, as King Grey had done. However, because Reynaldo had repeatedly criticized me for being too soft, we didn't discuss this often. I didn't ask many questions about King Grey, either. The events inside the audience chamber were more than enough to satisfy me.

Conversely, nothing had ended concerning Queen Tia. If I came face-to-face with her as I had with King Grey, would my feelings change? Based on my memories of Tia from my past life, she always hid in King Grey's shadow, grinning sinisterly at Rosemary. Remembering that smile frightened me.

As these worries crossed my mind, Reynaldo gripped my hand. "Mary."

When I looked up at Reynaldo, his young features from Rosemary's memories overlapped with his current ones. As he stared directly at me, I saw myself reflected in his jade eyes, which possessed a clarity capable of seeing through anything. Slowly, he lifted my hand and clasped it with both his palms. Then he laced his fingers with mine, holding my hand in a tight grip.

“Just as Rosemary’s wish is for me to be happy, my wish is for her to be happy as well.” Reynaldo kissed the back of my hand as if offering a prayer. “Even now that you’ve reincarnated as Mary, my wish hasn’t changed. Your happiness is my happiness.”

“...I feel the same way.”

Though we were no longer related, I treasured Reynaldo as family. Rosemary had loved him with all her heart, and those feelings would never change.

“Mary—my beloved sister,” Reynaldo said. “Please do whatever makes you the happiest. Always follow your heart.”

“Follow my heart...?” I repeated.

“Indeed. Never hold back, as you did in your past life. Should an insurmountable wall stand in your path, I will tear it down. Should someone bring you sorrow, I will do everything in my power to eliminate them.”

Reynaldo’s violent proclamations caused me to shiver with fright. I knew he was serious. Yet, as he spoke these words, he took on a divine cast.

“So please, act according to your heart from here on out,” he continued. “Unlike your previous life, there shouldn’t be anything hindering you anymore.”

Reynaldo’s morose smile bothered me. I extended my free hand towards him, touching his golden, slightly lengthy bangs, and nodded in response to his prayer-like request.

Based on my memories of Rosemary’s life, she’d always followed her father’s orders. Not only had she gotten engaged to Prince Grey at his behest, but, per the instructions of everyone around her, she’d also studied academia and courtly manners. She’d never followed her heart.

All the while, Reynaldo worried for her, watched over her, and loved her. Almost as if he’d known he was Rosemary’s only support.

“Thank you,” I said.

Tears threatened to well up in my eyes. My emotions felt unstable due to the joy and tenderness pouring out of my heart. Once again, I thanked God for allowing me to reconnect with Reynaldo even after my reincarnation.

While Reynaldo and I silently held hands, we heard a visitor arrive through the front door. When we looked in the direction of the door, Albert was standing there, his expression unreadable. His cheeks were red as if he'd raced over here.

"Albert," I said.

"Mary," he responded in a firm voice. "I'd like to speak with you. Just the two of us."

His serious gaze caused my nerves to spike.

"Do you mind if I stay here?" Reynaldo asked, tipping back his wineglass and taking a sip.

"No, I don't mind," Albert replied. "But right now, I'd like to speak with Mary alone. Is that okay with you, Mary?"

"Y-Yes... That's quite all right."

Still nervous, I grabbed a scarf and went outside with Albert. When I glimpsed Reynaldo's expression, he had a bemused smile.

While I wrapped the scarf around my neck, Albert and I walked beside each other under the somewhat chilly night sky. I wanted to help him relax since he'd just gotten off work, but since he'd asked to speak with me, I couldn't refuse. Due to the city's illumination, the stars were less visible in the capital than in Edigma. As we strolled beneath the black expanse, Albert led me to a small garden.

"I heard the news from Phil," Albert said. "Thanks for accepting the offer."

"No, it's my pleasure."

Our inability to meet each other's eyes was frustrating. Unable to hide our nervousness, we were both acting like complete strangers.

"Also..." Albert lifted his head, finally looking at me. His cheeks were red for reasons other than the cold. "About what I said last night..."

Upon recalling the previous night, I bowed my head in shame. I hadn't known how to respond to his sudden proposal.

“Th-Thank you for worrying about me,” I said. “You were thinking about me growing past marriageable age, weren’t you? But, um, if you make these kinds of decisions on the spur of the moment, you’ll wind up regretting them.”

I prattled a mile a minute due to my nerves. Countless times, I’d considered what to say when we saw each other, but now I could hardly string my words together.

“So, um...” I hedged. “Thank you for worrying about me.”

“That’s not why I proposed to you.”

The seriousness and weight of Albert’s words forced me to raise my head. Under the brilliant moonlight, he looked at me head-on, his eyes ensnaring me. Time slowed as Albert’s lips parted and he formed his next words.

“I simply spoke from my heart because I love you, Mary.”

This time, he’d genuinely professed his love. For the second night in a row, he shook me to my core.



THE next morning, I left Stanley’s house early and made my way to the chivalric order’s staffroom, which I’d used before. There, I fixed my appearance. Since my old apron was on the shelf, I put it on. After tying the string behind my back, I pulled my long hair into a bun.

Once I finished getting ready, I examined myself in the mirror. I fixed my bangs and looked again. No problems. After gazing at my reflection, I tried donning a cheerful smile. Again, no problems.

I took a deep breath to calm my racing heart and left the room. Starting today, I would be a handmaid for the chivalric order.

“Well, if it isn’t Mary!”

“Welcome back. We’ve been dying to see you again.”

“When Nicky left after you, this place lost all its beauty. We were so lonely!”

Each time I ran into one of the knights, they called out to me cheerfully.

“I’m looking forward to working with all of you again,” I responded to each of

them.

“I was surprised to see you at the coronation,” one of the knights said. “You looked lovely.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I appreciated all your hard work during the event.”

“Right? Being forced to stare at all that food was grueling.”

Before long, a group of towering men surrounded me. All the knights were tall and well-built; it made me feel like a child.

“Hopefully, the high commander will stop moping now!” one of them called out.

“Hey, quit flapping your gums,” his colleague chided him.

The mention of Albert caused a sudden shift in the atmosphere.

“The high commander’s been depressed ever since you left, Lady Mary,” the first knight continued. “But he’s perked up a bit lately.”

“Someone shut the guy up!” another knight shouted.

I watched in a daze as a group of men surrounded the chatty knight and tried to cover his mouth. Despite all this, I couldn’t picture Albert being depressed over my absence. As I recalled the past few days, my cheeks burned.

“What’s this?” one of the men asked.

All the knights stopped and stared in my direction. Panicked, I covered my face with my hands in a vain attempt to hide from their scrutiny.

“Don’t tell me...” one of the men trailed off.

“The high commander actually told her?!” another finished.

“Atta boy!” a third knight whooped. “We’ve gotta celebrate!”

Amid my confusion, everyone started making a commotion. While I tried to puzzle out the situation, Sir Eva appeared behind me.

“If you lot don’t get back to work right now, it’s going to impact your assessments,” he warned.

In response to these calm yet somehow terrifying words, the knights quieted.

After saluting Sir Eva, everyone raced back to their posts. As my cheeks continued burning, Sir Eva watched his subordinates flee the scene, then looked down at me with his usual charming, affable smile. How much did he know about my situation, exactly? The mere thought terrified me.

“I look forward to working with you, Lady Edigma,” he said.

“Ah, yes...” I replied. “I look forward to working with you as well.”

“This should have been one of the high commander’s days off, but for some reason, he still came into work. If you wouldn’t mind, please go greet him. The details of your job are the same as before. There are a few other handmaids here as well, so please introduce yourself to them during lunch break.”

Sir Eva spoke smoothly while leading me to the high commander’s office. It seemed as though everything was going according to his plan. At last, I felt as though I understood what Reynaldo had told me during dinner.

Sir Eva seemed to be a capable man, though his areas of expertise differed from Reynaldo’s. That aside, he knocked on the high commander’s office door, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Enter,” a voice called from inside.

That voice belonged to the man who’d professed his love for me last night. As my heart hammered in my chest, I calmly did as instructed, opening the door. Inside, Albert stood alone near the windowsill. He turned his gaze toward me. Though he usually appeared surly, he now smiled faintly.

“Good morning,” he greeted me. “I look forward to working with you.”

I bowed my head to Albert since he was acting like a proper boss. “As do I...”

Though we repeated the words we’d spoken last night, the location couldn’t have been more different. Albert approached me and held out his right hand. Puzzled, I held out my hand as well and gripped his.

At first, I interpreted this handshake as professional, but a moment later, he pressed his lips against my palm ever so lightly. “Please allow me to express my love for you even at work,” he said, the corners of his eyes wrinkling as he smiled at me. The radiance of his expression blinded me.

“Try not to abuse your authority too much, boss,” Sir Eva cut in. “It’ll cause all kinds of problems in the workplace.”

While Albert continued holding my hand, I stiffened, having completely forgotten about Sir Eva’s presence.

Chapter Six: Memorial Stone

“I love you.”

As Albert gripped my hand and professed his feelings, I looked up at him.

“May I hear your answer?” he pressed.

“Um, that makes me very happy, but...” I trailed off.

How should I respond? I stumbled over my words, unable to suppress the blush creeping up my cheeks. Meanwhile, Albert’s grip tightened, his face drawing closer. When his serious, dark brown irises were inches away from mine, I reflexively shut my eyes.

“I love you, Rosemary,” he proclaimed.

I lifted my head, stunned by the name he’d used. When I looked into his dark brown eyes again, I saw Rosemary reflected in them.

No, I’m not Rosemary!

As I tried to shout, I was startled awake, looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling. A fair amount of time had passed since I’d moved into a servant’s room. Regardless, I wasn’t used to seeing the ceiling’s wallpaper first thing in the morning. Groggy, I sat up in bed and looked out the window. The sun had only started to rise, and the weather seemed nice. However, my reflection in the window looked hideous compared to Rosemary’s.

“Dreams sure are honest,” I murmured to myself.

Though I’d be starting the day early, I got out of bed and headed to the sink to wash my face. Two weeks had passed since I’d started working for the chivalric order as a handmaid, and I’d finally grown accustomed to the flow of each day. At first, my constant thoughts of Albert made me overly awkward. That said, he was a great boss, never letting his personal feelings interfere with work.

But did he make suggestive comments to me in private? Why yes, he

definitely did.

Also, the knights were the worst at mixing work and personal matters.

Albert's feelings for me were already an open secret. As a result, many knights talked him up to support his romantic endeavors.

"Recently, banditry was on the rise in the capital, and the high commander caught their leader! Pretty cool of him, right?"

"Hey, Mary, did you know Albert sometimes visits the orphanage to play with the kids? He's super popular!"

"Lady Edigma, listen to this!"

I could write a book about Albert based solely on the multitude of stories I'd learned from their bragging. Incidentally, Albert didn't know what was going on, as his subordinates never acted this way in front of him. I didn't know whether to praise or disparage their gung-ho attitudes.

At first, I was constantly perplexed. Embarrassment impeded my work, and I considered the incessant interruptions a nuisance. Eventually, however, the conversations became enjoyable. No matter what I might have said, I liked hearing about Albert's achievements. After all, I harbored a deep admiration for knights, just as Rosemary had.

Is there a woman who doesn't admire knights? I wondered.

So far as I knew, there wasn't. Not until they learned the truth, at least.

Though many women applied to work as handmaids for the chivalric order, there was a high turnover rate. In the beginning, they were overjoyed to work for the knights they so admired. Unfortunately, the workplace could be stuffy, dangerous, and full of routine work. Thus, it could be a difficult job for someone who'd grown up in the city.

On the other hand, I'd grown accustomed to strenuous labor while living in the countryside. Personally, I enjoyed working for the chivalric order and found the job easy enough. Since the knights themselves didn't stand on ceremony, we'd opened up with each other enough to have trivial conversations.

Even so, the constant stream of information on Albert still grated on my

nerves.

“Perhaps I should take this matter to Sir Eva,” I murmured to myself one day.

If this happened to send shivers down the spines of a few knights, that was none of my concern.

After changing into work clothes and leaving my room early, I headed towards the servants’ dining hall. All the knights and palace servants lived in a lodging house within the palace. Of course, the former fiancée candidates hadn’t used this building, as we’d been handmaids in name only. Back then, we’d been provided with more elegant guest rooms. Now that I’d become an actual palace servant, this lodging house was my new home.

That said, the rooms were still of high quality, which was befitting of palace servants. Despite being low-ranking, most of us were children of nobles. Yes, there were commoners, but most were experienced workers with proven track records. Furthermore, they were only hired following strict investigations involving interviews and letters of recommendation. Discrimination based on status was still harsh, regardless of someone’s abilities.

Thanks to Sir Eva’s recommendation and my paltry status as a baron’s daughter, I got this job without any trouble. Even so, this would be a difficult position to obtain for most people.

But come to think of it, I’ve been bouncing around from one highly coveted job to another lately.

As usual, I sat at my designated window seat with a nice view of the grounds. Upon receiving my allotment of bread, soup, and salad, I ate. Obviously, everything was delicious, since the palace chefs prepared our meals.

Outside the window, I saw where visitors boarded and disembarked from carriages within the palace grounds. Despite the early hour, vehicles were arriving sporadically. In fact, I recognized the family crest on a single carriage that had just pulled up. Reynaldo disembarked from it.

Yes, I recognized that carriage as belonging to the Rose Duchy.

While popping a piece of bread into my mouth, I continued watching. Based on how early he’d returned to the palace, he’d probably ridden through the

night. He did seem fatigued as he disembarked from the carriage. Noticing my gaze, Reynaldo looked up and met my eye. He waved, his expression softening. Flustered, I waved back.

“Huh...?” I mumbled, focusing on Reynaldo’s gesturing. After beckoning to me, he pointed to where he was standing. By all appearances, he was signaling for me to join him.

I nodded at him through the window, gulped down the rest of my soup, and put away my utensils. After jogging down the stairs, I headed to where he was. He was still waiting for me.

“Lord Reynaldo,” I said.

“Mary,” he responded. “Sorry for calling you down here so early.”

I looked around the square. The carriage had already left, and only Reynaldo remained. The early morning air chilled my skin, turning our breath white in the cold. I felt guilty for making him wait for me.

“It’s no trouble,” I assured him. “Did you travel all through the night to arrive back at this time?”

“Indeed—I went to check on Rose. I considered inviting you, but since I was leaving suddenly and would be traveling through the night, I decided against it.” Reynaldo remembered that I wanted to thank the people who’d taken care of me at his duchy. That put a smile on my face. “How’s your job at the chivalric order?” he asked.

“Everyone’s been treating me very well.”

Almost too well.

“Are you working today?” Reynaldo inquired.

“Yes, but I was planning on waiting in the dining room since it’s still early. Have you eaten yet, Lord Reynaldo?”

“No, not yet. Would you like to take a break in my office? I can brew you some tea while I have my meal.”

I gladly accepted Reynaldo’s invitation. My routine of having dinner with him and Albert hadn’t been possible since I’d started living in the servants’ lodging

house. It had been a long time since we'd spent time together like this.

As the sun rose, my mood brightened. Thus, I followed Reynaldo.



A cup of warm tea sat in front of me. Conversely, a large pile of documents and a sandwich—which would be easy to eat while working—sat in front of Reynaldo. *Being prime minister keeps a person busy*, I realized all over again.

"Sorry for the mess," Reynaldo apologized. "I haven't had time to clean the room."

He was using the spacious office of the former prime minister, who'd been condemned and relieved of his duties. A sofa sat in front of the large desk to facilitate meetings. There was also a line of desks in the adjacent room for the prime minister's secretaries.

With the hour being so early, no one else had arrived for work yet. Nevertheless, Reynaldo called a servant to prepare him a meal. The sandwich seemed emblematic of how he'd been eating as of late.

"Are you eating proper dinners?" I asked.

Previously, we'd been having dinner together, but in the past couple of weeks, no such opportunities had arisen. As a result, I had no idea what his nightly meals looked like. When I inquired about this out of concern, he responded with a smile. Apparently, his dinners weren't much different from this breakfast.

"I tend to prioritize work," he said.

"You're going to ruin your health that way," I chided.

"I suppose so. What a conundrum..."

Is he actually taking this seriously? I observed Reynaldo sinking deep into thought. Eventually, he looked in my direction, as if something had just occurred to him.

"Since we both work at the palace, why don't we have dinner together?" he suggested. "If I make plans, I won't forget to eat."

“And you want those plans to be with me?”

“Of course.”

I usually ate dinner in the dining hall. Occasionally, I ate with the knights, but I'd never made food in my room or gone out to eat. Since this would be similar to what I usually did, I nodded in agreement.

“Thank you,” Reynaldo said. “Do you mind coming here after work then?”

“Um, to the prime minister's office...?”

That was a tall order. I could just imagine recoiling at everyone's stares.

“I'll let everyone around here know of our plans,” Reynaldo offered.

What could he say, exactly, to make everyone feel at ease with a lowly handmaid having dinner in the prime minister's office?

“Your grace,” I said.

“You agreed to call me Reynaldo in private, remember?”

“...Are you getting any rest, Reynaldo?” I corrected. “You look very busy.”

My eyes turned toward the documents piled around the room. I worried about Reynaldo's health. He was probably one of the busiest people in the palace right now. Being the ringleader of the coup and the new prime minister, not a day passed without me hearing his name in the palace. This was true among the knights as well. Reynaldo had taken on an unimaginable workload, second only to King Rizel.

After finishing his bite-sized sandwich, Reynaldo answered my question. “This workload won't last forever. Once things calm down, it won't be so bad, and I'm getting enough rest. Thank you for worrying about me, though.”

He grinned at me. I kept drinking my tea, unable to say anything.

“Honestly, I never intended to become prime minister,” he continued. “Compared to my revenge, I didn't give a damn about this country's future. Yet when King Rizel pleaded with me to take this job, I decided to give it a chance. To my surprise, I find the work rather interesting.”

Reynaldo wore a cheerful expression, having found purpose in his work. His

eyes sparkled like a young boy who'd gotten his hands on a new toy.

"Also," he added. "Since I purged everyone who slandered Rosemary, I'd like to inform future generations about how wonderful she was."

"What do you mean?" I asked, nearly spilling my tea.

"I plan on building a memorial to her in the palace. Likewise, I would like to immortalize her great deeds in a book. I'm in the middle of drafting an outline for a proposal right now. When the memorial is finished, I'd love for you to see it, Mary."

"P-Please don't do all that..."

"My apologies, but the king has already approved the memorial. The schedule for its construction has been decided upon as well."

I cast my eyes down. Prime Minister Reynaldo's terrifying enthusiasm left me speechless. Suddenly, I remembered my dream.

Should I speak to him about what's been worrying me lately...?

Since he had so much love and respect for Rosemary, hearing his opinion could prove helpful. Still, I hesitated, wondering if I should speak my mind.

"Um, Reynaldo..." Steeling myself, I looked up and spoke. "If you hadn't known I was Rosemary's reincarnation, what would you have thought of me?"

Lately, I'd been worrying about how my current self compared to Rosemary. Until a while ago, I hadn't even remembered my past life. Yet, upon regaining Rosemary's memories, I'd considered them nostalgic. I even loved the people from my past, such as Albert and Reynaldo. Ultimately, however, those memories belonged to Rosemary. Those feelings and recollections weren't necessarily mine.

Was Albert's profession of love directed towards Rosemary and not me? What if he saw me as his childhood friend rather than as Mary? If he hadn't known me to be Rosemary's reincarnation, would he have noticed me?

As a result of these concerns, I'd wound up asking Reynaldo a bizarre question.

"Um..." I mumbled. "Speaking hypothetically, of course."

Why did I even ask that question? I wondered, regret washing over me.

After a brief silence, Reynaldo took a sip of tea and looked at me. “That’s a difficult question. If I hadn’t known you were Rosemary’s reincarnation...” His lips tugged into a self-deprecating smile. “Well, you would have ended up despising me, I’m sure.”

His answer took me aback.

“I would have?” I asked.

“Indeed. Do you remember our first conversation? I attempted to threaten you into becoming Prince Rizel’s fiancée.”

I did remember. Reynaldo had treated me like a tool, even attempting to use my family members as bargaining chips. I’d gotten angry and scolded him, comparing his actions to his father’s, whom he’d hated. By doing so, I practically outed myself as Rosemary’s reincarnation.

“Did you know that most people consider me a cold-hearted man?” Reynaldo asked. “They’re exactly right—I’m not a kind person. So, if I hadn’t known you were Rosemary’s reincarnation... I would have treated you horribly. You would have hated me, and I would have regretted my actions.”

“But why...?”

Certainly, I remembered Reynaldo treating me horribly. Still, I didn’t understand why he would have regretted his actions.

Reynaldo donned a sad smile. “Because, by the time I came to know you deeply and loved you as Mary, you would already have despised me.”

Once he’d finished speaking, Reynaldo stood up and circled around to my side. His face closed in on mine, our noses touching, and he kissed me lightly on the ear. The gentle, warm sensation felt distant. While reaching up to touch my ear, I gazed at Reynaldo, whose face was still close to mine.

“Why?” I asked, straining to speak.

Why did you kiss my ear? I’d wanted to say, but I hadn’t been able to force out the words.

“Why, indeed?” Reynaldo responded simply, a soft smile dancing on his lips.

“It seems a great many things are troubling you, but you needn’t worry about those matters too deeply. You are your own person, after all.”

He kissed me on the forehead as though it were an afterthought. My head might explode as I struggled to comprehend Reynaldo’s behavior. These were the actions of a man coming onto a woman, but he didn’t seem to have those intentions.

While I forced my addled brain to start functioning again, someone knocked on the office door twice, killing the mood. Reynaldo and I had been staring at each other for an endless moment, but he finally pulled away from me.

“Enter,” he called.

“Pardon me,” the newcomer said. “Ah, you already had another guest. Please excuse my intrusion.”

“It’s no problem,” Reynaldo answered. “Allow me to introduce the two of you. This is Mary—a handmaid working for the chivalric order. Mary, this is Lyle—my secretary.”

Lyle’s features retained boyishness despite him being a young man. He seemed unaccustomed to his surroundings, perhaps having just finished his education. He had almond-shaped eyes, and his somewhat long hair had been styled beautifully. Altogether, he seemed like a sincere young man.

“I’m Mary Edigma.” I bowed my head to him.

“And I’m Lyle Cisvelle. Are you the daughter of Baron Edigma, perchance?”

“Yes, I am. You’re a member of the Cisvelle family?”

Many palace secretaries belonged to their house.

“Oh, you know about us?” Lyle asked. “My father serves as the head secretary. As an apprentice, I’m still inexperienced, but I’m happy to be of service to you.”

Lyle bowed to me politely. He reminded me of a young Reynaldo.

“Prime Minister,” Lyle continued. “Lord Macael is in the guest room. He wishes to have a meeting with you.”

“Understood,” Reynaldo answered, then turned to me. “Forgive me for leaving after inviting you here, but I must be on my way. Shall we continue this over dinner?”

“O-Okay,” I stammered. “I’ll see you then.”

Upon realizing that he hadn’t forgotten our promise, I nodded. With a satisfied smile, Reynaldo began to leave the office. However, he came to an abrupt halt.

“Mary,” he said. “About what just happened...”

As I recalled what Reynaldo had done, my cheeks burned.

“Did you perceive my actions as coming from a brother or from another man entirely?” he asked. “Either way, those emotions are yours alone.”

After winking at me, he left the room.

“Did His Grace just wink...?” Lyle muttered to himself as if he’d just seen something unbelievable.

Yeah, I can hardly believe my own eyes.

Left to my own devices, I sat there, dumbfounded and unsure of what to do. As Lyle cleared away my dishes, I sprang to my feet and lent a hand. When I lifted my head, my cheeks still burning, his eyes met mine.

“You’re a guest,” he said. “You needn’t help me.”

“But isn’t it time for you to begin work, Lord Cisvelle?” I asked.

“You may call me Lyle, and seeing to guests is part of my job. Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be getting to work soon as well?”

As Lyle continued clearing the dishes, I expressed my humble thanks. The beginning of the workday was about to start. I needed to return to the chivalric order’s office before the morning bell rang.

Lyle worked as he watched me prepare to leave. After considering something for a moment, he called out to me. “My apologies, but are you Lord Reynaldo’s lover, Lady Edigma?”

“Please call me Mary. And no, I’m not.”

Anyone who saw our previous exchange would come to that conclusion. Regardless, I brusquely denied the assumption.

“I see,” Lyle responded. “While I’m glad you two have such a friendly relationship, I’m not ignorant of the latest gossip. Do be careful. Some people have been spreading unseemly rumors about you.”

Lyle matter-of-factly provided this warning with no trace of malice. I could tell he’d spoken out of heartfelt concern for me. Though his emotions were hard to read, his kindness touched me.

I’d heard these rumors even within the chivalric order. After appearing from nowhere, the daughter of a baron received the favor of the high commander and the prime minister. Small wonder I’d wound up at the center of the latest gossip.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

Lyle’s concern for me—a stranger—filled me with warmth. Even though we’d just met, I felt an affinity for him, perhaps because he resembled a younger Reynaldo. After bowing to him, I exited the prime minister’s office.

As soon as I left, I met the eye of a nearby maid, who looked at me suspiciously. She quickly averted her gaze. Lyle’s warning seemed much more real. Yes, I’d been aware of the unseemly gossip spreading about me. At the same time, I also knew that Reynaldo was working behind the scenes to quash the rumors.

Whenever other servants asked about my relationship with Reynaldo out of curiosity, I would answer, “I’m a relative of the Duke of Rose.” This served as a stopgap measure, as Reynaldo had been giving a similar explanation. Nevertheless, we could never tell the truth, no matter how well we explained it. A number of wild speculations were circulating around the palace, and I dodged all of them with vague replies.

While the chivalric order cheered on my romance with Albert, denizens of the palace spied on my relationship with Reynaldo from afar. Despite my peculiar circumstances, I no longer wished to return to Edigma or my former life.

How truly strange.

Until recently, I couldn't imagine feeling that way. Edigma and my family had always been the most important things in my life. Remembering my past life as Rosemary and spending time in Dirésias Castle changed my feelings drastically. I'd reunited with my younger brother and childhood friend, whom I'd never expected to meet with or speak to again.

Suddenly, I recalled what Reynaldo had said to me.

"Did you perceive my actions as coming from a brother or from another man entirely?" he'd asked. "Either way, those emotions are yours alone."

Though his parting words had sounded like a riddle, he'd seen right through me. What were my feelings for Reynaldo as Mary? I considered my emotions.

"Even if we're no longer related by blood, you're still my younger brother, Reynaldo..." I whispered to myself.

I was Mary Edigma, not Rosemary Hubert. Regardless, my feelings for Reynaldo were familial. When I'd first reunited with him, he seemed like a completely different person from the boy Rosemary had known. Yet, after telling him the truth, a thought occurred to me each time we met. Whenever he looked at me, the person reflected in his eyes was no more than a projection of Rosemary. That didn't bother me, as I also viewed Reynaldo as a younger brother who'd surpassed me in age. Rosemary always wished for her family's happiness, and I still wished for Reynaldo's happiness.

But how do I actually feel about him?

I walked down the long castle corridor, unable to answer that question.

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ALBERT accepted his late-night summons to the prime minister's office without complaint. Thus, he knocked on Reynaldo's door. A short time passed with no response. Finding this strange, Albert opened the door slowly, and inside, Reynaldo was sleeping with his elbows on his desk.

It was unusual for Reynaldo to sleep without noticing a newcomer's presence. To Albert's knowledge, he tended to wake at the slightest sound. He wasn't the sort to let others be close to him, after all. Since he hadn't woken at Albert's entrance, he must have been exhausted. Or perhaps there was another reason.

Finally, the sound of the door closing woke Reynaldo. He looked at Albert, his features drowsy.

“Was I sleeping?” he asked. “Sorry for calling you here so late.”

“No worries. It looks like you needed the rest.”

“Yes, I suppose so. I’ve had a bit too much on my plate lately.”

Reynaldo stretched to drive away his exhaustion. Albert smiled at him. Whenever Reynaldo held late-night meetings in the past, he always moved around to drive away his fatigue. To Albert’s recollection, Reynaldo had always been sleep-deprived.

Whenever we met in secret to plot our revenge, it was often in the evening, Albert recalled.

“It’s been a while since we met this late,” Reynaldo noted.

Apparently, he’d been thinking the same thing.

“Indeed, it has,” Albert agreed.

“Back then, you were a low-ranking knight, and I was just a boy.”

How did twenty years come and go so quickly? Albert wondered, the all-too-rapid passage of time baffling him.

