

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba

6

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?!

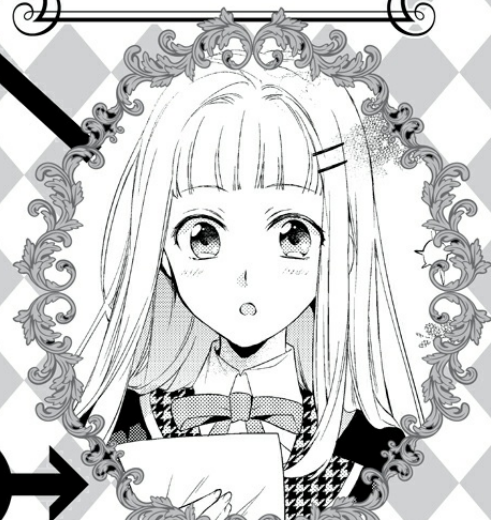
Trait: Service with a side of sass



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



Mauro Noze

A nobleman from Feydella who aggressively approached Mary.

Trait: Twisted man who doesn't know when to give up



Roberto

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

Trait: Curbs House Albert's charades

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Prologue

Mary's brows furrowed as she watched her knight take a hit with a high-pitched clank. *Oh no*, she murmured inwardly, lamenting how she had let her side of the board thin out to such a degree. Yet no amount of regret would bring the knight back to life, and giving in to her grief could've put the rest of her pieces at risk. The battlefield is an exceptionally unforgiving place, indeed.

No, it wasn't just the battlefield that was unforgiving. The reason behind this very fight—House Albert's succession battle—was most unforgiving of all. The siblings were awash in blood, kicking each other down in their struggle to reach the one and only throne. The winner would attain immense honor and glory, while the losers would have no choice but to depart.

Mary had committed herself to this struggle, and she refused to be shaken by the loss of a single piece. Reassuring herself in her mind, she reached her hand towards one of her own pieces, aiming to turn the tables in a single swift move.

She had to center all her attention on the game of chess. Her eyes were locked on the board, because she had to gaze at nothing but the monochrome pieces as they spun around the battlefield. She couldn't afford to look away. The gentle aroma wafting from the tea, the pound cake covered with dollops of fresh cream—she couldn't pay heed to such things.

Mary had to be careful not to let her brother's grin enter her field of vision either. The same was true for the partially hidden banner, which nevertheless was somewhat visible, bearing the words, "Friendly Chess Tournament between the House Albert Siblings."

"Lang, this is a genuine battle, so can't you look a little more serious?" Mary asked.

"Oh, pardon me," he responded. "Getting to play chess with you just makes me so happ—er, I mean, so *nervous* that I can't control my expression! But this is so nostalgic... We're the ones who taught you how to play chess, Mary."

“No, Adi taught me,” she corrected him. “You two would always mess about and start throwing the pieces. You didn’t teach me anything.”

“Really? You have a good memory, Mary. As expected of our adorable little sister.” Lang smiled in good humor, then glanced down at the board. “Oh dear, looks like I’ve lost!” he added, raising his arms in the air in a gesture of surrender. His attitude, expression, and tone of voice all suggested he was in high spirits. His countenance was always jovial to start with, and now he looked happier than ever. There was no trace of the loser’s frustration and disgrace about him.

Soon enough, Lucian cleared the board. “Now it’s my turn,” he declared, sitting across from Mary. He usually had a melancholic look about him, but right now he couldn’t hide his joy. He was also in a good mood, which was even harder to comprehend than with someone like Lang. “All right, Mary. Let’s have a friendly game of—I mean, a battle for heirship. You’re smart, so I’m sure this will be fun—I mean, I’m sure this will be a difficult and harrowing fight, which will endanger our very lives...”

“Your expression’s pretty soft, Lucian,” Mary noted.

“Soft? Me, who’s so very gloomy? That’s impossible... Oh, you’re right.” Lucian poked his own cheeks, realizing the face he was making. He then began listing all sorts of excuses, like how he was nervous after having witnessed the previous battle, and that he was trembling with excitement for the upcoming match. Neither of these actually explained his expression, so his words were no more than irrelevant non sequiturs.

Mary gazed at him intently and then replied, “That makes sense.”

This world contained a noblewoman who experienced every human emotion via tears, so it wasn’t all that strange to consider that there could be a gentleman whose expression grew soft when he felt nervous or excited. Probably, anyway. For the time being, Mary would leave it at that. In any case, right now she knew she ought to be focusing on chess.

“I’ll attain a crushing victory and freeze that look on your face!” Mary said, declaring war as she picked up one of her pieces.

When all was said and done, she ended up winning against Lucian as well. However, she didn't follow through on her words in their entirety, because her brother looked incredibly happy to have lost.

Even now, during the postgame analysis, the twins discussed the matches with soft, relaxed expressions. Of course, their "discussion" was composed entirely of them singing Mary's praises, saying things like, "That move of hers was particularly keen!" and "She didn't let herself be intimidated into taking the defensive—as expected of her!" They did this even for completely unremarkable moves she had made, claiming things like, "As she made that move, her hand looked so graceful!" and "When she reached for her piece, you could see that her fingers are shapely and beautiful, all the way down to her nails!"

Fed up with them, Mary turned to Adi and Roberto, who'd been watching the matches from the side. "I would like you two to answer me clearly, honestly, and without any falsehoods. Were our battles heated and harsh?"

Roberto smiled warmly. His narrow eyes creased with amusement, and he responded, "Yes, of course." His tone of voice wasn't any different from the usual, and he didn't seem to be lying.

As for Adi, however, his cheeks puffed up instantly with a repressed laugh, and he openly turned away to avoid Mary's gaze. Though he and Roberto were brothers, their reactions couldn't have been more different.

"Roberto, you think those were heated battles, right?" Mary prompted.

"So much so that even my hands have grown clammy with nerves," he claimed. "Everyone's fighting spirit was tangible as you refused to give each other ground."

"Y-Yes, exactly... What about you, Adi? Are your hands clammy too?"

"M-Me?! Uh... Rather than 'heated,' I'd say it was a warm and friendly— Ow!" Adi cried out suddenly, interrupting his incoherent reply. His glare was uncharacteristically sharp as he turned his eyes to Roberto, who was standing next to him.

Mary looked them over with confusion, only to discover that Roberto was

stomping on Adi's foot. His heel was grinding into the toe of Adi's shoe with such ferocity that Mary could practically hear it.

That must hurt, she thought. She had stomped on Adi's foot countless times herself, but only with moderate strength. Given that Adi was two heads taller than her, the sensation would've been more like having a kitten climb onto his foot. In contrast, Roberto was even taller than Adi, and there was no hesitation nor pity behind his actions. What made it all the more terrifying was the fact that his expression hadn't changed at all: if one didn't glance down at his feet, he would've still seemed like a perfectly composed butler.

