

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba

7

YOUNG
LADY ALBERT

IS

COURTING

DISASTER

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Mary Albert

Daughter of the nation's most prestigious noble family. Has memories of playing an otome game in her past life.

Trait: Ex-drilly tsundere



Adi

Longtime servant of House Albert. After a period of one-sided love, he became...Mary's husband?!

Trait: Service with a side of sass



Patrick Dyce

First son of House Dyce, a noble family equal to House Albert. Alicia's husband.

Trait: Beloved Prince Charming



Alicia

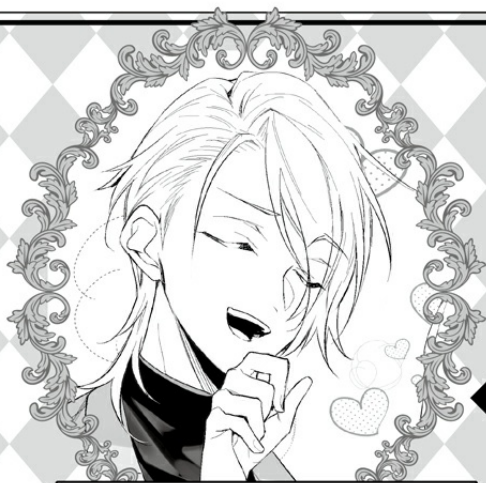
Heroine of the otome game. A princess of peasant origins.

Trait: Airheaded charge attack

Brothers

Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster

Characters



Lang Albert

Mary's older brother.

Trait: Sister-obsessed optimist



Lucian Albert

Mary's older brother.

Trait: Sister-obsessed pessimist

Twins

Siblings



Anna

A mysterious girl who suddenly appeared.

Trait: Levelheaded, but easily learns strange words

Father (?)



Roberto

Longtime servant of Lang and Lucian.
Adi's older brother.

Trait: Curbs House Albert's charades

Gainas Eldland

Parfette's fiancé.
Trait: Doomed to live under his wife's thumb (but he's happy about it)

Parfette Marquis

Daughter of House Marquis. Gainas's fiancée.

Trait: Dependent on Mary (endless tears are the default)

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Prologue

Inside one of the rooms in Albert Manor, the family doctor sat across from Mary. He'd been looking after her health since she was a child, and he was like a grandfather to her. "Congratulations, Lady Mary," he told her; Mary blinked at him.

She'd been feeling languid for the past few days, so she had asked him for a checkup. She was used to hearing things like "You have a cold," "You're tired," or "You mustn't feign illness," at the end of her examination. Commendations were the last thing she'd expected to hear today. After all, receiving praise when one appealed to the doctor about feeling poorly was extremely bizarre.

When Mary pointed this out, the man simply repeated, "Congratulations."

"I don't know why you're saying that, but thank you," she responded. "Anyway, how's my health?"

"As I said, congratulations."

"And I thank you once again for your courtesy. So what is this listlessness that I've been feeling all about? I've been really sleepy recently too."

"Indeed. That's why I'm congratulating you," the doctor insisted.

"Thank you. If it's such a cause for celebration, I'll arrange for a cake. But my symptoms are troubling me. Is it a cold?" Mary inquired.

The physician paused. "I'd like to congratulate you from the bottom of my heart, Lady Mary," he emphasized once again, at which point even Mary felt a sense of discomfort. The man's tone of voice sounded incredibly happy, and the wrinkles around his eyes were deeper than usual due to how broadly he smiled. He looked not like a doctor facing his patient, but rather a man sincerely congratulating his own granddaughter.

Based on the way he was looking at her, an idea formed in Mary's mind. In the next moment, the realization started seeping in.

“You’re...congratulating me?” she asked, hesitantly placing a hand on her abdomen. The doctor nodded, as if glad that his words had finally gotten through to her. His expression was gentle, which was to be expected of someone who’d worked for the Alberts for so many years. Mary’s thickheaded tendencies were a core component of hers, which he viewed affectionately.

“Indeed, I am,” he said. “I’m honored to be present at this occasion.”

“I see... So right now, in my belly...!” Mary exclaimed, rubbing her stomach, which was flat...*for now*. Then, she let out a gasp. Her dress today had a belt affixed around her abdomen. It wasn’t as tight as a corset; rather, it had been lightly tied to give her figure a more defined shape. As she didn’t feel any pressure from it, she’d forgotten all about it until now. Nonetheless, she hurriedly untied the belt, while the doctor laughed as he watched her.

“Lady Mary!” someone cried from behind her with emotion. It was one of the maids who looked after Mary on a daily basis, and who had accompanied her for the doctor’s visit. “Congratulations! I’m also honored to be here right now!”

“Thank you,” Mary responded. “Things are going to get busy from now on, so I’ll be counting on you.”

“Of course! Ah, I’m so elated! The bells of happiness are ringing for House Albert!”

“Bells?” Mary repeated. The maid sounded so happy that Mary wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d burst into song and started twirling around. After all, the woman’s longtime mistress was pregnant, and the maid had been there when she heard the news. It was a blessing for her, and she’d never been happier or prouder in all her life as a maid. Perhaps as a result of her bliss, she’d had her little outcry about the “bells of happiness.”

Indeed, bells would often ring to signify moments of joy during plays or other stage performances. And unlike Mary, in whom the feelings welled up gradually, the maid was already hearing joyful chimes as she basked in a field of flowers within her mind. Even the doctor responded in kind, as if he could hear those bells too.

“You’re exaggerating,” Mary said with a shrug, laughing at the maid’s delight. Yet her hand stayed pressed to her abdomen. Although it was still flat, she

rubbed it slowly and even inquired, “You think so too, right?” She was remaining calm to keep up appearances, but she was overjoyed as well. The flowers in her mind were starting to bloom one by one, and as if influenced by the maid’s glee, she began to hear the chimes resounding too.

The doctor watched the two women with a wry smile. “There’s one person you ought to inform first,” he told Mary softly.

All the words of congratulations Mary had received were indeed because she was pregnant. But of course, the pregnancy of none other than Mary Albert couldn’t be officially announced right away. High society would be in turmoil to find out that a new generation was coming to the nation’s most prestigious family. Not to mention, Mary was a candidate for succession, so the public might see this as the birth of House Albert’s future heir apparent.

This was all the more so the case considering that Lang and Lucian, Mary’s brothers, hadn’t even had a single romantic interaction with anyone, let alone a marriage. Everyone had high expectations for Mary and Adi as a married couple. The announcement was sure to make waves in high society, so for now it was best to take the appropriate steps and wait until the right moment to reveal it.

“Huh, I feel like I’m always shaking high society up. I’m so sorry...” Mary said with a teasing laugh as she plopped down on the bed. Slowly, she petted her abdomen. Until yesterday, it had simply been another part of her body, but now she saw it as more precious than anything. She was filled with a warm, ticklish feeling. “I want to give you a kiss already. But I can’t yet, so for now my hand will have to do,” she told her tummy.

There was a small knock on the door. With Mary’s permission, the door opened slightly, and Adi peered inside through the gap. He’d knocked lighter than usual, and the way he discreetly looked into the room must have meant he thought Mary might’ve been sleeping.

“Sorry to disturb your rest, milady,” he said. “May I enter?”

“It’s okay, Adi. I was just lying down.”

“How are you feeling?” Adi asked worriedly, and Mary smiled at him. She patted the edge of the bed, inviting him to sit next to her. Judging by her gesture, he surmised that nothing major was wrong, and with a look of relief, he sat down on the bed. He reached out, brushing Mary’s hair from her forehead, perhaps to check her complexion. His red eyes narrowed, and he playfully twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. “I’m glad it doesn’t seem like anything serious. What did the doctor say?”

Mary’s smile grew larger. She grasped the hand that was playing with her hair, pulling it over to her face. She nuzzled against it while Adi’s thumb stroked her cheek. Looking up at him, she recalled the doctor’s diagnosis.

“He congratulated me. So congratulations, Adi,” she said with a giggle.

Adi’s eyes widened. “Thank you...?” he replied with confusion.

Mary burst out laughing. (If the doctor had been here, would he have brought up Mary’s own thickheaded behavior from earlier and teased her about it? Or perhaps he would’ve simply watched on kindly, surmising that this was precisely why she and Adi were married.)

“The doctor congratulated me. That’s why I’m congratulating *you*, Adi,” she emphasized.

“Right, thank you. If this is such a cause for celebration, I’ll arrange for a cake during your after-dinner tea,” he said. “So, about your languidness. Is it just that you’re tired from being busy, or is it a cold?”

Mary’s smile widened even further when Adi still didn’t catch on. “You’re so slow,” she complained with a note of affection as she shrugged. Given what had happened a few minutes ago, it was as if Mary were throwing rocks—no, possibly entire boulders—while living in a glass house.

That said, Adi was slightly quicker on the uptake than Mary, for he seemed to have realized something. “Congratu...lations...?” he muttered. Rather than asking Mary, he was voicing his own suspicions out loud.

Mary’s impish smile turned into a composed one, and she moved Adi’s hand from her cheek to her abdomen. This must’ve cleared up his doubt, and his eyes shimmered. He looked unbelievably happy, as if he wanted to pull Mary in for

an embrace right away. Yet his hand gently rubbed her stomach, making Mary's heart and tummy feel ticklish at the same time.

"M-My lady, that means..."

"Yes, it does. Congratulations, Adi," Mary confirmed, sitting up and squeezing his hand. They gazed at each other, and his eyes glimmered with joy. Mary was sure she must've looked the same.

Then, Adi slowly spread his arms and drew Mary into a warm, soft hug. Surely one might hold a dainty piece of glasswork with more strength than this. His touch was so subtle that it wouldn't even have left a dent in cotton. Normally, Mary would've pestered him to hold her tighter, or even jokingly said, *"Don't think you can catch me in such a weak hold!"* while slipping out of his arms.

But now, it was different. Adi was hugging both her and the new life dwelling within her. His joy was out of this world, and though he wanted to hold her tighter, he didn't know how much of his strength to put into it. Though his hold on her was weak, he didn't want to let go. Understanding his emotions, Mary wrapped her arms around his back.

After all, they would naturally be cautious when hugging their child for the very first time.

Chapter 1

A few days had passed since Mary found out the good news. After she'd spoken with her parents, they collectively decided that they would wait a while before making an official announcement. (As a side note, her parents had been delighted, and both of them had kissed her cheek. Overcome with emotion, Keryl had even kissed Adi's cheek, which had left him quite shaken.)

They would prioritize the child's safety and wait for the doctor's endorsement before announcing the news during a befitting occasion. They would, of course, have to pick an auspicious day for it, but that was a consideration for the future. For now, they'd only inform those closest to them, as well as those on whom they relied for daily care. Each individual would be asked to stay silent on the matter. Yet even though House Albert trusted their staff, their mansion was always bursting with visitors and activity, so it was possible for information to spread unintentionally.

All that said, the maid who'd been with Mary when she had found out about her pregnancy had been genuinely gladdened by the news, and after congratulating Mary, she'd smiled and said, *"I look forward to the day of the announcement."* She had seemed to be excitedly anticipating the people's reaction, and had expressed how honored she felt to be one of the first few in the know. Even if Mary hadn't imposed a gag order on her, the maid would've surely cooperated.

The real problem lay with those Mary was close to. If she chose the wrong people to tell, her pregnancy would be as good as public knowledge.

"I'm honored that you shared the news with me despite having such worries," said Roberto with a composed smile. He, Mary, and Adi were in a room together.

Mary, who'd been the one to inform him of her pregnancy, nodded in response as she stroked the soft cushions laid out on each side of her.

"So that's why my foolish brother has been purchasing all those cushions and

burying you in them, Lady Mary,” Roberto went on. “I was convinced it must have something to do with your past life memories.”

“I don’t have memories of being buried in cushions,” she replied flatly.

“My apologies,” Roberto said with amusement, acting as his usual shrewd self.

“These cushions are only here because that brother of yours is a worrywart. There are dozens more in my room, and any gaps in between them are covered up with blankets,” Mary complained, exasperated at Adi’s overprotectiveness.

“And it’s still not enough,” Adi replied with a stern expression. He’d even laid a lap blanket over Mary’s knees, which was truly excessive.

If she were to take it off her lap, Adi would pull a throw blanket out of nowhere and wrap her up in it. If she were to try and beat him to the punch on that, saying, *“It’s fine. I don’t need it,”* he’d pull out another lap blanket instead.

“Anyway, I’d like for you to keep this a secret from my brothers,” Mary told Roberto.

“Do you not plan to inform Lord Lang and Lord Lucian about it?”

“If they were to find out, the whole country would know in an instant.”

“You have a point. They’re sure to kick up a fuss about it. Telling them would be the same as you making an official announcement,” he agreed.

“I’m certain they’d be so overjoyed that they would throw a party lasting for three days and three nights,” Mary supposed.

“In the worst-case scenario, they might even hold a parade in the town center,” Roberto said with a nod. “I can picture them making an uproar like a bunch of fools. Ah, excuse me. I was wrong to say they’d be *‘like’* a bunch of fools,” he appended, saying unbelievably rude words about his masters. He understood Mary’s point, as well as how her brothers would behave if they found out the news.

Thank goodness, Mary thought with a sigh of relief. She had a feeling she shouldn’t let Roberto’s abusive language pass by, but then again it hadn’t been about her, so she was willing to let it go in one ear and out the other.

“Yet I’m sure it’ll be difficult for you not to share the good news with them,” Roberto pointed out. “They’re getting what they deserve, but I can’t imagine how it must feel for you, Lady Mary.”

“I appreciate it, but to me, it’s good enough that I informed *you*, Roberto.”

“I’m not sure how to feel about you lumping me together with those two,” he appealed with a frown, discontent to hear that Mary thought of him, Lang, and Lucian as one and the same. His displeasure was evident in his good-looking features.

However, in the next moment, his typical cool countenance returned, and he smiled softly, his sharp eyes creasing. Then, he lowered his head deeply while his hair gently drooped with the movement. “Congratulations, Lady Mary,” he said in his calm, deep voice. It carried the note of a butler from a long line of servants expressing his congratulations, but it also sounded like he was addressing someone he had thought of as his sister for a long time. “I’ve never felt a greater joy than this, both as a servant of House Albert and on a personal level. I’m sure the bells will ring more mirthfully than ever.”

“Oh, so you’re making merry too. What a surprise,” Mary said. The maid who’d accompanied her on her doctor’s visit had mentioned the bells too, but Mary hadn’t expected for Roberto to say the same thing. He was usually too composed to consider such festive words necessary. Then again, back when Mary having a child was merely a fantasy, Roberto had said he wanted them to call him “uncle.” Even if his words had been influenced by alcohol and the twins’ boisterous instigation, he’d sounded quite merry indeed.

Although it was hard to imagine because of Roberto’s cool and composed appearance, he still experienced moments of joy and got into festive moods, especially upon hearing good news from a family member.

“Well, despite my surprise, I’m glad to hear you’re this happy about it. Thank you,” Mary said bashfully, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and joy.

Confused, Roberto and Adi exchanged a glance. When facing each other, their features looked somewhat similar, as expected from a pair of brothers. After they’d silently signaled each other with their eyes, Roberto exhaled deeply. Concealing his previous bafflement, he turned back to Mary with his usual calm

countenance. “As you said, Lady Mary, this good news has got me in a bit of a festive mood,” he acknowledged.

“Right, and what was that blatant exchange just now?” she asked.

“Please don’t worry about it,” Roberto insisted. “Either way, when there’s a new head of the house or a new family member on the way, I am as prone to making festive remarks as anyone.”

“I’m sure you are, Uncle Roberto,” Mary said with a smirk, at which Roberto cleared his throat. Though he admitted to his own festive mood, it seemed this wasn’t a topic he wanted to broach.

After pacifying Mary, Roberto turned to Adi and lightly punched him in the chest. It was an uncharacteristic action, but this was a way for an older brother to congratulate his younger brother. Roberto seemed unruffled, yet he couldn’t hide a note of mischief from his expression. “To think I’ll get to meet your child,” he remarked.

“What exactly are you trying to say with that look of yours?” Adi demanded.

“Nothing. As your brother, I simply feel moved,” Roberto claimed. “To think that you’ve come this far, when in the past you were so convinced your love for Lady Mary was unrequited that you even told our parents to give up on any expectations for grandchildren.”

“Yeah, I did say that. I also added that since *you* don’t have a human heart, our family line ends here.”

“Oh? I’d love for you to explain what you meant by that,” Roberto pressed, his smile widening.

Taking on the challenge, Adi smirked back boldly. “I meant what I said,” he retorted.

What a hostile exchange they were having! To outsiders, it would’ve seemed like the brothers despised each other. Yet it was this harsh exchange itself that proved how well they got along. Roberto’s nasty remarks were his way of teasingly congratulating his brother, and Adi was well aware of that. Any sincere conversation between them would surely be carried out in private.

Mary rubbed her stomach and murmured, “Your father and uncle are both such contrarians.”

Having congratulated Mary on her pregnancy, Roberto bowed to her. “I’ll prepare you something warm to drink,” he declared, and then walked away.

Mary watched him leave and exhaled deeply. She’d known that he would be happy to hear the news, but she’d still been nervous about the idea of telling someone. Hearing her sigh, Adi placed a second lap blanket onto her knees. “I don’t need any more of these,” she told him.

“In that case, I’ll bring you some cushions.”

“Ah, so you intend to drown the estate in cushions, do you?” Mary asked, then looked at her belly. “My darling child, you won’t grow up in Albert Manor—you’ll grow up in Fluff Manor!”

“N-No, I didn’t buy *that* many...!” Adi protested. “And by the way, I’ll be heading out for a bit. An order I placed has arrived, so I’ll be going to pick it up.” With that, he hurriedly got to his feet. He was acting obviously disingenuous.

Mary cast him a probing look. “What did you order?” she asked suspiciously.

Adi openly avoided her gaze. His eyes danced around uncharacteristically, and he kept umming and ahing as he tried to falteringly come up with some deception. Nearing the door, he quickly bowed and said, “Off I go!” before darting outside. He fled without ever giving a proper answer.

“Cushions. He *definitely* bought more cushions,” Mary said while rubbing her stomach, and lamented with a sigh how she would end up buried in them.

A few hours later, Adi returned with two cushions, just as expected. However, Mary couldn’t allude to it or smirk and say something like, “*I knew it.*” That was because Adi had come home with a small girl Mary had never seen before.

The child was clinging to Adi’s leg and tugging on his tailcoat, anxiously surveying her surroundings. She had red hair and eyes, and her features were still cherubic. She must’ve been around five years old. Her attire was very plain, and dirty in places. There was a small pochette hung over her shoulder, but that

too had stains on it.

Mary blinked upon seeing this unexpected guest. With a teacup in one hand, she glanced between Adi and the child. “Welcome back, Adi. Who is this girl?”

“She’s, uh...” Adi slurred. He held the cushions under one arm while awkwardly scratching the back of his head with his free hand. The gesture ruffled his rust-colored hair; it was the same shade as the little girl’s.



Still clinging onto him, the girl looked up at Adi apprehensively and in a feeble voice asked, “Daddy, where are we...?”



Naturally, there was an immediate uproar at Albert Manor when the child Adi had brought with him had referred to him as her father. Maids and servants swarmed into the room, wondering what on earth was going on, before exchanging looks with each other upon hearing the little girl call Adi her “daddy.” Some brought up the idea of summoning the Albert twins, which Mary hurriedly put a stop to. The situation was already incomprehensible enough on its own—if those boisterous brothers of hers were added to the mix, it would spiral completely out of control.

After explaining as much to the servants, Mary told them not to inform Lang and Lucian about this, and then had them leave the room. Nevertheless...

“I sense that Lady Mary is feeling troubled in this room!”

...Mary had no way of stopping Alicia, who burst onto the scene. Mary’s face stiffened, and she glared at the carefree girl, as well as Patrick, who walked in after her.

“Alicia, I don’t recall summoning you, nor would I have wanted to do so. Why are you here?”

“I was arranging the rose arch in the gardens, when a single petal fell off! I knew it was a sign that you were troubled, so I came over!” Alicia explained.

“Gracious! This gardener’s terrifying!” Mary complained, shuddering at the way Alicia’s intuition had proved correct. She flicked the gardener’s—that is, Alicia’s—forehead.

The other girl shrieked happily in response, and this was so par for the course by now that neither Adi nor Patrick even bothered trying to stop the girls’ exchange. After all, there was a bigger problem at hand than a princess acting as if she owned the place. (Or perhaps more accurately, it was already much too late to problematize the princess acting like she owned the place.)

The little girl was still clinging to Adi with an anxious expression. Noticing the way everyone was staring at her oddly, she seemed on the verge of bursting

into tears. She looked at Alicia, who'd barged into the room, then at Patrick, and finally hid behind Adi's tailcoat.

"Daddy..."

"I've told you so many times already: I'm not your father!"

"But you are, daddy..."

Adi sighed in defeat before addressing the others. "And that's all she's been saying, so I can't figure out what's going on."

The child continued calling Adi her father. She stared fixedly at his face, so it didn't seem like she'd misperceived him as someone else. Her tiny fists held tightly on to his tailcoat, as if it were her lifeline. This stumped everyone, but it wasn't as if they could force her off. Mary sighed, wondering what to do. For now, she concluded that standing around might tire the girl out, so she encouraged her and Adi to sit down.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asked the girl. "Where did you come from? Where's your mother?"

"Daddy, where are we...?" the girl repeated.

"This is House Albert's mansion," Mary responded. "Didn't you hear what I said, though? Ah, but it's not like I'm angry, so don't be scared... Right, you must be tired. We'll get you something to drink. Can you drink tea? Or maybe juice would be better?" she went on, desperately trying to get through to the child, who was sitting on the sofa next to Adi, still holding on to him.

Adi tried to do the same, but no matter what they said, the child kept averting her eyes nervously and only clung to Adi. She must've been fearful, having found herself in a strange new place and surrounded by unfamiliar people. On top of that, the one person she could rely on in this situation—her "daddy"—claimed that he didn't know who she was. It wouldn't have been surprising if she had burst into tears at any moment, considering her circumstances.

Although Mary was aware of this, they had to try and question the girl. Yet the unintelligible situation caused Mary to frown, and the sight of that frightened the child all over again. It was a vicious cycle.

While Mary was undergoing this anguish, another person smoothly stepped in. It was Alicia. She squatted in front of the little girl, smiled brilliantly, and said, “Hello there!” in a friendly voice. “Are you hungry? We have cake! How about we chat while we have some? Our cake is super tasty!”

The child’s eyes widened, as did everyone else’s, at Alicia’s frivolous and inappropriately cheerful statement. This was a serious situation, and here was the princess, bringing up cake!

Before Mary could stop herself, she grabbed Alicia by the scruff of the neck and pulled her up. Alicia shrieked, though it sounded forced. “What are you talking about?! This isn’t the time for cake!” Mary scolded.

“No, Lady Mary! Barraging her with questions will only frighten her! It’s better to allow her to calm down with some cake and have a gentle conversation with her!” Alicia pleaded.

Her words caused Mary’s mouth to snap shut. *Is that how things work with children...?* But indeed, there was a small hint of expectation in the little girl’s eyes as she stared at them. Perhaps the mention of cake had appealed to her. But when she made eye contact with Mary, she hurriedly buried her face in Adi’s jacket. *I see, she is definitely scared*, Mary thought with a nod. That realization caused her a bit (actually...quite a lot) of pain.

“I took a break in the canteen earlier, and the pâtissier told me that he’d bake a delicious cake for teatime today! They should be bringing it soon,” Alicia said with a dazzling grin that was free of any worries.

(Mary wanted to question why Alicia had taken a break in their canteen, but she swallowed her words. She concluded that it was in her best interest to leave this situation in the competent gardener’s hands.)

The little girl still seemed cautious, and glanced up at Adi with concern. “But...” she whispered.

After all, she was in an unknown place, and the adults around her didn’t seem to look favorably upon her. She must’ve been worried about whether she could trust Alicia’s words. Although she was young, she was an intelligent child, who understood the situation she was in and didn’t immediately jump at the offer of a tasty treat. Yet in contrast to her reaction, her stomach rumbled quietly at the

mention of cake.

“Oh my! Your tummy responded in your stead!” Alicia exclaimed with a mischievous smile. The little girl’s expression softened, and the uncomfortable air around her relaxed. “All right, let’s go wash our hands before the cake arrives!”

“But...” the girl objected again.

“You can’t be eating cake with dirty hands, right? Come on, let’s go. Adi, you too!” Alicia urged, standing up.

The girl looked surprised, and Adi was startled too at the idea of him coming along. But surmising that sitting around wouldn’t resolve anything, he got to his feet. Reluctantly, the child did the same, but she quickly clasped his coattails and hid behind them. Adi glanced down at the obvious bump in his jacket, and his shoulders sank as if to say he was troubled.

“Let’s just have some tea for now,” he decided.

“If you say so, daddy...”

“I told you, I’m not... Ah, never mind that for now. Let’s go wash our hands. And I’ll arrange for some new clothes for you,” Adi said, patting the girl’s shoulder through his jacket. The girl peeked through the gap in his coattails and responded with a single nod.

Alicia’s expression lit up at their exchange. “Now, let’s go!” she encouraged, and spearheaded the group as they began to vacate the room.

“You’re coming too, Alicia?” Adi asked her.

“My hands are still dirty from tinkering in the garden. And my clothes are muddy too. Oh, but you don’t have to prepare new clothes for me!”

“Right... After all, you already have your own spare clothes in our mansion,” Adi muttered, recalling the many sets of outfits Alicia had at the ready within Albert Manor for some reason. He cast her an exasperated look.

But she didn’t glance back at him. “A gardener needs to keep a change of clothes around!” she declared with an innocent smile.

And so the two of them—as well as the little girl, still clinging to Adi—left the

room. The door closed behind them with a thunk.

Staying behind in the room, Mary sighed. She felt a bit calmer now that Alicia was dealing with the little girl, but she still couldn't comprehend the situation. They hadn't learned anything, and she was just as confused as before.

"Are you okay, Mary?" Patrick asked her.

"Yes, I am... I was just a bit surprised. But I really wonder what's going on...?"

"Do your past life memories have any clues about this girl? Like her name, or where she came from?"

"Sadly, no. I don't recall anything about her," Mary said with a sigh, shaking her head.

The past life memories Patrick had mentioned were something Mary had publicly announced a few days ago. According to her recollections, the world they lived in was depicted as the setting of an otome game from her previous life. However, this situation had nothing to do with those memories. The present had already gone past the point of Mary's memories regarding the game. They were in a range outside of her comprehension—both in terms of the little girl, as well as Mary's pregnancy.

"All we know is that the child refers to Adi as her father," Mary whispered unhappily, staring at the door through which the others had left earlier. Then, something rested on her shoulder.

It was Patrick's hand. Sensing Mary's unease, he gently rubbed her shoulder. "She must have the wrong idea. You don't need to worry, Mary."

"Yes... You're right."

"That must be the case. There's no way Adi would be unfaithful to you," Patrick argued, shrugging.

The child called Adi her father, and refused to let go of him for even a moment. Her hair and eye colors were the same as his, so when the two stood next to each other, they almost did look like father and daughter. Adi had even mentioned that, when they were walking around together, other people had assumed as much, and when he'd tried to appeal that he wasn't her father,

some people had begun lecturing him about manning up and taking responsibility for it.

It might've been a mistake for Adi to have gone a long way from the familiar town center. To the strangers on the street, he simply looked like a negligent father running away from his clingy daughter. It was only natural that some felt the need to lecture him.

The more persistently the girl had called him her father, the colder everyone had glared at him. Unable to bear it any longer, Adi had brought the child back with him to Albert Manor.

Mary sighed as she thought back to Adi's retelling. No matter how hard the little girl insisted, she wasn't Adi's daughter. Adi wouldn't have been unfaithful to Mary. She knew his single-minded devotion better than anyone. When she muttered as much, Patrick swiftly rebutted her.