After swearing vengeance upon Rosemary’s killers, Reynaldo and Albert spent years discussing how best to achieve it. Though they clashed at times, their goal was fulfilled in a most unexpected way. As a result, Albert only had one regret: their inability to locate and punish Tia.

Reynaldo was searching for Tia with bloodshot eyes. No one knew how she’d slipped out of the castle on the day of the coup. Questioning the former king hadn’t provided any answers either. Even he didn’t know how the queen had disappeared.

Regardless of whether she’d successfully fled the castle, finding a single woman should have been easy. However, the situation had proven more fraught with difficulties than expected. This suggested the existence of co-conspirators. Someone was cooperating with and sheltering the queen. That was the main reason Reynaldo was overworking. Though he’d investigated Tia’s

associates, no one in the capital had enough power to hide her. In that case, she must have been relying on foreign collaborators.

The idea of their former queen possibly joining forces with a foreign entity came as a tremendous blow to the country. King Rizel was troubled by his mother's actions as well. As the leader of their country, he lamented being unable to extend her any kindness. Though Rizel felt little love for Tia, she was still his mother. He would probably wish to reduce her punishment in the event of her capture. Unfortunately, if she'd joined forces with a foreign country, he wouldn't be allowed to do so.

While Albert wanted to capture Tia as soon as possible, he didn't feel the same desire for vengeance as before. Mary had purged that darkness from his heart during King Grey's condemnation. Albert wished to live as a knight, not as a man hell-bent on revenge. And so, as Mary's protector, he wished to punish Tia justly.

"Albert," Reynaldo said.

Though Albert had been deep in thought, he lifted his head upon hearing his name.

"Did you profess your feelings to Mary?" Reynaldo asked with a piercing gaze.

Albert nodded honestly, seeing as Reynaldo probably knew the truth already. "... I did."

Initially, Albert proposed to Mary in a most disappointing fashion. While lamenting his idiocy, the meddlesome Sir Eva offered to help him. As a result, he later professed his actual feelings to Mary.

Even so, his anxieties remained, as the more he proclaimed his love for her, the more tense her expression grew. At first, he found her embarrassment adorable, but lately, she stopped blushing as she once had. Instead, she wore a different expression. Albert didn't understand the reason behind this change. That frustrated him. If he'd caused her discomfort, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself. When he considered that his professions might be a nuisance, he couldn't even bring himself to ask for clarification.

Albert was growing increasingly frustrated with himself. He wanted to love

and protect Mary, but he hated himself for stealing the smile from her face. Every day, he wondered if repressing his feelings would be preferable, and every day, he concluded that was impossible.

“I never would have expected you to act so rashly,” Reynaldo commented. “You must be desperate.”

The humor in Reynaldo’s tone annoyed Albert. Though he silently waited for Reynaldo to continue, the new prime minister said nothing else.

Impatience got the better of him. Albert opened his mouth to ask a question. “And what will you do?”

Will you stand by and watch, or will you tell her your feelings as well?

Reynaldo’s romantic feelings for Mary were as plain as day. After King Grey was arrested, Albert expected Reynaldo to act, but in an unexpected turn of events, he’d done nothing.

Secretly, Reynaldo took precautions to prevent Mary from becoming a political pawn, including the falsification of her identity. Of course, he’d taken these actions after consulting with Stanley, her current guardian. As always, Reynaldo’s ability to take the initiative was laudable.

Because of this, Albert found it strange that Reynaldo hadn’t taken the same actions as him. When Sir Eva suggested letting Mary work for the chivalric order, Albert expected Reynaldo to block her transfer. However, the matter proceeded without difficulty. Almost anticlimactically.

As the high commander, Albert could approve any servant to work for his order. Yet, even with Mary working for him, Albert worried about Reynaldo stealing her from him someday, as he’d done when taking her to Rose. Albert even considered what he would do if that occurred. Considering all this, Reynaldo’s behavior was strange, compelling him to ask the question.

What will you do?

“I won’t do anything,” Reynaldo answered.

His jade eyes—the same color as Rosemary’s—stared directly at Albert. Previously, revenge had darkened his eyes. Now, they’d taken on a more

peaceful hue.

“What do you mean?” Albert asked.

“I mean exactly what I said,” Reynaldo replied.

He won't do anything? Albert wondered. *This from Reynaldo, who loved Rosemary with all his heart and lived solely for her sake?*

Upon seeing Albert rattled, Reynaldo smiled at him coolly. “If Mary falls in love with you, I’m fine with that. However...” As Reynaldo approached Albert, he wore the smile that had earned him the moniker “Ice Duke”. He placed a long, slender finger on Albert’s shoulder. “Mary won’t reciprocate your feelings unless you change.”

He spoke and acted as if he knew Mary’s emotional state. Albert wanted to argue, but he couldn’t find the words. Reynaldo spoke the truth. Albert knew that Mary wouldn’t reciprocate his feelings as things currently stood. Even so, he didn’t know how to change it. After hearing this from a third party, Albert’s anxieties redoubled their assault on him.

“I understand,” Albert said. “But it’s too early to roll over and accept that.”

Resignation hadn’t filled his eyes with dejection. Neither were they twisted in agony. Rather, he stared back at Reynaldo with determination.

You think I would give up so easily?

Not even Albert could suppress the whirlpool of emotions raging inside him. Despite having been rejected, he couldn’t raise the white flag of surrender. He would seize any opportunity to win Mary’s heart. Likewise, he would clear away her concerns. If his feelings had intensified her anxieties, he would quash them. He would do anything to protect her.

Reynaldo donned a gentle smile at Albert’s steely resolve. “Well, then, I look forward to your next move.”

Albert couldn’t fathom what Reynaldo was thinking. The man was his enemy in love, but the so-called Ice Duke seemed to be supporting him. He didn’t understand why.

Regardless, Albert needed to consider other factors and resolve his own

worries. When he found the answers to his concerns, he would find them concerning Mary. He was vaguely certain of this.

* * *

“YOU finished Rosemary’s gravestone?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Albert replied. “With the help of our new prime minister, we finished the construction right away.”

“This will be Rosemary’s new resting place,” Reynaldo added. “It was only natural for me to put my utmost into the project.”

Some time had passed since I’d started having dinner in the prime minister’s office. Tonight, the subject of Rosemary’s gravestone in Hubert came up.

When Albert learned that Reynaldo and I were having dinner together, he joined in. That’s how we started eating our nightly meals together again. Occasionally, one of them would excuse themselves due to work, but as a general rule, the three of us had dinner together.

If we’d still been gathering at Stanley’s residence, this wouldn’t have given rise to much gossip. However, we were now dining in the prime minister’s office. Thus, rumors spread like wildfire. At first, this made me uneasy, but strangely enough, I’d gotten used to it.

“You’ve got guts, kid,” Sir Eva said with a laugh when I told him this.

I received curious and stern stares from all directions. They no longer bothered me; I’d come to accept them. Thanks to Reynaldo keeping the rumormongers at bay, I hadn’t suffered any real harm. Everyone’s stares might as well have been water off a duck’s back. Perhaps I had guts, as Sir Eva had said, or perhaps the entire Edigma family had nerves of steel. Stanley was a good example of that.

“I have some time off from work in the palace,” Albert said. “I’ll finally be able to act the part of a feudal lord, at least somewhat.”

A few days ago, Albert finished his peerage conferment ceremony. Afterward, he’d gone to inspect the region formerly known as Hubert.

Following Rosemary’s death, her father—the Marquis of Hubert—had been

demoted. Because the state seized a portion of his lands and transformed it into national territory, Hubert had been under government control for a long time. Now that Albert had received these lands, the region had been renamed McClain.

At first, Albert considered this too great an honor. In Dirésias, the names of regions changed to match the names of their rulers. As a consequence, they changed often.

Similar to Reynaldo, some people changed their last names whenever they received a peerage. Albert was reluctant to change his name, as he'd been a McClain his entire life. While he'd anguished over it, the decision was made for him. The Hubert region had been renamed McClain.

Albert's family had been thrilled to have the land renamed in their honor. Only the man himself struggled with the decision. From what I could tell, he'd been reluctant to rename his childhood home after himself.

Rosemary and Reynaldo's childhood home was included within Albert's new territory. Until recently, it had been used as a government facility, but when Albert received his peerage, it became his manor instead.

Nevertheless, Albert had his main duties as high commander to attend to. Likewise, he had no experience managing a territory. Per Reynaldo's advice, Albert hired the government worker who'd managed the region until now to continue presiding over McClain. Funnily enough, Reynaldo had a better grasp of the territory than Albert, as he'd kept a watchful eye over his childhood home.

Who's the real feudal lord here? I couldn't help but wonder.

Yet, rather than entrusting everything to a novice like Albert, we could all rest much easier with this decision. He would have to live with the mockery of being a lord in name only.

"I took time off during the same period as Albert," Reynaldo said. "I still need to move Rosemary's coffin from her current resting place. Will you attend the ceremony as well, Mary?"

"Is that all right?" I asked, turning towards Albert for confirmation.

He responded with a nod and a smile.

Back in the audience chamber, I declared my vengeance against Grey, and King Rizel carried out everything on his father's behalf. Immediately after the coronation, he put out a notice concerning the false accusations against Rosemary, whom the kingdom once called a villainess. At the time, newspapers printed the story nonstop. Rosemary transformed from a villainess to a tragic heroine, receiving a great deal of sympathy from the people. Yet, after a little while, the buzz died down, and these days, I rarely heard a whisper about her.

Decades later, people finally knew the truth. Personally, I had no strong feelings on the matter. *Good for her*, I thought as an outsider.

Albert and Reynaldo hadn't spoken much on the matter. For the past twenty years, they'd loved Rosemary and thirsted for vengeance to an unfathomable degree. Regardless of whether Rosemary was proven innocent, the past two decades would never be restored to them.

"The ceremony is in five days," Reynaldo said. "I'll return to Rose the day after tomorrow, retrieve Rosemary's coffin, and then travel to McClain. I'd like both of you to begin your journey around noon the day before the ceremony. If all goes well, we can hold the service in the morning five days from now."

"That works for me," Albert confirmed. "Mary, please adjust your schedule so that you can take time off work. We'll travel together."

I nodded while drinking my after-dinner tea. "Understood."

A handmaid cleared away Albert and Reynaldo's utensils before coming over to clear mine away. Sensing something off, I looked up. The handmaid glared at me from a position not visible to anyone else. Or perhaps she was staring at me?

I averted my gaze from her—who I recognized—and drained the rest of my tea. As I recalled, her name was Liella. Despite being a palace handmaid, she worked for the still-understaffed chivalric order. Every time I crossed paths with her outside, she would glare daggers at me.

Does she like Albert or Reynaldo, perhaps?

Sadly, I'd gotten used to other women treating me with borderline hostility.

Albert and Reynaldo were very popular with the opposite sex. Since both were unmarried, more than a few women threw themselves at the two men. A mountain of letters seeking arranged marriages arrived at Albert's workplace, despite the impropriety.

According to what Lyle told me a few days ago, the prime minister's office received similar letters. Mere handmaids, noblewomen, and even married women sent these letters.

How terrifying.

In all likelihood, Liella always glared at me because she harbored affection for Albert or Reynaldo.

As I avoided Liella's eyes, her hostility vanished. After finishing her duties as a handmaid, she left the room. Thankfully, her dislike of me hadn't affected her actual job. Even so, something still bothered me.

I don't know what, but...something about her seems different from the others.

Had it been her gaze? Unlike the other noblewomen, her eyes held more than just envy towards me. That said, I had no idea what had caused this.

"What's wrong, Mary?" Albert asked, noticing my peculiar behavior.

"It's nothing," I replied, dodging the issue.

Having silently watched over this series of events, Reynaldo sighed. "You really are dense, aren't you?"

He looked at Albert with exasperation. Apparently, Reynaldo noticed Liella's gaze. As the only person who hadn't caught on, Albert furrowed his brow, perplexed. Laughing, I changed the subject.

In five days, Rosemary's remains would return to her place of birth. The idea of returning to her childhood home filled me with joy, nervousness, and even a vague sense of unease. Perhaps because of this, I hadn't realized the reason behind Liella's hostile gaze.

I would soon come to regret that.



SINCE learning that Rosemary's memorial stone would be erected in her hometown, I tried speaking to her soul that lay dormant within me. Yes, I understood the peculiarity of speaking to my past self better than anyone. Still, I had such mixed feelings that I couldn't stop myself from calling out to her.

Rosemary, if you were alive right now, what would you think?

Based on my memories of my previous life, I was undeniably Rosemary. I thought I understood her better than anyone else and believed her desires to be my own. Nevertheless, there were many things I didn't understand. Even if I inherited Rosemary's soul, we were different people. This had been at the forefront of my consciousness lately, and I knew exactly why.

"It's because of Albert..." I murmured to myself.

I sighed while gazing at the sunset outside my window. Albert proposed to me, and soon afterward, he confessed his feelings for me. He continued expressing his love for me in between duties at work. I had no idea how to respond. One corner of my heart quivered with delight. How could such a persistent shower of affection *not* fill my chest with giddiness? I even toyed with the idea of accepting his advances.

Another thought plagued me at the same time. What if his feelings were for Rosemary, not me? When this idea occurred to me, sadness and suspicion replaced my happiness. As a result, I couldn't reciprocate his feelings.

It was absurd for Albert to even have feelings for me in the first place. He was more than ten years my senior, the high commander of the chivalric order, and a knight who'd sworn loyalty to Rosemary. Despite my new position as a handmaid for the chivalric order, I was merely a baron's daughter from the countryside. Recently, Albert obtained the rank of a viscount, becoming a suitable partner for someone like Rosemary.

Yes, Rosemary. Not me.

"Ugh, I'm sick of this..."

What could be hollower than feeling jealous of myself? My dead self, no less. That's right—I was jealous of Rosemary. Though I never would have met Albert without her memories, I envied her very existence.

“I’m no different from the other handmaids who are jealous of *me*, am I...?”

Albert and Reynaldo stayed by my side because I was Rosemary’s reincarnation, not because I was Mary. I could do nothing to change or reverse this fact. Even so, I thought I was content with the situation. After all, I was Rosemary, and her memories were mine. Yet, when I considered Albert having feelings for Rosemary and not me, I couldn’t bear the pain. Intellectually, I understood that Rosemary and I were one, but my heart had different thoughts on the matter.

Agonizing about this isn’t going to get me anywhere.

After sighing for the umpteenth time, I looked around my room. Tomorrow, I would head to the territory formerly known as Hubert with Albert. The day after tomorrow, the ceremony to place Rosemary’s casket in her new grave would happen. I’d been preparing for our departure.

The first ceremony to be held in the newly renamed McClain region would be in honor of the deceased. As such, it wouldn’t be a political event. Only friends and relatives would gather to oversee Rosemary’s entombment and offer her their prayers.

I couldn’t make sense of what was going through my mind. In all likelihood, no one else had ever experienced what I was feeling.

Of all things, I’ll be seeing my own coffin.

“Rosemary,” I addressed her aloud. “How do you feel right now?”

I couldn’t stop myself from asking the question. How did she feel about Albert professing his love to me? Or about being buried in the land she’d loved as a child? And finally, about me—her reincarnation—offering my prayers to her memorial?

“I’m happy,” I admitted. “After all this time, I’ll be able to see the place where you grew up.”

Rosemary’s memories of Hubert always seemed wonderful. Sure, her studies and training had been difficult. Likewise, her father was cold to her. Yet, all that aside, spending time with her beloved brother and childhood friend had filled her with joy.

The warmth of Hubert had brought her great comfort.

Since I'd only viewed Rosemary's homeland through memory, the idea of seeing it firsthand put a huge smile on my face. I didn't know if this joy was Rosemary's or my own.

Ever since I'd regained Rosemary's memories, our consciousnesses mixed together from time to time. This had occurred when I condemned King Grey, putting a stop to Albert and Reynaldo's vengeance. Back then, Rosemary had taken full control of my actions.

Since then, our consciousnesses had stopped mixing. It was hard to describe what I'd felt back then. I didn't fully understand it myself. Similarly, I didn't know if my feelings for Albert belonged to Rosemary or me. By that same logic, did Albert love me or Rosemary? I didn't know.

Over and over again, I asked myself questions that I had no hope of answering.

* * *

REYNALDO hadn't prayed at Rosemary's memorial in some time. Though he tried to decorate her casket with fresh flowers every day, he hadn't replaced them since his last visit. As a result, they'd withered. He couldn't remember ever being away from her resting place for this long.

"I'm home, Rosemary," Reynaldo whispered to her, placing his hand on his beloved sister's casket.

After replacing the flowers, he touched the engraving on the coffin, which spelled out the name Rosemary Hubert and the date of her death. Reynaldo himself had procured this casket many years ago.

I never thought I'd be able to return you to Hubert.

Reynaldo smiled drolly. Despite planning his vengeance for twenty years, this had never been part of it. When Mary made this request, Reynaldo was stunned. He'd lived his life with Rosemary constantly on his mind, yet even so, this idea had never occurred to him. Vengeance had been his single desire for so long, but she hadn't felt the same way.

“I’m sorry for making you rest in such a gloomy place for so long,” Reynaldo said. “You wanted to go home, didn’t you...? You must be rolling your eyes at my lack of tact. Still, I can finally grant your wish.”

Mary’s proposed vengeance had been to clear Rosemary’s name and have her remains returned to her homeland. She hadn’t wished for anything else.

At the same time, Rosemary harbored one regret: having stolen Reynaldo’s future. When he learned this, regret overcame him as well. He felt foolish and ashamed for being blind to any of Rosemary’s desires. He even forced Albert to walk down the path of vengeance with him.

Reynaldo hadn’t expected to ever regret his decisions. He loathed everyone who’d humiliated Rosemary and played a part in her death. So much so that he would have gladly cut them all to pieces. Like a curse, that hatred lingered inside him. If he had the chance to kill King Grey, he would do so with pleasure. And, if possible, he would gleefully watch the still-missing Queen Tia be hanged.

And yet, there was something Reynaldo wanted even more than that. Kneeling, he pressed his lips against the cold, stone coffin.

“If you had been by my side, Rosemary, I wouldn’t have wanted anything else.”

Why had he poured so much passion and hatred into vengeance? Possibly because he hadn’t known where to direct his feelings for Rosemary.

Once he removed his lips from the casket, Reynaldo stood, having steeled himself. He returned to Rose to deliver Rosemary to her homeland. After exiting the mausoleum, he checked if the preparations for his journey had run into any delays. He’d special-ordered a carriage to move Rosemary’s coffin. Despite its plain appearance, the vehicle—painted entirely black—was made of high-quality materials.

He hadn’t considered carrying Rosemary’s casket out in the open. This carriage had a wider roof than the vehicles used to transport nobles. After giving orders to a few servants, Reynaldo helped them carry the coffin to the carriage ever so carefully.

With that done, he departed for the land once known as Hubert. He was

bringing a handful of servants and guards with him, as the journey to deliver Rosemary's remains would be a lengthy one.



Reynaldo had already decided on their route to the newly renamed McClain region. With their procession being so conspicuous, he wouldn't use one of the main roads. Though a servant had advised Reynaldo to, he hadn't agreed. He didn't want to expose Rosemary to curious onlookers. Likewise, the main road would necessitate going the long way around. He would cross the mountains instead.

Atop his favorite steed, Reynaldo rode in front of the carriage. The distance between McClain and the northern region of Rose was vast. Everyone remained vigilant since they were occasionally forced to cross paths along the cliffs.

While glancing at the carriage every so often, he slipped into contemplation. He thought about Mary—the reincarnation of his beloved sister. Reynaldo immediately understood what was causing her so much grief as of late. Unfortunately, Albert hadn't come to the same conclusion, dullard that he was.

That's our high commander for you, Reynaldo mused. Acting as he pleases without even realizing the source of her distress. It's enough to make a man envious.

The shadow of her past self haunted Mary. Reynaldo and Albert could shower her with love and whisper endless sweet nothings into her ear, but no matter what, she would perceive these words as being directed at Rosemary, not herself. Reynaldo understood her feelings all too well. After all, he also viewed her as the shadow of Rosemary. Such actions could be called blasphemous towards the still-living Mary, but there it was.

Reynaldo came to view Mary as a substitute for his sister. He understood this about himself, and thus, he couldn't vocalize his love for her as Albert had. If he put his feelings into words, he would only hurt her.

While swaying atop his horse, Reynaldo considered an impossible, hypothetical scenario. What if Mary and Rosemary were about to fall from the edge of a cliff and Reynaldo could only save one of them? This was a common—practically clichéd—thought experiment. Even so, it was the best one to demonstrate his position.

Reynaldo would grab his sister's hand without hesitation, regardless of whether Mary wailed his name or her eyes rebuked him as she plummeted

towards the ground. Yes, that would be his decision, whether it damned him to Hell or not, or whether Rosemary pleaded with him to save Mary instead. His actual sister meant everything to him. Life without her was meaningless, and her memory had kept him alive all these years.

If Reynaldo asked Albert the same question, what answer would he give? And would it be the answer Mary desired?

Suddenly, Reynaldo sensed something off. He looked up and scanned his surroundings. They had to advance their horses with the utmost caution, as the mountain road they traveled had severe rises and drops in elevation. Soaring peaks towered above them, and steep cliffs dropped off below them.

Struck by an ill sense of foreboding, Reynaldo raised his hand—the signal to stop moving. Everyone came to a unified halt. The guards placed their hands on their swords, all sensing the peculiar atmosphere as well. If a battle broke out on this narrow road, it would be fraught with peril.

By the time Reynaldo recognized the danger, it was already too late. An arrow sailed down from overhead and pierced the back of a guard's horse. The beast flew into a fit of rage. Screaming, the guard plummeted off the edge of the cliff-like road.

“Hurry!” Reynaldo bellowed.

He raced his horse down the narrow road, dodging the arrows and protecting his head with his cloak. He had to control the spooked beast to stay mounted. Everything depended on his skill as a rider. Could he continue galloping onward without being bucked off?

Behind him, his guards and servants screamed. In all likelihood, a few had fallen off their horses, but he had no time to rescue them. Instead, he gripped the reins of his steed with all his might.

When the road widened somewhat, Reynaldo stopped and looked behind him. The horse pulling the carriage had been pierced with an arrow, causing the beast to fly into a rage. Reynaldo watched in horror. At this rate, the carriage would fall off the cliff, taking his sister's casket with it. He jumped off his horse reflexively and raced towards the vehicle.

An arrow had pierced the coachman's shoulder. Seeing that, Reynaldo jumped into the driver's seat and grabbed the reins. While the falling arrows were few in number, the archers were definitely targeting his party.

"Keep your head down!" he shouted at the coachman, using the reins to direct the horse into a gallop.

The horse regained some of its composure thanks to Reynaldo's control. Despite being shaken, the beast started galloping. Each time one of the wheels lurched, the coachman screamed. Teeth gritted, Reynaldo drove the carriage forward. He couldn't let the coffin fall off the cliff. No matter what, he would return Rosemary to her homeland. Perhaps this desperate wish reached the heavens, for Reynaldo soon came within a few paces of where his favorite steed waited for him.

When he momentarily relaxed in relief, pain lanced through his right shoulder. A silent scream escaped his lips. A sharp arrowhead pierced him directly through the shoulder. Reynaldo's grip on the reins slackened, causing the carriage and the coffin to lose their balance.

Aware of the futility, he reached towards the casket, blood pouring from his shoulder. He'd done the same thing during Rosemary's hanging, extending a hand that would never reach her. Reynaldo longed to save her with this hand. And yet, he'd never successfully seized hold of anything. The woman he loved always disappeared before his very eyes.

With a thunderous boom, Reynaldo's carriage fell off the cliff with him still in the driver's seat. Thanks to the trees acting as cushions, he didn't slam directly into the ground. Nevertheless, the branches whipped every inch of his body, and when he slipped from the trees, the tremendous impact of hitting the earth nearly caused him to black out.

The coachman and guards, who'd also fallen, were moaning faintly. Their survival was a cause for celebration. Ignoring the pain in his shoulder and the bruises he'd sustained from falling, Reynaldo sat up and took in the situation. Most of the party had plummeted off the road. Many of the guards who'd fallen before him had passed out. Thanks to the cliff being relatively short and the trees growing at the bottom, they had—at the very least—survived. Still, he

couldn't just sit there. So he slapped the faces of those who'd passed out to wake them.

"Wake up," Reynaldo instructed. "You need to get out of here as fast as possible."

"Lord... Reynaldo..."

"Listen to me. Don't return to Rose. There might be an ambush waiting for us there."

Somehow, Reynaldo got everyone awake and on their feet. Though no one had sustained serious wounds, no one was unscathed either.

He then checked on Rosemary's coffin, which had fallen alongside him. Thanks to the nails keeping the lid shut, the casket remained sealed and unharmed despite the steep drop. Still, he wouldn't be able to carry the coffin. Frustrated, Reynaldo balled his hand into a fist.

"Are we dealing with bandits?" a guard asked while helping the wounded.

Reynaldo shook his head. "I recognize those arrowheads. The small northern tribes use similar ones. These aren't bandits."

When Reynaldo pulled the arrow from his shoulder, he recognized the tip. It resembled those belonging to the tribes he'd once deceived and subjugated.

They have every reason to seek vengeance against me, but why now of all times? Also, how did they learn that I'd be traveling with this carriage?

"We don't have time," Reynaldo said. "Those who can move, carry the injured to a safe place and hide. Those who can still ride a horse, make haste to the capital or the McClain region."

"What will you do, Your Grace?" a guard asked.

"I'll slip out of here after confirming the enemy's identity."

"You'd be putting your life in peril! Please take a guard with you!"

"You will only get in my way right now. I'll have an easier time acting by myself."

The guards all hung their heads.

No one had shallow enough wounds to serve as Reynaldo's protection. He couldn't even move his dominant right arm himself. The place where the arrow had pierced his flesh still throbbed. Everyone had a higher probability of living if they hid themselves rather than running around without a plan. Thus, Reynaldo had given these directions.

In the worst-case scenario, Reynaldo could escape on his favorite steed, which had survived the volley of arrows. However, he couldn't leave without Rosemary's coffin. The enemy must have been aware of his circumstances. He could never leave her side and flee, regardless of how long ago she'd died.

"The enemy will come looking for us soon," Reynaldo warned. "Get out of here now. If you can ride a horse, go call for help. The representative feudal lord should be in McClain. You can also report to King Rizel in the capital."

After giving their assent, the guards picked up their wounded allies—as well as the unconscious coachman—and fled the scene. One of them mounted an uninjured horse and galloped down the road. Though the enemy would most likely target him, attempting to deliver a message was better than dying in vain here.

Alone, Reynaldo placed a hand on his sister's coffin. "Forgive me, Rosemary..."

How pathetic that I still can't protect you, even after all these years, he cursed himself. Even so, he couldn't flee while carrying such a heavy coffin. He would have to return to this place after regaining his footing.

"I'll come back here no matter what," Reynaldo said. "Please wait for me until then."

Suppressing his reluctance to leave her, he moved to find a hiding place. The enemy's ringleader would undoubtedly check the carriage. Reynaldo covered his tracks while searching, anticipating that the enemy would scour the area.

Finally, he found a hole in a large tree big enough for one person to squeeze into it. Pressing a hand against the wound on his shoulder, he forced himself to endure the pain. Sweat poured from his brow, but somehow, he held his breath and waited for his enemies. A horse whinnied in the distance. Hooves and human footsteps crunched the fallen leaves.

“They were here.”

The distant voice belonged to a man with a heavy accent. Reynaldo tried to distinguish a single person’s voice from the chatter of a group.

“Search the area,” a voice commanded, followed by the sound of horses galloping. Among the speakers, he even heard a woman’s voice.

“Thank you,” she said with a laugh. “That was a most delightful stroll through the mountains.”

Reynaldo would recognize that unpleasant voice anywhere. His blood boiled. Had he ever been so angry in his entire life? The mere sound of Tia’s unforgettable voice drove him mad with rage.

The way she elegantly rode her horse seemed out of place with the situation. After someone helped her dismount, she stood in front of Rosemary’s coffin, which lay on the ground. Her lips curled into a twisted smile.

“It’s been far too long, Lady Rosemary,” Tia said, repeating the same greeting she’d often spoken as a girl. “To think you would prove so useful even in death. You never cease to amaze me.”

She spoke to the coffin at her feet with utter delight, as if Rosemary were actually standing in front of her.



If Reynaldo could have leapt out and decapitated Tia, he would have, even if his other foes struck him down. However, he couldn't do anything with his injured dominant arm. His body trembled with frustration. He'd never hated anyone as much as he loathed Tia. He'd believed his thirst for vengeance had been quenched, but a voice inside his head screamed at him to kill her.