"Go on. Lady Mary is waiting, so answer her at once," Roberto ordered Adi. "Do note that depending on what you say, I'm willing to abandon all of my duties for the rest of the day in order to keep stomping on your foot."

"You're my brother, so I can tell you're serious about that. How terrifying," Adi murmured. "You need to stop that and do your job."

"Don't you worry. I do all my work one day ahead of schedule, so there's no problem. Now, answer her." Roberto put more of his weight onto Adi's foot.

Adi groaned, his brows furrowing from the pain. He turned to look at Mary. Part of him seemed to want to ask her for help, but since situations like this happened frequently, he decided to first answer her question.

"Did you also think they were heated battles, Adi?" she asked.

"Y-Yes, of course... They were truly bloodcurdling matches. From here, you all looked like mightily ferocious kitte—I mean, tigers," Adi said, his voice strained with pain.

Roberto removed his foot from Adi's, satisfied with that response. Adi let out a relieved breath, and hurriedly retreated to Mary's side. This was no cowardice—anyone would've done the same had they gone up against Roberto. Only a certain pair of careless twins had the nerve to oppose him.

"Lady Mary, did my foolish brother's answer satisfy you?"

"The idea of saying yes after witnessing that chain of events annoys me, but for the sake of Adi's foot, I'll pretend to have been fooled," Mary replied.

“Kind as always, Lady Mary. That brings us to the end of today’s succession battle,” Roberto declared. With a single clap of his hands, the atmosphere shifted immediately.

Lang and Lucian, knowing their afternoon work awaited, rose to their feet at the sound. Truly, it was hard to say who was the actual master between the three of them.

“Oh right!” Lang muttered suddenly, having remembered something. He signaled Lucian with his eyes, and the both of them approached Mary.

Their expressions were grave. Their previous joy seemed to have vanished, and their gazes were sharp. Despite their small frames and babyish features, which made them look younger than their actual age, their serious faces instantly gave them the sort of dignity that only House Albert’s sons could have.

Even Mary found herself fixing her posture. “What is it?” she inquired.

“Mary, there’s something we have to tell you,” said Lang, putting on airs. “There’s something that you need to do in order to become House Albert’s heir.”

“Something I need to do?” she repeated, leaning closer to him in anticipation.

The air around the brothers was tense, signifying that this “something” was very important. Mary gulped reflexively, urging them to continue.

Lang paused for a moment, and finally opened his mouth to speak while gazing at Mary. “In order to inherit House Albert, you must go on a journey!”

Mary was silent for a while, staring at him blankly. “A journey...?” she asked, tilting her head with a confused frown.

Chapter 1

“What do you mean, Lang? I’ve never heard of such a thing,” said Mary.

“That’s because you weren’t a candidate for heirship until recently,” Lang responded. “The next head of the family must undergo a grueling journey across the neighboring nations, and have their growth and skills recognized by those around them.” His voice lacked its usual cheer as he explained. There was no humor in it, nor was he trying to deceive Mary. Instead, his tone was heavy, as though he were teaching her about an important rule.

Lucian wore an equally grave look on his face, and when Mary glanced at him for confirmation, he nodded deeply.

The twins’ attitude was different from those of their normal selves, and there was an inexpressible intensity evident in their actions. Each word they said was heavy, and they had a solemnity about them that would rival even their father’s.

In fact, when the brothers actually tried, they could conduct themselves with solemnity and dignity. In front of Mary, they let their doting affection for her show, but during diplomatic meetings or emergencies, they displayed an obvious wit and capability. The other nobles had long decided either of them would make a good heir for House Albert, and some even envied the family for the security it had owing to such excellent sons.

That said, the pair’s affection for their younger sister was the strongest force of all. After all, those dignified and intelligent twins instantly turned into doting brothers as soon as they laid eyes on Mary. Their dignity disappeared in a flash, and any serious diplomatic discussions they might’ve been having turned into them singing Mary’s praises.

Yet that same duo was looking at her right now with grave expressions. A little overawed by their intimidating air, Mary once more murmured, “A journey...” as her mind spun.

It was such a sudden thing, but at the same time, she didn't find it that shocking. House Albert was this country's most distinguished family, and for generations they had been second in power only to the royalty. Their influence had naturally spread across the nation's borders as well. Taking action within their country alone wouldn't have been enough for previous heads of the house to inherit such a family. In other words, this was an international debut. Those who failed it wouldn't be worthy of taking on the title of House Albert's heir.

Mary nodded in understanding, and looked back up at Lang with a serious countenance. Under other circumstances, she might've responded to this by saying something like, "*How bothersome. What kind of souvenirs will you get for me?*" But now that she was a candidate for the succession herself, she couldn't make such leisurely remarks.

"Are you two going on that journey?" she asked.

"Yeah. The heir is still unsettled, but this trip might be the deciding factor," Lang said. "You'll come with us, won't you, Mary?" He wasn't just inviting her, but rather instigating her.

A fighting spirit glinted in Mary's eyes, and she clenched her fists. There was no need for them to even ask her that. "Of course!"

Lang and Lucian exchanged a look upon hearing her prompt reply. They nodded at one another as if affirming something.

"You could say this is a battle journey, and it will most certainly be severe..." Lucian was the one to speak up this time. Though he looked glum, his eyes were sharp, as if he were sizing up the fighting spirit within Mary. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Yes, I am. When do we depart, Lucian?"

"Tomorrow."

"Very well, I'll make the preparatio— *Tomorrow?!?*" Mary exclaimed, not having expected it to be so soon. If anything, she might've thought it would happen in the next few days. Departing tomorrow morning meant she had very little time left to prepare.

She quickly turned to look at Adi, silently asking if it was possible for her to

join her brothers on the trip. Surmising this, he started saying, “We’ll have to adjust your schedule...” until Roberto suddenly elbowed him in the side. That also looked painful.

Roberto cleared his throat and replied in Adi’s stead. “Tomorrow is luckily, conveniently, blessedly good timing, as your schedule is quite clear, Lady Mary. I see no issue with you going on the trip.”

“Really? That’s a relief to hear. It honestly is good timing. Almost too good...” she said with a frown. *Something’s strange about this...*

Young noblewomen’s lives seemed leisurely and extravagant from the sidelines, as they mostly consisted of attending parties and sipping tea. But as a daughter of a distinguished family, Mary still had responsibilities. Moreover, tea parties and mingling were a woman’s job in high society, and someone like Mary was kept busy with numerous invitations to all kinds of events.

On top of the things she’d learned while she was in school, Mary was now studying even more diligently so as not to fall behind her brothers as one of the candidates. Managing the migratory bird restaurant was not to be forgotten either. Rather than having an iron in the fire, she had three or even four of them.

Yet despite her busyness, her brothers’ trip was happening right when she had some time to spare. She had no invitations to events or tea parties, nor was she expecting any visitors. Could this truly be written off as mere luck or coincidence?