"No. You're not the one who knows his devotion best—I am."

"That's what you're objecting to? Really?"

"You bet I am. In fact, you're more thickheaded than others, past life memories and all," Patrick contended.

"Th-That's too much...!"

"Is it? You were the last person in this mansion—nay, in your entire surroundings—to notice Adi's devotion to you."

"You're being more insistent than ever before... But I can't deny it!" Mary groaned in frustration, while Patrick looked triumphant. She had no idea what kind of contest this was supposed to be, but apparently in his mind, he'd just won it.

Patrick regarded Mary for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled. He was trying to keep the corners of his lips down, but his shoulders were shaking. He seemed to be enjoying himself quite a bit.

When Mary saw him like this, her expression shifted back to a serious look. "This isn't the time for joking around," she rebuked, punching his arm. Still dissatisfied, she glared at him, causing his smile to widen. It was as if he wanted

to remark about her being back to her usual self. “We have an emergency on our hands, yet all Alicia can think about is cake, and you’re being strangely competitive. We’re not going to get anywhere at this rate. You two really are a good match.”

“Thanks. But the same is true for you and Adi. I’ve always thought that, long before your thickheaded self had realized it,” Patrick said, implicitly telling Mary not to worry.

She shrugged in response to his sarcasm. “I’m going to ignore that last part and take your words as a compliment. Anyway, we need to get that girl back to her parents. I’m sure they’re frantically searching for her as we speak,” Mary said. What would it feel like to have one’s own precious child vanish? The thought made her chest tighten painfully.

Before she could stop herself, she rubbed her abdomen. Just thinking about it pained her, so if she found herself in the same situation once her child was born... Imagining that made her feel like she was being crushed.

Patrick peered at her curiously. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just...” Mary trailed off, smiling evasively with her hand still on her abdomen.

Surmising something from her actions, Patrick gave her a soft, caring smile. His indigo eyes were gazing at her gently. “It’s all right,” he said, his voice a little lower than usual. It carried a calm, soothing tone. “Nobody will say anything if you eat two portions of cake. If you want, I’ll even give you mine.”

“It’s not that I’m hungry. Anyway, I want to discuss with you the way the princess barges in here all the time whenever she feels like it. I’d also like to hear all about why you assume *you’re* going to be eating cake here too as if it’s par for the course,” Mary pressed, glowering at him.

Realizing his blunder, Patrick immediately switched to his sparkling smile. How beautiful it was, indeed! If someone who didn’t know his true character were to have looked at him right now, his brilliance would’ve surely pierced right through their heart and caused them to let out a dreamy sigh. He had the glamour of a true prince.

Of course, Mary *did* know his true character, and so recognized that this was simply a means of deception.

“By the way, we should probably keep this from Lang and Lucian,” he proposed.

“Patrick, I’ve already told you countless times that this sparkling smile of yours has no effect on me.”

“I mean, if those two were here, things would become even more chaotic. They might even scare the child, and then we won’t be able to talk with her at all.”

“If you wish, I’ll meet you head-on and give you my first-rate, ladylike, faux innocent smile.”

“Fine... I’m sorry,” Patrick relented. “But about your brothers—I’m all for keeping quiet, but we can’t do it forever.”

“True. Still, we should keep this from them, at least until we find out that girl’s —”

“Identity,” Mary had been meaning to say. Yet she stopped herself from finishing her sentence when she heard a loud noise. It almost sounded like footsteps... No, those *were* footsteps. Two pairs of them, at that.

“I wanted to keep quiet about it...” Mary murmured.

“Yeah, me too...” Patrick agreed, and they both sighed in unison. Right then...

Bam!

...the door flew open vigorously, and the twins came flying into the room. Troublesome people always appeared precisely when one didn’t want them to. In fact, one could even say that they appeared at the worst possible time *because* they were troublesome. Worse yet...

“What’s this about Adi having a child?! Did he give birth to it himself?!”

“To think that Adi can do binary fission... How terrifying...!”

...Lang and Lucian weren’t even accusing Adi of infidelity. They had misunderstood the situation in a completely different way.

Roberto was standing behind the twins too. But rather than correcting their absurd theories...

“I’m shocked to discover that my own biological brother is a new breed of human. I’ll contact someone about conducting scientific research.”

...he was, for some reason, participating in them. His countenance was composed as ever as he remarked about how fascinating this all was.

“Just what are you talking about?” Mary asked her brothers, her shoulders drooping. She was glad that they didn’t suspect Adi of unfaithfulness, but their lines of thinking were problematic in their own right. They weren’t even treating Adi like a human being, with their theories of him birthing a child or reproducing asexually.

Yet in contrast to Mary’s dejection, Lang and Lucian looked earnest. They didn’t seem to be lying or joking around. “From what I heard, that child is around five years old,” Lang said. “Five years ago, you and Adi weren’t married yet. He still thought his love for you was unrequited back then. In other words, that love for you became twisted, and he birthed the child by himself!”

“Lang, people don’t just give birth on their own, even if their love becomes twisted,” Mary argued.

“Adi’s always had feelings for you... His unattainable desires burned his body so much that he split apart! But even so, that child still feels attached to him...!”

“Lucian, people don’t just do binary fission, even if their unattainable desires burn them,” Mary continued, swiftly correcting her brothers’ assumptions.



But instead, the twins exchanged a look with each other, as if affirming they had come to a conclusion. Then, they slowly opened their mouths and said in unison, “Could it be because of his height...?” The pair nodded. In the end, they had arrived at this topic.

Mary lost all will to rectify them, and only sighed in exasperation, almost exactly at the same time as Patrick. He also didn’t have the energy to redress the twins’ ridiculous stories. His dazzling smile from before was gone, and instead he cast Mary an exhausted look. He then patted her shoulder.

“Mary, is this also related to your past life memories? I’d like for you to say yes.”

“Sadly, the answer is once again no. This...” Mary paused, narrowing her eyes at Lang and Lucian. They were still insisting on their solo-birth and binary fission theories, while Roberto happily instigated them. Nothing they were saying had anything to do with Mary’s past life memories. “...is just a case of my brothers being annoying, troublesome people who don’t listen to others.”

Her shoulders sank again, and Patrick patted them once more. With every second, he looked at her with increasing pity.

Eventually, there was a small knock on the door. Adi and the others had returned.

“Milady, Lord Patrick. Sorry for the wait. I’ve arranged for tea and cake, so let’s keep talking while— L-Lord Lang! Lord Lucian!” Adi exclaimed, paling immediately upon the sight of the twins. He was facing his headstrong brothers-in-law, and his actual brother, whom Mary had once described as the most cunning man in House Albert. Given they had appeared during a situation like this, it was no wonder Adi was pale and on his guard.

The little girl was still clinging to him, and looked up at him to utter her usual line. “Daddy, who are these people...?”

Adi paled even further and let out a quiet shriek.

“Adi, what have you done?!” Lang demanded.

“It’s not what you think, Lord Lang! I have an explanation...!”

“We trusted you...” Lucian added accusingly.

“Please hear me out, Lord Lucian!”

While the twins questioned him, Adi trembled with fear, desperately trying to offer a justification. The scene looked as if Lang and Lucian were suspecting Adi of infidelity. Based on the previous conversation, however, Mary knew that they were messing around with him. She stepped in between the trio. It was cruel to make fun of Adi under these circumstances. Not to mention, they couldn't afford to frighten the child any further.

“Calm down, Adi,” Mary said. “They don't actually doubt you.”

“R-Really...?”

“Yes. They know you well. It's just that...Lang thinks you birthed this child yourself.”

“I *what*?!”

“Lucian advocates for the binary fission theory.”

“Fission?! *Me*?!”

“And whichever's the case, Roberto would like to sell you to a research facility.”

As Mary explained the present situation, Adi looked more and more confused by these outrageous claims. Not that she blamed him. Even she questioned this nonsense, despite how calm she was about it. However, Lang and Lucian finally burst into laughter, pleased with their successful trick. They seemed to be enjoying Adi's consternation, and looked satisfied with themselves.

Moreover, they'd shrewdly arranged for their own cake, which just exasperated Mary. “Don't complicate things even further!” she warned as she scowled at them. Next, she turned to the child.

The girl was staring at the twins and Roberto anxiously. From her perspective, they were three unknown people who had tormented her father. Mary hoped this wouldn't traumatize her.

“Sorry about all that noise,” Mary spoke up. “Forget these three. Let's just have some tea, okay?”

“Anna...” the girl murmured.

“Anna? Is that your name?” Mary asked, and the child nodded. It seemed that she had dropped her guard enough to reveal her name. Mary sighed in relief and glanced up at Adi. He’d already learned it by now, and the servants were investigating the whole matter. With House Albert’s exceptional staff looking into the situation, Anna’s identity and address would surely be discovered in no time.

In addition, perhaps as a form of apology for bullying Adi, or simply on a whim, Roberto declared, “I’ll supervise the investigation.”

“Are you sure, Roberto?” Mary asked.

“Of course. We should be able to resolve everything soon, now that we know her name,” he replied. “You ought to stay here and relax, Lady Mary.”

“I see that Uncle Roberto is truly reliable.”

“I... I’m sure her parents must be worried, so I’d best act swiftly. Excuse me.” Roberto lowered his head, then exited the room. His conduct was so very elegant. He’d volunteered to play a part in finding Anna’s parents, and vacated the place after gracefully bidding his farewell. It was a flow of events one would expect from someone like him. Those unaware would’ve never guessed he was escaping because Mary had referred to him as an uncle.

“I feel reassured to have Roberto on the case,” Mary said. “Anna, don’t worry. We’ll get you home soon.”

“Is daddy coming too...?”

“I’m afraid Adi can’t go home with you. But we’ll find your real father,” Mary responded with a soft smile.

However, Anna’s brows lowered as if she were on the verge of tears. She left the fork with which she’d been eating her cake on the plate and buried her face in Adi’s flank. *Oh no*, Mary thought, frustrated with her misstep. She’d intended to reassure Anna, but instead ended up upsetting her. It was the complete opposite of what she’d wanted.

Mary’s face soured reflexively. Anna grew even more fearful when she

noticed that, and hid in Adi's shadow. It was another vicious cycle.

Unable to let this go on any longer, Alicia stepped in and addressed the child. "Anna, there's an extra slice of cake because the man from before has left. Come on, we can share it in secret," she proposed, and though she was speaking of supposed secrets, her voice was quite loud.

Anna's eyes widened, and then she smiled slightly. It was a sweet, childlike smile. She looked at Alicia and nodded, so the idea must've appealed to her.

"That's an illegal transaction," Mary muttered under her breath. Apparently, Alicia was no mere journeyman, but rather a master of the art of dealing with children. It left Mary feeling a bit dissatisfied. Usually, she'd say something like, "*As expected of a peasant girl.*" But for once, this side of Alicia was actually proving useful, so Mary couldn't make cutting remarks about it. She patted her stomach instead.

"My mom is sick... She's in the hospital. That's why I looked around for my dad," Anna explained while munching on the cake. Everyone listened attentively, each eating their own share of cake so as not to overwhelm her with too much attention.

"So that's how you found Adi. Anna, do you know where your home is?" Mary inquired.

"No..."

"I wonder how far you walked? Does your mother know that you went out?"

Anna shook her head. She had left without telling anyone. She must've been desperate, so it was no wonder she was being so clingy with Adi. In her eyes, he was her only salvation. It was hard to stay indifferent to the situation with that in mind. So although Adi denied being her father, he wasn't harsh about it. Seeing how she was stuffing her cheeks with the cake, he rubbed her back to urge her to eat at a more leisurely pace.

"Are you hungry, Anna? You can have my share if you want," he told her.

"Okay," she agreed, accepting his plate and having another mouthful. She still

seemed a bit uneasy, but she was eating a lot, so she must've been starving. Her expression broke into a smile. "I've never had anything this tasty," she whispered.

"Have you already had lunch, Anna?" Alicia asked while cutting a slice of cake in half (it was originally Roberto's share).

Anna shook her head again. She'd been walking around without having had any lunch. And when Alicia questioned her about whether she'd had breakfast, Anna once more shook her head.

An uncomfortable air gripped the room. Even the usually boisterous duo of Lang and Lucian exchanged a silent glance at this. Mary could practically hear them asking, "*Could it be...?*" Even if Anna was still a child, she must've managed to cover a considerable distance if she'd skipped both lunch and breakfast.

Cautiously, Alicia continued. "Did you leave your home in the early morning, then?" Her dry smile showed that she had a bad feeling about this too. "You must be an early bird, Anna. This girl over here is very bad at waking up early, and even if I dress up as a maid and come to wake her up, she still won't get out of bed!"

"Don't sneakily expose my shameful behavior. Wait... You've pretended to be a maid to wake me up?!"

"Lady Mary, we must prioritize Anna right now! Anna, what time did you leave your home? But no matter how early it may be, you must always have a proper breakfast," Alicia told the little girl.

Anna's head drooped and she cast her eyes down. "It wasn't in the morning..." she admitted quietly. Convinced that they were reproaching her, she set her fork down and clung to Adi again, hiding her face.

Mary felt her blood run cold. *If she didn't leave in the morning, then that means...* She had a terrible premonition, which only intensified with each passing moment.

Anna's attire was dirty, and the soles of her shoes were worn down. The vigor with which she devoured her cake wasn't normal, and occasionally she stuffed

her cheeks so much that she almost choked, forcing Adi to pat her back to help her. The child must've been walking around without the luxury of food. In that case, just when had she left her home...?

"A-Anna, when did you leave your home?"

Mary's question caused Anna's shoulders to tremble lightly. She crawled over to hide in the space between the sofa and Adi's back. Adi did his best to soothe her with a gentle voice and reassure her that everything was okay. It was obvious that she was afraid, and she must've felt guilty for leaving without saying anything to her mother. Yet even if Mary understood the girl's feelings, she still didn't know what to do, and she felt at an utter loss.

Right then, a calm voice interjected. "Anna." It was Patrick. He was smiling calmly, and his eyes were fixed on Anna. "I'm sorry we're questioning you so much. Now that we've had our tea, how about we do a round of introductions?"

"Intro...ductions?" she echoed.

"Yes. My name is Patrick. Nice to meet you, Anna," he said, smiling at her gently.

Anna let out a quiet gasp. Though she was only five years old, Patrick must've looked like a shining Prince Charming to her.

Patrick then turned to Mary. "Your turn," he encouraged.

Mary cleared her throat. This was the first time she'd be introducing herself to a child. "M-My name's Mary Albert. I'm pleased to make your acquaint—"

"Mary, she won't understand such language," Patrick interrupted. "You need to introduce yourself in a more relatable way for her."

"My favorite food is croquettes!"

"How is *that* relatable...?" Patrick sighed when Mary strayed farther and farther off course. Alicia giggled, and even Adi's shoulders trembled.

Mary pursed her lips. "I've never done this before," she complained, discontent. She was House Albert's youngest child. She was no match for Patrick, who had two younger brothers, or Adi, who'd looked after her in her

younger days, and had sometimes even done babysitting for other families. It went without saying that the same held true for Alicia, who'd grown up in an orphanage and knew how to handle children.

I think I'm the worst at dealing with children out of everyone here... Mary thought, feeling pathetic. But right then...

"Kids love frogs, right?! Just hold on, Miss Anna! I, Lang Albert, will catch a massive frog for you!"

"No, I'm sure a lizard would be better... I, Lucian Albert, will find a live lizard in our garden...!"

...Lang and Lucian sprang to their feet and barged out of the room. In a way, this was their attempt at introducing themselves and appealing to Anna, but they hadn't even waited for her reply.

The room fell into silence after the noisy twins left. Anna clung to Adi with a quiet shriek, probably because she disliked both frogs and lizards.

"I always hated whenever they'd show me such critters as a child, but it looks like it still hasn't gotten through to them..." Mary lamented.

"It's strange that those two're trying to get her to like them through such means," Adi said. "Ah, but how nostalgic. You'd always scream as loud as a thunderclap whenever they showed you what they caught, my lady."

"Yes, how nostalgic... And don't worry, Anna. Whatever those two bring, I'll protect you," Mary promised enthusiastically, unwilling to let the girl taste the same kind of fear.

Anna, who'd looked worried at Lang and Lucian's declarations, seemed a little reassured. She let out a sigh of relief, then picked up her fork and once more began stuffing her cheeks. Her childlike behavior was adorable.

Mary couldn't fight back a smile. She decided to stop questioning the girl, and wait until she was ready to speak on her own. With that, Mary picked up her own fork as well.



After Anna finished the cake, Mary told her, "If you're still hungry, have this as

well,” and handed her a migratory bird rice bowl. Having eaten her fill, the little girl calmed down substantially and began explaining more of her circumstances.

That said, her words were still a child’s tale. The chronology was nonsensical, and sometimes she got choked up remembering her parents and hugged Adi with tears in her eyes. The adults couldn’t bear to rush her, so they waited until she calmed down. When she started speaking again, they would unravel her story bit by bit.

As a result, once Anna was finished, the sun had already set and evening had come.

“To think she walked for two days straight...” Mary murmured, and Patrick nodded solemnly.

From what they’d gathered based on Anna’s clumsy retelling, the girl had left her home not today, but *two days ago* at noon. She’d walked with single-minded intent, passing the night by herself, until she’d found Adi. Apparently, she had even taken a ride on a horse-drawn carriage at some point, which had shocked everyone to hear.

It was a miracle that Anna hadn’t come across any danger during her journey. With such a young girl walking around by herself at night, anything could’ve happened. Their nation and the neighboring countries had good public order, but it was still dangerous for a child to be out by themselves. It would’ve been one thing if she’d been out on a peaceful daytime errand, but this was another matter entirely.

“Why did nobody try to safeguard her when they saw such a little girl all by herself?” Mary wondered out loud.

“She’d tell everyone that she was on her way to meet her father, so they must’ve believed her,” Patrick answered. “Nobody could’ve guessed she’d come from so far away after seeing such a small child.”

“But still...” Mary trailed off, glancing at Anna.

Having finished her meal and her tale, the girl was dozing off. She’d finally found a safe place after walking for two days straight, so all the exhaustion that

had built up in her body was finally released. During her already faltering retelling, her replies had begun growing even more sluggish. A few times, she'd fallen silent for a bit, until her head drooped. The shock of that would wake her up again, and then she would continue her tale.

Everyone else had conjectured that it'd be difficult to continue at this stage, so they had decided to take a break. Unable to resist her drowsiness any longer, Anna had leaned against Adi, and soon enough her breathing grew long and steady. Adi gently cradled her. Her limbs were sprawled out, so she must've been sound asleep.

"We should let her rest for a bit. Once she wakes up, I'd like for her to take a bath, but..." Adi paused uncomfortably, as this wasn't something he could do for her himself.

"Yes!" Alicia agreed, vigorously raising her arm. "I'll stay with her! I'll take care of her bath time too!"

"Are you sure, Alicia?" Mary inquired. "You'd have to stay over at ours... Then again, you stay the night here all the time anyway."

"It's fine! I have everything I need for a sleepover here, including my pajamas. I also have thorough knowledge of the baths at Albert Manor!"

"I hope you're not just using this situation as an excuse to stay here..." Mary grumbled suspiciously as she glared at the other girl.

However, Alicia magnificently ignored such allusions. Instead, she approached Adi, and peered down at the sleeping Anna's face. "She's so cute like this," Alicia said affectionately, but to Mary, it just seemed like she was feigning ignorance.

Regardless, Alicia was experienced in dealing with children, so Mary could at least admit that she was thankful to have the girl's help. Knowing she had no other choice, she decided to keep quiet about the matter. "All right, Alicia. Please look after Anna."

"Okay! Now then, Adi! Please get Anna to bed, slowly, carefully, and without shaking her!" Alicia instructed, all the more invigorated now that Mary was relying on her.

Adi smiled dryly in response. He would've bowed, but couldn't do so without the risk of waking Anna, so instead he settled for a light nod. Then, he vacated the room.

It was shortly after he left that Roberto entered. "I'm afraid I come with bad news," he announced.

Once he'd put Anna to bed, Adi returned to the room. Roberto, who was taking a breather, began explaining what he'd discovered. Under his supervision, Albert Manor's staff had found out that nobody had reported a missing child named Anna in their country.

"Does that mean she came from another nation...?" Mary asked.

"The scope of our search is wide, but as you might expect, things are more complicated when it comes to other countries..." Roberto said.

"But Anna said her mother had been hospitalized. It's possible that nobody's noticed she's missing..." Mary argued.

If Anna truly was a lost child from abroad whom even her parents didn't know was missing, then finding more information about the matter wouldn't be easy. The only person they could ask at this stage was Anna herself. But if they pressed her too much, she might grow fearful again.

This may be a drawn out war... Mary thought, reaching for the postcards that were resting atop the table. "What are these?"

"Postcards from Anna's father. They mention that he's been working away from home for a long time now, and he doesn't even know where he is anymore," Roberto said.

"Working away...?"

"Yes. It sounds like he hasn't been back for as long as Anna can remember. That's why she was out looking for him based only on this postcard."

As Roberto explained, Mary glanced through each of the postcards in turn. There were only five of them. They looked old, and it seemed like they hadn't been kept properly, as the paper was deteriorating, wrinkled, and had a few

tears here and there. Everything would've been resolved if she could have read the address, but sadly those areas were too smudged to read.

All that remained was the landscape pictured on the postcards. The little Anna must've thought that she would be able to find her father if she followed the scenery depicted in these images. She'd had these postcards in her pochette, along with a creased handkerchief. There were also a few crumbled cookies, and so few coins that one couldn't even call it a child's allowance.

That was all she had on her. Her supplies were certainly insufficient for such a journey, but Anna must've prepared them to the best of her ability. The idea made Mary's chest ache.

"To think such a small child was walking around with only some postcards as her guide..." Adi muttered with a sigh, taking one of the cards from Mary. The writing was all blurry, and even the images were faded and dim. Using this as a guide was beyond unreliable. If anything, it was reckless.

Nevertheless, they were Anna's only means of finding her father. She had treated them with the utmost care when she'd taken them out of her pochette.

"Still..." Mary said quietly. Both the front and the back of the postcards were too blurry to be of use. They looked old, so they must've been sent several years ago. Anna had said that these five were the only ones they'd had, and that her mother had kept them in a box. Mary sighed when she remembered how lonely Anna had looked when she'd mentioned that.

The girl's father had left home a long time ago in order to work. The only information they had about him was based on old postcards, which had stopped coming a few years ago. This didn't exactly seem like a solution.

"Your Ladyship, I know you may have some things on your mind regarding this, but for now we should focus on finding Anna's mother. Getting her back home is the first priority," Adi said.

"You're right... Tomorrow, let's go out in a carriage to follow the path that Anna walked. Roberto, please continue the search too," Mary commanded, at which Roberto bowed his head.

"If you need extra hands, House Dyce will join the search," Patrick added.

“Mary, I’ll come along tomorrow as well.”

“Are you sure?” she asked him.

“I may not be as experienced as Alicia, but I have younger brothers myself, so I know a thing or two about caring for kids. I think I can help.”

“Right, how nostalgic... When our mothers had tea parties together, you used to sit to the side with your brothers and read them books. At the same time, my brothers were chasing me around with frogs in their hands...” Mary recalled, furrowing her brows at the unpleasant memory.

Compared to House Dyce’s intellectual brothers, the Albert children had been exceedingly boisterous. Generally, Mary would screech as loud as thunder, Adi would rush over, and Roberto would bring the twins down, drawing things to a close. It had all been very clamorous, indeed.

We’re both distinguished families from the same nation, so why is there such a difference between us? Mary asked herself inwardly. Even considering that their conditions at home hadn’t been identical, the disparity between them was just too great. A moment later, Mary shook her head to dispel these idle thoughts (things would always get postponed like this, which was why the state at Albert Manor was still so boisterous).

“Well, it’s heartening to hear that both you and Alicia will be around,” Mary spoke up. “Right, Adi?”

“Of course. However, I’m the reason we’re in this troublesome situation to begin with,” Adi responded. “So you can just stay here, milady. You shouldn’t be taking such trips. You ought to rest at home instead...”

“Rest at home? Mary, are you feeling unwell?” Patrick asked, looking at her with concern.

Adi’s face soured at his accidental slipup. Roberto glared at him coolly.

In contrast, Mary’s expression was clear as she evasively replied with, “A little.” Dealing with children may have been her weak point, but keeping up appearances and glossing things over was her specialty.

“If you don’t feel well, shouldn’t you stay at Albert Manor?” Patrick followed

up.

“I’m fine; Adi’s just a worrywart. Besides, I’m not sick. This is something I ought to accept,” Mary explained with a warm smile, giving herself a tight hug. She wondered if the child in her belly would feel the embrace. The thought made her feel all the more affectionate.

“Accept...?” Patrick repeated. “Well, as long as you’re not sick, then fair enough. I’m going to go back home and begin the preparations. You’ll see me again tomorrow morning.”

“I’d like to see you off, Lord Patrick,” Roberto proposed. “If you don’t mind, we’d certainly love to receive House Dyce’s assistance.”

“No problem. Well then, Mary, Adi. I’ll be excusing myself.”

Patrick and Roberto both stood up and walked out of the room. Now it was just Mary and Adi. Mary let out a deep breath, and Adi softly patted her arm. Naturally, that was because she blamed him for his earlier gaffe. Patrick was quick on the uptake, so it wouldn’t have been surprising if he’d realized something upon hearing Adi’s words.

Adi placed a cushion on Mary’s knees, perhaps by way of apology. Her arm was already midswing, but she altered its course towards the cushion. She punched it lightly to express her exasperation and anger.

“Gracious, what a careless father you are! Don’t you agree?” Mary asked, addressing her abdomen.

Adi awkwardly scratched the back of his head. He then moved closer to Mary and placed his hand on her belly. His touch was gentle, maybe for the sake of the child, or else to lift Mary’s mood. “I apologize. I’m just worried about you.”

“Only about me?” Mary prompted, purposefully sulking about Adi being a mean father.

Adi surmised what she was trying to say and smiled wryly. He looked a bit embarrassed, yet unspeakably happy as well. How utterly lovely his expression was in this moment. “I’m worried about you *and* our child. So please don’t push yourself too much.”

“Right, I’d better consult the doctor about this. And we should have the carriage drive slowly.”

“Of course. With the doctor’s permission, we’ll make all the preparations. We’ll inform the driver, take plenty of breaks, and travel as slowly as possible to reduce any shaking.”

Mary paused. “It sounds like walking would be faster.”

“You mustn’t walk for long periods of time,” Adi insisted, and Mary’s shoulders sank at his overprotectiveness. His expression made it clear that he wasn’t joking, and that he wouldn’t allow her to take a single step.

But thinking of the child in her belly, Mary concluded that maybe this level of protectiveness was acceptable. Adi was only acting like this because he cared about her and their baby. Mary was grateful for that. Yet even so...

“If we go that slowly and stop so frequently, the others might catch on. Patrick noticing wouldn’t be surprising, and as for Alicia... When it comes to me, she has a scarily good intuition,” Mary said, knowing better than to underestimate the girl.

If they did as Adi suggested, their friends might recognize that something was going on. They might wonder why Mary’s carriage was taking so long, given the fact that they were supposed to be in a hurry to get Anna back home.

When Mary said as much, Adi nodded deeply. “Leave that to me.” He puffed out his chest, seemingly having a plan. “After all, I have motion sickness!” he declared, for some reason sounding proud. The difference in temperatures between his imposing stance and his actual statement was unspeakable.

“You mean we’ll blame your motion sickness?” Mary questioned.

“Yes, exactly!”

“I wonder where your sudden pride and self-confidence have come from... But I suppose you have a point. We can deceive them that way.”

When Mary entrusted the matter to him, Adi nodded elatedly. What a thin line there was between looking cool versus unattractive. Nevertheless, with this plan in place, they’d be able to avoid Patrick and Alicia’s suspicion.