I want to slaughter her. I want to tear Rosemary's torturer apart, limb from limb.

Now was not the time to act based on emotions. He needed to consider how Tia prepared this ambush. How had she known that Reynaldo would be transporting Rosemary's coffin? What was her goal, and what were her ties to the small tribes?

After formulating several hypotheses, Reynaldo came to a single conclusion. This danger could likely befall others, not just himself. There was a high chance of Mary becoming another one of Tia's victims.

If there's a traitor in the palace, she could be in danger.

Even in the absence of a traitor, rumors had been circulating about Reynaldo's relationship with Mary. Suppose this attack had been arranged by someone with an intensely personal grudge against him. In that case, they would no doubt target Mary, whose safety could be used against him.

Please, Albert... Reynaldo prayed. *Please protect Mary in my pitifully inept stead.*

If his hypothesis proved correct, Mary was in danger. Reynaldo couldn't allow any harm to come to her. Unable to do anything but curse himself for this absurd situation, Reynaldo prayed. Hopefully, his desperate pleas would reach Albert and Mary, who were still in the capital.

* * *

I chose a black one-piece dress from the clothes I'd brought from home. After putting it on, I checked myself in the mirror for anything unusual.

"I wonder if this is too plain," I muttered to myself. "Still, I can't dress up any more than this..."

While the skirt was long and simple, the collar had a touch of flower-patterned embroidery that I'd sewn in my spare time. After searching up and down for something to wear on special occasions, I finally found this dress. Later, I added the embroidery to spruce it up a little. That was a good idea on my part.

Albert would come to get me soon, and we'd be heading to the McClain region today. During the ceremony, Rosemary's remains would be returned to her childhood home and placed in a new grave. I'd chosen a black dress out of respect for the occasion. Since this wasn't a funeral, we didn't need to wear mourning clothes. But we couldn't wear anything too gaudy either. Not that I had any such clothes to begin with.

I attempted to put together a mature outfit but was restless, wondering if I'd made the right choice. Feeling like a bundle of nerves, I finished preparing for the trip way too early. Now I only had to wait for Albert.

While I paced around the room, agitated, I heard a knock at the door. I forgot propriety and flung the door open without a word, thinking Albert had arrived early. I let out a yelp when I saw their face. This sort of blunder was bound to happen when you didn't confirm the identity of a visitor.

"Liella," I greeted her. "Sorry to startle you. What's going on?"

Me throwing the door open surprised Liella as well. I apologized to her when she backed away a little. I hadn't expected a colleague to visit me so early in the morning. Starting today, I would be taking a break from the chivalric order until the ceremony ended. That would be a few days, at least.

"Honestly, though, this isn't any different from your official duties," Sir Eva had said graciously. "You'll be accompanying the high commander, after all."

Liella knew I was leaving today. I'd told the knights and other handmaids about my trip. Why visit me now, of all times?

"Sorry to bother you so early," Liella apologized. "I wanted to confirm something related to our job before you left. Can you spare a few minutes right now, Mary?"

"Yes, if it's only a few minutes..."

During the fiancée selection, I'd worked alongside Liella a few times. Palace handmaids did our best to ignore status and position, never addressing each other with titles when speaking. But, while Liella and I were on a first-name basis, we weren't close friends.

Liella was a palace handmaid before the uproarious fiancée selection. Back then, she taught me about the job, but she always treated me harshly as well. Perhaps she coveted the position as Prince Rizel's fiancée. Or perhaps she had feelings for Albert or Reynaldo. Recently, she'd even been shooting me dirty looks in Reynaldo's office. Regardless, her visiting me like this was well within the realm of possibility, as she was serious about her job.

After giving my assent, I followed Liella down a palace corridor.

"You're heading to the McClain region soon, right?" Liella asked. "I've heard there's going to be a ceremony honoring the construction of Lady Rosemary's memorial."

"That's right," I confirmed.

"Then it's true that you're distantly related to Lady Rosemary?"

I smiled and dodged the question.

As Liella hastened through corridors and down staircases, she explained why she'd asked for my help.

"I found chivalric order uniforms in the basement storage room. When I checked them, they looked brand new, as if they'd just been tailored. From what I can guess, the person who received the packages must have been confused about where to send them, so they mistakenly wound up in the storage room. Originally, I wanted Sir McClain or Sir Eva to look at the packages, but in the chivalric order, delivering uniforms is a handmaid's job, right? So anyway, I'd like you to look at the packages and report back to Sir McClain."

"I did request a few new uniforms, but they wound up in the storage room?" I asked. "What on earth happened?"

The palace storage room contained emergency supplies, but I'd only visited the place a few times for work. It was a vast space, and I'd never set foot within its depths. Hardly anyone else used it, either. The basement was an

inconvenient location. It was an altogether strange place for packages to have wound up.

Before long, we reached a door in the deserted basement. Liella took out the key to the storage room, unlocked the door, and went inside first. At her urging, I picked up a candlestick and match that had been placed near the door, lighting a flame to help us see in the dark.

I looked around with the help of the faint light. Not a single window graced my field of vision, and items lay on the ground in a disorganized mess. The darkness hid its depths, but this place was clearly enormous.

Liella pointed to a burlap sack lying on the ground. "That's where the uniforms are."

Despite my hesitation to move in the darkness, I went to check the bag. When I glanced at Liella, she was holding the door open with one hand to keep it from closing. Relaxing, I took another step forward.

"Have you heard the gossip about Duke Rose and Sir McClain doting on you?" Liella asked.

Alarm bells went off in my head. I took another step forward. "Yes, I have."

"And is it true that other women are playing mean pranks on you?"

"Hmm. Something of the sort might be happening."

Other women in the palace had been showing off by tripping me or splashing water on me. I never took their bait since they were acting out of jealousy. Responding to the harassment would only delight the perpetrators. Ignoring it was the smart thing to do.

While some women obviously disliked me, they were all moved to different posts after a while. Presumably, other witnesses told Albert or Reynaldo about my harassment, as I hadn't tattled on anyone. They hadn't mentioned anything to me either. Talking about the matter seemed likely to stir up conflict, and as a result, we all held our tongues.

Why was Liella asking me these questions? Her attitude put me on high alert, but I couldn't put my finger on why. My wariness spiked. I looked towards the

entrance again. Liella was still waiting in front of the door.

I pushed my speculations out of my mind, unable to imagine Liella harassing me. She was the daughter of a viscount, after all. Despite being a handmaid, she was a high-ranking noblewoman with a great deal of pride. She wasn't the sort of woman who'd fallen on hard enough times to participate in such petty cruelties.

Even so, we weren't exactly on good terms. Every so often, I felt her shooting me dirty looks, like in Reynaldo's office. This wasn't envy born purely from covetousness or unrequited love. Her glare implied much more complex circumstances.

I don't fully understand the situation, but during my time as Rosemary, I received similar glares quite often.

During my past life, I'd been caught in a whirlpool of emotions more violent than a woman's simple jealousy. Liella's dirty looks reminded me of the glares I'd suffered back then.

Spurred by anxiety, I grabbed the bag and checked its contents. They appeared to be the uniforms I'd requested for tailoring.

"You were right," I told her. "These look like the chivalric order's uniforms."

Looking up, Liella still stood in front of the distant doorway, wearing a grief-stricken yet somehow twisted expression. This wasn't the face of an envious woman or someone taking cruel pleasure in harassment. Rather, her expression was closer to one of fear.

"I'm sorry, Mary."

The door thudded closed. Darkness consumed me. I hurried over to the entrance, utterly confused. The door was locked.

"Liella!" I cried. "What's going on?!"

She'd been hostile towards me, but I hadn't thought of her as the sort of woman who would participate in such things. More pressingly, I was trapped in the basement. I had little chance of opening the door until the next visitor came.

This is way overboard for harassment!

I banged on the door, but there was no response. Through the walls, only the sound of a woman's shoes running into the distance reached my ears. Liella was already retreating from the scene of the crime.

I tightened my grip on the candlestick in my hand. Somehow, I needed to get out. Albert would be visiting my room before long. How could I get word to him? Would he even notice that anything was amiss?

As anxiety threatened to crush me, I searched for anything in the darkness that might help me escape. Trapped in a lightless, soundless world, my entire body quivered. A similar fate had befallen me in the past. I'd been trapped in the darkness without a single spark of warmth to stave off the piercing cold and all-consuming silence.

Unbidden, I recalled Rosemary's time in prison. Tears spilled from my eyes, and I couldn't stop shaking.

"N-No, wait..." I mumbled.

Fear overwhelmed my instincts. I curled into a ball and hugged myself tightly, doing whatever I could to regain my sanity. At the same time, I stared intently at the candle burning in front of me.

I'm okay. I have light.

My situation was different from Rosemary's imprisonment. Without a doubt, I would have the chance to escape. During the final days of my past life, I'd given up hope of being rescueded.

"But I'm not Rosemary anymore."

My false accusation and imprisonment were both in the past.

Get your head together, I chided myself.

Finally, I regained my composure. With tension racking my body, I re-gripped the candlestick and looked around. My surroundings were dim and cramped, but one sound made my ears perk up. Faintly, something resembled groaning. At first, it terrified me even more, but as I reconsidered the matter with a cool head, I recognized the sound. It reminded me of the wind blowing through the

old wood of my home in Edigma.

“Could there be a path out of here?” I wondered aloud.

There were a few escape routes in the palace in case of an assault on the royal family. I didn’t know where they were, but I couldn’t dismiss the possibility of one being nearby. Gradually, I approached the groaning sound. When I located its source, I sensed the faint breath of wind.

“This must be the spot,” I murmured. “I can hear the wind from here.”

I pressed on the wall where the sound originated, but there was no response. When I shone my candlelight on the area in search of some contraption, muffled footsteps came from the other side of the wall. For one instant, I considered calling for help, but I changed my mind.

Would anyone arriving with such perfect timing be here to rescue me? The worse my premonitions are, the more likely they are to be right.

“Is this the place?” one of the approaching voices asked.

The speaker was a man, and he seemed to be searching for something close to the wall. However, there were two voices, and both of them had accents. Neither worked in the castle.

Snuffing out my candlelight, I hid behind a covering near the wall. From the other side, I heard at least two men continuing to search for something.

“Do you have the queen’s note?” one of them asked.

“Oh, this must be it.”

My heart leapt into my throat upon hearing the word *queen*. I clapped my hands over my mouth to cover my gasp.

Did I just hear what I think I did?

If I had, Queen Tia was one of their conspirators.

Also, they know about this secret passageway because she escaped from here!

On the day of Reynaldo’s coup, Queen Tia vanished. No matter where anyone looked in the castle, they couldn’t find her. She must have sneaked out through this secret passageway. Now, these two suspicious men were using the same

means to enter the castle.

The wall opened slowly. Apparently, the two men had found the contraption.

One way or another, I need to get out of here.

No sooner had I been imprisoned in the storage room than these two men appeared. In that case, I was probably their target. Even if I didn't know why they were after me, that much seemed obvious. Preparing to make my escape, I hid while facing the wall. After spotting an exit beyond the slightly open portal, I cleared my mind of any distractions.

With a dull sound, the hidden door finished opening. As I'd expected, the men appeared from the other side. I could make out their faces because of their candles, but I didn't recognize them. They were dressed in light garb reminiscent of merchants, but they held ropes and burlap sacks in their hands.

Could Liella have invited them in here...? No, I doubt that.

I dismissed this thought based on how she'd looked the moment before imprisoning me. More importantly, I doubted she knew about the hidden door. Yet, in the last moment, she'd worn a frightened expression, as if trapping me in here required a great deal of resolve. Someone else was pulling the strings, and that person told these men about this secret passageway. In all likelihood, they'd been ordered to capture me.

If I had to guess, Queen Tia was the one behind this.

But why me? I wondered.

I didn't consider myself valuable. The only possibilities that sprang to mind were my connections to Rosemary and Reynaldo. This timing matched perfectly with the moving of Rosemary's coffin. Perhaps this involved Reynaldo in some way.

First things first, I need to escape.

Contemplating the matter wouldn't help me right now. I watched and waited for the two men to enter the depths of the storage room. If possible, I wanted to escape through the secret passageway without being caught. However, if the men discovered me before then, my plan would come to nothing. As I watched

for the right moment, I inched toward the door leading to the secret passageway.

“Did you find her?” one of the men asked.

“Nope, she’s not here,” the other man replied. “It’s too dark to see anything.”

That settled it. They were looking for me.

I can’t just stand here—I need to go now!

After mentally giving myself the signal, I dashed into the secret passageway. Despite having no idea where this path led, I had no choice but to bet all my cards on it.

“Wait!” one of the men shouted, spotting me.

I sprinted down the passageway. There was a small door at the end of the gloomy, one-way corridor. After opening it, I came out onto an even smaller storage shed. I didn’t recognize this place, but stopping my pursuers came first. There was a shelf among the miscellaneous items, and I pushed it in front of the door, blocking the entryway. When my pursuers caught up to the door, they pounded on the wood, unable to open it.

Stop trembling with fear and look for an exit, I scolded myself.

There was only one door leading to the larger, underground storage room. I couldn’t leave through there, since I’d blocked the entryway with a shelf. All the while, the sound of two men ramming their bodies against the door in an attempt to open it echoed in my ears.

I searched for a way outside and finally located a small window. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t budge. The old, creaky window appeared to be locked. I snatched a small object from nearby and pounded it against the window.

The glass cracked with a shrill ring. Unflinchingly, I broke a large enough hole in the window for one person to slip through and started clambering outside. During my climb, fragments of glass cut my skin, but perhaps due to nerves, I didn’t feel any pain. Thankfully, there was solid ground right outside the window. I leapt out and scanned the area.

“Am I outside the castle...?”

I never would have imagined there being a passageway leading to a place like this. Castle walls towered all around me. As I took off, I searched for any place I might recognize.

So, the castle walls and this wooded area—both of which are deserted—hide a secret passageway, I thought. That makes sense. You could definitely escape from here in an emergency.

There probably wasn't a door on the outside to prevent intruders from sneaking in this way. From the outside, the storage shed looked like a small box. It didn't seem like the sort of place people could enter and exit.

Anyway, I need to get out of here, I thought while running like a madwoman. There wasn't a single soul in sight.

If I can at least make it to the castle gates, someone will be there.

Unfortunately, my prayers fell on deaf ears. The trapped men escaped from the building and were chasing after me.

Someone, please help me...!

I almost collapsed from sheer agony but mustered enough strength to continue racing forward. Even so, I couldn't outpace them. My pursuers caught up to me. One of them grabbed my arm in the middle of my run. I let out a piercing scream. If someone heard me, they might come to my rescue.

“Shut up!” the man roared while covering my mouth.

Though I resisted, the man used the rope he'd been carrying to bind my arms. As I thrashed about, the men held me in place, attempting to forcefully lift me onto their shoulders. My body trembled with fear. Tears of frustration welled in my eyes. Regardless, I never stopped thinking about what I could do to save myself.

Take...this!

I swung one of my still unbound feet upwards, kicking one of the men between the legs.

“Augh!” he shrieked.

As his grip on me loosened, I ran away again with my hands still bound. The other man chased after me, leaving behind his companion, who was curled up on the ground.

I'm almost there... Just a little bit farther!

I couldn't let myself be captured. I had to hold out until I reached the gate. Yet, once again, my prayers fell on deaf ears. Gasping for breath, my pursuer caught me around the waist and pinned me to the ground.

"You bitch!" he growled.

I closed my eyes, preparing for him to hit me. However, the pain never struck. Instead, the man let out a terrible howl and collapsed next to me.

An arrow stuck out from his back.

Trembling, I looked where the arrow had come from. I stood up to seek help, and upon seeing my rescuer, tears streamed from my eyes. Albert was racing towards me from a distance, carrying a bow. Relief washed over me, and I started blubbering.

* * *

ALBERT strolled down the corridor that housed the palace handmaids.

Am I a little too early? he wondered nervously upon reaching his destination.

Today, he and Mary would spend almost an entire day together traveling by carriage to McClain—Albert's new territory.

Thirty-six years old, and I'm this nervous to be going out with the girl I like? Albert thought, chuckling to himself. *I'm not used to this.*

Albert abandoned the idea of romance in the distant past. Or so he'd thought, at least. As of late, feelings reminiscent of a young man going through puberty smoldered within him. Even now, he was visiting Mary's room because he wanted to see her as soon as possible, despite their planned meet-up time not being for a while longer.

I hope I'm not being a nuisance, Albert worried while knocking on her door lightly.

Strangely, she didn't answer. It was too late for Mary to still be sleeping, and if she was getting ready, she would have responded.

"Mary, it's Albert," he called out, raising his voice slightly and knocking again. "Are you there?"

An odd sense of unease wormed its way into Albert's mind. Well aware of his discourteousness, he placed his hand on the doorknob. It wasn't locked.

"Sorry, but I'm coming in," he said.

If Mary was in the room and hadn't heard him, he would apologize. Yet what if that wasn't the case and she was in trouble? Compelled by this apprehension, Albert entered the room uninvited.

People had been speaking ill of Mary behind her back due to her closeness to Albert and Reynaldo. Albert had refuted all the lies about her. Likewise, he'd done everything in his power to stop her poor reputation from spreading. Along with Reynaldo, he'd kept a watchful eye on Mary to prevent as much harm from befalling her as possible. Regardless, rumors would inevitably arise in a place like the royal palace.

Surely nothing happened to her, right?

Unease overcame Albert. Once inside the room, it was evident that Mary had prepared to leave. She'd even organized her luggage for the trip. If she were here, they'd be able to depart. Yet, no matter how many times he called out to her, she didn't respond. From what Albert knew of Mary's personality, he couldn't imagine her leaving when she knew he would visit soon. In that case, a third party might have forced her to leave her room.

Albert dashed out of the room with no particular destination in mind. While deciding on his next course of action, he ordered a knight stationed in the palace to search for Mary. Appearing to have understood the situation, the knight ran off to relay similar instructions to his colleagues.

Where might she have been taken? Albert wondered.

A person living in the palace would choose a secluded location. If the perpetrator were committing a malicious act, they would want to do so away from prying eyes, whether they were merely harassing Mary or worse.

However, if the perpetrator wasn't a palace resident, they would probably take her outside. Then again, anyone from outside the palace would have been apprehended immediately and thrown out.

More importantly, Mary wouldn't open her door for a stranger. Besides, there were no traces of her room being ransacked. Even if the attacker *had* surprised her, the room should have been at least somewhat disturbed by her attempts to flee. In that case, the perpetrator must have been an acquaintance.

Albert dashed through the castle. "Have you seen Mary?" he questioned each staff member he passed. Unfortunately, none of them had.

Eventually, Albert crossed paths with a woman named Liella. When their eyes met, he sensed a reaction from her. Her face was pale, and she avoided Albert's gaze.

"Lady Liella," Albert called out to her, simultaneously blocking her path.

When she kept her head down and didn't respond, Albert repeated her name. He spoke in a low tone laced with intimidation. That voice belied his usually gentlemanly behavior towards women.

"Tell me where Mary is," he demanded.

"I-I don't know..." Liella mumbled in response.

Albert closed in on her, not hiding the murderous glint in his eyes. "Tell me—where did you take her?"

As he considered using physical force if she held her tongue, Liella burst into tears. A mere handmaid couldn't withstand a menacing interrogation from the high commander of the knights. Not for long, at least.

"The storage room," Liella answered through sobs. "I was threatened and told to bring her there. I'm so sorry..."

"Understood," Albert responded, suppressing his desire to race there right away. Instead, he handed Liella to a nearby guard. "Bring her to Sir Eva. Tell him to interrogate her about the situation surrounding Mary. Oh, and may I borrow your bow and arrows?"

After taking the guard's bow and quiver, Albert raced toward the storage

room. Though he always wore a sword, he'd borrowed the other weapon just in case.

Since Liella took Mary to the storage room, she's probably trapped inside, but I need to consider what to do if she's been taken outside.

Something even more disastrous could occur. Anticipating this, Albert borrowed the equipment. Having a horse would have been preferable as well, but time was of the essence. Albert hadn't fully grasped the situation, but he knew one thing: he needed to act fast. Judging from Liella's terrified expression, she hadn't just imprisoned Mary as a form of harassment. Liella also admitted to being threatened, which meant someone was targeting Mary.

Who would be targeting her? Albert wondered. *Either way, I can't allow anyone to steal her from me.*

Albert ran to the storage room while suppressing his rage. After darting down the stairs, he found the door to the basement room locked, even though he hadn't crossed paths with anyone on his way there.

No one else came this way? Albert asked himself, puzzling over the situation. *Does that mean they're already inside?*

Had Mary been locked inside the storage room, or had someone else followed after her and locked the door from within? Setting aside his questions, Albert kicked the door with all his might. It wouldn't break easily due to its sturdy construction, but after he'd rammed his heel into the wood countless times, it bent somewhat. With one last powerful kick, the door collapsed.

"Mary!" he shouted.

No one answered. A faint light streamed in from farther back.

"A hidden passageway?" Albert muttered to himself. "In a place like this?"

Despite his surprise, Albert pressed on. At the end of the passageway, he found a small storage shed built on the edge of the castle some time ago. Before, he'd wondered why the shed had been placed in such a deserted location, but evidently, it served as an emergency exit.

Albert found traces of people having come and gone, including a broken

window. After climbing outside to follow, he detected signs of people in the distance. According to his sharply refined senses, these individuals meant to cause others harm. While sprinting in a direction based on his intuition, he spotted a man in the distance.

As soon as Albert saw the man pinning someone down, he came to a halt, nocked an arrow, and drew back his bowstring. He could hit the target even from a distance. Moreover, he would eliminate anyone who meant to cause Mary harm. After taking a few deep, calming breaths, Albert released his arrow. It flew straight, striking the man and causing him to fall over.

He raced over to Mary. When she noticed him, tears poured from her eyes, all the tension draining from her body.

Thank God I wasn't late, he thought. I was able to save her this time.

He embraced the still-sobbing Mary, trembling with heartfelt joy.



AS I clung to Albert in his arms, the fearful trembling of my body eased. Without thinking, I held onto him even tighter, his heartbeat comforting me. Suddenly, it occurred to me what we were doing. Coming to my senses, I tried to pull away from him, but he continued to embrace me tightly.

My face flushed, and when I looked up at Albert, our eyes met. *Ah, how I longed to see those dark brown eyes,* I thought as he gazed at me with concern.

When Albert looked at me, did he see my true self, or did he see Rosemary? This worry had plagued me for so long. *Are you projecting my past self onto me?* I'd wondered when he'd professed his feelings to me. As a result, something about his declaration of love left me even more distressed.

Yet, out of anyone, *I'd* been the most concerned about Rosemary's lingering shadow.

I'm done with that.

I could finally let go of the doubt constricting my chest. Albert's racing to my aid filled me with joy. I loved him more than anyone, regardless of whether he couldn't forget Rosemary or continued to adore her. Free, I leaned into him, letting go of my deep-seated worries.

"Are you okay?" Albert asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Thank you so much. But how did you know where I was?"

Once he'd made sure of my safety, Albert looked into my eyes, his embrace relaxing. "My apologies, but I peeked into your room. When you weren't there, I went looking for you. In any case, I'm glad you're safe."

He'd looked for me simply because I hadn't been in my room? My heart swelled with joy, and I nearly burst into tears again, but I stopped myself.

After cutting the rope binding my arms with a dagger, Albert checked on the fallen men. The man who'd tried to drag me away had been pierced with an arrow, but what had become of his comrade? I had no way of knowing, seeing as I'd been running like a madwoman until a few minutes ago. Apparently, however, he'd noticed Albert and fled.

We need to chase after him, I thought.

“It’s okay,” Albert reassured me as if he’d read my mind.

He picked up the man who’d been pierced with an arrow. The man groaned, barely conscious.

“There you are, high commander!”

Sir Eva called out to us from near the castle gates, dashing over to Albert with a few knights in tow.

“We caught a suspicious man trying to slip out of the castle,” Sir Eva reported.

“Well done,” Albert said.

With that, we could rest easy.

“We threw him in the chivalric order’s prison,” Sir Eva continued. “Lady Liella has been taken to the guest room as well.”

Hearing her name, I turned to Albert. How did he already know of her involvement?

After passing the injured man to Sir Eva, Albert wrapped his arms around the backs of my knees. He picked me up in a bridal carry and began walking.

“I’m heading back now,” he announced.

“S-Sir Albert!” I cried out in a shrill voice.

I could hardly speak, what with Albert speed-walking as he carried me. While I reeled at this sudden turn of events, Albert headed towards the chivalric order’s building. All the while, I could see Sir Eva laughing from my elevated vantage point.

“Please put me down,” I said. “I can walk.”

Albert shook his head. “Respectfully, I must refuse. Your legs are injured.”

I looked at my legs, which were peeking out of my skirt. Putting aside my immodest appearance for the moment, I had sustained many cuts. Upon reflection, I probably scraped my legs when breaking the window and climbing outside. Back then, I hadn’t felt any pain, perhaps due to everything having occurred so quickly.

“It’s not just your legs,” Albert pointed out. “Your arms are injured too.”

Albert looked down at me from mere inches away, his gaze somewhat angry. When I looked at my arms again, I noticed a few cuts similar to those on my legs.

“I’ll treat you right away,” he said.

“That’s okay,” I replied. “It doesn’t hurt that bad.”

Getting a handle on the situation was more important. As I thought this, Albert’s dark brown eyes glared down at me, exerting silent pressure.

“I’ll treat you right away,” he repeated.

“O-Okay...”

Maybe I should keep my mouth shut for now.

I latched onto Albert’s shoulders to prevent myself from falling as he walked much faster than I did. Eventually, we entered the chivalric order’s building beneath the stares of curious onlookers.

Sir Eva had already finished interrogating the men. As such, he gave his report while the high commander treated my wounds. A bizarre sight indeed.

“They’re pretty tight-lipped,” Sir Eva said. “Well, that’s not too surprising. With a little more time, we could probably make them talk, but at the very least, they’re not from Dirésias. They have northern accents. Oh, and by all accounts, Lady Liella didn’t know anything about the men coming.”

Liella’s interrogation had already ended as well. According to Sir Eva’s report, her family had once been close associates of King Grey, but after his deposal, they’d lost their standing. Until recently, they ignored the management of their territory, sharing in the king’s wealth without any toil. Now impoverished, they began making unreasonable demands of Liella, who worked in the palace.

“Could you seek an audience with King Rizel?” they’d asked. “Or look for someone who can support us financially?”

This had likely been humiliating for Liella, who took pride in being the daughter of a viscount. For a long time, these worries plagued her, but one day, a certain noble’s messenger appeared before her. He passed along some money, asking her to cooperate. In short, she’d been taken advantage of.

“You know of a handmaid named Mary, correct?” the messenger had asked.

Liella hadn't thought well of me, as I'd shown up out of nowhere and spent so much time with the Duke of Rose and the high commander. Though she'd never harassed me directly, I had noticed the disgust in her gaze. Still, since we hadn't been friends, I could listen to Sir Eva's report without too much concern.

Albert held my hand softly, worried about me. When our eyes met, I smiled to convey that everything was all right.

After receiving instructions from the messenger, Liella didn't understand why my name had come up.

“The noble offering this money would like to stay anonymous,” the messenger explained. “Regardless, they hate Mary and would like to prevent her from attending a special occasion.”

That's right—the messenger asked Liella to act on the day of my trip to McClain. A mere handmaid receiving the favor of a duke and the high commander simply for being a distant relative of Rosemary's irritated Liella. My invitation to an exclusive ceremony was the clincher. Liella agreed to cooperate with the messenger, and after accepting the money, she hadn't been able to refuse his orders.

“Trap her in the storage room to prevent her from leaving,” the messenger had instructed.

At first, Liella sympathized with her employer and had no qualms about carrying out the plan. However, as the day of the assignment drew nearer, she'd grown increasingly uneasy. Why had she received so much money just to harass someone? Trapping Mary in the storage room would certainly suffice, but if you were simply locking someone up, weren't there better places to do so? And after Mary had been imprisoned, what did they plan on doing with her?

Liella had grown more and more terrified. Even so, she hadn't been able to return the money, as she'd already given it to her father. In the end, she went along with the plan.

“Liella's too ashamed to even offer an apology,” Sir Eva told me.

I smiled, unable to describe my feelings. After everything she'd done, Liella

would be banned from working in the palace. She'd lost the ability to ever see me again, much less apologize to me.

"Do you know who the messenger was?" I asked, curious about the instigator.

