



Izumi Okido

Illustration by  
Jyun Hayase

1

It Seems  
Turning Into a  
**High-Born**  
—\*— **Baddie** —\*—  
Makes the Prince  
—\*— All the More —\*—  
**Lovestruck!**

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New York

# Copyright

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Makes the Prince All the More Lovestruck!

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Izumi Okido

Illustration by Jyun Hayase

Translation by Sarah Moon

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AKUYAKU REIJO NI NARU HODO OJI NO DEKIAI WA KASOKU SURU YODESU

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♦ *Afterword*





## Duke Seeker

Prince of the kingdom  
of Durkis.  
Uses Water magic.  
Seems to be interested  
in Alicia. .?!

## Alicia Williams

Uses Dark magic.  
Eldest daughter of  
the Williams family.  
Remembers her previous life.  
A quirky girl who hates  
speaking in platitudes  
and dreams of becoming  
a villainess.

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# I'll Become a Villainess Who Goes Down in History

Meet the Characters





## Liz Cather

The girl meant to be the main character of this otome-game-based world.



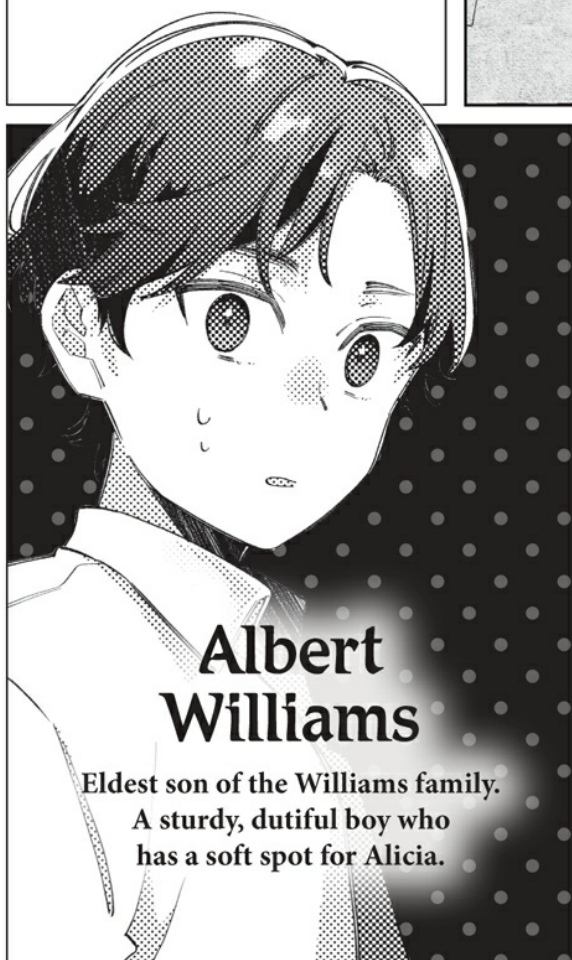
## Gill

A boy living in Roana Village. His parents were murdered, and he was living as a slave.



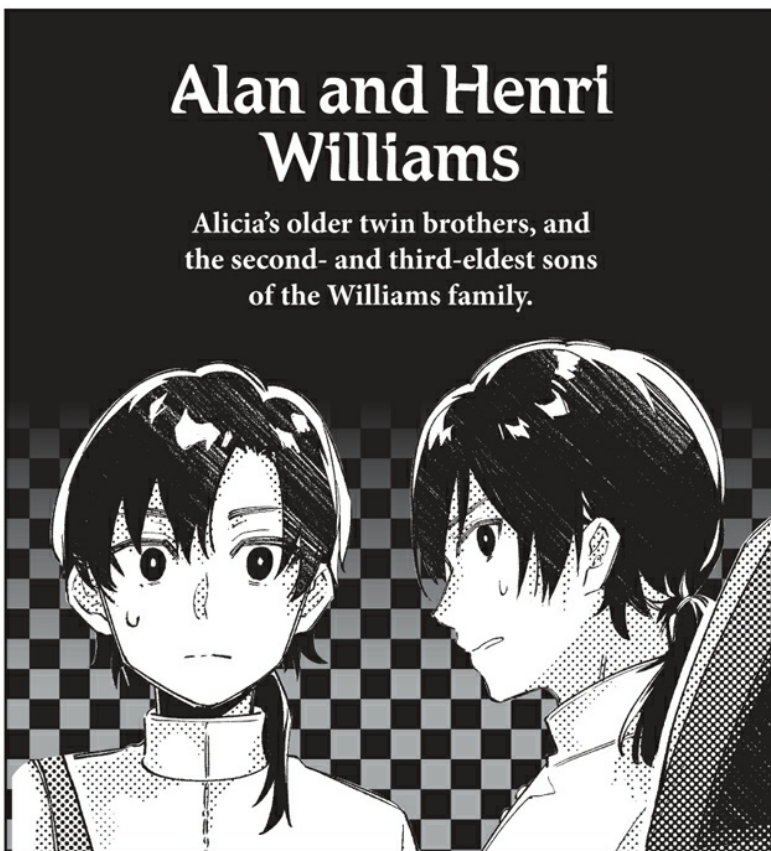
## Will

Resident of Roana Village. An unassuming old man with sharp insight and a wealth of knowledge.



## Albert Williams

Eldest son of the Williams family. A sturdy, dutiful boy who has a soft spot for Alicia.



## Alan and Henri Williams

Alicia's older twin brothers, and the second- and third-eldest sons of the Williams family.

I had a wish. That if I was reincarnated, it would be as the villainess of my favorite otome game. Because I could tell that behind that sharp tongue, she was a strong girl at her core.

All my friends wanted to become the heroine. Surrounded by hot guys in a reverse harem was their dream life. Honestly, I hated the heroine—or more like she rubbed me the wrong way. She had special powers that allowed her to join an elite magic school meant for nobility even though she was a commoner. Everyone said she had the smile of an angel. Meanwhile, the only thing that ever came out of that dense girl's mouth was naive, foolish drivel that she used to toy with the hearts of the princes... Well, let's set my personal hang-ups about the heroine aside for now.

I wanted to become the villainess. Because when she hurled vicious insults at the heroine, I understood exactly how she felt.

One day, when I was walking aimlessly down the street, wondering if people get reincarnated when we die—a truck hit me, and I really did die.

And these memories of my past life suddenly returned to me now, at age seven.

Yes, I've become Alicia, the eldest daughter of the Williams family... I am now the villainess of that otome game I was obsessed with in my past life. Alicia, the siren who charms men and women, young and old, alike. Alicia, the beautiful girl known for her jet-black hair and golden eyes...

But everyone's eyes are fixed on the heroine. The envy in Alicia will make her heart grow darker and darker until she finally becomes a true villainess.

Without meaning to, my lips soften into a smile.

I did it. I became a villainess.

Now all that's left is to become the greatest villainess this world has ever seen and go down in history!





## Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family—Age Seven

Magic exists in this world, but only the nobility can use it. Well, a commoner who can use magic will make an appearance later in the story. But let's set her aside for now. As for me—Alicia—naturally, I can use magic.

The Williams family is a noble house that specializes in dark magic. There are five elements: dark, light, water, wind, and fire. I said *specialize*, but the degree to which anybody can wield it varies from person to person.

Of course, my goal is to master dark magic. I'm going to become the number one villainess in this world, so of course I have to learn how to cast spells with ease. Starting tomorrow morning, I'm going to wake up early and hole myself up in the library to study magic.

"Good morning, Rose!"

My handmaiden Rozetta's eyes go wide as saucers as I fly out of my bedroom. She looks as if she's seen a ghost. To be fair, I've never woken up early or even bothered to greet her before—it was unthinkable of me. I was arrogant, selfish, and such a chronic complainer that my entire family was sick of me.

Looking back, Alicia sure was coddled by everyone around her. That's why she let herself go soft... But that version of Alicia is in the past now. Starting today, I'm going to be very strict with myself. Farewell, my former self. I shall never be you ever again.

I spot my brothers training with their swords in the garden. Is this something they do every morning? I ought to take a page out of their book.

With that thought circling in my head, I stare at the boys. The eldest, Albert, is twelve years old, and my other brothers, Henri and Alan, are ten. Unlike me, all my brothers are wildly gifted. Well, I guess that's understandable when your father hammers a hero's education into you from birth.

Since my elder brothers will be romanceable characters when they get older, they're all ridiculously beautiful. When Alicia thought the heroine stole her brothers away, she bullied the girl until her siblings cut all ties with Alicia. Ahh, what a badass. But I can't exactly remember what Alicia did to torment the heroine in the actual game. Well, that's okay. I'll just have to figure out how to bully her in my own way.

The longer I watch my brothers practice the sword, the more I want to try it myself. In my past life, I loved sports and was pretty athletic. Of course I didn't have any experience in sword fighting, but that's exactly why I want to give it a shot. If I'm gonna be a villainess, I gotta be physically strong, too.

"Brothers! Teach me how to use a sword."

My brothers freeze at the sound of my voice. Oh my, what a rare sight. Please, boys, don't stare at me so. You're making it look like I just said something crazy. Wait a minute...are girls not allowed to carry swords in this world?

"Ali? Do you have a fever or something?" Albert asks, his eyes still wide.

"I'll have you know I am perfectly healthy."

"Um...why do you suddenly want to learn how to use a sword?"

For all his initial surprise, Albert quickly smiles at me. He might be my brother, but he's still drop-dead gorgeous. Please don't flash that smile without thinking. You'll break so many hearts.

I turn to Albert, smile sweetly, and say, "I wish to become stronger."

"That's a lie," Alan and Henri say in unison.

That's twins for you. They're in perfect sync. And poor Albert's face freezes



over with shock at my answer. I know I said I wanted to become stronger, but it's more that I want the strength to bully the heroine. Maybe I need to elaborate.

Albert studies my expression and places a palm against my forehead. Um, rude? I don't have a fever. I'm trying to be serious here.

Henri's and Alan's faces line up to sandwich Albert's. Even though we're related, gazing at these three handsome faces at once still makes me blush.

"Hey, Al, what should we do?" Henri asks.

Albert frowns slightly and closes his eyes. Then after murmuring something under his breath, he opens his eyes and smiles, sweet as ever.

"Okay."

Um, Albert dearest? Even though you murmured that like a mosquito, I still heard you. You said, "We all know she'll just quit." I'll have you know when I set my mind to something, I follow through. I'll overcome any obstacle in my path to becoming the world's greatest villainess.

"Thank you very much." I beam, and my brothers stare back at me, eyes full of doubt.

"Okay, Ali. Before I train you, you need to build some basic strength and stamina."

I sort of saw it coming, but Albert didn't teach me the sword on day one. I agree, though. Having basic strength and stamina is important.

"Here's your daily routine: a hundred sit-ups and fifty push-ups."

Albert delivers his command with a smile. And maybe it's just me, but something about that kind smile looks a bit frightening. Still, I feel like a hundred sit-ups and fifty push-ups will be easy. In my past life, I did three hundred sit-ups, a hundred push-ups, and a hundred squats on the daily. I dabbled in rhythmic gymnastics, you see. So I could even do stuff like backflips and back handsprings in my sleep... Though I'm not sure I can do them right now, since I don't have much muscle.

“Dang, Al’s a sadist.”

“He’s already given Ali an impossible regimen to follow.”

I can hear Alan and Henri gossiping. An impossible regimen, you say? It might have been impossible for the former Alicia. But now that *I’m* Alicia, it’ll be a piece of cake. To be fair, my brothers don’t know anything about me gaining my past life’s memories.

“Understood, Brother. So if I build that strength, you will teach me the sword. Correct?”

“Yes. If you can keep it up for a week, then we’ll talk.”

A week?! Does he seriously think I can’t keep this up for just a week?

“Please don’t patronize me,” I snap and march away.

*Ooh, that line I just delivered sounded just like a villainess.* This is the first time in my life I’ve ever given my brother a look of contempt. Alan and Henri were staring at me with their jaws slack. Did you see that? Your sweet little sister who was always content to follow her brothers around just glared daggers at the eldest son. I’m going to keep polishing my villainous gaze just like that.

With a spring in my step, I make my way to my next destination: the library.

Some say that, excluding the royal library, the Williams family library is the biggest of all the noble families. I believe it. It’s big enough to get lost in.

Shelves twice as tall as I am seem to go on endlessly in every direction. What’s more, the library is two-storied.

Actually, this is my first time being here, even if I include the time before I regained my past life’s memories. I don’t even have an idea where the books on magic might be. What shall I do...? Well, I guess I’ll start off by just randomly wandering around.

Fairy tales, botany, zoology, medicine... Nothing! I can’t find a single book related to magic. And it’s not like I can just ask someone. I want to do this in secret.

Then I grab the botany book in front of me and read it cover to cover within an hour. And what a wonderful read it is. This world has all sorts of really cool plants! There are flying plants and even ones that emit light! Nothing like the plants in my old world. I guess I'll just stick with botany books for the rest of the day.

Forgetting my search for grimoires, I begin to pore over every book about plants and their effects.

"Lady Aliiicia?"

I hear Rozetta's voice in the distance. It's only then that it hits me: I've been reading books for over ten hours. I was so engrossed in them I skipped lunch.

I glance at the clock. It's just six. Time for dinner.

"Lady Aliiiiiciaaaa?"

Hearing Rozetta call for me again, I set down my book and count the number of volumes I've finished. One, two, three... Twenty-three books. I read twenty-three books in ten hours. But it took a whole hour to read the first one... I suppose my reading speed increased.

*Grrrrrmbl.*

My growling stomach booms through the library. Putting everything to the side, I run for the dining hall.

After dinner, I retire to my bedroom. And that's when exhaustion finally washes over me.

My parents and my brothers were all startled by my appetite. Well, I did eat three times what I normally eat.

I would love to just lie here and doze off, but I have to complete my training assignment. I start with my sit-ups, but this honestly feels like a slog. I have no muscles right now, so even fifty sit-ups is enough to wear me out. But I can't give up. Not now. A villainess needs the endurance of a boar!



I somehow manage to finish the set of one hundred sit-ups. It feels gross to do that right after a big dinner, but the push-ups should be a breeze.

I was wrong. Even ten push-ups are enough to make my arms shake.

Why are my arms so feeble? I guess a seven-year-old's physical strength is practically nonexistent. On my twenty-third push-up, I collapse to the floor and can't find the strength to get back up. But this is my all-important training to become a first-class villainess.

I steel my resolve and somehow manage to finish the set of fifty.

All those calisthenics have woken me up, so I might as well try my first back handspring in years. I'm tiny, and this room is pretty big, so I can probably go for three in a row.

With vigor, I flip my body backward. I see the floor, and I am suddenly hit with a sense of nostalgia.

One, two...three times. I did it! That last one was a little wobbly, but I did it! Muscle memory carries over from past lives apparently.

After all that exercise, I'm finally getting sleepy again.

I head straight to bed.

I get up early again the next day. One look at the clock, and I realize I have thirty minutes until Rozetta comes to wake me up. But my brothers probably get up even earlier for sword practice, so I can't let them outdo me. Time to start with some sit-ups.

And before I realize it, I finish my set of a hundred.

Whoa! Alicia, were you actually gifted after all? I'm surprised I don't have any muscle soreness, either...

I wonder why she was so useless in the game, then. It was probably all that coddling she got growing up. That means if I raise my skills early on, I can become an even better villainess than Alicia was in the game! Ahh, just the thought of it makes me smile.

I steady my breathing, get dressed, and exit my room. As I pass by the garden, I spot my brothers training. Agh, the more I watch them, the more I want to join in.

My brothers all have violet eyes, like our father. The way they catch the morning sun is absolutely breathtaking. And I can't help but lament the fact that I ended up with golden eyes that match our mother's. Violet eyes just feel so much eviler. But I won't be discouraged! It's what's on the inside that counts. I keep consoling myself with these thoughts as I head for the library.

I spend thirty minutes searching a different section than yesterday. But I still can't find any books on magic. I never thought it would be easy to locate them, but I can't believe it is so arduous.

Oh well, guess I'll read about zoology today.

After repeating that routine for a few days, the week is over. Word in the house is that I sneak off somewhere after waking up every day. Everyone became so worried that someone even suggested they call a doctor to check on my head. Talk about rude? I am *perfectly* sane.

No one even considered that I was in the library. But I don't blame them. At the dinner table, Father would always ask me where I had been all day, but I would just smile and evade the question.

During the past week, I also went through a dramatic growth spurt. And I'm not talking about my height. I can read ten books in an hour now. And since I read for about ten hours every day, that means I can read one hundred books a day. At first, this realization surprised me and even creeped me out a little, but I can't help it. My brain's processing capabilities seem rather advanced.

I also developed my physical strength. It's difficult to tell just by looking, but I can now reliably do five hundred sit-ups and three hundred push-ups. I can perform backflips, back handsprings, and somersaults at will, too. Is it just me or are my physical abilities a little too superhuman?! Maybe this is just standard when you live in a magical world.

These thoughts circle my mind as I look for Albert for my first sword lesson.

What is this incredible aura? And where is it coming from?

Besides my brothers, there are a few other people in the garden today. Oh, I see. Those are all the other romanceable characters in the otome game.

I study them from behind a pillar. And they really are handsome enough to melt your eyes.

But I'm surprised I get to meet them so soon. Am I the luckiest person in the world? Well, now's my chance to make my big first impression as the badass villainess.

As I look them over, I rack my brain for any past-life memories of them.

The one with the flaming red hair is Eric Hudson. He's ten years old and specializes in fire magic. He's the tallest of the group.

The one with sparkling golden hair is Finn Smith, also ten. He specializes in light magic. He's a bit short in stature and possesses a boyish charm.

Gale Evans, the one wearing glasses and with the mystical gray hair, is twelve years old. He specializes in wind magic and feels a bit more mature than the others.

And finally, the other twelve-year-old, with dark green hair in a ponytail, is Curtis Kenwood. He's the best-looking of them all and specializes in green magic.

Green magic does not fit in with the five elements. In this world, besides the five major types—dark, light, water, wind, and fire—there are many other varieties of magic. The high-ranking nobles who can use one of the five major elements of magic are called the Great Five noble families.

Oops, right, there's one more boy. The king's son, Duke Seeker. He's twelve years old and specializes in water magic, just like his father. With dark blue hair like the ocean and light brown skin, he's incredibly handsome and also rather tall...

Actually, he's totally my type. He's on a whole nother level compared with the



others. But he and the heroine end up together in the otome game's Happy Ending. Oh well, I guess I'll let the heroine have him.

Now that I remember everyone, I better go introduce myself.

I take a deep breath and make my way toward the handsome boys.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

As I greet them with a soft smile, they all turn to look at me. I can feel the blood rushing to my face, seeing them up close like that.

"So this is Al's little sister?"

"Super cute!"

"Wow, she's so tiny."

Their eyes sparkle as they look at me. Quick, how would a villainess react in this scenario? She would be anything but modest, of course. So I suppose I should simply agree with their remarks about my good looks. Wait, no! Introduce yourself first. I don't want them to think I'm an insolent brat who doesn't know her manners.

"My name is Alicia," I say as I lift the hem of my skirt and curtsy.

"Hey, Henri, Alan. She's nothing like what you told us," one of them mutters.

Alan, Henri... What in the world did you say about me? Well, I think I have a good guess.

"So, Alicia, what brings you out here?" Albert asks.

What brings me out here? Don't tell me you forgot! I've been pounding the basics into my muscles for a whole week for this day!

I swallow my words before they can come out and calm my temper. Then I firmly announce: "You're going to teach me the sword."

They give me that same dumbfounded expression as before. Except this time, the other handsome boys join in.

Did I really say something that surprising?

"I was only going to do that if you did your sit-ups and push-ups every day,

remember?" Albert chides me, a smile on his face.

But I did do them! In fact, I did way more than you assigned, Brother dearest. What kind of fool do you take me for?

I'm getting angrier, and I can feel my cheeks puffing out. Oh dear, that's a very immature way to show my anger. Well, I am still just a little girl. On the outside, at least. No! My resolve as a villainess isn't strong enough yet. I can't help myself. My feelings keep winning over reason.

"Ooh, she's cute when she's angry."

Curtis, we don't need your commentary for this scene. Could you please put a sock in it?

"Ali, swords are dangerous. They're not for children." Albert pats my head gently. Why did I ever think head pats were swoon-worthy in my past life? If anything, they infuriate me now. Swoon? More like *spew*.

I lightly slap his hand away, and Albert's expression stiffens. As do the expressions of all the other boys behind him. In the blink of an eye, the once peaceful atmosphere takes a tense turn.

Ummm...what am I supposed to do now? Why can't I remember when it's most important...? Whatever. I'll just trust my gut!

I pull the smaller of the swords out of my brother's belt.

Ack! Are swords always this heavy? Okay, I can see why you'd need weight training.

But the results of my hard work are showing. I could barely hold my own body weight just a week ago, but now I'm strong enough to swing a sword...barely.

I make my way over to the base of an apple tree, take a deep breath in, and concentrate all my strength into my foot. I measure the position of an apple that is about to fall and kick the trunk with all my might.

You'll fall for me, right? If you don't, I'm going to be very embarrassed.

I calculate the falling apple's trajectory the way the books taught me. Good thing I read all those. Then I swing the sword with all my might.

When I turn around and check the ground, I spot two halves of an apple.

Holy crap...I actually did it!

When I look up, everyone's eyes are wide open. And they stand there, frozen in place like statues. I wish they'd give me some kind of reaction. But isn't this my opportunity to make my mark like a true villainess?

After taking a deep breath, I meet Albert's gaze head-on. "I thought I told you not to patronize me, Brother. I have a goal, and I will overcome anything that stands in my way."

Beautiful. That was exactly the sort of line a villainess would say. And I *will* do whatever it takes to achieve my goal.

"That's amazing."

Duke is the first to speak. He watches me intently as the corners of his mouth rise ever so slightly.







He was completely indifferent to me before, so his staring is a little sudden and jarring. Under his penetrating blue eyes, I can feel my body heating up fast.

Albert picks up the two halves of the split apple, studying them. Rather than his usual smile, a grave face meets mine as he turns to me. “Are you sure you want to learn how to wield a sword?”

That’s what I’ve been telling him all along, but I suppose he didn’t get the message. I nod eagerly, and Albert falls silent with thought.

Then he murmurs: “All right.”

One moment... Did you, perchance, say “all right” just now? Does that mean you’re going to teach me?

“Omigod, you *mean it*?!”

I end up blurting out the first thing that comes to mind. Yikes. So much for my flawless performance. Well, can you blame me? I really do want to learn the sword. And even villainesses should be allowed to let loose and jump for joy once in a while!

Albert’s eyes crinkle. “Yes, I mean it,” he says sweetly, patting my head. And even though his head pats made my stomach churn earlier, this time, I’m finding them rather enjoyable. Overcome with emotion, I fling my arms around him.

“Thank you! Ooh, Albert, I *love* you!”

“Albert, you’re grinning like an idiot.”

“Maybe he’s embarrassed.”

“Aw, Al, what a lucky guy.”

Oh my, Albert, do you really have such a foolish look on your face? I would love to see that.

But by the time I look up, he’s already replaced it with his sweet, big-brother smile. What a killjoy.

Oh! That’s right—I have to get to the library! Have to do my dailies.

“Well, dear brothers, I shall see you later, then. Good day, gentlemen!”

And with that, I leave the dazed and confused boys in the dust and hurry out of the garden.





## Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family—Age Eight

After a year of Albert's rigorous training, I've gotten better at swinging a sword. Yes, you read that correctly—swinging only. He told me I needed to be able to hold a sword for hours on end, so I spent the whole year building the strength to do just that.

My brothers had assumed I'd get sick of it before the year was out. And I did get bored halfway through. I mean, all I got to do was practice swinging a heavy sword around every day. Of course, I can tough it out, since I have the goal of becoming the world's greatest villainess, but without that, I probably would have quit ages ago.

The truth is, I was so bitter about the countless hours spent holding a heavy sword that I'd sneak out into the garden every evening for some solo practice (but that's our little secret). Not only am I competitive, but I've also got guts. However, a villainess worthy of going down in history surely wouldn't be satisfied with that. I still have so much work to do.

I've read four thousand books in the past year. I don't know how many books a normal person can go through in the same amount of time, but I reckon it won't be more than me.

And yet, despite everything, I have yet to lay my hands on a single dark magic grimoire. I keep looking, but I can't find any. I'm starting to doubt whether that library has *any* books on magic.

Also, since I began my sword training and got into the habit of disappearing for ten hours at a time, some strange rumors started to circulate about me. But I couldn't care less. My mother was merely surprised. Father was the one who got so terribly worried that he almost called for a doctor. Of course, I nipped

that idea in the bud.

There was one other thing of note that transpired. After that fateful day, the gaggle of love interests started showing up at the mansion more frequently. When I asked Henri why, he told me they were there to watch me. What am I, a show pony? I'm taking my training seriously. I do wish they wouldn't use me for their personal entertainment.

Then again, as *She Who Is Destined to Be a Villainess*, I need to remain calm and composed, even in the face of such trying circumstances, so I do my best to ignore them and focus on my training. But Prince Duke tends to stare especially hard at me when I practice, and I feel like it's not good for my heart. I wish he would just chat with his friends instead.

Whenever our eyes meet, he's always watching me with such tenderness in his gaze. I don't care who you are: One look from those eyes, and you'll fall hard and fast.

But I won't.

Because I know that Duke falls in love with the heroine.



## Albert, Eldest Son of the Williams Family—Age Thirteen

My little sister, Alicia—the girl we regrettably brought up to be selfish and stubborn—was initially beyond my help. My younger twin brothers and I were all so excited for our first sister, and we spoiled her to bits. Perhaps that was a bad thing, because Alicia grew up believing she was the center of the universe.

But then, one day, she suddenly expressed a desire to learn the way of the sword. To be honest, that really irritated me. I assumed it was her usual selfishness and that she just wanted to hang around me or the twins. I didn't want her to make a mockery of all the training I'd dedicated myself to, and I was sure Henri and Alan felt the same way. So I gave my selfish sister an impossible task. No seven-year-old girl could possibly do a hundred sit-ups and fifty push-ups every day for a week, I thought.

But when I gave her those conditions, Alicia got angry. She glared at me, not with her usual stubbornness, but rather with a cool dignity.

I had never seen that expression on Alicia before. For a minute there, I couldn't believe my own eyes. And as the sun reflected off Alicia's glittering golden eyes, I found myself captivated.

So I've accepted that she was indeed being serious, but I still didn't think she would last a week. Based on her past behavior, I was sure it was impossible for her.

But the moment Alicia took my sword from my sheath, I felt a chill run down my spine. Alicia had easily drawn a sword that a little girl shouldn't even be able to lift.



Then she kicked the apple tree and split an apple in two. If I'm being perfectly honest, I'm not sure I could accomplish such a feat. For starters, you'd have to accurately predict exactly where the apple would be. More importantly, you'd need quite a bit of strength and speed.

That's not something you could pull off by pure luck.

But what surprised me most of all is how Duke started coming here almost every day to observe Alicia. The prince, famous for his cold stare, isn't known to take an interest in others, let alone girls. Nor is he known to stare with such a gentle gaze, not even at us, his regular companions.

Then, today, the topic of Alicia and where she runs off to after sword practice every day came up in conversation, along with the suggestion that we should try to find out. Duke doesn't seem all that interested, but he winds up coming with us anyway. According to the maids, Alicia has been sneaking off to the library. I can't believe my ears. It's unbelievable that *Alicia*, of all people, reads books. So we decide to follow her to see if the rumors are true.

Alan's and Henri's jaws drop once they spot her. Alicia has always hated learning. But here we are, watching her read.

What's even more shocking is how quickly she's turning the pages. The moment Alicia slams the cover shut, I glance at the clock. It took less than ten minutes for her to finish that volume. Everyone is flabbergasted, even Duke, whose eyes are as wide as saucers.

"This *can't* be real...," Gale whispers under his breath.

Alice then reaches for the next book and begins to read. *Surely, none of the words are going into her brain* is my first thought. But upon closer inspection, I notice her eyes are moving abnormally fast.

And just like that, she loses herself in books for another full ten hours.

After she leaves, we count the number of volumes she read and find ourselves speechless.

"A hundred books in ten hours..."

"She's a genius," Gale murmurs.

Everyone else nods. We all can see what Alicia can't: She *is* a genius.

After that, we return to my room to discuss Alicia's behavior. Suddenly, we hear the sound of something cutting through the wind outside. We peer down at the garden from the second-floor balcony and, to our astonishment, spot a little girl with sweat on her brow, swinging the sword over and over. Her hair, darker than the night, catches in the breeze. Her golden eyes reflect the mystical moonlight. And we all just stare at Alicia, spellbound.

"She's beautiful..."

For a second, I think I've misheard him. Duke has never used the word *beautiful* to describe another person before. That alone is more than enough evidence to suggest that Duke has feelings for Alicia.

It's likely thanks to these solo training sessions that Alicia is now able to hold a sword on her own for an entire day without any difficulty, after just a year of training.

Nothing surprises me anymore. Even with training, most boys would find it difficult to carry a sword for an entire day, especially with only a year's practice. Swords are not designed with an eight-year-old's physique in mind. No matter how developed they are.

What changed in Alicia? And what is this new version of her trying to accomplish?



## Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family—Age Eight

“Alicia, I’m about to visit the Smith family. Would you like to come along? Henri and Al will be coming, too.” Alan approaches me in the garden one day as I’m practicing my swings.

The Smiths are Finn’s family, and they’re users of light magic. Of course I’d like to go!

“I’d love to! I’ll get ready.”

I hurry to my room and change into one of my best dresses. Rozetta used to help me dress and undress before, but ever since memories of my past life have returned, I’ve gotten into the habit of dressing myself.

Before I regained those memories, I preferred flashy dresses. I prefer simpler things now. Personally, I think it’s even more impressive. How many eight-year-olds do you know who can pull off simple dresses?

Alicia has such a pretty face that she looks good in anything. So I choose a bright yellow chiffon dress and pair it with a matching set of earrings. My hair isn’t quite long enough to do up, so I guess I’ll just leave it down.

In the game, Alicia was rather proud of her straight, silky black hair. And, well, I don’t blame her. Her hair really is silky smooth. As I tuck my hair behind my right ear, it somehow dawns on me that I don’t look like I’m only eight years old. I look much more mature. The spitting image of a villainess.

I get lost in my own reflection. Just by my clothes alone, it’s amazing how badass I look. I think I’ll take extra care in my own appearance from now on.

“Aliiicia?”

Alan calls for me, and I hurry to the front entrance.

We travel to the Smith home by carriage. To be honest, I don't really like riding in carriages. My butt hurts after sitting in one for long periods of time. Oh, I know—I'll ride on horseback! Once we return home, I'll start practicing horseback riding. But the scenery of this kingdom really is idyllic. Ahh, if only this world had cameras. I could also use it to capture plenty of moments of my badass-villainess glory, too.

“Ali? Is something wrong?”