I feel like there’s a catch... Mary thought, and right then, someone presented her with an item. It was a thin pamphlet. The fine paper was sprinkled with gold dust, and its oppressive letters read, “*Handbook for the Next Family Head’s International Tour.*”

Mary took it, gulping at the sheer intimidation radiating off the cover. The lettering was gloomy, and the booklet felt profoundly heavy in her hands. Much care had obviously gone into selecting the paper as well.

She turned the first page to find a list of the necessary items to bring on the trip. On the next page was the place and time of meeting, the means of travel, and the destination. When Mary read the name of the nation, she let out a

quiet, surprised noise—it was Feydella.

Feydella was a small landlocked country, which rarely interacted with other nations. Most of its work was done within its own borders. Mary wasn't aware of any further details about the country, and seeing its name didn't bring anything particular to mind. However, her aunt and uncle lived there, and it seemed she and her brothers would be staying with them during their trip.

Her aunt and uncle were a good, kind couple. The thought of getting to see them again made Mary's heart throb. If they were only going to be staying there for a few days, it might be best for her to spend the time with her relatives. They could show her around any places of interest, and she could talk with them while enjoying tea. Reminiscing on her past meetings with them, Mary felt a wave of nostalgia and anticipation.

That said, her primary objective was the succession war. She realized that her aunt and uncle's assessment of her and her conduct during the trip may affect House Albert's heirship. Her face began to break into a smile at the thought, but she quickly pulled herself together. Perhaps it was her brothers' aim to distract her with the trip and kick her down... She couldn't help but have such concerns.

That was a close call. If I'd been swept up by some childish, playful mood, I would've fallen behind my brothers. I must be on my guard, Mary thought, disciplining herself. She exhaled deeply, and continued leafing through the handbook.

"Ah, a list of tourist attractions?" she said, looking over the page. "I'd love to climb the hill overlooking the entire town. And there's a famous café that sells seasonal tarts—I wouldn't miss it for the world. My, there's even a guide on popular souvenirs! How lovely. I'll get something for everyone." Mary giggled to herself as she read through the rest of the book.

The information regarding Feydella was detailed and well researched, but not overwhelming. The text had been interspersed with witty jokes and catchphrases recently favored by the youth, and there were even illustrations every now and then, making the whole package an easy read. What especially enraptured Mary's heart was seeing the listed attractions, such as the beautiful night views and seasonal tarts. The article on souvenirs was filled with a variety

of goods, and though she hadn't even departed yet, she was already deliberating on what to buy.

The quality of this handbook was almost too good for what it was. Publishing this pamphlet would certainly help to boost Feydella's tourism.

Mary paused. "This is a harsh journey for the succession war, right...?" she murmured. Overcome with a strange discomfort, she closed the book and glanced at the cover to double-check what it was. There, the oppressive letters did indeed read, "*Handbook for the Next Family Head's International Tour.*"

Sensing the difference in temperature between the cover and the contents, Mary furrowed her brows. She looked at the cover, then checked the inside, then once again glanced at the cover in a looping cycle. Formal, severe lettering; a lovely illustration of some cakes; formal, severe lettering; a catchphrase that made her heart pound...

Finding this bizarre, Mary opened her mouth to allude to the discomfort she was feeling. But right then, Lang exclaimed, "All right!" and vigorously rose to his feet. Lucian did the same. "I can't let myself get distracted now that I know Mary's coming too. To think that the succession battle turned into a three-way fight! That a trip between siblings could contain this much joy—I mean, sorrow!"

"Yeah, you're right," Lucian said. "I'm sure this will be the harshest journey in House Albert's history... I'm so excited that my expression is softening..."

"Well, since we're departing tomorrow, let's work hard to wrap up today's duties, Lucian. We'll excuse ourselves here, our sweet Mary."

"Mary, be sure to prepare for the trip... I look forward to—I mean, I'm brimming with fighting spirit at the thought of traveling with you."

The gleeful Lang and gloomy Lucian spoke in turns. Overwhelmed by their vigor, Mary could only nod in response. Soon enough, the twins vacated the room. Neither of them looked sorrowful nor brimming with the will to fight, but that much was stating the obvious by now.

Once the two yin-and-yang twins who nevertheless were equally boisterous had left, a silence settled over the room. Mary was unable to hide her

impatience. There was a fire in her eyes, and she gripped the handbook tightly.

“I do have a point of concern, but I’ll let it go for now. We need to get ready for the trip! Let’s go to the town center, Adi.”

“The town center?” he echoed.

“Since we’ll be staying with my aunt and uncle, I want to get some gifts for them. Little things like that are what the head of the family pays attention to!” Mary declared proudly, puffing out her chest.

If their relatives were to look after the three siblings during their stay, then Mary was certain her brothers had also arranged a way of showing their thanks. House Albert would never fail to remember such a thing, and it was possible the twins would prepare a gift even more expensive than a luxurious stay at an inn.

But the gift Mary was thinking of was something else entirely. She didn’t want to give her relatives something as a member of House Albert, but rather as herself. Such attention to detail made all the difference.

“Now, let’s go!” she urged Adi after explaining her thought process. But she suddenly noticed Roberto was still there and let out a gasp. She scolded herself in her mind. “Roberto, please don’t mention any of what I just said to my brothers.”

“Oh? You mean about your gift?” he inquired.

“That’s right. You’re their ally, aren’t you?” Mary questioned in turn. She’d thought up such a brilliant strategy to outwit the twins, but if Roberto told them about it, they’d probably copy her.

That was why she imposed a gag order on the butler, who expressed his agreement. His voice was calm and dependable when he replied. “Please rest assured. I won’t notify them of your tactics. And while I am the ally of Lord Lang and Lord Lucian, I am also *your* ally, Lady Mary.”

“Mine? Are you saying you don’t mind who inherits the family?”

“Indeed. I believe House Albert will be safe in the hands of whomever succeeds it. But if I had to specify...” Roberto trailed off, glancing aside. His gaze landed on the door through which Lang and Lucian had exited earlier. His sharp

eyes were filled with loyalty, as well as a deep friendship for the two brothers he'd grown up together with.

Mary tried to predict the rest of his words based on his expression. He was about to say who he hoped would succeed House Albert. Before Mary had entered the candidacy, she'd once asked Roberto which twin he'd like to be the heir, to which the butler had claimed that he would want to split them into ten parts.

Perhaps he'd repeat himself now. Or perhaps his line of thinking had changed with Mary joining the ring. She kept quiet, watching Roberto nervously as she awaited his next words.

The butler gazed at the door in reverie for some time, until with a gentle expression, he finally said, "I'd blend you, Lord Lang, and Lord Lucian together into one new whole."

"That's excessive," Mary said.

"Since House Albert is such a peerless family, being a little excessive is just right," Roberto said humorously. "Excuse me," he added, bowing once before exiting the room. His conduct was impressively elegant and beautiful, but Mary found his attitude slightly aloof. Was it because of what she'd witnessed earlier between him and Adi, or was that just a glimpse of Roberto's character?