Sir Eva shook his head. "According to Liella, the messenger works for someone high-ranking, but she doesn't know who. Not to mention how foolish it would be to believe a single word from someone that dodgy."

Though Sir Eva spoke harshly, I agreed with him. At the same time, I reconsidered the matter. The employer was someone high-ranking who also knew about Liella's family circumstances and their former ties to King Grey. Furthermore, this person had instructed her to lock me in the storage room because they knew about the secret passageway. Their plan had been for the two men to kidnap me from there.

If I had to guess, very few people in the palace know about that secret passageway.

"The queen," I murmured. "Yes, they mentioned the queen's name..."

Realizing I'd spoken reflexively, I clapped my hands over my mouth. However —

"That makes sense," Albert said.

"That's exactly what I was thinking!" Sir Eva concurred.

Both men had already come to this conclusion. With the queen having possibly reappeared, a messenger needed to be sent to King Rizel as soon as possible. Due to unfortunate timing, however, he wasn't in the castle. Not long ago, he'd left to inspect various regions in the kingdom.

"The men who tried to kidnap you were probably hired mercenaries," Sir Eva said. "But what bothers me are their northern accents."

During his interrogation, Sir Eva hadn't been able to identify the men, but in contrast to their boorish natures, they'd displayed incredible loyalty. In the end, they refused to give up their employer. Kidnappers and evildoers of this sort often faced the death penalty; they regularly sold out their leaders and companions in the hopes of reducing their sentences. Nevertheless, these men

hadn't given anyone up. They hadn't even reacted to the queen's name.

"Whenever I provoked them into talking, they spoke with an accent," Sir Eva went on. "Judging from that, the small northern tribes are probably involved somehow."

"In that case..." I trailed off.

"Mary?" Albert asked.

As my mind jumped to the worst possible conclusion, I grabbed Albert. "Reynaldo might be in danger! We need to check on the Rose region right away!"

"Reynaldo?" Albert's face went pale as he came to the same conclusion. "I see."

Over ten years ago, Reynaldo deceived the small northern tribes and stole their territory. If my kidnapping was somehow related to that grudge, Reynaldo was their real target.

"The queen is likely involved behind the scenes, but if the northerners are targeting Reynaldo, he might be in danger," Sir Eva agreed. "Where is he now?"

"...He's traveling to McClain with Rosemary's coffin," Albert replied.

The horrible timing made the danger of this situation all too clear. My heart pounded in my chest. At times like these, my gut feelings tended to be right.

"High commander!" No sooner than an out-of-breath knight had burst into Albert's office, he brought us the worst possible news. "One of Duke Reynaldo Rose's guards has informed us that their party was attacked."

And sadly, my gut feeling was correct.

* * *

ONE of Reynaldo's guards raced to the castle on the brink of death. Despite his severe wounds, he recounted how their party had been attacked while transporting the coffin. Reynaldo had remained hidden in the mountains rather than returning to Rose, ordering anyone who escaped to deliver word to the palace or the McClain region.

Albert ordered a knight on standby to treat the escaped guard's wounds. Furthermore, he ordered someone to bring word of this situation to King Rizel.

"First, we need to rescue Reynaldo," Albert said. "I'll head there right away. I leave the capital in your care, Phil. May I borrow the first and second units?"

"Of course," Sir Eva agreed. "If you find yourself in need of reinforcements, please send word."

"I will. Mary, you stay here in the capital and wait."

"No, let me go with you!" I cried, unable to bear waiting while Reynaldo was in danger. "I'm begging you!"

"But..."

"I agree with Mary, boss," Sir Eva chimed in, coming to my aid. "She was attacked not that long ago. If something of the sort happened again, there's no guarantee I'd be able to rescue her in time. Taking her with you and protecting her yourself would be much safer."

While mentally thanking Sir Eva, I moved closer to Albert. I couldn't sit around in the palace and do nothing, even if I'd be a hindrance.

"Understood," Albert said. "We'll leave immediately, then. Whatever you do, don't stray from my side, Mary."

"Of course!" I agreed, giving Albert's hand a tight squeeze. "Thank you so much!"

I joined Albert and his men as they hurriedly prepared to depart. The castle was in a state of pandemonium. That morning, sleepy-eyed people awoke to the uproar, trying to make sense of the commotion.

After I finished preparing, I mounted the same horse as Albert, bringing only basic necessities. Albert shouted an order, and the knights departed the capital. *Reynaldo, please be safe*, I prayed as a unit's worth of horse hooves echoed across the castle town.

Still, I knew Reynaldo all too well. The enemy using Rosemary's remains as a shield would paralyze him. Whoever devised this assault even included that in their calculations. Worse, the place of the attack took a few hours to reach from

the capital by horse.

“Mary,” Albert said.

While galloping the horse at great speed, he held onto me tightly from behind to prevent me from falling. Despite the situation, my heart fluttered with something other than anxiety.

“Yes?” I responded quietly.

“Whatever you do, don’t stray from my side,” Albert repeated.

I nodded. It might have been inappropriate for the situation, but Albert’s warmth calmed my heart. Despite being terrified a while ago, being close to Albert put me at ease. I wouldn’t want to leave his side, even if he told me to.

When had I become so dependent on him?

When I first remembered Albert from my past life, I hadn’t felt these emotions. He’d been Rosemary’s first love during her youth, and these feelings bloomed quietly in her heart. However, because their love could never come to fruition, Rosemary’s feelings disappeared, becoming nothing more than memories.

Upon regaining my memories and having my identity exposed to Albert and Reynaldo, I gained more opportunities to speak with them. Before long, both of them being by my side had come to feel natural.

Albert and Reynaldo had borne the curse of vengeance, but after learning Rosemary’s deepest wish, both men started looking towards the future. Their transformations filled me with joy. After all, Rosemary had wanted them to break free of her ghost as well.

I came to love eating with Albert and Reynaldo, as well as laughing over trivial matters. By reincarnating as Mary, I’d been able to grant Rosemary’s unfulfilled wishes. At the same time, a new fear wormed its way into my mind. Did Albert and Reynaldo need *me* in their lives, or did they need Rosemary? This worry arose precisely because the time I spent with them was so precious.

Even so, I wouldn’t hesitate any longer. I was myself. As Mary Edigma, I accepted everything, including Rosemary’s past. That was the sum total of who I

was.

I felt so much lighter after coming to this realization. As my horse raced on, I reflexively closed my eyes against the dazzling light of the rising sun. The pleasant wind, the sun's rays, and Albert's warmth were all so precious to me. To protect everything dear to my heart, I would have to face down Queen Tia—the binding curse from my past.

Chapter Seven: Tia

“I-IT’S nice to meet you, Prince Grey... My name is Tia Danzes, and starting today, I’ll be your handmaid. I look forward to serving you!”

Remember to blush and act as though you’re somewhat unreliable.

“You’re very kind, Prince Grey. Even when I make mistakes, you still praise me.”

While you pretend to be a klutz, also lay the respect on thick. And would you look at that? He’s eating from the palm of your hand.

With that, the prince fell for Tia’s wiles, and the game concluded. She’d always loved pastimes in which you achieved results by playing your cards right and using your head. Thinking up her own games and seizing victory had always delighted her as well.

When Tia’s father ordered her to become the prince’s handmaid, she turned winning his heart into entertainment. Once she’d succeeded, her next game was convincing the prince to break off his engagement with Rosemary. By taking advantage of the gossip network, she spread rumors that Rosemary victimized her. Later, she even fabricated evidence of Rosemary harassing her.

Tia’s father chose the Marquis of Hubert—Rosemary’s father—as his personal opponent. Over time, he drove the Marquis into an increasingly tight corner.

My, how the effects compound when games collide, she thought as she pretended to tremble in fear before Prince Grey. Of course, the prince embraced her to put her at ease.

Yet, in the middle of the game, Rosemary issued Tia a single warning.

“What you have done to others will someday befall you as well.”

What are you, some kind of prophetess?

This occurred when Rosemary was in prison waiting for her execution.

Hearing this from the loser of the game rankled Tia. Even so, Rosemary's execution was scheduled a few days later. Tia was the victor.

And so, Rosemary was executed, and Tia became Prince Grey's fiancée. The ease of the game soured Tia's enjoyment. Though she searched for other amusements, none could compare to the ones she'd enjoyed 'til now.

However, one person seemed like a promising opponent. During Rosemary's execution, Tia spotted a young boy. Tears poured from Reynaldo Hubert's eyes as he grieved Rosemary's death. After looking at his beloved sister hanging from a rope, he turned his glare upon Tia. His murderous rage made Tia bubble with anticipatory delight. Yet, contrary to her expectations, this new game had never been set into motion, even after her wedding.

Later, Tia was ordered to have a child with her husband, whom she'd already grown tired of playing with. Nevertheless, she performed her wifely duties, eventually giving birth to a prince.

I never want to do that again, she thought after the delivery.

Childbirth wasn't fun enough to be considered a game. While experiencing pain for the first time, Tia shed tears despite her desire to remain composed. Even so, she'd somehow pushed the child out of her womb.

Who knew giving birth could be so painful?

As a woman of leisure, Tia was sensitive to pain. Nothing brought one back to reality like physical anguish. Tia cared for nothing but playing games. She'd despised childbirth—the epitome of pain. Thankfully, her first child was a boy, meaning she would never have to endure pregnancy again.

With time, Tia finally noticed signs of a new game being set into motion. Reports of Reynaldo Hubert conquering the small northern tribes reached the palace. Lately, Tia's hands had been far too idle, with only small amusements to keep her stimulated. On most days, she made sport of her husband's jealousy and participated in wild merrymaking that was unthinkable to the average person.

At long last, the young boy had challenged her to a game.

What sort of challenge will he bring to me? Tia wondered. *Should I do*

anything to prepare?

First, she hired a spy to increase the pawns at her disposal. Unfortunately, her role as queen limited her actions. She strategized as best she could, but her position wavered as the name of Duke Reynaldo Rose spread throughout the palace.

At this rate, he'll win, Tia thought. I need to secure an escape route in case of an emergency.

She did just that, uncovering an old secret passageway no one knew about. Should anything happen, she would be able to escape from there. Next, she secured a means of transportation out of the capital. A few noble families connected to the Danzes faction supported Tia. They would prove useful, as she'd won them over with riches and indolence.

Later, Tia sought a trump card against Reynaldo in secrecy. As a result of covert investigations into his actions, she learned of his private mausoleum. While this was splendid information, Tia still agonized over how to use it.

Lastly, Tia contacted the small tribes of the northern region without anyone's knowledge. Reynaldo became the sworn enemy of these tribes after he deceived them and stole their lands. If the Ice Duke sought revenge against Tia, she simply needed to turn the same vengefulness against him. Though the small tribes didn't wish for much, they thirsted for Reynaldo's blood. In that sense, their goals aligned with Tia's.

Ah, what a thrilling game.

Tia swelled with delight, for she hadn't played such a splendid game in so long. After she escaped the palace, her subordinates aided her flight, allowing her to relocate to a fortress belonging to a small tribe. From within those walls, she crafted her next plan alongside them. Not long afterward, Tia learned that Reynaldo was building a memorial for Rosemary in his homeland.

"We can't let this opportunity pass us by," Tia said in a conversation with the tribespeople.

According to her servants still hiding in the palace, Reynaldo had developed an interest in some nondescript handmaid.

I could use her as another trump card, Tia thought.

To enact this plan, she hired two Northmen to kidnap the handmaid from the secret passageway. If Tia played her cards right, she would be able to capture Reynaldo.

Her entire game centered around the so-called Ice Duke. He wanted to avenge Rosemary. Thus, Tia selected the small tribes as her champions; they sought vengeance as well. Tia agreed to work with them under one condition. After winning this game, she would rely on them to move her base of operations somewhere distant. The new tribal leader agreed to this. His people's desire for vengeance ran deep, after all. This stirred Tia's excitement, reminding her of a certain young boy glaring at her.

This is shaping up to be a most interesting game.

Tia regarded her status as queen as nothing more than a piece in a game. Nothing mattered except winning. As she transported Rosemary's coffin back to the fortress, her face split into a wide grin. Stealing Prince Grey, having a young woman falsely executed, and now this battle with Reynaldo—all these most delightful games involved Rosemary.

"Never stop entertaining me, Lady Rosemary."

As she spoke to the coffin, Tia wore an innocent smile—the same one she'd used to deceive Rosemary and Grey as a young woman. When Reynaldo hadn't revealed himself, she'd left a message for him on the remaining carriage.

"Tonight, Rosemary's coffin will be incinerated per her original punishment," the note read.

Most people in Dirésias were buried, but criminals were cremated to prevent them from ever walking the earth again. Two decades ago, Reynaldo stole Rosemary's remains after her execution. Upon learning of her incineration, he would reveal himself, despite knowing full well that it was a trap.

Furthermore, Tia's men had most likely captured Mary. Even if Reynaldo showed no interest in the coffin, how would he react to this second trump card?

So she waited with anticipation swelling in her chest.

“Queen Tia.” One of her servants joined her by the coffin. “The men in the capital were arrested while trying to capture the handmaid, but one of their companions brought her in their stead. He’s asking for payment.”

“I see,” Tia replied. “Well then, give him the money. If the other two were caught, our enemies will learn of this location before long. Reynaldo will come as well.”

When Tia favored the man with a leisurely smile, his face reddened before he ran off to deliver her message to the tribal leader.

Other than Tia, there were also northern soldiers guarding this fortress. They could hold their position for the time being, even if knights were sent from the capital. Keeping her escape route in mind, she waited for the game to begin, her heart racing with excitement.



I was led forward while riding on horseback with a burlap sack over my head. A rare experience indeed. That aside, we were heading towards a hidden fortress. The anxious man leading me had gone completely silent. I couldn’t blame him. One of the knights had an arrow trained on him from behind.

We departed the capital in haste, yet by the time we reached the scene of the attack, it had already been deserted. When we checked the carriage that had been transporting the coffin, we found an already opened letter left behind.

“What does it say, Sir Albert?” I asked.

After he read the letter, Albert glared down at it with a frustrated gaze. “In all likelihood, Lord Reynaldo is already tracking down the enemy.”

As the knights investigated the vicinity for survivors or other evidence, a man screamed from a short distance away. A portion of the knights ran in the direction of the voice. Albert spun me around, and I waited for the bloodshed to end from inside his arms. A bit later, one of the knights returned.

“The enemy was hunting down survivors,” the knight explained. “We captured a man trying to attack one of His Grace’s guards.”

“Understood,” Albert replied.

He took my hand and escorted me towards the source of the commotion. Though I hadn't said anything, he understood my desire to accompany him.

The captured man's face twitched with fear as he watched everything unfold. Apparently, the Rose guard had been struck with an arrow while helping Reynaldo escort the coffin. Soon after finding a place to hide, he lost consciousness. Once he'd finally gotten back on his feet, however, a man hunting down survivors found him.

Albert eyed the captured man while listening to the details of the situation. If he was a hired mercenary, getting him to talk would be difficult.

Suddenly, the man looked at me, surprised. At first, I had no idea why he even glanced in my direction, but something occurred to me.

"Sir Albert," I said. "He must know that I was supposed to be kidnapped."

When I spoke with certainty, the man looked surprised again. I must have guessed correctly.

"The enemy was trying to carry out my abduction and the assault on Lord Reynaldo at the same time," I hypothesized. "With me being here, this man knows the plan failed."

Albert's eyes widened. "How astute of you. In that case, he must be one of Queen Tia's accomplices. He probably knows the location of their fortress as well. Let's bring him with us."

Albert pulled the man up by his rope bindings. After one of the knights put a sword to his neck, he showed no signs of resisting.

"Please wait," I said, bringing everyone to a halt.

I proposed my spur-of-the-moment plan.

Albert vehemently opposed it, but in the end, I convinced him. As a result, I was now riding a horse with the captured man leading me, a burlap sack covering my head.

"Why not use me as bait?" I'd asked.

My plan was simple. If the knights stormed the castle all at once, Tia would escape, as she'd done during the coup. On the other hand, we could pretend as

though my abduction was a success. After the captured man and I entered the fortress together, the knights could watch for an opportunity to follow. One group of knights agreed to this plan. Another group—headed by Albert—opposed it. However, allowing Tia to escape here would merely prolong the situation, forcing us to track her down all over again.

“While I act as the decoy, all of you can seize control of the fortress,” I’d said. “If you block off all paths of retreat, Tia won’t be able to escape.”

Albert shook his head. “I refuse to do anything that will put you in danger!”

“Then send another knight with me. If he takes off his uniform and accompanies the kidnapper, we should be able to fool our enemies. And once we’ve made it through the front door, that knight could guide everyone in from the inside.”

We would use the captured man until we entered the enemy’s stronghold. After my guardian knight seized control of one section of the fortress, he could guide the others inside. We couldn’t do anything drastic until we knew how many soldiers were inside the stronghold.

It may have been a reckless plan, but news of my capture would increase the odds of Tia keeping Reynaldo alive. Presumably, she wanted to trot me out in front of him.

“Please,” I’d begged. “If there’s even the slightest chance of saving Reynaldo, it’s worth trying.”

Even Albert knew my reckless plan was our best hope of saving Reynaldo under the current circumstances. Surprise attacks were risky, but if we succeeded, the odds of victory would be in our favor. Of course, I would still be putting myself in danger.

“I know you’ll protect me, Sir Albert,” I said. “That’s why I can suggest this.”

Albert would never let me come to any harm. When I spoke with the utmost confidence, Albert sighed heavily but gave his consent.

“Take the captain of the first unit with you,” he instructed. “I would be identified right away. And don’t do anything reckless. Your safety comes first.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “Thank you so much!”

In the present, I was invading the fortress as part of my reckless plan. The captured man led us forward under the captain’s threat. Speaking of the captain, he’d probably been chosen due to his frightening visage, but he was actually very nice.

Due to the burlap sack, I couldn’t see for a while. Instead, I focused on the barely audible sounds from outside. The man we captured was conversing with the gatekeeper.

“The moment you say anything to harm us, your head will roll,” the captain threatened our captive not long ago. As such, the man didn’t resist, simply reporting his capture of us. The gatekeeper didn’t ask about the captain either.

Suddenly, my body jerked. The horse must have moved. After a brief silence, someone removed the burlap sack from my head, restoring my vision.

“Are you all right, Lady Edigma?”

As the captain’s face appeared before me, he removed the ropes binding my hands.

“Yes,” I replied. “What’s going on right now?”

“I was told to wait here.”

On closer inspection, we’d been led into a small waiting room with only plain chairs and a desk. The captain had knocked out our captive, who was lying on the ground.

“I needed to put him to sleep for a good, long while,” the captain said. “We can’t trust him, after all.”

He bound and gagged the man with materials he seemed to acquire from thin air. That done, he tossed the man out of sight. Albert’s knights took their jobs seriously.

“How many soldiers did you see on our way here?” I asked.

I hadn’t caught a single glimpse of our surroundings due to the burlap sack. Conversely, the captain saw everything while playing the part of a mercenary.

“I didn’t see many on my way here,” he replied. “This stronghold doesn’t seem to contain a large force. It should be easy for us to signal to the high commander.”

“And how are we going to do that?”

“Oh, I forgot myself. Please take this. I have an extra one.”

The captain handed me something called a smoke candle. I’d never seen one before, but I knew about them. They were used to raise smoke signals.

“Break off this part when you want to raise the signal,” the captain instructed. “The inside will ignite, and smoke will pour out of the candle.”

“Thank you.”

“This will be the signal for the high commander and his men to attack from the front. I’ll throw a rope over the wall to let a portion of our forces in from there. I’ve already decided on a possible location, so we can raise the signal and have them scale the wall in the same place. All that’s left is to put the plan into motion. If a better opportunity presents itself, use the candle then. Our men will see the signal as soon as one of us uses it.”

As I placed the smoke candle in my pocket, the captain peeked through a crack in the door.

“We should be safe now,” he said, opening the door softly. “Let’s go.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

We did our best to leave the room quietly. Thankfully, we didn’t see many soldiers inside the gloomy fortress. Based on how unaccustomed they seemed to security roles, they were probably mercenaries. Regardless, we continued onward while holding our breaths.

Eventually, we arrived at a place that served as an easily identifiable landmark. The captain threw his rope over the wall and secured it to a large tree on our end. With Albert’s men storming the front and scaling the wall, they could surround the enemy.

Next, we needed to locate Reynaldo. We kept ourselves hidden while searching for him and the queen since we didn’t know where either was.

Albert's plan was: We would regroup with Reynaldo if possible, but if this proved difficult, we would hide and observe from nearby. Alternatively, we would raise the smoke signal if we found the queen or Reynaldo was in danger. Either way, Albert wanted us to raise the smoke signal as soon as we found the queen, even if Reynaldo wasn't there. After all, he might not have reached the fortress. In the worst-case scenario, he might have been captured already.

"It's a dangerous gamble, but Reynaldo would agree if he were here," Albert said. "He would prioritize the capture of Queen Tia, regardless of whether his life was in danger. Oh, but please don't misunderstand. This isn't for revenge. Capturing the ringleader—in this case, Queen Tia—provides us with the best chance for survival. If we leave her to her own devices, she could cause international problems. As the new prime minister, Reynaldo believes this would be the worst possible situation for Dirésias."

At any rate, I wanted to confirm Reynaldo's safety as soon as possible.

Please be okay.

Unable to do anything but pray, I walked around the fortress with the captain in search of Queen Tia. My prayers fell on deaf ears. While hiding in the shadows, I heard a voice that plunged me into despair.

"We've captured Reynaldo Rose!" a soldier shouted excitedly. "Take him to Queen Tia!"

When I shot up to catch a glimpse of Reynaldo, the captain pressed me back down by the shoulders. We needed to be patient.

"The situation is dire, but we'll be able to locate Queen Tia," he said. "Let's stay put for now."

I nodded. Still hiding, I stole a glance in the direction of the voices. They were gradually approaching us. Multiple men restrained a silent Reynaldo and led him forward. Ropes bound his hands, and wounds covered his body. He showed no signs of resisting arrest. Though the soldiers claimed to have captured him, he must have brazenly marched into the fortress after reading Tia's letter.

I feared as much.

I correctly predicted how he would react to the stolen coffin. That broke my

heart. Reynaldo would lay down his life to retrieve his sister's remains, no matter how many years she'd been gone. The knights had doubted that he would be so impulsive. However, I'd known the truth—come hell or high water, he'd storm the fortress.

Despite knowing that I was her reincarnation, Reynaldo's one and only beloved sister still slept within that coffin, even if only her bones remained. Rosemary's foolish and most beloved younger brother would never give up on her.

In that case, I can't give up either.

My past self prayed for Reynaldo's happiness, and I would grant that wish no matter what.

"Let's follow them," I said to the captain, steeling myself.

He nodded. More people gathered in the fortress due to Reynaldo's capture, and we followed them stealthily.

* * *

A few hours ago.

For a long time, Reynaldo hid, his teeth gritted against the pain of his wounds. Sometime later, all signs of the enemy disappeared. He went to check on the carriage the coffin had been stolen from. A letter was left in its place. After Reynaldo read it, he steeled himself. He couldn't imagine the queen returning Rosemary's remains unscathed, whether he allowed himself to be captured or offered up his life or not.

Could I at least take the life of the queen, who's a blight on our country?

Usually, Reynaldo wouldn't have entertained such short-sighted ideas, but he decided to storm the fortress with this goal in mind. More importantly, heading into enemy territory would buy time for help to arrive.

Returning to the site of the attack, he counted the number of hoof prints left behind. He compared the number of enemy horses to the number he'd brought with his guards. According to his calculations, one horse safely escaped. Based on the hoof prints, the rider was heading towards the capital.

“Good choice.”

Reynaldo intentionally left the letter in the carriage. Likewise, he used a rock as a paperweight to keep it from blowing away. Then he headed towards the fortress.

Albert and others would react as soon as they learned of the attack on Reynaldo. So long as the letter remained intact, the queen’s involvement would come to light, even if his attempt to buy time failed. Though he worried about the letter being disposed of, he would have to leave this single factor to chance. He had no comrades or tools to help him.

His only other concern was Mary. Tia would likely use her as another trump card. However, if Mary had been captured, she would probably be taken to the same fortress, supposing Tia meant to trot her out in front of him.

When the image of Mary rose to his mind, Reynaldo offered her a silent apology. He’d wanted to protect her from everything, to shield her from suffering. He sighed wearily at the idea of getting her wrapped up in this ordeal.

At the very least, I hope you’re safe. So long as Albert is there, I can’t foresee you coming to any harm.

Yet, he remained concerned.

Arriving at the fortress, he received a rough welcome. Based on the familiar northern accents of the soldiers, Tia had indeed used the enmity of the small tribes to her advantage. They despised him. Even now, they skirmished with Rose, and he settled what accounts he could financially. That said, grudges didn’t just disappear. Reynaldo knew that all too well.

Revenge was an endless cycle.

Ah, I see, he thought with a humorless chuckle. *That’s why Mary put a stop to my vengeance.*

Mary was the reincarnation of Reynaldo’s elder sister. Even if Rosemary’s remains were cremated, her soul would remain with Mary. Even so, he couldn’t ignore his sister.

I might as well be cursed.

Reynaldo brought this calamity on himself. While Rosemary reincarnated into her desired form and found contentment, Reynaldo hadn't changed. When vengeance was within his grasp, Mary told him what his sister wished for until the moment of her death. Even now, Rosemary was everything to him. He had no regrets about that. If he had one regret, it was involving Albert and the small tribes in his vengeance.

Rosemary only wished for my happiness, and yet... I can't find happiness without her.

After being dragged to a room, Reynaldo was shoved through the door. He recovered from a stumble and looked to find a woman elegantly drinking wine.

It was Tia.

"It's been too long, Lord Reynaldo."

She greeted him with the same innocent smile as always, but Reynaldo knew the terrors lurking beneath that expression.

"Being the queen of bandits suits you perfectly, Tia," he spat back.

"Now, now, don't be rude. These fine men are going out of their way to help poor little me."

The tribesmen in the room relaxed when Tia smiled at them. This was what made her so frightening. By acting like a pure and innocent girl, she drew the attention of men. She wasn't seductive in the same way as a prostitute, but men fell for her wiles all the same. Despite seeming innocent, her gaze was that of a vile enchantress. How many men died or suffered cruel fates due to those eyes?

"How about you drop the little girl act?" Reynaldo asked. "It makes my skin crawl coming from an old hag. Just looking at you gives me secondhand embarrassment."

Though he tried to get under Tia's skin, it didn't bother her.

"Oh, Reynaldo, you never were one to mince words," she said with an impish giggle.

This woman had killed Rosemary, crushed House Hubert, and wrapped the

prince around her finger while feigning innocence and frailty. In the end, she even won the northern tribes over to her side.

“To be honest, I’ve always wanted to play one of my games with you,” Tia continued.

After finishing her wine, she approached Reynaldo. Perhaps due to the dim lighting, he sensed something off about her appearance, but he couldn’t pinpoint what.

“You’ve always found such wonderful ways to delight me,” Tia crooned, closing the gap between her and Reynaldo. The wine had rouged her cheeks, and she stroked Reynaldo’s jaw with a slender finger. “I’ve been wondering what game we should play for so long.”

“You’re as vile as ever,” Reynaldo spat.

Tia brushed off his comment with a smile. “Come now, my lord, I only meant to praise you.”

Reynaldo furrowed his brow. An odd sense of déjà vu overcame him as he looked at Tia’s smiling face from mere inches away. The sense of wrongness he’d felt earlier intensified. For whatever reason, something about the queen seemed familiar. Not her face, as Reynaldo had always detested looking her in the eye.

Then what could it be?

The design of her dress was different from what she usually wore. As soon as he realized this, Reynaldo’s blood boiled with murderous rage.

“Did you finally notice?” Tia asked with a smile, enraptured by his wrathful expression.

“You stole from my sister, you thieving whore?!” Reynaldo bellowed.

“Of course,” Tia replied. “I’ve taken good care of all her favorite dresses and gems.”

She wore a flower-embroidered dress that had been one of Rosemary’s favorites. Reynaldo’s vision turned red. The lily-colored dress had looked splendid on Rosemary, but it would never suit a woman as wicked as Tia.

When Reynaldo lifted his bound arms to strike Tia, the men on either side of him restrained him, beating him into submission. Ignoring the pain, he glared at Tia. However, she merely responded with a sweet smile, enjoying the fury in his eyes.

This woman is insane, Reynaldo realized, warning bells going off in his head. I have to kill her, and not for vengeance or national security. Her mere existence poses a threat to this world.