I'll have to wake up early tomorrow and see the doctor, Mary thought. "But..." she whispered, for there was one thing still on her mind. Adi looked at her inquiringly. "I'm a bit worried about going back to my room all by myself when I'm pregnant. I wonder if I'll be able to find the way?" she mused, pretending to be fearful.

Adi smiled softly, reading her intentions, and held out his hand to her.



A single horse-drawn carriage departed from Albert Manor the following day. Inside were Mary and Adi, as well as Anna, who'd clung to Adi since the moment she opened her eyes. Sitting across from the trio were Patrick and Alicia. However, directly behind this carriage...

"Follow them!"

"Make sure we don't lose sight of them..."

...was yet another carriage with Lang and Lucian inside.

Chapter 2

“They’re obviously following us,” Mary murmured with disgruntlement while glaring at the carriage behind them. It definitely belonged to House Albert, and to her brothers, no less. Yesterday, they had disappeared after mentioning frogs and lizards, and Mary had thought that would be the end of that. But now it was clear to her that the twins had been devising a way to follow her since the previous day.

Mary had wanted to leave the house in their hands while she was away, but things hadn’t turned out like that at all. The small light of expectation within her, as well as her appraisal of her brothers, went out in a blaze of glory. Now, she lamented the fact that she had sent Roberto out on the search.

If he’d been here, he would’ve been able to stop Lang and Lucian’s antics. Or perhaps, after a long period of deliberating whether he should stop his foolish masters or follow his foolish brother, he would’ve hopped onto the carriage after all. (Mary thought the latter was more likely, because while she found Roberto reliable, she still thought of him, Lang, and Lucian as a unit.)

“Goodness!” she complained. “I told them we were going to look for Anna’s house. Do they think we’re taking a leisurely trip?”

“I’m sure they’re just concerned. But don’t worry, Anna. I guarantee they’re not bringing frogs or lizards with them,” Adi reassured the girl.

“I hate frogs and lizards...” she whispered fearfully while clinging to him. Just looking at her terrified countenance made Mary feel a stab of pain.

Reflexively, she clenched her fist. “Leave it to me!” she proclaimed enthusiastically. “Be it frogs or lizards, I’ll drive them all away!”

“Really...?” Anna asked quietly.

“Really! I’ll...um...pick them up and toss them out of the carriage window!” Mary declared proudly.

Anna contemplated for a few seconds. “But then I’ll feel sorry for them...” she

said eventually, her head drooping. Although she hated frogs and lizards, she still didn't want to see them tossed out a window. Considering the carriage's speed and the way it shook, throwing small creatures from it would be a matter of life and death for them.

Mary looked blatantly troubled at Anna's sympathizing with the critters. "Then what do you want me to do...?" she asked pathetically. She didn't think she could go up against frogs and lizards in the first place. Had Anna not been here and Mary's brothers barged into the carriage with such creatures, Mary would've screamed at the sight of them. (Or perhaps she would've bemoaned her brothers' immaturity.) But it wasn't as if she could retract her statement, so she was at a loss for what else to do.

At that moment, Alicia smiled and addressed Anna. "If it comes to it, we can take those frogs and lizards back home to Albert Manor. There's a garden and a fountain, so the critters can live there safe and sound."

"Really? So nobody will toss them?"

"No, don't worry. But we'll have to get House Albert's approval first," Alicia said, purposefully casting Mary a worried look.

Mary's eyes widened at this sudden change in topic. "Me?" she asked. But when Adi lightly elbowed her with a wry smile on his face, she finally understood what Alicia was doing. Patrick was smiling as well, and sent Mary a nod.

Anna hesitantly glanced up at Mary. Her soft, fluffy hair swayed with the movement, and her large red eyes were practically urging Mary to agree. It was adorable to see how worried she was about the critters, even though none of it was actually happening. "Can the frogs and lizards live in your home?"

"F-Fine," Mary replied. "If need be, I'll even install a frog-shaped ornament by the fountain."

Anna thought about that for a while. "No need," she decided, rejecting the idea. Apparently, the idea of a frog objet d'art was not to her liking.

Mary groaned and murmured, "You're quite selfish, aren't you?"

The little girl giggled at her words. The way she hid her mouth with both

hands was very childlike. It seemed like Anna was teasing Mary, and Mary was left at the mercy of Anna's shifting attitude.

The conversation continued for a while as they traveled. Anna was slowly coming out of her shell, and occasionally she played hand games with Alicia. Although she still stuck by Adi and called him her father, she was no longer wary of everyone else.

"Ah, I lost again. This is the first time I've taken loss after loss in a game," Patrick said, having just lost against Anna. It was the first time in his life that he'd been on such a losing streak, and nothing was going his way.

"You're losing because you're trying to employ elaborate strategies in a hand game, Patrick," Mary said. "That won't do you any good."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who keeps adding an element of psychological warfare to this," he responded.

They both smiled pleasantly while criticizing each other's faults. Their smiles were beautiful, as if taken straight out of a painting. Yet in reality, there was a spark of strife between them as they struggled not to land in last place. Alicia and Anna watched them with amusement. As for Adi...

"Daddy, are you okay?"

"I'm not your father, and I'm not okay... But don't worry. Just keep playing..."

...he was leaning against the window as he stared into the distance with hollow eyes. Indeed, it was due to his motion sickness. He wasn't putting on an act.

"Adi loses by default."

"Adi takes last place."

Mary and Patrick were still smiling as they nodded at each other. This was no coward's way out; it was simply that as members of distinguished noble families, they couldn't afford to land in last place, even in a children's game.

The trip continued, interspersed with more games and idle chatter, until eventually the carriage began slowing down. “We’re here, Adi,” Mary said, rubbing his shoulder. (Anna imitated Mary and rubbed his arm too. What a gentle child she was.)

The carriage stopped, and everyone looked out through the windows. Before them was an expansive field of flowers, blooming in many colors beneath the sun’s rays. The breeze reached inside the carriage, bringing with it a floral fragrance. Mary’s breath hitched at the gorgeous scenery. It was different from the pristinely managed garden within Albert Manor. There was a natural beauty here, with flowers freely blooming all over the place.

Mary had been here a couple of times. The flowers changed color according to the season, and because they were out in the wilderness, no view was ever the same. However, this was no time to be thinking about that. Mary turned to Anna and requested to look at her postcards.

The girl took them out of her pochette with utmost care and handed them to Mary. Although the types of flowers depicted on them were different, it was undoubtedly this very field.

“Anna, you’ve been here before, right?” Mary asked her.

“Yes... But my dad wasn’t here, so I got on a carriage.” Upon remembering the events of that day, the girl clung to Adi more tightly.

This place was beautiful, but if a little child were to come here on her own looking for her father, she wouldn’t have the time to appreciate the scenery. It hadn’t been on Anna’s mind at all. The lovely flowers, the sweet fragrance in the air, the butterflies flitting to and fro—she’d been so focused on her quest as she wandered about that such things wouldn’t have reached her heart.

“That’s right,” Mary said as she recalled Anna’s objective. “She might remember something if we walk around here, so let’s go a little farther in.”

“Good idea,” Adi agreed. “Anna could use a break from the trip. And sitting around so much might not be good for your body either, my lady, so let’s rest outside for a bit.”

“Most importantly of all, if we keep traveling so quickly, a certain someone’s

motion sickness might worsen.”

“Indeed... I request an hour of rest,” Adi pleaded, looking pallid. He then gingerly stepped out of the carriage and started tottering unsteadily.

Mary could only sigh as she followed outside and grabbed his right arm to support him. Meanwhile, Anna grabbed his left arm. Rather than hiding, this time she was trying to help him in her own way. She reached out her other hand and rubbed Adi’s arm, before surveying her surroundings. Spotting a resting place where a few people could sit around a table, she pulled on his arm, intending to go towards it.

To outsiders, this might look like a father being supported by his wife and daughter... Mary smiled wryly as she thought this, and with Adi’s arm in hers, began walking towards the table as well.

“We’ll be spending some time together,” Patrick declared happily while taking Alicia away, but Mary pretended not to see it. The couple had accompanied her thus far, so she was willing to overlook their date in the flower field.

And of course...

“Oh, Mary! What a coincidence!”

“It must’ve been divine Providence for us to meet here...”

...Mary also ignored Lang and Lucian, who stepped out of the carriage behind hers.



“Look, Mary! They’re selling gelato over there. I bought you a portion as well, so come, eat with me!”

“Peacefully eating gelato with my siblings in a flower field... What a beautiful scene...”

While Lang and Lucian, who were sitting around the table, chattered carelessly at their leisure, Mary openly turned away from them. Despite her cold attitude, she’d astutely accepted her portion of the frozen treat, of course. The dessert itself was blameless, and the twins had bought some for Anna too. They’d even gotten Adi a drink. Perhaps they felt bad for having followed Mary

and the others without being asked to.

Mary glared at her brothers accusingly while licking her gelato. “So tasty!” she exclaimed cheerfully before she could stop herself. A floral scent drifted through the air as she tasted the sweetness of the ice cream, and a cool sensation spread inside her mouth. Indeed, it was delicious.

Snapping back to her senses, she quickly shifted her expression into a severe look again. But it was already too late, as Lang and Lucian were gazing at her happily. Mary felt like she’d dug her own grave as they stared at her affectionately, and she looked away from them with a huff...while having another taste of the ice cream.

“I admit, the gelato is good, but that doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven you two for tagging along,” she said. “These are entirely separate matters.”

“It’s not that we’re following you, Mary,” Lang responded. “Lucian and I are taking a trip, that’s all. It’s just that, by sheer coincidence, our destination has miraculously ended up being the same as yours.”

“What a barefaced lie. Even if that were true, why on earth are you taking a trip?”

“For the succession war!” Lang proclaimed enthusiastically, holding out a booklet. Unlike the handbook they had used for their visit to Feydella, this one was small and looked to be cheaply made. It was just a few sheets of paper stuck together, and couldn’t rightfully be called a handbook, even as a means of flattery.

Just what is this...? Mary wondered, staring at the booklet Lang had placed on the table.

The writing on the cover wasn’t even styled in any way, and it read, “*The Struggle for House Albert’s Succession: Round One.*”

“Round one?! Are you two warring against each other?” Mary questioned.

“Yeah, Lucian and I are taking part in round one! You’ll fight the winner, Mary,” Lang explained.

“So I’m the seed?!” she exclaimed in shock at this unforeseen situation.

House Albert was the nation's most distinguished noble family. They even had influence abroad, and both domestic and foreign powers were waiting to see who'd inherit the house with rapt attention. *To think that our family's succession war is written out in such a flimsy booklet...* Mary thought, picking it up.

The clasp must've gotten loose, as the pages flitted down onto the ground. Most of them were blank. Worse yet, some irrelevant documents, which could've only been collected at random, were interspersed in between. Mary glared at the pages for a moment, then slowly picked them up one by one as if to show them off. Everything about them was crude and messy. There was a world of difference between this "handbook" and the previous.

"What is this supposed to be?" she asked.

"You must act to the best of your ability, even if there're no documents... This is the journey that will ascertain your discernment and adaptability as an heir...!"

"Well argued, Lucian. I'll show my due respect for said discernment and adaptability, and disregard it this time," Mary said, deciding to play it off as though she'd been fooled.

Lang and Lucian exchanged a look. Though they were as different as yin and yang, they smiled in unison to celebrate their success.

"These two... Don't worry, Anna. I won't let them pull any weird tricks," Mary promised.

"The ice cream's tasty," Anna said merrily, bits of gelato stuck around her mouth. She wasn't really following the siblings' conversation, as it was too difficult for her.

Adi pulled out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped Anna's mouth with it. The girl closed her mouth, and even her eyes, tightly in response. She looked as adorable as a little kitten being groomed by its parent.

Once her face was clean, Anna stood up from her chair and turned to face the twins. "Thank you for the ice cream, Big Brother Lang."

"O-Oh! Even though Adi birthed you, you're so cute and polite!"

“I did *not* birth her.”

“Big Brother Lucian, thank you too,” Anna continued.

“To think Adi’s binary fission would’ve produced such a sweet child... Adi, do it a few more times...”

“I didn’t do fission either!” Adi protested, his shoulders sinking as the twins continued to live in their own world.

Yet Lang and Lucian paid this no heed. They forced Adi and Mary from their seats, and sat down on each side of Anna. The twins cast Mary a sideways glance, signaling her with their eyes. They were saying that they’d look after Anna for now.

It was good timing, as right around then, Alicia and Patrick returned. “Oh my, Anna! I see you have a tasty treat!” Alicia said with exaggeration, and Anna smiled happily.

Mary decided to leave the child in their care, and pulled on Adi’s sleeve to get him to follow her.

Mary and Adi nestled against each other as they walked down the narrow path weaving through the flower field. The breeze blew pleasantly every now and then, leaving Mary in good humor. However...

“Please be careful, Your Ladyship. Ah, there’s a stone by your feet! Are there any insects around? Bees, perhaps? And the heavy floral scent might make you feel sick...!”

...Adi was fretting over every little thing the entire time, so Mary couldn’t immerse herself in the beautiful scenery. Whichever way she looked, and no matter what she did, Adi was worried about her. Both she and the baby in her belly thought as much.

When he said, “There are some stairs... Shall I carry you down?” Mary’s exasperation finally won out over her fondness for his paternal instincts.

She walked down the stairs with an audible rhythm, then swiftly turned back and faced Adi to show off her agility. “I understand where you’re coming from,

but you worry too much,” she told him.

“Even as you say that, I still feel like I’m on the verge of wrapping you up in a soft blanket and carrying you...”

“I think I could be buried in this field. The nutrients in my body would create some wonderful flowers!” Mary exclaimed jokingly, causing Adi to sigh in exhaustion.

But he must’ve realized he was worrying too much, as he caught up with Mary and grabbed her hand. “At least let me do this much,” he said. To him, this was a compromise.

Mary certainly didn’t want anyone wrapping her up in blankets, so she gladly welcomed holding Adi’s hand in exchange. “How nostalgic. In the past, we walked through this field while holding hands too.”

“Indeed. You were five years old the first time we came here, my lady. Right around Anna’s age.”

“I recall that you were worried about me back then too, and that’s why you held my hand.”

“W-Was I?” Adi muttered, turning away. He was acting as if he couldn’t remember that embarrassing story. Yet this very attitude practically screamed that he *did* remember it.

Mary couldn’t hold back her laughter as she squeezed his hand. “If I was five, then you must’ve been ten. You were already quite tall by that time.”

“Right. I was still in training as a servant back then, so I was a greenhorn. And...I believe that was around when I overtook Lord Lang and Lord Lucian in height...”

“*That* memory is best left forgotten. Let’s leave it behind us altogether. Anyway, I want to ask you something about those times,” Mary said, tightening her grip on Adi’s hand even more.

Adi glanced at her curiously...and then narrowed his eyes. His brows furrowed, and his expression turned sour. He must’ve had a bad feeling about this. Although he’d been the one to grab Mary’s hand initially, now he was

trying to pull away. Of course, Mary wouldn't allow it, holding on that much tighter. She even gripped his hand in both of hers.

"Wh-What is it...?" he asked.

"Ten years old is practically a strapping young lad already, right? I wonder if a certain devoted boy had already fallen in love with a little lady by then?" Mary inquired with a smirk. The devoted boy she was referring to was, of course, Adi, and the only person he'd ever fallen in love with was her. And though Mary had teased him using roundabout words, there was no way he wouldn't pick up on what she was saying.

"I...! You were House Albert's precious daughter since before you were even born, not to mention my precious mistress!"

"No use dodging the question. Come on, tell me... When you held my hand right here all those years ago, was I really just a precious '*mistress*' to you? Or a precious girl?" Mary pressed, smirking.

Adi flushed so much that there wasn't a single flower around them redder than his cheeks. Yet he must've made up his mind, for he placed his free hand onto Mary's. As Mary had already been holding his hand in both of hers, his other hand enveloped them. It was hard to tell who was holding whose hand by this point.

"You're making light of it, but I really struggled with my first love for a very long time," Adi appealed.

"So much so that you even birthed a child and did binary fission."

"Yes, indeed. My heart has belonged to you from the beginning, even when I held your hand right here back then," he said, recalling his past memories.

To Mary, they were vague and hazy; she could hardly remember it. It had simply been that long ago. Yet Adi had already been in love with her at that time. Mary's heart tingled, a sensation even sweeter than the gelato she had eaten earlier.

"This is kind of embarrassing..." she admitted.

"*You're* the one who asked, milady. I'm *beyond* embarrassed..." Adi muttered,

scratching the back of his head to conceal his shame as he glanced away sulkily.

Mary smiled impishly at the sight. Despite her embarrassment, she felt pleased. "Once our child is born, let's revisit this place. And then you can say all of that again."

"In front of the child?!"

"That's right. In fact, our child *has* to hear this story!"



“Please don’t be like that... Let’s end this topic once and for all!” Adi pleaded. Unable to bear it any longer, he began swiftly walking away. However, he was still holding Mary’s hand. Forced to match his stride, she had to jog slightly to keep up with him.

“Your father is so mean, refusing to match pace with us,” she said, addressing her abdomen.

The moment Adi heard that, he slowed down his pace.

Once they had returned to where the others were, everyone got back into the carriages, and they departed again.

“All right, see you later, Mary! Let’s spend more time together if we happen to run into each other again!”

“I don’t know if we’ll meet each other again... But I hope that we do...”

Lang and Lucian entered their own carriage, delivering their disingenuous farewells, but at this point, nobody even bothered to say anything about it.



As the carriage swayed gently, Mary gazed at the postcards she’d received from Anna. They had been sent by the little girl’s father. They looked old, and the paper was severely deteriorated. The images were blurry, and most of the writing was too faded to read. The paper quality couldn’t have been called good, even charitably, and the same was true for the ink. It wasn’t unrealistic for them to have degraded this much over several years, especially since they hadn’t been kept well.

Yet the creases and tears were conspicuous. In fact, if Mary looked carefully, it seemed to her like someone had crumpled them on purpose. She’d thought the edges had tears in them due to aging, but could someone have ripped them on purpose? Then again, these were postcards that someone had sent. Would anyone truly treat them so roughly?

“Perhaps somebody didn’t want to look at them...” Mary whispered.

These postcards had stopped coming long ago, right around the time Anna

had been born. Mary's chest ached as she considered the implications of that. If her hypothesis was true, then she could understand why Anna's mother would've hid the postcards away.

"What's wrong, big sis?"

Mary, who'd been staring down at the postcards, quickly snapped back to her senses when something tugged on her sleeve. She looked up and realized Anna was watching her. Alicia and Patrick were gazing at Mary curiously too, and Adi, acting as the representative, asked her what the matter was.

"N-No, nothing. I was just lost in thought," Mary replied.

"Are you sure? If you're not feeling well, we should go back to Albert Manor and rest awhile," Adi proposed.

"I'm fine. I... I'm fine... I'm *fine*, so stop stuffing cushions into every opening!" Mary yelled, pushing away the cushions that Adi had crammed beside her.

On closer inspection, she realized she didn't recognize them, and they looked new. When she asked about it, she found out that Adi had bought them from a stall in the flower field. To think their number of cushions was increasing even midjourney...

"From now on, buying additional cushions is forbidden!" Mary declared, and then used the one in her hand to smack Alicia, who was sitting across from her.

The other girl let out a shriek, but Patrick's hand stopped the cushion from making impact at the last second. "Mary, if you're feeling unwell, then I also think we should take a break," he said. "This might be a longer trip than we originally planned for."

"You're worrying too much as well, Patrick."

"You shouldn't push yourself, considering your situation," Patrick argued, unusually persistent.

Mary frowned. Just what had he meant by "situation"? She knew that he was a sharp and perceptive man. Perhaps he'd already realized that she was pregnant. Mary breathed out heavily through her nose and glared at Adi. Her harsh glare screamed, "*See?! He found out!*"

“As expected of you, Patrick. But kindly keep my ‘situation’ to yourself,” Mary told him.

“Yeah, I know. It’s not something you can announce right away,” he responded. Indeed, he’d already grasped her intention.

“What? What are you talking about?” Alicia asked, glancing between Mary and Patrick in confusion as question marks flitted about her head. There couldn’t have been a greater difference between her and her husband.

Although Patrick finding out about the news was an unforeseen development, he wasn’t someone who would carelessly expose the secret. Nor would he throw a party or parade for the occasion. He was aware of Mary’s position and influence, so he would surely cooperate. Mary may have been frustrated that he’d figured it out, but she was glad it was him.

“You’re not allowed to tell Alicia, no matter how much she pesters you,” Mary asserted.

“You’re hiding something from me? How cruel! I’ll have to do everything in my power to find out the truth from Lord Patrick... Now’s the time to use my deadly move!” Alicia exclaimed proudly, shuffling closer to Patrick.

Mary and Adi kept watch on Alicia’s movements, wondering if she’d try to plead with Patrick or seduce him. (Adi’s hand was resting on top of Anna’s head in the event that Alicia did try something seductive, in which case he’d cover the child’s eyes.)

Patrick couldn’t bring himself to be strict with his beloved wife, so with a wry smile he said, “Go easy on me.”

Just what is she planning to do...? Mary wondered.

As everyone watched, Alicia suddenly grabbed Patrick’s hand with both of hers. Her slender fingers wrapped around Patrick’s graceful yet masculine ones. A beautiful couple was holding hands and gazing at each other; Patrick’s indigo hair fluttered, and Alicia’s golden locks shimmered. What a gorgeous scene this was, indeed.

And so, after a while of them staring at each other...

“Alicia, you can’t entice me with chocolate.”

...Patrick’s shoulders sank as he sighed. He slowly opened his hand to reveal a tiny parcel.

“What?! I can’t believe my deadly move failed!” Alicia lamented.

“Goodness... And here I was, wondering what sort of trick you’d use... Anna, do you like chocolate?” Patrick asked with a calm smile, handing it over to her.

The cute sweet was wrapped in pink packaging. Anna happily took it and unwrapped it. She popped the chocolate into her mouth and rolled it around, her face instantly breaking into a smile. Both Patrick and Alicia looked pleased with this, even though the latter’s deadly move had failed. Most likely, Alicia had foreseen this turn of events. She already got along well with Anna, so now she wanted to act as the intermediary between the little girl and Patrick.

Mary couldn’t stop herself from smiling at this heartwarming sight. She was certain that the couple would raise their own child with such kindness too. Perhaps they might even dote on her child.

“These two might be useful, so I suppose I’ll at least let them be our assistants,” Mary said with a huff. Adi, understanding the implication of her words, smiled wryly.

The carriage came to a sudden halt while the group was engaged in conversation. Because they still hadn’t reached their destination, everyone wondered what was going on.

“There you are, Lady Mary.”

“Oh, Roberto!” Mary exclaimed upon seeing the man’s face appear in the window.

Apparently, Roberto had uncovered some new information and therefore caught up with their carriage. Yet whatever he’d discovered must’ve been unfavorable, as when he appealed, “I’d like to speak with you,” his voice was slightly lower than usual. His sharp eyes glanced briefly over to Anna, silently alluding that he didn’t want her to hear this.

“Anna, why don’t we step outside for a break? Let’s go find the carriage that’s following us and give them a little surprise,” Alicia suggested, smiling mischievously.

The little girl smirked at those words and nodded enthusiastically. The heavy air emanating from Roberto must’ve flown right over her head.

After Alicia and Anna stepped out of the carriage, Roberto entered in their place. Mary expressed her thanks for his efforts, and inquired as to what he’d found out.

“I have discovered Anna’s identity,” he announced. “She came here from Sylvino.”

“Sylvino?! You mean she crossed the border?!” Mary shouted.

“Indeed. She has surprising initiative for a child. Even better than Lord Lang and Lord Lucian’s escapades, I’d say.”

“My brothers aren’t children...is what I’d *like* to say, but since they’re literally following us around, I’ll refrain.”

“I *did* tell them they should stay at the mansion, as they have work to do,” Roberto said, his eyes sharpening. He must’ve been picturing his freewheeling masters who were always brimming with way too much dynamism. Had Mary voiced her permission, he would’ve certainly gone into the twins’ carriage at a moment’s notice.

What would happen next...? But before Mary could imagine it, she realized she ought to be focusing on Anna and vanquished the thought. She didn’t want to picture it, anyway.

“Forget my brothers for now. You’ve found out Anna’s identity, so why do you look so forlorn?” Mary asked. “Sure, Sylvino is quite far, but if we go at an even pace, we’ll get there by noon tomorrow.”

“About that...” Roberto said, looking depressed. His next words were much harsher than anything Mary had been prepared for.



Anna came from a land called Sylvino. Her father had left their home before

she was born. Although he used to send letters and occasionally came back to visit, all contact from him had ceased several years ago. According to Roberto's findings, Anna's father had rambled around from place to place in search of work, until he met a different woman, with whom he built a new family. Ever since then, he'd stopped visiting Anna and her mother and hadn't so much as contacted them.

Mary's breath hitched as she listened to the tale. What a heartless story it was, for a man to abandon his wife and child and start a new family with someone else. "So that's why Anna's mother hid those postcards..." she muttered.

"With no relatives to rely on, it must've been incredibly difficult for her to raise Anna by herself," Adi affirmed.

"All her hard work must've wrecked her body, and so Anna left to find help from her father. She still believes he's working somewhere out there for her and her mother..."

The reality was much too painful for such a young child. It was likely that Anna's mother had kept the truth from her daughter so as not to hurt her.

"From what I've found out, Anna's father had red hair and eyes," Roberto went on. "Anna's mother had told her as much, so Anna must've followed the scenery depicted in the postcards, found Adi, and confused him for her father," he speculated, which made sense...even though it was a harrowing tale.

All of them felt resentful. Adi's face twisted in heartbreak, and he turned to gaze out the window. Alicia had taken Anna outside, and now the little girl was playing with Lang and Lucian. Without any additional context, the scene would've looked joyful. Anna's occasional ecstatic screams were so very childlike.

That same child had no idea that her father had turned his back on her, and she had gone out looking for him. She'd even crossed national borders in her quest. She must've been desperate to save her hospitalized mother. Thinking about Anna's intentions caused Mary to tear up. As an adult, and someone who'd soon have a child of her own, she couldn't simply abandon this matter.

"I'm going to visit Anna's home. I'll speak with her mother, and if need be,

House Albert will give her support,” Mary declared.

“Are you sure, my lady?” Adi asked.

“Of course I am. Anna isn’t your child, but there’s no way I could just return her home and write this whole thing off here and now!” she asserted with determination.

Adi looked relieved, and Patrick smiled wryly as well. They nodded at each other as if saying, *“That’s Mary for you,”* and *“As expected of milady.”*

“However, there’s one problem,” Roberto interjected, as if to restrain Mary’s enthusiasm.

“Problem?” she repeated.

“The region where Anna lives doesn’t have good public order. Life there must be quite difficult...” Roberto lowered his voice, perhaps not wanting to say too much.

Mary and Adi gasped at his words, while Patrick muttered, “About that...” He was frowning, and his expression was unusually severe for his typically pleasant self. “I heard that land management in Sylvino is largely left up to each individual feudal lord, so there’s a lot of wealth disparity between the different regions.”

“Is that why Anna’s father had to leave? I still won’t pardon him!” Mary exclaimed.

“You say that, but this is another nation’s matter. It might cause problems if we try to intervene. Besides, there’s another country between us,” Patrick said, implying that they wouldn’t be able to discuss the matter easily.

Mary racked her brain, drawing a map in her mind’s eye. Indeed, there was one country in between theirs and Sylvino. However...

“If we can’t intervene, somebody else can do it for us,” Mary pronounced confidently, for the country she was thinking of housed a certain crybaby noblewoman who would welcome her with open arms.