Mary groaned to herself. "He's always like this," she muttered with a sigh, her shoulders drooping. Adi smiled bitterly, for he knew his brother's personality better than anyone. "There's no point in trying to guess his intentions. He is the most cunning man in all of House Albert."

"He's my brother, but even I don't understand his character," Adi told her.

"I'd like to blend him and my brothers together, then split them into three."

"I don't think any of them would let you do that."

As they conversed, she began heading out of the room in order to go shopping at the town center. Mary straightened her back and clenched her fists with renewed determination. This wasn't the first time her brothers had stirred up trouble, and if she wasn't competent enough to rein them in, then she wouldn't be worthy of inheriting the family.

The wall she had to overcome was tall, but that was what made it fun. Only once she had knocked such a wall down would the seat awaiting on the other side have any worth.

“Through this journey, I’m going to rein in my brothers and Roberto, and take the heir’s seat!” Mary declared, pumping her fist in the air before triumphantly exiting the room.



Adi’s shoulders sank when he was left alone in the room. He was holding something that Roberto had given him earlier. It was the handbook for the upcoming trip, its paper of high quality. The cover was intricate, sprinkled in a layer of gold dust, and the beautiful and dignified writing read, “*Handbook for House Albert’s Friendly Family Trip.*”

“*Do not let Lady Mary see this,*” Roberto had ordered when he’d passed the book to Adi. His voice had been icy and overflowing with intensity.

Lang and Lucian had been standing behind Roberto at the time, and though neither uttered a word, they were radiating an aura that said, “*You got that?*”

Faced with his brother, whom even Mary had dubbed House Albert’s most cunning man, and the twins, who’d been headstrong since childhood, Adi knew he couldn’t oppose them. He had paled, and all he could do was nod. Even if Mary were to see this handbook eventually, Adi thought he would like to go for at least a day without having to examine the tips of his shoes. The trio was sure to stomp on them relentlessly if Mary found out the truth.

“For the sake of my feet, please remain fooled for a while, milady...!” Adi muttered under his breath.

“Let’s go, Adi!” Mary’s voice called to him from beyond the door, and so he hurried after her.



Mary was assembling everything she needed for tomorrow’s journey in her suitcase. Of course, since she was a noblewoman, it was the servants’ job to pack her belongings. No matter how abrupt the trip, she was within her rights to command, “*Make the arrangements,*” and leave it there. So right now, Adi

was stuffing various items into the suitcase while Mary lounged on the lavish sofa.

Occasionally, he asked her things like, “Do you wish to bring the white shirt, or the light-blue one?”

Sleepily, Mary would respond with, “The turquoise one.” That about sums up the extent of her participation. But out of nowhere, she recalled something and suddenly sprang to her feet. “Oh no! This is a trap!”

“A trap?” Adi questioned.

“Yes. A proper head of the family should be able to pack their own belongings. If my brothers were to find out I left all my packing to you, I bet they’d laugh and think I’m still a child!” Mary explained, rushing over to Adi’s side.

The packing was mostly done, but there were still a few items that hadn’t been put away into the suitcase, and Mary let out a relieved breath. This meant she could pack some of her own things, and her brothers wouldn’t be able to claim that she’d had Adi do all of it.

When she said as much, Adi sighed in exasperation. “Milady, can you really picture Lord Lang and Lord Lucian doing their own packing?”

“I can. I’m sure they’ll pack their own suitcases... Oh, my mental image just changed into a competition between them to see which one can fit more things into their luggage.”

“Of course it did.”

“Now they’re debating whether it’ll be possible to close the suitcase if they get on top of it... Oh no, Roberto is standing behind them with an icy smile! Run, my brothers, run!” Mary shrieked, trying to warn the twins in her imagination.

While she did that, Adi finished up the packing and closed the suitcase with a thunk. “There, all done,” he said. “Just what were you thinking, my lady? Packing your suitcase isn’t a part of the succession war.”

“Hey, don’t act like you know it all,” Mary scolded, disgruntled with Adi’s

nonchalant attitude. “To me, this trip is like a trial. I have to be vigilant at all times, and take up any challenge that arises!”

The upcoming trip would indeed be a battle between Mary and the twins, and although Adi was her husband, he had no interest in becoming heir and therefore wasn't involved in the war. Of course he was Mary's ally, but no more than that. That was why he felt more at ease than the involved parties. Still, Mary didn't appreciate how he was acting.

“A trial...” she murmured under her breath, then smirked.

That look on her face gave Adi a bad premonition. “Your Ladyship, just what are you plotting this time?”

“I'm not ‘plotting’ anything! How rude.”

“Whenever you make that face, your ideas are never good,” Adi lamented. Indeed, Mary smirking never led to positive things, yet he knew there was nothing he could do to defy her. That might've been because of his deeply ingrained loyalty as a servant, or because his heart was enslaved to her, or perhaps both of those factors.

“Adi, you will also have to overcome a trial during this journey!” Mary announced.

“And just what is this trial of mine...?”

“It's the way you refer to me. It's about time you stopped with that ‘milady’ business.”

“The way I refer to you...?” Confused, Adi tilted his head at her. He'd referred to her that way since they were children, so he wouldn't be able to just change it at the drop of a hat. “Then how would you like me to refer to you?”

“Just by my name is fine.”

“What? Without any titles?!” Adi asked, flustered.

“Of course. You're my husband, after all,” Mary replied bluntly.

Adi may have referred to her as “milady” for a long time, but they were now a married couple. Mary was even trying to become the next head of House Albert. It was strange for her own husband to keep calling her such terms. (That

said, in other noble houses, a mere servant referring to a noblewoman as “milady” would’ve been seen as a grave offense, but the statute of limitations on this matter had already expired.)

Still, Mary ordering Adi to change what he called her now was extremely sudden. “I can’t do it!” Adi protested.

“You rejected it so plainly...”

“Milady, I can only refer to you differently if we’re attending some formal event, or when we’re alone and I want to put you in a good mood, or when you caught me doing something bad and I want to cover it up. I couldn’t do it *all* the time...”

“That’s exactly why this trip is a great opportunity for you to— Wait, cover things up? What’s that supposed to mean?!” Mary pressed, having heard him mention something she couldn’t just ignore.

But before she could say anything else, Adi put his hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. His pupils were the color of a dark fire, and he gazed at her passionately, as though he hadn’t just said anything questionable. Although they’d been married for a while now, Mary’s heart still throbbed in response. His hand felt hot on her shoulder.

Even when she couldn’t understand his feelings or her own, gazing into those eyes had always calmed her down. She could only wonder how she’d failed to notice the way he looked at her for so long.



“Mary,” Adi called in his deep, soothing voice, and it was enough to put her into a trance.

She stared at him as if enraptured, and instead of responding, she only exhaled sweetly.

“That’s how I want it to feel when I call you by name,” Adi told her.

“I see. Indeed, I’m in a good mood, and you covered up your wrongdoing.”