Albert peers into my eyes with concern. Oh, shame on me. I got so caught up in my own fantasies, I must have looked like an airhead. That's no way for a villainess to behave. In moments like this, I must say something cutting and cruel. Hmm...I can't think of anything. It seems like I still have a long way to go.

I decide to giggle it off. How convenient that I've got a *Mona Lisa* smile.

“You know, Ali, you've changed,” Alan says, staring hard at me.

“In what way?”

“In every way,” Alan and Henri answer in unison.

Huh, have I really changed that much? Well, I suppose Alicia was spoiled rotten before. A perfect little spoiled rich girl, yet she made no effort to become a villainess. I wonder what would have become of her if she never gained my memories? Just thinking about it horrifies me.

Albert's eyes take on a somber look as he says, “I know it's a little late for this, but...what made you become so earnest?”

“Earnest?”

I tilt my head in confusion. Me? Earnest? Is that how I seem to others?! Oh dear, when did I mistakenly give off such an impression?

“Surely you jest. I am simply doing the bare minimum.”

I force a smile and deliver the line in a manner sure to dispel all doubt and

misunderstanding. Albert looks a bit stunned by my response, but he finally murmurs, “Ah, I see,” and smiles at me.

When I get out of the carriage, several almost-blinding rays of light rain down upon me. Is *this* Finn’s house?!

Give it to light magic. I’ve never seen a house shine like this before. My eyes are twitching from how bright it is, and part of me wishes I brought sunglasses. But of course, those don’t exist in this world.

“Al, Henri, Alan! Welcome to my home!” The boy smiles and runs over. “Thanks for coming, Alicia! I asked Alan to bring you along so I could chat with you.”

Light practically radiates off Finn’s face as he speaks. Ah yes, this is the smile that enslaved the heart of every shotacon in Japan. How sweet.

“Thank you very much for the kind invitation.” I lift my skirt and curtsy. Finn then tells me I needn’t be so stiff and formal, but a villainess never lets her guard down.

We are escorted to the parlor.

“After you.”

Finn opens the giant door for me, and I thank him as I set foot into the room. Inside, Curtis, Eric, Gale, and Duke are all sitting on a large sofa.

This is starting to become a problem—I’ve been bumping into these guys a lot lately. A villainess isn’t supposed to be sociable.

What’s this? A map spread on the coffee table... Why is there a map? Oh no, am I going to be exiled? Are we at the end of the game already? Did I do something that evil? Then again, if I did evil without realizing it, that would make me a truly top-class villainess. It’s been a surprisingly short journey, I suppose...

Then I hear a knock at the door. It slowly opens, and when the person finally enters the room, I feel my spine go ice-cold.



What is the king doing here?

It's not a fake, right? It's definitely the real king. I mean, he has an amazing presence.

The boys all bow their heads, and I follow suit at a delay. Wait a minute, did I commit a crime so heinous that the king himself is coming to see me personally?

"You may rise."

His dignified voice reverberates through the room, and we all look up. He may be on the older side, but he's still easy on the eyes. His blue eyes are a bit darker than Duke's.

The king stares at me for a moment before smirking and saying, "So you are Alicia."

Wow, what a mature smile. Such confidence! So cool!

"Good day, Your Majesty."

I give the king the same formal greeting I gave Finn earlier.

"I have heard much about you," the king says.

"About me, Your Majesty...?!" My voice cracks, betraying my surprise.

"May I ask you a few questions?"

I stupidly answer yes, not really understanding what he's talking about. Then the king lowers himself onto the sofa, and the boys follow suit. Wait, am I the odd man out?

I stand there, watching them all.

The king stares at the map briefly before turning it toward me. Unless I'm imagining things, his wise eyes seem to be intent on testing me.

The king speaks slowly. "Where do you think Durkis stands in the world?"

The question is so sudden that my brain screeches to a halt.

Uh, what did he just say? Where does Durkis stand? Why would he ask *me* that? There's no way I can answer that. Doesn't he know I'm just an eight-year-

old girl? (Only on the outside, of course. But still.)

Hold on. Could this all be a test to see if I'm suitable to be a villainess? Yes, it must be. Otherwise, there's no reason for the king to waltz in here out of nowhere and start asking me questions.

I look at the map on the table. What is Durkis's standing in the world...?

Though the same can be said for every kingdom, I suppose I should say that Durkis has many problems. After all, I did read about it in my books.

Wait, that's probably exactly what I should be saying! Like, tell the king his own kingdom sucks to his face! Textbook-perfect villainess right there.

"Your Majesty, I'm afraid that while Durkis is indeed a major superpower, I cannot, in good faith, call it a *good* kingdom."

I look the king in the eye and stand tall as I say my piece. The king's face clouds over.

Of course he's upset. An eight-year-old girl just dissed him. Oh my, Prince Duke? Why do you look so amused? Aren't you the king's son?

"In what ways is Durkis a bad kingdom?"

Excuse me? Here I am, surrounded by handsome older guys while my king interrogates me—what kind of torture session is this? Then again, a true villainess never buckles under pressure. At supersonic speed, I connect the dots between everything I've read and reply.

"At a glance, our economy appears to be thriving. But upon a closer look, you will notice a huge wealth disparity between the rich and the poor. Roana Village, in particular, is in dire condition. With the possibility of an uprising looming on the horizon, it would be wise to put more energy into improving our fiscal policies."

The king's eyes widen. He grunts in surprise and begins to stroke his beard.

"Tell me, then—what would you propose as a solution?"

Are you still asking questions?! Come on, there's no way a kid could answer something so complicated.

Or could it be that he's trying to assess my aptitude as a villainess?! It has to be! A true villainess would surely give an unorthodox answer to such a question.

"Why don't we help Laval's vassal state, Carvella, gain independence?"

Everyone's expressions calcify. I've seen that look many times since regaining my past life's memories. And I'm honestly sick of it. Can't we all start making silly faces now and then to mix things up?

Gale's intelligent eyes are round behind his spectacles. He turns to me and says, "Helping Carvella gain independence is one thing, but we cannot take them under our wing."

Thank you, Gale. I was hoping somebody would feed me that line.

"Exactly. That's why we *won't*."

"Then what *would* we do?" the king asks, his eyes widening slightly.

Okay, now this is where a villainess can shine! I correct my posture and look the king directly in the eye.

"We would put them in our debt."

"Put them in our debt...?" Eric mutters under his breath.

His tone is just as stern as his fiery red hair. He doesn't seem to understand what I mean. But Albert, Gale, Duke, and the king all understand perfectly.

"Carvella's primary source of wealth comes from its gold mines. We can propose a deal that will free them from Laval's control. Perhaps framing it as commerce or a trade deal will make the arrangement sound much more favorable. As a result, we can put Carvella in our debt as they gain independence. Then we use that wealth we gain to boost our economy and reduce the wealth gap."

Taking advantage of another country's weakness is a proposal a goody-goody heroine would *never* even think of. If I keep this up, there will be unavoidable friction between me and the heroine, launching me on the path of becoming a peak villainess!

"How intriguing. So we would make use of Carvella..." The king looks at me,

eyes full of hope. Um, what's with the gaze, good sir?

"Precisely, Your Majesty." I smile. Other nations are nothing more than tools to serve our own—so sayeth the villainess.

"I very much enjoyed chatting with you, Alicia," the king says. And with a gentle smile, he rises to his feet.

"And I you, Your Majesty."

I give a soft curtsy. Not to toot my own horn, but I'm very good at curtsying. Sloppy form would make me a laughingstock, you see. Every little detail can prove fruitful or fatal to a villainess.

After the king leaves the parlor, I sigh in relief. Ahh, that was bad for my heart. But I suppose I passed my villainess aptitude test with flying colors?

"Were you nervous?" Duke asks me gently.

Like father, like son. I can see clear traces of the king in him, right down to how handsome they both are.

However, I seem to remember Duke despising Alicia in the original game. All his kind words and smiles were reserved for the heroine, and the heroine alone. I never dreamed the day would come when Duke would show those smiles to me. But I suppose the choices I make can change the story in some way.

I guess the king really did come all the way out here to ask for my opinions. But why? I'm just a little girl... And why would he come to Finn's house? I guess it's best not to read too much into this.

"You must be tired after that. Come to the back garden and have some tea with us!"

Finn tugs on my hand, his eyes glimmering. And I let him drag me out to the back garden.

No way! It's a spread of all my favorite desserts! Everything smells amazing. Does this mean I can eat anything I want?

Finn smiles. And as if he's read my mind, he says, "Go ahead. Have anything you'd like."

I load my dish with cookies and cakes. After overworking my brain, I could really use some sugar.

This is so delicious my cheeks might just melt off. I could eat plates of this. I know it's unsightly, but I can't resist the allure of food.

Without a care for the people around me, I eagerly cram pastry after pastry into my mouth. It's the best feeling in the world.

That's right. This is the main reason I came here in the first place! That chat with the king was just a bonus, right?

They might think I'm a glutton with the way I'm stuffing my face. But I couldn't care less. A villainess must indulge in her desires. Tea parties are the best! The phrase "two birds with one stone" was made for moments like this.

And just like that, my lips melt into a goofy grin without me noticing.

Little did I know how closely Duke was watching me.



I mentioned Roana Village to the king, but I don't actually know what the conditions there are like. It's a bad look to make proclamations without knowledge of the truth. Seeing is believing, as they say. Perhaps I should go pay it a visit.

But Father would never allow it. Neither would my tender mother nor my doting brothers. They would all be against it for sure. It's not a place suitable for the nobility, and whenever I leave the house, I always have an attendant.

I guess I'll just have to sneak out, then!

I start carefully drawing up a plan. Roana Village is in a forest beyond the town, so it's pretty far away. As I spread the map on the table, something catches my attention.

What's this? The forest behind our property is connected to Roana Village.



That's quite a shortcut. No proper roads seem to lead there, but at least it's still reachable by foot.

But I seem to recall that Roana Village is protected by magic walls. I've read in books that these walls were erected to keep the villagers from leaving, but I think those with magic power should still be able to pass through them.

I'm not sure, though. And it's not like I can ask anyone. And I haven't found any books on magic, either—yet another obstacle in my way!

My only choice is to break through with force. If I can't get through the walls, I'll just have to find another way in. Let's say I pretend to go to bed at nine PM, then sneak out the window. It's about ten kilometers away. With my current endurance levels, I can get there in about an hour if I run. That would leave me with plenty of time to explore Roana Village.

I finish supper and immediately start getting ready to depart for Roana. But then...

"Ali! Duke came to see you!"

I think I hear Albert saying something, but surely, my ears are playing tricks on me.

"Oh, Aliiii!"

Okay, maybe they aren't. I leave my bedroom and head to the parlor.

Why would Duke visit me? And this late in the day, at that? This makes no sense.

I enter the parlor to find Albert and Duke waiting for me.

"He has something for you, Ali," Albert says, skipping pleasantries.

As I stand there staring blankly, Duke approaches me with a gentle look in his eyes. Yeah, this guy's dangerous. If he comes any closer with that sweet face of his, my heart is going to fly out of my rib cage. I can feel my pulse quickening already.

"A bit late, but happy birthday," Duke says, handing me a tiny box.

I'm so surprised I just stand there like a statue. I never dreamed Duke would give me a birthday present. There wasn't even an event in the game where he gave the MC one.

For a fleeting moment, I let myself imagine he might have feelings for me. But then I remember—there's a five-year age difference between us. If anything, I'm probably like a little sister to him. Still, I can't understand why he'd give me a birthday present when we've barely talked before.

"Thank you?" My mind is filled with question marks, but I thank him anyway and take the tiny box. "May I open it now?"

"Sure."

With Duke's permission, I carefully open the box...then immediately shut it from the sheer impact of what I've seen. Um, are my eyes playing tricks on me?

"Is it not to your liking?"

"N-no, it's just... What is this?" Doubting my own eyes, I have to ask Duke like an idiot.

"It's a pendant."

"Well, yes, I can see that, but what's the gemstone in the center?"

"Oh, that's a diamond."

I thought so. I don't care that he's the king's son—this feels way too extravagant for an eight-year-old girl's birthday gift!

I curtsy deeply and thank him again, just to be safe. A true villainess would never get flustered over receiving something valuable, but a diamond is far beyond anything I could have imagined.

"Well, I've done what I came for, so I'll get going."

And just like that, Duke leaves the parlor.

Did he really come all this way just to give me a birthday present? Isn't he going to stay and chat with Albert? I'm so stunned I forget to say good-bye.

I open the box again and look inside. Yep, that's definitely a diamond. Diamonds are even more valuable in this world than in my old one, and Duke

gave one...to me, an eight-year-old.

I still can't fully process what just happened. The only thing I can think of is how the diamond's sparkle reminds me of Duke's crystal-blue eyes.

So much happened today that I ended up canceling my trip to Roana Village. As I lie on my bed, examining the pendant Duke gave me, I find myself getting lost in how beautiful it is.

Duke is supposed to fall in love with the heroine, and I'm supposed to bully her, right? What am I going to do if Duke demands I return the pendant?

Well, a true villainess would never return a gift.

I jump out of bed, stand in front of the mirror, and secure it around my neck. It's small enough that it won't get in the way of my sword practice, so I can wear it all day if I want.

And with that, I go to bed with Duke's pendant still on my neck.



Today's the day—I'm going to Roana Village.

After putting my plans into motion, I find myself on the outskirts of the forest behind our family mansion. Escaping undetected was so easy, I almost felt betrayed by how simple it was. And wow, forests at night really are creepy, huh?

But girls are strong. I'm not going to let some stupid forest freak me out.

I force my shivering body to attention and take my first steps into the forest.

Wow, it's pitch-black. Bringing a lantern was definitely the right call.

The trees are starting to look like giant monsters, but I won't be intimidated. I've decided to go to Roana, and I'll see it through. The trees aren't going to attack me—they're just trees. Just trees. I keep telling myself this as I run

through the dark woods.

I trust my instincts and keep running in the direction I think I should go, even though I'm not entirely sure if it's right.

After about an hour of running, I finally spot a wall of fog up ahead. Why is the fog only covering that one area? Wait, is that the edge of Roana Village? Did I arrive already? Wow, I'm awesome! Since no one's around to praise me, I do it myself.

Okay, now the important question: Will I be able to pass through that wall? I can't use magic yet, but I do have magic power. Let me get a little closer...

I can't see anything beyond the thick fog, but Roana Village must be on the other side. I just have to find out for myself. My heart slams against my rib cage as I take a deep breath in and let it out, then step into the fog.

The moment I emerge on the other side, I'm hit by a stench so foul it nearly knocks me over. It invades the deepest part of my nose, making me gag. Voices wailing in agony echo around me, and for a moment, I feel like I might faint.

I just stand there, speechless.

I've never seen such miserable conditions in my life. I quickly pull my cloak's hood over my face and extinguish my lantern. If anyone realizes I'm nobility, I'll be attacked for sure. Trembling with fear, I can't believe how bad things are. I knew, from the books I'd read, that Roana's conditions were poor—but not like this.

In the game, what was the heroine supposed to do about Roana Village? My thoughts are cut off by another wave of the unbearable stench. I...I can't even begin to imagine how anyone could improve these conditions. And I'm not a merciful person. I only care about myself. That's what a villainess does.

But for some reason, my legs keep moving. I keep walking, even though my instincts scream at me to run. Through the dim light, I can barely make out figures lying here and there in the streets.

I arrive at what might be the village commons. There's a fountain in the

center, but no water flows from it. Instead, a stagnant pool of dirty water has collected at its base. People are lying around the commons, too, and I realize how many homeless there are in Roana. Candles provide the only light—there are no streetlights, and the moon isn't visible, as thick clouds cover the sky. Even the air feels filthy.

“Li’l miss.”

My spine freezes at the sudden voice. Is he talking to me? Did he notice I don't belong here? I've improved my sword skills, but I didn't bring one with me... Could I outrun him if I tried? The thought of dying in a place like this terrifies me.

“Li’l miss,” he repeats, this time patting my shoulder.

Villainesses don't cry, but I can't stop the tears from welling up. I glance down at the hand on my shoulder. It's large and slightly wrinkled.

Slowly, I turn around.

The voice belongs to an older man with white hair, though I quickly realize he only looks older because of it. He's probably younger than I first thought, almost like he's intentionally trying to look older. He has thin lips and a tall nose, a surprisingly handsome facial structure. But his eyes are closed. Is he blind?

All my fear melts away, replaced by a strange warmth that radiates from him. It's surprising just how calm I feel now. His presence is oddly soothing despite everything.

“You aren't from around here, I take it,” he says kindly. How does he know that without even seeing me? I answer quietly that he's right. “Well, it's dangerous here. You should run along home.”

I just stand there, whimpering.

“Come with me,” he says, turning to walk away.

Every instinct I have screams about stranger danger, but somehow, I know this old man is safe. Still, I remind myself that sometimes the kindest-seeming people are the most dangerous. Yet I find myself trusting him anyway.



Before I know it, he's already quite a distance ahead. Despite his apparent blindness, he walks with steady confidence, never stumbling. Maybe he can see after all? I hesitate for a moment, but in the end, I decide to follow him.

This old man... He's not a character from the game, is he? That's right—Roana Village was known for being so dangerous that you couldn't leave once you entered. The heroine never visited. And here I am, brazenly walking into this place. Will I make it out alive? Won't it be ironic if this old man turns around and eats me or something?

But he warned me to go home. So he has to be safe, right?

It still amazes me that there's a place where you can literally hear voices moaning in the air. I shiver. Roana is home to hundreds of people—how can they live in a place where even the moon doesn't shine? Maybe the sunlight doesn't reach them here, either. I vaguely remember the heroine making some kind of suggestion about Roana in the game, but the details escape me now.







“This is the place,” the old man says as he steps into a cottage that looks like it might collapse at any moment. I hesitate but then follow him inside. The interior is surprisingly more ordinary than I expected. Well, *ordinary* might be too generous a word—the room contains only a rickety bed, a small wooden table with two chairs, and a furnace that looks like it hasn’t worked in ages.

“There ain’t much, but welcome to my home,” he says, gesturing to one of the chairs. Every movement he makes is strangely elegant, almost like he’s a gentleman. I sit down across from him as he takes the other chair.

“Sorry I don’t have any tea to serve you.”

“Oh, no, that’s quite all right.”

“Now, li’l miss, what’s someone like you doing in a rundown place like this? You’re a highborn, right?”

My heart skips a beat. How does this blind man know I’m highborn? Especially when I’m wearing a hooded cloak. Wait, I should take my hood off—keeping it on indoors is rude. I hurriedly pull it down, but now I’m even more confused. How does he know I’m both highborn and a “li’l miss” if he can’t see me?

“Excuse me, old man, but are you blind?” I ask, interrupting without answering his question. It’s incredibly disrespectful of me. On top of that, I haven’t even introduced myself properly.

Yet the old man just smiles and replies, “I am.”

“Then how...?”

“I can’t see, but I can still sense things. I lost only one of my five senses. I’ve still got the others.”

Still, a person can gather far more from seeing than from any other sense. There’s no way he can tell I’m a noble girl based just on smell or sound.

“Even in the darkness, I can sense a person’s aura,” he explains, as though reading my thoughts. “The way you breathe, the way you walk—fast and light—the sound of your clothes rustling, your scent. None of it fits in here, li’l miss.”

“How... Were you born blind, sir?” I ask, curiosity edging out my shock.

His expression darkens. “No. My eyes were taken from me in my twenties.”

“Taken?” The word feels heavy in my mouth. What does he mean?

“I used to work in the palace.” His smile is peaceful but tinged with loneliness.

“In the palace?” I can’t fathom what someone like him is doing in Roana.

“I had a disagreement with someone powerful. Made ’em furious. So they took my eyes and exiled me here.”

My heart tightens. “What...what was the disagreement?” I ask, my voice trembling slightly.

He pauses, then asks, “What’s your name, li’l miss?”

“Alicia, sir.”

“I see. Alicia...good name. I’m Will. No last name, just Will.” He gently pats my head, and for a moment, I wonder if he can tell how terrified I’ve been. His touch is so soothing, calming the fear I’ve carried with me.

“Alicia,” he continues, his tone warm and thoughtful, “you may be too young to understand this, but preserving traditions isn’t always the right choice. Do you know why we look back on history?”

I stay quiet, waiting for him to go on.

“We don’t look back to convince ourselves everything was better in the past. We do it to make the future better. History is there to teach us, to help us learn from our mistakes, and to guide progress.”

His words resonate deeply. I’ve spent so much time training to be a villainess, to leave my mark on history. But why was someone so wise and gifted cast out from the palace?

“It’s important to learn all you can, but there ain’t much point if you don’t use the wisdom you gain,” Will adds. His calm, weighty tone makes every word sink in.

I find myself asking, “Do you hate the nobility?”

His face tenses slightly. “If I said I didn’t, I’d be lying. Even now, when I dream, I still search for shadows of my former self. Sometimes it’s painful. But I have

faith that one day someone will understand why I did what I did.”

Shame washes over me as I realize how blessed I am to have been born into a life of privilege. The tears come before I can stop them, and I feel pathetic for crying like this. But I can’t help it.

Rage toward the noble who stole Will’s eyes fills my entire being. Sorrow follows, and all my emotions mix together until they overwhelm me. But Will gently pulls me into his arms, offering a moment of comfort I’ll never forget.

When I finally speak, I bare my soul to him, telling him everything—my dream of becoming a powerful villainess, my reasons for coming to Roana.

Will listens quietly until I finish, then smiles kindly and pats my head. “You’re a very smart little girl,” he says softly, his voice peaceful and full of warmth.

I say good-bye to Will and make my way back toward the wall of fog. All the fear that had consumed me earlier is gone now, replaced by a strange sense of calm. As I run through the forest at full speed, my thoughts drift back to Roana Village.

If I had to describe it in one phrase, it would be a place of unimaginable decay. But deep down, I know I’ll return to Roana someday. I want to speak with Old Man Will again, to hear more of his wisdom.

Of all the people I’ve ever met, he is by far the wisest.





## Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family—Age Ten

The two years since my first visit to Roana Village have flown by. During that time, not much changed—my days blended into a routine. I woke up, practiced swordsmanship, read, and of course, visited Old Man Will.

I've improved quite a bit with the sword in these past two years, so naturally, I want to take a swordsmanship exam. But my brothers and father are firmly against it. All I want is to test my strength, yet it seems only my brothers are allowed that privilege. It feels so unfair, almost cruel.

Meanwhile, I've learned a lot from Will. Whenever I'm stuck with a problem, he always helps me find the answer. He's far more insightful than my tutor back at the mansion.

I once suggested that Will come live at the mansion, but unsurprisingly, he declined. He can't leave Roana, likely because of those magical walls imprisoning him there. It frustrates me to think that such a brilliant mind is trapped in such a wretched place.

Maybe Roana Village holds other hidden gems like Will. Intelligent people left to languish while the rest of the kingdom remains blissfully unaware. In this kingdom, the nobility are always favored. Sure, only nobles can wield magic, but intelligence has nothing to do with magic. This world truly is strange.

The only significant change in my life has been Albert's departure for the magic academy. Gale, Curtis, and Duke joined him there, and of course, the heroine—the very one from the otome game—has made her grand entrance. She's that typical "commoner with magic" who gets special admission to the academy. At last, the heroine has arrived.

And Duke—well, at fifteen, he’s even more handsome than before, exuding confidence and charm. One look from those kind, tender eyes, and it’s easy to see how the heroine will fall head over heels for him. He’s been tender with me, too, but I’d never fall in love with Duke. Why would I? I already know he’ll end up with the heroine. I’m not foolish enough to set myself up for that heartbreak.

No, once the heroine enters our circle, my role is clear: I will make her life hell. That’s the villainess’s job, after all. It’s inevitable that my brothers—along with Eric, Finn, Gale, Curtis, and all the other love interests—will soon begin to hate me. That is my fate as the villainess of this story.

Plus, the heroine is five years older than me. Imagine a mere ten-year-old with the audacity to antagonize someone five years her senior! That’s peak villainess behavior, isn’t it? Ah, I can’t wait to meet the heroine.

I’m in the garden practicing with my sword as usual when Eric approaches me. Huh, what could he want with me? He’s the same age as my twin brothers and hasn’t begun studying at the magic academy yet, so he still spends many of his days visiting our family home. I stop my practice swings and look at Eric.

“Hey, Alicia, now that you’re ten, do you want to go to town with me?”

That’s right. I’ve been visiting Roana Village almost every day, but I haven’t visited the town yet.

“Oh, I’d love to go!” I reply.

Eric smiles brightly at my response.

“Eric, what are you doing?” Henri asks. Strange—maybe he didn’t know Eric was visiting today.

“Lord Eric and I are going to town,” I say.

Henri’s face immediately sours, and he gives Eric a sharp side-eye. Maybe he’s upset about being left out.

“I’m coming, too,” Henri says with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

Ah, I see. Henri just wants to be included. But I sense something behind that

outwardly warm expression—something that reminds me of the smiles Albert sometimes flashes.

“What about Alan?” I ask.

“Alan is studying with his tutor right now,” Henri replies.

Huh, I guess twins don’t do everything together after all.

“Come on, let’s get in the carriage,” Eric says, though his expression is slightly stiff.

I’d much rather go by horse, since I know how to ride now.

“Can we take the horses instead?” I suggest.

The two boys freeze. Then Henri asks, “Does that mean you want to share a horse with one of us?”

“No, Brother, I want to ride my own horse.”

“But, Ali, you’re a girl.”

“Is it wrong for girls to ride horses?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...most people wouldn’t...”

“I still want to ride a horse. You and Lord Eric can take the carriage if you’d prefer.”

The two fall silent, stunned by my suggestion. Look at me, stubbornly holding my ground until I get my way—peak villainess behavior. The fruits of three years of hard work are showing. These selfish words flow freely from my mouth without hesitation. I’d say I’m a picture-perfect example of a villainess right now, wouldn’t you?

Henri sighs loudly. Oh dear. You know, some say a little bit of happiness escapes every time you sigh, so you should be careful.

“Fine. We’ll go on horseback, too.”

All right! I feel quite victorious. I can always win when it’s just Henri.

“Good idea. It would be strange for us to take a carriage while Alicia rides alone on horseback,” Eric adds with a little laugh. Ooh, that smile of his really

packs a punch. Most people would probably faint at the sight of it. But of course, I've developed an immunity, thanks to my brothers...

We ride to town on horseback. Are all towns this lively? If I had to compare it to my old world, I'd say it looks like a European town square from the Middle Ages! The place is thrumming with activity: florists, bakeries, liquor shops, clothing shops—all bustling with life. Music fills the air, and some people are even dancing. It's a town full of smiles, basking under glittering sunbeams.

I can't help but compare it to Will's village of Roana, where the sun never shines, not even at noon, and the children born there may live their entire lives without ever seeing sunlight. How can two places in the same kingdom be worlds apart?

"Is there any place in particular you'd like to go, Alicia?" Eric asks.

I look around, trying to decide. I'd love to go to the bakery and take a peek at that patisserie, too. There are so many wonderful places that it's hard to choose.

Then I notice a sign.

"Hey, Lord Eric, what does that shop sell?"

Eric looks to where I'm pointing. "Oh, that's a shop that deals in rare plants."

Rare plants?! They might have some from the very first book I read!

"I want to go there." I grab Eric and Henri by the hands and drag them along.

"Eric, wipe that goofy grin off your face," Henri says behind me.

I didn't know Eric was also interested in plants. I peer into the store as we approach, then I open the door and step through.

The air inside feels different, refreshing even, almost as if my soul is being cleansed. It's cozy here. Plants fill the room, and some even seem to be dancing. Oh! There are flying ones, too! That one's called a wing plant, isn't it?

"Welcome!" calls a middle-aged man with chestnut-brown hair and glasses who emerges from the back. He wears an apron that suits him surprisingly well.

There's something about him. The plants seem almost happy to see him. Could he be a green magic user?

"Eric! Henri! Haven't seen you boys in ages!" The man smiles, raising a hand in greeting. So he knows them?

"Hi, Paul! Good to see you again. How've you been?" Henri answers with a smile.

As I stand there, a bit lost, the man crouches to my eye level and smiles. "Nice to meet you. I'm Paul, the shopkeeper. You must be Alicia?"

"Yes, I'm Alicia. Nice to meet you. How did you know my name?"

"Your brothers talk about you often."

I'm curious what exactly they've said. Probably something about my top-tier villainess conduct.

"So you're friends with my brothers?"

"I may not look it, but I'm technically a nobleman," Paul replies sheepishly.

A nobleman? That explains the green magic. Oh! Now I remember. He's Paul, the plant shop owner from the game! He only appeared briefly, in the part where the heroine bought plants for medicine.

"A nobleman running a store—you sure are a strange fellow," Eric says with a chuckle.

"What made you decide to open a botanical business, sir?" I ask.

"Plants can heal the sick and soothe the soul. I wanted to do something that helps people, and it's an easy life for a lower noble like me."

Paul's smile shines as brightly as the sun.

"Well, I think you chose a lovely profession," I blurt out, unable to hold back my thoughts.

"Thank you," he replies, his face lighting up with a warm smile. I don't care how much older he is—that smile is enough to make anyone swoon.

"We have a lot of rarities here. For example..." Paul fetches a small pot from the back. In his hands is a tiny plant.



“Chado,” we say in unison.

Paul’s eyes widen. I wonder how often he gets that reaction.

“You know it?” he asks, still surprised.

“Y-yes.”

“Do you know its attributes?”

“Chado promotes the release of serotonin, the happiness hormone. It’s often used to treat depression and other mental illnesses.”

As I explain, Paul’s eyes widen even more. Hey, your eyeballs will fall out of your head if you open them much wider. You too, Eric—don’t gape so much. You’ll catch a fly.

Well, it’s not every day you find a ten-year-old who knows this much about chado. You’d have to be a real botany freak. But I only read about it because I couldn’t find books on magic.

“Alicia, how old are you?” Paul asks with a smile.

“I’m ten, sir.”

A perplexed expression crosses his face. “Ten...”

Did I say something strange? It doesn’t seem like it was worth a frown.

“Do you like plants, Alicia?”

“Not really.”

“Then why do you know so much about them?”

Oh dear, now how am I supposed to answer that? If I say I read it in a book, he’ll ask which one, and if I say someone taught me, he’ll want to know who. No, I have to respond like a true villainess...

I beam at him. “That’s simply common sense, sir. Anyone who doesn’t know that much needs to study harder.”

A classic villainess line, exactly the sort a privileged villainess would hurl at the heroine and make a terrible impression! Paul, Eric, and Henri freeze like statues. A ten-year-old girl just questioned their intelligence.

But instead of the sour look I expect, Paul bursts out laughing. “Common knowledge. Is that so? I guess I’d better brush up on my studies, then.”

There’s not a hint of sarcasm in his laughter. How can he be so broad-minded? It makes me resent my own pettiness.

Eric and Henri exchange smirks and look at me fondly. Just as I’m thinking their smiles won’t last long, Eric makes a ridiculous proposal.

“Hey, Henri, is it okay if I marry Alicia?”

“I’m not giving my baby sister away to the likes of you.”

Oh, Eric, one day you will come to regret that line.