Chapter 3

Although the Eldland estate fell short in comparison to Albert Manor, it was still a splendid and majestic home, full of character. The maids must've looked after it constantly, as there wasn't a speck of dust, and the interior was decorated with seasonal plants and paintings. Every nook and cranny was well maintained, which displayed not only the family's dignity, but also how much everyone adored their new head of the house.

In contrast to this majesty, a rushed pitter-patter of footsteps resounded in the mansion. "Lady Mary! Lady Mary...!" Parfette cried as she approached. She was still a fair distance away, but she'd already spread her arms, and her off-white dress fluttered behind her. Once she had finally made her way over to Mary, she wanted to embrace her, delighted by their reunion.

Yet Adi wedged himself between the girls, redirecting Parfette's trajectory towards Alicia instead.

"Lady Mary, I missed you... No, this doesn't feel like Lady Mary! Lady Alicia?!" Parfette squeaked, surprised to discover whom she was hugging.

Nevertheless, Alicia embraced the other girl tightly. "It's been a while, Parfette!"

"Yes, it has...!"

Two beautiful girls hugged each other, celebrating their reunion. What a gorgeous scene it was, indeed. But Mary, who was left out of it, only shrugged her shoulders at this typical course of events. She then glanced over at Adi.

"I don't really think it's a problem if Parfette wants to hug me," she informed him.

"No can do. I won't let anyone hug you, milady," he responded.

"No? Then I suppose I'll be feeling lonely for quite some time."

"*I'm* an exception," Adi clarified as he blushed.

Mary smiled dryly, then turned her attention to Patrick and Gainas, who were exchanging greetings with each other.

The head of House Eldland could be referred to as this nation's representative. From Mary's perspective, he was simply a man whose wife led him around by the nose. However, that didn't change the fact that Gainas was the leader of a distinguished family with many connections, both domestically and abroad. He had great influence, all the more so when it came to Sylvino, a country adjacent to his own.

Once she had finished explaining all the details, Mary smiled at Gainas and clapped her hands. "So there you have it. Now, I'd like you to intrude on Sylvino's affairs, and haul the feudal lord who governs Anna's region over the coals."

"This may turn into an international incident, Lady Mary, so couldn't we sugarcoat things a lit—"

"Crush him completely!!!"

"I'll take the appropriate measures." Despite the way his head drooped, Gainas agreed to cooperate.

Patrick patted Gainas's arm to console him. He looked at the other man with a calm and lovely smile, as though he could understand Gainas's feelings. He nodded deeply, and...

"Drive him to the point of no return."

...delivered a follow-up attack. His smile was beyond stunning at that moment. His overall degree of shininess was about twenty percent stronger than the disturbing quality of his words.

Gainas narrowed his eyes. Perhaps he was exasperated, or else dazzled by Patrick's light. "Even you, Lord Patrick...?"

"I'm in a certain position here myself. A single representative of a nation shouldn't carelessly meddle in the affairs of another country. But things are different for House Eldland."

“You have a point,” Gainas concurred. “Many people from Sylvino have crossed into our country recently, so starting the conversation from that point should make things easier. The disparity between Sylvino’s wealthy and poor has come up numerous times before, so this might be an ideal opportunity.”

“Good. We’re counting on you. If push comes to shove, be ready to expand House Eldland’s territory.”

“Lord Patrick, let’s try to resolve this peacefully, I beg of you...”

“We’ll thoroughly uproot him and snatch his lands.”

“I’ll take the appropriate measures.” As Gainas realized that arguing was useless in this case too, his shoulders sank.

Adi called out to Gainas next. His voice was lower than usual, and he stared fixedly at the other man. He was almost radiating an air of intimidation. Mary, who sat next to him, noticed the change and looked up at him as well. Adi’s countenance was grim. Though he remained calm, a fiery vortex of passion was swirling in his eyes.

“Please do what you can, Lord Gainas.”

“Lord Adi...”

“Obviously, Anna isn’t my daughter. But though she may have done so out of a misunderstanding, she nevertheless asked for my help. She was extremely anxious and afraid. When I remember that, I cannot bring myself to wrap the matter up by simply sending her home.”

Adi’s voice was filled with indignation as he spoke, and everyone’s attention turned to him. They could feel the icy wrath emanating from him. Given Anna’s unreasonable circumstances, Adi couldn’t suppress his feelings right now.

Gainas’s expression also shifted to a serious one as he looked back at Adi. “I’m going to send a messenger to the feudal lord right away.”

“Please do.”

“It might be best if we leave tomorrow. You all must be tired from the journey, so I’ll arrange for you to stay the night here,” Gainas proposed. The others thanked him for the courtesy and took him up on his offer.

The Eldland estate was sizable, so it must've had plenty of spare rooms. Allowing Mary and the others to stay the night was a point of honor for the family. Occasionally, one had to take someone up on an offer without reserve, and then return the favor at another time. This was one of the ways to deepen the relationships between families.

Parfette and Alicia, who'd been taking care of Anna, bowed to each other when they heard of this plan. "I hope you have an enjoyable stay here," Parfette said, offering a warm welcome. She already possessed the dignity of the lady of the house.

"We'll take you up on that," Alicia responded, lowering her head. A princess shouldn't bow to just anyone, but since this was a sleepover at a friend's house, that surely wasn't a problem.

Anna, who was sitting between the girls, looked at each of them in turn before mimicking them and lowering her head too. Her adorable gesture and her faltering words of "We'll take you up on that," caused the two women to scream shrilly.

Such a heartwarming scene evaporated the tension between the others as they smiled. Recalling something, Mary addressed Gainas. "Could you arrange a stay for my brothers as well? They said they wanted to gather some information on Sylvino and disappeared, but I'm sure they'll be back."

"You mean Lord Lang and Lord Lucian? Of course, it's not an issue," Gainas replied.

"They're annoyingly loud, so you can stuff them both into one room."

"I... I couldn't... I'll get each of them a proper room. And one for Adi's brother too."

"Indeed, please arrange for Roberto to have his own room."

"Isn't there something strange about your difference in treatment?" Gainas muttered with a strained expression.

Usually, the idea of a noble family's two eldest sons being put into one room while their servant got his own separate room was unthinkable. Such rudeness would've been sure to incite the guests' wrath, and they wouldn't have been

wrong to accuse their host of breaching common sense.

Yet Mary once more insisted, “My brothers will be fine in one room.” She wasn’t saying this as a display of modesty or restraint. Rather, she found her brothers bothersome enough that she wanted them done away with in one convenient place.

“W-Well, I’ll still arrange for three rooms and let them decide by themselves. Does that sound reasonable?” Gainas tried.

“Or we can just have all three of them stay in one room.”

“Why are you choosing the most confined option...? Anyway, I’ll arrange for one room per person. Please use them as you see fit,” Gainas said, his shoulders drooping. He knew that if this conversation continued, they wouldn’t make any progress.

After he’d stepped away to hand out the instructions to his servants, Mary sighed. She would finally be able to settle down and rest. They’d gone to one place after another today, and the sun was already setting. They might’ve been traveling via carriage, but that in itself was still tiresome enough. To think that Anna had covered such a long distance by herself, and using only dirty postcards as her guide, no less. Mary wanted to ensure that the child received a good night’s sleep. With a word of pardon, a maid entered the room, and Gainas instructed her to prepare dinner for the guests. Despite their party’s unannounced visit, their host was even providing a meal. Mary was about to accept his kindness, when...

“Mary, shouldn’t you be watching your diet?”

...Patrick called out to her. He must’ve been referring to the baby in her belly.

Mary glanced down at her abdomen and had an epiphany. Perhaps it was still too soon to be worrying about her diet, but then again, considering she was in the midst of an excursion, she thought it might be a good idea to take it into account.

Gainas must’ve heard this too, as he turned around to look at Mary with surprise. “Is there anything you dislike to eat, Lady Mary?”

“No... But I suppose I do want to discuss some things regarding dinner.”

“Very well. I’ll summon the head maid, so would you mind informing her about your preferences?”

“I will, thanks. I’ll give you five— No, you’re accommodating us all, so you can get *ten* points from each guest.”

“In that case, I’d better arrange for dessert and some chocolates to be left in every room,” Gainas said in jest, before leaving to summon the head maid.

Mary turned to Adi. “Would you mind explaining everything to the maid?” she inquired.

“Leave it to me. I’ll supervise your food preparation.”

“Just don’t worry so much that you leave me with only a tiny portion of vegetables. But don’t overdo it and give me too much either,” Mary instructed humorously.

Surmising that she was laughing at his overprotectiveness, Adi sulkily replied, “It’ll be fine.” The head maid entered the room right at that moment, and Adi took the opportunity to go over to her side.

Mary shrugged as she watched him go. Then she glanced sideways at Patrick, who’d been observing the exchange. He had been the one to bring up the topic of her diet, so he must’ve been aware of her situation. Yet Mary couldn’t openly say anything, so she limited herself to quietly thanking him. Patrick responded with a wink. He was one clever man, indeed.

Alicia’s voice interrupted this exchange. “We still have some time until dinner, Anna!” she exclaimed, so Mary and Patrick naturally turned their attention in her direction.

Anna was sitting next to Alicia, leaning against her. The little girl’s weariness must’ve come to the surface, and she had grown sleepy. Her eyes were half-lidded, and when Alicia shook Anna’s shoulder, the child’s head drooped.

“Anna, you should at least have some dinner before bed! It’ll be yummy!”

“We’re preparing it right now, so please hold on a bit...!”

Alicia and Parfette were doing their best to get Anna to open her eyes, but she was certain to fall asleep at any moment. She hadn’t uttered a word of

complaint throughout the journey. Even yesterday, she'd held out to her limit before suddenly falling asleep. Aware of her own situation, Anna must've been doing her utmost to persevere until the last minute.

"What a commendable girl," Mary whispered under her breath.

Lang, Lucian, and Roberto did indeed arrive at the Eldland estate eventually, but when they did...

"What a coincidence! We just wanted to stop by and say hello to Lord Gainas. Who would've thought you'd all be here too! What a total coincidence."

"I'm sure it must've been Mary's incredible conduct that brought us all together. This is practically a miracle..."

"Yes, yes. It's a coincidence and a miracle. We apologize for the sudden visit, Lord Gainas."

...their excuses were unbelievably insincere. They really were a three-person unit.

Yet nobody felt like saying anything about it at this point, and only Gainas conscientiously humored their hypotheses while ushering them in. "By sheer coincidence, I've arranged enough food for everyone," he said, his words sounding incredibly forced.

Once everyone had their fill of dinner, it was time for them to retire to their respective bedrooms. Mary had received a room of her own, but she only left her luggage there before going over to Adi's room. So far, they had all been traveling as a group, but now she wanted to spend time with her beloved, just the two...or *three* of them, as it were.

That had been Mary's plan, but when she arrived in Adi's room, Anna was sound asleep on top of his bed. It was large enough to accommodate up to three adults, and she was curled into a ball right in the middle, as if she were a kitten.

"I was going to have the maids look after her, but the idea upset her," Adi

explained. "It'd be troublesome if she woke up in the middle of the night and started crying, so we decided to let her sleep in my room."

"Right, that makes sense," Mary agreed.

"My apologies. You even came here expecting for the two of us to spend some time together..."

"It's nothing to apologize over. In fact, if you had ignored Anna and started saying you wanted to make out with me, I would've kicked you right out of this room. Anyway...it wouldn't have been just us two in the first place." Mary giggled, rubbing her belly.

Adi smiled. "The *three* of us," he rectified. He then clasped Mary's hand and invited her to sit on the bed. Mary did so, careful not to wake Anna. "I'm sorry I got us caught up in this turmoil when you should be taking it easy."

"It's fine. Besides, given my personality, I'd get bored just sitting around and waiting until the child is born," Mary said jokingly, at which Adi smiled wryly as well. It was a familiar smile, one she had seen since she was an infant. Yet how strange to think that this would soon be the face of a father.

Mary felt like nothing had changed between herself and Adi since their youth, but as it turned out, everything had been slowly changing without her noticing. "I wonder if I'll be able to raise our child properly?" she mused.

"Are you anxious about it?"

"Everyone's anxious the first time they face a challenge. You have plenty of experience looking after children, so you're fine," Mary said sulkily, muttering about how she was a novice at it.

It wasn't just Adi. Patrick had experience from living with two younger brothers, and dealing with children was Alicia's forte. Parfette seemed used to it as well, and in the same way, Gainas interacted with Anna naturally. Mary was the only one unaccustomed to dealing with children. Yet she'd soon be a mother, so it was natural that she had some anxiety about it.

"I've never felt this nervous about anything. Not when I pursued my own ruin, started up the migratory bird restaurant business, entered House Albert's succession war, or published a dictionary of Feydella's flowery words..."

“It’s not as if you’ll be raising the child by yourself, milady. Everyone else will help out too, and most importantly, I will be there. You’ll be fine,” Adi assured her, rubbing her arm. The touch of his large, warm hand melted away Mary’s anxiety. “No matter if it’s raising a child or anything else, you have nothing to worry about as long as I’m with you. After all, the young lady I’ve been assisting all this time has become the most ladylike woman in the whole world.”

Mary’s eyes widened when Adi boasted of his achievement. Then, she laughed. “You fool.” Of course, the woman he was referring to was none other than Mary herself. “But you’re right. If you’re there, then raising a child will be no problem,” she said, her voice no longer showing a hint of apprehension. Quite the opposite: her anxiety had vanished to the point that she let out a yawn. Now that her mind was lighter, she was hit with a wave of drowsiness.

Mary murmured that she wanted to sleep, and slowly lay down on the bed. Anna, who’d been curled into a ball, must’ve felt the movement, as she began to fidget restlessly. Mary placed her hand on the girl’s tummy to calm her down, and gently patted it a few times, recalling what her own mother used to do for her long ago.

How small and soft the little girl was. Mary found it slightly difficult to adjust the amount of force she used, but she must’ve done it right, for Anna’s movements ceased. As a sign that she was comforted by the gesture, the child’s breathing grew slow and steady once more.

In her restlessness, a strand of hair had fallen against Anna’s forehead. Mary brushed it aside with her fingers. It was the same shade as Adi’s.

“I wonder what hair color our child will have? Mine, or yours...? They might even have red drills,” Mary theorized. The child wasn’t even born yet, and Mary’s belly was still flat, yet her imagination was running wild. They still didn’t know anything, not the child’s gender, nor the color of their eyes or hair. All the two of them knew was that there was a child in Mary’s abdomen, which was exactly what made thinking about it so exciting.

While Mary was excited by her imagination, Adi smiled wryly. He lay down next to Anna as well. With each of them on one side of the small child, it was as if they were parents already.

“We still have plenty of time, so let’s give it some careful thought,” Adi proposed.

“Right. And we have to prioritize Anna for now. Let’s save her and her mother, then beat the feudal lord to a pulp!”

“You won’t be able to sleep if you get so worked up. We’re getting up early tomorrow,” Adi pointed out, urging Mary to sleep.

Mary nodded. It was almost as if *she* were a child being put to sleep. Feeling a mixture of drowsiness and embarrassment, she closed her eyes to lull herself to sleep, and...

“That’s right; picture books are great for lulling children to sleep! Which ones should we get? Let’s order some lovely ones from all over the world!”

...opened her eyes again with a flash.

However, Anna began fidgeting once more. She mumbled incomprehensibly under her breath like a mewling kitten, until finally muttering, “Be quieeet...”

Mary and Adi exchanged a look. With a dry smile, they both bid each other good night and went to sleep.

It was by sheer coincidence that Mary woke up in the middle of the night. Normally, she’d simply go right back to sleep. She found it hard to wake up most of the time, and was the type of person who’d laze about in bed throughout the morning.

Yet tonight, she felt strangely awake, and slowly sat up so as not to disturb the sleeping Adi. She looked around her dark surroundings, remembering that she wasn’t in Albert Manor. *Right, we’re staying over at the Eldland estate...* she thought, and in that same moment, she spotted a small figure sitting on the sofa in the corner of the room.

“What’s wrong, Anna?” Mary asked, stepping out of the bed and squatting by the sofa. She asked if Anna felt unwell, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“I woke up,” the little girl responded quietly.

“It’s still too early to get up. Why don’t we sleep for a little longer?” Mary

suggested.

“But...”

“Are you worried about something? Would you like me to read to you before going back to bed? A fable, maybe? Or would you prefer a lullaby?” Mary didn’t know how to convince a child to go to bed, so she listed all sorts of methods. She had some ideas when it came to her own unborn child, but when push came to shove, she didn’t know what to actually do. Worse yet, none of her ideas enticed Anna to return to bed, and she continued sitting there dejectedly. The darkness made her look pitiful.

Yet soon enough, a small growl resounded in the room. Anna hurriedly curled in on herself, wrapping both arms around her belly protectively.

“Ah, you can’t sleep because you’re hungry. You fell asleep before dinner, so it’s no wonder,” Mary said, letting out a sigh of relief as she understood the situation. It would’ve been a serious problem if Anna had felt sick. Mary would’ve been just as troubled if the child had been longing for her mother. However, a hungry child was something even Mary could deal with. Surely Anna would feel sleepy once her stomach was full. “All right, I’ll bring you something delicious!”

“Really...?”

“Yes, so wait just a moment,” Mary promised, petting the girl’s head. She smiled happily in response. The child’s red hair stood out even in the darkness, and its softness as it entwined around Mary’s fingers felt ticklish.

As Mary left the room, a small voice told her, “See you soon.”

Right around the time Mary had woken up, Gainas had received a messenger in his room. Returning so late in the night, the messenger had indeed informed Sylvino’s feudal lord about Gainas’s desire to meet him. The lord had agreed, and found no issue with Gainas paying him a visit tomorrow morning.

Gainas apologized to the servant for the sudden errand, praised their achievement, and then asked about the situation in that particular domain of Sylvino. However, his expression soured upon hearing a rather unfavorable

report.

“To think Anna grew up in such a terrible place,” Parfette said with a sigh. She’d been trying to stay awake as Gainas finished up his work, but now she frowned sorrowfully at the messenger’s tale. House Marquis had raised her with care, as if she were a princess, and to someone of her temperament, the situation in Sylvino was almost too much to listen to.

Gainas noticed the state she was in, and beckoned her over. He wrapped one arm around Parfette and comforted her. “It’s just like Lord Patrick said. If need be, House Eldland will deal with that region.”

“Are you sure? It could become an international incident...”

“We may not be as big as House Albert or House Dyce, but we still carry some authority. And we can’t just ignore this matter.”

“You’re kind and dependable, Lord Gainas. Twenty points,” Parfette declared, her cheeks slightly flushed as she leaned against him.

The messenger, who had until now spoken with a severe expression on his face, smiled wryly at the couple and said, “I’ll finish my report tomorrow,” before bowing and making a quick exit. This messenger knew how to read the room.

Gainas decided that he shouldn’t let that consideration go to waste. He informed Parfette that he was done working for the day. In reality, he still had a few things left to do, but he couldn’t resume his duties under such circumstances.

“We’ll be departing early tomorrow, so let’s go to bed,” he said.

“You’re right. Well then, I’ll return to my room,” Parfette replied with an impish giggle, slipping out of his arms.

“What, weren’t you waiting for me?” Gainas countered, restraining her in a tight hug. When he implored her to let the two of them sleep together, Parfette purposefully put on a cold act. She made a show of wondering what to do, all because she wanted Gainas to make a decisive move.

Sensing as much, Gainas brought his face closer to hers. Parfette gazed up at

him, then closed her eyes, and...

“That’s enough! Put out some food!”

...both their eyes widened when Mary suddenly interrupted.

“A robber?! No, *Lady Mary*?!”

“I’m sorry for the late visit to your room, Gainas. I’d like you to arrange for some food,” Mary asserted.

“Food...? Was dinner insufficient?”

“No, but Anna woke up feeling hungry. We need to give her a light meal and get her back to bed, or else it’ll affect how she feels tomorrow,” Mary explained.

Parfette, flushed with embarrassment, suddenly came forward. “I’ll do it! I’ll ask for something from the kitchen, so please hold on a moment.”

“Go ahead,” Mary responded, and the still-blushing Parfette scurried out of the room. Mary watched her go, then eased out a sigh. She hadn’t been sure of what to do, since she couldn’t act as she pleased in the Eldland estate. But now it seemed she’d be able to return to Anna’s side in no time. Not to mention, Parfette was sure to be thoughtful and arrange for an appropriate meal.

What a relief... Mary thought, then glanced at the nearby Gainas.

In contrast to the reddened Parfette, he looked notably pale. He hadn’t said a word, yet Mary could practically hear him shrieking, “*Don’t leave me, Parfette!*”

“You’re surprisingly bold to be inviting her to bed when you’re not even married,” Mary remarked.

“N-No, I was just...! I did invite her, but I just wanted us to sleep next to each other! I wouldn’t do anything that’d leave me with a guilty conscience...!”

“Then can you tell me all about it while we wait for Parfette? Oho ho ho...!” Mary laughed elegantly, while Gainas paled even further.

Yet he seemed to have remembered something, and exclaimed, “Oh, that’s right!” in order to change the topic. “The messenger I sent to Sylvino has returned. I’ll be able to meet with the feudal lord in question tomorrow!”

“I believe we were discussing how you invited Parfette to bed.”

“The messenger also mentioned that the territory is in an even worse state than we’ve heard.”

“You mentioned that you wouldn’t do anything that’d make you feel guilty, right? So just what kind of things were you imagining when you said that, *hmm?*”

“Thankfully, I have relatives in Sylvino, so I’d be able to leave the land management to them. That way, things won’t escalate into an international affair.”

“I have no desire to meddle, but as your friend, I’d like you to share all kinds of things with me.”

Gainas frantically tried to put up a resistance, but Mary swiftly hacked away at it. She was grateful that he had set up a meeting with the feudal lord, but these were entirely separate matters.

Gainas sensed that he was in a bad spot, and a cold sweat broke out across his temples. “By the way...” he muttered hoarsely. “D-Does this matter, uhh...have any relation to your past life memories and such?”

“Not in the slightest. Anyway, regarding those ‘guilty conscience’ things you mentioned—do tell me about them concretely. Are they things you’ve done with Parfette already? If not, what kind of plans do you have for the future? I’m listening,” Mary said with a graceful smile, elbowing the man.

For outsiders, this would’ve looked like a noblewoman acting a little bit mean. Yet upon careful inspection, it was clear that Mary’s blows landed right in Gainas’s flank, and each time her elbow dug into him, he let out a pained groan. These couldn’t exactly be passed off as minor acts of meanness.

“Parfette, please come back quickly...” Gainas’s pathetic voice echoed fruitlessly in the quiet hallways of the Eldland estate.

Parfette had arranged for an assortment of bite-size sandwiches. The fillings were mostly vegetable based, with some ham and cheese ones as well. It was a

splendid choice for a late-night snack. The platter was also garnished with fruit, and Parfette had prepared two cups of warm milk so that Mary could have one too.

Mary brought everything back to the room, where a small light had been switched on. Anna came out to greet her, and her eyes lit up at the sight of the sandwiches. As soon as they were ready, she began happily munching away. Mary had been worried when she'd initially seen the little girl sitting by herself on the sofa, but at this rate, it looked like they would easily be able to go back to sleep.

However, once Anna had finished her meal and her preparations to return to bed, she went back to sit on the sofa instead. She quietly called out Mary's name, and there was no vigor to her like when she'd been eating the sandwiches. Mary peered at her dispirited features; the little girl's eyes were wavering as if she was on the verge of tears.

"What's wrong, Anna?"

"I'm sorry..." Anna whispered so quietly that her voice almost faded out.

Mary's eyes widened. Why was Anna apologizing? "It's all right. Nobody will be angry with you for waking up at such an hour. Staying up late every now and then isn't so bad."

"That's not what I mean..."

"Then are you apologizing because you had a late dinner? It's not a big deal. After all, you fell asleep without having eaten anything."

"It's not that either..."

"Wait, did you wet the bed?!" Mary conjectured. "That's okay. I'll get you a hot bath and a change of clothes. If you're embarrassed about it, we can just blame Adi!"

"I know that...he isn't my dad..." Anna admitted weakly, hanging her head.

"Anna..." Mary said with concern.

Anna's voice trembled when she spoke next, convulsing with sobs. As Mary rubbed her small shoulders, large tears began streaming down her cheeks. "I

knew...that he wasn't my real dad... But if I said so...he'd tell me to go back home by myself..." she appealed desperately through her hiccups. She tried to wipe her tears away with both hands, but more soon replaced them. It was a painful sight.

Mary quickly pulled out a handkerchief and wiped Anna's face. The corners of her eyes were red because of the messy way she'd rubbed them.

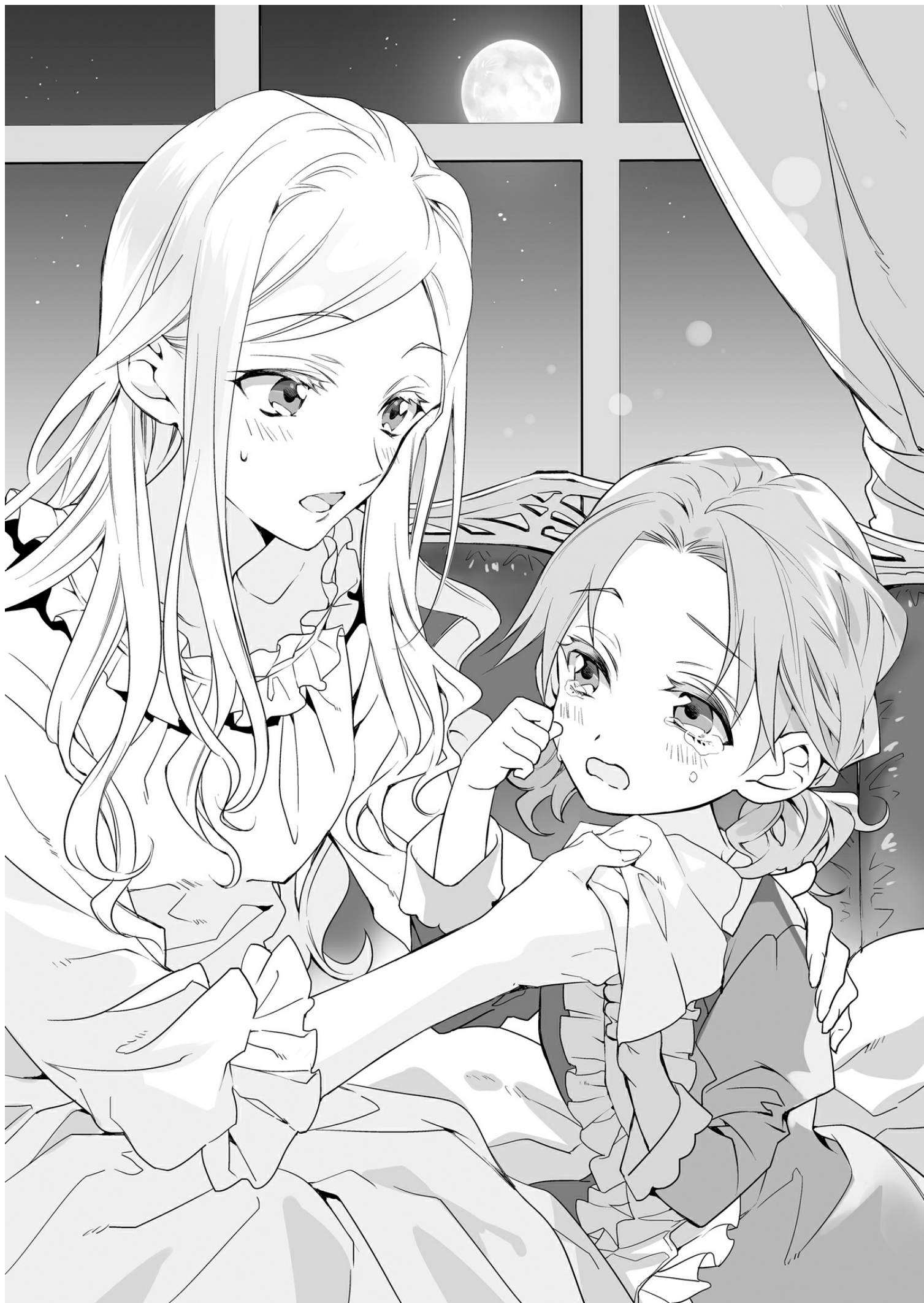
"I'm sorry... I caused everyone trouble..."