Adi smoothly removed his hand from her shoulder, and his fiery gaze seemed to have vanished, replaced by his usual disposition.

Mary’s heart instantly calmed down as well. “Goodness,” she murmured grumpily, deciding to overlook his earlier wrongdoing. She had to admit, his methods were very effective. *But still*, she thought as she faced him with renewed determination. Sensing that she still wasn’t letting the topic go, Adi once again tried to put his hand on her shoulder, but Mary swiftly brushed him off. She wouldn’t let him use the same trick on her twice in a row.

“I’m going to ignore what you said about covering up your actions, but you need to change the way you refer to me. We’re married.”

“I will take appropriate measures...to the best of my ability...”

“Then go on, try it. Say my name, but without trying to put me in a good mood,” Mary demanded, staring at Adi expectantly. It felt odd to her that she had to coax him into saying her name. Nevertheless, she gazed up at him and batted her eyelashes to urge him.

Adi reddened, obviously embarrassed. He took a few moments to gather his courage, and then looked at Mary with determination. “M-Ma...” he mumbled, trying to say her name. After a while of hesitating, he finally said with great confidence, “Lady Mary Albert.”

“That feels so formal and distant,” she complained.

“L-Lady Mary of House Albert.”

“Same problem. Leave the House Albert part out.”

“I’m sorry. It’s so embarrassing to do this...” Adi said, hanging his head with a

crestfallen expression.

Mary tilted her head in puzzlement. Why on earth was Adi this embarrassed to say her name? It wasn't as if she was asking him to call her a term of endearment or anything, just her name. "Maybe you'd have more luck getting used to calling me 'honey' instead. What do you say, darling?"

"I'll do what I can, so please let it go..." Adi appealed weakly, his cheeks flushed.

Mary's shoulders drooped. "This trip will be a trial for us both," she asserted while patting his shoulder.



The next morning, two beautiful horse-drawn carriages were standing in front of Albert Manor. These were the means of transport to Feydella. They were as well-made as one would expect of House Albert, and the cushions the maids were busily arranging inside looked obviously soft. Those cushions would ensure that the passengers' bodies wouldn't hurt during the long journey, and could even be used to take a nap.

Mary was about to board one of the carriages. She turned back to urge Adi to do the same, but her eyes widened at the scene playing out before her.

Roberto had Adi in a nelson hold and was dragging him into the other coach. "I want to be with milady...!" Adi despaired in vain. Soon enough, the doors to the carriage Roberto and Adi had boarded (or rather, Adi had been forced to board) were shut.

"Was that an incident?" Mary murmured.

"Come on, Mary!" Lang called out to her. "We're about to depart!"

"Lang, I just witnessed Roberto abducting Adi."

"How long has it been since the three of us traveled together?" Lucian mused. "That carriage's always just full of men... I wonder if your presence will instantly turn its atmosphere into something pleasant, Mary..."

"But Lucian, Roberto just abducted Adi."

"Would you like some tea?" Lang proposed. "I arranged for a special blend for

today! I've also had your favorite scones heated up."

"But Adi—"

"You've always had a weakness for scones, Mary..." Lucian said. "To think a day has come when we can enjoy them together again..."

"Let's depart," Mary said, giving up with a shake of her head and sitting opposite her brothers. As if on cue, the two carriages began moving.

As the interior shook gently, Mary began nibbling on the scones. They were delicious. The tea was of fine quality too, wafting a delightful aroma. It was sweetened just right, making it easy to drink. It was as clear as day that all the food items were high-class. Lang must've been truthful when he said he had made special arrangements.

Had this been a tea party between her friends, Mary would've been in a great mood. Even if Alicia frolicked around and Parfette quivered and wept, Mary would've had to concede that everything was just *that* delicious. (Alicia would've picked up one of the tea cakes and spiritedly said, "Aren't they so tasty, Lady Mary? Now, say 'ahhh'!")

(Meanwhile, Parfette would've shakily cried, "Such fine tea... I can't stop my tears...!" These things happened all the time.)

However, right now Mary couldn't immerse herself in the taste of the scones or the tea. After all, right in front of her...

"Would you like another serving of tea, Mary? We have other tea leaves too."

"And we brought lots of scones..."

...were her brothers, devotedly concerning themselves with her.

Their happy grins made her pause and stare at them for a while. "This *is* a harsh journey for the succession war, right?" she inquired at last.

Lang and Lucian inhaled sharply. They exchanged a glance and signaled each other with their eyes, then took the scones and tea they'd been offering to Mary and brought them over towards themselves. "Yep, this is a grueling journey for the title of heir! If you want another serving of tea, you'll have to defeat me first!" Lang declared.

“Yeah... You might be our adorable Mary, but we’ll show you no leniency on this trip. If you want to earn the right to eat these scones, you’ll have to battle against us...” Lucian added.

Mary’s shoulders sank at the way the twins had suddenly become combative. They were being so disingenuous. After a while, that aggressive atmosphere vanished once more, and her brothers happily presented her with the tea and scones again. Mary had some things to say, but she was in the mood for another snack, so she held her tongue. The tea and scones were truly delicious. Not to mention, there were plenty of varieties present, so the wisest thing to do would be to stay quiet.

With that on her mind, Mary decided to postpone her questions for the sake of satisfying her appetite.

“Mary, whenever you’d ride in the carriage as a child, you always worried whether the horses weren’t getting too tired. It was so cute! Do you remember? Lucian and I were the ones to teach you about how strong and durable horses are!”

“How nostalgic... Yet before we knew it, Mary got her own carriage and started taking rides with Adi instead of us. When we first found out about it, we fell into utter despair...”

“Yeah, we were depressed for three days and three nights. Those were truly sad times!”

“And the way you helped him with his motion sickness... You’re so kind, Mary!”

“But it *is* annoying that she’s kind for *Adi*’s sake.”

“Yeah, really annoying...”

While the twins expressed their disdain for Adi, Mary could only sigh in exasperation. Ever since they’d departed from Albert Manor, the topic of conversation was always the same at its core, even if the details changed here and there. Lang and Lucian would reminisce about when Mary was little, then complain about Adi. After stewing in their anger for a bit, one of them would

say something like, “Oh, but there was this other time when you were a kid, Mary...” and the two of them would get excited again.

At intervals, Mary grumbled, “This is a harsh journey...” under her breath. Her doing so initially created a combative atmosphere in the carriage, but it didn’t last long, as the topic eventually cycled back to Mary again. And griping about Adi, of course. This just kept repeating over and over.

The whole thing was somewhat understandable, since her brothers had been by her side ever since she was born. But the same was true for Adi—no, in fact, he’d spent even longer by her side on account of being her servant. Mary used to follow him around everywhere when she was little too.

In other words, each time her brothers reminisced about her, naturally Adi was part of those memories as well. So the conversation would shift from being about Mary to being about Adi. It wasn’t an unexpected flow of events.