But I keep the retort to myself as the warm, cozy atmosphere of the shop wraps around us.

Alan corners me as soon as we return home. “Where were you?” he asks.

Behind him stand Finn, Gale, Curtis, and Duke. Perhaps they’re on their way home from school. My, what close friends.

“We went to town,” Henri answers for me.

“On horseback,” Eric adds.

What’s this? Why is Duke glaring at Henri and Eric? Is he upset he didn’t get to go with us?

“Let me guess: Did one of the boys share a horse with you, Ali??”

*Ali?! That’s the first time Curtis has called me that. He certainly knows how to turn up the charm.*

“No, Alicia rode on her own horse,” Henri replies with a chuckle. This softens Duke’s frown.

“Aww, I wish I could’ve gone on a date with Alicia,” Finn pouts.

Attention, all baby-face lovers—take a look at this boy. It could make anyone faint.

And why is he calling it a date? We went as a trio.

“Hey, Ali, wanna go out with me sometime?” Curtis asks. “I’ll take you anywhere you want.”

Hmm. Where do I want to go?

“I want to take my sword exam.”

That’s right. I’ve made great progress with my training, but my father and brothers won’t let me get tested.

Rather than Curtis, Albert replies, saying, “Absolutely not.”

Wasn’t that a bit too blunt? I daresay I’m getting a bit annoyed here.

“Why are the boys allowed to take it, but I’m not?”

“Because you’re a girl, Ali.”

What kind of excuse is that? The double standard is infuriating.

“My being a girl is a ridiculous reason to keep me from taking the exam.”

“Nevertheless, no means no.”

“At least give me an acceptable reason.”

Albert falls silent, and the atmosphere shifts instantly. This is what they mean when they say you could cut the tension with a knife.

“I’m training because I want to be stronger,” I say, my voice breaking the silence. “I deserve to know what level I’m at!”

“I still can’t allow that.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Alicia!! That’s enough!”

This is the first time Albert has yelled at me. He’s calmly rebuked me before, but never has he raised his voice in anger.

“I’m sorry, Alicia. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

Albert seems to come to his senses and reaches out to put a hand on my head. I slap it away.

“I will never back down.”

I am a villainess, Albert. I hold my gaze steady, scrutinizing my brother.

Then without another word, I turn and leave the room. The moment I'm outside, I exhale loudly. I feel a bit sorry for the boys, but honestly, I'm brimming with a sense of accomplishment.

I mean, I was the perfect villainess just now! Picture-perfect, if I say so myself. With a light spring in my step, I skip back to my room.

The next morning, as I leave my room to practice with my sword, I hear voices in the hall. Who's that...Albert and Father?

"I'm afraid I really upset Alicia," Albert says.

"Maybe it's time we finally tell her the real reason?" Father replies.

Does he mean why I can't take the swordsmanship test? Yes, I'd definitely like to hear that.

"Father, I don't think we should. It's best for Alicia."

Oh, come on! Now I really want to know what it is.

"I, for one, would like to hear the reason."

Feeling both guilty for eavesdropping and driven by my need for the truth, I reveal myself.

"Ali..." Albert looks uncomfortable.

Don't worry, dear brother. Yesterday's outburst doesn't bother me anymore. But as a textbook villainess, I won't forgive you right away.

"Alicia, how much did you hear?" Father asks.

"Everything, Father. Now, what is this real reason?"

Father closes his mouth, but I have a right to know.

"Father?"

"Alicia, I promise I'll tell you when you're fifteen and you enter the magic academy. Can you wait until then?"

I have five more years before I attend the academy... Is it really so sensitive

that I can't know now?

Then again, if I push too hard, he likely won't tell me at all. I'll have to play along for the time being.

Taking a solemn tone, I say, "Understood, Father."

"Good girl," he replies, patting my head. I wish he wouldn't treat me like a child, but then again, I'm only ten. I suppose I *am* still a child.

"Ali, what's made you grow up so suddenly? Why don't you let me baby you anymore?" Albert asks with a touch of melancholy. I can see in his eyes just how much he cherishes me.

I admit there isn't a trace of childishness in me anymore... But I can't change. My resolve is unbreakable. I won't return to the girl I used to be.

"Young Master, it's almost time," a maid calls out to Albert, interrupting my thoughts.

And with that, the conversation ends before it can reach a satisfying conclusion.

I do wish people wouldn't patronize me just because I'm a child.

That thought races through my mind all day after the incident this morning with my father and Albert. I usually sneak out under the cover of night to avoid getting caught, but today I can't be bothered with such worries. Besides, I want to visit Roana Village while the sun is up for once.

The forest isn't scary at all in the daylight. I hide my face beneath my hood as I slip through the fog. Even in the daytime, you can't see the sun here. It's like this place has been cut off from the world...a complete contrast to the lively town we visited.

After two years of visiting, I've gotten used to the stench. I enter the village and walk through but shudder when I see it in the harsh light of day.

There are rows of run-down houses, unfit for human habitation, and the air is filled with the squabbling voices of people with nowhere to go. Many of the villagers' bodies are covered in wounds. I didn't notice them at night, but now I



see bloodstains scattered across the ground.

My body shakes with horror. The villagers' clothes are in tatters, and from their odor alone, it's obvious how unsanitary their conditions are. The only water source is that muddy fountain.

Suddenly, I hear a child screaming and crying. I look over and see a little boy on the ground, bleeding from his head. A large man stands over him, holding an iron pipe, the tip of the pipe stained with blood.

Is that the boy's blood? Why is that man laughing?

The man tilts his head back and cackles, revealing a single tooth. He slowly approaches the boy, dragging the iron pipe along the ground. I can't stop shaking.

"Alicia, what're you doing here at this hour?"

Will's voice comes from behind me. Before I can respond, he ushers me back toward the fog.

"Go home. Don't ever come here at this time of day again."

In a daze, I let him push me through the fog, then slowly walk through the forest. I haven't processed what I just saw. Was that the true face of Roana Village?

"Lady Alicia! Where were you?" Rozetta calls out, running up to me.

I stare at her, still in shock.

"Lady Alicia? Is something the matter?" Rozetta shakes my shoulders, peering into my face with worry.

What happened to that little boy? I couldn't do anything for him. I just stood there and watched, too scared to move.

"Lady Alicia?"

I couldn't extend a helping hand...

I've never felt such regret. How weak I was! All my grand declarations about becoming a top-tier villainess—how conceited of me. It takes everything I have to keep my self-loathing in check.

“Are you all right, my lady?” Rozetta shakes my shoulders, looking worried.

“I...think I’ll go to the library,” I murmur, turning away.

I have to get stronger. My first step is to find out how Roana Village became like that.

I obsessively search the library for books about Roana. Standing on a stepladder, I desperately sift through the highest shelves.

Is this...a book on magic?

The book I happen to grab describes the various forms of magic. Seriously? Now it turns up?! Why couldn’t I have found this earlier?! I glance at the other books beside it, but none of them are about magic. Maybe someone put this here by mistake.

Shrugging, I open the book and scan the table of contents. Water magic... Light magic... There it is! Dark magic! I flip to the section on my own element.

So dark magic has levels. I wonder how high they go. I flip to the last page in the section.

“Highest level unknown.”

Unknown?! Oh, that’s right. I remember now. Dark, light, water, wind, and fire magic all have unknown top levels. This book only records spells up to level 100. In the game, only Duke and the heroine were suspected of surpassing that level.

Does this mean no matter how hard I work, I’ll never surpass level 100? No way! This game is rigged! I’d love to give those developers a piece of my mind.

But wait, if Alicia has limitless potential, then maybe, with a lot of hard work, I can go beyond level 100. For now, I’ll focus on mastering the level-1 spells. Let’s see what kind of magic I’m dealing with.

I start reading through the spells from level 1. Interestingly, there don’t seem to be that many spells in the dark magic family.

Whoa, there’s a cleaning spell at level 10?! That could come in handy. I get my dresses dirty often, so I’d love to have that in my back pocket.

After some reading, I reach a warning on the level-50 page.

“Only great nobles can surpass level 50.”

Well, since my family is one of the top five noble houses, that means I’ll be able to do it with a bit of practice. If I remember correctly, the game mentioned that Alicia never reached level 50... Let’s ignore that for now.

Hmm, interesting. I can create magic walls at level 50. That must mean whoever erected the ones around Roana Village was a great noble.

Motivated, I read further until I stop on a certain page.

A spell that allows transplanting parts of yourself into others?

“Level 87: Personal Transference Magic. Anything from your body—organs, skin, hair, eyeballs, etc.—can be transplanted into another person. Dark Magic.”

Eyeballs? I can give someone my eyes? That means I could give Will my eyesight. I flip back a few pages and read the warning for level 80.

“Level 80 training time: three years.”

I flip forward.

“Level 90 training time: five years.”

Wow, it takes a long time. The path ahead is rough, but I won’t give up. I flip further ahead.

“Level 100 training method: not fully clear.”

What a strange description. Now I really want to give those developers a piece of my mind.

So Duke and the heroine must be on another level entirely, surpassing level 100. While we’re at it, can we talk about how unfair it is that the heroine can go beyond level 100 even though she’s only a commoner? And she can use all the elements, too.

Absolutely infuriating. I totally understand why Alicia bullied her.

“Lady Alicia! Everyone’s in the parlor to see you.”

Rozetta enters the library. How did she know I was here?

Oh! That's right. When I returned from Roana, I muttered something about going to the library. My brain wasn't fully working. Ugh, this is the worst...

But Rozetta doesn't seem surprised to find me in the library. I wonder why...? Three years ago, if I'd said I was coming here, she definitely would've been suspicious.

As these thoughts pass through my mind, I set the book down and head for the parlor.

When I arrive at the parlor, I find my brothers, Gale, Curtis, and Duke waiting for me. I suppose they came straight from school.

"Good evening," I greet them.

Albert walks over and hands me a bag of macarons. Ooh, macarons—my favorite!

"Ali, I'm sorry about yesterday," Albert says, looking awkward.

"Are these for me?"

"Yeah," he replies with a smile.

I take the bag of macarons and inspect them. They look so delicious—like little jewels. Just seeing all the colors makes my heart dance.

"Thank you so much, Brother," I say, smiling without meaning to.

Ugh, there it is again... I want to stay mad at him, but if I let my guard down, my true colors show.

And now I've made eye contact with Duke. I wish he wouldn't look at me like that. I'm a villainess, you know? A prince shouldn't look at me with such...gentle eyes.

"Lord Albert, His Majesty the King has arrived."

Excuse me?! The king is at our house? Why? And why isn't anyone surprised? It's the king, people. Wait, did they know about this?

With a knock, the door opens slowly, and the king's aura is as awe-inspiring as ever.

I curtsy deeply. When I glance up, I notice others behind him.

Are those government officials? Oh...and Father is with them.

“You may rise.”

The king’s deep, powerful voice carries throughout the room. Beside him are four older men with an air of distinguished maturity that only comes with age. They’re likely the heads of the five great noble houses. And naturally, since their children are handsome, so are they...

“Good evening. I am Joan Evans,” says a man with ash-gray hair standing beside the king.

Evans? That must mean he’s Gale’s father.

“I’m Neville Smith.”

The next man speaks. With those golden locks, he’s clearly Finn’s father.

“I’m Derek Hudson.”

Looks like being tall runs in the family—he’s the spitting image of Eric. My father doesn’t introduce himself. So, um. Why are all the most powerful men in the country gathered in one room? Has there been some kind of scandal?

“Alicia, I have a few questions for you,” the king says, looking directly at me.

Me again? Are they going to interrogate me right now?

“Do you like your kingdom, Alicia?”

I freeze—that’s the last question I expected. Is he testing my patriotism? I’m about to answer yes, but then a picture of Roana Village flashes through my mind. I can’t answer honestly, or they’ll know I’ve been to Roana.

As I hesitate, the king speaks again. “Let me rephrase that. How do you feel about the way our kingdom operates?”

I’m not sure what the king wants from me. Does he realize I’m only ten?

Even though I doubt he’ll understand, I answer with the first thing that comes to mind.

“I dislike how the nobility receives preferential treatment.”

“You dislike preferential treatment?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I detest it.”

Everyone gives me a dubious look.

“And why is that?” Joan asks, searching my eyes.

“Because it allows those without talent to lead.”

As soon as I say that, everyone’s face darkens. Good. Looks like I gave a proper villainess answer.

“Are you mocking us?” Joan sneers.

I understand his anger, but I’d rather not be glared at that way. Any other ten-year-old would probably cry.

“I’m not claiming this is true of everyone in power. I’m saying that the ability to use magic does not mean one is the wisest in the nation.”

“What do you mean by that?” the king demands.

“Choose your words wisely, girl,” Joan warns.

“Please forgive me, Your Majesty. I was insolent.” I hold my tongue under the weight of Joan’s contempt. Even though they’re the ones getting offended by the answer they asked for.

But the king says, “Continue, child.”

“Your Majesty?!” Joan barks.

Yes, I understand his shock—that had to sting. But I haven’t said anything wrong. Besides, a villainess can’t back down now.

I take a shallow breath, steady myself, and continue. “Intellectually speaking, there are plenty of people wiser than many nobles. What I’m trying to emphasize is that magic ability and wisdom are unrelated. By not allowing those with true talent a chance to contribute, we’re wasting this kingdom’s potential—nothing more.”

“So are you saying you wouldn’t mind if your own title was taken away?”

The king’s gaze pierces me as if looking into my very soul. I’m very aware of

how quickly my pulse has risen.

“I was born into the Williams family by sheer luck, Your Majesty. I did not earn my nobility through effort. I would have no right to complain if I were stripped of that title.”

My answer clearly surprises the king. Duke’s eyes also widen in disbelief. Did I say something that surprising?

Joan assesses me silently.

“Alicia, you may return to your room,” my father says, breaking the tension with a soft smile.

What was this meeting even about...?

With a deep curtsy, I leave the parlor.

That night, I go to Roana Village to visit Will. Surely, since it’s night this time, he won’t get angry.

“Good evening.”

When I enter his house, I see someone lying in his bed. It’s the boy from earlier today. So he survived.

But I can see blood seeping through the tattered cloth wrapped around his head. I doubt there are any proper bandages in this village. He also has scrapes all over his body... He’s in a lot of pain.

“He’s got a high fever,” Will says.

I approach the bed and place a hand on the boy’s forehead. He’s burning up.

I rip a piece of fabric from my dress, remove the cloth haphazardly wound around his head, and tightly wrap my dress scrap around the wound. It should stop the bleeding for now, but without proper treatment, it could easily get infected.

But there’s nothing more I can do. I’ll just have to wait and see.

“Alicia, come here,” Will says softly.



I sit opposite him at the table, like we usually do.

“Old Man Will, did you save that boy?”

Will nods with a sad look in his eyes. “After that big fellow left, I carried him here.”

“Wasn’t anyone else going to save him?”

“Nobody here can afford to worry about tomorrow. They’re just desperate to survive today and don’t have the time to think about anybody else. We’re all barely getting by as is.”

There’s a deep sadness in Will’s smile.

“I’ve never wanted to improve the world or help anybody, but I do want you to live another day, Old Man Will.”

Will pats my head with his big hand. His touch is strangely calming. “Alicia, I’ll say it again: Don’t you dare come here during daylight again.”

“What I saw today...is it always like that?”

Will nods.

“Can’t anybody here use magic?”

“There was a nobleman stripped of his title here... Dead now.”

“Oh. I see.”

“This boy’s very smart—a genius.”

Will glances over at the boy, who’s deliriously moaning in his sleep. He must be quite remarkable for Will to say so. I want to talk to him. But first, I need to save him...

I leave Will’s house and run all the way back home. I tell myself I’m not doing this out of the goodness of my heart—it’s only because I’m curious and want to speak with him. That’s all. It’s for my own gain, I keep reminding myself as I run.

I gather some bandages, healing salve, and a bottle of clean water, then add the bag of macarons from Albert. All that’s left is medicine for his fever.

I glance at the clock—it’s already two AM.

It's too late for me to return to Roana now. I'll go into town first thing tomorrow morning to buy medicine.

With that, I crawl into bed and fall asleep.

"Lady Aliiicia."

It's Rozetta's voice. Why does she have to be so loud at this ungodly hour?

"Lady Aliiicia!"

Odd, she doesn't usually come to wake me anymore. I pry my eyes half-open and look at the clock. What—it's ten?!

The shock jolts me awake. Come on, Rozetta, why didn't you wake me sooner?!

No, no, this is my fault. I can't blame others.

I hurry into my clothes, grab some money, and dash out of the house. As I yell "I'm going to town!" to Rozetta on my way out, she's surprisingly accommodating. She must be getting used to my antics by now.

I ride to town on horseback and slowly open the door to Paul's shop. Ahh, the plants here are so soothing. I could breathe in this refreshing, peaceful air forever.

"Welcome!"

As Paul emerges from the back, the whole room seems to fill with a gentle, calming aura.

"Alicia! What brings you here?" Paul asks, looking surprised to see me alone.

"I came for some josaiah."

"Josaiah? Does someone have a fever?"

Wait a minute. Paul knows my brothers. I can't let him know my true purpose. What should I say?

I hesitate, and Paul shoots me a knowing, sympathetic smile before handing me a bag of josaiah.

“I won’t ask why you need this.”

Gratitude fills my heart as I take the bag. Paul really is a remarkable grown-up. It takes a special kind of person to work hard and open their own botanical shop, even as a nobleman.

“Um, I can pay...”

“It’s on me this time. A little reward for guessing the chado correctly,” he says with a smile.

I know I’ve resolved to live as a villainess, but if I’m ever reborn, I think I’d like to be someone like Paul.

“Thank you so much.”

After curtsying deeply, I run out of Paul’s shop.

As soon as I return home, I shut myself in the library and start searching for grimoires like always. I’m tired of feeling so powerless. I need to become much stronger.

I squint at the bookcase with determination, and as I do, I spot a thick book, clearly different from the others.

Is this what I think it is...? I slowly reach for the book and flip through the pages to confirm.

No way. I’ve finally found it. It’s a book on how to cast spells.

“I did it!”

Overcome with joy, I do a little dance. That was close—thank goodness nobody saw that. It would be catastrophic if Duke or any of his group saw me like that. I need to be more careful.

I open the book to the section on level-1 spells and skim through the words.

“Level-1 spells: available to anyone who possesses magical energy.”

Does that mean I can cast these right now? Maybe if I practice and reach level 100 before I’m old enough for magic school, I won’t even need to go. Well, I’ll still go just so I can bully the heroine, of course.

The magic academy is a six-year program, so the heroine will be in her final year by the time I start. Alicia really had guts—bullying a sixth-year as a first-year? That’s peak villainess behavior! Ooh, I can’t wait for school.

Let’s start with a level-1 floating spell. I feel a little nervous—this is my first time using magic.

“Visualize the target object floating, then snap your middle finger against your thumb.”

Just a snap of my fingers? I’d bring shame to the villainess name if I faltered at level 1. Let’s do this.

I set the book on the floor, close my eyes, and imagine it floating. Then I snap my fingers.

Ooh, that was a satisfying snap.

I slowly open my eyes, and there it is—a floating book. Success?

I did it! I used magic! No strings or anything—it’s really floating on its own!

I had no idea magic was so easy to use. I thought it would be much harder. But this *is* just level 1.

I quickly binge read through the pages documenting levels 1 through 5.

So all it takes is focus and imagination. Okay, I’ve crammed all the theory into my brain. Now it’s time for practice.

I cast spells to my heart’s content. Paper-cutting magic, teeth-whitening magic, nail-trimming magic, object-moving magic—I try every spell from the practical ones to the questionably practical ones.

I lose all sense of time as I obsessively cast spells, and in a single day, I master level 5.

Well, I suppose anyone could easily practice lower-level spells like these independently. I still have a long way to go.

“Lady Aliiicia?” I hear Rozetta’s voice in the distance.

It’s dinnertime! I suddenly realize I’m starving.

“I’ll be right there!”

Brimming with a sense of accomplishment, I happily trot to the dining hall.

A peaceful gust of wind drifts in from outside, flipping the pages of the grimoire Alicia had just been reading.

And the moonlight illuminates the warning written on the page:

“Only those aged thirteen and above are able to use magic.”

That night, I pack my bag and head to Will’s house. The boy is moaning in pain, in worse shape than the day before. Will is doing his best to wipe the boy’s sweat away.

I creep over to the bed, pull a bottle from my bag, and hand it to Will.

“What’s this, child?”

“Clean water, sir.”

Will murmurs a barely audible “Thank you.”

“I also brought this.” I hand him the herbs from Paul.

“Josaiah...”

Wow, leave it to Will to recognize it just by feel and smell—he truly is extraordinary.

Will puts the josaiah into the bottle of water. The herb dissolves, turning the water a light green. He brings the bottle to the boy’s lips, tipping it gently. Bit by bit, the boy’s condition stabilizes. The josaiah water takes effect in less than a minute.

I remove the scrap of my clothing from the boy’s head. Then I rub the clean bandage I brought with salve and carefully wrap it around his head.

“Alicia...I can’t thank you enough,” Will says again.

“I’m just...doing this for my own benefit. You needn’t thank me.”

That’s right. I put my personal ambitions above all else. Even saving this boy—I’m only doing it because I want to see what it’s like to talk to a genius.

Will's face fills with an emotion I can't quite place. I don't want him to despise me for what I said, but I won't lie to him.

"Thank you all the same," Will says warmly.

"What's his name?"

"Gill."

"How old is he?"

"Six."

"Where are his parents...?"

"Killed by villagers here."

They were killed? Not from disease?

Will pauses, his face clouded with melancholy. "That's the sort of place Roana is, Alicia. Everyone exiled from Durkis ends up here."

"But that's crazy."

"I agree. But there's nothing we can do."

What about the heroine? Why doesn't she hurry up and fix this place?

Wait a minute. Why am I waiting for the heroine to fix this? Well, helping this village wouldn't really benefit me in any way. But I can't help but feel angry.

"You should go home, Alicia. Don't trouble yourself over this," Will says, patting my head.

"Here. Share this with him." I pull out the little bag of colorful macarons and hand it to Will.

Perhaps sensing the listlessness in my voice, Will pats my head again and murmurs, "It'll be okay, child."

My chest feels heavy... I wonder if I caught whatever Gill has. My throat feels like it's on fire, I'm nauseous, and I can't stop sweating. Does this disease really spread in just one day?

"Alicia, everyone's here to visit."

I hear Alan's voice from the other side of the door.

"Alicia?"

I can't speak. My throat hurts so badly. Oh god. Am I going to die?

"Alicia, are you in there?"

I hear the door open. And through my flickering consciousness, I look up at Alan.

"Alicia!! Are you okay?!"

No, I'm not okay. Don't be so loud.

I try to protest and ask for help, but my voice comes out as a croak.

"Somebody!!"

I hear stomping down the hall. Even the vibrations are killing me. Can't they all be quiet?

"What's wrong?"

I hear Albert's voice but can't open my eyes anymore.

"Alicia's burning up."

"Alicia?! The girl with a gorilla's constitution?!"

I'm going to kill you, Curtis.

"Let's take her temperature." I feel Albert's hand on my forehead. "Thirty-nine degrees..."

Huh? How did he take my temperature? Magic? Right, I think I remember a temperature-taking spell. I used to wonder why you'd bother when thermometers exist, but I guess it does have a purpose.

"Her fever is really high."

Now I hear Duke's voice.

"We have josaiah in storage, don't we?" Albert asks.

I can hardly believe my ears. No way. We had josaiah at home all along?

I wasted a trip to town!



Ahh, it's no use... I'm fading fast. It's starting to hurt to breathe.

"Alan, go get the josaiah from the shed."

"We should all give her some space for now."

"Not like we would catch her illness anyway..."

I can't even tell who's talking anymore, but I'm really glad they're leaving my room. I didn't realize how painful human voices could be. Wait, what did they just say? They can't catch my illness? Why not? Why am I the only one in so much pain?

It's no good. My brain won't work. A villainess must never let herself be vulnerable, but I can't do anything about that right now. I mean, I'm dying here! I've never felt so sick in my entire life.

And while I muse to myself, I fall asleep without realizing it.

I wake to the sound of my door clicking. The pain in my head is even worse now. It feels like someone is hitting it over and over, and it might just split open.

I didn't live long in my past life, either, but am I really going to die at age ten? How cruel.

No, don't give up, Alicia! You're going to become the baddest villainess in the world! You're going to be a legend! You haven't even met the heroine yet!

...But no amount of motivation can change the reality I'm in.

Who came into my room just now?

I crack my eyes open.

...Duke?

I see a faint glimpse of blue hair.

What is Duke doing in my room? He's the last person I want to see right now. He must have heard me moaning. I feel like he's exploiting my weakness. Well, I certainly do look pathetic right now.

"Alicia...drink this."

Duke holds a cup out to me. But I don't have the strength to take it. I can't even sit up—how does he expect me to drink?

"Please...just leave me...alone," I murmur through the searing pain in my head.

I'm sorry, Duke. But I'm in a lot of pain. I hope you can understand that.

Silence falls...

Did I make him angry? All I hear is my own ragged breathing and raspy moans. I can't see his reaction.

Then, suddenly, I feel Duke's hand behind my neck, lifting me up. Before I can protest, his lips press against mine.

...Huh?

Then I feel the medicine sliding down my throat. My brain is sluggish from the sickness yet spinning from the shock.

What just happened?

I reflexively swallow the medicine. Once he's sure of this, Duke pulls away.

Gradually, I feel lighter, and my breathing steadies. Was that josaiah? Wow, it works fast. Experiencing it firsthand really deepens my appreciation for it.

So...does this count as my first kiss? It was purely clinical, right? Besides, considering our ages, I'm only ten, and Duke is fifteen. That's five years between us. So to him, this was probably just an act of kindness for a sick little girl.







Take a breath, Alicia, and think rationally. Why would someone who supposedly hates you go so far as to feed you medicine by mouth?

Could Duke have feelings for me? But he's supposed to fall for the heroine! That's set in stone!

Isn't the heroine already at the magic academy? Surely Duke has met her by now...right? Have they not fallen in love yet? That must be it. Otherwise, he wouldn't be here, feeding me medicine like this, would he?

More and more doubts keep filling my head. I have so many important things to ponder, but my brain is still fuzzy, so I can't organize my thoughts properly.

"Feeling better?" Duke murmurs, his voice gentle as he draws me into his arms and strokes my hair.

Yeah. Now I'm dying for a completely different reason.

My heart pounds in my chest, but I somehow manage to keep my composure.

Then I remember: Sons of nobility often take small doses of poison from a young age to boost their immune systems. That must be why he's safe from whatever illness I have.

Duke lays me back down, but I can feel his presence beside me.

When is he going to leave? I don't want him watching me sleep, but the medicine is making me drowsy. The side effects must be just as quick as the cure.

And just like that, I fall asleep.

My fever went down in a day, and I feel completely better. Whenever you get sick, you really appreciate your health. As for Duke's...clinical intervention yesterday, I've decided not to overthink it.

The real issue at hand is this: The heroine is already at the magic academy.

It's the most important thing to keep track of, yet I dropped the ball. I wonder what's happening at the school right now. Surely, the heroine is getting cozy with all the romanceable characters, right? But Albert hasn't breathed a word

about her yet. Has she really entered the magic academy? She's a commoner who can use all five magic elements—you'd think she'd be the talk of the town.

Maybe the academy didn't let her in after all because she's a commoner? But she's supposed to be on scholarship, so that shouldn't matter. Agh, now I really want to know what's going on.

Welp, guess I'll just have to sneak into the magic academy! That way, I can see the heroine with my own eyes, and I need to gather my own intel anyway.

Ahh, I finally get to meet the heroine!

Strike while the iron is hot—I run to the stables.

Okay, so I've made it into the magic academy. But I'm stunned speechless. Just how much funding did it take to build this place?

I knew what it looked like from the game, but seeing it in person? It's incredible. I can see why they only admit nobility.

All those stained-glass windows... What do they do when a stray ball smashes through one at recess? Questions like this swim through my mind as I wander inside.

Um, game devs? Isn't this academy way too big? Was it really necessary to make it this large? I thought I was headed toward the main school building, but now I'm somehow lost in the woods. Why is there a forest inside a school anyway?

"Are you lost?"

Yes, that's right. I'm los—

"Huh?" I blurt out, whirling to face the direction the voice came from.

"Are you okay?"

The owner of the voice approaches with soft steps. She has bright emerald-green eyes and black hair, just like mine... Wait, is this the heroine? She and I have the same hair color... Don't they know you're not supposed to do that? It makes it hard for people to tell us apart!

“What’s your name, little one?”

Great. She’s treating me like a child. Well, of course she is—I’m only ten.

“Shouldn’t you tell me your name first?” I retort.

The maybe-heroine’s eyes widen in surprise. She probably didn’t expect this poor, lost little girl to give her sass.

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. I’m Liz. Liz Cather. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Alicia Williams. I’ve never heard of the Cather family.”

“Oh, well, I’m not a noble.”

“!!!”

It’s confirmed. Liz Cather is, without a doubt, the heroine of this world!

At last, I’ve met her! Oh, how I’ve longed for this day.

“So, Alicia dear, what are you looking for?”

Alicia...dear? A bit friendly, aren’t we? Know your place, peasant.

—is what I’d like to say, but unfortunately, I didn’t become noble through my own hard work. Liz must have overcome a great deal to get accepted into the magic academy on a scholarship—I can’t bring myself to say something like that to her.

“I was...”

What am I looking for? Actually, I’ve already accomplished today’s goal. After all, I was looking for Liz. But since I’ve come all this way...I might as well get a tour of the school.

“I wish to go to the main school building.”

“Oh, well, that’s this way,” Liz says, smiling like an angel. Most people would love that smile, but for me, it’s a little too...*perfect*.

“Here we are.”

Liz escorts me all the way to the front door of the main school building. How careless of me. I’m already in debt to the heroine on day one.

“Did you come here to see someone?” Her emerald-green eyes peer into

mine. What a lovely color. Before I know it, I'm swooning.

"Alicia?"

"Huh? Oh, um...thank you for taking me this far. Truly. Bye, then."

Without another word, I flee into the school building. I can't tell Liz that she is the one I came to see. That would make me sound like a Liz stan.

Wow, this school building really is spotless. Not a speck of dust in sight. Maybe they keep it clean with magic.

By this time of day, I suppose they're in class. I haven't seen anyone in the halls.

Well, five years from now, I'll be a student here. Surely, I'm allowed to look around a little.

I set off down the long, broad hallway. The voices of teachers teaching in their classrooms follow me as I pass by.

What an intriguing lecture. I'd love to hear more, but I don't want to spoil the fun I'll have five years from now. Hold back, Alicia.

When I reach the other end of the hallway, I spot a tiny wooden door that looks like it's straight out of a fairy tale.

I wonder what's on the other side. It's really tickling my curiosity.

Ahh, I need to know what's behind the door. I want to look right now. If this area is restricted, wouldn't that make me an über-villainess for entering without permission? Fantastic.

I boldly push the door.

Huh? It won't budge. Is it locked?