"It's okay, and you didn't trouble anyone. You did your best to help your mother," Mary reassured her. "And nobody would've told you to go home by yourself."

"I... I want to see my mommy... B-But if she goes away too because of her illness...then what about me? I... I...!" Anna sobbed, appealing that she'd be left all alone. Unable to bear the thought, she burst into tears.

Mary hugged the child at once. Before offering words of reassurance, she used her arms to comfort Anna. The girl hugged Mary back, burying her face in her chest while sobbing. Her body was so very small. The anxiety of being apart from her mother, the hopelessness of her attempt to find her father, and the guilt over calling Adi her dad—Anna's body was too small to endure all these emotions. Yet without anyone to rely on and unable to reveal her true feelings, she had frantically tried to withstand it all by herself without being crushed in the process. Thinking about it all caused Mary to embrace Anna tighter.

"It's okay. Your mother will get better soon, Anna. And I'll make sure you both live safely."



“Big Sis Mary...” Anna choked out through her sobs.

Suddenly, someone called out, “What’s going on?” It was Adi. The noise must’ve woken him up, but based on the low sound of his voice and the way he’d mumbled, he must’ve still been half in a dream. He got out of bed and approached the sofa. His movements were sluggish, so he probably wasn’t fully awake yet.

Anna was still clinging to Mary, and she glanced up at Adi fearfully. “I’m sorry,” she said, apologizing for having woken him up. This must’ve deepened her feelings of guilt even more.

“It’s okay. Nothing bad is happening,” Mary told Adi. “We were just talking for a bit.”

Adi paused. “Let’s go back to sleep...”

“Indeed. Come on, Anna. You come back to bed too,” Mary encouraged her, speaking gently to calm the child down. But then, someone’s arms reached out towards them.

Needless to say, they were Adi’s. He nimbly picked Anna up. Then, just like that, he tottered back to the bed. Mary had no choice but to follow him. She gazed at the familiar sight of his back, where two unfamiliar hands were holding on to him tightly. It was the strangest feeling.

“Time for bed... We’re getting up early tomorrow...” Adi muttered.

“Good night,” Anna said after a pause.

“Good night, Anna,” he responded once they were both in the bed, gently patting the child. However, the movement of his hand didn’t last for long, stalling while his breathing grew deep. He’d been partially asleep the entire time.

Mary smiled to herself, and carefully got into bed so as not to wake Adi. She lay down on the other side of Anna, so that the little girl was between her and Adi. Anna, who’d been looking at Adi, rolled over to face Mary. Her eyes were still a bit red, but she’d calmed down now that she had been put to bed. She wasn’t sobbing like she had been earlier.

“Big Brother Adi is already asleep, right?” Anna asked, keeping her voice quiet to avoid awakening him.

“Yes, that’s right. He falls asleep easily,” Mary replied.

“I wonder if daddy was as nice as Big Bro Adi...” Despite her young age, Anna spoke wistfully with a sigh.

Mary’s breath hitched at those words. She gently reached out and patted Anna’s small, warm body soothingly underneath the duvet. Anna didn’t know why her father had abandoned her and her mother. She still believed that he was working somewhere for their sake. Her mother probably couldn’t bear to tell her young, pure daughter the truth. The thought of how her mother must’ve felt looking at Anna, who’d never stopped believing in her father, broke Mary’s heart.

“You know, Anna... If you two would like it, maybe your mother could work in my home,” Mary suggested.

“Really?”

“Yes. After all, your mother’s got years of experience on me when it comes to raising a kind child.”

“A kind child?”

“I mean you, Anna. Just like your mother, I want to raise this child into a good, kind person,” Mary said, withdrawing her hand from Anna and rubbing her own abdomen to show the girl what she meant.

Anna’s eyes widened in understanding. Although she’d been crying so much earlier, now her eyes were glimmering. Aware that shouting would wake up Adi, she pressed both hands over her mouth. “Really?” she inquired softly.

“Yes. But don’t tell anyone yet, okay? It’s a secret.”

“A secret?”

“That’s right. Only Adi and Roberto know about it. Patrick’s clever, so he might’ve already noticed, but he’s been keeping it a secret too,” Mary explained.

“What about Big Sis Alicia, Big Bro Lang, and Big Bro Lucian?” Anna asked,

wondering if Mary hadn't told her friend or brothers yet.

Mary shrugged. She knew what Anna was trying to say, but...

"We can't tell them yet. If they find out, they might make a ruckus, burst into song, and claim the bells of happiness are ringing."

"Bells of happiness?"

"Yes. They're going to kick up a fuss, ring bells, sing and dance at a party, and hold a nationwide parade. The parade's last stop might even be your house, Anna," Mary exaggerated jokingly.

Anna laughed at her words. Though she was still pressing her hands to her mouth, her adorable giggles managed to escape.

"That's why it's still a secret. So make sure to keep it, okay?" Mary said, calmly adding that this was a promise between them.

Anna giggled again and nodded happily. For some reason, words such as "secret" and "promise" often thrill children, all the more so if they're said about something good.

The topic must've lifted Anna's mood, as her previously wistful countenance morphed into a sleepy one. But just as quickly as her expression had brightened, it changed into a blank look. She'd filled her stomach with sandwiches, sobbed after revealing her true emotions, and then felt thrilled upon hearing Mary's words. After all of that, the lethargy must've sprung up on her.

Mary smiled calmly at the child's ever-changing expressions, reaching out to rub her cheek. Her fingertips brushed against the corner of Anna's reddened eye, and the girl closed her eyes as if the sensation tickled her. Then, she promptly fell asleep, breathing deeply through her open mouth. She'd laughed after having cried, and fell asleep within mere moments. Children are so fast-paced, indeed. After being caught up in that dizzying speed, Mary understood how all the parents felt when they lovingly said that raising children goes by in the blink of an eye.

Yet to think that a fast-paced, adorable child like Anna—no, not just her, but all the children from her domain, were being forced to live through poverty and

hardship...

“I have to give that feudal lord a rough time. I’ll bring him down so completely that he’ll never even think of ruling over another territory again! Wait... Is this what they call motherhood?!” Mary’s eyes lit up at the powerful sense of duty that had built up in her chest.

If she’d asked that question in front of Patrick, he would’ve probably said, *“That’s quite the aggressive motherhood.”* But in her joy, Mary wouldn’t even have noticed.

Reflexively, Mary drew Anna closer, and gently patted her as if doing a rehearsal. “Let’s steal his land for ourselves and beat him to a pulp,” she said, making disturbing proclamations in a soft voice. Then, she once again fell into a peaceful slumber.

Chapter 4

The next day after breakfast, everyone began preparing for departure.

Gainas informed Mary that her brothers had already departed at the break of dawn. They'd left a letter for her, in which they explained that they would head to Sylvino first and look for Anna's mother. Lang and Lucian may have been a troublesome duo, but they could be very capable when it came down to it, even among nobility. (Regrettably, this was only the case so long as the condition of Mary's absence was fulfilled.) If those two said they'd do it, then Mary felt safe leaving the search in their hands.

"I did arrange for breakfast, but because your brothers left so early, the waiters couldn't catch up with them," Gainas explained. "I'm worried that we didn't do everything in our power..."

"It's fine," Mary replied. "Those two always wake up excessively early on the day of an outing. It's their own fault for missing breakfast, and if they get hungry, they can just buy themselves some sweets."

Gainas's face stiffened at her declaration. He seemed to have something on his mind, but was holding himself back. Most likely, he wanted to say something like, *"It's as if they're children."* Mary completely agreed with that sentiment.

"I'm happy to have them find Anna's mother, but I'd be remiss to let them make it to the feudal lord before me! Let's get going too! It's time for a beating!" she exclaimed.

"Please stop saying such things, I beg of you... Lord Patrick, you too! Please don't come here with a charming smile while making those disturbing statements!" Gainas lamented.

Mary only let out a high-pitched laugh at his attempts to inhibit them.

And so it was time to hurry on...except the whole party couldn't fit into the same carriage. As such, they arranged for a second vehicle from House Eldland,

at which point...

“Lady Mary! We may be in separate carriages, but p-please don’t forget me...!”

...Parfette cried out sorrowfully. Just why was she so upset? And why did she think that Mary would forget her just because they were traveling in different vehicles? Yet she didn’t seem all that opposed when Gainas took her by the hand into their own carriage. Mary was sure Parfette would be infatuated by the air between them once they were inside.

“Is that girl a crybaby?” Anna asked curiously.

Everyone in the carriage nodded in response. Parfette was indeed a crybaby. In fact, she was *always* in tears, so “crybaby” almost seemed like too light of a term to use. Even Mary didn’t feel like defending her in this instance.

However, when she heard this, Anna hid in Adi’s tailcoat, revealing that she’d cried last night. She peered out from the coat, ostensibly feeling ashamed of being a crybaby herself.

Adi gazed at her with concern and patted her head. As he did so, Anna looked up at him and hesitantly opened her mouth. “*Big Brother* Adi...” she uttered falteringly, using the same term for him as she did for the others. Anna referred to Mary and her friends as her older brothers and sisters. Only in Adi’s case had she stubbornly referred to him as her father and refused to listen to anyone who said otherwise. In fact, this whole situation had begun because she’d called Adi her “daddy.”

Yet just now, she had called him her older brother; she’d acknowledged that he wasn’t her father. Her expression as she did so was anxious and fragile, as if she were imploring him. She must’ve been worried that he might throw her out now that she admitted the truth. Recalling how Anna had opened her heart last night, Mary watched the two of them with concern.

Adi noticed the change in terminology as well. He was on the verge of saying something, but then gently responded with “It’s okay, Anna.” After that, he placed his hand on her head, stroking and scooping up her hair, which was the same shade as his. “And speaking of crying...” he added brightly, casting a glance at Mary. “Milady also cried often when she was your age, Anna. It was so

loud that people at every end of the mansion could hear her.”

“Stop it, Adi,” Mary objected. “Besides, that’s not true. I cried in a much more elegant and sweet way.”

“Yes, when you were fake crying,” Adi conceded. “Your crocodile tears were indeed adorable and feeble, and you’d curl up into a ball like a kitten. But when you were actually crying, it was terribly loud—”

“How cowardly of you, bringing up my childhood like this! Hey, Alicia! Why are you rushing to take notes?! Patrick, steal that notebook from her!”

“Thinking back on it, Lord Patrick seldom cried,” Adi continued. “But there was that one time when he took a mighty fall and burst into tears.”

“All right! The focus has turned to Patrick! I want to hear all the details!” Mary proclaimed, instigating Adi now that the topic had shifted from her.

Alicia was excited to hear about anyone’s childhood, and her eyes glittered as she waited for tales of Patrick’s. Of course, the man himself looked panicked.

House Albert and House Dyce had enjoyed good relations with each other for a long time, so Adi had known Patrick since they were children. And since Adi was five years older than Patrick, he naturally had clearer memories about those times. Even someone like Patrick, who was handsome, accomplished in both academics and sports, and essentially the embodiment of perfection, had done certain things when he was a very young child.

“How nostalgic,” Adi said. “There was also that time when you tearfully lamented that everyone was looking at your younger brother and not paying any attention to you.”

“A-Anyway, we should be talking about Sylvino’s domain right now,” Patrick argued. “You think so too, right, Alicia?”

“I once argued with my caregiver at the orphanage, and then ran away in tears to pitch a tent behind the building!” For some reason, Alicia mistook Patrick’s attempt at changing the topic for her turn to speak about herself. She was the only one who didn’t look embarrassed to be discussing her childhood, seeing it as nothing more than a cute story.

Nonetheless, pitching a tent behind the orphanage was still a hard-core attempt at running away from home, despite its proximity. “What a problem child you were!” Mary mocked, which was like the pot calling the kettle black.

“On the third day we had a hurricane, so my caregiver came out to get me,” Alicia added.

“A peasant child like you must’ve caused her so much trouble... Wait, the *third* day?!”

“Apparently, she carried me back to my room at night after I fell asleep, and then brought me back into the tent in the morning. I never noticed, and lived in that tent for three days,” Alicia narrated with a bashful giggle. Should this story really have been waved off with a mere giggle? Not to mention, though Mary didn’t know how old Alicia had been at the time, she felt that spending three days in a tent was still very forceful behavior.

“Compared to this country hick, we were practically angels as children. Right, Anna?” Mary prompted with a scoff, casting Alicia a withering look. She brought Anna closer to herself to show a sense of camaraderie.

Anna laughed and clung to Mary. Feeling left out, Alicia puffed out her cheeks.

“What a peasantly pout,” Mary said before she could stop herself.

The little girl’s mood must’ve been lifted by this exchange, as she laughed happily and then puffed out her own cheeks to imitate Alicia.

As the party entered Sylvino, the scenery around them gradually began changing. Yet there was no clear wealth disparity at the moment; rather, this could’ve been interpreted as cultural differences between their countries. If anything, the changes were so subtle that it wouldn’t have been all that surprising for their group to find similar sights in their own nation. There were some minor distinctions apparent in the buildings and shops lining the street, but all the passersby looked to be at peace.

“Huh, it doesn’t seem as bad as we’ve heard,” Mary commented with relief as she gazed out the window. She observed a young family walking together. The

mother was holding a small baby, while two young boys clung to the father's legs. They didn't appear impoverished, and seemed like a happy family. While this land couldn't have been compared to House Albert (then again, only the royal family and House Dyce would've been reasonable comparisons), it didn't look destitute.

"Perhaps the rumors were exaggerated?" Mary wondered. "Still, it looks like we won't have to steal this land from the feudal lord after all."

"No, Mary," Patrick muttered in a low tone of voice.

"No?" she repeated, confused.

Patrick gazed out the window with a somewhat grim expression, as if feeling pity for the place.

"What do you mean?" Mary prompted.

"I've also only heard the rumors, but we're about to cross the border. Then you'll see."

"The border?"

What could Patrick have been talking about if not national borders? Yet when Mary looked at him, it seemed unlikely that he'd respond with any more detail. In that case, she'd patiently wait and see. It wouldn't take long before they reached the border Patrick was talking about, so rather than forcing him to reply, she thought it would be easier to see for herself.

With that decided, Mary likewise turned her gaze to the outside view. The scenery soon began changing drastically, and a heavy, glum air permeated the carriage.

"What on earth...?" she whispered, her voice reverberating inside the silent vehicle. Nobody answered as they all turned their faces away. The only reply Mary got was the sound of someone sighing.

The peaceful view suddenly changed, and though the sun should've been shining, dark shadows infested the scenery. The buildings looked conspicuously deteriorated, with a few of the houses exhibiting shattered windows. They'd only traveled for a few minutes, yet the happy voices of children and any sense

of liveliness had faded away. It was as if the heartwarming scene from before were little more than a lie.

However, Anna must've been used to the scenery, as she stuck her head out of the window and said they were getting close to her home.

"I see... So your house is somewhere here, Anna?" Mary asked.

"But mommy isn't there, so nobody's home..."

"Then let's spend some more time together. We have to go speak to someone soon, but we'd feel heartened if you came with us," Mary said, inquiring if the girl would like to accompany them.

Anna's face brightened and she nodded. Did she think they would force her to go to her empty house by herself? Obviously, they would've done no such thing. On the other hand, they also wouldn't force her to attend the meeting with the feudal lord. The conversation would be too difficult for a child to keep up with, and if they ended up quarreling, witnessing it might scar Anna. Mary didn't want the little girl to listen to such a severe discussion. That said...

"We're beating someone to a pulp! Right?"

...when Anna exclaimed such a thing, Mary frowned with regret. "N-No, that's just a figure of speech... You can't use such bad words, Anna."

"Beat him to a pulp and snatch his lands!"

"Oh no, we're a bad influence on her..." Mary murmured, exchanging a guilty glance with Patrick. The phrases Anna was using were ones they had said themselves. The girl had learned such disturbing language without even properly understanding it.

I'll have to apologize to her mother... Mary thought, her head drooping. What if those words became Anna's catchphrase?

"You shouldn't say that, Anna." Patrick tried to correct the child as well, but because he was the one who'd said such things, his persuasive power was nonexistent.

"You shouldn't worry so much. Children always remember the words you *don't* want them to," Adi consoled them with a wry smile.

Intent on adding even more fuel to the fire, Anna yet again cried out, “Beat him to a pulp and snatch his lands!” She then laughed joyously when Adi covered her mouth with his hand.

Mary rubbed her abdomen while watching them. She wondered if her own child would also happily exclaim newly learned words (and whether those words would trouble their parents too). If possible, she’d prefer for them to only know nice words, but things might not go to plan.

Noticing her actions, Patrick called out Mary’s name. He asked her what was wrong, so she quickly moved her hand away from her belly. He might’ve already known about her pregnancy, but Alicia didn’t. Patrick also looked like he wanted to say, *“If she knew, she’d kick up a fuss, so let’s keep it from her for now.”*

In response to his sharp gaze, Mary nodded. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” she told him.

“I know you feel enthused by Anna’s presence, but don’t overdo it,” he advised. He used evasive words to express his concerns, all while continuing to hide the truth. How reliable he was, indeed.

“I know. Thanks,” Mary replied, glancing at Alicia to check whether she’d been fooled.



The sight of Alicia's profile as she sternly gazed out the window caused Mary's breath to hitch. "Alicia..." she uttered, stopping herself from saying anything else. That was just how severe Alicia's countenance was at present, and she looked so beautiful that it enraptured Mary.

Those violet eyes pierced into the scenery, taking in the wealth disparity. Alicia's shapely lips were pressed into a hard line out of pent-up resentment. She looked borderline intimidating, and if Mary were meeting her for the first time right now, she would've found the other girl dignified and respectable.

Mary wasn't the only one who felt the pressure emanating from Alicia, as Adi also looked at her with surprise. Patrick, who was sitting next to Alicia, rubbed her arm while gazing at her.

Snapping back to her senses, Alicia turned to look at the rest of them. Her golden locks swayed, and her eyes widened. Her expression was back to that of her usual self. "Oh, pardon me! I was lost in thought... Er, what were we talking about?"

"You seemed to be thinking very hard about something, Alicia," Mary remarked.

"Well... Ever since we entered this particular area, I've seen many children outside all by themselves. House Eldland's messenger did say as much, but it really looks like many parents struggle to look after their children in this part of Sylvino..." Alicia said sorrowfully, once more staring out the window.

Apparently, the wealth disparity in Sylvino was so severe that in some territories, there were no job opportunities at all. Even if one did happen to arise, the wealthy lined their own pockets with most of the profits through brokerage fees. As a result, the gap between the rich and the poor only grew wider, and the oppressed couldn't even earn enough money to survive. Oftentimes, just like Anna's father, the family's breadwinner had to leave home to find a job while their children stayed behind someplace else. In Anna's case, if her mother didn't recover, she would have to be put into an orphanage.

Alicia must've seen herself in Anna and the other children like her.

"At the orphanage where I grew up, people left children behind for all kinds of

reasons too. Of course, life there wasn't bad. But in this case...the parents *want* to be with their children, but cannot do so without forcing them to live in terrible conditions..."

Poverty separated parents from their children, all while the domain's feudal lord looked the other way. This situation was simply unforgivable. Although Alicia spoke calmly, each of her words emanated an unspeakable pressure. She didn't puff out her cheeks to express her upset like usual, but instead showed her anger as a princess towards another country's sloppy rule system.

Alicia's purple eyes landed on Mary next. They were gorgeous and filled with nobility. "I won't allow Anna and the other children to undergo such terrible treatment any longer. I would like to join the talks with the feudal lord as well, and do everything in my power to help—as a princess, of course."

"R-Right, that'd be wonderful," Mary responded, overpowered by Alicia's matter-of-fact, princessly declaration.

Here Mary was, expecting the other girl to have clapped her hands and said something like, "*Let's protect Anna and the whole domain!*" or for her to have shouted encouragement at them while carrying out her typical charge attack. Yet that wasn't the case at all. Having been raised in an orphanage herself, Alicia restrained the fury swirling inside of her in order to remain as calm as possible, and conducted herself like a proper, powerful princess. As such, she refrained from making any unnecessary statements.

If this had been only about Anna, Alicia might've spoken more on a personal level rather than as a member of the royalty. But in order to imbue her statement with authority, she had carefully selected each of her words. Supporting her was Mary's duty as a noble.

"If you join us, then behave yourself like a proper princess!" Mary exclaimed sarcastically.

Returning to her usual self, Alicia responded, "Leave it to me!" while striking her own chest.

As if in a show of support for Alicia's resolve, the carriage slowly came to a halt. When Mary looked outside, the scenery was once again peaceful. They must've passed the previous neighborhood and returned to one inhabited by

the rich. To think that such contrasting landscapes could exist within one domain was enough to make her head spin.

Alas, this was no time for lamenting, as a small knock resounded on the door. Someone opened it, and Gainas peered inside. He was sporting a severe expression as well, and Parfette nestled against him tearfully. The domain must've surpassed their expectations, in spite of the rumors they'd heard about it.

"We've arrived. The feudal lord is waiting for us here," Gainas announced.

"Where are we?" Mary inquired.

"The lord's vacation home... One of *many*," he responded, his voice akin to a growl.

Having a holiday home in and of itself wasn't a bad thing. Both House Albert and House Eldland each owned a couple. Even those who weren't aristocrats but had the money to build villas in distant lands often did so as well. Under normal circumstances, Mary might've said, "*What a splendid house*," and left the matter there.

However, the scenery from earlier was still burned into her mind, and she was in no mood to praise the villa. If anything, the sight of it only vexed her further. The feudal lord ignored the destitute populace of his domain who struggled to make a living, while he built several holiday homes. It was the height of arrogance.

I must do something about this! Mary thought with determination.

Right as she did, someone's high-pitched voice called out, "Anna!"

Everyone turned around, and Anna shouted, "Mommy!"

Standing by the carriage were Lang, Lucian, Roberto, and a woman. She looked about ten years older than Mary. She was thin, and her complexion was sickly; Mary worried she might collapse at any second. Yet she persistently called out for Anna, staggering slightly as she rushed over.

Anna jumped into the woman's arms, who embraced her in turn.

"Mommy! Mommy...!"

“Anna, why didn’t you go to the institute?! When I heard you weren’t there, I was so worried!”

“I’m sorry... I just wanted to... Mommy...!”

“I’m so glad you’re safe! You must’ve been so scared!”

They both called out to one another while ensuring the other was well. Anna buried her face in her mother’s chest, bursting into tears. All the stress and loneliness she’d been enduring surged forth as she sobbed loudly. Her mother’s shoulders were still trembling, and she hugged Anna so tightly that she might’ve crushed her little body.

The others let out a relieved sigh upon witnessing the reunion. They had managed to get Anna back to her mother.

“You found Anna’s mother, didn’t you?” Mary asked the twins.

“Yeah, but we underestimated how hard it’d be,” Lang replied. “We thought we’d find her right away if we went to the hospital, but once we got there, they told us Anna’s mother had run out when she learned her daughter was missing. The hospital was terrible too, and they said they wouldn’t treat patients who didn’t have the money to pay for it.”

“Goodness!”

“The three of us looked everywhere, and eventually found Anna’s mother—Helene—crouched on the side of the street. She looked deathly pale, and barely responded when we called out to her. I thought my heart was going to stop, right, Lucian?”

Lucian nodded with a serious expression. Helene had been in a desperate situation when the trio had found her. She should’ve been in a hospital, yet she’d run away from it. Her body was in a terrible state, and her heart had been riddled with worry. She was in no condition, physically or mentally, to walk. Driven by the need to find her daughter, all she’d been able to do was crawl around in search of her.

Mary was thankful that her brothers had decided to head out first. When she told them as much, they puffed out their chests proudly.

“See? Aren’t you glad we came along?”

“We can be useful too...”

“Oh? Weren’t you two in the middle of *‘The Struggle for House Albert’s Succession: Round One’*?” Mary asked, pointing out the inconsistency in their statements.

Lang’s and Lucian’s faces stiffened visibly. They’d been so preoccupied with Anna’s circumstances that they had entirely forgotten the deception they’d created by claiming to have coincidentally run into Mary during their struggle for heirship. In spite of their yin-yang characters, both of their expressions clearly said, “*Uh-oh.*” As a side note, Roberto was presently turning a blind eye to his masters’ crisis.

Mary smiled in exasperation. Her brothers were dependable and thoughtless at the same time. “You two came to Sylvino by accident, and found Helene by sheer coincidence, right?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right!” Lang agreed. “Everything was a total coincidence! I’m sure it was divine Providence putting us to use in order to help you!”

“You also learned by coincidence that Helene was Anna’s mother and then brought her here, yes?”

“Exactly...” Lucian replied. “I’m sure these are the fruits of your daily good deeds, Mary... You’ve created a miracle! You’re a miracle worker...”

“That would be terrifying,” Mary said flatly, ending the topic there. She knew they were lying, but as a way of recognizing their accomplishment, she decided to pretend that they’d saved Helene by coincidence. (That said, she had no intention of being made out as a miracle worker following close on the heels of being dubbed the goddess of beauty.)

Lang and Lucian looked relieved at Mary’s compromise. They decided that alluding to this matter any further would be a bad idea, so they rushed over to Anna instead. In their place, Roberto approached Mary with a calm smile on his face. He should’ve been the first to defend his masters during their crisis, yet here he was with his imposing attitude.

“Thank you too, Roberto,” Mary said. “It’s a stroke of good luck that you all

managed to find Helene.”

“Indeed, this miraculous coincidence is quite astonishing. The first round ended without a hitch too, so I’d like to assist you and your team next, Lady Mary.”

“Gosh, there’s no need for these elaborate lies. Just say from the start that you’d like to cooperate... Wait, the first round’s over?” Mary repeated, asking Roberto if the twins had had a proper competition.

He responded by nodding and smiling elegantly. His expression was charming, yet incredibly shady at the same time. Then, he pulled out a letter from his breast pocket and handed it to Mary. It was a pure-white envelope, sealed with wax. However, Mary didn’t recognize the crest, so she tilted her head at the sight of it.

“What is this, Roberto?”

“Perhaps I should call this the spoils of war from the first round. I’m offering them to you, Lady Mary.”

“Spoils of war...? But why do *you* have them, Roberto? Don’t tell me you’re fed up with my brothers always competing without there ever being a winner, so you’re finally rebelling...!”

When Mary looked at Roberto suspiciously, he simply smiled. What a graceful expression, indeed. Yet it seemed he hadn’t rebelled against the twins, as he evasively responded with, “A good joke.” (Then again, Mary felt like his daily behavior was basically a form of rebellion, anyway.) “As for the contents of these spoils...” he added, then leaned down to whisper the rest into her ear.

Mary blinked in surprise. Yet in the next moment, as she processed his words and her brothers’ idea, she smirked. “I see you had a productive first round,” she remarked while putting the letter away into her pocket.

“Quite so,” Roberto affirmed with a satisfied nod. His smile contained a hint of conspiracy he couldn’t conceal, but Mary felt the same.

“Well then, it’s time for us to throw down the gauntlet,” she declared. “Roberto, you must be tired. You and my brothers should take a break in another room.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

“And if you don’t mind, I’d like for you three to look after Anna. I’m not sure how the discussion will go, but it’s not something a child should overhear, right?”

“Indeed. It could turn into a very dangerous discussion, with Anna constantly exclaiming, ‘Crush him and snatch his lands!’”

“Patrick really needs to stop using such foul language in front of children,” Mary said, nonchalantly throwing the blame at Patrick as she glanced at Anna.