“I’ve invited a woman here today for this very occasion,” Tia said, her words plunging him into even deeper terror. “What was her name again? Ah, yes, it was Mary. You know her as well, I believe?”

Tia smiled sweetly as she spoke Mary’s name, causing the blood to drain from his face. His terrible premonition had been right on the mark.

Does she mean to continue tormenting us even further?

Tia’s smile changed to one of deep satisfaction as she observed him. “I’ve been looking forward to seeing what kind of woman she is. You have a certain fondness for this handmaid, don’t you?”

“...You could say that. She’s a pure young woman. Her heart isn’t an ugly husk like yours.”

“You’re making me jealous,” Tia said with a giggle, absorbed in her merrymaking. “And how might I make a game of tarnishing that purity?”

Tia’s unusual behavior made the surrounding men uneasy. Her suitors were as numerous as the stars, but in the end, those men all died with terror etched upon their faces. Reynaldo had witnessed this countless times in the past. At first, she would seduce them with her harmless, innocent smile. In the end, she always betrayed them cruelly, turning them into playthings.

“Would someone bring her in here?” Tia called.

“I-I’ll do it!” one of the men restraining Reynaldo cried out, leaving the room.

Reynaldo tried to form a plan for protecting Mary when she arrived. He considered killing Tia with the dagger hidden up his sleeve, but with Mary being taken hostage, he would have to stay his hand for now.

No matter what happens, I have to protect Mary, Reynaldo thought. Tia will have her way over my dead body. Never again will she defile Rosemary's spirit.

Moments later, a different man from before dragged none other than Mary into the room, her hands bound. Despite being taken hostage, Mary stared Tia in the eye, boldly and directly.

* * *

AFTER being reincarnated as Mary and becoming a handmaid at the castle, I'd seen Tia countless times. She deliberately picked fights with King Grey to provoke him, shamelessly brought suitors into the castle, and hosted lavish tea parties with no concern for the cost.

Rosemary remembered Tia as a quiet handmaid, who only made mistakes and burst into tears when Prince Grey was nearby. Each time, the prince comforted her, and though Tia wept by his side, her eyes were devoid of emotion.

Even when Prince Grey broke off his engagement with Rosemary and formed a relationship with Tia, her eyes were still dead. This baffled Rosemary. Nevertheless, when she met with Tia prior to her execution and observed the other woman's features, she realized something.

This woman doesn't view other people as human.

And so, Rosemary issued her a warning.

"What you've done to others will someday befall you as well."

Even after being reborn as Mary, I still believed that. At this moment, murky delight filled Tia's eyes—a far cry from her once emotionless gaze. At last, she'd revealed her true nature.

Shortly before confronting Tia, the captain and I were hiding a short distance from the room, watching everything. Suddenly, a man darted out of the room.

"Bring the woman here!" he shouted at the soldiers on standby.

Most of the men on standby headed towards the room where I'd originally been taken. Seizing this opportunity, the captain knocked out the one man who'd remained as a lookout.

"I'm going to join Reynaldo before everyone comes back," I said.

“Are you serious?” the captain asked.

“I couldn’t be more so. Please send up the smoke signal!”

With a sigh of resignation, the captain tied up the guard, left the room, and prepared the smoke signal. While watching him from the corner of my eye, I pushed a shelf in front of the room to block the entrance.

As the captain finished throwing up the smoke signal outside a window, I grinned at him. “Will you come with me, sir knight?” I asked, knowing he had no other choice.

“Please tell the high commander not to kill me,” he muttered with another deep sigh.

He bound my hands for show before we entered the room. This way, it would look like I’d been captured and brought here against my will. Once we were inside, a few guards looked in our direction. Reynaldo was curled up in the middle of the room, with Queen Tia standing in front of him.

As she stared directly at me, vague memories of my past life rose to mind. I stared back at her, recalling what Rosemary told the queen.

“What you’ve done to others will someday befall you as well.”

Tia simply smiled as she held my gaze, seeming none too concerned.

Eventually, I nodded wordlessly to the captain.

He drew his sword and slashed the few men around him. Shaken and helpless, the men fell without resistance. The captain took control of the area in the blink of an eye, despite having been outnumbered.

Meanwhile, I took off, heading towards Reynaldo. As I moved to undo his bindings, the man who’d been pinning him down lunged in my direction. For one split second, fear paralyzed me, but Reynaldo leapt gracefully to his feet, using his long legs to kick down my assailant.

“Mary!” Reynaldo cried.

“Here you go!” I shouted back.

I tossed Reynaldo his short sword, which I’d retrieved from the carriage. After

easily cutting his bindings, he slew the man who attacked me. Finally, he turned the bloody sword on Tia, glanced in my direction, and let out a deep breath. Though wounds covered his face, he still smiled.

“You truly do one unexpected thing after another,” he said. “Thank you, Mary.”

I smiled back at him calmly.

The captain and I had formulated this plan earlier. While I entered the room as a decoy, he would look for an opportunity to strike down the guards. At the same time, I would run over to Reynaldo with his short sword. Earlier, we saw Reynaldo’s hands were bound while being brought to this room. If the bindings hadn’t been undone, I planned to use this sword to cut them.

“The most important part of this plan is speed,” the unit captain had drilled into me.

In the end, we succeeded. If Tia had recognized the captain, we would have been in danger, but that had been a needless worry. When Reynaldo saw us, he moved as if he’d known the plan all along.

Still, how did he react so well while injured? I wondered.

The captain nodded to Reynaldo. “I’m glad you’re safe, Your Grace.”

“You’re the captain of the first unit, aren’t you?” Reynaldo asked. “I need to ask Albert to provide you with a special reward. If you’re here, that means he’s close, correct?”

“Yes sir. I’ve raised a smoke signal, so his forces should be storming the fortress soon.”

“Sorry, but could you go call him for me?”

At first, the captain looked at me and Reynaldo worriedly, but eventually, he nodded and left the room. The ones left were me, Reynaldo, Tia, and the unconscious men.

“How was that, Queen Tia?” Reynaldo asked calmly, pressing his short sword to her neck. “Did you enjoy your game?”



Despite being soaked with sweat, Queen Tia smiled slowly. “Enjoy, you ask? At the very least, I’ve never fought a battle so fierce before.”

“Of course. Coward that you are, you’ve always run away. You only play your little games when your victory is assured. And I must admit—you’ve always been faster to flee than anyone.”

Reynaldo wore a cold expression, deliberately using a disdainful tone to provoke Tia.

“Indeed...” Tia allowed. “If I hadn’t planned these crude little tricks and sought to capture the handmaid, I might still have won.”

Though the queen looked in my direction, I had no idea what she and Reynaldo were talking about.

“Queen Tia,” I said. “With all due respect, this isn’t a game.” Throughout this conversation, the use of the word *game* felt wrong to me. “Games should be left to the drawing room.”

Tia laughed haughtily. “Am I even being scolded by lowly handmaids now?”

Even as she mocked me, I held her gaze, knowing nothing would reach her. So at the very least, I would leave her with these few words.

“What you’ve done to others will someday befall you as well,” I said in the same tone that Rosemary had.

Tia’s smile stiffened. “...What?”

Yes, she remembers, I thought with a slight smile myself.

Tia’s lips trembled.

“Have your actions not come back to haunt you?” I pressed.

Tia looked at me one more time with panic in her eyes. “Lady Rosemary...?”

When she addressed me with the same title as she had in the past, I smiled slightly again. Somehow or another, Tia’s innocent smile even fooled Rosemary until the very end.

“Mary!”

The door flung open with a loud bang, and Albert raced to me, sweeping me up in his arms. When I nearly collapsed from the force of the embrace, I leaned my full weight into him. Albert held onto me, unconcerned about anything else.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Albert said directly into my ear, his tone one of heartfelt relief.

I hugged him back gently, my heart pounding in my chest. “Sorry for worrying you.”

“I thought I might die from a heart attack. Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m perfectly fine. Reynaldo is the one you should be worried about.”

Reynaldo had wounds all over his body and needed to be treated as soon as possible. Albert and I looked at him. He stood in front of Rosemary’s coffin, which I hadn’t noticed was discarded in a corner of the room until now. Though slightly dirtied during the commotion, the coffin hadn’t suffered any major damage.

Albert and I walked over to the casket—or rather, Rosemary’s resting place. Before leaving on this journey, I wondered what I might feel when looking at the coffin of my past self. Now that I stood before it, nothing within me changed. Nevertheless, I placed my hand on Rosemary’s name and likeness, both of which had been carved into the casket. Her favorite flowers had been engraved on the surface. Clearly, the creator of this coffin cared a great deal for her.

“Rosemary...” Reynaldo murmured his sister’s name. He knelt before the coffin and offered an apology. “I’m so glad you’re safe. My selfish actions nearly put you in harm’s way. Please forgive me.”

Even after all these years, his love for Rosemary hadn’t diminished.

If Rosemary could have spoken to him, she probably would have forgiven him with some gentle chiding.

“Don’t put yourself in danger for my sake,” she would have said.

Even so, I loved Reynaldo for his devotion to Rosemary. She would forever reside in his heart, regardless of whether her life had ended or her coffin was

burned.

“I must apologize to you as well,” Reynaldo told me. “Sincerely, I’m sorry for putting your life in jeopardy. However, I’m also grateful. Not only did your actions protect Rosemary, but you also saved my life. Thank you so much.”

After favoring me with a gentle smile, Reynaldo bowed his head. At least, I thought he was bowing his head. Suddenly, his body lurched forward, and he collapsed.

“Reynaldo!” I cried.

He fell so suddenly that neither Albert nor I could support him. I collapsed to the floor beneath him, my hands grabbing his back. Not only was his body feverish, but he’d started to bleed. The commotion must have aggravated his wounds.

“Albert, he’s bleeding!” I called out.

“I’ll have him looked at right away,” Albert replied.

Other knights who’d been on standby lifted Reynaldo carefully and carried him to where their comrades had gathered. The knights had already suppressed the fortress’s soldiers, who were being taken back to the capital with Tia.

After receiving treatment from a still-present group of knights, Reynaldo was also placed on a carriage heading back to the capital. He slept facedown, as the vehicle’s rattling risked aggravating his wounds. Though cuts laced his entire body, the arrow wound to his shoulder was particularly bad. Apart from having salves smeared on him, Reynaldo had also taken medicine to prevent festering. Even so, he was still feverish, sweat pouring from his face.

I rode in the same carriage to act as his nurse, wiping sweat from his body. Despite his somewhat labored breathing, his expression was peaceful.

Suddenly, the carriage moved onto unsteady ground. The vehicle rattled, and Reynaldo’s eyes cracked open. From the looks of it, he’d regained consciousness.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He looked up slightly, noticing me. “...Where am I?”

“Inside a carriage belonging to the chivalric order. We’re bound for the capital. You came down with a fever due to your wounds and lost consciousness.”

“I see. How disgraceful...”

“Don’t say that.”

Seeing Reynaldo smile slightly at his blunder put me at ease.

“Where’s Rosemary’s casket?” he asked.

“Sir Albert ordered the carriages to return to the capital as soon as possible. Once the preparations are finished, he’ll take the coffin to McClain. Right now, knights are guarding it at the fortress.”

After remaining silent for a time, Reynaldo lifted himself somewhat from his facedown position, extending his hand towards where I sat. Sensing his intention, I gripped his hand.

“Mary,” he called out to me. “I remembered something you said.”

“Something I said?”

“Indeed. ‘I should have left you with a different future. One where you weren’t forced to seek vengeance.’ You spoke those words in Rosemary’s stead. ‘I don’t want revenge.’ You spoke those words yourself.” At this, Reynaldo gripped my hand tighter. “I used the northern people as a means to an end. My thirst for vengeance had so consumed me that I didn’t care about their resentment. As a result, the queen ended up using the small tribes as her pawns.”

When I remained silent, Reynaldo continued speaking.

“I alone perpetuated this cycle of vengeance. Surely, Rosemary wanted to stop me from creating any more sorrow.”

Reynaldo’s eyes warped painfully with melancholy. I squeezed his hand without answering.

“I finally understand what you said as I tried to exact my vengeance in the audience chamber...”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Well then...” I said, caressing Reynaldo’s sweat-dampened forehead. “I doubt you’ll make any more mistakes. Also, I hope you find happiness.”

Rosemary always wished for her younger brother’s happiness. When I stated this clearly, Reynaldo burst out laughing. That aggravated his wounds, causing him to groan.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Also, why are you laughing?”

“Ugh... I mean, you sound so much like Rosemary. Or rather, you sound so much like yourself.”

Reynaldo laughed again, unable to suppress his mirth despite the pain. Pouting, I scolded him, but even then, he wouldn’t stop laughing.

This is the first time I’ve seen him laugh so hard, I realized.

I hadn’t seen Reynaldo smile in a long, long time. Nonetheless, his expression was the same as the young boy’s from Rosemary’s memories.

Chapter Eight: Love & Decision Making

AS soon as we arrived in the capital, Reynaldo was taken to the royal hospital for professional treatment. According to the doctors, he would be hospitalized for a while.

At the same time, Tia and the tribesmen were imprisoned within the capital and underwent trial. Although their punishments hadn't been rendered yet, Tia was placed in the same prison cell Rosemary had occupied. That thought inspired complicated feelings in me, but I supposed it was fitting.

Albert and King Rizel grew even busier as they worked to resolve this most recent disturbance. Rosemary's memorial ceremony was postponed, and I continued working as a handmaid for the chivalric order.

"No matter how many times I think back on it, that was one crazy ordeal," Sir Eva said. While munching on a cookie, he handed me a cup of tea.

"Thank you." I accepted the tea from the opposite seat. "The knights helped me in so many ways. I can't think of a better group of men to have at my side."

"But you were the most impressive, Lady Mary. Not only did you escape the kidnappers, but you also volunteered to act as a decoy at the fortress. That's the stuff of legends. We knights should record this tale of heroism and sell it to the public. The sales would be a great source of revenue."

"You and your jokes," I said, attempting to change the subject while sipping my tea. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Sir Eva."

"I'm hardly joking."

Sir Eva had asked me to join him for tea during the middle of my workday. I was taking a break in his office.



Albert was hellishly busy due to the queen's arrest and couldn't perform his usual duties as the high commander. Thus, Sir Eva took over Albert's job and his office. These days, Sir Eva and I often had tea together during our breaks.

Speaking of which, when does Sir Eva actually work? I only catch sight of him going home right when his shift ends.

"Well, King Rizel is having a rough go of it as well, what with both his parents being arrested," Sir Eva said. "The royal family's dignity is at an all-time low."

Despite speaking like a casual observer, recent events had affected Sir Eva a great deal. The knights were racing around the castle to quell disturbances as the waning of our national prestige gave rise to unlawfulness. Hopefully, everything would resolve itself soon. The knights had received high praise for doing everything within their power to protect the citizens, after all.

Reynaldo was still in the hospital. Much to my surprise, he was performing his duties as prime minister from bed.

"You should be resting," I chided him during a visit.

"I'm simply reaping what I've sown," he replied, continuing his work. "By the way, did you participate in the trial?"

"Yes, I provided my testimony."

Immediately after things settled down, Queen Tia's trial began. Matters had proceeded swiftly due to the severity of her crimes. Despite being convalescent, Reynaldo even jeopardized his recovery to appear in court. As Tia's main victim, he needed to testify during the trial.

As the victim of an attempted kidnapping, I testified many times as well. Explaining everything I'd done in detail proved incredibly embarrassing. I needed to recount everything, from breaking the window to escape the kidnappers to donning a burlap sack to act as a decoy. The story of my rescuing Reynaldo caused quite a stir among the nobles in the court. I felt like running away at that point.

"Your testimony made the front page of the newspapers," Sir Eva said. "I bought two copies to commemorate the occasion."

“That’s quite enough...”

A newspaper reporter selected by the state attended the trial to publicize the proceedings. King Rizel received praise for this decision, as it had been his first initiative to relay the truth to his citizens. However, the article spent more time reporting on my actions than the queen’s crimes. As a result, many readers suspected it was some kind of national conspiracy.

“Honestly, after listening in on the trial, I feel more inclined to report on you,” the reporter said excitedly. “Speaking of which, would you be willing to give an interview?”

I’d declined, but based on that conversation, it probably wasn’t a conspiracy.

Once things settled down and Stanley heard the full story, he came to me with another suggestion. “Why don’t we create a local souvenir named after you to help enrich Edigma?”

Shouldn’t you show a little concern for your sister before suggesting money-making schemes? I’d wondered. But if it will help Edigma prosper, maybe I should consider it.

My worried father came to visit me once as well. The palace sent a swift horse to Edigma to relay the situation to him out of concern for me. Father raced to the capital without delay, where he was relieved to find me perfectly healthy. Afterward, our family enjoyed a wonderful meal out on the town for the first time in a while.

“The newspaper still hasn’t reached Edigma,” Father said. “Once it does, there’s going to be an uproar.”

“Still, you probably won’t be able to serve the knights for much longer, will you?” Sir Eva asked me in the present. “This place will be so dreary without you.”

I shook my head. “No, I can still stay here for a while more...”

“You don’t sound too confident.”

Well, what do you expect from me?

Palace officials had approached me about taking a short leave from the

chivalric order. For better or worse, I'd become more recognizable as the commotion grew. Strangers even began calling out to me.

"People might wish to take advantage of you," I'd been warned. "Thus, you have two options: keep a low profile or serve somewhere else in the capital."

In less than half a year, I'd been a handmaid for the palace, then the chivalric order, then the Rose Duchy, and then the chivalric order again.

How many times am I going to change jobs, exactly? I wondered. *It might be time for me to take my leave.*

"Come back home soon," Father had told me worriedly.

Though Prince Rizel's fiancée uproar seemed like a distant memory, only around half a year had passed. I'd experienced so much during that time. As a fiancée candidate, I'd become a palace handmaid, and later, I'd worked for the chivalric order alongside Nicky. Next, Prince Rizel's proposal led to Albert and Reynaldo uncovering my identity as Rosemary's reincarnation. After exacting my "vengeance" against King Grey, I returned to being a handmaid for the chivalric order. Finally, my attempted kidnapping had occurred, and as a result, we'd captured Queen Tia.

Throughout these events, I came to know Rosemary, and her wish had reached Reynaldo. And then—

"Are you feeling warm?" Sir Eva asked me.

I jerked my head up to look at him. "Huh?"

"You seemed fine a while ago, but your face just turned red. If you caught a cold, perhaps you should go home."

Apparently, recalling Albert's declaration of love caused my face to flush.

"I'm fine," I attempted to gloss over the issue. "It's just a little warm in here."

However, when my flush persisted, Sir Eva urged me to go home. Though I felt bad for making him worry, it was a good opportunity to think. I had three options, not two. I could return home, serve in the capital, or accept Albert's proposal. I needed to decide soon.

For the first time in days, I visited the palace's infirmary. The distinctive odor

of disinfectant hung in the air. Reynaldo continued his duties while confined to his bed here. As such, I popped in whenever work ended, or I had time to spare. Though I considered leaving if he was busy, Reynaldo always called out to me when I stood beyond the door, as if he could see through the wood. He did the same thing today; his instincts weren't the least bit dulled.

"Is that you, Mary?" he asked. "Please come in."

He called out before I could even knock, so I opened the door gently. Reynaldo—who'd been looking over paperwork—turned in my direction.

"Have you finished work for the day?" he asked.

"I have. How are you feeling?"

"I should be able to return to my usual routine the day after tomorrow."

Now that his wounds had mostly healed, he'd been transferred to the infirmary—a convalescent facility for palace servants who'd fallen ill. Reynaldo requested to be transferred here so that he could work during the last leg of his recovery. As a palace resident, I could visit him casually, which I was grateful for.

Reynaldo looked different than usual. His bangs hung over his forehead, and he wore a robe similar to pajamas. When he'd first been admitted to the hospital, bandages covered nearly every inch of him. Only his back was bandaged now.

"Did you hear?" Reynaldo asked. "Queen Tia will receive her verdict tomorrow. With all her crimes combined, she'll likely be hanged."

"Truly?"

Then she'll receive the same sentence as Rosemary?

"It's just as you proclaimed." Reynaldo guessed what I was thinking. "What she did to others has befallen her as well."

He remembers what I said to her. Although Rosemary was the first one to speak those words.

"I suppose so," I agreed.

This time, Tia would be the one standing on the gallows. Honestly, some people might refer to this as *exacting vengeance*. Regardless of my own desires, the world would interpret it as such. Personally, I felt sorry for Tia, as she would soon know the fear of stumbling towards her own execution. Even after death, I'd never forgotten the feeling of the rope that had killed me. I wouldn't wish that terror on anyone.

"Will you attend the execution?" Reynaldo asked, concerned about me.

After thinking it over, I nodded. I had a duty to see everything through until its conclusion.

"And what will you do after Tia has been taken care of?" Reynaldo inquired.

"Honestly, that's been on my mind a lot lately," I replied. "I wanted to ask for your advice."

"Did you now?"

Though surprised, Reynaldo seemed like the best person to ask advice from.

"That's right," I answered. "You're probably the one who knows me and Rosemary the best."

When I clarified that, Reynaldo looked even more surprised. To the best of my knowledge, he knew me better than anyone, excluding Albert or a member of my current family. Also, I believed that he would give me his honest opinion.

After considering something, Reynaldo donned a mischievous smile. "Do you need my advice on matters of romance?"

His directness caused me to squirm in embarrassment. "I-I might..."

"Aren't you an honest one?"

Reynaldo smiled more frequently lately, and his expression was dazzling. Unfortunately, I couldn't look at him directly due to embarrassment.

"Hmm..." he mused. "First, allow me to guess what you need advice on. You're wondering how to respond to Albert's proposal. Though you haven't rejected him, you haven't agreed either. Right now, you're agonizing over what to tell him."

“Yes, that’s right.”

Was he some kind of fortune-teller?

“Furthermore, working for the chivalric order has its appeal, but you also want to go home,” Reynaldo continued. “And if you had to choose one, you would choose the latter.”

I couldn’t think of a response.

“Am I right?” Reynaldo pressed.

I nodded. “Yes, you are.”

I’d chosen to come to Reynaldo for advice, but I couldn’t believe how accurately he’d guessed my worries. Even fortune-tellers would kneel before him.

“You have feelings for Albert,” Reynaldo barreled onward, “but there’s a reason why you’re hesitant to accept his proposal.”

“Correct.”

Right on the mark again. Perhaps he’s a mind reader, not a fortune-teller.

“However, Albert—dunce that he is—doesn’t have a clue about your worries,” Reynaldo said. “Hmm... Personally, I’d advise you to find a much better man, but since I know Albert’s good qualities, I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

You call that keeping your mouth shut?

“If you’ve guessed that much, you probably know the source of my worries, don’t you?” I asked. “I fear Albert is expressing his love for Rosemary through me.”

Ever since his proposal and declaration of love, I didn’t know whether to deny or accept it. *When his dark brown eyes gaze at me with such passion, is he seeing me or Rosemary?* I often wondered.

“If I were beautiful and we were close in age, as in my past life, then I would gladly accept his proposal,” I said. “But—”

“Stop right there,” Reynaldo cut me off. “You’re a wonderful woman, Mary, and very beautiful at that. Please don’t demean yourself so.” He spoke firmly,

his kindness filling me with joy.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Still, I’m not Rosemary. Even if I inherited her memories. Even if I am her reincarnation.”

That’s right—I wasn’t Rosemary. This worry had coiled around my gut for so long. So when Albert looked me in the eye and expressed his love for me, I wasn’t able to reciprocate.

Even if he sees me as Rosemary, part of me doesn’t mind. I simply want Albert to love me.

Coming to terms with these shallow feelings had been incredibly painful. If I accepted Albert’s proposal, I would be deceiving him, regardless of whether we had a happy relationship. *Oh, you’re not actually Rosemary*, he might realize one day and reject me. I’d been torturously dragging out my answer due to this internal conflict.

“May I say something?” Reynaldo asked after a pause. “Unfortunately, you might find it unpleasant.” Reynaldo asking for permission to speak was unusual. Nevertheless, I nodded without hesitation. “It’s just as you say,” he continued. “Even if you inherited Rosemary’s soul, you aren’t my sister, regardless of whether you possess her memories or feelings only known to her. In the end, you *are* a different person.”

Despite being the one to state this truth, Reynaldo wore a pained expression.

“I must admit something to you,” he said. “Back when I sought vengeance, I also thought of making you my wife.”

His wife?

“What?” I asked stupidly. The revelation stunned me.

“That’s right,” Reynaldo said. “I thought of marrying you regardless of what you wanted. Back then, I thought that was the only way to ease your worries concerning your connection to Rosemary. This manner of thinking might resemble Tia, only seeing people as game pieces. Similarly, I merely viewed you as Rosemary, not as your own person.”

Reynaldo’s confession shocked me, but part of me had an inkling of this all

along.

“If I’d professed my feelings for you back then, a clever woman like yourself would have brushed me off,” Reynaldo continued. “But Albert is different—he sees you as Mary, which includes your past as Rosemary. He’s a bumbling man who doesn’t concern himself with complex thoughts. By the same token, he loves what he loves, and is pulled towards what attracts him. Still, his inability to ease your worries does warrant criticism.”

I found myself wanting to agree with this brutally honest description of Albert, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want to criticize him.

Once again, Reynaldo donned a mischievous smile as he observed me. “Well then, why don’t we put Albert to the test?”

“Put him to the test?” I repeated.

Reynaldo’s expression changed from mischievous to malicious. “Indeed. We’ll see how he truly feels.”

What on earth does he plan on doing? I wondered. After I heard his explanation, it didn’t sound too crazy.

That was my naiveté speaking.

* * *

THE morning after I sought Reynaldo’s counsel, I stood with him in front of Sir Eva.

“So anyway, can you make sure our stories line up?” Reynaldo asked.

“Of course!” Sir Eva whooped. “Still, having Duke Rose himself aid in Albert’s romantic endeavors? We, knights, couldn’t be more thrilled!”

As an overjoyed Sir Eva thanked Reynaldo, I realized how naïve I’d been. Even the unit captain was there.

I can’t believe we have knights helping us with this deception.

Per the *test* Reynaldo thought up, I would pretend to have lost all of Rosemary’s memories.

“Suppose Albert is only interested in Rosemary,” Reynaldo whispered into my

ear softly enough that the knights wouldn't overhear. "In that case, he would no longer love you without her memories, correct?"

How could he suggest something so terrifying in such an aloof manner?

According to the plan, I would collapse from some unknown cause, and a worried Sir Eva would carry me to the castle infirmary. Afterward, a knight would report it to Albert. In all likelihood, Albert would race to the infirmary, but before he could visit me, Reynaldo would stop him and lie about me having lost Rosemary's memories.

"If Albert only sees you as Rosemary, how would this differ from the woman he loves disappearing?" Reynaldo asked, his expression delighted. "This will test his love for you, as Mary."

He's probably right, I thought, unable to argue with him.

Though I'd agreed to the plan, I was still a bundle of nerves.

What if Albert loses interest in me when I only have memories of my current life? When I'm no longer Rosemary?

That would be incredibly painful, but I would have to accept it. Until my worries were alleviated, I wouldn't be able to reciprocate Albert's feelings.

Even so, I thought, pressing my hands to my chest forlornly, *when Albert saved me from being kidnapped, I didn't care if he only saw me as Rosemary.*

Albert was always the first person to come to my rescue. I loved him enough that I didn't mind being Rosemary's substitute. Yet, someday, that would destroy me. I would fall deeper in love with Albert, and if I suspected he only saw me as Rosemary, I would hate my own past self.

In that case, I needed to lock away my love for Albert before it turned to despair, like plucking a newly budded leaf from a tree. I still had time to do so.

Listening to Reynaldo, I hung my head. Suddenly, a cold but gentle hand touched my cheek. It was his.

"If Albert doesn't provide the answer you're hoping for, forget about him and marry me instead," Reynaldo said. "After Rosemary, you're the woman I love the most."

Despite his jocular smile, I knew he was serious. The fluttering in my heart eased, and I smiled back at him. “Well then, I’ll do just that,” I replied, riposting his quip.

I relaxed, the tension draining from my shoulders. Sir Eva, observing Reynaldo and me, looked as if he’d just seen a monster. “I might have gotten you into a world of trouble, boss...” he muttered.

I pretended not to hear him.

Afterward, everything proceeded smoothly, just as Reynaldo anticipated. Sir Eva carried me from the chivalric order’s headquarters to the palace infirmary. Despite my illness being fake, everyone showed great concern for me, instructing me to rest.