I grab the stubborn doorknob and push and pull with all my might until— — with a loud boom that echoes down the hall, I fall on my butt.

It opened. I guess it was a pull door.

I stand up and dust off my dress.



It smells faintly of paper. Is this a library?

I step inside, and immediately, the unique aroma of books wraps around me.

What a wonderful place! It feels like this room was built for books to relax in.

Sunlight filters through large windows, illuminating wooden tables, chairs, and towering stacks of reading material in every corner. I take a deep breath.

Ahh, so relaxing. I could spend the rest of my life here.

I walk farther in.

What's this? A blackboard? Up close, it's twice my height. How did they make such a massive blackboard?

After staring at it for a moment, I notice something written at the very top.

"Propose a way for Durkis to gain leverage over Laval . Everyone is free to write their suggestions below."

Laval...gain leverage...

My brain whirls into action. I grab a chair, set it in front of the blackboard, climb up, and let the chalk dance in my hand as I scribble my thoughts.



## Curtis, Eldest Son of the Kenwood Family—Age Fifteen

I come from a noble family specializing in green magic, though we're not one of the five most prominent noble houses that are considered the pillars of Durkis. All my friends belong to those top five houses, but I've never once felt inferior because of it. I probably have their good character to thank for that.

Alicia often comes up in our conversations. Alicia—little sister of Alan and Henri, who are dark magic users. Her brothers have always described her as self-centered and arrogant. But when we finally met her, she was quite the opposite.

Alicia has a unique quality you'd never find in an ordinary person. She's hardworking, intelligent, and bold, and she carries a confidence and fortitude far beyond her years. Not to mention, she's exceptionally beautiful.

As Gale once said, the word *genius* was invented for people like her. When she was only eight, she proposed helping Carvella gain independence from Laval so we could put them in our debt and enrich our economy. I would never have imagined such an idea at her age.

The other surprise was Duke's interest in Alicia...and I quickly recognized his interest as more than just curiosity.

Plenty of girls—servants included—have taken an interest in Duke, but he's never shown any for them. If anything, he seems to dislike their attention. Yet here he is, developing a special affection for a girl five years his junior.

Even now, Alicia is captivating. To capture Duke's attention, she is more than just impressive. According to her brothers, she never misses a day of sword training and frequently holes up in the library reading. Sometimes she can be outspoken, but she's still a ten-year-old girl. And ten-year-old girls are, after all, creatures of whimsy.

When I turned fifteen and started attending the magic academy, the first thing that caught my interest was the commoner girl who had managed to gain admission.

She had black hair like Alicia's and emerald-green eyes. A commoner at the academy was unprecedented, so rumors about her spread like wildfire across campus. What made her truly remarkable, though, was her ability to use all the magic elements.

Everyone immediately took an interest in her, and she proved to be a hard worker, too.

This commoner, Liz Cather, was smart enough to hold her own in conversations with Duke. She earned everyone's admiration, and even Duke seemed intrigued by her intelligence.

Duke spoke with Liz far more often than he did with other girls, sparking rumors that they might be in love.

For a time, Liz was bullied. But her kind and innocent nature eventually won over even those who initially tormented her.

I once saw Duke coming to Liz's aid. When he found out that someone had hidden her textbooks, he helped her look for them. From that day on, Liz and Duke were often seen together.

Liz came to me for advice several times, constantly asking how she could get Duke to notice her. But from where I stood, it was clear as day: Duke had no romantic interest in Liz whatsoever.

So I always gave her what I considered to be a rather callous answer:

"You will never outshine the other girl."

And now, here is that other girl, effortlessly scribbling across the library blackboard with a piece of chalk as we all look on. At that moment, I realize my assessment of her has been spot-on.

“Hey, I heard there’s an amazing girl in the old library room right now!”

“I heard she’s crazy smart!”

As soon as class lets out, the halls erupt in chatter.

“What’s going on?” Gale asks, a sour look on his face.

“What’s she like?”

“They say she’s a little girl with black hair!”

I immediately glance at her older brother Albert. “Please don’t let it be her...,” he mutters under his breath.

Duke takes off for the library, and we all chase after him. When we reach the small door to the old library, we find it packed with students trying to squeeze in.

“Coming through...,” I say, pushing my way to the back of the room. And there she is—a little girl standing on a chair, chalk in hand, scribbling intently across the blackboard. Her eyes are fixed on her work, oblivious to the crowd that has gathered. Her focus is incredible.

...It’s Alicia.

We all turn our attention to the blackboard. Nobody says a word as we read what she’s written.

The questions written on the blackboard are open to the entire student body. Anybody is welcome to answer them, but nobody does.

“Propose a way for Durkis to gain leverage over Laval. Everyone is free to write their suggestions below.”

I read through her answers in order.

Is this really the work of a ten-year-old?

To summarize, Alicia suggests manipulating neighboring states that have grievances with Laval to isolate them. When the time is right, Durkis could conveniently offer aid to Laval. Then when their guard is down, Durkis would subtly take control.

When she finishes writing the last letter, she lets out a small sigh and glances around as if suddenly aware of her surroundings.

“Huh?” Her eyes widen in surprise.

“What focus and imagination... It’s hard to believe she’s only ten,” Gale says, his glasses gleaming.

I mostly agree, but one point I just don’t quite understand: In her answer, she claims that Duran’s economy might collapse. Their economy is currently booming—so why would she go out of her way to suggest that?

Alicia then turns, looking at Albert with a hint of dread in her expression. She’s probably afraid of getting in trouble for sneaking into the academy. But Albert’s utter shock has won over his anger. For a long moment, we all just stand there, staring at the blackboard in stunned silence.



## Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family—Age Ten

Albert did get angry at me for sneaking into the academy, but since I'd finally met the heroine, I was thoroughly satisfied. I could tell she was very good, very cute, and very popular. She was like a classic "good girl" come to life, and to be honest...I didn't care for her.

Anyway, today I'm gonna practice my magic!

I head straight to the library first thing in the morning. By now, everyone in the house knows I spend my time here. I only made a passing remark to Rozetta about it once, but news travels fast. Well, now that the cat's out of the bag, nothing will stop my quest for villainess glory!

As I enter the library, I hear voices.

Oh, somebody beat me here?

I approach on tiptoe.

"She's a Divergent."

"But she's leading a normal life."

"Still, she's dangerous."

"That's no way to talk about her!"

Who are they talking about? They said *Divergent*— Could they mean Liz?! Has she already been marked as dangerous? That's Father's voice, isn't it? And the other voice sounds familiar, too, but I can't place it.

"Sorry, let me rephrase that. Her cognitive abilities are extraordinary."



“I know.”

“But she has little love for this kingdom.”

“Are you trying to say she would make a dangerous enemy?”

If they're talking about Liz, why is Father so angry? Maybe I shouldn't be eavesdropping.

I try to slip away as discreetly as possible, but I accidentally bump my elbow.

Ouch! Curse you, bookcase...

“Who's there!”

A sharp voice cuts through the library.

Just my luck. I want to run away, but that would be unbecoming of a villainess. My pride won't allow it.

I step out from behind the bookcase.

It's my father and...Gale's father, Joan?

They both give me a stern look. Sure, eavesdropping isn't great, but if they didn't want to be overheard, maybe they shouldn't have had their conversation in the library.

“Good day, gentlemen,” I say, keeping my tone casual despite the awkward atmosphere.

“Alicia... Did you overhear our conversation?” Father asks.

I might as well tell the truth.

“Yes.”

“We have to erase her memory,” Joan says.

“Excuse me?”

I can't believe what I just heard him say.

Did he really just say that? Erase my memory? But they can't—wait, no, they can. I remember that level-68 spells include memory-erasing magic. Still, isn't that kind of unfair? And, Father, wipe that look of resignation off your face. I am not in the mood for a memory wipe today.

“I promise I won’t repeat what I just heard to anyone else.”

“Why would you...?”

“I won’t tell anyone that the commoner, Liz Cather, is dangerous.”

Not that I was planning to anyway, but I don’t want them thinking I’m a snitch. Yet both Father and Joan just stare at me in utter bewilderment—*why*?

“Liz Cather...”

Huh? What kind of reaction is that? Wait, were they not talking about Liz?

“Understood. Then we won’t erase your memory.”

“Thank you, sir.”

This might sound strange coming from me, but...you really shouldn’t believe everything people say so easily. Though I am relieved they’re sparing my memory.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“I’d better be on my way. See you later, Arnold, Alicia.”

And with that, Joan leaves. My father exits, too, giving my head a little pat on his way out. With a lot of questions still buzzing in my mind, I make my way up the stairs to the second floor.

I read through the entries for level-6 to level-10 magic, then practiced each spell one by one. Honestly, it was easier than I expected, but I’ve hit a snag with the level-10 spell Clean Dirty Items. It’s a shame, too, because I really want to purify the water in Roana.

I grab some dirty water and practice the spell over and over. But it’s hopeless. The water isn’t getting any cleaner! The cup is spotless, but the water remains murky. Am I doing something wrong?

I check the grimoire again. I’m not making any mistakes, so why isn’t it working?

As I flip through the pages, my eyes land on a level-25 spell.

“Purify Water.”

No way. Cleaning dirty items and purifying water are completely different spells? What a scam! Give me back all that time and energy I just wasted.

Well, let’s see if I can clean the shoes I’m wearing right now...

I look down at my feet and cast the same spell.

They’re shining like new.

I realize I’ll need to master each spell one at a time. I should take each spell seriously and research it thoroughly before practicing. With a satisfied smile, I nod quietly to myself.

When I visit Will that night, I find Gill in the corner of the living room. I sigh in relief to see him out of bed.

“Whatcha doing over there?” I call out to him.

Gill slowly turns to look at me. His dark brown hair is messy, and his clear gray eyes look like stagnant pools of gloom, as if he’s standing in a vortex of despair.

“My name’s Alicia.”

Still no reaction. He just stares hard at me.

“He’s hardened his heart,” Will says.

“Even to you, Old Man Will?”

“Me, not so much... Gill’s scared of people,” Will explains.

Well, of course he’s scared of people—after everything he’s been through, it would be strange if he weren’t. Everyone completely ignored him when he was beaten. Bullies who pick on the weak usually have no confidence or self-respect. A true villainess would never stoop so low.

“But I know you can open his heart, Alicia.”

What are you talking about, Will? I’m a villainess. I can’t open his heart or offer comfort like a saint—I can’t stand that kind of sappy stuff. Liz could do it, though. She’d become friends with him in an instant.

Wait a minute... If Liz could do it, then I need to be able to as well! If I'm inferior to her, how will I be ready to bully her when the time comes?

I slap my cheeks to focus. Time to give him a pep talk—villainess-style.

"Hey, Gill, so you're scared of people? Don't make me laugh. Tell me, then—why didn't you just die?"

Gill stares hard at me.

"If you're too scared of people to interact with them, wouldn't it have been better to give up? The world is full of people. If you keep living, you'll have to interact with them. Do you think you can spend the rest of your life huddled in the corner of this shack?"

All right—now get mad. Let the anger flow through you.

"You had a high fever and were bleeding from the head. If you didn't want to live, you could have died then. Sure, I gave you medicine purely for my own satisfaction. But you chose to swallow it, didn't you?"

Gill glares at me. I've always been a natural at making people angry.

"Is this how you want to live? Running away from everything that scares you? Is that really the choice you're making?"

"You're wrong..." Gill mutters quietly.

All right! He speaks!

"I'm wrong? Doesn't seem that way to me."

Gill glares with even more intensity. "What could you nobles possibly understand...?"

"I don't understand aaaanything," I say, as flippantly as possible. "How could I? We live in completely different worlds."

For a moment, he looks like he might leap and attack me.

"But I saved your life. So I need to take some responsibility."

"What?"

"You didn't want to go on living, but I saved your life anyway. So if you really

want to die, it's my responsibility to kill you myself."

I give him my most menacing look, and fear begins to creep into his eyes.

Oh, if only someone could capture this moment on video. Then the whole world could witness my epic villainess prowess.

"But if you want to keep living, I'll do everything I can to help you. If you need help, I'll be there. But don't go soft on me. If you choose to live, you'll have to face people head-on for the rest of your life. And that's a battle only you can fight, Gill. I won't fight it for you."







“...Someone like you could never possibly understand how I feel.”

I can see the anguish reddening Gill’s eyes.

“You’re right, Gill. I can’t possibly understand. Because I’m blessed.”

“Then stop mouthing off!”

His eyes flood with tears—anger or resentment, I can’t tell.

“Hey. You’re smart, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I believe that those with talent should stand at the top of the world.”

“But you nobles are already there. There’s no place for me!”

Is this boy even listening to me? Now I’m really getting angry.

I get why he’s mad—the magic walls keep the villagers imprisoned in Roana. When I researched how Roana was founded, I learned that their ancestors were either lower-class citizens cast out from society or escaped convicts. But that has nothing to do with the people here now.

“Well, which is it, Gill? Do you want to live, or do you want to die?”

He falls silent.

“Answer me.”

I glare hard at him, turning up the pressure. This glare is something I’ve practiced in the mirror daily since deciding to become a villainess.

“Of course I don’t wanna die. But how the hell am I supposed to escape this open-air prison? It doesn’t matter how smart I am if I can’t even leave.”

Then finally, the tears spill over.

“Did you hear any of what I just said? I’m offering to help you. If you want to escape the darkness, then I vow on my life to put you on a stage where the light can shine! I’ll take you to a place where you can spread those big wings of yours, and no one can clip them!”

Oops, I raised my voice at the end. That didn’t sound very villainess-like, did it?



Gill's tears start flowing like a waterfall.

"Why? Why would you go so far for me?"

"Remember what I said? I need to take responsibility for saving your life when you didn't ask for it."

"Are you stupid...?"

Then for the first time, Gill smiles at me.

Oh my, he's actually really cute when he smiles. Does this mean I've opened up his heart? Cool. I win.

(Incidentally, to maintain my villainess cred, I won't mention that I saved him out of compassion.)

After that, Gill cried himself to sleep.

"Alicia...thank you," Will says, patting my head like he always does.

Hmm, I didn't do anything worth thanking.

"I said nothing but horrible things to him."

"And it was the truth."

"I doubt a saint would've said things like that," I retort.

Wrinkles form at the corners of Will's eyes as he chuckles. "A saint's words wouldn't have reached the boy."

So does that mean I beat Liz? I guess it's silly to think that way—this wasn't even a contest.

"Oh! That's right—I learned how to use a spell that cleans dirty items."

Even without looking at Will's eyes, I can tell he's shocked. Maybe it's insensitive to brag about magic in front of someone who can't use it.

But Old Man Will isn't the sort to get angry about that.

"Alicia—how old are you?"

"I'm ten, sir."

Why is he suddenly asking about my age? Will puts a hand on his chin, his

expression growing grim.

“Is there a problem?”

“Well, I guess not. Alicia, can you cast that spell for me right now?”

“Very well.”

“All right, then—can you make everything in this room clean?”

“I’ll give it a try, sir.”

I imagine the entire room spotless, every nook and cranny sparkling. Usually, I close my eyes when I visualize spells, but this time I keep them open. Truth be told, I used to close them out of fear of failure. But I want to see myself cast this spell, so I keep my eyes open and snap my fingers. A shimmering aura expands from me, filling the room. It’s incredibly beautiful, all shiny and lovely.

The aura spreads to the chairs, the table, and the bed, and then it slowly fades away.

Wow, look at me... I’m allowed to brag about this, aren’t I? It’s like a completely different room now—spotless and fresh.

Even the yellowed windows, the dusty ceiling, and the floor, which had been barely visible under all the grime, are squeaky-clean.

“Even the air feels clean,” Will marvels. “This house used to be oppressive, but now it feels light and bright. You’re amazing, Alicia.”

Ooh, I love it when Old Man Will praises me. I’m definitely going to have sweet dreams tonight.



“Lady Alicia, everyone’s in the parlor to see you.”

Rozetta’s voice echoes through the library.

Aw man, I was just getting to a good part.

I pause my reading and slide a bookmark between the pages.

“I’m coming.”

“One of the visitors is a lady this time.”

A lady visitor? No way...Liz Cather, the heroine?! Liz has come to our home? I get to see her outside the magic academy?

This is turning out to be the best day ever. Ahh, I’m so excited. At last, the day has arrived to reveal myself to her in all my villainess glory!

With a spring in my step, I hurry to the parlor.

“Greetings, everyone.”

When I enter the parlor, I find my prayers answered—Liz is here. As expected, she has an aura unlike anyone else. She doesn’t look like a peasant at all. Liz steps forward to pay her respects.

“Hello, Alicia dear. So you’re Albert’s little sister.” She looks into my eyes and smiles, her expression as blindingly bright as ever.

“Yes, I am,” I answer with a defiant smile of my own. But mine is far from sparkling like Liz’s—if anything, I’m sure I’m radiating a pitch-black aura!

“Hi, Ali. Lovely as always.”

“Hi, Curtis. Shallow as always.”

The nerve of Curtis, delivering such a trite line when I’ve made my grand villainess entrance, evil smile on full display! I wish he wouldn’t ruin the mood.

“So what brings you all here today?” I ask.

“The student council is making pamphlets,” Albert explains with a smile.

Right, Albert and his friends are all on the student council. But why did they want to see me?

“Don’t make that face,” Albert chuckles. “We just want a little advice.”

He hands me a piece of paper: “Magic Academy Festival: The Student Council’s Entry.”

Oh, this is one of the events from the game. If I recall correctly, it's where Duke and Liz's romance really started to progress. And they want my advice? I know I've said this a million times, but have they forgotten I'm only ten?

Then again, a true villainess is more than her age. I'm not here to make Duke and Liz fall in love. I'm certainly not rooting for them, but once they're cozy, I'll give Liz hell for it. *"The nerve of a peasant like you..."* No, wait—that won't do. Bringing class into it would be too easy. Liz earned her spot at the academy, so I'll have to be more brazen.

"Alicia? Why the perplexed face?"

"When she makes that face, she's usually not hearing a word we say."

"Well, she does tend to dive deep into her thoughts."

"It's a talent, in a way."

That's right... Perhaps I should challenge her on her worthiness for Duke. The heroine and villainess must be rivals, after all! Then when Liz declares, *"Well, I love Duke more than you,"* I'll retort with a smug *"You're awfully confident..."* dripping with malice.

But how can I say such an embarrassing line without cringing? It'd be like confessing my love for Duke out of nowhere. Then again, Duke's going to reject me either way, so I might as well go all out. Anything for villainess glory!

"By the way, Brother, what are you thinking of entering for the festival?"

Albert smiles sheepishly. "Hmm, we haven't thought that far."

"So what exactly do you want me to do?"

"We want your ideas, Alicia," Liz says, cutting in.

Perfect time to unleash some villainess sass.

"I didn't ask you, Liz."

I keep my sweetest smile as I deliver that line, and the room falls silent. Yes. This is the icy mood I wanted to create!

"Alicia? What's come over you?" Albert asks, giving me a curious look.

Nothing's come over me, dear brother. I'm merely doing my duty.

“You know, I didn’t realize you and Ali were acquainted, Liz,” Curtis says, trying to smooth things over.

Great. The icy mood I built gets shattered in an instant. Liz and I were supposed to be having an intense face-off where the skies turn black and thunder crackles, but alas.

“So what do you think we should do, Alicia?” Finn asks cheerfully.

Well, all that matters is that Duke and Liz get together, so my input doesn’t actually matter. I just need Liz to see me as a rival.

“Liz, I hear you can use all the elements?”

Plus earth and green magic, too—she has it all. I am so envious of the heroine’s character stats.

“Yes, I can...,” Liz answers cautiously.

Good. Just the look I want from you. Now show me more of those emotions!

“Why don’t you capitalize on that, then? You have such a wonderful talent—it’s a shame to waste it by keeping it all to yourself.”

I lift one corner of my mouth into a lopsided sneer.

“Thank you!”

Huh? Why is she thanking me?

“That’s so sweet of you to praise my talents!”

Ugh, I was being sarcastic! God, she’s so dense! This is why I hate heroines. She’s supposed to look to Duke for help, not smile at me like an idiot!

“You know, that is a rather good idea,” Gale nods.

Wait—what? I pulled that idea out of my ass. Are they really running with it? Wait, are they so arrogant that they’re mocking *me*, the villainess, instead?

Then I hear laughter.

No way. Duke is laughing. Is he actually enjoying watching me squirm? I really don’t understand how this guy thinks.

In the end, my “idea” is adopted, and the meeting wraps up. Would it kill

these people to come up with their own ideas once in a while?

“Say, why don’t we have Alicia join you onstage as your assistant?”

Today, the group is back at my house again to discuss their entry for the school festival.

Um, did you just suggest that *I* be *her* assistant? Albert, darling, what in the world are you thinking? For that matter, why do I even have to sit through this fruitless discussion in the first place?

“Yes, that does sound like a good idea.”

Gale? Please don’t second that motion. I’m not even a member of the student council.

“I refuse,” I say bluntly.

“Why?” Albert looks at me, puzzled.

“Well, for one thing, I’m not a student.”

“We’ll find a way around that.”

I’d rather you not.

“Oh, come on, Alicia, it will be fun!” Liz says, beaming at me.

“I’m telling you, I’d rather die.”

Despite my cutting retort, Liz just keeps smiling, unfazed. Moments like this make me really hate her. She can probably read the room just fine but refuses to take no for an answer. If anything, I’m the real victim here.

“But I promise it’ll be fun. And think of all the lovely memories we’ll make!”

“Could you please not force your way of thinking on me?”

With that, the room falls into silence. A bewildered look crosses Liz’s face.

Yes! That’s the face I’ve been waiting for! I may have failed last time, but this time, I’m going to win.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to push.”

Huh, I was expecting fiercer resistance, but she's just handed me the win.

"Alicia, you were too harsh." Albert's tone is laced with irritation.

"I only spoke my mind."

"And that can hurt people."

I won't deny that. But what's so wrong about asserting myself?

"Let's move on," Curtis says loudly. "Ali was probably just upset that it felt like she was being forced to do something she didn't want to."

What an annoying feeling. Things were much simpler when I was seven. People just called me selfish and let me get away with it. Now that I'm older, everyone is less accommodating.

I remember in my past life, the older I got, the more I had to bite my tongue. And here I am, dealing with this at the tender age of ten. This must mean that game-Alicia only grew outwardly, never inwardly, and that's how she ended up a shallow, mean-girl villainess. If I keep maturing on the inside, I'll become a proper villainess. Yes, I should just stay true to myself!

Then Albert turns to me and says, "Ali, why don't you and Liz go shopping together and get to know each other?"

...Excuse me?! Albert, my sweet brother, what on earth are you suggesting? Becoming friends with Liz would bring shame to the very title of villainess!

"I would love to be friends," Liz says, smiling at me like an angel.

Ugh, I can't stand that smile. She thinks it'll somehow raise her Affection Score with me or something.

"Well, I don't feel any need to become friends with Liz."

Liz's emerald-green eyes suddenly look very sad. "Oh dear... Have I done something to make you dislike me, Alicia?"

You're the heroine. I'm the villainess. We were never meant to be friends.

"Isn't friendship something that shouldn't be forced?" I retort.

I can practically see the question marks hanging over everyone's heads. Did I say something so strange?



“Ali, how can you say you won’t be her friend if you don’t even know her?” Albert asks with a smile.

“Yes, if we talk a lot, I’m sure we could be great friends,” Liz adds.

Ah yes, the classic “if we talk, we’ll understand each other” argument... Straight from the heroine’s playbook. Some people are a good fit for each other, and some aren’t. No amount of talking will change that.

“If it means I won’t have to go shopping with Liz, then I’ll gladly have a chat.”

Liz’s face lights up, and Albert sighs in relief. Huh. Something about this is incredibly fishy.

“Alicia dear, what’s your favorite sweet?”

“Macarons.”

“Macarons! I love them, too. They just might have the power to make people happy. What’s your favorite flora?”

Ugh, I hate people who say *flora* when they just mean *flower*. It’s so pretentious.

“I’m not interested in flowers.”

“Oh... Well, I love marguerites.”

That sounds about right for Liz.

“I love their symbolism, too,” she adds.

“ “True love,” ” we say simultaneously. Liz looks surprised.

“They also symbolize honesty and trust. They suit you perfectly, Liz,” I say with a smile, lacing my words with sarcasm. (Not that Liz would pick up on that.)

“How do you know that if you aren’t interested in flowers?” she asks.

“It’s something every lady should know.”

“You’re so clever for someone so young! Are there any flowers in particular that stand out to you?”

Did I stutter? I said I’m not interested in flowers. But she’s looking at me with that sparkle in her eyes...

“I like lilies of the valley,” I answer flatly.

“Ooh, they symbolize purity and the return of good fortune. What a lovely meaning for a flower to have.”

“Yes. And despite their innocent appearance and lovely symbolism, they are so poisonous that they can inflict one of the worst deaths imaginable—I find that aspect quite charming as well.”

The room falls silent. I can see Liz’s angelic smile waver. I’m on a roll—this is Villainess’s Greatest Hits!

Liz finally breaks the silence. “Alicia dear, what’s your favorite color?”

This girl... She’s still holding her ground. I gotta give it to her. Just a little.

“Black.”

“Ooh, you like black? My favorite color is white.”

“Yes, the complete opposite,” I reply, smiling.

Liz smiles right back.

(Even the meaning behind our smiles is the exact opposite.) “Don’t opposites attract?” Liz asks.

“Indeed.”

Like hell this conversation is bringing us closer.

“What sorts of things do you like?”

Still more questions? And isn’t that question a bit broad? Liz isn’t picking up on my bored expression at all. This is why I hate dense heroines!

“This is what I like.”

Wanting to finally shut her up, I snap my fingers, and a flower from a nearby vase flies toward me.







Behold: an item-attracting spell.

I catch the flower with a flourish and hold it out to Liz. “Here you go.”

But Liz and everyone else in the room freeze in shock. Have I really done something that surprising?

“Magic...?”

“Yes.”

Couldn’t you be quicker on the uptake? I’m getting secondhand embarrassment.

“Um, how old is Ali?”

“She’s ten...”

“I thought so.”

I hear Curtis and Albert whisper in low voices. Will had asked my age when he saw me cast a spell, too. Perhaps I’m more gifted than most children my age? Well, considering all the time I’ve devoted to studying magic, it’s only natural I’d be this good, right?

Finally, Liz takes the flower from my hand. “Thank you. What a lovely marguerite.”

She gives me a smile so divine it could put angels to shame. But raising my Affection Score with Liz doesn’t please me in the slightest.

I gave you that flower ironically, Liz. Honestly, you’re almost lucky to be so dense.

After everyone goes home, I head to the library. We didn’t even finalize the student council’s entry for the festival. All I did was have a conversation with Liz. How boring.

Just as I reach the library, I spot my father and Albert talking in the hallway. They look incredibly grim. I wonder what heavy topic they could possibly be discussing.

I sneak closer, careful not to make a sound.

“Alicia used magic? Are you sure?”

“Yes, Father. I saw it myself.”

“But Alicia is only ten.”

There it is again— Why does everyone get so hung up on my age?

“I can’t believe it...”

“I was shocked, too, Father. You’re only supposed to be able to use magic when you turn thirteen.”

Wait, what? But I’m ten. Am I missing something here?

“She’s a Divergent,” my father finally says, his voice carrying a weight I’ve never heard before.

I’m a Divergent? But the heroine is supposed to be the only Divergent in this world. There must be some kind of mistake.

Before I can make any sense of the conversation, I run the rest of the way to the library.

Grimoire, grimoire... Aha, here it is. I’m so nervous I can’t even turn the pages. Father and Albert have to be lying.

As I do my best to convince myself of this, I finally arrive at a certain page.

“Only those aged thirteen and above are able to use magic.”

I couldn’t have misread that.

I pull out the magic encyclopedia, which goes into more detail on the inner workings of magic.

“Only those aged thirteen and above are able to use magic.”

It says the exact same thing here.

“Because of this, those of noble birth begin their magic training at age

thirteen, and those who master level-20 spells by age fifteen are permitted entry to the magic academy.”

Level 20? Oh, I’m almost at level 20 already. I wonder if there’s anything else in here. Maybe examples of people who could cast spells at a younger age...

I skim through all the pages in that section, but there’s nothing relevant to my case.

Does this mean it’s still a mystery? Ugh, I really hate it when mysteries are left unsolved. Then again, it’s not like I can get any answers just by asking someone outright... Ooh, I know—maybe Will knows something about this. The sun’s already down, so it should be safe to head over to Roana Village now.

Oh, and I’d better bring a book for Gill while I’m at it.

When I arrive at Will’s house, Gill is already asleep. I leave the bag with the book I brought for him at the corner of his bed, then settle into my usual chair. Even though Will can’t see, he immediately notices how flustered I am. If only the heroine had even a fraction of his ability to read people.

“I have a question to ask,” I blurt out.

“Have a seat and catch your breath first,” Will says, his tone serene yet firm.

I take a deep breath and slowly exhale. “Old Man Will, why can I—?”

“Why can you use magic even though you’re only ten? Is that your question?”

He takes the words right out of my mouth. His perceptiveness never ceases to amaze me. Sometimes I wonder if he has the power to read minds.

“Old Man Will...do you know why?”

Will looks troubled, as if I’ve stirred up old memories of his days at the palace. And unless I’m mistaken, there’s a flicker of melancholy in his expression.

“Alicia, the ability to use magic at your age means you’re incredibly gifted. But that gift comes with the potential for destruction.”

“Destruction?”

Will nods slowly, and I sense there is more to this story. Perhaps there was

someone like me in the past?

“Don’t look so scared. You’ll be fine,” His warm voice assures me, as usual. Every time he reads my mind, I further begin to doubt whether he’s blind.

“There was someone I knew long ago who could use magic at a very young age. People praised his rare gift, so he used magic more and more. By thirteen, he had practiced all the way up to level eighty.”

“Level eighty?” I can barely believe it. That’s supposed to take three years of practice, and only those from great noble families can reach it.

“Yes. And that’s when things went wrong. He grew overconfident. Thought he was better than everyone else.”

*“Wasn’t he better than everyone else, though?”*

If you reached level 80 by age thirteen, you’d be crazy not to be enamored with yourself.

“It was the cause of his destruction,” Will says, smiling sadly. “Since he’d taught himself all the way up to level eighty, he became overconfident and assumed he could skip ahead to level one hundred.”

Well, yeah, that’s a level only the Chosen Ones can even practice. But I don’t blame the boy for thinking he was special.

“What happened to him?”

“He lost the ability to use magic forever.”

A great noble unable to use magic—that’s a fate worse than death. He’d have to live with the weight of failing everyone who had placed their hopes in him.

Unless that boy left his family...? For a moment, I consider asking Will for more details, but I bite my tongue. He looks too sad to go on, and his face tells me this person wasn’t just “somebody he knew.” Will genuinely cares about him. Just thinking about it, I can feel my heart breaking a little.

“Alicia, you have a wonderful gift,” he says, turning to me with a beseeching look. “But please don’t push yourself beyond your limits before you’re ready.”

“I understand.”



Will gives me a smile and pats my head. “Good girl.”