The child had stopped crying, but she was still clinging to her mother. It would be best for the both of them to stay in a different room during the talks. To separate them so soon after their reunion would’ve been cruel. Lang and Lucian seemed concerned about Helene, so Mary didn’t see the problem in letting her brothers look after the woman and her daughter.

“Well, let’s not keep them waiting. Right, Adi? Adi...?” Mary asked, turning to him when she realized he hadn’t said anything in a while.

Adi was watching Anna and Helene’s reunion with a broad smile. He appeared to be relieved, but also a little irritated. Unsure what to make of it, Mary rubbed his arm, causing him to finally snap back to reality and look at her. His rust-colored hair swayed as he did so, and he put on a forced, somewhat clumsy smile.

“Are you all right, Adi?” Mary asked him. “Maybe you should skip the meeting and go with Roberto.”

“No, I’m staying with you, my lady,” he replied. “It’s just that... When I look at Anna, I can’t help but wonder why her father abandoned her.”

“Adi...”

“The feudal lord is one matter, but I’d also like to beat her father to a pulp.” Although Adi spoke calmly, his glare was sharp. His red eyes almost looked like flames.

“I know how you feel. But first things first—we need to crush the feudal lord!” Mary exclaimed enthusiastically. “Let’s steal this villa from him too,” she added

in jest, and Adi's severe expression relaxed into a wry smile. His mood seemed to improve a little. Perhaps he'd decided to direct his anger at the feudal lord for now. "Come on!" Mary urged, then turned to look at Alicia.

The girl observed the family reunion with a serious countenance. All kinds of emotions were swirling within the depths of her eyes. She had once been separated from her parents too, so this sight both pleased and angered her. However, when she noticed Mary was looking at her, she smiled gently. "Let's go," she agreed, sounding composed. She wasn't her typical boisterous self—right now, she was Princess Alicia.

In that case... Mary thought, lowering her head. Her silver locks fluttered in her field of vision as she did so. "Let us go, Princess Alicia."

In a clear voice, Alicia responded, "Indeed."

As Mary slowly raised her head, she saw a strong determination shining in Alicia's features. She must've picked up on what Mary was implying by her formal words and gesture, and intuited how she ought to respond in turn.

Inspired by the scene, the others likewise steeled themselves, and they all made their way towards the lavish mansion.

The group was taken to a large room that had more than enough chairs to seat them all. The other furniture was sparse but of good quality, and the simple interior created a comfortable atmosphere. The place made for a perfect holiday home, since its occupant was afforded some distance from their work back in the main residence while they came here to stretch their legs. Yet this extravagance only vexed Mary even further at this point.

Meanwhile, the feudal lord, Fleur, saw Mary and the others as surprise visitors and welcomed them with open arms. With a placid smile, he offered them a polite greeting, handling everything with consideration. Every single one of his words overflowed with elegance, yet he didn't come across as boastful. Not only did he ask his servants to prepare a room for Mary's brothers to rest, but he even arranged for a place for the coachman.

Fleur looked to be about the same age as Mary's grandfather. Under usual

circumstances, he would've already retired, but apparently his wife and son had died young, and all he had left were mementos of them, in addition to his sole granddaughter. As such, he was still continuing his duties. Though his advanced age was apparent in the way he walked with the help of his cane, it also gave him a mature sense of majesty.

Based on appearances alone, Fleur seemed like a capable enough feudal lord. Had the situation been different, Mary would've probably respected him.

"Now, as for what you wished to discuss...?" Fleur prompted.

Inwardly, Mary muttered about how insincere he was. However, it wasn't time to start sounding the drums of war just yet. She suppressed her animosity before smiling elegantly. "We came here to discuss the domain you manage. My friends live there, but they aren't able to lead a good life," she explained. Although Anna and Helene were in a separate room, Mary still couldn't bring herself to openly call them impoverished, so she kept her statement vague.

Fleur surmised what she was trying to say. He frowned, and his already wrinkly face creased even further with disgust. "Your *friends* live in *those* areas, Lady Mary?"

"That's right. Is there an issue with that?"

"Pardon me for saying so, but I think you ought to refrain from socializing with those people. They aren't like you, Lady Mary."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"I'm talking about the situation they were born into. We have nothing in common with them. The difference between us has already been decided since the moment of our birth," Fleur asserted.

Mary blinked in shock. The man had spoken politely, yet he was obviously insulting Anna and Helene. It was a good thing she'd decided to send them to a different room. But even as Mary thought that, Fleur continued.

"One's circumstances of birth determine everything. Refinement and nobility are available to one who is born into a suitable family. We were born into good families, and that's why we can live a good life with food, clothing, and shelter."

“That’s quite an extreme way of thinking,” Mary responded. “Is that why you turn a blind eye to the rampant wealth disparity within your own territory?”

“Turn a blind eye? Not at all! I am governing my lands perfectly well,” Fleur declared. “I draw a clear line between the haves and have-nots, ensuring that everything continues as it has been.”

“You govern them ‘well,’ and that’s how your lands ended up in such a state, I take it? In that case, what about my friends who are struggling to survive? Are you saying they should suffer like that for the rest of their lives?”

“Your circumstances of birth determine everything, so I’m afraid there’s no other way,” Fleur said with an amicable smile. He acted as though his words were reasonable, and that it was for the best for things to remain that way.

What an idiotic opinion! Mary murmured in her mind, and then...

“What an idiotic opinion.”

...actually pronounced it aloud. When she realized what she’d done, she quickly shut her mouth. She’d been meaning to restrain herself from saying what was truly on her mind, but the words had escaped unintentionally. Thank goodness Anna wasn’t here. Otherwise, she might’ve taken a liking to those words and begun merrily using them. Mary would’ve been too ashamed to face Helene after that.

“What do you mean, Lady Mary?” Fleur asked in apparently earnest confusion. He wasn’t lying or trying to manipulate her, nor did he seem to have any secret ill intentions. He truly believed in his philosophy that birth determined everything, so to have someone say that it was idiotic had confused him.

Mary looked right into his eyes. Though they were enveloped by deep wrinkles, they still hadn’t dulled, shining with a strong determination. They looked strangely cold.

“I have been observing the territory since my childhood,” Fleur went on. “Those born into rich families are raised through wealth, and build even more rich families. The opposite is also true. Your life is already determined at the moment of your birth.”

“That’s not true,” Mary replied.

“Oh, but it is. Surely you should understand that better than anyone, Lady Mary of House Albert. As for your husband—although he cannot compare to you, he was still born into a decent family,” Fleur said, turning to look at Adi.

Just as he’d said, Adi’s family couldn’t be compared to nobility, but it *was* a decent one. Despite his rank as a servant, he came from a lineage who’d long served House Albert, so he was still a cut above the rest. It wouldn’t have been surprising if his family had owned their own holiday home. They couldn’t be lumped together with Anna and Helene. Adi himself was respectably wealthy too.

Mary had a few things to say in response to Fleur’s allusions. However, before she could voice her concerns...

“Are you saying it was par for the course that Anna was separated from her parents, just because of where she was born?”

...the dark tone of Adi’s voice made her breath hitch. He was staring fixedly at Fleur, with sharp eyes that looked even redder than usual. His right hand was curled into a fist atop the table, while his left hand enveloped the other in an attempt to hold it down. His fingers were digging into his skin, so his grip must’ve been strong.

“Anna...?” Fleur parroted. “Now that you mention it, I do recall hearing about some woman making a racket because her child had disappeared. Is that the child in question?”

“Her father left home to find a job, and she went out looking for him. A little girl, all by herself...”

“I see, so that’s what caused you all this trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“This is exactly why they are such plebeians... They’re lowborn, so all they know how to do is rely on others. My apologies for what they put you through.” Fleur lowered his head with sincerity. In that moment, he looked like the textbook example of a feudal lord apologizing for strife occurring in his domain.

There was no hint of malice about him. He *truly* held no ill will. He believed in his philosophy so fully that he now apologized on Anna's behalf for her behavior. From his perspective, doing so was expected of him, since he'd been born into a family of lords, and birth circumstances determined everything. Honestly, Mary felt it would've been better if he *did* have malicious intent.

Fleur's attitude only instigated Adi's wrath. The latter grew impatient and sprang to his feet as his chair rattled behind him. Mary hurriedly grabbed his clenched fist.

"Adi, calm down...!"

"I can't excuse his remark just now!"

Mary did her best to try and pacify Adi. However, someone's low voice interjected. "Circumstances of birth...?"

It was Alicia. She was gazing at Fleur. Her eyes were violet, her hair a shining gold. Her features were proof that she'd been born as a princess. "You claim that birth determines everything, do you?" she questioned.

"Indeed. I'm glad you understand, Princess Alicia," Fleur said.

"No, I *don't*! To think that Anna was separated from her mother due to such a philosophy! If this is your just way of doing things as a feudal lord, then I'll respond in kind as a princess!" Alicia exclaimed with obvious rage, unable to hold back her emotions.

Everyone grew silent at her words. The pressure and anger radiating from her seemed hot enough to burn. Add her authority to the mix, and it was no wonder that nobody was bold enough to step in. Yet the tense atmosphere was soon broken...

"Don't lose your princessly composure so easily!"

...as Mary scolded Alicia and flicked her forehead with a satisfying smack. Silence stretched out within the room, owing to this sudden difference in temperature.

Amid the quietude, Mary grabbed Alicia's arm and vigorously pulled her from her seat. "Oho ho ho! Pardon us for a moment!" she said, glossing over the

situation with her elegant laugh while taking the other girl out into the hallway. Once there, she closed the door behind them with a thud.

“Lady Maryyy...” Alicia cried pathetically, having returned to her usual self.

“What was that about responding in kind as a princess?! Don’t make such rash decisions all by yourself!”

“But I can’t let him get away with this!”

“Even so, you shouldn’t unleash your maximum firepower as a first move!” Mary shouted, once more flicking Alicia’s forehead.

After all, Alicia’s words had a much greater weight behind them than those of other nobles, since she was royalty. If she were to use her power to seize territory within another nation, the matter would immediately become an international incident. Mary explained as much, asking if Alicia was even aware of that, to which the girl pitifully responded, “But stiill...”

Hearing Fleur’s calm words while she thought of Anna had caused Alicia to lose her temper. If he had simply been a self-serving man, she might’ve been able to keep her cool. However, his apathy, coupled with the way he believed all was as it should be, had instigated her feelings.

“Listen. You’re a princess. All you have to do is firmly stand your ground,” Mary said.

“But...I just can’t allow this...”

“I know. Regardless, a princess cannot act rashly. You were born a princess, so if you want to do something, then act accordingly.”

“Act accordingly...?”

“That’s right. Just who do you think bowed her head to you before this meeting started?” Mary asked flatly.

Alicia snapped her mouth shut in response. She turned her gaze aside while deliberating. Then, her eyes lit up as she finally began to understand what Mary was implying.

“What a thickheaded girl,” Mary scoffed. Alicia turned back to Mary, her eyes full of expectation. This caused Mary to grow silent. Her abusive language had

been a means of pointing out that Alicia was acting as her peasant self right now. “What I need is the backing of a princess. If you wish to behave like a mere country hick, then leave.”

“I understand... But Lady Mary—No, Mary Albert...” Alicia’s voice sounded as light as a bell, yet it was cool and composed. Keeping her gaze on Mary, she took a deep breath and slowly opened her mouth. “Use our nation’s authority and bring this situation under control.”

The hallway was silent following Alicia’s command. Eventually, Mary let out a fearless laugh, gripping her skirt as she gracefully curtsied. “Very well, Princess Alicia,” she replied, not just as herself, but in the role of Mary Albert. Alicia had given her an order as royalty, so Mary had to respond appropriately as an aristocrat. Consequently, Mary’s actions would now count as being under imperial orders.

Any third parties would’ve surely seen this as a splendid exchange. Two women, a princess and the daughter of a noble house, were joining hands based on their convictions. Alas...

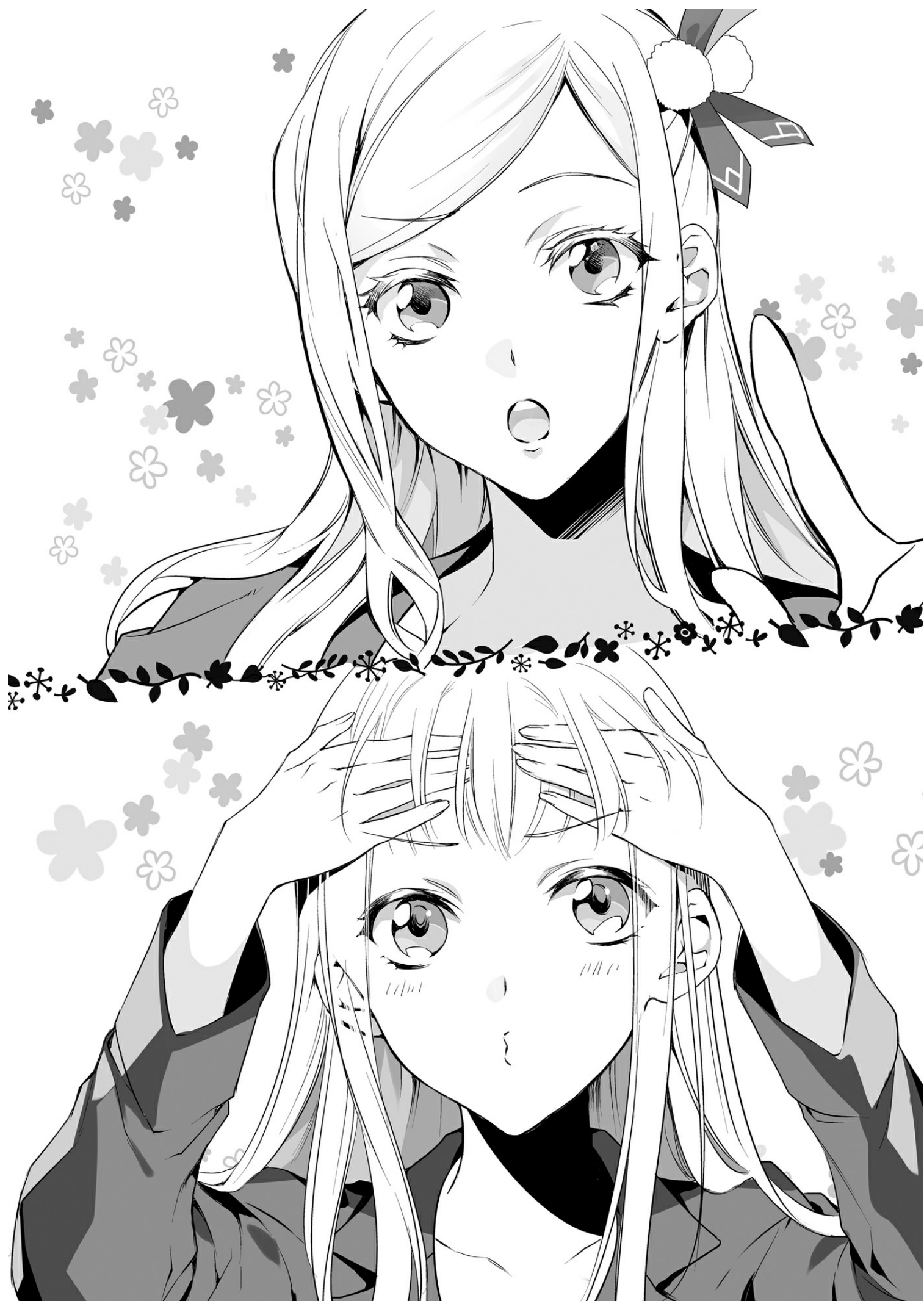
“And once this is all over, I order you to have a sleepover with me in my tent!”

“‘Very well...’ Is that what you thought I’d say?! As if!”

...everything quickly returned to business as usual. Mary smacked Alicia’s forehead, and the other girl puffed out her cheeks sulkily. The solemn air from before vanished instantly.

Mary shrugged in exasperation, glancing at Alicia. “Let’s get back there, but behave like a proper princess!”

“Okay!”



“If everything goes well, I’ll agree to have a tea party in your tent. But pitch it in the royal gardens,” Mary muttered before turning to the door to reenter the room.

As Mary and Alicia returned, everyone in the room expected the discussion to resume. Mary apologized for having left her seat. “Well then...” she added urgingly. However, she didn’t feel like continuing the talks. Or rather, she knew they wouldn’t reach an agreement no matter how long the discussion went on.

Fleur believed the state of affairs in his domain to be a natural consequence of the citizens’ various circumstances of birth. There was no malice or hidden motive behind his beliefs, nor did he have any vulgar thoughts about lining his own pockets with profit. He had reached his conclusion after living for more than twice as long as Mary, so it would take time to change his mind. Mary had no intention of doing that; it wasn’t her job to sober him up.

“You won’t change your mind about the idea that circumstances of birth determine everything, right?” she prompted, just in case.

Fleur solemnly shook his head. His face was etched with wrinkles, but his pronounced eyes hadn’t faded with age. He wouldn’t concede, nor did he see the need to do so in the first place. Everyone else’s faces soured at the sight of his obstinacy.

Mary was the only one who smiled at him. “That’s great. I was worried you might retract your statement at this point. But since you haven’t, then please leave this domain immediately.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“My, I doubt there’s any need to explain. After all, I am Mary Albert. I’m sure you’re aware of what my family can do?” Mary asked with a calm smile.

Fleur’s eyes twitched. His wrinkles deepened as he stared at Mary in puzzlement. Now his dignified appearance began emanating a sense of hostility. The petite elder suddenly looked very large in Mary’s eyes. *But I can’t waver now*, she thought while exhaling slowly. It didn’t matter how much older Fleur was, or what kind of power he held. He was insignificant compared to her.

Mary stole a glance at Alicia, who was gazing at Fleur with a grave countenance. She didn't say a word, entrusting the matter to Mary, who carried her distinguished family name along with the princess's imperial orders. There was no need to yield. No, they *wouldn't* yield.

That said, Fleur had no intention of simply handing over his domain either. Exuding a quiet sense of animosity, he opened his mouth. "You may be an Albert, but don't you think it boorish to meddle with another country's affairs?"

"I do so with Princess Alicia's approval. The same is true for Gainas, the head of House Eldland. Besides..." Mary trailed off, pulling out an envelope from her pocket. She put it on the table and slid it towards Fleur, who picked it up with his frail, wrinkly hand. Then, his eyes widened. The intense way in which his aged face contorted startled everyone else, but Mary remained smiling.

Alas, it was no wonder that Fleur was shocked, considering the contents of the letter. "I see. So you've already spoken with Sylvino's upper echelons."

"Indeed," Mary said in response to Fleur.

"That crest..." Gainas muttered while staring at the envelope in the feudal lord's hands. As his nation neighbored Sylvino, he recognized the crest pressed into the sealing wax. It belonged to the royal family of Sylvino. Yet though Gainas recognized it, he still didn't understand why Mary was in possession of such a letter, and he cast her a questioning, suspicious look.

Mary puffed out her chest. "It's the first round's booty!" she proclaimed.

Once more, the room was filled with silence. Mary cleared her throat regretfully. She'd spoken the truth, but it didn't seem suitable for this place. She had demolished the atmosphere completely. "Anyway," she said to get the topic back on track as she turned to Fleur. The others did the same, gazing at the letter he was holding. "We'd prefer to keep things civil, but if you insist, we don't mind escalating the matter."

Mary's words implicitly told Fleur that she was willing to keep quiet about the matter and let it end here and now. Otherwise, if the incident grew in scale, Fleur would be gravely wounded. Or rather, since Sylvino's top brass had sided with Mary and her friends, *only Fleur* would be hurt as a result.

This domain had been a problem to begin with, and now a princess and a group of prominent foreign aristocrats had raised a complaint against it. There was no question about which side Sylvino's royalty would choose to cut down. However, if Fleur were to quietly give in, everything would end without a fuss. Mary knew it was a coercive measure, but this was part of her wager.

"If circumstances of birth determine everything, then I, who was born into House Albert... No, *you* will act in accordance with *my* birth," Mary said quietly.

The room was strangely silent as everyone waited for Fleur's reply. Eventually, he broke the silence with a sigh, before slowly lowering his head. "Very well," he said huskily.

Mary couldn't hide her surprise. She had thought he would put up more of a fight, yet he quickly gave up. He issued an order to a maid who was standing in the corner, then with dignified conduct took a sip of his tea. He didn't appear to be panicking, nor did he look frustrated. There was no indication that he would withdraw his statement either.

He's... Mary thought, gazing at Fleur. Adi, Alicia, and the others seemed surprised too.

When he noticed their stares, Fleur paused with the teacup raised to his mouth. "What is it?"

"Well... I'm just surprised you agreed right away. I'm grateful, of course, but..." Mary hesitated.

"Did you expect that a selfish feudal lord like me would put up more of a resistance?" he inquired.

"To be honest with you, yes."

Fleur nodded, understanding her point. He still looked calm, so much so that it was hard to believe he'd been forced to withdraw via a threat. "I'm just following my own line of thinking."

"So you still haven't changed your mind."

"Of course not. I believe that birth determines everything, and since I was born as a feudal lord, I cannot go against someone who outranks me," he

explained. There was no hesitation in his words, and he spoke as if he were admonishing Mary with a sound argument. Not even she could destroy his conviction.

How admirable, Mary thought, since it meant she and her allies couldn't declare this as their complete victory. She had no intention of endorsing his views, but she found it creditable that he stepped back in order to stay true to his beliefs. "Thank you for making that decision," she said, showing her respect for him. Alicia and Patrick followed up with similar words.

But even though they expressed their gratitude, nobody lowered their head to Fleur. They expressed their thanks with consideration for rank differences, as per his beliefs.

Fleur still didn't waver in response. He only sighed, and his quiet mutter of "Times change..." made its way to Mary's ears.

"What do you mean you relinquished the domain, grandfather?!" someone yelled in shock while Mary and the others were preparing to depart. They turned around to see a young woman walking towards them. The household staff were trying to pacify her, but she paid them no heed as she angrily stomped onwards.

Anna and Helene trembled at the rage that visibly crossed the woman's features. Roberto smoothly pushed Anna behind him, while Lang and Lucian moved in front of Helene protectively. Gainas stood by Parfette, whose breath had hitched at the furious shout. Adi and Patrick were about to offer up protection to their respective beloveds too...

"Someone with a bit of oomph has appeared! Let's deal with her at once!"

"Yes! It's beating time!"

...but since Mary's and Alicia's eyes were twinkling as though they'd just spotted their prey, each man hurriedly grabbed a hold of his wife's arm.

"Your Ladyship, please be mature about this!" Adi pleaded.

"No! Fleur meekly retreated, but something tells me that girl is different! I can

finally go all out and take someone down!”

“Alicia, where did your composure go?!” Patrick questioned.

“Princess time is over now!”

Mary and Alicia didn’t listen to a word their husbands said, their eyes burning with determination as they glared at the young woman. She must’ve been Fleur’s granddaughter. Based on the way the servants had referred to her, her name was Milenia. She was clad in a gorgeous dress with well-tailored ornaments, and if she were calm, she would’ve looked beautiful.

However, right now her lovely features were twisted with open wrath. Directing her anger at Fleur, she hounded him by screaming, “How could you do such a foolish thing?! Don’t tell me you’re retiring by handing over the territory? That’s just absurd!”

“I’ve made my decision, and I won’t retract it,” Fleur replied. “Besides, we have guests. Calm yourself.”

“I don’t care! If you do this, I won’t be able to live the way I have been until now! I was just about to get engaged too...!” Milenia lamented, demanding an explanation. Apparently, things had been going well between her and the aristocrat she’d been aiming for, so her desperate state upon hearing such terrible news was no surprise.

Milenia continued appealing to her grandfather, saying things like “I saved up so much money!” and “I even outmaneuvered the other noblewomen too!” so she must’ve been using the domain and its assets to her advantage. It wasn’t anything pleasant to listen to.

Fleur must’ve felt the same, as he frowned at her. His expression was full of disgust and exasperation that hadn’t appeared when he’d spoken to Mary and the rest.

“You said you’d give the domain to *me*, grandfather!”

“But you wouldn’t have tried to govern this place by yourself,” he argued.

“Of course not! Why should I have to do that? As the daughter of a feudal lord, I ought to get married. After all, I was born into a family of lords!” Milenia

countered, speaking as if that were only to be expected of her.

Everyone else exchanged a glance. Milenia was exactly like they would've imagined Fleur's granddaughter to be. She'd been raised based on his belief that circumstances of birth determined everything, and so she believed it too.

"I do think it's impressive that Fleur won't let his conviction be shaken, but to see *this* resulting from it is pure irony," Mary said with a scoff.

Milenia whipped around to glare at her upon hearing that. She must've felt that Mary and her friends were the cause of this situation. "So these people have enticed you, have they?" she asked Fleur, her voice full of hostility. She ignored her grandfather's denial and raised the hem of her skirt before swiftly approaching Mary. Her countenance was grim, and it wouldn't have been surprising if she had tried to grab Mary in her fury.

Adi stepped in front of his spouse to shield her. Yet Mary pushed him aside and faced Milenia directly as the other girl glowered at her sharply. "What a shameful conclusion for someone born into a family of lords to reach. You should've just inherited the lands yourself," Mary told her.

"Me? I'm a woman! I obviously can't become the feudal lord!"

"Is that a fact? Even women have to try sometimes, you know. If you'd inherited the domain, you would've at least had a say in its fate, and you might have even been allowed to keep it," Mary said, shrugging to show how regretful she thought it all was.

Milenia wasn't the feudal lord—she was merely the feudal lord's granddaughter. No matter how much she screamed, she had no right to overturn the decision. However, things would've been different had she inherited the domain. Mary would've spoken to her instead, and as the feudal lord, Milenia could've resisted to the bitter end.

Milenia's eyes widened when Mary pointed this out. "But why should I, a woman, be a feudal lord?!"

"Obviously, because you're the feudal lord's granddaughter. If you want to put your position to use, you have to work for it, right?"

"What are you talking about?! Anyway, don't put on airs just because you're

my grandfather's guest!" Milenia raised her voice, trying to grab hold of Mary.

But Mary saw right through the woman's frantic behavior, stepping aside as something grabbed her arm. Adi embraced Mary, placing himself between the two women. Yet before Milenia's hand could reach either of them, a cane swung down with a whoosh, knocking it aside.

It was Fleur. Although Milenia was his granddaughter, he had struck her hand with his cane, showing no leniency. The woman cried out sorrowfully, covering her hand with the other. She, Mary, and all the rest turned to look at the man in shock.

"G-Grandfather! Why...?!"

"You are the granddaughter of a lord, so don't defy these people," he replied. "My apologies, Lady Mary."

"Lady Mary...?" Milenia repeated with disbelief, looking at Mary.

Mary huffed as she looked back at her. The Albert name was well-known even in Sylvino, and Mary was a succession candidate for the distinguished family. Normally, her brothers should've taken the seat, yet she had come forward to fight for that right herself. One might say she was the complete opposite of Milenia, who'd been raised to fixate on what sort of environment she was born into, and believed that she couldn't inherit the domain as a woman.

Mary glared at her coolly. "Your ideas about birth circumstances, women, and the like are just plain outdated."

"But... You're from House Albert...?" Milenia muttered weakly. She lacked her previous vigor, no longer willing to fight back now that she knew she was up against Mary Albert. Unlike Fleur, who had retreated with dignity, she merely hesitated when faced with an opponent who couldn't be chased off by her grandfather's authority.

Even so, Milenia tried to mumble some sort of reply, so Mary swiftly shut her down. "Quiet," she demanded. "The idea that birth determines everything is an old-fashioned belief that doesn't fit the current times. Every single person has the right to be happy, and to live peacefully without being oppressed by another. Those of us born into good fortune have a duty to accept these

blessings while protecting such rights.”

“B-But I’m a woman...”

“Gender is irrelevant. If you want to enjoy the benefits of being born into a family of lords, you should give back to others too,” Mary declared plainly.