“When Mary was little, she used to say, ‘When I’m older, I’ll marry my brothers!’”

“Ah, how nostalgic! Our adorable Mary insisted she’d marry us, and she’d even say that since she couldn’t choose between us, she’d become the bride of us both!”

This time Lucian had initiated the topic, and Lang got on board excitedly. Mary expected this would soon change into a conversation about Adi too. But she wasn’t in the mood to scold the twins, and just munched on a scone.

Yet just in case, she decided to interject: “I only said that because you two held Adi hostage. I remember.” The twins could get worked up about the old times all they wanted, but Mary wouldn’t allow them to falsify events...

Mary had said she’d marry her brothers when she was five years old. Lucian and Lang were twelve, and exceedingly mischievous. Then again, they were still mischievous now, and Mary imagined their personalities would stay the same forevermore.

The twins had taken Adi as a hostage, and demanded for Mary to say she’d marry them in order to release him. Those words hadn’t been Mary’s true feelings. Actually, Roberto had been the one to give her that idea.

The calm Roberto had been pulling Lang and Lucian's strings since childhood, and he'd acted perfectly detached during this incident too. He had leaned in and whispered into Mary's ear, "Please tell them you'll marry them when you're older. I'm sure those two simpletons will be overjoyed to hear that. You can use that opportunity to rescue my foolish brother, Lady Mary."

"Okay. What will you do, Roberto?"

"I will bring those two down."

"Oh, you mean you'll stop them?"

"No. I will bring them *down*."

"Just don't go overboard..."

Such a conversation had occurred between them...

It was a moving tale, one created from Mary's own efforts in her childhood, no less. She wouldn't allow the twins to alter it. However, Lang and Lucian weren't put off by her interjection. Instead, they moved on swiftly to the next topic.

It had been a long time since Mary had spent time alone with her brothers like this. They were inside of a carriage, so no outsiders could interrupt either. That must've been why they were getting so stirred up in fawning over Mary (more so than usual, which was already troublesome enough).

There's no stopping them now... Mary judged in her mind, and reached over for her suitcase, which had been placed beside her. She pulled out the handbook and began flicking through it.

Pleased by the sight, Lang scooted closer to her. "I made this page. I researched some places I thought you'd lik—I mean, would be good spots to discuss the succession!"

"The article about the popular tearooms, hmm?" Mary said. "I'm especially interested in this teahouse that sells seasonal tarts and has live music. We could definitely discuss House Albert's future there."

"I was in charge of the next page..." Lucian spoke up. "I chose some shops I thought would make you hap—I mean, would sell goods that could be used for

diplomacy!”

“Ah, the article on popular souvenir stores? You have a point. Bringing these tarts and cookies to tea parties would definitely please the other nobles.”

Each time Mary turned a page, one of the brothers would discuss it in turns. Clearly, the handbook was a work of art they took a lot of pride in. Mary decided not to bring up the fact that it was handmade, since it seemed like they’d never stop talking about it if she did. She listened to their explanations as she read through the book, until she made it to the last page and closed it with a snap.

As before, the cover read, “*Handbook for the Next Family Head’s International Tour*” in grave lettering. The exterior looked breathtakingly strict and ceremonious, and surely anyone who picked up the book without knowing its contents would hesitate to open it. Some people might think it contained some major secrets about House Albert, or that it was a book that should’ve been left to slumber somewhere deep within Albert Manor and never taken off its premises. But that was only if they didn’t know the contents, of course.

Just to check, Mary flipped to the first page to see a list of items she’d need for the trip, laid out in a cheerful font. There really was something discomfoting about the difference between the cover and the interior of the book, causing Mary’s brows to crease.

“I just feel like there’s something odd about this handbo—”

Before she could finish her thought, the carriage came to a sudden halt. Mary looked out the window and saw a few small shops lining the road here and there. It was a much more rural display compared to the town center. They were still far from the border, but to Mary, this was a novel sight. *But why on earth would we stop here?* she wondered, still gazing out the window.

Meanwhile, Lang and Lucian began readying themselves to get out of the carriage, saying things like “I guess we’re already here!” and “That was faster than I thought!” It seemed like this was a planned stop.

Mary hurriedly began preparing to leave as well. However, all she needed to do was straighten the creases in her skirt. She was still curious about the handbook, but she decided to postpone her questions as she stuffed it back into

her suitcase.

“This is a harsh fight, but there’s no need to rush. We’re stopping for a break,” Lang informed her. “There’s actually a café here that Lucian and I often visit. We’ve been meaning to bring you here for ages.”

“Really? Goodness, you two take some long trips.”

“Whenever we want to slack off studying or work, we ditch Roberto and escape here. We’re going to pretend it’s our first visit today to fool him, but the staff will probably recognize us as regulars.”

The second the coachman opened the door, Mary came flying out of the carriage. “Time to snitch!” she shouted. Of course, she was going to inform Roberto of everything.

While she rushed over to the second carriage, her brothers’ cries of, “Wait, Mary!” and “This is our place of refuge!” echoed behind her.

Needless to say, their pleas didn’t stop Mary. This was her revenge for their attempts at falsifying memories of the past. Harboring such intentions, Mary waited until the doors of the other carriage opened and the servant brothers appeared. Roberto was standing there with Adi limply slumped over his shoulder.

The sight of her weakened husband made Mary forget all about her scheme, and she grabbed his arm lightly. As always, he was suffering from motion sickness. “Adi, are you okay?”

“I’m sorry that you have to see me in this pathetic state, milady...”

“It’s fine. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen you being pathetic.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? Or is it meant to be a coup de grâce?”

“It’s because you called me ‘milady.’ Anyway, you seem all right. Just rest for a bit...”

“And I’m sure you’ll feel better,” Mary had meant to say, but suddenly stopped and whipped back around towards her carriage.

Lang and Lucian were talking about something. Judging by their dry smiles

and the way they shrugged their shoulders, they must've been making fun of Adi's motion sickness. Yet they had been the ones to decide on this stop. They'd said it was because there was a café they liked here, and they wanted to show it to Mary. But there was no doubt in Mary's mind that this break was for Adi's sake.

Adi would later tell her that the cool Roberto, who normally disparaged Adi for being foolish, had treated him kindly during the trip. He'd allowed Adi to take the seat of honor, and because there was nobody else in the carriage, he'd even urged Adi to lie down.

But right now, Roberto showed no hint of such behavior. He only apologized to Mary for his foolish brother being so troublesome, before swiftly walking over to join the twins. He truly was a tough nut to crack. All Mary could do was smile wryly as she watched him.

"It must be difficult to have such a contrarian for a brother," she remarked, at which Adi smiled bitterly as well and nodded.

After a brief break at the café, the trip was due to resume once more.

As a side note, though Lang and Lucian pretended to be first-time customers, they had gone right over to the café with no hesitation, ordered without looking at the menu, and even greeted the staff by saying, "It's been a while!" Their poorly planned plot fell apart at the seams.