Usually, his touch fills me with warmth. But today, it does little to ease the heaviness in my chest.



“Alicia, get up.”

I wake to the sound of my father’s voice. He never comes to wake me personally—what could it be? I quickly get out of bed, dress, and leave my room.

“Is something the matter, Father?” I ask, noticing the grave look in his eyes.

“Alicia, we need to talk,” he replies. Then he turns and begins walking, and I quietly follow.

Uh-oh...did he find out I’ve been visiting Roana Village?

We arrive at his office, a place I’ve never been before. I step inside, and to my surprise, I see the king, along with the heads of the five great noble families. What’s the meaning of this?

“Alicia, so good to see you again.”

“I am honored, Your Majesty,” I reply, curtsying deeply. This feels like some kind of stress test.

“Alicia, is it true you can already use magic?”

“Yes,” I confirm. Oh, so that’s what this is about. Still, it was only yesterday that I showed the others my magic. News sure travels fast.

“Could you show us a spell right now?” the king requests.

I snap my fingers lightly, using a binding spell to summon books one by one and bind them together. I decide to organize and bind my father’s papers as well. I align a stack of books and then bind a tall pile of documents. There, all the corners are lined up perfectly. Stellar job, if I do say so myself!

“Very nicely bound.”

“Yeah, no stray edges or corners.”

“Nobody can execute the spell with such precision the first time...”

The heads of the great noble houses comment on my spell like they’re scoring me for an exam.

“My heavens...” The king looks speechless, and I wonder if this really is some kind of test.

“Thank you, Alicia. You may go now,” my father says with a smile, a secretive glint in his eyes—much like Albert’s.

Still unsure of the purpose behind this mysterious meeting, I leave the room. It’s probably a question I won’t get answered anytime soon.

I feel like I’ve just been bewitched by a fae... Maybe I’ll practice the sword to shake it off and get my body moving.

With that, I head to the garden where Alan and Henri are, all thoughts of asking my father about the boy who lost his ability to use magic completely forgotten.

As we practice our sword forms, Alan suddenly says, “You know, I heard the magic academy festival got canceled.”

The news is so shocking I freeze mid-swing. The magic academy festival is canceled? Could it be because Liz and I weren’t getting along? No, that can’t be related—I’m not even a student there.

“Did something happen?” I ask.

“Liz collapsed,” Henri replies for Alan.

She did?

“According to Al, Liz’s magic ran wild.”

“Her magic ran wild?” I echo.

“Yeah, they still don’t know why, but they didn’t want an accident at the

festival, so they canceled it.”

I’ve never heard of that before. Is that something that can happen? Eager to learn more, I head straight for the library.

I carefully read through the magic encyclopedia once more, but it doesn’t mention anything about magic running wild. That must mean there’s never been a documented example of it. I pull out a nearby copy of *Dark Magic: A Guide* and skim the pages.

“Dark magic is both a destructive and healing magic.”

What’s that supposed to mean? That seems contradictory.

I flip through more pages, searching for an explanation.

Hmm. Nothing here clarifies that phrase. Wait—why am I even doing this research on Liz’s behalf? I should be practicing my own magic. Liz already has enough of it to run wild!

With renewed focus, I read all the way through to level-20 spells. Before I know it, I’m practicing them with the same vigor and ease as level 1.

I just casually mastered the level required for admission. Dang, I am so awesome! I’m catching up with the heroine now. If I keep advancing while Liz is down, we might even be on equal ground by the time she recovers.

In high spirits, I grab the level-21 book and begin reading.



## **Arnold, Father of the Williams Family—Age Thirty-Six**

All three of my sons were quite gifted, and I couldn't be prouder. My youngest child, Alicia, was a beautiful girl and a delight to the eyes. Though we did spoil her a little, and she could be quite selfish, I always thought that only made her more charming.

But when she was seven, Alicia underwent a peculiar change. She suddenly wanted to take a sword proficiency test, and I used everything at my disposal to put a stop to it. She didn't seem to have any self-awareness of her own sword skills, but I knew if I had someone of her caliber tested, she'd undoubtedly attract the wrong kind of attention. I think it's good for my daughter to be gifted and to stand out, but Alicia was simply too young to be noticed in that way.

My eldest, Albert, shared my concerns. We agreed to explain things to her when she turned fifteen and entered the magic academy. However, the situation escalated in a way we couldn't have anticipated.

Alicia proved she could use magic—at only ten years old.

After Alicia's magic is witnessed, the heads of the five great noble houses hold an emergency meeting.

"I can't believe it's come to this," Neville murmurs, stroking his beard.

"A ten-year-old who can use magic. That's unprecedented," Derek adds.

"No, it's happened before," Joan retorts. "There was one, long ago."

"And what happened to that prodigy?"

"Lost the ability to use magic ever again," Luke replies, and the room falls

silent. Whenever it's just the six of us, we refer to the king as Luke—his given name, Luke Seeker.

Neville's brows furrow. "So are you saying the same could happen to Alicia?"

"Not as long as she progresses properly through the magic levels in order."

"I see."

I never imagined my own daughter could be a Divergent. I want Alicia to lead a happy life. It's all any father wants for his children.

"Luke—why don't we make an exception and let Alicia enter the magic academy?" Joan suggests.

I can hardly believe my ears. "Alicia is only ten."

"That's the safest solution."

That may be true, but I want Alicia to lead a normal life. Ten is far too young.

"At least wait until she's thirteen," I plead.

Joan nods. "Yes, thirteen would be reasonable. What do you say, Luke?"

Luke pinches the bridge of his nose, thinking deeply. After a long pause, he finally looks up and says, "What will we do about Liz Cather?"

Liz Cather. She's also a Divergent. Initially, she was our sole concern. She possesses a rare talent, allowing her to use all the magic elements, even though she's a commoner. That alone makes her a precious and sought-after existence. We also believe she might become the saint to bring peace to the world. But her magic ran wild recently, and while the cause is unclear, we suspect it's due to her overwhelming power.

"She is the saint—no mistaking it," Joan says.

"But a saint without the proper wisdom and intellect cannot be considered our ally," Neville quickly counters.

"Her grades are good."

"Grades have nothing to do with intelligence or wisdom."

"Here's an idea," Joan suggests. "Why don't we assign Alicia to monitor Liz?"

I'm stunned again. He wants my daughter to keep tabs on the saint?

"It has been confirmed many times that Alicia is highly perceptive. She has a discerning eye that can see through the true nature of people and things."

"But that's no job for a little girl," Derek argues, his long red hair like a flame.

"Joan—" I stare hard at the man. "I know what you want of my daughter goes beyond the role of a monitor."

"You're right. I want her to steer the saint toward wise decisions, guiding her to become someone who can rule the kingdom."

In other words, Alicia would carry the burden of disciplining the saint. Such a role would almost certainly condemn her to a life of isolation. No matter what horrible things people said about her, she would have to endure it all quietly. It may even ruin her life.

"I'm against it," I say, raising my hand.

"So am I," Derek echoes, raising his.

Neville remains silent, arms crossed, with a troubled expression.

But Luke's voice is firm. "Once Alicia enters the academy, she will monitor Liz Cather."

Is he really going to force that role on Alicia? It's easy to make such a decision when she isn't his daughter. I understand the need to protect the kingdom, but Alicia is my child.

"But we aren't taking her feelings into consideration at all," Joan says. "What if we ask her when she turns thirteen? Offer her early admission to the academy in exchange for the role of the saint's monitor."

With a nod, Luke agrees. "All right. We'll ask Alicia." He gives us all a hard stare, adding, "We'll see if she's willing to play the villain."



## Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family—Age Thirteen

At last, I've worked all the way up to level 80!

Honestly, it was pretty easy. Over time, channeling magic energy just became second nature. And my father scolded me nearly every day: "Go slow and don't skip any levels!" So I took my time, and now here I am—level 80 at last!

I can't wait to see how everyone will react when I tell them. Normally, people don't even start learning magic until they're my age. If only game-Alicia had put in the effort! Such a waste of talent. And in the next two years before I enter the magic academy, I'll only grow more powerful.

I stand before the mirror and look at myself. I think I'm finally growing into the pendant Duke gave me for my birthday. I have changed quite a bit over these past three years, haven't I? My hair now falls past my chest. I feel like a woman. And I feel even more like a villainess. Ooh, won't somebody just shout "You vile woman!" at me already? I can hardly wait. Just fantasizing about it is making me smirk. No, no, stop that! Pull yourself together!

"Lady Alicia? The master wishes to see you," Rozetta calls from the other side of my door.

Father wants to see me? Whatever for? I take a small breath, then leave my room.

I have a bad feeling about this...

I knock gently on my father's door before stepping inside. My bad feeling was right—I swear, this plot twist will never take me by surprise again.



There he is: my old pal, the king.

“Alicia, so good to see you again.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It’s been three years now.”

“My, how you’ve grown,” the king says with a smile.

I sure hope I grew. But never mind that—why are all five great noble family heads here? Every time this happens, I have my theories, but I’m way off base every single time. So I don’t even bother trying. Nothing they say can surprise me anymore.

“Alicia, this is highly unorthodox, but would you like to go to the Academy of Magic?” Joan asks.

I take it back. I’m extremely surprised. I expected them to ask about my magic level, but this? I could enter the magic academy at thirteen. And I’d get to meet with Liz two years early! Naturally, I’m going to say yes.

“Yes, I would love to go. Rather, I insist.”

“I see.” My father’s face takes on a disturbed look. For that matter, they all look disturbed— Why? Was I supposed to be more modest? But modesty isn’t a concern for a villainess. I’ll seize any opportunity I get.

“Alicia. What level of magic are you currently practicing?”

Ah, there’s the question I assumed they were going to ask.

I beam. “Level eighty, sir.” A villainess must answer with pride.

Um, why are they all frowning even more? I wouldn’t mind a little more reaction here. Praise, perhaps? Shouldn’t you be pleased? What’s with the frown, Father?

“Eighty.” Neville whispers, almost inaudible. (Oh, come on, show some surprise!) “That’s the same level as the saint,” someone remarks.

The saint? Heroines usually fill that role in otome games, right? They must be talking about Liz. Am I at the same level as Liz? Awesome! Now we’re on equal ground. I try to keep my inner celebration to myself.

“Alicia, we have a request for you—would you hear us out?”

“What’s your request, sir?” I ask, noticing how my father is glaring at Joan. Why does he seem so angry?

“Of course, you can say no.”

“S-sure, I understand.”

I get the feeling that turning down the request of one of the five most powerful men in the kingdom wouldn’t end well.

The king speaks. “We want you to be Liz Cather’s monitor.”

It takes me a full ten seconds to process. Be Liz Cather’s...monitor? Why does Liz need monitoring?

“We know just how gifted you are. That is why you are the only one we can ask.”

“When you put it that way, Alicia can’t say no,” my father says, rebuking the king before I can respond.

“Um, what exactly do you mean by ‘be her monitor,’ Your Majesty?”

“Liz Cather is destined to be the saint who saves this kingdom,” Joan says.

I don’t even flinch. Heroines are often saints, so that’s no shock to me. But what would a saint’s monitor do?

“You know her magic ran wild, yes?”

“Yes.”

“She cannot be a saint without ample wisdom.”

Oh, right. In the game, there’s an event that tested the heroine’s wisdom. I remember now. I scored zero because I made all the wrong choices. I mean, they were all goody-two-shoes things! That was why I never got a chance to attend the important meetings of the kingdom in-game.

“That’s where you come in—we want you to assess if she has the wisdom to carry this kingdom on her shoulders. And if she’s lacking, guide her until she’s on the right path.”

In other words, I am to judge if Liz deserves to stand at the top? But what does “guidance” mean? Are they expecting me to influence her thoughts until

she's ready to be a saint? Well, I'd rather die! That's something only for a supreme Goody Two-shoes—not me.

“I refu—”

“Alicia, are you willing to play the role of the villainess?”

...Maybe I misheard that. Did the king just say *villainess*?

“Um, I'm sorry, I thought I heard the word *villainess*...”

“That's right. Monitoring Liz Cather would be a top-secret mission. It would involve speaking harshly to steer her in the right direction. Liz has already gathered quite a loyal following at the academy.”

This is like a dream come true. Is this my reward from God for all the work I've put into becoming a villainess?

“In other words, you're asking me to become the greatest villainess in the world?”

“Not necessarily the world, but perhaps.”

“You don't have to say yes,” my father says, looking at me.

Why would I say no? I'm beyond thrilled. This is the happiest day of my life. Just think, an honorable assignment directly from the king! I've been worried about how I'd bully Liz, but now a perfect excuse has fallen right into my lap! Oh, how could I possibly describe this feeling?

“It would be my pleasure, Your Majesty. I will become the greatest villainess you've ever seen!”

Everyone seems relieved by my answer. (Except my father.)

“This position might make you very lonely,” he warns.

“I'll be fine, Father.”

“People might hate you.”

“I'm prepared for that.”

“Can you endure it?”

What a silly question. I'll enjoy every day at that school.

“Of course I can.”

Father finally sighs in defeat, accepting my decision.

“Not even your brothers can know—”

I interrupt the king. “You have my word. I won’t tell a soul.”

I meet his gaze, my voice filled with resolve.

Just as I’m about to leave the room, Joan calls out to me. “If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to tell us.”

What could I possibly need from them? Oh! That’s right! I almost forgot something very important.

“There’s a boy named Gill in Roana Village—please allow him to attend the magic academy with me.”

Everyone freezes, except me.

Oops. Right. My visits to Roana are supposed to be a secret.

“Roana Village?! How do you even know about such a place?”

“Alicia! Please don’t tell me you’ve been going there.”

Father, please don’t make such a scary face. You make me sound like a criminal.

“Only at night,” I reply coolly, not about to cower. I am a villainess, after all.

“At night?”

“It’s safer that way.”

“So I take it you’ve also been there during the day?”

Wait a minute. Am I digging my own grave here? But Father really has no real reason to be angry. There’s no law against visiting Roana Village.

I stand tall and look him square in the eye. “Father, I fail to see why I’m being scolded. Gill is only nine years old. He’s a commoner who can’t use magic, but he’s smarter than I am.”

That's right. Gill really is a genius. He never forgets anything, not even if he's only seen it once. And he has an amazing imagination. Make no mistake, he will stand at the top of this kingdom.

"Your Majesty"—I turn to the king—"do you recall when I spoke about the deplorable conditions in Roana Village?"

"I do."

"At the time, I only knew what I'd read in books. So I went there to see it for myself."

I could see tension in the king's eyes. I press on, undaunted. "The actual conditions in Roana are worse than any book could describe. It's a living hell. Everyone is deeply impoverished. They don't even know if they're dead or alive. Yes, the village was originally meant to imprison dangerous individuals. But should their descendants still be paying for those sins?"

The room falls silent. I can tell that even Father is no longer angry.

"Gill's parents were murdered. And he's lost the will to live. When I first saw him, he was just a little boy, six years old, being beaten by a giant man with an iron pipe."

"And then? What happened to him after that?" Derek's face twists with discomfort.

"He wandered the chasm between life and death, but he chose life. He'll become a pillar of this kingdom one day, mark my words. I implore you—free him from Roana Village."

I pour every ounce of resolve I can muster into my plea. I made a promise to Gill. And I would be a failure of a villainess if I didn't keep it.

With a deep crease between his brows, the king finally sighs and says, "I suppose we could release him as your aide."

"That would be more than adequate," I reply without hesitation.

"I'll see what we can do."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." I bow deeply.

That's right. Perhaps I should ask about Will, too. Does he want to leave Roana Village?

"Alicia, how exactly have you been getting to Roana?" Father looks at me, bewildered.

"That's a secret." I smile sweetly—there's no need to reveal everything. A villainess always maintains an air of mystery.

Father's face twists into a dissatisfied look. Wait, now that I'm going to be entering the magic academy, I should be able to ask about this, right?

Taking a shallow breath, I meet his gaze. "Father, why didn't you let me take my sword exam?"

For a moment, he seems caught off guard, his eyes shifting from left to right. But then he smiles. "Because you're far too good for that, Ali."

That's not the most satisfying answer, but it sounds like a compliment, so I suppose I'll take it.



"Alicia, Gill's admittance to the magic academy has been approved."

A few days after our conversation, my father brings me fantastic news.

All right! I need to tell Gill right away. I wonder if I should also tell him about my new role as the villainess—he'll be my aide, after all.

"Father, would it be all right if I told Gill about my assignment as Liz's monitor?"

"Yes, he'll need to accompany you in that. Also, this is for you."

He hands me a tiny bottle containing a light pink liquid.

"What is this?"

"A potion that lets you pass through the walls of magic mist around Roana

Village. You can go through them, since you possess magic energy, but ordinary people can't."

"Thank you, Father." I curtsy and turn to leave.

"Ali... Don't you have any regrets?"

Regrets? No, I'm the happiest I've ever been.

With a smile, I answer, "None at all."

My father's eyebrows arch in surprise. Then, muttering a quiet "I see...", he leaves.

Why did he make that face? I suppose he's worried about his sweet daughter. I'll be just fine, Father. I couldn't be more satisfied.

As the sun sets, I head toward Roana Village. By now, even the eerie forest doesn't faze me. It's amazing how adaptable we can be. I slip through the fog and rush to Will's house.

On my way, something grabs my ankle, and a shiver runs down my spine. I glance down to find a thin, dirty hand clutching my ankle with surprising strength, refusing to let go.

"Help...me...", a hoarse voice pleads.

It sounds like a woman. Her stench is so foul it's almost unbearable. Instinctively, I cover my nose. I've grown used to foul smells, but this one is overwhelming. And with my ankle pinned, I'm not sure what to do.

Stay calm. A villainess never lets emotions control her—she lets logic guide her. The gears in my head begin to turn at full speed.

A true villainess doesn't hurt those weaker than herself. She is kind to the powerless and ruthless to the powerful. That's why I'm so hard on Liz.

Yes, I'll save this woman—because I'm a villainess.

I reach out and say, "Everything will be okay." Then I lift her off the ground. I work out, after all. Holding a grown woman in my arms is nothing.

But she's so light. She looks older than me, but she weighs less. It's a miracle



she's even alive.

I hurry to the plaza where the fountain is. As usual, it's filled with people sleeping on the ground. I carry her quietly to avoid waking the children.

As I expected, the water is muddy. I could use magic to purify it, but that would attract too much attention. What should I do?

"It...hurts...so much..."

Don't freeze up, Alicia. You have to act fast. If you don't save her, you'll be a disgrace to villainesses everywhere.

I gently lay her near the fountain. My snapping fingers echo across the plaza. The fountain water begins to glow as it clears. I sense people waking up around me. I remove my cloak and dip it in the now-clean water.

"Alicia?!" Gill calls from a distance. "What are you doing?"

Gill runs over to me, with Will following behind him.

"You need to leave, fast! They'll kill you for this!" Gill whispers urgently.

I know. But I can't let this woman die.

"Alicia, what's gotten into you, child?" Will asks as he reaches my side.

"I'm going to save this woman," I reply, looking at both Gill and Will. Despite their protests, I won't back down.

"Okay. Help her."

"Huh?"

"Gramps?! What are you saying?"

"Help that lady. There's no time."

Will and I have known each other for years. He understands me well.

I wring out my cloak, using all my strength. I really do have incredible upper-body strength. Water drips from it.

"Water...," some villagers murmur, stirring. I can't let them interfere. I erect a magic wall with black glyphs around the fountain to keep the people away. I read about it in a book, but the color of the walls corresponds to the magic

you're using. And the walls of mist around Roana were created with water magic.

Once I'm sure we're secure, I start wiping the woman down. The cloak gets dirtier with each pass. It's really difficult to get all the dirt clods off her.

Wait—this isn't dirt. Her skin is blistered! Shocked, I pause.

"Alicia, are you okay?" Gill asks, peering into my eyes. "This happens all the time. Many people here are worse off," he says grimly, looking down at the woman.

"She was probably trapped in a house that was set on fire," Will adds sadly.

I'm speechless. I don't have the power to save her. Dark magic is full of useless spells.

Slowly, I continue wiping her down. Her right leg is necrotic from the knee down. The fire probably got her. The sight makes me feel sick. I've never seen someone in such a state.

How can I save her? I need to stay calm, but my mind is racing in a panic, and I can't think straight.

Maybe I was naive to think I could save her. I overestimated myself, just because I'm good at a few magic tricks.

"Ali, you okay? Is there anything I can do?" Gill asks, concern in his voice.

I start to hyperventilate.

"Alicia, hold it together. Breathe slowly," Will commands.

I follow his instructions, taking slow breaths as he rubs my back.

"Magic's all about how you use it. Even the most useless spell can do good if you can figure out how."

I have such a hard time sorting through my emotions, I end up lashing out at him. "But how can you be sure?"

"You're smart. I know you can save her."

"Don't say that—there's no basis for that! Saving a life is too heavy a burden for me. I can't do it!"

Will's words should comfort me, but I snap at him instead. I've never faced a crisis like this before. I have no idea what to do. Not even my book knowledge is helping now. I'm drawing a complete blank.

Before I realize it, tears are streaming down my face.

"Alicia..." Gill looks at me. But I'm unable to control myself, and the tears keep falling against my will.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Will whispers in my ear. "Solve the problem, Alicia. That should be easy for you."

Both Gill and I freeze. It's the first time Will has ever scolded me.

"You'll face challenges even harder than this one as you grow." Will's voice carries a deep weight. "Didn't you say you wanted to be the best villainess in the world? Was that a lie?"

"No...I do want that," I answer firmly.

"Then you can't get stuck here. What kind of villainess do you want to be?"

"I want to be ambitious... Someone who stands against tradition... Consistent in her methods... Thoughtful and wise, and...able to make hard decisions calmly... That's the kind of villainess I want to be—stronghearted."

Though difficult, I manage to voice my ambitions. Hearing them aloud helps me understand them better.

That's right. I'm going to be a stronghearted villainess. I'm going to be so formidable that no heroine could ever touch me.

Will gently smiles. "That's the spirit, Alicia."

"You got this, Alicia," Gill adds with a reassuring look.

I'll do this. If I can't save one measly life, I don't deserve to be called a villainess.

I look at the woman again. Her skin is blistered. Maybe that spell would work? No harm in trying.

I snap my fingers, casting Purify Skin. I initially thought the spell was just for clearing up skin blemishes, but it starts to heal her burns, returning her skin to

normal. I can't believe the spell can heal burns. Why didn't I think of that sooner?

Her skin regains its healthy glow—she's much younger than I realized, only a little older than me.

Now, what do I do about her necrotic leg? I can't heal it. It's rotted away. If her leg wasn't so far gone, I could probably save it. But as it stands now, there's no bringing it back. Amputation is the only option.

I'm pretty sure you have to cut a little above the affected area, meaning I need to make the cut on her thigh. I would use my sword, but without any drugs, the shock might kill her.

Wait—dark magic is about healing and destruction, right? If I cast a healing spell, that should help with the pain.

I clean my cloak with another spell.

"What are you going to do?"

I ignore Gill's question and punch the girl in the gut, knocking her unconscious. It's better this way. She doesn't need to see herself getting maimed.

"Oops, I should have gotten her name before I knocked her out."

"It's Rebecca," Will answers for her.

"Okay, Rebecca. Hang in there."

I grip my sword and slowly breathe in and out. My heart pounds, but I steady myself. I swing down with all my might, cleanly severing her leg. Blood pools rapidly, so I quickly snap my fingers to slow the bleeding.

"Ah, agh, that hurts! Ahhh!"

Rebecca wakes with a scream. My spell worked, but it took effect a little too late. She's going to have to grit her teeth and bear it. Once I confirm the bleeding has stopped, I tear a strip from my cloak and bind the stump.

"Help... It hurts so bad! I can't—"

"Shut up! You wanted me to help you, right?"

At the risk of repeating myself, I am not a good person—just so we’re clear. A saint would comfort her, but I’m a villainess. I have no intention of sugarcoating things.

“My leg is gone! Give it back! I want my leg back!” she cries, thrashing with all her other limbs. Gill does everything he can to pin her down.

“Rebecca, if I hadn’t cut off your leg, you’d be dead.”

“What?! I’d be...dead?” Rebecca freezes and stares at me with wide eyes.

“Your leg was rotting. The cells were dead. The rate of progression varies from person to person, so I can’t say this with complete certainty, but if I had left your leg alone, the necrosis would have spread and you might have died. Does it hurt now?”

Rebecca pauses, her face softening. My spell must be kicking in.

“It...doesn’t hurt,” she whispers hoarsely. She touches her face, seeing her reflection in the fountain. “Um, thank—”

“No need to thank me.”

She stares, shocked. I don’t want her mistaking me for a saint. A villainess acts for her own gain.

“I didn’t save you out of the goodness of my heart.”

Not even a saint would save anybody purely out of goodwill. Even she would desire something. Recognition for her kindness, perhaps, would be enough to serve as her compensation.

The only difference between a saint and a villainess is that a saint isn’t explicit in her desire for compensation. And if somebody ever is unkind to the saint, a selfish thought is sure to emerge from deep within her heart: *How dare you, after everything I did for you, after how kind I was to you!* Heroines often offer to be a friend to the friendless, but what if that friendless person genuinely likes being alone? In that case, her friendship would be unwelcomed.

I believe that at their core, all people are hypocrites. The only thing that separates the saints from the villainesses within society is whether they hide their hypocrisy or let it show.

“Rebecca, I require compensation from you.”

Rebecca’s expression shifts from surprise to fear.

“Compensation?”

Gill compensated me by offering his mind and his wisdom. So what shall I do about Rebecca? She has light brown eyes and silvery hair, and her pretty face shows traces of intelligence.

“Rebecca, how old are you?”

“I’m fifteen.”

She’s two years older than me.

“Why did you ask me for help?”

Rebecca gives me a peculiar look, as if she didn’t expect the question.

“Because you smelled good. Nobody from this village would ever smell like that. I figured you were of noble blood.”

“But weren’t you worried that grabbing a noble’s foot would get you killed?”

Rebecca’s face twists slightly. “I didn’t think someone like that would ever come to a place like this.”

In other words, she made the wisest choice to survive. She’s very astute.

I glance around at our immediate surroundings. I hadn’t noticed before, but most of the people are watching me with hope in their eyes.

Crap. Did using magic give them the wrong idea about me?

I don’t like this. Saints are supposed to be saviors, not villainesses. If I get branded as the savior of Roana Village, I’ll be a laughingstock as a villainess. I need to avoid that somehow.

“Alicia?” Gill peers at me.

I lightly pat his head, then grab Rebecca by the scruff of her tattered clothes, pulling her close.

“Rebecca. Become the savior of Roana Village. That will serve as your compensation.”

Rebecca's jaw drops.

Oh dear, did I not make myself clear? Don't stare at me like an idiot.

"Huh? Savior?"

"That's right. I'm glad you understand."

"How do I do that?"

"Let me see. Listen to the grievances of the people in this village and relay them to me."

"That's all?"

"Of course not. But that's all for now."

I don't think she's caught on yet, but she's smart—she'll figure it out eventually. Anyway, I'd like to make a grand exit. I guess teleportation magic is my only option. I've never used it on people before, but it'll be okay, I suppose.

"Alicia, how are you going to get us out of here?"

"Don't worry, Gill. I've got it all taken care of."

Ooh, a classic villainess line! *"I've got it all taken care of"*—how incredibly badass. I love it!

I revel in the glory of my own words. That was a line I memorized from a famous legend about a witch. I think I can get a lot of use out of that one.

"Gill, Old Man Will, Rebecca, brace yourselves—you'll feel quite sick for a minute."

I snap my fingers. And as the magic walls around the fountain disappear, I teleport the four of us to Will's house.

I did it. This is undeniably the right house.

"Wow."

"We're in Gramps's house!"

"Well, well, this is somethin'."

As the trio takes in their surroundings in a daze, I find that their expressions are priceless.



“Alicia, just who in the world are—oof!”

Before Rebecca can finish her question, I punch her in the gut again. I need to have a private conversation with Gill and Will, so I can’t have her overhearing. I don’t care if this seems cruel. I’m a villainess, after all.

As Rebecca falls, I catch her and lay her on Will’s bed.

Oops. I just remembered I know a spell that can put people to sleep. That might have worked better than punching her. Oh well, too late now. Sorry, Rebecca.

After I put Rebecca to bed, I turn and stare at Will.

“What’s with the smirk? It’s creepy,” Gill complains.

“Creepy? How rude. You should be thanking me, Gill. You get to go to the Academy of Magic because of me—though technically as my aide.”

Gill stares at me, dumbfounded. Like he doesn’t understand what I just said. I really wish he’d give me a stronger reaction. I can’t tell if he’s pleased or upset.

“Does that mean...I can...leave this place?”

“Yes, that’s precisely what it means.”

Gill’s eyes fill with tears.

“There, I’ve kept my promise. Now how you live the rest of your life is up to you—oof?!”

Before I can finish, Gill throws himself into my arms, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist, his shoulders shaking. How am I supposed to respond to this?

I gently hold Gill close. Seeing his tiny body shiver like that fills me with adoration.

I think a villainess is allowed this kind of feeling once in a while.

Gill cried himself to sleep. I can see how swollen his eyes are—he sure cried a lot. I give his head a gentle pat, then turn to Will. Now, let’s move on to the

main topic at hand.

“Old Man Will—do you still have any desire to work at the palace again?”

Will’s face quickly tenses up. I feel bad, knowing I might have brought back some unpleasant memories, but I want him to return to the palace. I want his knowledge and wisdom to benefit Durkis. I don’t want people like Will to fall through the cracks.

“I don’t think about that life anymore...”

“Huh?”

“When you told Rebecca to be our savior, I got excited. Roana Village is about to go through a big change, and I want see it for myself—well, I can’t see, but I want to stay here all the same.”

Crinkles form around Will’s eyes as he chuckles. So my actions made Old Man Will not want to return to the palace?! Oh dear, this is all my fault.

“Alicia, don’t blame yourself.”

He did it again—he read my mind. Seriously, how does he do that?

“Do you have any idea just how happy it makes me that you want to do something for me? As long as you hold on to that feeling, Alicia, I’ll keep looking forward to living another day in Roana Village.”

“No, you’re wrong.” I shake my head. “I don’t have such noble feelings in my heart. I do everything for my own gain. I only want you to return to the palace so I can make use of your knowledge and wisdom.”

I’m not here to grant people’s wishes. That doesn’t fall under a villainess’s job description.

“Then why are you blaming yourself for my decision to stay behind?” Will prods, not giving me an opening. “You can come here whenever you like to take advantage of my wisdom and knowledge, pass it off as yours, and use it at the palace as you please.”

“I’ll never do something so dishonest,” I insist.

Will looks surprised for a moment, then quickly smiles and says, “Alicia, I’m

staying here.”

His words linger clearly in my ears.

“Sorry, I let my ego get the better of me,” I say, curtsying.

A villainess never accepts defeat. I live by this rule. But Old Man Will is the only person who understands me. I don’t want to lose him. So this will be the last time I lower my head to him.