No one else was in the infirmary. Though Reynaldo had been occupying the room next to mine, he left to speak with Albert. Unable to suppress my guilt, I sat on the bed in the dead silent room, waiting for time to pass.

There weren’t any injured people in the infirmary; the palace had quieted since the coup. Likewise, not many people fell ill around this time of year. So, Reynaldo had given me permission to use this room. However, as a mere handmaid, I was reluctant to use a palace medical facility for my personal benefit.

Reynaldo must have intuited my feelings since visitors arrived during my wait. A slew of people claiming to be his servants entered my room, delivering a veritable mountain of items.

“Huh...?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

The items varied from dresses and gems to books. The former two sported somewhat outdated designs, and the books had yellowed with age. More importantly, everything invoked an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

All these things belonged to Rosemary, I realized after a while. Overcome with nostalgia, I gazed at the possessions of my past self from her time in the palace.

“What in the world is going on here?” I asked one of the servants.

“His Grace instructed us to bring you everything retrieved from Tia’s room.”

“From Tia’s room...?”

After Rosemary’s execution, Tia apparently stole all my past self’s belongings. *Why would she do such a thing?* I wondered, gazing at an old dress that didn’t match Tia’s tastes. Shortly after, Reynaldo visited the room.

“I sent a message to Albert on a swift horse,” he said. “Also, I instructed him to see me as soon as he arrives, so as not to disturb your rest. The message indicated that you might have lost your memories.”

“Thank you very much.” I looked around at the mountain of glittering gems and other old items crammed into the room. “By the way, um, what is all this?”

Reynaldo picked up a bracelet, looking at it nostalgically. “I want you to confirm which items truly belonged to Rosemary by using her memories. Afterward, I’d like to return her possessions to McClain or Rose.”

“Understood. Tia was keeping all these things in her room?”

“That’s right,” Reynaldo answered, his face twisting. “What a vile woman. Still, she kept everything in good condition.”

Certainly, everything had been taken care of quite well. Even the old jewelry had been polished to perfection.

“I’m hiding everything here because I obtained them in secret,” Reynaldo said. “That’s the story anyway.”

People had been coming and going from Tia’s room since before the trial to search for evidence. Meanwhile, Reynaldo slipped in and retrieved a mountain of items. If this came to light, there would be consequences, what with the trial being such a serious matter.

“You truly have blinders on when it comes to Rosemary,” I voiced my honest thoughts.

And why wouldn’t I? Reynaldo’s smile implied. Afterward, he left the room to attend to an urgent matter. I sighed deeply while watching him go. Recently, Albert had been traveling back and forth between McClain and the northern fortress, where the tribespeople had been skirmishing with Dirésias. As a result, he’d been extremely busy.

Should he be wasting time on me with everything else going on?

I fell into pensive thought while organizing Rosemary's belongings. Everything I held sent waves of nostalgia through me.

I wore this dress when my engagement to Prince Grey was announced. Oh, and I received this piece of jewelry from his father on my sixteenth birthday. Come to think of it, there aren't any gifts from Grey himself here. I chuckled bitterly at that. *Honestly, I can't even remember if he ever gave me anything.*

I had few memories of spending time with Prince Grey as his fiancée. He accused me of being a nag and avoided me. Around one year after the official announcement of our engagement, he began supporting Tia instead of me.

"Oh, this is a gift from Sir Albert," I muttered.

I picked up a hair ornament. Albert gave it to Rosemary on her birthday before she began living in the palace. Though it was much cheaper than the other accessories in the pile, it was stored lovingly in a box. Clearly, Rosemary cherished this gift.

My past self loved Albert as well, I thought, a spike of jealousy lancing through my chest.

I recalled Rosemary's fleeting love for Albert. Receiving this present from him was one of her most precious memories. Likewise, I remembered how lovingly she stored this gift until her death. Seeing it again caused my heart to ache.

Recently, Albert gave me presents as well: flowers, candies, and other cute gifts.

"I'm not sure what to give a young lady," he'd admitted bashfully while handing them to me.

Despite his busy schedule, he set aside as much time as possible to see me. When I began working as his handmaid, he'd always shown me a great deal of consideration as well.

"Do you need help learning anything?" he would ask. "Are you finding this workplace to your liking?"

Even since my time as a lowly handmaid, Albert's attitude remained ever the

same.

Other memories of him rose to mind. Before learning my true identity, he often invited me to have tea with him. Furthermore, I sometimes watched him practice his swordplay. Per Rosemary's memories, he was still young and much less skilled. Nowadays, he often served as an instructor, but when I caught sight of him sparring from time to time, he was the paragon of knightliness.

I cherished memories of Albert from both of my lives. Both were real and true.

Now I sounded like an envious woman from some third-rate play. "Only look at me and never anyone else," she would beg her love. I despised myself for it, but I'd morphed into that character. Above all, part of me had given up on ever comparing favorably to my past self.

Rosemary, I spoke inwardly, clutching one of her beloved dresses and hats to my chest. When you look at me right now, what do you think? Does it disillusion you to know you've turned into such a self-loathing woman?

My past self received constant instruction to become worthy of respect as the next queen. "You must give careful consideration to your country, not your personal feelings," she'd been taught at length. "You must become a woman capable of supporting your husband—Prince Grey."

She hadn't received a single lesson on love. She'd grown up without knowing how it drove people to madness. Eventually, she witnessed that for herself. When Prince Grey ruined his position to proclaim his love for Tia, Rosemary was stunned with disbelief.

Despite how much pain I'd suffered in my previous life, I was in no position to speak ill of King Grey, whose love drove him mad. After all, I would soon be deceiving Albert to test his love for me.

I shouldn't lie.

When Reynaldo suggested putting Albert to the test, I should have opposed him. Even so, I wanted to know who Albert truly loved. I'd agreed to the plan, hoping it would provide me with the truth. What else could this be but madness driven by love? Did my avarice know no bounds?

I laughed suddenly, a humorous thought occurring to me. “After all this time, I finally understand King Grey.”

I'll tell him the truth, I thought, returning the hair ornament to the top of the desk. *Sir Albert will answer me honestly, even if I don't lie.*

Steeling myself, I stood and looked at the twilit sky outside the window. Reynaldo sent a swift horse to Albert to tell him of my condition. Albert was traveling to the McClain region, but knowing him, he would return to the castle after nightfall.

He needs to hear the truth from me, I thought, looking at the sky. The accessories strewn across the room sparkled in the crimson light filtering through the window.

I feel very sleepy all of a sudden...

The window rattled in the wind, birds chirped in the distance, and the warmth of the setting sun felt pleasant upon my skin. The sounds and sensations coalesced into a lullaby, pulling me to sleep.

Goodnight, Mary, a kind and motherly voice said to me as my eyelids fluttered closed. I sensed someone's presence, their cool fingertips beckoning me towards slumber. Swaddled in a blanket of fatigue, I had no means of resisting that tender invitation.

I fell into a deep sleep.

✱ ✱ ✱

A horse whinnied near the gate. At first, the guard kept a wary eye on the man galloping into the castle, but upon seeing his face and coat of arms, he immediately straightened.

Albert dismounted gracefully from his horse, which hadn't settled down from its intense gallop. He forced the reins into the hands of the gatekeeper, who calmed the overexcited horse despite his panic.

Meanwhile, Albert raced into the castle. As he dashed through the corridors, servants stopped to look at him, surprised. Nevertheless, he continued toward the infirmary, not caring one whit about their reactions. He had but one reason

for panicking. A messenger from the chivalric order had delivered news from Reynaldo. Mary had collapsed. When Albert asked for details, the messenger claimed not to know anything more.

“You need to hear the whole story from Reynaldo,” he insisted.

Albert wanted to return as soon as possible, but he’d been away on urgent business. After doing the bare minimum to complete his work, he rode a swift horseback to the capital. The sun was just setting when he returned, and he barely even allowed the horse to rest.

How could this happen when Reynaldo and I have already dealt with everything that could harm Mary? Albert wondered. Not only did we abandon our vengeance, but we also captured Tia. All causes for concern should have disappeared. So why now?!

“Reynaldo!” Albert cried.

The Ice Duke showed no sign of surprise at Albert’s sudden arrival. Instead, he wore a look of apprehension.

“Tell me, Albert,” Reynaldo said. “Would you still be able to love Mary even if she lost Rosemary’s memories?”

“What are you talking about? What’s wrong with Mary?”

“Answer the question. This is an important matter. I meant exactly what I asked. Do you love Mary or my elder sister? That’s all.”

“I...” Albert found himself at a loss for words.

“If you love Mary because she and Rosemary were one, then turn back now without visiting her,” Reynaldo instructed. “Mary has lost her memories of her past life. If you love her while seeking Rosemary’s ghost, that would be far too tragic for her.”

Albert’s legs almost gave out from under him. “You speak truly...?”

Reynaldo stared out the window sorrowfully. Unfortunately, Albert didn’t notice his expert acting due to shock.

“Perhaps this happened because we’ve settled all our scores,” Reynaldo said. “I doubt she’ll remember anything you ask her. The memories you shared

during childhood. The promises you made to each other. All of them are gone...”

As Albert went silent, Reynaldo turned toward him. His features were beautiful in their resemblance to Rosemary.

“Listen to me, Albert,” Reynaldo continued. “Much to our detriment, we never moved on, but Mary... Well, she lives in the present. Perhaps she’s too resplendent for men like us, who exist as slaves to our pasts.”

Albert understood what Reynaldo meant to say. As someone who’d lived in bondage to revenge, those words stung. At the same time, he remembered the days he’d spent with Mary. He hadn’t shared those experiences with Rosemary. No, he’d been drawn to Mary and wanted to be with her because she was her own person.

“...Before anything else, I just want to see Mary,” Albert decided.

Nothing was more important to him than confirming her safety. He would do so, regardless of whether she’d forgotten her past life, her old memories of Albert, or even everything up to the present.

Mary’s safety comes first, he thought. My feelings don’t matter right now. I want to know how she’s doing.

“She’s in the next room,” Reynaldo said.

Albert left Reynaldo’s room immediately, his expression grave. Reynaldo sighed as he listened to the man’s footsteps fade into the distance.

“Well, I rattled him,” Reynaldo muttered. “Let’s see how much of an effect it has.”

Aloofly, Reynaldo gazed at the door from which Albert had left, his once sorrowful expression gone.

“Much to our detriment, we never moved on. Perhaps Mary is too resplendent for men like us, who exist as slaves to our pasts,” Reynaldo repeated to himself the words he’d spoken to Albert.

“She truly is too resplendent...”

Her light brought such tears to his eyes that he had to look away. She was

pure radiance to him.



ALBERT knocked lightly on the neighboring door. When there was no answer, he opened it slowly. Wind blew through the open window, carrying the scent of the infirmary's disinfectant to his nostrils.

Mary wasn't lying in bed. Instead, she sat in a chair by the windowsill, her face turned towards the outside. She seemed to be dozing; she was completely still. After approaching her, Albert found her eyes closed, as he'd expected. She wore a peaceful expression, unaware of his presence.

He considered calling out to her but hesitated. First, he needed to check if she was injured. Relief washed over him when he found her unharmed. *Still, she might catch a cold at this rate*, he thought. He decided to carry her to bed gently enough that she wouldn't wake.

He kept his footsteps quiet. *Am I wrong to even consider her peacefully sleeping face so lovely?* Albert wondered when her features came into full view.

Reynaldo's words lingered in his mind.

Would you be able to love Mary even if she lost Rosemary's memories?

Albert couldn't answer that question immediately.

"I don't know," he mumbled, scratching his head.

When he'd first met her, she'd simply been a handmaid named Mary Edigma. Later, she turned out to be Rosemary's reincarnation.

He chuckled to himself derisively. "No one's ever called me a deep thinker."

Though Albert thought he'd spoken softly, Mary's eyelids fluttered.

Did I wake her up?

He waited for her to regain consciousness with a tinge of guilt. Before long, she slowly opened her honey-colored eyes and looked at him.

"Are you okay, Mary?" he asked, peering at her face from nearby.

She said nothing in response.

“Mary?” he asked again.

A new worry settled in his mind. She hadn’t forgotten her other memories, too, had she? However, she soon smiled, filling him with relief.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Albert said.

At first, he thought to confirm what Reynaldo told him, but he swelled with happiness just seeing Mary safe. However, her unexpected reaction erased all thoughts from his mind. She stood from her chair and clasped his hand in both her palms. The gratitude expressed in her touch threw him off balance, causing him to forget what he’d meant to ask.

She’s never clasped my hand so lovingly before.

“Albert,” she spoke his name tenderly.

She sounded like Mary, but Albert sensed something off, as if she’d transformed into a different person. Perhaps her memories were disordered, based on what Reynaldo said. Flustered, Albert squeezed her hand in return.

“Mary,” he said. “Reynaldo says you’re having trouble remembering things, but is anything else wrong? Are you in any pain? If anything occurs to you, please tell me. I’ll do whatever I can to help put you at ease, no matter how small.”

Albert would move mountains to relieve Mary of her anxieties. With this in mind, he brought his face close to hers, checking for anything unusual.

Yes, I sense something amiss.

While the woman in front of him was undoubtedly Mary in features and form, apprehension still needled him.

“Mary?” he asked.

For some reason, he wanted to say her name and confirm the truth. Despite knowing her so well, he needed to be sure.

The woman shook her head, validating his suspicions. “No, I’m not Mary,” the gesture told him.

Then who is this woman in front of me? Albert wondered.

After letting go of his hand, the woman, who resembled Mary, retrieved a hair ornament from her pocket. Albert gave it to Rosemary some twenty years ago. He remembered the accessory because she'd lovingly worn it for a long time, despite its cheapness.

Albert looked back and forth between Mary and the ornament. "Are you Rosemary?" he asked in disbelief.

She smiled in response to his outrageous question. The quirk of her lips resembled Mary's, but at the same time, it was different. Albert recalled this refined noblewoman's smile as part of an unimaginably distant memory. Once, the mere memory of this expression broke his heart.

This is the opposite of what Reynaldo told me! Albert thought, dumbstruck.

According to Reynaldo, Mary had forgotten her past life. Yet now Rosemary stood here, not her current self. Furthermore, the woman in front of Albert had honey-colored eyes, but the longer he gazed at her, they appeared jade green, as if by some trick of the light. As siblings, Reynaldo and Rosemary had been known for their distinctive eye color—a trait of the Hubert family.

How can I recognize Rosemary merely by her smile?

Mary had lived as Rosemary in her past life, but they weren't related. Their facial features didn't resemble each other in the slightest.

Tears formed in the corners of Albert's eyes. Emotion overwhelmed him as he looked upon the person he'd longed to reunite with. At the same time, he couldn't rejoice. All in all, this was probably the most confused he'd been in his entire life.

As Albert puzzled over what to do, Mary squeezed his hand firmly. "Albert," she said his name calmly, not addressing him as *Sir* as she usually did. "Allow me a moment of your time, and please don't worry. Mary will only be asleep for a little while."

"She's just sleeping?"

"Indeed. Consider this a dream, and allow me to speak with you for a short time while she sleeps."

Albert hadn't seen his former liege speak through Mary in some time. Not since the incident in the audience chamber when Reynaldo attempted to take revenge on King Grey. She'd appeared like an illusion, quelling his and Reynaldo's desire for vengeance.

Yes, Albert would gladly indulge in this short dream.

"Is it really you?" he asked, still in disbelief.

When she answered with the same smile as before, he fell to one knee and kissed the back of her hand. He'd done this countless times in the past to proclaim his loyalty as her knight.

"Lady Rosemary!" Albert cried, a wave of remorse forcing him to hang his head. He'd carried this regret inside him for so long, and these words were his penitence. "Despite my vows, I wasn't able to protect you in the end. I'm so sorry!"

Tears formed in the corners of his eyes, but he had no right to spill them. Before, he'd considered himself unable to repent until he'd exacted his vengeance. Even so, Rosemary brought her face close to his while he knelt on the floor, pleading for forgiveness.

"I forgive you," she said simply.

With those three words, a single tear finally ran down his cheek.

"Albert, you protected Mary and Reynaldo," she continued. "Thank you so much for that."

Albert bowed his head even deeper upon hearing his liege's words spoken in Mary's voice. "I'm undeserving of such thanks."

He no longer considered himself worthy of swearing his loyalty to Rosemary. He'd done so in the past and failed to save her. Saying those thoughts aloud would only sadden her. Even so, her first words being ones of gratitude put a faint smile on his lips.

"But why are you here now, Lady Rosemary?" Albert asked.

He didn't know how to interpret the current situation.

Still smiling calmly, Rosemary picked up a hand mirror she'd used during her

life. Gazing at Mary's reflection, she tucked her hair behind her ear.

"As soon as I died, I reincarnated as Mary," she explained. "I've grown up with her this whole time."

Formlessly, Rosemary had resided alongside Mary's soul since her first cries as a babe.

"I've been with her since she first walked, since she first had a fight with a friend," Rosemary continued. "I've watched everything alongside her, like a best friend and a mother. It's strange... Though Mary and I are one, we are also separate."

Reincarnating and living a new life dazzled Rosemary. Though she loved and treasured Mary, she also envied her. Mary had fulfilled so many of Rosemary's lifelong wishes.

"Just as Mary possesses my memories, I also possess hers, I suppose?" Rosemary went on. "When she learned of your and Reynaldo's vengeance, she called out to me over and over again. 'Please save them,' she begged me. Honestly, I never anticipated being able to speak out in the open like that."

A wave of nostalgia crashed over Albert upon seeing Rosemary's slightly mischievous smile. As a young girl, she'd sometimes wear that expression.

"This time, I feel a bit like meddling," she admitted. "That's why I'm talking to you."

Albert couldn't imagine her—the former daughter of a marquis—acting in such a way. "Meddling?" he repeated.

"That's right. For the sake of my beloved Mary, I'm sticking my nose in your business, just like Reynaldo." Rosemary folded her hands as if to envelop her two selves. She looked at Albert, her eyes still appearing jade green to him. "Tell me the truth. Who do you love—me or Mary?"

"What?"

Her words reminded Albert of his conversation with Reynaldo. Both brother and sister asked him the same question. However, when Rosemary sought the truth from him, her words carried greater weight. Though she was asking about

mundane, romantic matters, the gravity of her words exerted physical pressure on him.

“Are you my knight or Mary’s knight?” Rosemary pressed. “And did you swear your loyalty to her because we’re the same person?”

Indeed, he had done that.

“Well...” Albert trailed off.

“I was also listening when you proposed to her,” Rosemary noted.

“Say what?!”

The idea of Rosemary witnessing his disgrace caused Albert’s expression to contort incomprehensibly. Was he blushing, or had the blood drained from his face? Either way, he longed to go back in time and erase that blunder from history.

“Do you truly love Mary? Can you truly make her happy? If you see even the slightest shadow of my ghost in her, that will bring her nothing but misery.” Rosemary lifted her head and looked at Albert. “And if you can’t make Mary happy, please leave her alone.”

Her words were sharp, and her gaze bore into him, seeking the truth. Albert deliberated over how to respond. Platitudes were meaningless here. A clever woman like Rosemary would see through even the whitest of lies. Though he had no intention of lying, could he provide an answer without arriving at a conclusion?

Even so, I have to say something. If I don’t speak up now, I might lose the opportunity to ever do so again.

That terrified him more than anything.

“My allegiance shall always lie with only one person. If I must answer your question...” After taking a deep breath, Albert looked at Rosemary once more. “I swear my loyalty to you, Lady Rosemary, and only you.”

Albert hadn’t meant to lie when swearing his oath to Mary, but he wouldn’t have done so without knowledge of her true identity. Because Mary inherited the soul of his former liege, Albert thought it proper to swear his loyalty to her

again.

“Yet, right now, Mary is the woman I truly wish to protect,” Albert continued. “She’s the one I wish to love.”

Albert no longer knew if he’d been drawn to Mary because of her connection to his first love. However, Mary now stood by his side, and he loved her. He knew that much, at least.

Rosemary smiled drolly upon hearing Albert’s answer. Seeing her expressions change so rapidly was novel. She was more affable than during her previous life, perhaps due to Mary’s influence. Albert liked how Mary’s expressions changed from one moment to another.

“As a knight, I’ve sworn my loyalty only to you, Lady Rosemary,” he said. “That hasn’t changed, even now. However, as a man, I wish to protect the woman I love. Please allow me this.”

That said, I’m not sure if I can make Mary happy.

“You asked if I could make Mary happy,” Albert continued, voicing his thoughts aloud. “I can’t answer that question so long as I don’t know what brings her joy. Yet, if her happiness is the same as mine, I will do everything in my power to grant her wishes.”

Mary always seemed satisfied. Albert never saw her act out of a desire for personal fulfillment. Nevertheless, the opinions of others didn’t sway her. Rather, she acted for the sake of others of her own will. She put herself on the line for Rosemary, Reynaldo, and even Albert. She was a kindhearted woman who loved her family, everything Rosemary had once treasured, and even Rosemary herself. In turn, Albert loved everything about her.

“Lady Rosemary,” he said. “In answer to your previous question...”

Albert stared into Rosemary’s depths, where her present self now slept. If Mary’s recent worries and Rosemary’s decision to appear of her own volition had the same root cause, Albert wanted to alleviate her anxieties.

“Would you still be able to love Mary even if she lost Rosemary’s memories?” Reynaldo had asked.

“Who do you love—me or Mary?” Rosemary had asked.

Albert had but one answer.

“I love Mary because she treasures every single one of your memories as well,” Albert said. “Does that serve as an answer?”

Once he stated his conclusion, Rosemary burst out laughing.

“Lady Rosemary?” he asked, looking at her curiously.

Rosemary giggled. “Apparently, that was the right answer,” she replied, her eyes sparkling with delight.

“Huh?”

Albert had never worn such an idiotic expression in his entire life.

“I’m sorry for tricking you,” Rosemary apologized. “Mary is listening to you through me. The two of us are one, after all.”

Later, a thought would occur to Albert.

At that moment, she couldn’t have been more like her brother.

* * *

SHORTLY after dozing off, I opened my eyes to find Albert standing in front of me.

What?

His presence shook me to my core. On top of Albert seeing me sleeping, I was probably wearing a dopey expression. How embarrassing. I thought to regain my composure and call out to him, but my mouth wouldn’t open. Furthermore, I acted contrary to my desires, as if someone else was controlling me. Though I was still myself, my body wouldn’t listen to me, turning me into a bystander within my own mind.

Could I still be dreaming?

While still under someone else’s control, I rose to my feet, picked up a hair ornament from the pile of accessories, and gazed at it. This was the gift from Albert I’d been reminiscing about earlier. Soon afterward, I—or the person in control of me—spoke. My usual self could never adopt this elegant bearing and

manner of speech.

When Albert said Rosemary's name, I gradually understood what was going on. Normally, this would have been incomprehensible. By all accounts, it seemed like a dream, but I had memories of this sensation.

Have I become Rosemary again?

During the events in the audience chamber, I'd wanted to stop Reynaldo and Albert's vengeance. When I'd prayed to Rosemary, my sense of self faded, and I'd moved as if possessed. My current situation felt the same as if there were two of me inside my mind.

Rosemary? I asked inwardly.

Yes, she replied from her place in my heart.

It really is you.

Rosemary borrowed my body to speak with Albert. Despite using my voice, she sounded like a different person. Likewise, Albert recognized Rosemary soon after entering the room.

By the end of the conversation, I understood its purpose and why Rosemary spoke to Albert on my behalf.

So, Rosemary was privy to my feelings all along...? That makes sense, but it's still mortifying!

Awareness of my past life created a sense of separation between me and Rosemary, but in the end, we were the same person. Obviously, she would be privy to my secrets.

Please, I begged inwardly. Don't expose any more of me.

Everything she'd said on my behalf was true, after all.

"Are you looking for me in Mary?" she'd asked Albert. "Do you truly love her, or did you merely swear your loyalty to her?"

Th-These are all things I was worried about! I'd rather keep living as Rosemary forever than deal with this embarrassment!

Even so, Albert's words filled me with joy. His true feelings allowed the

worries coiled around my chest to loosen and disappear. Selfishly, I wanted Albert to see me as Mary, yet I didn't want him to forget my past self. This had been my internal conflict for some time. I wanted to love Albert, but my other self didn't want him to forget her either.

And then Albert gave the best possible response to my two selves.

I feel like an idiot for being so indecisive.

At first, Rosemary's awakening, seizing control of my body, and asking questions on my behalf distressed me. Now, I felt grateful.

Thank you, Rosemary.

I offered words of gratitude to her like a prayer. Outwardly, Rosemary accepted them with a bemused smile.

"She's a sweet girl," Rosemary said. "Despite getting entangled in relationships from her past life, she persevered on my behalf without a word of complaint."

"That she did," Albert agreed.

"How fortunate I am to have been reborn as Mary. I'm truly blessed."

Rosemary's gratitude resonated with me. I never expected her to thank me. She was my past self, whom I knew only through memory. Her appearing like this was a miracle in itself—one that I was endlessly grateful for.

"I have one last favor to ask of you," Rosemary said to Albert. "I apologize for being such a demanding liege. However, this is something I can only ask of you, as the one who swore his loyalty to me."

Gradually, my consciousness returned to my body. As Rosemary's consciousness faded away, she gripped Albert's hand in a final farewell, and I sensed what she sensed.

"I leave Reynaldo in your care," she said. "And please find happiness for yourself as well."

"As you wish, my lady," Albert agreed to her request.

He gazed at her from mere inches away, his dark brown eyes gleaming with

determination. Rosemary smiled, satisfied, and my consciousness returned to my body.

“...Mary?” Albert asked.

He could probably tell that Rosemary had disappeared based on my dazed expression. Even so, I couldn’t bring myself to answer him. Why not? Well, because I was embarrassed. After hearing such an earnest declaration of love, I couldn’t look him in the eye.

“Could you hear everything I said?” he asked.

“...Yes.”

In response to my feeble answer, Albert cracked up laughing. My face flushing, I looked up.

“Then may I hear your response to what I asked you the other day?” he pressed.

I stayed silent, half wanting to punch the stupid grin off his face. His handsome features only added to my frustration.

Still, seeing him so full of confidence was wonderful. His words filled me with joy, just as Rosemary had said. My heart was fit to burst with happiness. The idea of Albert’s affections being entirely directed towards Rosemary anguished me so much for so long. However, his words alleviated my worries. Without uttering a single falsehood, he’d explained the difference between wanting to protect me and swearing his loyalty to Rosemary.

I couldn’t honestly convey my happiness; I felt guilty and pathetic for forcing Albert to explain himself. Though I tried to respond, I couldn’t find the words. As my mouth hung open dumbly, Albert smiled at me. His handsome face closed in on mine, and he kissed me. His actions were so swift that I didn’t have time to consider resisting. Our lips parted, and after a short pause, I finally found my voice.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” I cried.

“Oh, was it not to your liking?”

Seizing the initiative, Albert seemed more composed than usual. Of course, it

was to my liking. I loved him, after all.

“If you’re going to kiss me, at least say so beforehand,” I grumbled.

What on earth am I saying? I wondered, well aware of my irrationality. No matter what forewarning Albert might have given me, I would have ended up tongue-tied.

Albert smiled at my response. “Well then, may I kiss you again, Mary?”