Mary, who'd considered assisting them, had given up completely by that point. She'd been able to sense the way Roberto's sharp eyes grew colder and colder with each passing moment. Every now and then, he would murmur, "I see," and "No wonder I never caught them." His voice had been lower than usual, and just listening to it seemed to freeze Mary's heart to the core.

Her easy-to-read brothers, and the keenly perceptive Roberto... With such a combination, there was simply no need for Mary to go snitching. *How heartless*, she had muttered inwardly, and with great skill concentrated on her chiffon cake.

Now that they'd left the café, it was time to board the carriages again, and

Mary once more bore witness to Adi's abduction. Except now, Lang and Lucian were the ones to kidnap him.

Although the twins were smaller in stature than Adi, they showed great coordination. Lang caught Adi by the arms, while Lucian used that as an opening to shove Adi into the carriage. It wasn't anything that should be praised, but the way they'd worked together so smoothly without any cues or signals just showed that they truly were twins.

"If you'd just told me, I would've gotten in by myself...!" Adi shrieked pitifully. Unfortunately, nobody offered him a helping hand, and his voice was cut off with the slam of the carriage doors.

"Why must they always partake in violence?" Mary mused. "Well, no matter. I'm sure it's fine. So I'm sharing the carriage with you this time, Roberto?"

Roberto, who'd been holding the carriage door open with one hand, smiled calmly in response. He held out his free hand to her, and she climbed aboard with his assistance. It was the same carriage she'd shared with her brothers last time. The seats were adorned with soft cushions, and Roberto sat down opposite her.

Though he was a servant, his perfect posture added an air of dignity to him. He looked beautiful and refreshing, and his composed attitude made him appear more mature than Lang and Lucian, even though they were all the same age. (Then again, was it Roberto's maturity that made him seem older than his age, or was it the twins' excitability that made them seem younger?)

"It's a little strange to be in the carriage alone with you, Roberto," Mary said. "But at least now I'll have some peace and quiet."

"I hope you won't mind my company for a little while," Roberto said, lowering his head deeply, at which Mary nodded.

Roberto was a servant. On top of that, he came from a family line that had served House Albert for generations. He was brilliant enough to have been entrusted with looking after two Alberts by himself, and on occasion, he even assisted the head of House Albert in place of his father. His breadth of knowledge and skills surpassed even that of Mary, who'd joined the succession candidacy so late.

Getting to spend time with him alone... Yes, she should definitely make use of this situation.

“This is perfect. I have so many things I’d like you to teach me about!” she exclaimed.

“So long as it’s something I can answer, then I’d be happy to do so,” Roberto replied. “Unlike certain people, you are a diligent person, Lady Mary. It’s an honor to teach you.”

“Unlike certain people, huh?”

“Yes, indeed. But to think you’d be so different from your own siblings... Our foolish brothers only cause both of us trouble, don’t they?”

“You’re not even trying to be ambiguous about who you mean. But it’s causing me no harm, so I’ll let it slide,” Mary said, and then brought up the main topics she wanted to discuss.

Roberto answered her courteously, and explained everything in a way that was easy for her to understand. Sometimes he spoke calmly as if advising her, other times he encouraged her to share her own flashes of inspiration, and praised her when she showed that she had understood.

Even Mary, who’d had private tutors since she was a child, attended aristocratic schools, studied abroad, and occasionally took lectures outside of her major (usually management studies), was impressed at how skillfully Roberto was able to teach her. The professors she’d had until now would’ve surely been astonished at his ability. They might have even asked him for advice on how to teach others.

“You explain everything so clearly, yet my brothers still choose to run away to a café. What a waste,” Mary commented.

“I’m teaching you gently because you’re diligent, Lady Mary. When it comes to those two, I’m much more... No, never mind. It’s just that rather than teaching them, we all study at the same time. Of course, I’d never be *violent* with them...”

“Yet sometimes you *are*, aren’t you? I shouldn’t overlook this. But you’ve been teaching me well, and I’m so moved that I’ll unconsciously let it slide.” Deciding to ignore Roberto’s remark (this was no act of cruelty—she simply knew just how uncontrollable her brothers could be), Mary asked her next question.

After a while, she was out of inquiries, and let out a satisfied breath for having spent the time well. Then, she looked up at Roberto again as she got an idea.

His eyes widened slightly, and he asked her what was wrong. His expression bore some resemblance to Adi’s.

“Now that I think about it, you’re my brother-in-law,” she pointed out.

“Brother-in-law...” Roberto repeated with surprise, as though he hadn’t considered this before.

Indeed, Adi and Roberto were brothers, so now that Mary and Adi were wedded, Roberto was Mary’s brother-in-law. This wouldn’t really influence their relationship, which they had developed as they grew up together, but nonetheless, they were officially related now.

Once Mary explained that, Roberto contemplated things for a while before laughing softly, as if admonishing her. “Please treat me the same as always,” he told her in a composed tone of voice. “I won’t act like your brother after all this time. To me, you are still the daughter of House Albert, whom I am bound to serve, and nothing has changed.”

“Nothing has changed?” Mary echoed.

“Yes, exactly,” he replied decisively.

This time, Mary paused to consider his words. Then her expression brightened. “You’re right!” she exclaimed. “Nothing has changed, because you’ve always been like an older brother to me.”

“Huh...?” Roberto was dumbstruck by her statement and the way she’d said it so nonchalantly, as if that were the end of the topic. His eyes were wide, and seeing him unable to hide his shock like this was a rarity.

Mary was surprised in turn to see him so flabbergasted. After all, wasn’t it

obvious? If Lang and Lucian saw Adi as their younger brother, then Roberto was like Mary's older brother. Sure, he was a servant, but that didn't change the fact that they'd grown up together like family. Lang and Lucian were difficult and bothersome brothers, while Roberto was the reliable brother who reined them in. There was no more fitting explanation than to describe them as Roberto being the oldest brother, followed by Lang and Lucian, then Adi, and finally Mary as the youngest.



When Mary explained her thoughts, the still-stunned Roberto murmured, “Is that right...?” It was very unusual for him to mumble like this.

He looks exactly like Adi when he’s dumbstruck. It makes him look younger too, Mary observed calmly.

“So...you’re my younger sister, Lady Mary?”

“Yes, I am, big brother Roberto,” Mary answered with a giggle.

Roberto chuckled wryly at her words. Uncharacteristically, he smiled broadly and his cheeks flushed slightly, but he didn’t seem upset with her.

“Well, I still have things I’d like you to teach me, big brother Roberto. I hope you don’t mind,” she told him.

He paused. “I’ll tell you anything, so please don’t call me that,” he requested as he glanced aside with embarrassment. He pressed his hand to his mouth, and Mary was sure it was to hide his smile.

She grinned. “Brothers really are selfish creatures, huh?” she said with a shrug.

The carriages continued on their way to Feydella, with plenty of breaks and the passengers switching places. The trip was boisterous, lively, and thoroughly enjoyable.