I press the mouth of the little bottle from my father against Gill’s lips and pour the light pink contents down his throat, being careful not to wake him. Once I’m sure he’s swallowed it all, I lift him with one arm—it seems all that weight training has paid off.

I pull the macarons I’d brought for Gill out of my pocket and hand them to Will.

“Share them with Rebecca this time.”

“Thanks,” Will says, smiling warmly. “Everyone’s usually asleep by now, so you should be safe, but wear this just in case. Give Gill my regards.”

He drapes a tattered cloak over my head. Gill sleeps soundly in my arms, looking like he won’t wake for quite some time.

“I can’t believe you both got into the magic academy on a special exception, Alicia. You really are a marvel.”

Will mutters something, but I can’t quite make it out. Oh well. If it was important, he’d have spoken up. No need to worry about it.

With a nod to Will, I step out of the house. Then with Gill still cradled in my arms, I run into the mist.

“Good morning, Gill,” I say as soon as he wakes.

Gill’s eyes flutter open, and he stares at me, still dazed. “Alicia?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“This bed is so fluffy...”

Well, of course it is. Will’s mattress was stiff. Looks like Gill is still half-asleep.

“Where am I?”

“My house. And starting today, your house, too. Make yourself at home.”

At my words, Gill’s eyes shoot open. Aha, now he’s finally awake.

“My house?!”

His eyes dart around the room.

“Come on, get dressed. We’re going to the Academy of Magic early this morning.”

“We’re starting today?” Gill asks, surprised.

“That’s right. Our admissions have already been taken care of. I’m sure you’re already aware of this, but the saint goes to the academy.”

“You mean that saint who’s supposed to bring peace to the world? Didn’t realize she actually existed.”

“Oh, she exists. Now, what I’m about to tell you is absolutely confidential. Can you promise not to tell anyone? That includes my brothers.”

Gill nods solemnly, his eyes glinting with wisdom. It’s reassuring to have him with me.

I take a shallow breath, then say, “I’ve been chosen to be that saint’s monitor.”

“Her monitor?”

“That’s right. I have to determine whether she’s smart enough to stand at the top of this kingdom. And in addition, guide her onto the correct path.”

Gill tilts his head, confused. “Wait, doesn’t that make you an incredibly good person, Alicia? I thought you wanted to be a villainess.”

“If you look at it another way, it can also mean I’m a great villainess. Everyone loves the saint—they always have.”

“Oh, I see. So you’ll have to be cruel and tell her hard truths to guide her, and

everyone else will think you're the villain."

"Exactly." I grin, triumphant. That's my Gill—quick on the uptake. "Think you can keep up with my epic villainess-ness?" I dare him.

"I'll act as a villainess's aide should." He smirks back at me. "Do you even know who you're talking to? Besides, you were already pretty impressive the first day we met, Alicia."

Yes, yes, he's right. No complaints here.

"One more thing, Gill. We need to keep your Roana upbringing a secret as well."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Good. Now, get dressed. I'll be waiting outside the room."



Ah, back at the magic academy after all these years. It truly is a picture of opulence.

I glance over at Gill. He's staring at the school, mouth agape. "Why...why are things so different here?" he murmurs hoarsely.

When Gill left Roana Village and saw the sun for the first time, he cried. There's no telling what emotions he's feeling now as he beholds the world outside Roana. But I know one thing for sure—he's angry about the unfairness of it all.

I can't help but question the state of Roana myself. How did it deteriorate so horribly? Did conditions worsen under the current monarch's rule...?

"I wonder what horrible things I did to deserve that." Gill looks at me, his eyes a bit dewy but not quite on the verge of tears. There's just anguish under those thickly creased brows. The look in his eyes breaks my heart.

"Gill, do you think you did bad things?"

He shakes his head.

“Then you should hold your head high.”

At my command, Gill lifts his head and boldly looks at the school’s front gate. Without another word, he steps through.

According to my father, Liz’s magic hasn’t run wild since that initial incident.

“Aren’t you Alicia?”

“Albert’s little sister, right?”

“My, what a pretty little thing.”

Suddenly, we’re surrounded by a gaggle of young ladies. They’re fawning over us with shrill squeals.

“Ooh, you must be Henri and Alan’s little sister.”

“Yes, she’s beautiful, just like her brothers.”

Why are they just marching up to me without a proper introduction? Aren’t they supposed to start with a “Nice to meet you” or something?

“I think I feel sick,” I say.

The girls freeze like statues. A soft, familiar voice breaks the silence.

“What are you doing?”

I turn toward the voice.

Of course it’s Liz, with her emerald-green eyes as resplendent as ever. Naturally, my brothers and their friends are right behind her, as if they were her personal knights.

Wow, Duke... He’s grown. He’s even more manly, and somehow even hotter than before. Sure, all the romanceable characters are hot, but Duke is just something else.

“Hi, Alicia. It’s been ages! What brings you here?” Curtis says in greeting.

“Alicia, is something wrong?” Albert asks, concerned.

Before I can answer, one of the fawning young ladies jumps in. “Alicia said some cruel things to us.”

Huh? Did I?

“Alicia, is that true?” Albert asks, watching me dubiously.

“I merely told them I feel sick.”

“And why did you say that?” Liz cuts in.

Um, excuse me? The boys and I are talking.

“Well, you are at fault here, Alicia. Wouldn’t it hurt your feelings if someone said something hurtful to you? You mustn’t treat others that way.”

Liz smiles at me sweetly. I really can’t stand her.

“Well, I don’t even know these people. Yet they’re acting like we’re the best of friends. Of course that’s disturbing.”

Liz stares at me, stunned. She probably wasn’t expecting that comeback. Ha-ha-ha, I’ll have you know I’m a villainess. Don’t you ever forget it!

“Gill, we’re leaving.”

And with that, I leave. I can feel their judgmental stares boring into me, but I keep marching forward without turning back.

Oh, the weight of those stares showering down upon me. How delightful! This is exactly what I wanted! Nothing quite like the feeling of everyone’s bewildered gazes directed my way.

“Did you hear? Alicia was mean to some girls.”

“I heard one of them was so terrified she threw out her back.”

“I heard they all burst into tears, and someone even fainted.”

Oh my, what embellishments. Rumors really do spread like a virus, mutating with each passing whisper.

“I do wish she wouldn’t let her special admission go to her head.”

“I heard His Majesty the King personally approved her admission.”



So even facts beyond the rumors have surfaced. News truly does travel fast.

“I heard she said horrible things to Liz right afterward.”

“She’s nothing like her brothers.”

Ah, now they’re bad-mouthing me. Yes, I really do have what it takes to be a villainess.

“By the way, who’s that boy with her?”

“He’s cute, isn’t he?”

“Eek—he just glared at me!”

“Rumor has it he’s a commoner, attending as Alicia’s aide.”

“Wow, is he really that impressive?”

“She must have convinced the king to let him in.”

Now rumors about Gill are starting to fly. I glance at him. Hoh-hoh, what an incredible frown. He’s certainly spoiling his pretty little face. At the same time, this makes him worthy of being my henchman.

Whoops...!

Suddenly, I feel the sensation of somebody tugging on my arm.

“Huh? What’s that?!”

“Alicia!”

Gill’s voice calling my name is the last thing I hear before I’m catapulted elsewhere via teleportation magic. Whoever cast it must be at least level 80.

I slowly open my eyes, and I see a giant desk surrounded by bookshelves. Around it are some sofas. Is this a conference room? And something smells amazing...

I glance at the hand gripping my wrist—it’s large, delicate, and coppery brown. Duke?

Slowly, I look up at him. He’s close—too close. His hotness is making me feel faint. Was he always this tall? My heart is about to explode. Calm down, Alicia. A villainess mustn’t be frazzled by something like this.

“Where in the world are we?”

“The student council room.”

“Is that so? Well, using teleportation magic to summon someone is incredibly disrespectful, even for a prince.”

By now, Duke must already be head over heels for Liz, right? So why did he snatch me up like this? Is it because I was cruel to her? Ah, that makes sense—his love runs so deep. I wonder if he’s going to kill me.

“Why didn’t you turn down my father’s assignment?”

I can’t believe my ears. Is he talking about me being Liz’s monitor? How does Duke know about that?! Did I blow my cover right from the start? As I have an internal panic attack, Duke keeps staring at me. Any attempt to lie would be futile. I’ll have to answer him with the defiant honesty only a villainess can muster.

“How do you know about that? It’s supposed to be top secret.”

“Gathering intel is easy if you want it badly enough.”

Spoken like a true royal prodigy. He must have done background checks on everyone around Liz.

“So what do you want with me, Prince Duke?”





This time, Duke falls silent. His gaze drops until it finds the pendant around my neck. Is he going to ask for it back?

Duke reaches out and lifts the diamond into his fingers.

Are we going the “prince rips the pendant off the villainess’s neck” route? Yes, that’s textbook. What an honor to experience it firsthand. Now, do your worst, Prince!

Or so I thought—

Duke suddenly leans in and presses a gentle kiss on the diamond.

“Huh?!” I yelp without meaning to. My brain struggles to process what just happened. Why did he do that? My heart won’t stop pounding.

Perhaps he cast a spell to keep me away from Liz? But why would he kiss a piece of jewelry he gave me just to cast a spell? I don’t understand this!

“You’re so cute,” he says, resting his hand on the top of my head.

This has to be illegal. My heart’s beating even louder now. And why are you doing this to me, Duke? You’re not the kind of person who would do this to just anyone, and you’re supposed to be with Liz, aren’t you? A prince shouldn’t be so close to a villainess like me.

“His Majesty’s request was a dream come true for me, so I accepted. Now I can commit all the evil deeds I want, and no one can complain, since I have the king’s permission.”

Duke smirks. “I doubt a girl who blushes at my kiss is capable of committing any evil.”

What? Was he always like this? And more importantly, is he mocking me right now?

Blushing is very unbecoming for a villainess.

“I’m warning you! I really have a rotten heart.”

With that, I dart out of the student council room. I spot Gill and run over to him.

“Gill!”



“Alicia!”

He meets me halfway, heaving a sigh of relief. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Who cast that teleportation spell on you?” His eyes are stern.

“Duke of House Seeker.”

“The king’s son...the prince?”

“That’s right.”

Gill frowns, deep in thought. I should probably warn him that his face might freeze like that. But whenever he’s lost in his own head, he can’t hear anyone around him.

“What did the king’s son want with you?”

“I’m not sure. He probably just wanted to mock me.”

Though the teachers don’t have inside information, as a student on special admission, I’m allowed to borrow Liz’s essays. Gill and I read them the night before, and to sum it up in a phrase: It’s a bunch of clichés. To expand briefly on that, she sees everyone in the world as equals.

Everyone is equal. Therefore, we must not discriminate based on the ability to use magic. We should not classify people as superior or inferior. There’s nothing technically wrong with that. It’s the quintessential heroine philosophy.

But my task for the day is to teach her that there are other ways of thinking. So I steel myself and march over to see her.

“This feels wildly opulent,” Gill says, scrunching up his face.

“They’re having tea in the rose garden today,” I explain.

Gill and I enter the rose garden together, there to crash the tea party. I feel a little sorry for everyone else, but I need to make a name for myself as a villainess—and more important, I need to act decisively to prevent Liz’s thinking

from becoming too biased. The moment we enter the garden, multiple people stare hard at us.

“Ali...” Albert walks over to us.

Sorry, Albert, but I don’t have time to deal with you and your posse today.

I march straight up to Liz, who is surrounded by her usual groupies. That’s a heroine for you, always the center of attention.

Duke’s gaze penetrates me, and I wish he wouldn’t stare like that. I always feel like he’s reading my thoughts.

“Alicia dea—”

“Liz, I’ll ask you directly—” I interrupt her. “Do you honestly believe everyone in the world is equal?”

“Um, why do you ask?” Liz looks at me warily.

“Let me rephrase that. You believe it’s wrong to categorize people as superior and inferior—is that correct?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then by that logic, the very existence of this academy is wrong.”

“Huh? I don’t understand where you’re coming from.”

“I read your essays. I’ll just state my opinion first, shall I? I believe we *should* categorize people as superior and inferior.”

“Well, that’s wrong,” Liz argues. “Everybody has their own unique talents. There should be no hierarchies.”

“Then do you believe we shouldn’t have a king?”

The collective gaze directed at me sharpens when I say that. I’ve just painted a target on my back. Perfect. This is just what I was going for!

“Are you insulting the king?” Gale adjusts his glasses sharply. His eyes look just like his father’s, Joan’s.

“Alicia dear, I just think it’s best that people live as they naturally are.” Liz smiles at me like an angel. Bewitched by her smile, the other students all nod in

agreement.

“Liz is right.”

“Alicia is only thinking of herself.”

“She insulted the king.”

I hear the other students disparaging me. Yes, this is the quintessential environment for a villainess! The best plot development I could ask for.

“Don’t change the subject—I am only talking about the superior versus the inferior.”

“I said it once, and I’ll say it again: I don’t believe we should label anyone as superior or inferior,” Liz says.

“Then are you opposed to hierarchy *within* the pool of unique talents?”

“Huh?”

Why does she have to play so dumb?

“Let’s not ignore the elephant in the room. Your talents were recognized as superior. Isn’t that why you were given special admission to this academy?”

“Liz made it in because she worked hard!” Eric yells, his red hair burning in anger.

I sigh quietly. “I am well aware of that. So answer me this: Should all commoners, then, be allowed admittance here if they work as hard as—no, if they work harder than Liz?”

My question shuts Eric’s mouth. It’s the first time he’s ever glared at me with such contempt—a testament to my growth as a villainess.

“Social status, pedigree, timing, physical appearance, economic power, talent—not a single one of these elements can be considered perfectly equal among all people. However, what everyone does share equally is the right to live as they are. How this right is exercised all depends on an individual’s efforts and talents.”

“Is this what you mean when you say people should be deemed superior and inferior?” There is a part of Liz that sounds like she agrees with what I’ve said.



Oh? Is she finally starting to understand what I'm trying to say?

"Liz! Don't even listen to this shrew."

A boy cuts in from the side. To think he has the audacity to call somebody he barely knows a shrew. His words can't be worth much.

"So you subscribe to Liz's philosophy?"

"That's right!"

"Then I have a question for you. How would you create a world where superiority and inferiority did not exist?"

The boy suddenly falters. As I expected, he hasn't thought it through.

"My first move would be to tear down the walls of Roana," Liz says firmly as she turns to me. "It's an emblem of poverty in this kingdom."

I glance at Gill to gauge his reaction. He's staring at Liz in frustration. I'm right with you there, buddy.

"But if you did that, the kingdom would fall into disorder."

"Hey, you're contradicting yourself!" a boy standing dumbly on the sideline snaps at me.

"Watch how you speak to me! Who do you think you are?" I glare at that boy with all the intensity I can muster. As a special treat for you, I'll even channel my magic.

The air suddenly grows tense, and the boy's legs shake. Right here, right now, I am the most badass villainess of all time. If the internet existed in this world, this whole event would totally be live streamed.

"That's enough!" Liz yells.

The air lightens, and since Liz possesses more magic energy than I do, she easily offsets my spell. Oh, how I envy you, heroine!

"It's all well and good to express what your ideal world would be," I elaborate. "But before you tear down the walls around Roana, there's a plethora of other problems you would need to solve first."

"But the feelings of Roana's residents should come first. I'm sure they all wish

the walls were gone. That way, they could finally live in peace.”

“I agree with Liz!”

“Yeah, Liz is in the right!”

“Get out of here, you devil!”

“Honestly, I wish she would just leave.”

“You ruined our tea party!”

Everyone starts to yell at me simultaneously.

This is a gathering of idiots, I suppose. If you tore down the walls without any plan or preparation, the pent-up frustrations of Roana’s residents would erupt and spark an open rebellion—that much is obvious. Liz would know that if she had ever set foot in Roana like I did. Then she would understand just how precarious our situation is right now. Even without looking at Gill, I would’ve been able to imagine the sort of face he’s making. He’s beyond frustration and now staring at Liz with contempt.

Sensing no more impending objections, I scan the crowd, and my eyes accidentally meet Duke’s. Is it just me, or is he getting a kick out of the drama?

All right, as Liz Cather’s monitor, it’s time to draw the curtains on this scene.

“May I ask just one final question? Do you consider yourself a competitive person, Liz?”

Liz smiles like an angel and promptly answers, “The only person I compete against is myself. I wish to be a better version of myself than I was yesterday.”

“I see. That is a fantastic sentiment. However, there are times when rivals and competition help people grow. In other words, deeming people superior or inferior is essential for a person’s growth. Equality is the death of individuality.”

With a smile, I leave the rose garden with Gill. There. I’ve satisfied my duties for the day, haven’t I?

Liz seems smart enough, so surely, she’ll understand what I’m trying to say. A smile creeps onto my face. It bothers me that I’m smiling over Liz, but I won’t dwell on that because I’m on cloud nine right now.

By tomorrow, everyone will be calling me a villainess, I suppose. Ahh, what a satisfying feeling. I'm going to sleep well tonight!

After coming home from school, I take a quick nap before setting out for Will's house alongside Gill.

"Old Man Will!"

"Gramps!"

"Alicia, Gill, come on in."

"Hello!"

Rebecca appears from behind Will, supporting herself with a crutch. Oh my. Looks like someone has made a full recovery. She's glowing, like someone who's finally found a purpose in life.

"I did as you said, Ali. I asked around to see what everyone in this village thinks, and—"

"Wait, slow down! Did anybody attack you?"

"No, if anything, they were scared of me. I have you to thank for that, Ali."

"Oh? Well, that makes sense. That was the first time anyone around here's seen magic."

"Exactly. They all think you're my backer, so they were very obedient."

As Rebecca and Gill begin a conversation between themselves, I can't help but think this is the most wonderful turn of events. I've become the savior's puppet master. I can feel the grin forming on my face.

Rebecca's expression turns somber. "Anyway, as I was saying, about eighty percent of the people I asked are ready for revolution."

If the people of Roana do rise up, the nearby towns will almost certainly be destroyed. I've already known this for a while. But if they get to a point where they act on their anger and desperation, it could be the end of our kingdom. None of them will play by the rules.

"So what's the plan?" Rebecca asks, awaiting my orders.

The best way to nip an uprising in the bud is to improve conditions in Roana. But that isn't something that can be done overnight.

"Why don't we direct their desire for revolution elsewhere?" Gill suggests, his hand on his chin. He always does that when he is deep in thought.

"Not a bad idea," I reply. "But their hatred for the nobility runs much deeper than I could've ever predicted. You never know when someone in this village might try to murder me."

"Actually, with the way things are now, I think everyone would listen to you, Alicia. That's the impression I got from some of the witnesses last night."

They would? If I'm being honest, I don't have the slightest intention of personally improving Roana's living conditions. I just don't like the idea of society collapsing, and I also hate classism of any kind.

"Not a single noble has ever set foot in Roana before you. And you saved my life."

Rebecca speaks gently, as if she read my mind. Looks like my hunch was right—she has a talent for reading people. Why can't the heroine do that, I wonder?

"Alicia? Is something the matter?" Gill glances at me.

Oops, how careless of me. My mind wandered off in a completely different direction.

"I don't want people to like me. I need to lower my popularity, stat."

"For all their preaching, those rich folks at the academy probably hate the people of Roana, at least a little. So wouldn't it actually be better for your villainess rep if you got the support of the people of Roana?" Gill offers, the indifference clear in his eyes.

Gill might have a point there. If I'm the secret ruler of the people of Roana—whom the nobility hate—then this would be the perfect opportunity for me to raise my Villainess Score! Rebecca is their messiah. So all I need to do is give her my command. The setup couldn't be any more ideal!

"What does he mean by *villainess*?" Rebecca casts me a strange look.

That's top secret, so I can't tell you, Rebecca. The day may come when I do

tell you, but today is not that day.

“Pay it no mind,” I assure Rebecca with a wide smile on my face.



I wake up bright and early to a knock at my door. Given how early it is, it has to be Rozetta.

“Aliiii?”

Huh? It’s Henri. I jump out of bed and open the door.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re still sleeping.”

“Oh, it’s all right. What is it?”

“Can I come in?”

“Be my guest.”

I step aside, and he walks in. It’s rare for Henri to make solo visits to my room, so it feels a bit strange.

“So, hey...do you hate Liz?”

Oh my, I wasn’t expecting him to be so direct. Is he here to try to convince me to bury the hatchet with her?

“*Hate* isn’t the right word. More like she rubs me the wrong way.”

Since there’s no real need to lie, I answer truthfully. Henri watches me, his expression unchanging. Now that I take a better look at him, it strikes me just how mature he’s become. He has a stronger chin than Alan. I suppose even twins can be different in their own ways.

“I don’t see you and Alan together much anymore,” I probe.

Henri’s eyes grow wide, allowing me a clear view of their purple color. They’re darker now compared with when he was younger.

“Well, that’s because we disagree on a lot of things these days,” he says with

a light smile.

They disagree? I guess even twins can do that every now and then.

“Alan and I have been together since birth, right? So I just accepted that as a given, and I didn’t really mind it, either. We had similar views, and he understood me better than anyone. But ever since Liz came into the picture, we’ve diverged little by little.”

Henri’s voice is tinged with a hint of sadness. I seem to remember Henri having a crush on Liz in the original game.

“I was proud to be Alan’s twin. It felt like the two of us shared an identity.”

“Ew, that sounds kind of gross,” I blurt out, likely twisting my face in disgust as well.

“You’re absolutely right.” Henri chuckles, not even slightly angry with me. “Then Liz said to me: ‘Henri is Henri, and Alan is Alan. So Alan shouldn’t try to be like Henri, and Henri shouldn’t try to be like Alan.’”

Yep, that’s a classic heroine line right there. She probably said it with her trademark angelic smile, too. But if that’s what changed Alan’s way of thinking, why didn’t it work on Henri?

“And when Liz said that, did Alan think someone had finally come into his life who saw him as an individual and not a twin—and fall for her?”

Henri blinks a few times. Come on, don’t act so surprised. I was an avid otome gamer in my past life. That’s Otome 101.

“So how did *you* feel when she said that, Henri?”

“Well, uh, I can’t deny that my heart skipped a beat.”

“It did?!”

“Yeah, well. Something about Liz’s pure smile and kind heart... I found myself developing a soft spot for her.”

Because the heroine’s power is absolute.

“Say, Ali. If Alan and I were having an identity crisis, what would you say to us?”

How would I know? I'm a villainess. If you're looking for answers, you should seek help from the saint, not me.

"I'll be frank with you, Henri. I hate the expression 'You are your own person.' Because that's something you should already know. Better than anyone else." My voice takes a scornful tone. "Shouldn't you be ashamed that it took somebody else telling you for you to realize it?"

Henri stares at me for a moment, dumbfounded, only to suddenly burst out laughing. He's laughing so hard I wonder if his belly might split open.

What am I, a clown show? Why is he laughing so hard?

"You're right. I agree," Henri says as he clutches his stomach. Well, if that's what he thinks, why bother asking for my opinion?

"I was definitely attracted to Liz. But then I realized something at the tea party: I was just brainwashed by Liz's idealism, and I mistook that for love."

Brainwashed? Isn't there a nicer way of putting that?

"I agree with you, Ali. And once I realized that, Liz started rubbing me the wrong way. Our philosophies were just fundamentally different."

"Despite having different values, you were attracted to her?"

"She always rubbed me the wrong way a little. But when she gave me that sweet smile, I couldn't help but be drawn to her. Or something like that?"

Henri smiles at me, though his expression is tinted with the slightest bit of shame. Beware the power of the angel's smile, I suppose.

"Did Albert and Alan not come to the same conclusion as you?"

"No, they're head over heels for her."

I see. So my actions made Henri realize his true feelings. I suppose even brothers from the same womb have their differences.

"And you came here just to tell me that?"

"No, that's not all." His expression suddenly becomes grave, and it gives me a bad feeling.

If Henri and I have a similar line of thought, I dread what he's going to ask me



next. I inch my face slightly away from his as Henri's eyes search mine intensely.

"Ali—what in the world are you scheming?"

Yeah, if Liz rubs him the wrong way, then my behavior would surely strike him as odd. To be honest, I don't think Liz's philosophy is entirely wrong, either. I just personally dislike it.

"And one more thing: Who is that boy?"

"That boy" he's referring to must be Gill. I thought it was strange that no one has asked me about him all this time. Especially considering that my relationship with Roana Village is still a secret.

"He's my aide," I answer.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I'm aware."

Henri sighs loudly. He knows perfectly well that once I've decided to keep my mouth shut about something, no amount of prying will get me to open it. That's my brother. How convenient for him to give up so easily.

"Besides, I am not *scheming* anything in the slightest," I answer with a smile, though I'm sure Henri can see right through my lie.

"I figured you wouldn't give me an answer," Henri says, disappointed.

Well, sorry, but it's a secret.

Come to think of it, if my actions made Henri snap out of Liz's spell, could the same thing be happening to other people? To be honest, I don't know Derek very well. So it's entirely possible he's treating me that way purely out of spite.

"By the way, has anyone else expressed the same feelings as you, Henri?"

"I'm not sure, but I think all the guys like Liz."

"There's no reason to dislike her."

"Well, you can't really be sure what's in someone's heart...," Henri says, staring up at the ceiling.

I think I can guess what he's about to say next.

“I want to speak with that boy.”

“I want to speak with that boy.”

Henri eyes me with shock. See? I knew he was going to say that.

I suppose it would be all right to let them speak. The real issue is whether Gill would open up to Henri. I don't particularly want another ally, but I do think that of all people, Henri might get along with Gill the best.

“Can I please?” Henri gazes at me, eyes full of hope.

I sigh quietly. “Very well.”

Henri's face lights up. “Thanks, Ali!”

No need to thank me. I agreed out of personal curiosity. Now to see if Gill opens up to Henri.

“Gill, do you have a minute?”

“Alicia? Is everything okay?”

“We're coming in.”

Henri and I slowly open the door to Gill's room and step inside. Gill casts a dubious glance in our direction.

“Gill, I'd like you to meet my second-eldest brother.”

“Your brother?”

“That's right. He wants to speak with you.”

Gill's face immediately shifts into alarm. He sizes Henri up.

“I've got nothing to say to him.”

Now, that's something I didn't expect. He's put on the tough-as-nails Gill act. How will Henri deal with him?

Henri returns Gill's glare with sharp daggers of his own. He's taking a different approach than I thought he would. Whenever the heroine encounters somebody who's fearful and has closed off their heart, even though she has no idea what's wrong, she will simply smile and tell them it's going to be okay.

From there, the two would become friends. But I suppose Henri does resemble me a lot more.

“What?” Gill demands, keeping his gaze fixed on Henri.

“You’re Ali’s aide, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Then you need to behave more like it.”

Wow, picking a fight right away? That’s not like the peaceful Henri at all.

“Huh? Why? Should I smile and make nice with everyone?”

“Smile? There’s no need for that.”

“Look, what’re you trying to say?” Gill asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Do you know what’s the best quality about someone scary? It’s their poker face. You let your emotions show too much. When I came in, you flinched in fear.”

“No I didn’t.”

“It was probably subconscious. I don’t know why, but you’re scared of everyone except Alicia. And it shows on your face.”

“But I’m not scared,” Gill says sulkily.

Right now, Henri seems like a different person. And Gill is finally looking his age.

“I’m not telling you not to be scared. I’m just saying you shouldn’t let your fear show. If Ali chose you to be her aide, you must be quite capable.”

“What’s your point?”

“If you wear your heart on your sleeve, your enemies can grasp your weakness in an instant.”

Gill falls silent and stares at Henri. I wonder if Henri’s angelic smile has always hidden this darker side. I know Albert’s does, but I’ve never sensed a hint of darkness in Henri’s seemingly pure and innocent smile before.

“I don’t know what kind of life you’ve lived so far, but you’re spending the

rest of it with Ali, right? Then learn to mask your emotions. It's always the cunning ones who survive the longest."

I can tell Gill's sense of caution has completely vanished. He's no longer glaring at Henri in contempt. And my brother is right. In the end, it's the cunning who survive. And a look of fear is taboo for a villainess. I'd better take that lesson to heart, too.

"My name is Gill," he says.

Since Gill gave his name, that means Henri won. He smiles lightly.

"I'm Henri. Nice to meet you."



"This way, miss."

A kind maid wearing a blue embroidered dress escorts me down the hall. It's quite a gorgeous dress. She is probably one of the higher-ranking maids.

But that's not important. For some reason, I'm at the king's home. In other words, the palace. A summon from the king never means anything good.

"In here, miss."

She brings me to a door about three times the size of the ones at my own home. Wow, the king sure lives in luxury. The ceilings are way higher than necessary, and the long hallways are decked out with fine decor. Just the sight of it exhausts me.

Two guards are stationed at the door. And part of me would love to know why this it has to be so big and so heavily guarded. Is there a dragon inside or something?

"Well, I'll take my leave now, miss."

With a polite nod, the maid leaves. Ahh, I want to leave, too. Because I know it isn't a dragon behind this door but the king.

The guards slowly open the large door, and I can't help but wonder if it's as heavy as the dread in my heart right now. I take a deep breath to calm my beating heart.

"Excuse me."

With a light bow, I walk inside.

The room is huge. So huge you could probably do a fifty-meter dash in it. There is a needlessly long table with the king at the head. And sitting around the table are the five heads of the great noble houses and...Liz?! What is Liz doing here? And why is she sitting next to Duke? Wouldn't they normally make a commoner like her stand? They disrespected my brothers, Gale, Curtis, Eric, and Finn to let *her* sit next to Duke? That's the heroine for you, I guess. Okay, so what is this meeting about?

"Alicia, I have a question for you."

I hate this. I can tell from the atmosphere of the room that nothing will be in my favor. If only I had Gill with me for moral support. Why was I asked to come alone?

"Duran has experienced an economic collapse," the king says, his deep, dignified voice reverberating in my ears.

An economic collapse? Ooh, my prediction came true.

"How did you know that was going to happen?" Joan asks, scrutinizing me.

Um, I never once said aloud "I believe Duran's economy will collapse." Are you a mind reader, Lord Joan?

"You wrote it on the blackboard three years ago, didn't you?" Curtis reminds me gently. "On the library blackboard of the magic academy. One of the professors asked how Durkis could gain leverage over Laval, and you wrote that Durkis should give Duran an economic bailout. So we figured your assumption was that its economy would collapse."

Oh, right. I totally forgot about that.

"How did you know that?"

Lord Joan really is terrifying with his interrogation skills. Doesn't he realize I'm

but a tender girl, only thirteen years of age? At least give me credit for walking right into the lion's den all by myself.

I take a quiet breath before saying, "Their purchasing power and their productivity were out of balance."

Liz looks startled, but the king, the five great noble family heads, Duke, Albert, and even Finn don't seem surprised. It's as if they already know what I'm going to say. Ah, I get it. So that's what this meeting is about. They're here to see how I judge Liz's way of thinking. A monitoring test, you could call it?

"Their purchasing power didn't match their productivity?" Liz repeats, still dazed by my response.

"Correct. About four years ago, Duran dramatically expanded production."

"Well, yes, I know that. But shouldn't that have boosted their economy?"