Alicia exhaled hotly at these words. Patrick and Gainas nodded in agreement, while for some reason, Lang and Lucian were acting as proud as if this were their own achievement, on the verge of proclaiming, *“That’s our Mary!”*

They all believed that Mary had made a sound argument, and that her assertions were splendid. Even Fleur seemed impressed. His expression was complicated, perhaps because he was comparing Mary to his own granddaughter. He muttered under his breath that this was a new era, his voice uncharacteristically lacking in power.

Only Mary continued to glare coldly at Milenia while whispering in her mind, *I might’ve said too many upstanding things. That’s not like me...*

Of course, the things she’d said were her true feelings. But the way she’d phrased them sounded like a wish for everyone to live peacefully, as well as an appeal to the others that they should contribute to that. Which wasn’t necessarily untrue, but she didn’t harbor such deep passion for it either. If Patrick or Gainas had said such things, she might’ve sent them a round of applause. In Alicia’s case, it would’ve been too vexing to openly praise her, so Mary might’ve dismissively said, *“Obviously a princess should think that way.”*

“But...I’m not such a virtuous person,” she murmured. If she was to make a statement, then she wanted it to be a true reflection of herself. Earlier, she had felt as though she was borrowing her words from someone else. Her brows furrowed at this strange discomfort, though nobody seemed to notice.

Naturally, Mary couldn’t just say something like, *“Actually, that wasn’t quite right,”* at this point. She didn’t want the others to notice her discomfort either. “But still, this doesn’t feel right...!” she muttered quietly, before turning to look at Adi and calling his name.

“Well done, milady. That was a noble sentiment,” he told her.

“Th-Thanks... I suppose you’re right. It was a noble sentiment.”

“Indeed. However...” With a gentle smile, Adi held out his hand.

Mary thought he’d wrap his arm around her waist like always. Except this time, her eyes widened in surprise when she realized that instead of resting on her hip, his hand pressed against her abdomen. “Adi, what is it?” she asked.

“I’m plugging their ears.”

Mary’s eyes widened at Adi’s words, looking between his face and his hand. It was resting on her belly, but surely he was intending to plug their unborn baby’s ears by doing so, even though the child was still so young that it didn’t have the sense of hearing yet.

Surmising his intentions, Mary smiled softly. “You’re right. Such earnest, pure appeals just don’t suit me.”

“Yes. Those may be noble ideals, but it didn’t feel right when *you* said them, my lady.”

“Later, let’s insist that Patrick did that speech,” Mary said jokingly, then looked down at her abdomen. “No imitating what I’m about to say,” she told it just to be sure, as she’d learned that the more one didn’t want children to repeat bad words, the more they wanted to learn and use them.

Afterwards, Mary once more faced Milenia. The woman, who’d been observing the exchange in puzzlement, now put herself on guard. She must’ve thought Mary was about to deliver a finishing blow to a fleeing enemy.

Mary’s gaze was cold. “You are nothing more than the granddaughter of a lord. You weren’t willing to inherit the title, and all you did was disgracefully indulge in Fleur’s profits behind his back. A woman like you cannot compare to me, who readily stepped forth as one of House Albert’s succession candidates.”

“I... I...”

“I was born an Albert. Someone like you shouldn’t talk back to me. Stick to being the granddaughter of a lord until the end, and get out of these lands!” Mary demanded sharply.

Milenia glared at her in frustration. She pressed her lips into a hard line, yet feeling that it still wasn’t enough, she trembled. However, she didn’t say a

word, because she was still seized by the idea that birth determined everything.

How unsightly, Mary muttered inwardly. She would've rather had the woman bite back and try to reclaim her right to the title. If she'd had enough mettle to do that, Mary would've acknowledged her.

But Milenia only hung her head and whispered, "Why...?"

The staff also had no idea how to respond, standing at a distance while watching her.

At that point, Fleur addressed Mary. "I apologize for my granddaughter's behavior."

"With that attitude, I can't even see her as an opponent," Mary responded cynically, and Fleur's face soured.

Milenia still looked dispirited, casting Mary a glare just before a maid took the girl by the arm and led her away. She was full of despondency as she retreated, which was quite the contrast to her showy dress.

Alas, even if Fleur retired from his role, it didn't mean that he and Milenia would fall into poverty. They would have to leave this domain, but they'd still be able to live comfortably. Fleur had stepped down voluntarily, and since the matter didn't affect the entire country, it wouldn't escalate into an international affair. Perhaps his new life wouldn't be luxurious, but he would be able to enjoy a pleasant retirement.

That didn't seem to satisfy Milenia, but since she hadn't been willing to become the next feudal lord herself, Mary just felt exasperated with her.

"Circumstances of birth determine everything, huh? It looks like she grew up exactly as you wanted," Mary remarked.

"That's harsh of you to say," Fleur murmured.

"The two of you need to leave this land. If you do, I won't chase you down. However...if you return, I'll show you exactly how different the circumstances of our births have determined us to be," Mary said nonchalantly. It was a warning, but also the biggest concession she was willing to grant him.

Fleur must've understood this, as he politely lowered his head, picked up his

cane, and followed after his granddaughter.



That's one job finished, Mary thought, breathing a sigh of relief.

However, things were far from over. In fact, the changes were only just beginning. The wealth disparity in this domain was an unbearable sight, so the reformation would have to be significant, and thereby necessitate a lot of work. Those like Anna, who'd been forced to live in such cruel conditions, were probably overflowing with pent-up frustration, while the wealthy families who had lined their pockets would resist the changes. The gap between both parties was wide, and if an inexperienced figure were to be put in charge of the domain, it could become the catalyst for an open conflict.

With that in mind, Mary surveyed her surroundings. "Oh, how terrible! Won't somebody help me? Anybody!" she exclaimed with exaggeration.

(Adi, who was standing next to her, muttered, "What a ham actor..." but Mary shut him up by stomping on his foot.)

"What's the matter, Lady Mary?! I'll save you!" Alicia shouted heatedly, rushing over to Mary's side.

"I... I want to help too...!" cried Parfette, shuffling behind Alicia tearily.

Mary smirked at the girls. "I may have done all this for Anna's sake, but I might have gone too far. What if Their Majesties scold me for it? I'm terrified!"

"Not to worry! I'll explain everything to my parents, so I'm sure they'll understand!"

"Really? You're so reliable, Alicia," Mary replied. "But I'm worried about the domain. It's too far from House Albert's estate for us to commute here. How dreadful!"

"I-In that case, I... Lord Gainas and I will look after the domain, so please leave it to us...!"

"What a relief! I know they'll be safe in your hands, Parfette. Thank you both," Mary said, giving them a first-class smile, and the other two girls responded with great enthusiasm.

Next, Mary turned her attention towards Patrick and Gainas. Their wives had made impulsive decisions because they liked Mary a little too much, but instead of voicing dissent, the two men just shrugged.

“I mean, I’ve intended to uproot the feudal lord and snatch his lands from the beginning, so I suppose I’ll cooperate until the end,” Patrick remarked.

“Lord Patrick, you *cannot* just say such disturbing things without hesitation...! Ah, never mind. I won’t comment on it again,” Gainas murmured. “Rest assured, Lady Mary. I’ll keep in close contact with the new feudal lord, and report everything back to you.”

Mary smiled at their agreement. She whispered something into Alicia’s and Parfette’s ears, and then sent them both off to their husbands.

Alicia leaped forward to capture Patrick in a tight embrace. (He groaned quietly from the pain, which was par for the course.) Parfette also hugged Gainas, and the girls exclaimed in unison, “Let’s do our best!”

In response, the two powerful men’s expressions relaxed with affection for their respective partners. The way they had all promised to work hard for the sake of the domain was very sweet, indeed.

Mary watched them while smirking in satisfaction. With this, the men’s authority and skills were sure to be drawn out to their maximum potential. After a moment, she turned to look at her brothers, who were watching this scene play out with faces that practically screamed, “*That’s our Mary!*”

“I’m sure there will be people who oppose today’s decision,” she told them. “Especially Sylvino’s aristocracy, and wealthy persons who’ve been lining their pockets this whole time. However, I—”

“Don’t worry, Mary! Leave that to your brothers! We’ll do anything for you!”

“Let me finish, Lang. However, I don’t want any viol—”

“I’ll happily get my hands dirty for you, Mary... We can’t let *your* hands be sullied, after all...”

“Thank you, Lucian. But hear me out until the end. I meant to say, I don’t want to do anything violent, so—”

“The faster we resolve this, the better, I say. Once we return to Albert Manor, I’ll investigate those who voice any opposition.”

Now that even Roberto had interrupted her, Mary sighed in exasperation. “All right, then. Thanks.”

I’m sure this is just another sign of my brothers’ enthusiasm, Mary assured herself. *I didn’t get to say what I wanted, but if just one of them picked up on what I meant, there should be no issue.* She inhaled deeply, knowing she could leave the rest of this matter to the others. But right then, Patrick spoke up.

“What are *you* going to do, Mary?”

“Me? I’m not going to do anything,” she answered.

“You’re the one who made all those proclamations. Don’t tell me you’re going to put your feet up and watch the rest of us labor away?”

“That’s such a terrible way to put it. I can’t afford to exert myself at the moment.”

“I get that, but you made it all the way out here, so you should be fine, right? There’s no need to drag this out,” Patrick argued, insisting that she ought to contribute to the betterment of the territory.

Mary furrowed her brows. What a strange sentiment he was voicing. Naturally, managing the land was of great importance. She and her friends might have to work themselves to the bone in order to improve the lives of those who’d suffered under poverty as soon as possible. Such was their duty as those of high standing.

However, things were different in Mary’s case. Right now, her biggest concern was the baby in her belly. Patrick should’ve known this, yet here he was, telling her to get to work. It was discourteous in the extreme.

Mary glared at Patrick with condemnation. Sensing the sudden tension in the air, Adi tilted his head, confused.

“I see. So *that’s* your opinion, is it, Patrick?” Mary asked coolly. “Well, I’m afraid that I plan to rest for the time being.”

“Rest? I think you’re blowing this out of proportion. I understand that this

might be difficult for you, but..." Patrick paused. His eyes, which had been gazing into Mary's, suddenly moved down and landed on her abdomen. Then, he opened his mouth to continue. "...you don't really need *that* much rest just because you have indigestion."

Mary's eyes grew wide as saucers. Patrick had very clearly just said "*indigestion*."

Adi also stared off into the distance for a moment, muttering, "This has happened before..."

Alicia, who'd been clinging to Patrick, turned her surprised gaze onto Mary. "Are you suffering from indigestion again, Lady Mary?"

"'Again'?! How rude! Don't make it sound like I have a perpetual stomach bug!" Mary objected.

"Did you eat too many croquettes?" Alicia inquired. "Or maybe too many rice bowls? I do think a croquette and rice bowl combo is a bit heavy."

"I'm telling you, that's not it! Stop making me out to be some kind of glutton! And what's a croquette and rice bowl combo even supposed to be? Humph... I suppose it *does* sound possible..." Mary said, muttering to herself about adding that option to the menu.

Adi lightly poked her arm, silently appealing that this wasn't the time for such considerations. Mary nodded in agreement. She would brainstorm the new menu once the Sylvino matter had been wrapped up.

"Anyway, regardless of what you say, I'll be taking a long rest," Mary proclaimed emphatically.

Patrick and Alicia stared at her. They'd both been sincerely convinced that she was suffering from indigestion, so the idea that there could be another cause seemed impossible to them (which Mary thought was quite rude). It wasn't just them—Parfette, Gainas, and even the twins were looking at Mary, wondering what was going on. Meanwhile, Roberto and Anna, who knew the truth, smiled in satisfaction.

Mary turned to look at Adi. He was smiling as well, as if he couldn't contain his happiness. She did likewise, pressing her hand to her abdomen—not her

stomach, but lower than that. It was still flat, but the baby was right there.

“I need to rest so that I can take the time to learn how to be a mother, while being buried in soft cushions. Right, Adi?”

“In that case, I’ll learn how to be a father by arranging for said soft cushions,” he replied. As they smiled at each other, everyone around them fell silent.

Then, after a slight pause, there was a massive uproar. The first to scream in excitement was Alicia. Her joy surged through not just her face, but her entire body. She spread her arms wide and rushed towards Mary, but...

“N-No, I mustn’t...!”

...she stopped herself at the last second. She knew that tackling a pregnant woman was dangerous. A simple hug would’ve been better, but in her present excitement, she might’ve gone too far. Therefore, Alicia withdrew her arms and suppressed her overflowing emotions. She was trembling slightly, which only showed how delighted she was.

After holding down her own arms for a few moments, Alicia suddenly looked up. “A wet nurse...” she said, as if she’d just had a great idea.

“I will *not* let you raise my baby,” Mary said, instantly shutting that notion down. In what world would a princess volunteer to be a wet nurse? And even if there evidently *was* one such reality, as if Mary would hand her baby over to her! She glared at Alicia as she rejected her, but her words hardly reached the overjoyed girl.

“How wonderful...!” someone called out weakly. “L-L-Lady Maaaryyy...!”

Of course, it was Parfette. She was quivering even more than usual in her state of bliss. Spreading her arms, she drew nearer to Mary step after timid step. Her eyes were moist, with tears gathered in the corners. Yet once Parfette was in front of Mary, she gasped suddenly. She looked down at her arms, realizing that she shouldn’t hug Mary either.

In Mary’s eyes, Parfette’s gentle approach was of little concern when compared to that of Alicia, who still had some of her initial vigor left in her. In fact, if Mary didn’t accept Parfette’s hug right now, she thought might seriously be confined to a life wrapped in blankets and buried in cushions.

She was about to reassure the teary woman, when Alicia interjected. “Parfette!” she shouted, opening her arms invitingly. Parfette crept closer, and...

“Lady Alicia!”

“Parfette!”

...the two of them jumped into each other’s arms.

“L-Lady Alicia...! I wonder if I’ll become a capable wet nurse too...?”

“Of course you will, Parfette! Let us both master the wet nurse path together!”

“Yes!”

They continued to assert their determination while embracing. Everyone else gazed at them with soft smiles.

Mary was the only one who bitterly muttered, “Like I said, I *won’t* let you.” She whipped around to face Patrick and Gainas, demanding that they retrieve their beloveds at once.

Upon hearing that, Gainas put his arm around Parfette’s shoulder, gently drawing her away from Alicia and towards himself. “Congratulations, Lady Mary and Lord Adi,” he said.

“Thank you,” Mary responded. “I said that on the spur of the moment, but do keep quiet about it until the official announcement.”

“Of course. We’ll send our official congratulations for the occasion.”

“I look forward to it. And...if Parfette is about to say anything about it, you may shut her mouth yourself. I won’t interrupt again, so worry not.” Mary laughed elegantly following her humorous remark.

Gainas looked startled. “V-Very well,” he blurted out in a shrill voice, scratching his head in discomfort.

Parfette’s cheeks flushed at once. “Gosh, Lady Mary!” she protested frailly. She must’ve remembered how Mary had interrupted her kiss with Gainas last night.

Mary laughed good-naturedly. Once she had composed herself, she turned to Patrick. He was still just standing there, dumbstruck. “Oh? Are you not even going to congratulate your childhood friend on the good news?” Mary asked him.

“Huh? O-Oh, right... I see, so you and Adi are having a baby...” he said, his expression relaxing as his true emotions sprang forth. Delight exuded from him with such strength, it was as if this were his own matter. His indigo eyes were creased with joy as he looked at Mary. “Good grief, even *I* feel like hugging you right now. To think that you’ll actually be a mother...”

“I’m still a bit surprised myself,” Mary admitted. “But I can’t believe you confused my pregnancy for indigestion. I didn’t think you’d be so wide of the mark.”

“Ha ha, touché. By the way, Mary, take a look in this hand mirror. What do you see?”

“A beauty.”

“All right, you’re still you. I’m relieved that you haven’t changed at all,” Patrick muttered, his shoulders drooping. “Congratulations,” he said with sincere kindness, and Mary smiled at him.

Patrick patted Adi’s shoulder, offering him a congratulatory word as well. There was more power in his gesture than usual, as if to demonstrate the extent of his good mood.

After watching that exchange, Mary shifted her focus to Lang and Lucian. They hadn’t said a word. Despite their yin-and-yang differences, they were typically a boisterous duo, so this silence was extremely out of character. They simply stood there without so much as a twitch while staring at Mary.

“Are they going to faint from joy?” Mary mused.

“Well, at least they’d be moving, then,” Adi replied. “Ah, looks like Roberto’s going to—”

“*Wake them up,*” he’d been meaning to say before stopping. Or rather, a low sound had drowned out his voice.

Just what was that sound? Why, Roberto had karate chopped Lang and Lucian on the back of their necks. He was merciless, and the twins groaned in pain.

“Roberto! How could you do this to us, your own masters?! No, never mind. There’s no time for that now... Mary’s having a *child*?!”

“Roberto, that was inappropriate... No... This isn’t the time to worry about that. Mary’s *child*...?!”

The twins had both tried scolding Roberto at first, before the reality of the situation finally dawned on them as one. Their willingness to overlook Roberto’s violence was so very much like them.

“Indeed, we are talking about Lady Mary’s child right now,” Roberto said, nonchalantly adding fuel to the fire. The way he secured his innocence was also par for the course.

Mary and Adi exchanged a glance, silently signaling to each other that everything was playing out the same as usual. “All you brothers are awful when you’re together. Adi is better, but *purely* for the fact that he doesn’t use violence,” Mary asserted.

“Now’s not the time for such discussions,” Adi said, glossing over the matter.

“Mary, are you really having a child?” asked Lang.

“I am. My and Adi’s baby is in my belly right now. *My and Adi’s*, do you hear me?”

“A baby... Mary and Adi’s baby...” Lucian mumbled.

“That’s right, my and Adi’s. I am *not* undergoing binary fission. And neither is Adi,” Mary emphasized, to ensure that her brothers wouldn’t misunderstand. If she neglected to do this now, she couldn’t guarantee that they wouldn’t get carried away again. Of course, no matter what she said, she couldn’t fully control the extent of their imagination.

Lang and Lucian looked at each other...

“It’s party time! An angel is descending upon us, and we’ll celebrate for three days and three nights! Let’s ring the bells and revel in grand style!”

“We must inform the whole world that an angel is about to be born... To start,

let's hold a parade in the town center. It'll be extravagant, the largest our country has ever seen...! We'll ring the bells to signal its start..."

...and instantly began making merry.

Mary and Adi scrunched up their faces. They didn't say anything, but it was obvious they were both thinking, *"Things really are turning out exactly as we said they would..."* On top of that, even Lang and Lucian were mentioning the "bells" now.

Exasperated, Mary looked to Roberto. Her eyes silently ordered him to do something about this. Understanding as much, he nodded deeply. He loomed behind the frolicking twins, slowly raised his hands...and in the next moment, a sharp noise resounded in the air.

"Oh my," Alicia remarked with a foolish expression, while Patrick only sighed. The trembling Parfette covered Anna's eyes, and Gainas covered Parfette's.

Roberto, however, paid no heed to these reactions as he dragged the moaning Lang and Lucian back to their carriage. He forced them inside, then turned back to face Mary and bowed. "We shall be excusing ourselves now. We still have time, so I think we'll return to Albert Manor and share a few drinks."

"You plan to drink them under the table before they can make a fuss, right?" Mary inquired.

"If you feel the need, Lady Mary, I'll make it so that they forget all about what happened earlier."

"That's terrifying... Anyway, just calm them down by the time we get back. And if possible, let them keep their memories."

"Understood, Lady Mary. Excuse me." The softly smiling Roberto stepped into the carriage, and it began moving away.

Everything had gone about as expected, and everyone watched the carriage leave in silence. Mary shrugged her shoulders, saying, "We can leave those two in Roberto's hands. If they *do* lose their memories, it'll just mean Roberto took whatever measures he felt were necessary."

"Right... And when they decide to vent their anger, *I'll* be their target," Adi

grumbled.

“That will also be a necessary sacrifice,” Mary reasoned, while Adi’s shoulders sank.

It was all so ridiculous, but that was to be expected by now. Adi muttered to himself how much better life would be if he could only resolve things as well as his brother. Mary patted his arm soothingly. But her eyes soon widened when Adi, who would usually let things end with an exhausted sigh, suddenly looked fierce.

“Adi?”

“I won’t let them keep taking their anger out on me! I’m about to become a father!” he declared, his cheeks flushing with vigor. Perhaps he didn’t want his child to see him being pathetic.

Mary rubbed her belly. “What a cool father you have,” she told it.

Epilogue

A grand party was held to announce Mary's pregnancy.

Alas, as Mary's abdomen gradually grew rounder with each passing day, everyone around her became more and more protective. The change in those closest to her was obvious to anyone. However, nobody pointed it out, waiting with great joy and anticipation until the day of the announcement.

And so, the moment of the reveal was finally upon them.

Mary basked in her audience's expectant gazes, though some part of her did feel anxious and nervous. Adi's hand was wrapped around her waist. He hadn't stepped away from her for even a moment, supporting her the entire time.

"Everyone, we have an announcement," Mary said slowly, without raising her voice too much. Even so, her statement carried throughout the venue. She informed the crowd that she and Adi had been blessed with a child.

Instantly, the place lit up with excitement. All the guests congratulated the couple, looking joyous over the news. A few of the waiters even stopped in their tracks for a second, and among them at least one had tears in their eyes.

Amid all that, somebody called out Mary's name. Her brothers were approaching, and Lang was holding a small box, which he handed to her. "Congratulations again, Mary. This is a gift from us."

"A gift...? You two are constantly giving me gifts these days," Mary said, laughing impishly as she stared at the box.

Ever since she had told the twins about her pregnancy back in Sylvino, they'd been giving her presents. The contents varied, with some gifts being things Mary herself liked, while others were for the baby. Moreover, they'd even joined Adi in giving her cushions, at which point she felt more exasperated than grateful. Nonetheless, she had anticipated that they would arrange some kind of gift for her today, and that had indeed happened.

Yet this one must've been different from usual, as Lucian emphasized, "This

present is special.” Both he and Lang looked uncharacteristically calm today, and Mary even felt that there was a serious glint in their eyes as they gazed at her.

Wondering what this was all about, she accepted the box. It was wrapped up beautifully, using a silver and red ribbon, so the twins must’ve prepared it with Mary and Adi’s signature colors in mind. The box felt slightly heavy.

“This is the best gift that we can offer you two,” Lang proclaimed.

“And to your child too... No, it’s a gift that will last far, far beyond that...” Lucian added.

The smiling twins watched as Mary began unwrapping the box. She gently lifted the white lid. “This is...” she whispered. Adi peered over her shoulder, and his breath hitched.

The atmosphere had been festive until this moment, so a few people picked up on the change and glanced their way, confused as to what was going on. However, Mary was in no state to answer their questioning looks. Instead, she took out what had been resting inside the box.

It was a glittering jeweled pocket watch, its lid engraved with their family emblem. It was obvious at a glance that this was a valuable object. Yet the watch’s true worth had nothing to do with its price, for it bore a great significance. After all, this very pocket watch symbolized the head of House Albert. Mary had held it once herself, before returning it to her father and declaring that she’d take it when she was the rightful heir.

“Lang, Lucian... Are you truly...giving this to me?” Mary stammered.

“Yeah—it’s our gift to you, Mary. You’ll accept it, won’t you?” Lang asked.

“But I have to prioritize being a mother over being the head of the house...”

“Of course... That’s why we’ll support you,” Lucian assured her. “It’s our joy in life to be there for you and your child, Mary...”

Mary gazed at the pocket watch in her hand, then slowly looked up at her brothers. They gazed back at her, their eyes shining with kindness. At the same time, the two brimmed with steadfast determination. By giving this to her here

and now, in front of a countless number of people, they were announcing that Mary had been chosen as House Albert's heir.

Realizing as much, Mary tightened her grip on the watch. Adi's larger hand enveloped hers in turn. "I'll be raising a child for the first time in my life, and working as the head of House Albert all the while. I'm sure it won't be easy," she said.

"Indeed, I agree. However..." Adi smiled at her. His gentle gaze seemed to say that he was willing to yield his next sentence. Or rather, he had set it up for her to finish.

Mary took him up on that, squeezing his hand tighter. "As long as we're together, we'll be fine!" she asserted enthusiastically, and Adi nodded in response.

The venue erupted with cheers just as loud as when Mary had announced her pregnancy. If anything, everyone was even more excited now that they had multiple matters to congratulate her on, and some began raising toasts.

Mary and Adi looked at each other. Adi slowly withdrew his hand from Mary's, only to place it onto her abdomen. While rubbing it softly, he pulled her closer. "As long as we're together, we'll be fine," he echoed, gazing into her eyes.

Mary's smile widened. Indeed, so long as Adi was by her side, everything would be all right. And soon enough, their child would join them, so Mary wasn't at all worried about how things would turn out. She only felt hope and anticipation.

Of course, within this throng of cheers...

"Lady Mary! Me! I'm here too!!! Lady Mary!!!"

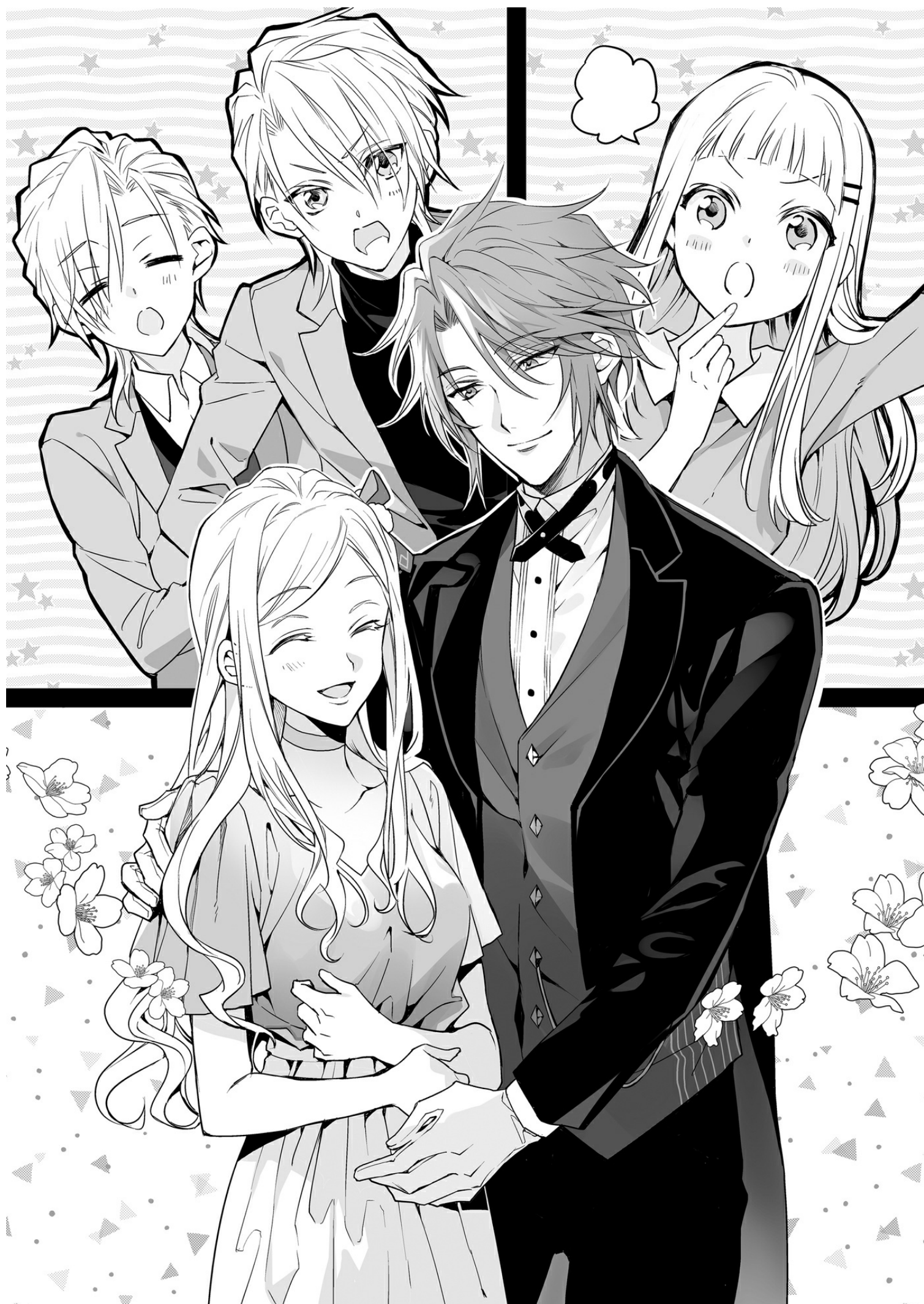
...was Alicia's voice...