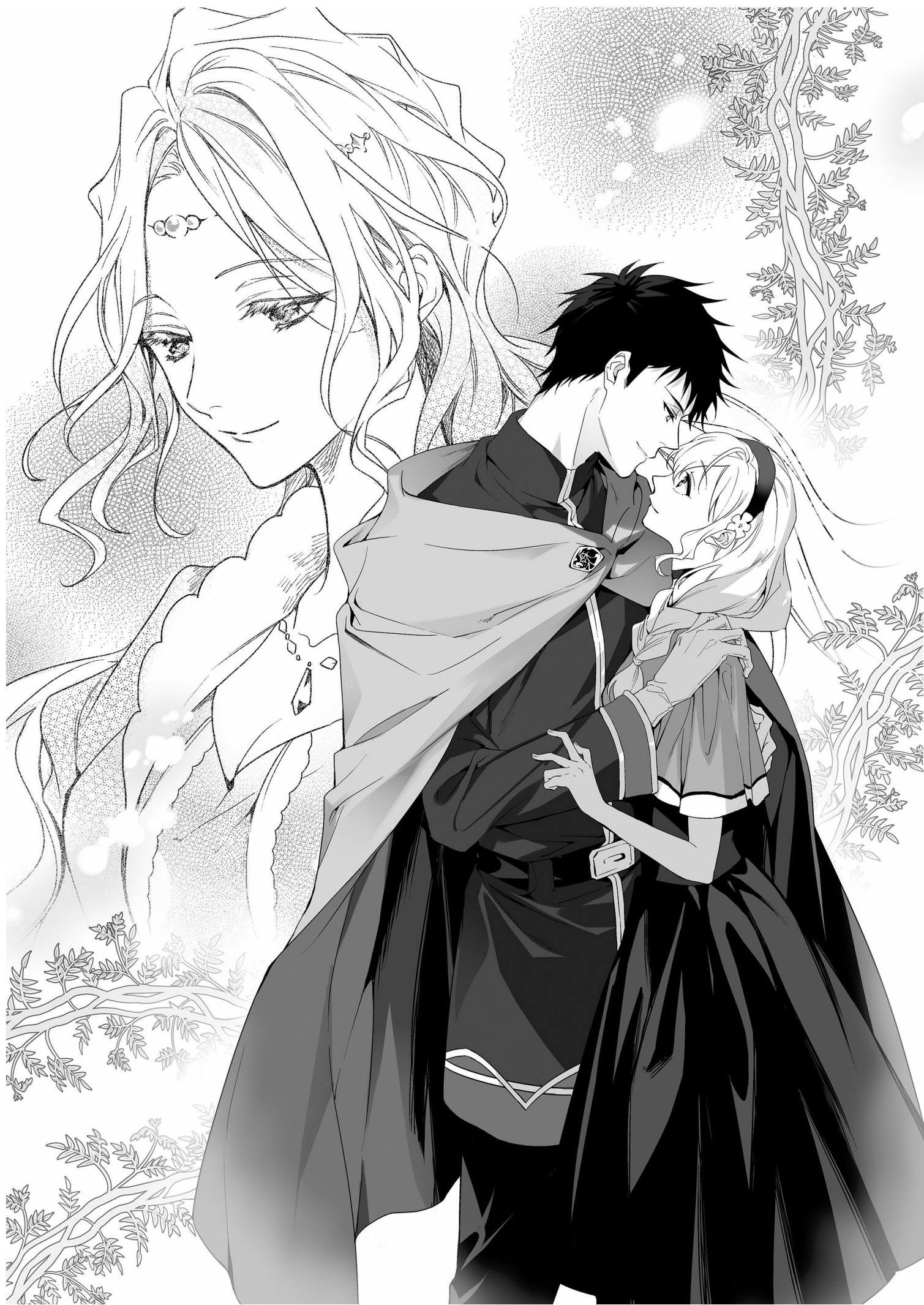
His hand caressed my cheek, his skin callused from sword training. He looked into my eyes with a sensual expression, our noses close enough to touch. His gaze bore into my heart, causing my pulse to quicken.

Yes, I’d told him to inform me beforehand, but I probably would’ve been less nervous if he hadn’t said anything. Asking for permission felt immodest. Regardless, I’d already decided on my answer.

“...By all means.”

As I lost myself in Albert’s next kiss, he wrapped his arms around me. Silently, I closed my eyes, the joy springing from the bottom of my heart overwhelming me. I put all the words I hadn’t been able to say into that kiss.

While a kiss from my first love intoxicated me, I inwardly uttered a word of thanks to Rosemary. And from the depths of my heart, she smiled back at me.



Chapter Nine: Beyond Revenge

EVERY day, Tia stared at her cramped, dirty prison cell with glazed eyes. She hated this place. Worse, whenever she slept on the cold, thin bed, she woke with aches and pains all over her body.

She received two meals a day—one in the morning and one in the evening. The bland food consisted of hard bread and cold soup. When the first meal arrived, Tia hadn't touched it, as she'd never eaten food so devoid of flavor in her entire life. Nevertheless, hunger whetted her appetite, and she now subsisted entirely on these bland morsels.

Each day, Tia awoke in her cold, solitary prison cell. After doing nothing for hours on end, she ate her allotted food and fell asleep on a chilly bed. She woke in the middle of the night due to pain and the cold air. As she gazed at the moon through a small window, dawn would eventually break.

Despite having nothing to do, Tia clung to life. Up until now, her existence had been empty and boring. She spent her days creating games and indulging in merrymaking. Winning battles had always filled her with delight. She'd never even considered the future beyond losing a battle.

"How long must I stay here?" Tia muttered.

Her voice sounded hoarse; she hadn't spoken in a long time. Once, men compared her voice to the ringing of a light bell. Now, she sounded like an old woman.

Furthermore, her body emitted a putrid stench, as she hadn't been able to wash properly. Every three days, she received a damp washcloth to wipe herself down with, but she couldn't cleanse her entire body with so little. Even so, being able to wash once every three days felt more refreshing than anything she'd experienced in her life. Without exaggeration, that damp washcloth had become her single comfort in prison.

Even after Tia was driven from the royal castle, handmaids still served her around the clock. Those women rubbed oil into her red hair, bringing out its luster while she bathed. Now, her hair had lost its moisture, and she combed out its tangles with her hands.

As a side note, she'd been given an embroidery set provided to women in solitary confinement. Though she had nothing else to pass her time with, she hadn't touched it since she didn't like embroidery.

I visited Rosemary in this prison cell a long time ago, Tia recalled. She was doing embroidery back then.

Tia's situation perfectly mirrored Rosemary's. At the time, she laughed at Rosemary for being filthy. *She deserves to be in prison*, Tia had thought. *Not only for viewing me as her enemy but also for interfering with my game.*

Tia bit her ragged fingernails, a habit she had developed since her imprisonment.

How frustrating. I shouldn't even be here to begin with.

She should have received special treatment as the queen. During her trial, she expected the court to take her position as King Rizel's mother into account and merely exile her. In reality, she'd been cruelly condemned to hanging.

Tia hadn't believed her ears. She'd never considered the possibility of being executed. Naturally, she wanted to scream in protest. However, she'd been restrained immediately, dragged out of court, and thrown into this solitary cell.

Since then, she counted the days until her execution. While this terrified her, she couldn't stop. She needed to know how many days she had left to live.

Please let me wake up from this nightmare.

Unfortunately, reality tormented her. Every day, she grew hungry and had to dispose of waste.

Tia had never found reality so painful. Never had she wanted to escape from it so desperately. From birth until now, she'd found life dull. Her father instructed her on how to live, and she'd only found purpose in games.

Three things brought Tia joy: the frustrated expressions of those she

deceived, the despair of someone realizing their own defeat, and laughing at those who tried to hurl their rage back upon her. Tia had never experienced despair or frustration for herself, for she'd never engaged in battles she couldn't win. If failure seemed likely, she fled, made new arrangements, and began the game anew from her hiding place. She repeated this process over and over again.

This time, she failed spectacularly. She couldn't deny that fact, no matter how hard she tried. Still, she feared one thing more than defeat.

Death.

Since learning how little time she had left to live, fear, such as she had never known, plagued her every waking hour.

If I don't escape, they're going to kill me, Tia thought. No, no, no, I don't want to die! I want to live!

But why? What would she even do with the rest of her life?

Tia had already lost her status, position, and wealth. She couldn't even formulate a survival strategy. She was just clinging to life with all her might.

These emotions were brand new to her. She'd never begged for her life before; she'd considered such actions pitiful. Countless people pleaded with Tia to spare them, and each time she laughed at them derisively.

How filthy, she'd thought. Why should the victor spare someone who begs for mercy?

So she'd abandoned them to their fates. Yet, with the roles reserved, she realized something for the first time. She couldn't face death and would relinquish every modicum of her pride if it meant salvation.

Nevertheless, the day of her execution drew closer with every hour.

Someone, please save me!

Tia wanted to scream herself even more hoarse. Sadly, the guard outside wouldn't rescue her, no matter how much she pleaded for her life. She needed to think of a way to survive.

Now's the time to use my head. I'm skilled at winning games, aren't I?

After finally thinking up a plan of rescue, she called out to the guard. He approached reluctantly, speaking in a cold voice when he greeted her.

“I need to see my son before my execution,” Tia pleaded, gripping the bars hard enough that her knuckles turned white. “Please, tell Rizel that I wish to see him.”

Her eyes watered as she made the request. She played up the part of a loving mother who longed to see her son.

The guard fell silent for a short while. “I’ll let him know,” he finally replied, turning around and leaving the dungeon.

Tia had never been pious enough to pray, but right then, she could have dropped to her knees and thanked God. Surely, a kindhearted man like Rizel would be merciful enough to spare his mother. She began thinking up a plan. How could she convince her son to set her free? Being the mother of the current king was the only ace up her sleeve.

However, as someone who only saw people as pawns, Tia failed to realize what vital component her card was lacking.

Love.



THREE days until the execution.

I’m not giving up yet, Tia thought while nibbling on a cold, stale piece of bread. According to the guard, he’d delivered the message to Rizel. She only needed to wait for her son. Yet time stretched into eternity. For days on end, she’d look up at the door each time she heard a sound, only to be disappointed.

Tia finished her breakfast all too quickly and set down the plate. She would spend the rest of the day as she did every other day—staring through the window at her scant view of the outside.

Finally, the moment she’d been waiting for arrived. The door leading aboveground opened, letting in the faint light, and the man she’d been longing to see appeared in the entryway. The guard bowed his head to King Rizel. Though Tia couldn’t hear her son clearly, he spoke a word of thanks to the

guard. He then cast his gaze towards her prison cell.

“Rizel!” Tia cried, approaching the bars and extending a hand toward her son. All the while, she put on a show of trembling like a mother overcome with emotion. “How I’ve longed to see you!”

A single tear rolled down her cheek. She chanced a look at her son, wondering how he would react to his mother’s passionate crying. His response contradicted her expectations. She thought to elicit his sympathy and earn salvation, but his eyes held not a trace of compassion. Instead, he silently regarded her as if she were some wretch.

“Rizel?” Tia asked. His expression made her anxious, but she couldn’t give up. “I know you might have a hard time forgiving me. Even I’m not sure how things turned out this way. Surely, there must have been some kind of mistake.”

She appealed to her son with emotion, but unfortunately, she’d never learned how to win her child’s sympathy. She only knew how to interact with romantic partners. Still, she had knowledge, if not practice.

“My mistakes might be unforgivable,” Tia continued, “but at the very least, I wanted you—my son—to understand.”

“Your son...?” Rizel repeated.

Until now, he’d remained silent, but when he spoke, he sounded more dispassionate than Tia could have ever imagined.

“I never expected to hear those words from you in a million years,” Rizel said. “After all, I don’t have a single memory of you ever offering me any motherly love.”

“Rizel...? D-Don’t be silly. I always wanted to be more loving, but you were to be the next king. Yes, I might have been cold, but I was taught that pushing you away was a form of love. Truthfully—”

“That’s enough, Mother.”

Rizel’s interruption panicked Tia. When she looked at him and saw his expression, she knew her plan had failed.

This isn’t going to work.

“Rizel, I’m begging you!” Tia cried, no longer caring about appearances. “Please! I’m not ready to die!”

“How many people have you falsely accused of crimes, placed in this exact prison cell, and watched die?” Rizel furrowed his brow as he glared at Tia, the corners of his eyes watering slightly. “Have you ever taken the slightest pity on anyone, Mother? How many people have lost their lives because of you? How many of my younger brothers and sisters did you poison in your womb?”

Tia couldn’t say anything, for Rizel had spoken the truth. Before she could think of an excuse, he spoke again.

“There was a time when I still called you Mom. Do you remember when I started addressing you as Mother? Speaking of which, do you even remember how old I was when I first succeeded on a hunt?”

Tia tried to think of how to respond to his rapid-fire questions but failed. She didn’t know the correct answers. Yes, she’d participated in events related to her son, but she couldn’t remember how old he’d been on those occasions.

Rizel learned everything he needed to know from Tia’s expression. On the other hand, she couldn’t even look at him. She had no strength left to consider the depth of sorrow in his voice.

“Do you know who I first fell in love with?” Rizel pressed. “It was Mary Edigma—the woman you attempted to kidnap and use for your nefarious purposes.”

As Tia recalled the woman from the fortress, Rosemary sprang to mind. “Rosemary...” she muttered under her breath. “That vile woman is always getting in my way. Yes, she even deceived you. Listen to me, Rizel—that woman is a villainess. She’s lying to you and Duke Reynaldo. She’s the one who set me up.”

Tia cursed the names of Mary and Rosemary, having gone mad.

“You brought this upon yourself!” Rizel shouted at his mother, the dam holding back his emotions bursting. “This is the result of your deceit and treating people’s lives like toys! How do you not understand that?!”

Rizel no longer felt anything for his mother. From childhood on, he’d never received parental love. He no longer desired his mother’s affection.

Furthermore, her crimes were too grave for him to show the slightest amount of pity. Not even royalty could be forgiven for selling out their kingdom to a foreign nation. If Razel showed her any hint of mercy, faith in the royal family would waver. Did she not understand that?

As the new king, Razel had to remain detached. At the same time, he couldn't suppress his irritation. He couldn't forgive her for kidnapping the only woman he'd ever loved. Though he was no longer in a position to express his feelings for Mary, they hadn't changed at all. Even after becoming king, not a day passed in which he didn't imagine a future with her.

If she hadn't possessed Rosemary's memories, perhaps her feelings towards the royal family would have been different. Razel lacked the courage to continue professing his feelings to her, as his parents had caused her death in a past life. Consequently, the days he'd been able to love her with all his heart had been few. Immediately after their first meeting, he did his best to court her. That brief period had been incredibly precious to him.

"This is the last time I'll speak to you directly, Mother," Razel said. "Please use the rest of your life to atone for those you killed."

"How could you be so cruel, my son...?"



As Tia muttered to herself, Rizel departed, returning from whence he'd come. Considering his enormous workload, he didn't have a moment to spare on pity. He opened the door, letting in the faint light, and closed it with a heavy thud.



“WHAT? My sister was actually here?”

After I reported the incident with Rosemary to Reynaldo, those were the first words out of his mouth.

He'd been working in his hospital room. He probably should have moved back to his office, but he'd decided not to since he didn't want to waste time going back and forth between two places. Also, he hadn't fully recovered, despite his claims to the contrary.

I'd gone to thank Reynaldo since he'd taken time out of his busy schedule to help me and Albert. After I explained what had just occurred, his expression darkened.

“Are you ready to die by my hand, Albert?” he asked. His features radiated deathly cold. Likewise, he was so incensed that his bloodlust prickled my skin.

“B-But I have so much to live for,” Albert stammered.

Despite being older than Reynaldo and the high commander, his voice quavered. I racked my brain for ways to quell Reynaldo's wrath.

“You were the one who came up with the idea of tricking Albert in the first place,” I said to Reynaldo. “And Albert, I should apologize to you for agreeing to that plan.”

“No, I bear some responsibility for driving you to such actions,” Albert replied. “All's forgiven.”

Reynaldo looked somewhat chastened at that. “Well then, let's call ourselves even.”



SOMETIME after this conversation, Tia's execution took place. I watched as she stood on the gallows, finally witnessing the moment she died. All the while,

I remembered when Rosemary stood on a similar platform. My legs nearly gave out under me. I couldn't remain composed in the face of past anguish and terrible déjà vu. I was only able to make it through the hanging thanks to Albert's support.

Still, I thought it was wrong to look away. Not only had I been a victim of her crimes, but I'd also been involved in her punishment. I needed to accept the outcome.

Tia had already lost her sanity. As the executioner recited her crimes, she muttered to herself nonstop. Claiming not to be at fault, she cursed Rosemary's name from time to time. Though this enraged Albert and Reynaldo, they still showed more concern for my well-being, which afforded me some measure of happiness.

Under King Rizel's new decree, the corpses of the condemned wouldn't remain exposed to the public. Tia's remains were returned to the castle, where House Danzes would receive them. Though Tia had once been queen, her family would never be allowed to be in the presence of royalty again.

A few days after the execution, I made up my mind to speak to Albert and Reynaldo. "I'm planning on returning to Edigma," I said. "Not because I'm worried about the region. I just have so much to report to my parents."

"Do you mind if I accompany you?" Albert asked while squeezing my hand.

Incidentally, Reynaldo and Stanley were present as well. Albert had already explained everything to Stanley, who neither opposed our relationship nor congratulated me. "I should've guessed you'd end up with a knight," he'd said simply. When would he learn manners?

"I'd like to announce our engagement to your father directly," Albert said, "as well as before your mother's grave."

"O-Our engagement?" I stammered.

"What are you so surprised about?" Stanley asked.

"Don't you remember him proposing to you?" Reynaldo chimed in.

Oh, that's right, I remembered in response to their stone-faced quips. *Albert*

did propose to me.

“Sure, I remember,” I said. “But hearing it put into words again is so embarrassing.”

I covered my face with my hands; I couldn’t suppress the blush creeping up my cheeks. Albert and I had just confirmed our feelings for each other a few days ago, and now we were getting married?

“Would you rather not get married?” Albert asked. My reaction made him uneasy.

I shook my head fervently. “No, of course, I want to get married. Speaking of which, shouldn’t I meet your parents first?”

“I don’t mind postponing that for now. I’m not House McClain’s oldest son, and my parents are workhorses. They probably wouldn’t take the day off even to hear about their own son’s engagement.”

According to Rosemary’s memories, the McClains were a prominent family of knights. *Workhorses* was an apt description for them. Considering their achievements, their previous lack of title and lands seemed strange. However, they turned down all such offers in the past due to their pride as knights. To the McClains, serving their lords and ladies was the highest virtue. Had this not been the case, they wouldn’t have ordered a young Albert to serve an even younger Rosemary as her knight.

I nodded, fully grasping the situation. “At the very least, we should send them a letter.”

“Good idea,” Albert agreed. “In that case, we can visit Edigma in person, but write to my parents for now.”

“Considering your age difference, you need to start having kids now,” Stanley interrupted with unasked-for advice. “You should have the ceremony as soon as possible.”

“Do you mind if I plan the ceremony?” Reynaldo asked, taking charge for some reason. “We can have it in Rose, McClain, or even the capital. I’ll special order a wedding dress from a first-rate designer that will look lovely on Mary.”

As I suppressed the urge to yell, Albert squeezed my shoulder softly. “Please don’t hesitate to say whatever’s on your mind, Mary. I don’t want to force you into doing anything unpleasant.”

“Thank you...”

“If you wish, I don’t mind moving to Edigma with you. There aren’t any knights in your hometown, correct? I could help start a city watch. Since my territory has an administrator, I don’t plan on tying you down into the life of a viscount’s wife.”

“Sir Albert...?”

I wanted him to take charge. Also, how could he consider leaving the chivalric order so easily? These discussions were out of the ordinary for a soon-to-be-married couple. Rather than sighing in joy, I sighed at the mental anguish awaiting me in the future.

Thus, Albert and I decided to visit Edigma and report on everything to my parents. We could take care of everything else in the future.

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AS the familiar scenery came into view, I leaned out the carriage window and looked outside, unable to sit still. I’d often gaze at that mountain range from this poorly maintained road.

“Don’t lean out too far,” Albert cautioned me.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help myself.”

When Albert laughed at me for acting like a giddy child, I felt embarrassed. Even so, I couldn’t maintain my composure as we approached my hometown, considering how long I’d been away.

This rural village had nothing to its name—not even a single tourist attraction. Our small population cultivated fields, raised cows and pigs, and collected wool for fabric. In short, we prided ourselves on being self-sufficient.

Some people dreamed of living in the capital, like Stanley. Many of them moved there, got married, and then returned home. But my father’s personality had seeped into the people of Edigma, and it was one of the easiest and most

comfortable places to live. That was our strongest source of pride.

“What a lively place,” Albert commented.

When we entered the village, children watched our carriage curiously. Visitors were rare. After spotting me inside, they squealed with delight, chasing after the vehicle.

“Isn’t it?” I agreed with Albert while waving to the children. “Edigma is home to the most spirited people in all the kingdom.”

“That’s certainly enviable.”

When Albert smiled, I couldn’t help but smile back. Even though it was his first time visiting a countryside village, he showed no signs of disliking it. His eyes shone with delight as he took in his surroundings.

“Still, there’s not a single interesting thing here,” I said.

“How could this village not be wonderful when you were born and raised here?”

“You think too highly of me.”

Albert chuckled, his expression peaceful. “I’m only being honest.”

He wore noble attire rather than his usual knightly fatigues. I couldn’t stop staring; I hardly ever saw him in plain clothes. He’d dressed up more than usual because he would be asking for my father’s blessing, further emphasizing his handsomeness. Just looking at him made my heart race.

Also, he’d stopped speaking so formally when we were alone together. Having such friendly conversations with each other filled me with joy.

Since we’d sent word ahead of time, Tobias—my father—was waiting for us in front of our small manor. As soon as the carriage stopped, I jumped out and hugged him.

“Welcome home,” he greeted me.

“It’s good to be back,” I replied.

Though Father recently visited me in the capital, reuniting with him in Edigma was a different experience. He embraced me in the place of my birth. I was

finally home.

“Did Stanley not come with you?” Father inquired.

“Do you even have to ask?”

Stanley vastly preferred capital life to the countryside. He wouldn't come home for anything except errands pertaining to being a feudal lord. Not even his little sister introducing her fiancée would change that.

“Um, on that note...” I trailed off, bashfully hanging my head while looking at the carriage. Albert disembarked, came to stand by my side, and bowed his head to Father.

“I'm Albert McClain,” he introduced himself. “Please excuse my sudden visit.”

Father smiled warmly and held out his hand to Albert. “Thank you for making such a long journey. I'm Tobias Edigma.”

“Of course. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

I laughed at the two men, who both wore vaguely nervous expressions. Happiness welled up within me. When I sent a letter to Father about wanting to marry Albert, he wrote back with his blessing. I hadn't expected Father to oppose our marriage, but when I saw him and Albert together, my lips tugged into a joyous smile. Hopefully, no one would tire of how much I'd been smiling lately.

“Mary, do you mind brewing us some of your wonderful tea?” Father asked. “It's been too long.”

His words brought me back to reality. “Of course,” I agreed before dashing into my childhood home.

Later, the three of us sat in the small parlor room. After taking a deep breath, Father opened his mouth to speak. “To be honest, this all seems too good to be true for Mary.”

My eyes widened at Father's brutal honesty. Beside me, Albert spilled a few drops of tea, looking similarly shocked.

Father rushed to explain himself. “My daughter is wonderful, and I'm very proud of her. Even considering my fatherly bias, she's a beautiful young woman.

She takes after her mother, after all. Or does she...? Well, that's beside the point. In any case, you're a very important man, Lord McClain. Should you be marrying a baron's daughter?"

Father made a good point. As a countryside noble, I was unworthy of Albert—a viscount who'd performed great deeds in the capital. Normally, such a marriage wouldn't be possible. If Albert hadn't received a peerage, perhaps the circumstances would be different. As things stood, however, this seemed too good to be true for me.

"Honestly, I'm a baron in name only," Father admitted. "I'm more of a village leader. Now that you're a viscount, plenty of high-ranking noblewomen must be clamoring for your attention. Is your family not worried about your future?"

Apparently, Father and I shared the same concerns, so Albert gave him the same explanation as he'd given me. "Regardless of my position, I want to take Mary as my wife because I love her."

"I see," Father said. He looked at me with a contemplative expression. "Will you be okay, Mary?"

He was probably worried about me becoming a viscount's wife.

"I'll manage," I replied.

This might have sounded like a poorly considered response, but it was my honest answer. If I found myself incapable of something, I would learn how to accomplish it. If I still found myself lacking, Albert and I could think up a solution.

"Honestly, Mary would be a better ruler than me," Albert said, uncharacteristically bashful. "I only have skill as a knight."

Apparently, he was also worried about being a viscount.

"Albert has entrusted his region to an administrator," I said. "Honestly, it makes more sense to call me the wife of the high commander than the wife of a viscount."

"Oh, I see," Father replied with a wide grin. "I must say—you two seem like a perfect match for each other."

Albert and I looked at each other, sharing an awkward smile.

“Well, then, shall we go share the news with your mother?” Father asked.

When he stood, Albert and I followed.

I haven't visited Mother's grave in a long time.

A beautiful, solitary gravestone stood in the middle of a peaceful meadow surrounded by nature. Ten years after Mother's death, the gravestone showed no signs of aging thanks to Father's conscientious upkeep. Each morning, he visited with an offering of flowers. On the anniversary of her death, he decorated the gravestone with an even more extravagant floral arrangement. Finally, he would sing Mother's favorite song on her birthday. The depth of his undying love for her warmed my heart.

“Miriam,” Father said. “Our daughter is getting married. Please continue to watch over her.”

He kissed the memorial stone. I walked up from behind, placed flowers at the grave, and offered a prayer. Afterward, I told her about Albert, Rosemary, and everything that had transpired over the past six months. Though telling the whole story took a great deal of time, Albert joined me in a long prayer.

“You have a lot to tell her, don't you?” Father asked, moved.

“A lot happened in the capital,” I replied.

I still hadn't told Father about my being a reincarnation. I'd considered telling him, but he brought up a similar conversation as if something had just occurred to him.

“Do you still want to be your mother's daughter in your next life, Mary?”

Albert and I stiffened at the words *your next life*.

“...What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You don't remember, eh? A long time ago, you said, ‘I hope Mother is my mom again in my next life’.”

I couldn't remember saying anything of the sort. Mother died when I was very young. Nevertheless, the gears in my mind turned at full speed to recall what I'd

been thinking as a child. As I did so, Father spoke up first.

“If Miriam and I marry in our next life and we have you as our daughter again, nothing could make me happier.”

At first, I didn’t know how to respond. Eventually, however, I knew this was a good chance to speak my mind. “If I happened to be the reincarnation of a certain nobleman’s daughter, what would you think, Father...?”

“What’s this? A certain nobleman?” After thinking it over, Father laughed. “Ah, I see. You already knew courtly manners as a child because you were the daughter of a nobleman.”

In response to this carefree answer, Albert and I froze. Father was aware of me possibly being a reincarnation before I regained my memories. He was a difficult man to rattle, but all the same, I hadn’t expected him to understand this talk of past lives.

While Albert and I stood there dumbstruck, Father looked at us curiously. “Am I wrong? When you started acting like a highborn lady as a child, I was sure you must be someone’s reincarnation.”

“No, you’re right, but...you actually believe me?” I asked.

Normally, people would call a person crazy for making such a claim. Reincarnation sounded like something out of a fairy tale, and there was no historical precedent for it. Yet, as usual, Father showed no signs of doubting me.

He shrugged. “Well, if you claim to be someone’s reincarnation, I don’t see any reason to disbelieve you.”

“You’re taking me at my word?” I pressed.

“Hmm. You don’t seem to remember, but you said things of that nature during your childhood.”

No, I didn’t remember. After all, I’d only recently recalled my past life.

“What did she say as a child?” Albert asked, unable to suppress his curiosity about anything concerning Rosemary.

Father pondered the question. “She occasionally said things similar to that

previous comment about her next mother. Also, she knew complicated, courtly manners that I'd never even learned myself. In any case, she was a very well-mannered child. You couldn't have learned to curtsy like that in Edigma, Mary."

"Huh?" I asked. "Really?"

I hadn't been conscious of where I'd learned my manners. They'd been ingrained in me for as long as I could remember. *But now that he mentions it, where did I learn them?* I wondered.

"That's right," Father replied. "Not only did you have great table manners, but you also bowed to everyone so politely. Visitors always complimented you."

That behavior came to me naturally, but looking back on my childhood, I hadn't learned those manners in Edigma. I'd been aware of social etiquette to a greater degree than my tutor ever taught me. For some reason, I'd never wondered where this knowledge came from.

"It seemed so obvious that I never even stopped to think about it!" I cried.

Albert nodded. "Lady Rosemary received rigorous instructions in courtly manners, after all."

The idea of those instructions being engraved on her reincarnated soul was terrifying. Also, I only recalled courtly manners, not any other knowledge. Considering that, I wouldn't wish the education of a prospective queen on my worst enemy.

"Rosemary!" Father called out. "Even your names are similar! It must be fate. I'm sure she was a wonderful woman."

Oh, that's right, I thought, watching him make a merry racket. *No one mentioned the name of my past self until just now.*

Shortly after, the three of us sat down, and I explained the situation from beginning to end.

"Wow," Father said, grasping the enormity of the situation. "I feel guilty about making you take care of the livestock."

How typical of him.

That evening, Albert returned to the capital for work. Conversely, I decided to

stay in Edigma for at least two days to fully enjoy my homecoming.

“I’ll be back for you,” Albert said when leaving, giving me a light kiss on the cheek. I watched him until he faded into the distance and then I went inside the manor.