"Only for the first few months. If you're going to study, do take it more seriously," I tell Liz with a smile. If she can't grasp something as basic as this, I worry about our future.

"But Liz sacrifices sleep to study!" Eric shouts at me.

Is he stupid? His ego and physique are huge, but I guess his brain is miniscule by comparison.

"Sacrificing sleep to retain only a vague sense of what she studied is worthless. She might as well get some shut-eye."

"What do you know?! You've never watched her study."

Does he think hard work justifies everything? Well, I suppose my brand of common sense is a bit misaligned with how the rest of this world thinks.

"Eric, please don't chastise Alicia," Liz intervenes. "Let's all be civil. My studies were indeed lacking. I'm sorry."

Liz sounds genuinely remorseful. That's a heroine for you, always courteous and deferential. Still, when did she and Eric get on a first-name basis? They've certainly gotten cozy.

"Missing one piece of the big picture can lead to huge problems. Do you

understand that now?" I continue.

"Yes. I'll start working harder," Liz answers with determination.

Huh. Everyone seems to be beaming at Liz with encouragement. But does that mean that look on Henri's face is him acting? Incredible. Well, I certainly can't let him upstage me.

"You'll *work harder*? Do you believe hard work always pays off, Liz?" I challenge her with a condescending smile.

"Yes. As long as you work hard, your efforts will be rewarded."

"Hard work is meaningless unless it yields results."

"But those who work hard always get results."

Everyone nods, agreeing with Liz's proclamation. My goodness, everyone's fallen under this Goody Two-shoes girl's spell, haven't they?

Duke and my father remain neutral, though. Could it be? Perhaps Henri isn't the only person at this table who's acting.

"If there's one thing continuous hard work will bring, it's not results, but self-confidence."

All eyes gather on me, and I take a little breath before continuing.

"Returning to the topic at hand, Duran overproduced and created a glut of supply that far outstripped their market's ability to consume said goods. This is what sparked their economic collapse. And that is why...the time to buy is *now!*"

I say this with a big smile on my face. That line, with a wide smile? That's sure to earn me major Villainess Points.

"Buy?"

"That's right. Durkis will bring Duran into its sphere of influence by indebting them to us. Then we'll maintain that momentum and steadily expand our influence over the other states neighboring Laval to systematically isolate it."

"And what will become of the people of Duran?"

"Don't know, don't care. Gaining leverage over Laval is the main objective



here.”

“But that’s just too cruel.” Liz stares at me harshly. “Duran’s people are innocent bystanders in this.”

“Yes, but if conditions are truly that bleak, they could have fled to any of the neighboring nations.”

“Even so, this just isn’t right! You aren’t considering the people of Duran in the slightest! If the people of Duran starve to death after Durkis buys their nation, won’t you feel sorry for them?”

“I won’t. Besides, what comes after is not for me to decide.”

“That’s just irresponsible.” Liz watches me, contempt in her eyes. Albert and Eric are right there with her. Head over heels much?

“All right, then. What would you do, Liz?”

“I would form an alliance, not buy them out!”

“Form an alliance with a bankrupt nation?”

“That’s right.”

A laugh escapes my mouth. But as expected, the king and the five great noble house heads are silent.

“What amusing things you say, Liz.” I smirk. “If we form an alliance with an economically floundering nation, what do we have to gain from that?”

“If you decide everything based purely on personal gain, you lose sight of what’s most important.”

What is she babbling on about? She sounds just like a saint! Well, she is the saint, but still.

“And what would you do after the alliance is formed?”

“Well, I would help stabilize their economy by providing aid.”

I’m so glad Gill isn’t here right now. He would definitely not be able to keep his emotions in check. He’d straight up yell at Liz.

“Considering how we still have Roana Village to deal with, I doubt Durkis can

afford to send much aid to other nations, though.”

“Well, I...” Liz falls silent.

“Your plan completely disregards the future, Liz.”

“But I want Duran’s economy to recover!”

“You want? That’s all? Without giving a single realistic plan on how to make that happen?”

“I said we should send them aid and—”

“My dear, are there any brain cells inside that skull of yours?”

Liz is stunned into silence.

“Hey! Do you have any idea what you’ve just said?!” Eric sputters, his face bright red.

Oh my, Liz’s knight in shining armor rushing to her defense to yell at me. A classic villainess moment, right here.

“What in the world would Durkis have to gain by forming an alliance with Duran in their current condition? Duran has little value in and of itself now that they’ve experienced such a sharp decline.”

“Alicia!!!”

Albert’s patience has finally snapped. I’m a villainess prodigy.

“Your actions shouldn’t be dictated only by what you have to gain,” Liz says, quietly and calmly. “If you do, you will face the consequences.”

“Your astounding idealism will never be feasible unless we act in our own interests first. Now, if you wish to sacrifice yourself to help someone in need, that’s your prerogative. But only a fool thinks that way when it comes to geopolitics.”

“Alicia. Get out,” Albert says, his voice hoarse from restraint. I can see his fist trembling on top of the table.

He looks quite angry. But I am a villainess—I will not take orders from him.

I assume a power stance, look Albert dead in the eye, and say, “Until His

Majesty the King commands me to leave, I have a right to be here.”

The king says nothing. He just draws his brows together and closes his eyes.

“Alicia dear, what would you do?” Liz asks, her emerald-green eyes penetrating mine.

Argh, now I’m starting to get hungry. It’s true what they say: You can’t ride into battle on an empty stomach. But as Liz Cather’s monitor, I must provide a solid answer.

“Even if you form an alliance, there would be no point in Durkis providing aid to Duran. They must revitalize their economy on their own.”

“But how?”

“I assume you are familiar with Duran’s specialty crop?”

“I believe it’s...potatoes?”

“Correct. Their economy may be going under, but they still have something unique to offer.”

“I see. Potatoes... Perhaps they could find a way to add value to their specialty good and sell it to other nations?”

Liz’s face lights up. She and I are finally on the same page.

“And Duran has never exported potatoes before!” she exclaims.

“Yes, they could raise the price and sell them to other nations.”

“That’s right! That just might revive Duran’s economy! I’m certain Duran could sell their potatoes at a good price!”

I’m glad she finally understands what I’ve been trying to tell her. Man, what a sense of accomplishment! That means I passed the monitor test, right? I made a striking impression as a villainess on everyone in the room, and I led Liz to the correct answer. Everybody wins!

A satisfied smile spreads on my face.

Ahh, I’m finally free of that cursed room. I think I’ll run home and eat some

macarons.

I turn around and retrace my steps. At least, I try to.

What's this? Did I walk this way? I don't remember this giant vase.

I glance at a painting on the wall. It shows someone with blue eyes and hair, matching the color of the sky in the painting's background. Is this the king as a young boy? His hair was a bit brighter back then. And that gentle-looking man with the handsome face next to him, is that the king's father? But he kinda looks familiar.

"Alicia?"

I slowly turn around at the sound of Duke's voice. Sunlight streams through the window, reflecting off something in Duke's ears, making them sparkle. Are those earrings?

Duke approaches me, and I strain my eyes trying to stare at his earrings: clear blue gemstones—magic stones. You can only wear those once you reach level 100. So does that mean Duke is practicing beyond level 100 now? That's right—in the game, he advanced in magic faster than the heroine, didn't he?

"What's wrong?" Duke asks me softly. I do wish he wouldn't talk to me in such close proximity.

But I suppose as a villainess...it would be bad form to admit I am lost.

"I was...exploring," I answer vaguely with a smile.

Duke seems to see right through me. He can probably tell I'm lost. If that's the case, can he please stop rubbing that mature confidence in my face?

"Want me to escort you to the front gate?" he chuckles.

This is 100 percent brotherly behavior...right? He hated Alicia so much in the game that I still fail to see what could make Duke like me.

Is Duke putting on an act to get rid of me? Like, beneath that gentle mask, he secretly hates me?

"Alicia?" Duke glances at me.

Uh-oh. This is dangerous. He's too close. Please, away with you before my

heart explodes.

Duke's scent softly embraces me, and I just know my face is turning red.

This is the worst. I need to show a face suitable for a villainess, but—

Duke's gaze is incredibly tender as he looks at me. "You're red."

Yes, I'm well aware of that, thank you. Agh, I just don't understand who Duke really is. I thought he was the cool, aloof type, but he can see right through me. And is it just me, or is he kind of a sadist?

"Prince Duke, do you enjoy teasing me?"

Duke's eyes widen for a moment, but his expression quickly softens. "Teasing you... It's something I definitely don't mind."

With that, he gives my head a gentle pat.

Did you have to deliver that line with that expression?! All the Duke stans in the world are fainting right now. And if I weren't striving to be a villainess, I'd be getting a nosebleed, if not blacking out myself!

I really can't get a grasp on Duke's character. The way he looks at a girl so sweetly and pats her head. Who does that? The power of a beautiful prince is indeed impressive.

"Let's go," Duke says as he begins to walk.

I suppose I should walk behind him, or should I keep pace beside him?

Considering my position, it would be a bad look for my villainess reputation if I were to get any closer to Duke. So I walk slightly behind him.

Then he slows his pace to match mine.



"Um, Henri? Brother dearest?"

"What?"

“What, pray tell, are you doing in my bedroom?”

“Are you upset?”

“Yes.”

Henri looks at me with disdain. “Okay, then what is Gill doing here?”

“I’m Alicia’s aide,” Gill murmurs, not looking up from his book.

“What, you don’t trust me?” Henri asks, giving me a forlorn look.

I see those puppy eyes, Brother. But they won’t work on me.

“I just don’t know how much of your behavior is genuine and how much of it is an act,” I retort.

Henri’s face crinkles into a smile. “I never act in front of you, Ali. I’m your ally.”

“Fair warning: Nothing good comes from being my ally.”

Henri’s voice suddenly takes on a serious turn. “I don’t know what impression you have of me, Ali, but I’m capable of killing someone if I don’t like them.”

“Have you killed before?”

“Yes.”

I’m stunned speechless. His blunt answer is a bit too much, even for me. Gill puts down his book and stares at Henri. He doesn’t seem like he’s lying.

“Whom did you kill?”

“That’s a secret,” Henri sings, the way he’s grinning practically cutting through the air.

A secret, huh? Wait a minute. Has Henri done more misdeeds than I have? Is my true rival not Liz, but Henri?

“If you tell me what you’re scheming, Ali, then I’ll tell you my secret.”

An exchange, eh? Well, I can’t possibly tell him I’m Liz’s monitor. Oh, I know! I could just tell him I’m a villainess in training. Then he’ll tell me who he killed. My, I am quite the genius if I do say so myself.

“Very well. I’ll answer your question. The truth is, I’m training to become a

villainess. I'm going to be the greatest villainess in the world. I will be Liz's equal and bully all the popular Goody Two-shoes like her. And now that I attend the academy, I can finally stand on the same stage as her at least."

Henri's eyes blink in wonderment at my confession. I don't blame him for being surprised.

"So that's why you wanted to become stronger," Henri murmurs.

Oh, that's right. That was the reason I gave when I first declared that I wanted to learn how to use a sword. How nostalgic. Though, it's funny that he glossed over the whole "I want to be a villainess" part. Personally, that's the part I'd like him to come to grips with.

"And you say you're on the same stage?"

"Why, yes. I can cast level eighty magic now."

"What?!" Henri shrieks. He doesn't need to be that shocked. "You know, I don't think anything is going to surprise me anymore. Not after that."

I'm about to tell him I doubt that very much, but I decide not to. I just want to learn Henri's secret as soon as possible.

"Now then, who did you kill, Henri?"

The dazed stare vanishes from Henri's face, and it's replaced by a solemn gaze. He slowly opens his mouth and answers.

"The first one was a teacher, the second was a family maid, and the third was also a family maid, if I remember correctly."

"Whoa, wait just a minute."

I can't keep up with Henri's hit list that he so calmly presented. So that teacher who disappeared one day, and those maids I suddenly stopped seeing around the house—they were murdered by Henri? No way.

"How many people total have you killed?"

"Seven." Henri answers without flinching.

"What was your motive? Was it different each time?" I can't imagine Henri taking anybody's life without a good reason.

“I guess it was the same motive for them all.”

Gill closes the book he’s reading. “Let me guess. You killed them because they were after your family’s money?”

“Yeah, you could say that. Though *killed* is a bit of an exaggeration.” Henri gives us a vague smile.

Does that mean he didn’t technically kill them?

They all disappeared a few years ago. I wonder how he knew they were after our money. Perhaps it’s better to say he eliminated them, just to be delicate about this whole situation.

“The first one—the teacher—was cultivating poisonous medicinal herbs, and the maids tried to poison our tea. All the others weren’t after our family fortune, but they were after the family. They tried to kill us all.”

Wait, so does this mean if it weren’t for Henri, we’d all be dead right now?

“They were plotting murder, so surely they were ready to be killed in turn.” Henri smirks. Oh my, he looks just like the devil.

“Do Alan and Albert know about this?”

“Yeah, they know. Though they weren’t involved.”

“Why not?”

“Because they were opposed to it.”

I can see the scorn in Henri’s eyes for his brothers. Their family’s lives were in danger. How could they have been opposed to—? Oh, it was probably her.

“Because of Liz Cather?” Gill murmurs, exhausted.

Yes, Liz would absolutely be against taking someone’s life, no matter the reason.

“Your guess is as good as mine. Okay, so I’m allowed to stick around you and Gill now, aren’t I?”

Henri says all this with a smile. After all he has confessed, there’s no way we can keep our own secret to ourselves.



I look at Gill. He opens his eyes decisively and says, “My secret is—” He pauses and looks Henri dead in the eye, and I feel Gill’s anxiety as if it were my own. “I am...from Roana Village,” he finally says, a deep crease between his eyebrows. What a painful confession for him to make.

“I’m sorry.” Henri says nothing more. Instead, he hugs Gill, wrapping him up in his arms. “Thanks for telling me. That was very brave.”

Henri’s voice is soft and gentle. Gill’s eyes slowly flood with tears.

You know, when they’re like this, they look like brothers.

Henri gives me a bewildered look. “So, Ali, where did you meet Gill?”

“In Roana,” I answer brazenly.

Henri bursts out laughing. I guess in retrospect, there wasn’t any other place I could have possibly met him.

“Dang, Ali, you really are a crazy villainess,” my brother says.

“I agree.” Gill smiles.

I’m not exactly sure what’s going on, but they’re complimenting me, right...? That’s fine, I suppose.

For quite a while after, my room is filled with Henri’s cheerful laughter.



My arm is killing me... Why am I locked up in such a shabby little hut? Why can’t I be back where I was, strolling through the forest on campus?

Right, I remember now. Someone hit me from behind. The impact shot through my spine, and I don’t really remember what happened after that. Sneaking up on me like that is a low blow. A villainess like me should never fall into such a predicament. I need to get out of here before everyone finds out. But there’s nothing nearby to cut these ropes. Come to think of it, where’s Gill? He must have been captured with me, right?

Just as I think this, the door bangs open, and three brawny men enter the hut.

They look like they've stepped straight out of a kung fu movie. This place is getting awfully cramped. Can one of them leave?

"The boy who was with me—where is he?" I ask.

The three men glare down at me.

"Ehh? Little lady, I'd watch my mouth if I were you."

"Yeah, but damn, she's a looker. Let's have some fun with her."

"Good idea. This should be enjoyable."

They smirk as they talk, and a chill shoots down my spine. Could they be any more repugnant? Fine, I'll just use magic to— Wait, what? I can't cast. No matter how many times I snap my fingers, there's no magic. No way. How did this happen?

"Stop that stupid snapping!"

The brawniest one kicks me in the stomach.

"Oof...oww..."

That hurts. Is getting kicked supposed to hurt this badly? What, does this guy have trauma from people snapping their fingers or something?

The man with black hair—who appears to be their leader—leans in close to me.

"Check out her eyes. They're gold. Shit, she really does have a pretty face."

Ugh, I want to hit him so bad, but I can't move.

Since all I can do is speak, I finally say, "Please keep your filthy face away from me."

The black-haired man looks startled for a moment but quickly grabs my collar and yanks me off the floor.

"You've got guts, sweetie, but don't get cocky."

And with that, he slugs me in the cheek. I wince in pain.

Ahh, he broke a tooth. I can feel the blood filling my mouth as I fall to the

floor. The trio leaves the hut.

Who hired them? I can't move my body, but my brain is working just fine. I'll find a way out and repay them tenfold for this.

Wait, what's this? There's something around my neck. A collar? Why is there a coll—? Aha, that explains it. This must be a magic-suppressing collar. Meaning, their employer must be a noble.

"Hey, little lady, is this the boy you were talking about?" the black-haired man asks as he reenters the hut.

Gill? I'm so shocked I can't speak. He's covered in blood. His shirt is in tatters, and he's bleeding from his head. I can feel my own blood drain at the sight of him.

Gill looks at me with half-open eyes. "Ali...run," he mutters, on the verge of collapsing.

"Stubborn little shit."

Gill frowns and gasps as the man punches him in the gut. But his eyes stay on the black-haired man, defiant.

Then the floor shakes violently. They toss Gill to me like garbage. I'm so mad. All I see is red.

I can't believe this. Who would attack a poor, defenseless boy like that? Even a villainess wouldn't stoop this low!

"Ali, you okay?" Gill croaks, smiling faintly up at me. How can he think about someone else when he's covered in blood?

"Gill, don't worry about me. I promised I'd always save you, remember?" I whisper, just for him to hear. Gill is covered in scrapes. How many punches has he taken?

"That kid's as good as trash now," the black-haired man spits in contempt.

Excuse me...? What did you just call Gill?

For the first time in my life, I feel a genuine urge to kill. He's not getting away with this. The nerve, incurring the wrath of a villainess. He doesn't deserve even

a shred of mercy.

You bastards, and whoever hired you...I'll kill you all.



## Gill—Age Nine

Right after I was born, my parents were killed, so I've always been on my own in Roana Village. Without the power to survive on my own, I became a slave to the bastards who murdered my parents.

The first person who saved me was Will...my gramps. To be honest, those days were filled with nothing but suffering, and I had no will to live. Then one day, when I was beaten up so badly that I couldn't move, Gramps took me in, gave me some medicine, and lowered my fever.

Gramps said the one who rescued me was Alicia, the eldest daughter of House Williams, one of the five great noble families in Durkis. I just assumed she was some selfish rich girl who saved me on a whim. I assumed her brand of justice only went so far and that she saved me out of pity. But Alicia was a young lady who far exceeded my imagination. She heartlessly told me that if I wanted to die, I should just die.

But she said she would hold herself accountable for saving my life.

I chose to live. And Alicia said as compensation for saving my life, she wanted to make use of my intelligence. I thought it was a ridiculous proposal, but Alicia kept coming to visit with stacks of books for me. And then she helped me escape from that living hell of a village.

The first time I ever saw the sun, I was so happy I hadn't died without knowing its dazzling light. Everything in the world was so new, brilliant, and beautiful to me. I never told her out loud, but I whispered it to her in my heart over and over—*Thank you for saving my life.*

And I vowed then and there...that I would devote my life to Alicia until my last breath.

Now she stands before me, her golden eyes blazing. Her beautiful, lustrous black hair flutters in the breeze as if charged by the murderous rage within her.

Her profile is a sculpture of bravery as she glares at the man who beat me. She's so beautiful I can't look away.

Alicia slowly raises the corners of her mouth and says, "You bastards are the trash... Farewell."

My spine freezes. I've never seen that look in Alicia's eyes before—a look that says she's ready to kill at any second.

"That's enough outta you!"

The leader screams, lunging to hit Alicia. But she vanishes. And in the blink of an eye, she reappears behind him. It all happened so quickly that I couldn't process it. The other two goons stare at her in confusion. They haven't even registered what just happened.

"You'll get the pleasure of dying last," Alicia whispers in his ear with a smirk.

Her smile makes me tremble down to my toes. Before he can turn around, Alicia hits him with a nimble roundhouse kick. Her foot lands a clean shot on his head. I didn't know roundhouses could have such precision. For someone with her arms bound behind her, she's got incredible balance.

"Gill, can you untie me?" she asks, rushing over to me.

I manage to sit up and reach to untie Alicia's ropes. The knots are tight, but I have to untie them, or Alicia will die, not me. The thought petrifies me with fear.

I can't let her die here—not Alicia. I squeeze out every ounce of strength I have and manage to loosen her ropes just a bit.

"Don't get cocky, you little shits!" the biggest man screams, charging at Alicia from behind with a sword.

"Alicia! Behind you!"

Just as I scream, Alicia whirls around and spits something from her mouth. The man moans, covering his eyes. They're bloody—it looks like he's crying blood. He wobbles, and something falls from his hand to the floor.

A tooth...?

On the floor is a bright red tooth. Did Alicia break a tooth?

“You little bitch...”

The man grips his sword and glares at Alicia. He’s insanely muscular. His arms are three times the size of hers. His punches had hurt the most.

Come to think of it, where did the third man go?

“...!”

Alicia grunts in pain as she forces the ropes off her. Dark marks run along her skin where she was bound.

The corners of her mouth rise in an unsettling way. Provoked by the grimace, the muscleman charges at her head-on. I strain my eyes to watch her every move. Just like before, Alicia vanishes, then reappears behind him, knocking him out with his own sword.

She’s using her small size to her advantage. She lowered her center of gravity as far as it could go, entered her opponent’s blind spot, pulled the spare sword from his belt, and spun behind him to get in position.

In terms of speed and skill, Alicia is superior. I never realized she could be this good. No matter what happens, she can always adapt instantly, calmly analyzing the analyzing the situation and decisively taking action with a cool head. Moreover, she has exceptional skill and rare beauty, and she can use magic... I have no doubt she’ll become a legend. I know it now. Despite the danger, I smile.

Incredible. I’m an aide to a superhuman.

Then I see a silhouette behind Alicia. The goon I thought had left is back, raising an ax high above his head. Alicia performs a swift backflip, plunging the sword she just stole into the axman’s chest as she lands. The movement is so beautiful that I almost swoon.

“Grah...!” The stabbed man clutches his chest and falls.

Is he not dead...?

Apparently, Alicia only knocked him unconscious with a punch to the chest using her sword hand. What incredible skill. And no matter how possessed with rage Alicia may be, there are still lines she won't cross.

I forget my own pain just watching her. Alicia takes the ax from the man she just knocked out.

"Raaaah!" The brawny man charges at her.

Without flinching, Alicia stares intently at the sword aimed at her and swings the ax straight down. The man's sword shatters, defeated by the inertia of her ax. I never thought an ax could break a sword. I'm startled by her agility and strength when she swings it. Her arms are so thin. Can someone really be this strong without magic? The collar around her neck must be suppressing it. I read about magic-suppressing collars once.

"My...my sword..."

The muscleman stares dumbly at his hand. Alicia drops the ax and leaps into the air with explosive power. She grabs his head with both hands and drives her knee into his face. By the time Alicia's feet hit the ground, the man is wobbling, clutching his smashed face. Alicia picks up the ax and raises it high. The man trembles, too fearful to even try escaping.

I gasp, expecting her to finish him, but she stops short. Her eyes burn with bloodlust as she stares him down.

Why did she stop...?

"No, stop!!"

A sudden scream comes from the doorway. I know that shrill voice. I glance over.

It's Liz Cather. Her retinue of white knights are accompanying her, as per usual. A gaggle of the ungifted. That's why Alicia stopped—because of her. I instantly realize.

She didn't stop. She was stopped. By Liz Cather's magic.

Alicia's expression grows increasingly stern. She's trying desperately to move but can't even flinch, can't even speak. I can tell she's fighting Liz's spell with all



her might, her face twisted in pain.

Liz Cather is the saint. No one can match her in magic. I look outside the door and scream as loudly as I can.

“Liz Cather! Let her go!”

My cries snap the leader back to his senses.

“Gra-ha-ha-ha! Can’t move, sweetheart?” he mocks, displaying dirty teeth as he cackles. He pulls a small blade from his pocket, and panic fills Alicia’s face for the first time.

“Alicia!!” Screaming her name won’t change anything, but I can’t stop myself.

“Shut it, kid,” the leader says with a gleeful sneer.

I curse my inability to move. No matter how hard I try, my legs won’t budge. It’s only then that I realize they’re broken. I try to use my arms to crawl toward Alicia, but the leader’s big foot crushes my hand.

“Ngaaah!”

He grinds my hand into the ground. I lift my head, only for him to kick me right in the stomach. I fly into the air, and Alicia watches, horrified, still unable to move. I beg her with my eyes to focus on herself, not me.

With a dull thud, I hit the floor. Pain shoots through me. I wonder if this is the end.

But the thought of Alicia leaving this world hurts more than any physical pain. My body is bruised and battered, but I would give it all for her. If this broken body can save her, I’ll give up my life for her.

Please, God, save Alicia. I promise I’ll never curse your name again. No matter what unfair circumstances I face, I won’t complain. Just please...please don’t let Alicia die.

I pray with all my heart.

But bright red droplets fall mercilessly before my eyes. A chill runs down my spine, and I feel the blood drain from my body.

If Alicia was stabbed to death, how could I go on living?

Seeing the bright red blood before me, I tremble. Slowly, fearfully, I look up at Alicia.

And I see...blue.

I was terrified of seeing Alicia covered in blood, but instead, I find a man with deep, beautiful blue hair, tawny skin, and clear blue eyes standing there, filled with a desire to kill.

“Duke...,” I murmur so quietly no one hears. The man’s knife is stabbing Duke’s left arm—no, it’s embedded in it. The blood pooling in front of me is Duke’s.

Alicia stares at Duke with wide eyes.

He used a teleportation spell. What the hell took him so long? Why did he have to wait until his beloved was about to die before showing up? A prince like that belongs only in fairy tales.

I glare up at Duke as these thoughts flash through my mind.

Wait, what?

Suddenly, the pain in my body fades, and I’m enveloped in a shining black light.

Healing magic?

I glance behind me.

“Sorry I’m late.” Henri looks at me, his violet eyes filled with worry.

“Y-you...”

I hear the man’s voice crack. I glance back at Alicia and Duke. The leader is scooting away, his body shaking. Duke rips the knife from his arm and points it at the thug leader. His eyes are colder than ice as he stares down at the man.

Then Duke punches him in the gut, and the man collapses, unconscious.

“Hey, I wanted to do that.”

That’s the first thing Alicia says. To joke at a time like this—does she have nerves of steel?

The disappointment is plain to see on her face as she lowers the ax. She can move again.

“Oh—but there’s still one guy left,” she says with a smile. I can see the musclemán’s face tense up.

“Please spare my life!”

“Do you honestly think I’ll let you off that easily?”

“I beg of you!”

“Shut up,” Duke says, slugging him and knocking him unconscious. Alicia freezes for an instant, then scowls. She seems angry that he’s stolen her prey again.

While Alicia fumes, Duke is just the opposite. He frowns with worry, looking her over. Slowly, he begins to cover Alicia with something blue and sparkling.

Magic really is beautiful. As Duke heals her, he raises walls around the hut. Alicia often calls them “walls,” but they’re more like barriers.

“Why the walls...?” Alicia murmurs. She’s asking the same question I’m thinking.

“So nobody from the outside can bother us,” Duke says, his voice chilling.

So nobody can bother you... But aren’t they on your side? I pull myself up into a half-sitting position but barely manage it. Noticing this, Henri helps me up and explains.

“When you and Alicia didn’t return from lunch, we all searched the academy.”

“How did you know we were here?”

Henri smiles sheepishly. “Duke almost immediately caught their employer and got him to talk.”

“What?” Alicia and I say in unison. Neither of us expected them to be hunting down the mastermind.

“Tell me, is their employer still alive?” Alicia asks sternly.

Did she really want to kill him that badly? Alicia raises an eyebrow and scrutinizes Henri. I can see his muscles tense.

“He was already half-dead, from what I saw.”

I shudder to my core. Alicia’s eyes don’t blink.

“This was after he gave up all the information.”

Duke must have done that. Okay, maybe he’s not a fairy-tale prince.

“Since their employer was a noble, it would’ve taken too long to destroy his entire house, even for Duke,” I say, guessing what happened. But when I look at Henri and Duke, they stare back at me, surprised. “So you sent others ahead of you, but they were all worthless,” I continue, disparaging the people outside the hut. “They nearly got Alicia killed, on top of that.”

“That’s not quite right,” Alicia says. “The king sent them. Isn’t that right, Henri?”

She looks pleased with her clairvoyance. Henri nods, looking uncomfortable.

“Explain,” I demand.

“I was just a pawn,” Alicia answers. “The king used our kidnapping to test Liz’s powers—a golden opportunity. He’s one shrewd bastard.”

I can’t believe my ears. Would the king really do that?

“I’m not going to save the world, Gill. That’s the saint’s job. No matter how smart I am, it’s all meaningless.”

Alicia looks satisfied. She’s probably thinking, *Textbook villainess, right here.*

She sighs and looks at Duke. “So...who was their employer?”

“Neil of House Johnson,” Duke answers promptly.

Who’s that? He must be a nobleman, but I’ve never heard of him.

“Neil?”

Alicia hasn’t heard of him, either, which comes as a relief to me. I don’t feel as ignorant.

“Their family uses earth magic,” Henri says. Alicia still doesn’t seem to recognize him.

“He’s the guy from the tea party,” Henri elaborates. “The one who snapped at

you.”

Finally, the pieces fall into place. He’s one of Liz Cather’s devotees.

“So he tried to get rid of me because I made a mockery of Liz?” Alicia asks cheerfully. I can practically hear her celebrating: *Ooh, I’m such a great villainess that somebody wants to kill me?!* Alicia is an idiot. Then again, Neil’s the sort of guy whose love for Liz led him to orchestrate a murder. He’s the real idiot.

“Ali, that’s nothing to cheer about,” Henri sighs.

I thought there was a greater conspiracy at play.

Then Duke meets my eyes.

“I’m Gill. You were late, but thanks for saving Alicia.”

The words spill out of me as I volunteer my name for the first time. The three of them look at me in shock.

I can tell from Duke’s eyes that he’s intelligent.

“I’m Duke. Sorry, Gill. I won’t be so careless next time,” Duke says with an easy smile. He’s so beautiful, I could almost fall for him.

“You’ve got a good head on your shoulders, Gill,” Duke says.

“He’s my aide—of course he does,” Alicia says proudly.

I feel a fire in my chest. Alicia is proud of me. I never realized how happy that would make me feel.

My heart warms, and tears threaten to spill out. I have to keep it together. Years ago, I wished for the nobility to disappear. Now I want them to stay—for Alicia, Henri, and Duke’s sake. And that’s why— “It’s just so weird.”

—I blurt out my thoughts, and they all look at me.

“I honestly don’t think the saint has the power to bring peace to Durkis. Liz Cather and her group are idiots.”

I spit those words with venom. I can’t forgive Liz Cather’s devotees for trying to kill Alicia.

“You realize you just casually insulted my brothers, right?” Alicia asks.

“Guess so.”

Alicia’s expression softens. “I suppose we should leave this hut?” she says, glancing around. I don’t want to see Liz Cather’s face, but we can’t stay here with the unconscious goons forever.