"The same goes for your brothers, Mary! I know you and Adi are in your own world right now, but Lucian and I will always support you!"

"Keep us in your sights too, our adorable Mary..."

...and the twins' voices, all of which frantically attempted to appeal to her.

Exasperated, Mary could only sigh.





“Congratulations, Lady Mary.” Carina and Margaret both delivered their blessings. Mary, who was sitting on the bench in the garden, smiled.

A soft cape was wrapped around her shoulders, and a lap blanket stretched all the way down to her feet. There were cushions on either side of her, and the bench had a backrest stuffed with cotton. She looked very well protected indeed, and the other two girls chuckled at the sight.

Earlier, the two mentioned that the entire country had been discussing Mary being buried in cushions even before the official announcement. That new development had been practically as good as announcing it, and everyone had a hard time pretending they hadn’t noticed. While the girls teased her, Mary laughed bashfully. What an embarrassing tale this was.

“I’m sure your and Adi’s child will be wonderful. I can’t wait to meet them,” Carina remarked.

“Thank you, Carina.”

“And then the heirship too... I already knew you were pregnant, but I had no idea we’d find out House Albert’s heir today! You’re full of surprises, Lady Mary.”

Mary laughed gracefully at Carina’s words. “My apologies,” she said, clearly enjoying herself and not feeling sorry in the slightest. She had known she was prone to shaking up high society, and here she’d gone and done it again. It looked like that wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

Carina smiled wryly when she saw that Mary was entirely pleased with herself. “This is exactly why you’re you,” she said, her voice overflowing with genuine friendliness.

Both of the girls then turned to look at Margaret, who was lost in thought. She’d been deliberating upon something and muttering to herself this entire time with a serious expression. “If Lady Mary and Lord Adi have a child, that child will without a doubt become House Albert’s next heir. This is the beginning of a new era...”

“Oh, you exaggerate, Margaret,” Mary commented.

“That will surely influence Bernard, and then he’ll be ready to take the next step. This is an unparalleled opportunity for a marriage proposal. Time to fire off a killer blow...!”

“I suppose I respect how unwavering you are, even with the arrival of a new era,” Mary added, half exasperated and half affectionate. Carina only smiled, being used to it by now.

However, a youthful voice soon interrupted their friendly exchange. “A killer blow?”

Mary looked up to see Anna running over towards them, clad in a pink dress. Following her was Helene, who was wearing a classical dress. Lang and Lucian were behind them, so they must’ve shown them here.

“Good to see you, Anna and Helene,” Mary greeted them.

“What does ‘killer blow’ mean?”

“It means bringing down your intended partner,” Margaret explained. “It’s only effective if you find the right moment, dress for the occasion, and attack with your best smile.”

“Stop teaching Anna strange things,” Mary demanded. “Anna, these girls are scary, so let’s go somewhere else. They have cake over there.” As Mary urged the child, rubbing her shoulders, Margaret laughed elegantly.

“‘*These girls*’? Now why would you say that?” Carina inquired, but Mary ignored her. Carina had asked her question with an icy yet beautiful smile upon her face, which was exactly what made her so scary.

The women were perfectly self-aware, watching the escaping Mary with amusement. “How rude,” one remarked.

“Truly,” the other agreed.

Naturally, many aristocrats had been invited to House Albert’s party. Adi’s friends had received invites as well, and though all of them were servants, they mostly worked for reputable families and were perfectly refined themselves. On the other hand, Helene felt awkward and out of place because of how different

she was from the people around her.

Sure, she'd been in communication with Mary ever since the incident in Sylvino, but this was still a whole new world to her. So while the young Anna gazed at her gaudy surroundings with sparkling eyes, Helene was restless and couldn't calm herself down.

"Lady Mary, I really don't think I belong here after all... You even arranged a dress for me, but I feel like the dress is wearing *me*."

"Don't say that, Helene," Mary replied. "You have a lot to teach me as a mother. And that dress suits you! Honestly, it's a far cry from a certain princess who once turned up at my home wearing an astonishingly shabby outfit," she added sourly, still unable to forget that dreadful sight.

That princess's gown had been unbelievably old-fashioned, with ornaments that highlighted her vital areas not unlike a marksman's practice target. Worst of all, she'd brought a parasol to an evening party. No matter what anyone wore, it would never top *that*.

As for said princess...

"I still have that dress, you know!"

...it was obviously Alicia, who butted her way into the conversation. For some reason, she was smiling boldly. Truly, why?

"I'll wear it again if you like, Lady Mary."

"Enough. If you show up in that thing again, I'll dub you a party troll," Mary declared, glaring sharply at the grinning Alicia. She put her hand over her stomach protectively, and turned her back to the other girl. Though her belly was only slightly round, it was very noticeable given her slender and petite frame. Mary purposefully kept her distance from Alicia, who protested pitifully in response. Helene and Anna watched them while smiling.

"Parfette and Gainas are here too, Anna, so you should say hello to them. I'm sure my brothers can take you to them," Mary proposed, and Anna happily agreed. When Mary called her brothers over, the little girl jumped up and down, her pink dress bouncing adorably.

Lang and Lucian both held an arm out to Helene. They seemed strangely enthusiastic about it—or was that just Mary’s imagination?

“Helene, I make for a perfect escort. Please take my hand!” said Lang.

“Helene, this may be hard to believe, but escorting is my specialty... Come with me,” said Lucian.

“Th-Thank you two. But you don’t need to escort *me* of all people...” Helene responded, bewildered at the way the twins had approached her in tandem. This was the first party she’d ever experienced, so being in the presence of House Albert’s eldest sons naturally overwhelmed her. Even a noblewoman would’ve found herself perplexed in the face of such an occurrence.

Helene’s arm paused in midair, as she had no idea whether to take Lang’s or Lucian’s hand. Making a snap decision here would’ve been impossible. However, a third party took her hand from the side before anything else could happen.

It was Roberto. With a composed smile, he said, “If you’re unsure, *I’ll* gladly escort you,” and then began walking alongside her. Anna happily followed after them, and once Lang and Lucian had snapped back to their senses, they did the same.

Mary had been observing the entire scene with wide eyes. But now that she thought about it, she realized her brothers had been concerning themselves with Anna and Helene a great deal lately. The mother and daughter duo often visited Albert Manor even without Mary’s invitation. Perhaps the twins were reminded of Mary when she was little whenever they saw Anna. Or perhaps they were practicing now in case Mary had a baby girl.

Or maybe they have a completely different motive...

“Ah, but trying to predict what they’ve got in mind is out of the question. Even just thinking about it is pointless. And if something *does* happen, I’m sure it’ll shake up high society,” Mary said, smoothly changing her mind as she watched the group leave.

Anna was grinning in a carefree way, and Helene, despite her nerves, watched her daughter with a gentle smile. When Mary had first seen the woman, she

had been sickly and on the verge of collapse, but now she seemed perfectly well.

What a relief... Mary thought with a sigh.

The betterment of Sylvino's domain was still an ongoing process, but Anna, Helene, and everyone else who'd suffered in poverty now lived peacefully. Gainas and Parfette had begun making moves immediately after the meeting with the ex-feudal lord, and everyone else had supported them. These changes were thanks to their efforts.

An even brighter future was still ahead. That went for Anna and her family, and Mary too.

As Mary thought upon that while rubbing her belly, someone else's hand came into view. It belonged to Alicia, and it slowly approached Mary's abdomen as if testing the waters. Mary slapped Alicia's hand away, demanding that the other girl not touch her.

Having nowhere else to go, Alicia's hand started rubbing the cushion instead. She even placed it on her lap and told it, "Lady Mary's such a bully, isn't she?" as if she were talking to a child. She patted the cushion in imitation of patting a child's head.

Mary couldn't hold back and burst into laughter at this ridiculous exchange. Right then, someone called her name, and she turned to see that it was Patrick. Adi was next to him too. "I bid you a warm welcome," she said, addressing Patrick. "Now collect that girl and go back to your place." She nudged Alicia with her elbow repeatedly, and the other girl smiled and stood up.

"Well then, excuse me!" she said, bowing. Mary was sure she'd be back in no time anyway. But for now, Alicia was in the mood to meekly go along with Patrick, allowing him to clasp her hand while she gazed at him adoringly. She nestled against him, and in an instant the air around them turned saccharine.

Patrick looked pleased as well, waving Mary and Adi a brief goodbye before the two of them walked away. Was he telling Mary and Adi to take a moment to enjoy themselves together, or that they should resume their celebrations? Or perhaps he meant to say he wanted to enjoy his time with Alicia and that they shouldn't interrupt.

Either way, it's all par for the course, Mary thought as she watched them leave.

Adi sat next to her, busying himself with spreading cushions all around the bench. Mary could only shrug helplessly at his overprotectiveness. Her cushion ban had gone unheard, and their number multiplied day by day. Lately, even if Adi covered Mary and her surroundings in cushions, she found herself thinking, *At least he's not wrapping me up in blankets.*

"You're acting like this now, so I dread to think what you'll be like once the child is actually born," she huffed.

"W-Well... As a father, it's only natural that I wish to protect my wife and child," he argued.

"You're finally fighting back, are you? Hmm... Fine, let's just say you're a reliable father and leave it at that," Mary decided—to Adi's annoyance—as she rubbed her belly. He placed his hand on top of hers, and she wondered whether he was trying to soothe her or the baby. "The doctor says we're both in perfect health, so we should be meeting them soon."

"I can't wait. By the way, about the bells..."

"This, again?" Mary said, laughing in amusement. People had been telling her about the bells of happiness ringing ever since she'd found out she was pregnant. They must've believed it was a symbol of bliss, but Mary felt that everyone was exaggerating. When she said as much, Adi smiled wryly.

"It's because you're House Albert's youngest child, Your Ladyship. You're the youngest even among your close relatives."

"True. That's why I didn't know how to deal with children. But my mother and Helene have been tutoring me, and Anna's teaching me how children think and feel, so I'll be fine," Mary explained, triumphantly adding that she wouldn't let everyone else outpace her.

Yes, she had decided to take a back seat when it came to sorting out the domain reformation over in Sylvino, but she wasn't just doing nothing while being buried in cushions. She had been endeavoring to learn all about being a mother. Mary got advice from Keryl and Helene—both of whom had experience

as mothers—and learned how to handle babies from wet nurses. (Mary wondered why on earth Alicia and Parfette were always present during her talks with the wet nurses, as if the two girls wanted to learn all the details too.)

Mary once more asserted that she would be fine, puffing out her chest proudly.

“That’s not what I was talking about,” Adi pointed out. “I mentioned the bells.”

“You’re still on about that? I mean, I suppose the sound of bells does signify happiness.”

“No, it’s not just a symbol. You’re the youngest, so it makes sense that you wouldn’t know, but this is a long-standing tradition for House Albert,” Adi clarified.

“You mean...?” Mary muttered, and Adi put his hand on her abdomen. His rust-colored eyes gazed at her affectionately while he gently rubbed her belly. Mary smiled back at him too, when...

Ding-dong!

...a lovely high-pitched sound reverberated through the air. Mary gasped and looked up at the sky. That was definitely the sound of a bell.

“They’re really ringing! Wait... We have *bells* in Albert Manor?! Where?!” she demanded, and another ringing of the bells drowned out her voice.

House Albert's Little Treasure

Around six months after the pregnancy announcement, Mary was sitting inside of a carriage. Her belly was very large by now, so it was obvious to anyone at a glance that she was pregnant. Many people pointed out that it was almost time, so Mary likewise had high expectations. This was also the reason she was currently traveling.

Her destination was House Albert's villa located inside a resort. It was a peaceful place surrounded by nature, perfectly suited to spending one's time both before and after childbirth. Keryl had gone there to give birth to her three children, and even Mary's grandmother had gone there to give birth to Keryl. One could say it was a generations-long custom. The Alberts had traveled there a few times for vacation, so Mary knew the place well.

"The doctor went ahead, and will wait for us there, right?" she inquired.

"Yes. I heard he left first thing in the morning. The servants have already arrived at the villa too, so living there won't be inconvenient in the slightest," Adi explained.

"Thank you," Mary said happily.

Villas may exist for the purpose of spending time in peace and quiet, but this one also had to be ready for the birth of the baby. Many carefully selected people, such as the family's private doctor, other medical personnel, maids, servants, and wet nurses had already made their way to the holiday home.

Mary sighed in relief...and then mumbled, "Wet nurses?" under her breath. "Please tell me our wet nurses don't include a peasant and a crybaby?"

"Rest assured. Obviously, Alicia and Lady Parfette won't be there... Though they *did* volunteer themselves as candidates," Adi said with a dry smile.

Mary's shoulders sank. While she'd been studying how to become a mother, for some reason Alicia and Parfette were always right there with her, studying how to be wet nurses. Mary had kept telling them, "*I won't hand my baby over*

to you!" and *"I won't let you raise them!"* but none of her words had reached their ears. Eventually, Mary had caved in, and the three of them studied childcare together.

Inwardly, Mary was glad to have her friends by her side, but of course she'd never say that out loud.

"Still, it looks like they're willing to wait patiently..." Mary said, but just to be absolutely sure, she glanced out the window. There was no other carriage running parallel to hers, nor was there one trailing her. *All right*, she thought with a nod. "I'm glad," she said with more confidence, and Adi, who perfectly understood her feelings, smiled and nodded...

When Mary had revealed that she would be moving to a resort to give birth, a few people had said that they would accompany her.

The first was Alicia. "What day will we be going?" she asked, as if her coming along was entirely expected. Mary silently flicked the girl's forehead and then pushed her into Patrick's arms.

Realizing that this meant she'd have to stay behind, Alicia lamented loudly and with great exaggeration. She pulled out a handkerchief and pretended to sniffle, dabbing the corners of her eyes. It was blatantly obvious that she was putting on an act. In actuality, she did understand the reason for Mary's move, and didn't forcibly insist on accompanying her.

In other words, Alicia had been playing around. As soon as Mary had realized that, she yelled, "Cease your crocodile tears!" and threw a nearby cushion at the princess...

And so as a result, only Mary and Adi were in the carriage now. Alicia must've been at the palace. Mary was sure that the girl was still pretending to sulk, and that Patrick was gently soothing her.

"She said she wants me to send her letters in exchange for her house-sitting," Mary remarked. "Well, I suppose I can afford to do that. Parfette also mentioned she wants me to write to her," she added, smiling as she recalled their parting...

Unlike Alicia, Parfette hadn't burst into crocodile tears when she found out

that she couldn't accompany Mary to the villa. Instead, she trembled and despaired over their temporary separation with *genuine* tears in her eyes. (Honestly, would the concept of crocodile tears even *exist* for someone like her?)

Parfette frantically clung to Mary, imploring her to send letters. "I... I'll write to you too, Lady Mary, so please, find it in yourself to respond to me...!" she appealed, tugging on the sleeves of Mary's outfit.

Of course Mary couldn't refuse in the face of such a display. She agreed, and Parfette's damp eyes instantly began sparkling. The sense of friendship overflowing from the girl's entire body caused Mary to smile despite herself.

And then Alicia, who was nearby, suddenly declared, "Then I'll write to you too, Parfette!"

Perhaps carried away by the momentum, Parfette also promised that she'd write replies to Alicia. In the end, all three of them had agreed to exchange letters with each other, utterly complicating the matter...

"I also have to write to Carina and Margaret," Mary told Adi.

"I think instead of a reply, you're going to get a lengthy management report," he teased.

Mary was about to deny it, but stopped herself. That *was* possible, after all. Said report would pertain to the migratory bird restaurant. Since she was moving to the resort, she would have to take a break from running both it and the family business. That was the entire point of her move.

She could leave House Albert in her brothers' hands, while Gainas watched over the domain in Sylvino with a promise to send her regular updates. As for the publication of Feydella's flowery language dictionary, both Parfette and Veltina had volunteered to take care of it. Though they huffed and puffed at each other, they were managing the task together.

That left the restaurant, which Mary had decided to entrust to Carina and Margaret. They were both sharp and intelligent women, so she was confident they'd run the business well in her absence.

"I just hope they don't hijack it..." Mary murmured to herself. She had faith in

their capabilities, but those same capabilities also made her anxious about them usurping the business. Those two might actually do it. In fact, Mary wouldn't be surprised if the women took advantage of her absence to steal the restaurant's secret recipe and nonchalantly open up a sister shop.

As Mary voiced her concerns, Adi patted her shoulder reassuringly. "That won't happen. You needn't worry about anything, milady. Just leave it to them."

"Really? You don't think they'll hijack the business?"

"Lady Carina and Lady Margaret are faithful to their friends. They won't hijack anything."

Mary considered Adi's words, then breathed a sigh of relief. The Carina and Margaret in her imagination both laughed elegantly, the former saying, "*My, how rude of her!*" and the latter replying, "*Honestly.*" It was certain that they had strong capabilities, but their friendship was also true. They'd both been dumbfounded when Mary first told them she would like to entrust the restaurant to them, but once they had realized she was serious, they gladly accepted.

"You're right. I don't need to worry about anything. I'll just relax at the villa and send them letters, and I'm sure everything will turn out fine. Oh, and speaking of, I also need to write to my brothers," Mary said, frowning at the recollection.

As expected, when she told them that she'd be moving to the holiday home, they had also wanted to join her. (She was supposed to be going to a quiet, peaceful place, yet all the boisterous people constantly wanted to tag along!) Mary had denied them, but had offered a compromise in the form of sending letters.

"I think I'm going to need a *lot* of paper and envelopes. And since I, a member of House Albert, will be sending them, I can't use the paper they sell at the resort. We'd better arrange for some high-quality goods," she suggested.

"Lord Lang and Lord Lucian have already made arrangements for that."

"My, is that so? How tactful of them." Mary was a little exasperated that

she'd have to send so many letters, but she thought it best to just go along with her brothers' consideration. Not to mention, the goods they had arranged were guaranteed to be of high quality, since those two were the sons of House Albert (and they had done this for the sake of their beloved sister, no less).

Mary jokingly mentioned she had high expectations. Adi reached over for his suitcase, and she was sure he wanted to show her the paper and envelopes the twins had prepared. Yet his expression was strangely tense. "What's wrong, Adi?"

"I suppose they did arrange them, but they just stuffed everything into my suitcase without my permission. No matter how often I took it all out, they'd just stubbornly put it back in. Before I knew it, all the paper and envelopes wound up at the bottom..."

"Ah, I see. So they forcibly packed it all into your luggage," Mary said, grasping the situation. Adi nodded with an indescribable look on his face. The twins must've been very tenacious indeed.

The sheer amount of paper contained inside Adi's suitcase was almost audible as he opened it up. There must've been well over a hundred sheets in there. Perhaps there were five hundred—no, maybe even over a thousand. Mary's eyes grew wide. She'd never seen such a quantity of stationery in her life.

"I probably won't run out of paper even if I write letters hourly, let alone daily..." Mary muttered.

"Just writing the addressees on the envelopes takes a considerable amount of time," Adi said with a sigh, gazing at the bundles. Alas, he still put them back into the suitcase, since they were something the twins had given him—even if by force. He had mentioned that he'd tried emptying his luggage numerous times, but the bundles he held in his hands were a sign of the brothers' victory.

If Lang and Lucian had tried imposing upon Mary instead, she would've turned to Roberto, who had a handle on them, and said, "If they try to put anything into my suitcase again, stop them." She wouldn't even have minded if he'd resorted to violence in this instance.

When she informed Adi of this, he defensively appealed, "I also resisted!" In accordance with his previous proclamation that he wouldn't allow the twins to

vent their anger out on him, he'd been opposing them quite strongly recently. "They also tried to shove a huge amount of ink and a mountain of pens into my luggage, but I refused! They only put the paper and envelopes in!"

Mary paused. "Woowow."

"Initially, there was double the amount of paper and envelopes, enough to fill up one of my suitcases entirely. I managed to get them to halve it!"

"Woowow."

"A-And they also asked me to send a messenger once every two hours, but I refused that too! I got them to agree to only get reports from me in the morning and evening!"

"Woowow, you really did it."

"I... I admit that I failed to put up enough of a resistance, so please stop talking like that," Adi said, crestfallen. It frustrated him to admit it, but he knew that Lang and Lucian had managed to have their way.

Mary felt bad upon seeing the heartbroken look on Adi's face, so she put one of the cushions on his lap. She was imitating his usual actions, which was her way of showing gratitude. "With this much paper, I'll be able to write to them all every day." She'd have to write to her friends and brothers, but also send regular updates to her parents. Mary figured she probably ought to do the same for her other relatives, as well as those who'd looked after her.

And of course, they'll be writing back... she thought, realizing how time-consuming it would be. She might spend half her day dealing with these letters.

"Still, penning letters while surrounded by nature and listening to the birdsong might be quite nice," she admitted, sighing in admiration as she pictured the scene...

Mary was inside a quiet room of the mansion, surrounded by nature. The curtains by the window fluttered in the refreshing breeze, and the birds were singing outside. Letters from her friends and family lined the table, and she looked them over with a hot drink in one hand. In a cradle next to her, her newborn infant slept, and Mary glanced at their face while spelling out all the recent news in her letters...

“What a wonderful scene! I wouldn’t mind if the child was born right this moment!”

“I do want to meet them as soon as possible, but right now would be a little *too* soon! Please calm down!” Adi cried, frantically pacifying Mary, who’d sprung to her feet in her excitement over her idealized scenario.

Snapping back to reality, Mary laughed to gloss over her actions while sitting back down. Indeed, it was still too soon, and they were in a carriage. She patted her bulging abdomen and said, “Hang in there for a little bit longer.” As she did so, she felt something move in response. The baby must’ve been kicking.

Back in Sylvino, her tummy had still been flat. But nowadays, it was noticeably swollen, and sometimes she felt the baby kicking inside of her. It was the strangest sensation, yet she found it incredibly endearing. She giggled, and Adi put his hand on her abdomen too, smiling as he felt their child respond.

They continued talking for a while, until eventually the carriage, which had already been moving slowly for Mary’s sake, began losing even more speed. Mary looked out the window, spotting the familiar villa. It was quite compact when compared to House Albert’s principal residence, but it was perfectly comfortable for a few people to live here peacefully. The environment radiated a sense of calm thanks to all the trees and flowers everywhere.

We’re finally here, Mary thought with excitement. She’d been here numerous times, yet the purpose of her visit this time was different than before. She would experience a very special moment right here in this place. She rubbed her abdomen, and Adi’s hand rested atop hers. His skin felt warm against hers; she knew he must’ve understood how special the occasion of their visit was too.

“We’re here to spend time as just the two—the *three* of us, so let’s enjoy it,” he said, and Mary’s heart throbbed with joy as she smiled at him.

However, her expression was soon broken when a maid who was supposed to greet her walked up to Mary and handed her an envelope, saying, “A letter from Princess Alicia.”

To think that a *letter* would arrive before Mary...



A few months later.

Mary was sitting in a chair by the window, looking over the newest batch of letters. Next to her was a cradle. Its bedding and pillows were small too, but everything was of good quality. A mewling noise came from within, so Mary placed her letters on the table and peered into the cradle. The tiny bed contained tiny bedding, tiny pillows, and...her tiny child.

The infant tossed about, raising her voice as if she was on the verge of crying. Wondering what the matter was, Mary petted her head. Perhaps she'd calm down if Mary held her. But there was a possibility that the child would cry upon being picked up too. For any mother, it was difficult to predict which outcome would come to pass.

While Mary pondered, she heard someone's footsteps outside. There was a light knock on the door, and Adi peeked inside to check on them.

"Oh, look. Your father is here," Mary told her daughter. "He runs right over whenever he thinks you might cry."

"Of course I do. Whenever you cried when you were little, mila—No, Mary, I was always the first one at your side, even if I was on the other side of the mansion," Adi explained, looking proud at his overprotectiveness for some reason. He approached the cradle, and his expression softened upon seeing his baby's face. He didn't need to say anything; his affection was obvious. Mary found it adorable.

"She's been sleeping this whole time, so maybe she's gotten tired of it," Mary said.

"How about we take her for a walk in the garden?"

"Good idea. The weather's nice, so we can all go together. Right?" she said, addressing the baby as she poked her cheek.

The infant closed her eyes, then slowly opened them again. Her large, moist eyes stared up at her parents' faces. Although she'd been on the verge of tears, her expression suddenly brightened. She opened her mouth and let out a shrill

sound of happiness.



“She laughed!” Mary and Adi exclaimed in unison. The baby had made various expressions until now, including smiling, but this was the first time she had laughed while looking at her parents.

“Adi! She laughed from looking at us!”

“Yes, I saw. She certainly did!”

Having confirmed their child’s reaction, they exchanged a look and then nodded. “Time to write a letter!” they said as they both reached for the paper and pens on the table. They wanted to inform everyone as soon as possible how adorable their daughter’s laughter was.

Yet the contents would have to be brief. Rather than spending all their time writing letters, they wanted to spend it together as a family. Thankfully, the maids were in charge of addressing the envelopes, so all Mary and Adi had to do was write about how their daughter was growing, how adorable she was, and how happy they were. There was no need to include the season’s greetings or farewells. The people they were writing to wouldn’t require such conventional phrases.

Mary also didn’t care if the others were overwhelmed by all the gushing letters they sent practically by the hour. Their daughter was adorable, and that was that.

And so both she and Adi briefly and swiftly penned their letters and finished simultaneously. “All right, let’s go for that walk!” Mary said.

“Yes,” Adi agreed with a smile, picking the infant up.

Mary put on her jacket, then stood next to Adi so that the baby was between them. From now on, it would be the three of them together. She couldn’t imagine a greater joy.

Afterword

Hello, this is Saki.

Thank you for buying the seventh volume of *Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster!*

The eccentric Lady Mary, who once pursued her own ruin, has now experienced love, become aware of friendship, and overcome many obstacles together with her family and friends. She's grown a lot, and in this volume she's been rewarded with her and Adi's baby.

And then a lost child who called Adi her "daddy" appeared. On top of writing about Mary's pregnancy, I also made sure to include the usual hectic shenanigans. I enjoyed writing the series's typical boisterousness, as well as scenes displaying Mary and Adi's affection for their child.

As for said child, I was scant on details. What is her personality and hair color? Did she inherit the drills/ringlets? I hope I'll be able to reveal all these things at some point. I pray that until that time, Alicia and the others continue to stay away from the villa and make do with the letters.

Thank you to Futaba for the gorgeous illustrations again. Every time I see Mary, I admire how beautiful she looks and feel that she's truly grown up. Thank you for always drawing the characters in such a lovely way.

I apologize to my manager for fussing over certain things, and for all the delays.

And to all my friends and family who asked me to thank them in the afterword: thank you. I've always had to keep my afterwords short, but this time I was allowed double the space, so I'm able to thank you at last.

Finally, to everyone who purchases this book, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

I hope we can meet again soon.

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba

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YOUNG
LADY ALBERT

IS

COURTING

DISASTER



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Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster: Volume 7

by Saki

Translated by Ray Krycki Edited by Casey Pritt

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