Father was cooking in the kitchen. As a gourmet, he knew how to whip up a scrumptious home-cooked meal. Considering his skill, he could probably make a living as a chef even if stripped of land and title. I often wondered if that was his true calling.

“I’m making your favorite meat pie today,” he said.

“Thank you! That sounds wonderful.”

When I sat at the table, Father served the food and poured us two glasses of red wine. Thus began our private meal.

“Congratulations on your engagement.” Father raised his glass to me.

“Cheers!” I raised my glass in turn. Cheap and easy to drink, it filled me with memories of home.

We talked about various things while eating, such as my life in the capital and the state of the chivalric order. I even discussed the recent turmoil in a downplayed manner so as not to worry Father. Finally, I brought up Rosemary.

“It’s a strange sensation,” I said. “As if another version of myself has been asleep and dreaming inside me for my entire life.”

I described how it felt to occasionally sense Rosemary next to me. Explaining how we were the same person yet separate was always difficult.

“To be honest, I only regained her memories recently,” I said. “Do you remember when I lost consciousness before going to the capital? That was the trigger.”

“Ah, I do remember that.”

A rope grazing my neck brought back memories of my previous life. Looking back on that day, everything started there.

“What a strange story,” Father said. “If you hadn’t regained your memories,

the future of our country might have changed dramatically. And you probably wouldn't have gotten engaged to Sir Albert."

"Yes, that seems likely..."

Had I not regained my memories, I would have worked as a palace handmaid without incident. During that time, Reynaldo and Albert would have exacted their vengeance.

"I think there must have been some reason you recalled your past life," Father said.

"What do you mean?"

"After learning of Lord Reynaldo and Sir Albert's plans, Lady Rosemary wanted to convey her lack of desire for vengeance. Perhaps she wanted to save them. Or, perhaps, some power awakened your memories to save the kingdom. What do you think of that?"

I laughed. "You should be a writer."

Despite showing mirth at Father's outlandish story, he might have been right. Perhaps I regained my memories because someone desired this future. If not, I might have lived my whole life without ever remembering Rosemary. In that case, I would have regarded the courtly manners engraved upon my soul as a curiosity.

"But there is one thing I know for certain," Father said, winking at me awkwardly. "No matter what happens, you'll always be my precious daughter."

His words filled me with such joy that I could have wept. However, I only smiled. While this had been a short period in my life, it felt like I'd reached the end of a long, winding journey. Amid conflicts and upheavals, I even uncovered a new side of myself.

Yet, in the end, I would always return to my family's side.

Epilogue

A bell rang out in celebration. As wedding attendees pushed towards the newlywed couple, the decorations on the bride's dress sparkled in the sunlight. The groom wore formal, knightly attire while he escorted his bride, his face appearing and disappearing within the crowd. Knights, palace handmaids, and friends from the couple's childhood homes came to celebrate the wedding. In unison, the attendees threw flower petals into the air, which rained upon the couple in a dazzling shower.

Half a year had passed since the wedding date had been set. Today, the ceremony took place in a church in one corner of the capital. Lady Mary Edigma and Viscount Albert McClain had finally been married.

Normally, churches in the capital were reserved for the most important weddings. However, with the assistance of King Rizel and Prime Minister Reynaldo Rose, Mary and Albert were able to hold their ceremony there.

In her past life, the bride was executed in the capital, with the sonorous bell heralding Rosemary's death. She longed for a fresh start—to replace sorrowful memories with joyful ones. Upon hearing this wish, the people closest to Mary helped plan her ceremony in this church. And today, her dream wedding became a reality. She gripped Albert's arm, her expression the embodiment of joy. When Albert smiled back at her, the knights collectively burst into tears.

The ceremony moved Mary's family, but their eyes also sparkled at the sight of the wedding feast. It had been prepared by the capital's finest chefs, after all.

That aside, Tobias Edigma's eyes were filled with kindness as he watched the couple from afar alongside his son. He opened the cover of his pocket watch, looking at a small portrait of his wife engraved inside, and told her about their daughter's wedding in his most cheerful voice.

Despite authorizing the ceremony, King Rizel turned down his invitation, as he had royal duties to attend to. Likewise, he worried that a king attending a

viscount's wedding could lead to unwanted gossip. Those were his pretexts, at least, but what were his true feelings? Even now, thinking about Mary gave rise to a bittersweet ache in his chest. He couldn't decide if he wished to see her celebrating her marriage. Regardless, he wished them the best, sending his heartfelt blessings. He'd also offered an apology from the royal family, who'd caused Mary many long years of suffering.

From now on, let the sound of this bell bring you joy, not sorrow, King Rizel thought while gazing at the sky.

The bell rang out again. At that moment, a man appeared in front of the bride and groom. His face reminded Mary of the boy she'd seen before being executed in her past life. He'd wailed his sister's name, tears streaming down his face. However, Reynaldo Rose was no longer that young boy from Hubert. He no longer wore black mourning clothes, either. Today, he donned a lavishly ornamented outfit, perfect for a celebration. Standing before the bride and groom, he gazed at them with a more joyous smile than anyone present. The future he'd always envisioned had become a reality. His long-held wish had finally been granted.

As Mary considered everything she wished to tell him, Reynaldo prayed for their lifelong happiness.

"Reynaldo," Mary whispered, only loud enough for him to hear. "I'll always be by your side, and I wish for you to find happiness as well."

"...I love you, Mary," Reynaldo answered, offering his heartfelt blessing like an adoring brother.

The wind kicked up again, and the flower petals soared high into the air. As the bell tolled once more, Mary was lifted off the ground. Unable to contain his happiness, Albert swept her into a bridal carry. Flustered, she clung to her beloved husband, doing her best not to drop her bouquet.

The tolling of the bell no longer inspired a thirst for vengeance. Now, its sonorous ringing simply marked the passage of time.

Bonus Story: Hometown

I stood on a gently sloping hill in the McClain region, formerly known as the Hubert region. A sweeping view surrounded by nature stretched into the distance.

This would be an easy place to live, I thought.

As Mary, I'd never been here before, but I'd breathed this air and admired this scenery for many years in my past life. A wave of nostalgia crashed over me. Rosemary had loved this view as well. It brought back a childish urge to run around with outstretched arms without a care in the world.

"Mary," Albert called out to me. He'd been talking to another man a short distance away, but now he gave me his full attention. "Sorry for making you wait. Let's be on our way."

"All right."

I took his proffered hand, and we walked towards Rosemary's grave.

* * *

PLANS to move Rosemary's remains to her memorial were delayed, but some progress was made during Tia's trial. Despite his injuries, Reynaldo was desperate to accomplish this task. Thus, we'd departed for McClain as soon as his doctor deemed him capable of moving. Albert and I had a wedding coming up, and I'd been taking care of the formalities on his behalf, as he was very busy. However, I accompanied him and Reynaldo on the day of the casket's transportation.

Reynaldo and Albert—who knew Rosemary better than anyone—constructed her memorial on one corner of this large hill. I'd agreed to this idea. Rosemary had preferred this hill's sweeping scenery to the stifling manor.

"Does this place bring back fond memories?" Albert asked.

I nodded. "I've been feeling nostalgic ever since we arrived here. Rosemary

loved this view, didn't she?"

"Indeed, she did. The garden was the only place to play inside the manor. Whenever we went out, it was usually to this hill."

At the time, Rosemary hadn't been able to walk around town often, as she'd been a candidate for the crown princess.

"This way." Albert pointed towards a memorial stone in the distance.

Reynaldo stood in front of the memorial, which was surrounded by flowers. His blond hair swayed in the breeze, and he held white lilies. The scene was picturesque in its beauty.

"Reynaldo," I called out to him.

He'd been staring at the memorial, but when he heard me, his jade-green eyes turned to me, and he smiled. "Mary, you've arrived. Welcome to your former hometown."

"Thank you. It brings back so many memories."

I looked at Rosemary's name inscribed on the stone monument. The casket was buried deep within the memorial. After the burial, a priest would offer his prayers, and the soul of the deceased would return to Heaven. According to our scriptures, at least.

"Coming here reminds me of the days I spent with Rosemary." After placing his flowers before the grave, Reynaldo stood and surveyed the distant landscape. "She brought me out here quite often. Since I tended to stay cooped up in the house, she wanted me to have a little fun."

I hadn't known this. While some memories of my past life were clear, others were fragmented. Occasionally, I couldn't remember something Reynaldo or Albert brought up.

"The priest should be here soon," Reynaldo said.

"Who else will be in attendance?" I asked.

"It's just you, me, and Albert. Rosemary would feel more at ease that way."

How typical of Reynaldo—the Rosemary supremacist.

Standing in front of the memorial, I folded my hands and offered a prayer. I wanted to tell her a million different things, but for now, I beseeched her to rest peacefully in her beloved hometown. Albert prayed beside me with his eyes closed. However, as a knight addressing his liege, he sat on his knees with his head bowed.

What is he saying to her? I wondered while peering at him.

Albert opened his eyes, looked in my direction, and smiled. “Your gaze is going to burn a hole through me.”

“S-Sorry,” I apologized.

Apparently, I’d been a little too obvious. I hurriedly looked away, only to find Reynaldo grinning at me, too.

“Feeling jealous, Mary?” he asked.

“N-Not at all!”

Albert stood up and sighed theatrically. “Now that just hurts my feelings.”

“Please don’t tease me like that.” My face grew increasingly warm. “I was just wondering what you were saying to her.”

“Me? I was telling her about you. Then I apologized for causing her so much worry. Lastly, I promised to protect this land.”

With Albert focusing on his job as the high commander, he rarely had time to visit his territory. Even so, he still wanted to give his best effort to being a feudal lord.

“I never planned on entrusting everything to you, Albert, so you needn’t worry,” Reynaldo said. “Everything will be fine. Should anything happen, I’ll be there to support you.”

While Reynaldo grinned from ear to ear, Albert’s expression darkened. “I don’t know whether to feel grateful or insulted.”

“My older brother might ask you to return this land to him,” Reynaldo added. “If that happens, let me speak on your behalf. You would have a difficult time turning him away, wouldn’t you?”

“...I suppose so.”

Reynaldo and Rosemary’s much older brother had originally been next in line to inherit the Hubert region. However, after his father’s fall from power and his sister’s execution, the lands had been seized, and he’d been demoted in court rank. To my knowledge, he still passed himself off as a viscount, but until Reynaldo brought up the subject, I hadn’t thought about him at all.

“Do you remember our brother, Mary?” Reynaldo asked.

I tried to recall him, but strangely, my memories were vague. “Not really,” I answered, shaking my head.

“That makes sense. Rosemary distanced herself from him as well. To Albert, however, he’s the older brother of his former liege, and they’re close in age. Dealing with him would be difficult.”

“That’s true,” Albert agreed. “Honestly, I’m grateful for the offer.”

“Think nothing of it. To make things even, why don’t you let me handle Mary’s wedding dress?”

Albert and I went silent. At that moment, we were probably thinking the same thing.

Wait, he still hasn’t given up on that?

When Albert and I announced our engagement, Reynaldo—for some reason—insisted upon tailoring my wedding dress. Relentlessly so.

“You can choose whatever style of wedding dress you like,” Albert had told me. Honestly, though, I wasn’t picky, so long as I liked the design.

Still, the palace was a small place. Not long ago, Reynaldo called me into the prime minister’s office, where a handmaid took my measurements in a separate room. To my horror, rumors spread around the palace in the blink of an eye.

“Reynaldo is choosing the wedding dress for a handmaid named Mary!”

“Mary is only pretending to be engaged to Albert. She’s actually marrying Reynaldo!”

As for the most shocking rumor—

“Reynaldo and Albert are using Mary to hide their forbidden love!”

In any case, I’d heard plenty of absurd gossip about myself.

According to the official story, I was a distant relative of Rosemary’s, which led to a friendship blossoming between Reynaldo and me. If the public believed that story, everything would have been fine and dandy. Considering the rumors of our secret marriage, however, I couldn’t choose my wedding dress with Reynaldo. Also, my engagement with Albert was publicly announced, so why were rumors even circulating in the first place?

“Reynaldo, didn’t I ask you to stop talking about this?!” I cried.

“What’s the harm if no one finds out?” Reynaldo countered. “If we use Albert’s name with everything concerning the dress, that should suffice, right?”

“How can you be so thoughtless? If the payments are traced back to you, our cover will be blown immediately!”

“In that case, let’s hire a personal designer under Albert’s name. He can pay the original fee, but all subsequent charges will be billed to me.”

I groaned. “This is getting way too convoluted...”

“Please, you two, we’re in front of Rosemary’s grave,” Albert reminded us in an even tone.

I came back to my senses and apologized quietly to her memorial.

* * *

“**BUT** anyway, why is Reynaldo so fixated on my wedding dress?” I asked.

Albert and I had moved to the feudal lord’s manor in the McClain region. While I sat in an office chair, Albert signed papers. Rosemary hadn’t spent much time in this building. It was a separate manor that her father had used for work. Though she knew of the home’s location and purpose, she’d never been inside the office.

“You don’t know?” Albert asked, surprised.

“Well, I know it must have something to do with Rosemary.”

Nine times out of ten, when Reynaldo acted hardheaded, it involved his sister.

“Rosemary’s wedding dress was the only thing she had to look forward to in her marriage to Prince Grey,” Albert said. “Do you not remember that?”

“What?”

This was news to me. I couldn’t recall Rosemary thinking this.

“According to Rosemary, she didn’t want to become the crown princess, but she was looking forward to wearing the most beautiful dress a bride could hope for,” Albert explained. “But if you don’t remember that, perhaps it was a lie to set Reynaldo’s mind at ease.”

I had no recollection of Rosemary looking forward to her wedding dress. However, I recalled her wanting to provide Reynaldo with the brightest future she could.

“What will I do when you leave, Rosemary?” he’d asked.

“Oh...!” I cried.

A memory rushed back to me. Though Rosemary was still young, her engagement to Crown Prince Grey was already decided. While Hubert was abuzz with the good news, Reynaldo uttered those words sadly. Rosemary was the only person he’d ever trusted, and the idea of her leaving had made him anxious. Likewise, he’d been concerned for his older sister, as she hadn’t truly wished to become the crown princess. Thus, she’d occasionally speak of a bright future to cheer him up.

“Someday, we might be able to live in the capital together, so make sure you study hard, okay?”

“I’m not sad, Reynaldo. After all, I get to wear a beautiful wedding dress like the princess in my favorite picture book.”

I recalled Rosemary saying that to Reynaldo. The torrent of memories crashing over me was enough to cause a dizzy spell. As I nearly swooned, Albert came over to support me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Are you okay?”

“I am—thank you,” I answered. “Some of Rosemary’s memories just came back to me. As you said, she tried to set Reynaldo’s mind at ease by comparing

her situation to her favorite picture book.”

“...I see.”

Rosemary loved a picture book in which a knight protected a beautiful princess, and in the end, she married a prince. To allay Reynaldo’s concerns, Rosemary claimed to want such a fairy tale life.

Sadly, being engaged to the prince hadn’t been a dream. Rosemary endured a harsh education to become the perfect queen, and she and Grey hadn’t loved each other in the slightest. Meanwhile, she’d been forced to deal with constant politics and conspiracies.

Though Rosemary loved that picture book, only the princess and the knight caught her fancy. She never longed to marry a prince. Even so, she lied about looking forward to the wedding so as not to worry Reynaldo. Even if he saw through her falsehoods, it was the most she’d been able to do.

“I expect Reynaldo knows the truth,” Albert said. “At the same time, he still wants to grant Rosemary’s wish, regardless of whether she was being genuine.”

Hearing this, I made up my mind. “Albert, may I leave the dress to Reynaldo?”

This could give rise to more strange rumors, and Albert could even face slander. Even so, he merely smiled. “As I said, the choice is yours, remember? I’m sure you’ll look beautiful, no matter what dress you wear.”

Albert kissed me on the forehead, his expression aglow with happiness. I pressed my face into his chest to hide my flushed cheeks.

When I spoke to Reynaldo about the dress the next day, he took to the task enthusiastically. Whenever he set his mind to something, he was unstoppable.

Yet, as for the finished product—

“Aha...” I laughed awkwardly.

Reynaldo finished the dress a few months before my wedding. When I came to view it, the sight rendered me speechless. One of my friends was a seamstress, and I’d even tailored my own dress for my debutante. As such, I knew how over the top it was.

“He’s gone way too far!” I cried.

The pure white fabric could only be obtained in the Camille region and was used exclusively for high-end dresses. Furthermore, the silver embroidery thread—which Reynaldo used lavishly—was also extremely high quality. It had been sewn tastefully onto the hems and bust of the dress in rose and lily patterns. At the very least, it would take several seamstresses over half a year to do this much work.

Even more striking were the small gemstones inlaid into the dress. These rare diamonds were mixed with a pale honey color. I had no idea how much even one of these small, droplet-sized gemstones would cost, and Reynaldo used them unsparingly. This single dress was probably worth an entire castle. Seeing something so valuable terrified me.

I don't even want to know this exists, much less wear it, I thought. If even a speck of dirt lands on this dress, I'll probably pass out.

"What's done is done." Albert patted me on the shoulders. "It's not as though we can unmake the dress, and if we returned it, Reynaldo would tailor a new one."

"Ugh," I groaned, my eyes brimming with tears as I covered the dress. I couldn't let this terrifying garment see the light of day until absolutely necessary; otherwise, I would never rest easy. I vowed to keep it hidden until my wedding.

"That aside, I have a gift for you," Albert said. "Although it might pale in comparison to this nightmare of a dress."

As I cocked my head, puzzled, Albert withdrew something from his pocket. After taking my left hand, he placed it around my wrist. It was a bracelet.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"I might have let Reynaldo take charge of the dress, but at the very least, I still wanted to give you this myself."

Per tradition in Dirésias, engaged couples exchanged gifts with each other, such as bracelets, necklaces, and so forth.

"Thank you so much." My chest swelled with happiness as I gazed at the present.

“You only wear a wedding dress once, but you can put this on every day, right?”

“Huh?”

After he finished slipping on the bracelet, Albert looked at me bashfully. “Do you think I’m being petty?”

Don’t tell me...

“Did Reynaldo’s involvement in the dress bother you?” I asked.

Since he’d acted unperturbed, I doubted myself while asking the question.

Albert shrugged. “Well... Perhaps a little bit.”

Not expecting that answer in the slightest, I looked at the bracelet and smiled.

“If you’d asked Reynaldo to take care of this as well, I might have been angry,” Albert admitted.

That got a laugh from me.

* * *

“**WHAT’S** this?” Reynaldo asked the next day. “Did Albert beat me to the punch?”

He’d brought another bracelet because, in his words, it matched the dress. Of course, it also looked incredibly expensive. Albert and I both exhaled quiet sighs of relief, knowing we’d dodged an arrow.

E-Book Exclusive Side Story: I Have No Intention of Getting Married

A year had passed since the coup in the Dirésias Kingdom, and a shocking rumor spread throughout the palace. It concerned the marriage of Duke Reynaldo Rose—the right hand of the new king, the ringleader of the coup, the prime minister, and lord of the northern territories.

In the year since the coup, Reynaldo had made every effort to keep the kingdom at peace. *The spread of this rumor might serve as proof that he succeeded*, a single man contemplated somberly within an office of the chivalric order. His name was Albert McClain, and he'd also supported the coup one year ago.

Albert was born into a family of knights that should have received a peerage many generations ago. Nevertheless, he'd received the rank of viscount and a portion of the Hubert region—his hometown—one year ago. Though he was now a member of the landed gentry, his life hadn't changed much. Rather, he continued to serve as the high commander of the kingdom's chivalric order.

Frankly, his wife was more skilled at running their household and managing their territory than him. Before long, she'd taken control of these matters, and thanks to her efforts, he spent his days in the chivalric order's offices. Albert was endlessly grateful for this; he was better suited to wielding a sword than pushing a pen.

Now then...

As someone who worked in the palace, Albert had also heard the rumors of Duke Reynaldo Rose's marriage. According to the initial gossip, he would soon marry a young noblewoman, but over the past two weeks, her name had changed twice.

Where had this gossip arisen from? No one knew, but Reynaldo had made a statement to his retainers to quell the confusion.

“I have no intention of getting married.”

This statement hadn't only shaken single women to their cores. Married women and even men had been equally surprised.

After all, Reynaldo had come into a great deal of power while still a bachelor. Some critics even accused him of being the true authority in Dirésias. He was intelligent, a capable prime minister, and had earned King Rizel's deep trust. Likewise, he was praised for keeping Dirésias on its feet, as he excelled at statecraft and foreign diplomacy.

Many people sought to get close to Reynaldo. As his old friend, Albert knew about the innumerable letters he'd received concerning political marriages. Yet, rather than looking at those letters, he burned them as a substitute for kindling.

Albert sighed deeply, looking at the multiple letters in his hand.

So he has no intention of marrying, does he?

Many families still sought a political marriage from Reynaldo, despite knowing he burned all letters related to the subject. They were using any means necessary to get his attention. This included sending even more letters to Albert, asking for his help.

“Boss,” Eva said in exasperation while doing paperwork next to Albert. “If you keep sighing as a newlywed, it's going to invite misunderstandings.”

Albert frowned. “What kind of misunderstandings?”

“That things aren't going well with your wife, for instance.”

“That's ridiculous. Things couldn't possibly be going any better... I think.”

“Why the hesitation at the end?”

Personally, Albert found his marriage life favorable. He'd never been happier, and that wasn't an exaggeration. As a young lad, he'd harbored faint romantic feelings for Rosemary, and half a year ago, he'd wed her reincarnation—Mary.

Though Albert was uptight and quite a bit older than Mary, they'd come together as husband and wife. Half a year later, he could hardly believe his own reality. If possible, he would go back in time and redo his disgraceful proposal, but despite his pathetic display, she'd still accepted. Nothing in the world could

make him happier.

But truthfully, Albert was still insecure. Mary was such a charming woman that King Rizel fell in love with her at first sight. In Albert's estimation, the king still pined for her, but he'd buried those feelings after learning her identity as Rosemary's reincarnation. Rizel's consideration elicited guilt and gratitude in Albert, considering how uneasy the situation made him.

However, his greatest source of anxiety stemmed from another person: Reynaldo Rose. Rosemary's younger brother claimed that he wouldn't make a move on Mary. He'd even supported Albert and Mary's romance.

This was likely the result of Reynaldo considering Mary's happiness. As someone who always put Rosemary first, he'd probably decided that he couldn't make Mary happy. Thus, he removed himself from the equation. No, Reynaldo hadn't spoken these thoughts out loud, but all the same, he knew about Mary's worries concerning her feelings for Albert. Since he still viewed Mary as his sister's ghost, he backed off.

"...How terrifying," Albert muttered to himself.

If his assumptions were correct, he'd gotten lucky. Of course, he had no intention of giving up the fortune he'd seized. Chuckling to himself, Albert grabbed a bunch of the letters on his desk and stuffed them into a drawer. *I'll ask Eva to send letters of refusal on Reynaldo's behalf*, Albert thought while resuming his work.



AFTER finishing his work on schedule, Albert raced home to his manor in the capital. He'd bought this house after his engagement to Mary. Until then, he'd lived in the chivalric order barracks, as he hadn't possessed the energy to take care of his own house.

Previously, the knights teased Albert about not owning a home despite being the high commander. Since his wedding, they cheered for him when he raced home at the same time each day.

"Welcome home," Mary greeted him.

"It's good to be back," Albert replied.

He tried to wipe the dopey grin off his face while he gently embraced his wife in the doorway. Since their wedding, Mary had grown accustomed to hugging and other forms of physical affection, even demanding them from him. Though public displays of affection still embarrassed both of them, embracing in the comfort of their own home had become the norm.

“It looks like you had a hard day at work,” Mary noted.

“How can you tell?” Albert asked.

“There’s a crease between your brows,” Mary answered with a giggle, taking his cloak and handing it to a servant. She was the picture of a noblewoman presiding over her domain. The servants were probably more loyal to her than Albert, the actual head of the household.

“Apparently, I find peace more mentally draining than upheaval,” Albert said.

“I can see that. You prefer being active, after all. Shall I prepare you some hot tea?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Albert agreed cheerfully, as it was still a little early for dinner. “Will you join me?”

She’s so lovely, he thought, her beauty moving him as if for the first time. *Should I be allowed to have such an adorable wife?*

“You sound like a teenage boy gushing about his first love,” a phantom Phil Eva deadpanned inside his head.

After Mary prepared tea, she and Albert chatted on the terrace while enjoying the view. Albert always drank citrus tea, but since Mary often changed the variety, he never grew tired of the flavor.

“Speaking of which, I’ve heard the rumors about Reynaldo,” Mary said.

Albert struggled not to choke on his tea. “...May I ask what sort of rumors?”

“According to the gossip, Reynaldo was engaged to be married. Apparently, that was a lie, and he declared that he would never wed.”

“You’re well-informed for someone who doesn’t live or work in the castle.”

Mary had attended more than a few tea parties with other noblewomen.

Though she'd probably heard the gossip at those functions, the rumors spreading so far annoyed Albert.

"I've been receiving a bothersome number of letters asking for matchmaking help," Albert said.

"You as well?" Mary asked.

"...As well?"

This doesn't sound good.

"I receive similar letters from time to time," Mary explained. "I decline all of them in a roundabout manner, though."

I hadn't the faintest idea, Albert thought with surprise, turning his gaze toward a House McClain butler who waited on them in the distance. "Why yes, I knew," his blank expression seemed to say.

Am I the only one who didn't know about this?

"Perhaps it's because I'm supposedly Rosemary's distant relative," Mary continued. "I discussed the matter with Reynaldo since the volume of letters was growing a bit excessive recently. Forgive me if that's why the rumors have spread so far."

Reynaldo must have made his *never getting married* declaration after speaking to Mary about the letters. As Albert observed her troubled expression, he knew this for certain.

"What did Reynaldo say about the letters?" he asked.

"He apologized for causing trouble and promised to take measures so that no more letters would reach me."

"I see."

Even after Reynaldo's declaration, letters were still reaching Albert. Yet, despite being in the same position, Mary was no longer receiving them. Clearly, Reynaldo had taken measures of some sort. Albert went silent. At times, Reynaldo's abnormal protectiveness of Albert's wife frightened him.

"Albert?" Mary asked.

After setting down his teacup, Albert leaned towards Mary—who sat beside him—and kissed her cheek. As she looked at him with surprise, he leaned in again to kiss her on the lips. In response, she slowly closed her eyes and accepted the kiss.

Albert refused to let go of his beloved wife, regardless of her younger brother's abnormal attachment to her. Regardless of whether the king changed his mind and tried to steal her from him.

“Why don't we stop talking about Reynaldo and discuss the two of us instead?” Albert suggested.

They had so much to catch up on, including Mary's past and present lives. Albert would forever want to know everything about her. He hoped she felt the same way about him, and indeed, she nodded happily.

And so the two lovers continued their lively conversation until the sun set beyond the terrace. As the sky darkened, the butler finally called them in for dinner.

* * *

THE next day, Albert and Reynaldo had a chance to speak.

“If possible, I'd like to adopt one of your future children,” Reynaldo suggested.

Albert politely declined.

Afterword

THANK you for reading *The Reincarnated Villainess Won't Seek Revenge Volume 2*. I'm Akako, and I began writing this story in late winter, one year before its publication in Japan. Honestly, I still can't believe that my web novel has been traditionally published, or that so many people have read it. I often find myself thinking, "Wow, the impossible really can happen." It's a strange feeling.

I've enjoyed reading and writing stories since I was young. As a student, I would ask my friends to read my novels. After becoming an adult, I had the amazing opportunity to post my stories online for people to read. When I reflect on the past, I realize that I made it this far because I never gave up on doing what I loved.

This second volume concludes *Reincarnated Villainess*, but the manga is still ongoing. It's a lovely adaptation, so please read it! I'm thrilled to still have some connection with the characters.

Incidentally, people have told me that they're Team Razel or Team Reynaldo. (Laughs) Thank you so much! Mary might have ended up with Albert in this volume, but fear not! There are alternate retellings of the story starring Razel and Reynaldo on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*. If that interests you, please check out my profile on the website. It would make me very happy.

I've received help from so many people leading up to the publication. I'm especially grateful to my editor, Oda-san, as well as my friends, who helped me plot and think up illustrations.

The comments and messages from everyone who read these novels were so encouraging. From here on out, I want to write as many stories that I find interesting as possible. I sincerely hope to provide readers with more stories you find interesting as well.

As I said, the manga is still ongoing, so please check that out, too! I'm always

incredibly excited to read a new chapter!

I hope you had a great time reading this book. And if you made it to the end, thank you so much.



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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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