“Good idea,” Duke says, snapping his fingers and making the walls disappear. I noticed earlier that some spells need snapping, while others don’t. I thought Alicia snapped just because she wanted to, but there was no snap when Henri healed me.

I don’t know the particulars, since I can’t use magic.

“Well, shall we go?”

“Er—what?!”

Alicia and Henri speak in unison. Alicia is slung over Duke’s shoulder. I suppose when someone looks ready to rampage, that’s the safest way to carry her.

“Let me down,” she demands.

“But you’re hurt.”

“I can walk on my own.”

“Don’t struggle, or you’ll fall.”

Alicia is red in the face as she protests, all the way up to her ears. I’ve never seen her shy before. I got to see so many sides of her today. And there’s a glint of mirth in Duke’s eyes. He’s obviously worried about Alicia.

“Don’t struggle, either, Gill,” Henri says, lifting me.

“Heh? But I can walk on my own.”

“Says the guy with broken legs,” Henri teases with a smirk. He’s well built, so although my legs were healed at some point, I can’t escape no matter how hard I try.

“My legs are better—”

“But they need rest,” Henri says before I finish. I can see he’s worried, so I stay quiet and let him carry me. Having someone worry about me isn’t a bad

feeling...

And so, we finally leave the hut behind.



## Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family—Age Thirteen

How truly humiliating this position I'm in is. And what about Duke's arm? Is he okay?

"Prince Duke..."

I hear Liz's voice as we step out of the hut. Unfortunately, since I'm hoisted over Duke's shoulder, I can't see what kind of expression she has on her face.

"Prince Duke, I'd like to come down now."

"No."

"I wish to speak with Liz."

At my request, Duke gently lowers me to the ground, though I can see objection in his eyes. As he does, he quickly slips his jacket over my shoulders.

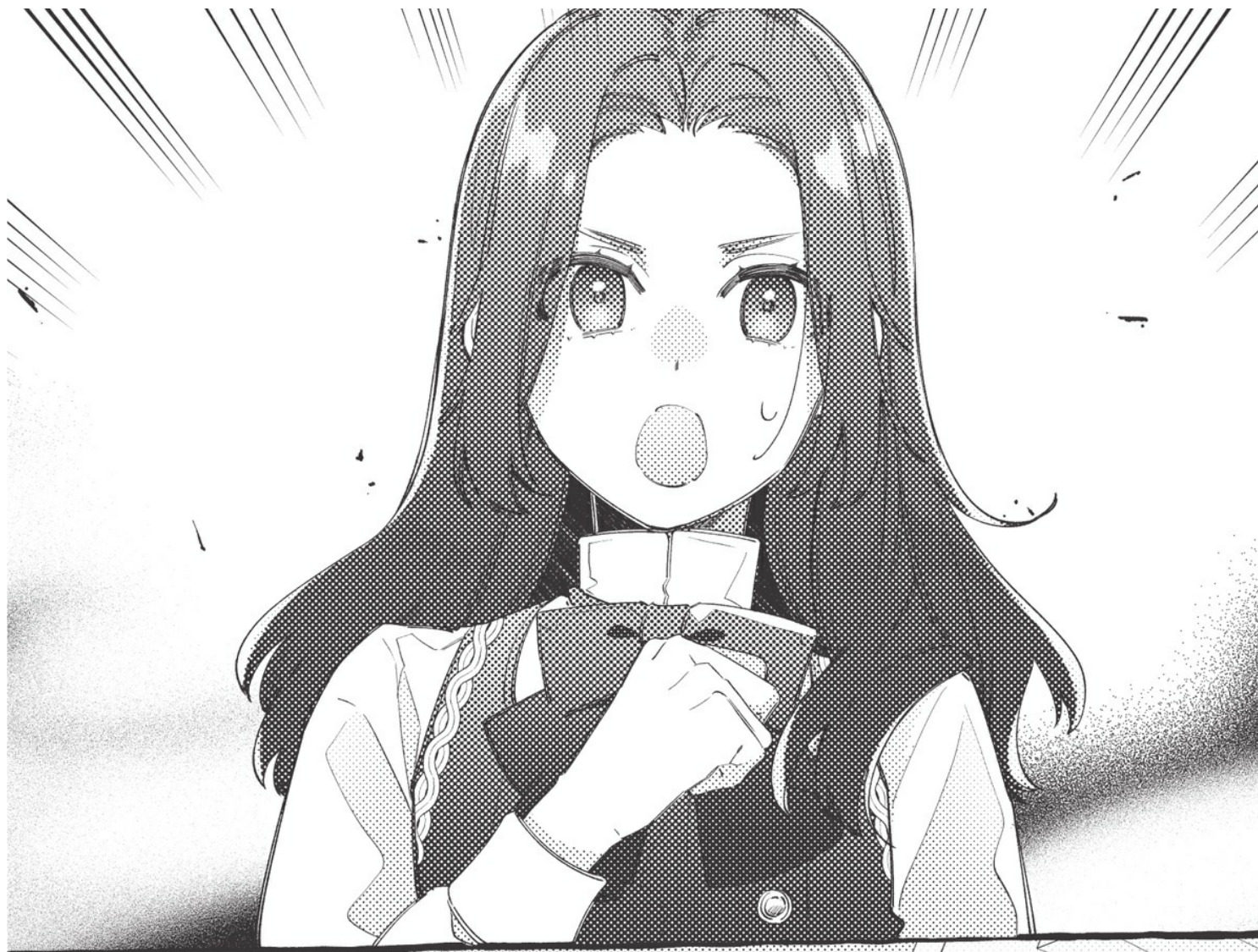
"I'm dismounting, too, just for now," Gill says, sliding out of Henri's arms and landing on the ground. Henri removes his jacket and hands it to Gill, whose clothes are in a dreadful state. The more I look at them, the angrier I feel until I'm absolutely seething.

"Liz. Why did you stop me back there?"

Liz looks at me with fear. After a long silence, she finally says, "Because...you tried to murder someone."

Murder someone?







“But they tried to murder *me*.”

I stare at Liz with open contempt and malice. Forget about me—look at what those bastards did to Gill.

Liz looks back at me, her gaze critical. “Even so...murder is wrong!”

Thanks to Duke, I didn’t even get a chance to kill them. Goes to show Liz is performing her role as saint with flying colors.

I smirk and say, “If they didn’t die, they might have come to murder you next, Liz.”

“Hey!” Eric is the first to react. Talking to them is always so tiresome.

I glare at Eric. “Do you have an objection, Lord Eric?”

“Nothing Liz said was wrong. Taking a life is wrong, no matter whose it is.”

“Does this rule apply to knights serving our nation?”

Eric looks me in the eye and says, “War itself is wrong.”

There’s just no reasoning with these people. Do saints exist to destroy nations? What is everyone smoking?

I turn to Liz and spit out, “I detest people who can’t protect themselves.”

Albert’s and Alan’s eyes fill with anger. I couldn’t care less. And I’m just getting started. I’m a villainess, after all.

“And Liz here is always surrounded by knights ready to leap out and protect her at a moment’s notice.”

“Ali—stop it.” Albert glares at me. It’s amazing how my sweet, gentle brother can look at me with such contempt when Liz is around.

“And I suppose you’re opposed to killing as well, Albert?”

“Of course.”

“Even if your life was in danger? Even if your family’s lives were in danger?”

He falters momentarily, but Albert’s tone is firm as he answers. “Yes. Killing is wrong.”

I beam and say, “Then do us a favor and throw away that sword hanging at your side right this instant.”

Albert stares at me as if he can’t process what I just said.

“If you don’t want to kill anyone, then why carry that silly thing?”

“What?”

Albert’s face clouds with suspicion. To a chivalry-loving man like him, belittling his sword is the highest offense.

“Why do you carry that sword?”

“To protect the ones I love.”

“Yes, but if the ones you love are killed before your eyes, I assume you won’t use that sword to kill their murderer, correct?”

“Hate begets nothing but hate,” Liz answers before Albert can. I hate it when she butts in like that. It always complicates things. “Hate begets nothing but hate—the cycle of hatred just lives on.” A classic saying. But isn’t it natural to want your attacker to feel the same pain you do?

“Forgiveness is a necessity, too.”

For a moment, I can’t comprehend the words Liz spouts. It’s impressive, really, that she can say that while Gill is standing right here with all his wounds. I was right—I’ll never bring myself to like Liz.

“Even if your family was murdered, would you do nothing?”

“No matter the circumstances, I could never take a life. No matter the reason.”

“You speak in platitudes.”

“You say all that, but you tried to kill Alicia,” Gill suddenly says. Usually, he stays silent. I glance over at him. Gill is glaring at Liz with a look that could freeze blood.

“No, Alicia was the one who tried to kill someone,” Gale says, scornfully looking at Gill.

He’s technically right, but those goons tried to kill me first, and if Duke hadn’t

come to my rescue, they would have.

“Do your eyes even work?” Gill says with a sigh.

Liz looks at me boldly. “At that moment, he wasn’t holding a weapon. He was defenseless. Yet Alicia would have killed him with that ax, without hesitation.”

Oh, is that her comeback? I wish she’d consider things like differences in physique. As her monitor, it’s my duty to say a few words.

“Those men tried to kill me, and the man I was trying to strike down had a concealed dagger. Let’s not forget—the one who arranged this ambush was one of your ardent fans.”

Liz’s eyes widen. Her emerald-green eyes are beautiful, no matter how many times I see them.

“Yeah, but that guy’s the one to blame! Liz did nothing wrong,” Eric sputters.

I wish I could make him understand that those men had every intention of killing me, but it’s a waste of breath trying to explain that to someone who won’t listen.

“Liz is correct in saying hatred can’t overturn hatred. But sometimes hatred can also be a motivation to move on and survive,” I say, standing tall and looking Liz in the eye. I need to be bolder and more authoritative than anyone else so that she understands me.

“You have to face reality. Why should Gill—an innocent boy—and I suffer for the sake of your rose-tinted idealism?” I smirk.

“But Liz was bullied when she first entered the academy, and she never retaliated,” Eric says quietly. “Her good heart won them over.”

Has he joined a Liz cult or something? I always knew Eric was a hothead, but I didn’t think he would become this obsessed.

“Liz’s environment just happened to favor her.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“What if she were in an environment where no one came to her rescue when she was bullied?”

“Alicia dear, I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

Liz looks at me with doubt. I suppose she still doesn’t understand that trusting in the goodness of your fellow man isn’t always enough to get through life.

I take on a belittling tone. “You’ll often find envy and jealousy embedded in hatred. Can you even imagine how the innocents in Roana Village feel about us?”

I wish I didn’t have to use Roana as an example in front of Gill. But he looks at me, letting me know he’s okay with it.

Finally, Alan speaks. “Ali, you grew up in one of the most privileged environments possible. How can you talk like this? Don’t you see it’s meaningless to fight hate with hate? The people of Roana shouldn’t fight hate with hate, either, and we should be the ones to teach them that. Why can’t you grasp such a simple concept?”

Alan’s eyes hold not just dissatisfaction but animosity as he looks at me.

If it was that simple, Durkis would be a far better country. Ugh, that’s it! I hate the devs who made this otome game. Why didn’t they make the cast of characters smarter? If all you have is a goody-two-shoes heroine in a harem of hot men, you get nothing but paradoxes.

“Okay, that’s enough of that!” Curtis chirps, trying to break the tension. “Ali and her friends are covered in blood, so let’s get you clean. This is no state to leave a lady in.”

I never understand what’s on Curtis’s mind. He’s shallow and a people pleaser, but maybe he has a dark side, like Henri.

With a smile, Curtis snaps his fingers. A beautiful, glittering green light envelops us, and all the blood is gone.

Gill frowns and looks at me. “Can’t you fix your tooth, Alicia?”

Aw, Gill, it’s so sweet of you to worry. You’re in worse shape than I am.

“No, once it’s gone, it can’t grow ba—ack?!”

Before I finish, I’m floating. Duke has hoisted me into his arms, his scent enveloping me.

Well, that's a foul move. I must stink right now.

"Please—let me down."

Duke ignores my demand. Liz and her posse just stare at us. Oh, right...Liz has a crush on Duke, doesn't she?

"You need to go home and rest," Duke says sternly. Meanwhile, Henri lifts Gill into his arms. Unlike me, Gill obediently goes along with it.

"Well, I don't like this. I can walk."

"Stay still until I get you to the carriage."

My request is flatly dismissed. Gill and Henri smirk as they watch. I hope they aren't getting the wrong impression.

"You can do whatever you want, Alicia, except one thing—stop putting your life in danger."

Duke's voice is more serious than I've ever heard it. I'm not sure what expression he's wearing, but one thing is clear: He cares about me.

Does Duke have a little—or maybe even a *huge* crush on me? The thought makes my body temperature spike. Argh, shut up, heart. Duke will hear you pounding.

I somehow manage to calm my fluttering heart. But I still hear a heartbeat... Wait, is that Duke's?

"Duke sure is generous," Gill remarks.

"No, I think he's actually quite possessive," Henri replies. "He just doesn't let it show."

"But he's really soft on Alicia."

"Most of the time, Duke doesn't show emotions... He just does that around Alicia."

Gill and Henri continue chatting behind us, but I'm too distracted trying to hide my bright red face to catch what they're saying.



A fluffy bed... A soft pillow... Warm bare skin... Wait, warm bare skin?!

My eyes fly open in shock, all traces of sleepiness vanishing instantly.

Long eyelashes... A handsome nose... Slightly thin lips... What a beautiful sleeping face.

...Wait a minute, why is Duke in bed with me? And why is he shirtless?

He's so muscular. What a beautiful body. Why can't I get muscles like that?

Trying to shake off these thoughts, I glance around the room. This isn't my room. Mine isn't this big or this simple. Is this Duke's room? Meaning, we're at the palace?







How did we even get here? My memory cuts out after we got into the carriage. I must have fallen asleep. Right now, there's only one thing I can do...

I have to get out of here.

I quietly slip out of bed.

"Where do you think you're going?"

As soon as my foot hits the floor, I hear Duke's voice. Was he awake this whole time? I slowly turn to look at him.

My diamond pendant. Why does he have it? It was on my neck— Oh. The magic-suppressing collar is gone.

"I found it in the pocket of the guy you almost beheaded," Duke says, flashing a devilish smile.

No way. Did that guy steal my pendant? I feel the blood drain from my head. Yeah, I really need to get out of here. I pretend Duke hasn't said anything and turn to leave.

"Come here."

Without another word, Duke grabs me by the waist and effortlessly lifts me back onto the bed, facing him. What's he going to do? Lecture me? Keep it together, Alicia. You're a villainess. Don't get intimidated by some scolding.

Then Duke's gentle hands reach behind my neck.

Huh?

The next thing I know, the pendant is hanging around my neck again, shining as beautifully as ever.

"I'm glad you've been wearing it all these years."

Wh-whatever. I only wear it because it was a free gift.

His deep blue eyes pierce into mine, and I feel my insides catch on fire.

How am I even supposed to react? A heroine would shyly avoid his gaze, but it'd be rude to break eye contact in a moment like this—and more important, I refuse to act like a heroine.

So I push through the embarrassment and look coyly into Duke's eyes. A flash of shyness appears on his face before he wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me close.

His embrace is firm but gentle, without a hint of force. The sound of our heartbeats echoes through the room.

"Alicia..."

He leans in, his eyes intense, like a predator closing in on its prey.

No guy's ever looked at me like that before. What do I do?!

Duke's gaze is locked on mine as his hand slides gently onto my cheek.

"So, so, so, so! Does His Majesty...?"

"....."

I choke and change the subject. With a disappointed sigh, Duke lets go of me, looking terrifyingly moody.

"Stay calm, Duke."

Duke mutters something under his breath, but I can't hear it. I don't regret what I said, but under the circumstances, I feel like a bit of a failure as a villainess.

"Oh Aliiicia?"

I hear a voice on the other side of the door before it slowly opens. Gill's head pops inside.

"Alicia? You there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

I hurry out of bed, seeing a chance to escape. Henri is standing behind Gill. Oh, good, the gang's all here. That means we can leave immediately!

"Duke, we're coming in," Henri says, pushing Gill into the room with him.

Um, no. Let's *leave*.

"You slept like that again?" Henri asks Duke, frustration edging his voice.

"Oh, Alicia. Here," Gill says, handing me a tiny tooth. I stare at it, wide-eyed. "I

read in a book that we keep memories in our teeth,” he explains, catching my confused expression. I remember reading the same thing once. That’s why we’re supposed to cherish them.

“Want it?” he asks.

“Absolutely not,” I reply honestly.

Gill’s eyes sparkle. “Can I have it?”

“Sure. But you do realize it’s a tooth, right?” I give him a dubious look. Why would he want a worthless tooth?

“Yeah, I want to keep it,” Gill says, smiling.

What a weird kid.

“Say, who’s in that big painting on the wall in the hallway?” Gill asks Duke.

What is he talking about? Duke looks as confused as I am. Could he mean the one I saw in the hallway when I got lost here once?

“You mean the piece with my dad and uncle?”

Huh? So that boy in the painting was the king’s brother?! The age gap looks huge. Is Duke’s uncle older? But if so, that’s odd. Normally, the firstborn son inherits. So why did Duke’s father become king?

“Did he die?” Gill asks bluntly.

Thanks, Gill. Just what I wanted to know.

“Who knows,” Duke says vaguely.

Yeah, he’s hiding something. But he doesn’t seem like he’ll talk just because we ask. I wonder what his secret could be.

“I have another question,” Gill says, his eyebrows lowering as he stares at Duke.

“What?”

“From what I’ve read in books, saints are legendary figures, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, they are,” Duke answers without hesitation.

Wait a minute, saints are legendary? So the heroine is guaranteed to go down

in history!

Why did I have to be born in the same era as the saint? No matter how crazy badass I am, I'll always be upstaged. Now I won't get to bask in the spotlight as a villainess.

"Alicia? Why the long face?"

Gill peers at me. I wish I could speak my mind, but Duke doesn't know about my dream.

"It's nothing." So I lie with a smile.

Argh! This is the worst. How did it take me so long to realize this?

As my heart sinks into a whirlpool of chaotic despair, Gill murmurs quietly beside me, "When the saint appears, she's destined to marry the next king..."



After I get home, I hole up in the library and practice magic like there's no tomorrow. But no matter how hard I try, I simply can't elevate myself beyond level 80. Is this what they call a slump?

"You're in bad shape today."

Gill is hanging out with me while I practice (though he's been reading a book the whole time).

"I wonder what I'm doing wrong. I'm not making any progress at all."

"I think reaching level eighty at your age is quite the feat."

"But if I want to be a famous villainess in an era with the saint, this is nowhere near enough," I insist firmly.

Gill gives me a tired look and sighs. "I don't care either way. Just remember what Gramps said. Don't even think about trying to skip ahead to level one hundred."

“Yes, yes, I know.”

I think back to what Will said. I’d lose the ability to use magic forever if I’m not careful. I need to level up at my own pace, step-by-step. With that in mind, I try to resume my magic practice...but Gill’s words back at the palace still haunt me.

“Hey, Gill...”

“What?”

“Is it true the saint always marries the king?”

“That’s what the book says.”

Gill pulls the thickest tome from the nearby stack and flips through the pages. I read the passage he points to.

“The saint shall marry the king and become a symbol of peace for the kingdom.”

Oh, so it’s true. I’m rejecting the very purpose of a saint. So I was right—the heroine and Duke are destined to be together.

“It’s kind of sad that some people don’t have control over their own destiny.”

If the saint and king aren’t compatible, that would be awful. In truth, Liz and Duke seem like a poor match.

“But Duke defied destiny.” Gill’s eyes sparkle as he smiles.

“Defied destiny?! Where did you get that idea?”

“Alicia, for a genius, you can be pretty dense. You did sleep in Duke’s bed, didn’t you?”

“Yes...and it startled me a little, but nothing happened.”

“Are you aware of what it means to be the daughter of one of the five most powerful families in the kingdom?”

“Yes, but I don’t see the issue. It’s just Duke. In his eyes, he’s helping a little sister in need, nothing more.”

Gill stares at me, wide-eyed, like his eyes might pop out of his head.

“Alicia—you’re really dense, aren’t you?” he mutters.

I'm...dense? That's the last thing I want to be called! How could Gill say such a thing to my face?

"I can't let that insult slide. Yes, Duke likes me—I've noticed. But if he's supposed to marry the saint, then it doesn't mean anything."

I glare at Gill, wary that I might draw criticism for getting so angry with a child. But villainesses have short tempers, and besides, *dense* is a word meant for heroines.

"Hey, don't snap at me. All I'm saying is Duke knows exactly what he's doing," Gill replies, unfazed.

Is he implying Duke is aware he's supposed to marry the saint, yet he lets me into his bed anyway? No way. Does he have some sort of edge over me?

"Do you finally get what I'm trying to say?" Gill stares at me as I stand there, dazed.

This is serious. If Duke and I get engaged, Liz won't listen to a word I say. Liz is in love with Duke! She might stop being my rival and just ignore me instead! We couldn't have a fair fight on equal footing. I need her around to elevate me as a villainess. Without her, my dream would shatter like a fleeting memory.

Well, I'm not messing around. I'll become an awesome villainess if it's the last thing I do. Besides, I might've told Gill that I know Duke likes me on the spur of the moment—but honestly, I don't believe it. I'm the villainess who torments the heroine, after all. And Duke has never said he likes me.

So everything's still okay, right?

"Hey, how much longer are you gonna be here?" Gill asks tiredly, opening his book.

"I'm not leaving this library until I reach level eighty-five."

Gill looks startled. "I know you're determined, but there's no point in punishing yourself," he says gently, sounding older than me. "When's the next time we're visiting Gramps?"

That's right—we have to visit Will. I glance out the window. It's already dark...

Then I notice the moonlight illuminating the library. When did that moon come out? It's still a crescent moon. Just how many hours have I been in here practicing magic?

"Gill, the sun's set."

"What are you talking about? It's night. Of course the sun has set."

Gill gives me a concerned look. For all my practicing, I haven't made even a bit of progress. Dammit, I just want to be a lion already. That level-82 animal transformation spell is a must-have.

"We're going to the academy tomorrow, aren't we?" Gill asks.

"Yes, we are." I can't see a reason not to.

"Then you should get your beauty sleep."

Wow, Gill sounds like a doting mother. Come on, what kind of villainess gets doted on?! I have to grow up and be a strong woman on my own.

"Very well. I'll turn in early tonight," I tell Gill with a smile. He gives a satisfied nod.

And that night, we retire to my room with no further progress...or so I think.

"Alicia? Are you awake?"

I hear my father's voice. Is this a dream, or is it reality?

"Ali? Got a minute?"

Now I hear another voice.

I get up, half-asleep, and open the door. A look of relief fills my father's face.

"Father? What's the matter?"

"Don't give me that. My only daughter was kidnapped and harmed." There's a nervous edge in his voice.

Oh, that's right. I was kidnapped. The anger in his eyes is unmistakable. Wow, he must have been really worried about me.

"I'm so glad you're safe."



I can hear a tremble in his voice. His large hand on my back is warm and comforting. My father's touch has always been reassuring. But Will's touch is just as reassuring. My father slowly pulls away and places his hands on my shoulders, looking straight into my eyes as he speaks, slowly and firmly.

"Alicia. Quit your role as Liz Cather's monitor."

Quit?

"I can't have you putting yourself in further danger. What if this happens again?"

Looking into his eyes, I can tell he worries for me with all his heart. But he doesn't need to. I'm trained.

"I can protect myself, Father," I say with determination.

"But you're just a thirteen-year-old girl," he rebukes me in a deep growl.

Oh my. He's only just noticed?

"It's all my fault. You have a special gift, so I couldn't help but ask you to use it." A deep crease forms between his brows as he frowns in anguish.

"Please don't trouble yourself, Father. I accepted this role, and I intend to carry it out fully."

"I don't care. You can't do it. I know how unfair I'm being, asking you to take on the role and then suddenly asking you to give it up. But, Ali, I can't bear the thought of you getting hurt again."

Fierce emotion is visible in my father's eyes. But I have no intention of backing down.

"I will not quit! I chose this path myself, and I will see it through. Nobody can shake my commitment—nobody." There's a sharp edge in my voice. I can feel the air tense against my skin.

A villainess never goes back on her decision. If I were the heroine, I might hear him out and relent, but...

Father steadies his breathing and says, "I just want you to be happy, Ali."

My heart falters for a moment. Is it really fair to be so stubborn when he

cares so deeply for me? But...I have a dream. A dream to become the greatest villainess of all time. And nobody is going to stand in my way. I'm committed to this path, no matter what he says.

"Father, I...I won't quit," I tell him quietly.

He stares into my eyes until he finally gives a quiet, reluctant sigh. "Then let me set some terms and conditions."

He speaks in a voice more dignified than I've ever heard from him, and it makes me instinctively stand up straight.

"Very well, Father. But if I satisfy all of them, promise me I may continue being her monitor."

"I promise." His words are backed by an unbreakable dignity. "From now until the day you turn fifteen, you must not see Liz Cather. Nor can you see your family. You will live in a little hut, away from the main house."

His eyes gleam as he continues, "Additionally, by the time you turn fifteen, you must be practicing magic at level ninety."

Say what now? Level 90? But most people are only level 20 by age fifteen when they're admitted to the Academy of Magic. He doesn't really expect me to meet that expectation— Oh, I see his game. He thinks by setting impossible conditions, I'll have no choice but to give up on being Liz Cather's monitor.

"Those are my terms."

His deep voice booms throughout the room. Those requirements are utterly insane. But if I want to keep being Liz Cather's monitor, I'll have to accept them.

Truth be told, I could keep tormenting Liz Cather without being her monitor. But as a villainess, I want to see my decisions through till the end. No half-hearted villainess will ever go down in history. And I'd rather die than be so pathetic.

"Understood, Father." I nod firmly.

You probably thought I'd say no. Don't come crying to me if you regret it, Father. I'll make you wish you gave me even stricter conditions.

"...You'll be staying in a little hut," he reminds me.

“Yes. That’s not a problem.”

“You’ll be all alone for two years.”

A villainess is a lone wolf. This is all part of my training.

“I understand that, Father. But do let me keep my books.”

“Level ninety—”

“Will be reached with due practice,” I interrupt, a smile spreading across my face.



## **Duke, Eldest Son of the Seeker Family—Age Eighteen**

Ever since I was little, I dreamed of being king. I was constantly surrounded by people. But more than anything, I hated the idea of having my freedom stolen from me.

When I was quite young, my mother left this world. She was not from Durkis. My light tan skin is something I inherited from her. I have faint memories of her. She was unyielding and earnest. She hated injustice and sought the truth more than anyone. She was the complete opposite of my father, who is an idealist. My life philosophy likely came from my mother. She was a strong woman. No matter what horrible things people said behind closed doors about the foreign harpy my father took as queen, she did not falter even once.

It's public knowledge that my mother died from illness. But the truth was that a lady-in-waiting poisoned her. I have foreign blood in my veins just like her. But the same death did not come for me. Allowing my rage to consume me, I killed the responsible attendant. To sweep what I'd done under the rug, my father told the cover story that my mother had died from a sickness.

From that day on, I lost my trust in everyone.

Then at some point around that time, Albert's little sister, Alicia, would come up in conversation among my companions from other noble families. She was stubborn, arrogant, and impossible to tame. I was completely disinterested in her. That was because I thought most women of the world were selfish like that.

But Alicia was far beyond my wildest dreams.

The first day I met her, she was an ordinary polite girl—that was the impression she gave off. But then, one day, she suddenly begged Albert to teach her how to use a sword. We assumed she only made that sudden

outrageous request to get our attention. All the girls who tried to get close to me in the past were like that. And I believed Alicia was one of them.

Until the day Alicia pulled the sword from Albert's belt.

Alicia was the first girl I fell for. Her sharp gaze seemed to see into the future. Every word she said drew me to her. When I heard the news that she had been sneaking into Roana Village, I was impressed, but not surprised.

The thought had crossed my mind to visit Roana Village at least once. But the environment in which I lived would absolutely never allow it. I was monitored far beyond what was normal. So every time I learned of something new she had done, I fell harder and harder for her.

Meanwhile, everyone in her circle grew to hate her. This was likely due to the commoner Liz Cather, who was admitted to the Academy of Magic on scholarship. She had a life philosophy that appealed to the masses. But her philosophy was not unconditionally good. Much of it was unrealistic, and I thought she resembled my father a little. She was intelligent but ignorant of reality.

I recognized immediately that Liz had feelings for me. But my heart would beat for no one except Alicia.

When I heard she was kidnapped, I felt my blood run cold.

I couldn't imagine a world without Alicia in it. I wanted to be a generous man who protectively watched over her every move from afar.

But at the same time, I wanted to make her mine and smother her with love. I wanted to make it so she couldn't live without me... But she didn't want that. She was not the sort of lady who could be shut away. If anyone tried to do that, she would break free immediately.

Only I needed to know how bewitching she was.

Besides, she's still so young.

Alicia's lustrous black hair, her fiery golden eyes, her crisp, girlish voice, her clairvoyant wisdom, and her heart quietly burning with the strength to defy all distress, anguish, and sorrow. Everything about her is so beautiful. Whenever

I'm around her, my reason threatens to abandon me. I'm terrified I won't be able to hold myself back much longer.

So I've decided to simply watch over her from a safe distance until she's a little older.

When I heard that Arnold was going to shut Alicia in a tiny hut for two whole years, I seethed. But deep down in my heart, I felt a wave of relief.

Each day I see her become prettier than the last, I lose confidence in my ability to keep my heart in check.

One day, while I was consumed with rage, panic, and worry, Curtis said something to me:

"When Ali is free from that hut, she'll be fifteen. Then you can go for her without holding back."

He's right... The next time I see Alicia, she will be fifteen.

Brace yourself, Alicia. When you come out, nothing will stop me from offering up my heart to you.

—*Fin*

## Afterword

Hello! Izumi Okido here.

Thank you for reading *I'll Become a Villainess Who Goes Down in History* to the very end.

This story chronicles the battle between an idealist heroine and a realist villainess. My inspiration was wanting to give a reality check to a heroine spouting nothing but platitudes.

As a general rule, the POV character is Alicia, so you'll get to learn the inner workings of her mind as you read. No matter what horrible things the people in her circle say to her, she's always happy on the inside knowing she's getting closer to her goal of being a great villainess. But when the POV character changes to someone else in the cast, you'll get to see Alicia respond to the slander either with no emotion or by clapping back with a daring smile on her face.

*Being smack-talked is the best thing ever!*—is something only Alicia thinks. And she never lets it show on her face... What a terrifying girl our little protagonist is.

The only person who sees through her is Duke. Of course Will and Gill do as well, but Alicia let them in on her secret, so they don't exactly count.

Duke falls for Alicia rather early in the game, but she's five years younger than him...so Duke spends years wrestling his demons. Hang in there, Duke!

So here's a question for all of you: Are you an idealist or a realist?

Thank you to my editors who are always there with a word of advice, and thank you to Jyun Hayase for the very beautiful illustrations.

Until we meet again!

Izumi Okido



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