At one point, Mary was alone with Lang in the coach. “Not like I plan on giving up, but if *you* were to succeed the family, Mary...” he said, and then cheerfully began discussing the future of House Albert with her.

Next, she ended up alone with Lucian. “I don’t see how I could win... Let’s go with the assumption that you’ll be the head of the house, Mary...” he said, chatting with her in his usual gloomy way.

When she, Adi, and Roberto were together, Roberto scolded Adi for being foolish, even while worrying about his motion sickness. Mary could only shrug at Roberto’s contrarianism.

No matter who she was riding with, she was able to pass the time

comfortably. She still had her doubts about this being a harsh journey, but she decided to let them slide, since they hadn't yet arrived at their destination. With that on her mind, she looked between Lucian and Roberto as they conversed.

This was another fun combination. Lucian was prone to making negative remarks due to his nature, but it didn't lessen how much he fawned over Mary. Roberto's responses were cool, composed, and—if Mary listened carefully—extremely rude. It was the same kind of exchange as always.

I'd like to listen to these two some more. But at the same time, I wonder who I'll end up with next? Mary wondered. Whatever combination was up next, she was certain she'd enjoy herself.

Yet no matter how many times they swapped places, Mary and Adi were never left on their own. Mary could feel her brothers' tenacity and fixation, but she didn't give it much thought as she began dozing off.

A powerful lurch suddenly woke Mary up. She lifted her head, dazedly murmuring, "I was asleep..." to nobody in particular. Glancing up, she noticed that Adi was looking out the window at the scenery. The wind fluttered his hair, and his eyes gazed at some spot in the distance.

Perhaps because he was lost in reverie, there was a touch of sorrow in his countenance. His composure made him look more mature than usual. It was strange, for while some traces of childishness remained in his features, his profile had the charm of an adult about it.

Mary realized she had fallen asleep leaning against his shoulder. No, in fact, her whole body was leaning against him.

Finally noticing her stir, Adi turned to look at her. "Ah, you're awake?" he asked with a soft smile. "The trip must be taking its toll on you. Are you in any pain?"

"I slept in the world's best bed, so I'm fine," Mary joked.

Adi blushed slightly. "That's a relief," he responded. His embarrassed expression was so endearing.

As a follow-up attack, Mary moved closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder again. She surveyed her surroundings, noticing that it had gotten dark outside. She must've been asleep for quite some time. When she inquired about their location, she found out that they had crossed the border a while ago and were already in Feydella.

Mary then glanced around the carriage. Nobody was sitting opposite her and Adi; all she could see were the neatly stacked cushions. She saw no sign of Roberto or either of her brothers. Now that clarity had returned to her in full, she tilted her head at this discovery. Last she recalled, she'd been in the carriage with Lucian and Roberto.

"We're only one hiding place down. It's no big deal..." Lucian had said earlier with a glum smile.

Roberto's glare had been harsh and icy. "Very well. In a few years' time, I'll uncover them all," he'd responded, graciously accepting the challenge thrown his way.

One had been melancholy yet fearless, and the other charming yet cool, both smiling at each other in the beautiful yet tense atmosphere. It had been the very definition of an explosive situation. However, to Mary, this was business as usual. She was so used to the sound of their voices that their discussion had been like a lullaby to her. She'd watched them while nodding off, and suddenly found herself waking up next to Adi.

Mary wondered where her brothers had gone, and how she'd even wound up next to Adi. When she voiced her questions, Adi smiled while rubbing her shoulder lovingly.

"We changed right before the sun went down. Lord Lucian and Roberto came over to my and Lord Lang's carriage and demanded that I lend you my shoulder because you fell asleep."

"Ah, so they switched with you."

"Yes. They were also very insistent that I had to be careful not to wake you up, and that I should take a break beforehand and get into my seat slowly for your sake," Adi explained with exasperation.

The twins had been so stubborn about not letting Mary and Adi be alone, yet when she had fallen asleep, they instantly switched him in. They had highlighted that this was for Mary's sake, yet they'd also shown concern for Adi's motion sickness.

My brothers sure are contrarians as well, Mary thought. "I bet Lang and Lucian were very unhappy," she noted.

"Exceedingly so. They held my head down, glared at me, and said, 'Your impertinent height finally has a use!'"

"And what about Roberto?"

"He took them down by saying, 'If you'll be quiet for five minutes, I'll let you both share the carriage with the sleeping Lady Mary.'"

"I can picture that easily," Mary said with a giggle. Lang and Lucian were the same as always, whether it came to doting on Mary, or their contradictory way of showing concern for their younger brother, Adi. She was sure that right about now, the twins were fawning over her in the other carriage, while Roberto coldly rebuked them. Mary's smile grew as she imagined the scene.

Her brothers were the same as ever, and they'd be that way forever. But...would that still be true if she inherited House Albert?

Doubt swirled within her chest, and Mary blinked. What on earth was she even thinking? But now that the doubt had gripped her, it wouldn't be dispelled so easily, frustratingly enough.

"Nothing will change...right?" she mumbled under her breath.

"My lady, what's the matter?" Adi asked, looking at her with concern. His rust-colored eyes bored into her, and he prompted once more, "Milady?"

Returning to her senses, Mary quickly straightened up. She once again scolded herself for her thoughts. Even if she became the head of House Albert, surely her brothers wouldn't change.

"I'm fine. I was just lost in thought," Mary responded. "By the way, you're calling me 'milady' again."

"That's because I was worried about you, milady... I mean Lady Mary... I mean

M-Ma... Sorry, I can't do it because I'm motion sick." Finding himself in an unfavorable position, Adi leaned against the window and pleaded motion sickness.

"You're just tactfully giving up," Mary said with a sigh, seeing right through him. But she decided to overlook it this time, and rubbed his back in return for him having lent his shoulder to her. She glanced outside the window herself, to the sight of magnificent architecture.

Once the carriages came to a stop outside of an estate, a married couple appeared to greet them. The wife's name was Karen. She was Mary's mother's older sister, and her serene smile looked similar to Keryl's. Standing next to her was Dan, whose appearance gave off a rugged and intimidating impression, but on the inside he was a kind man. They looked like a harmonious pair as they stood side by side.

Mary stepped out of the carriage and rushed over to them. Karen smiled, spreading her arms open. They hugged each other tightly, and a flowery scent enveloped Mary.

"It's been a long time, Mary! Ah, no, you're all grown up now, and even a candidate for the succession. Perhaps I should call you Lady Mary?" Karen suggested, as if she were humoring a child.

"No way, auntie! Please talk to me the same way you used to," Mary responded with an embarrassed giggle. Being treated like a child was embarrassing in its own right, but it would be equally so to have relatives whom she'd known for a long time change how they referred to her.

Karen conjectured Mary's thoughts, and for that precise reason, she decided to keep up her teasing as she turned to Adi next. She was smiling in satisfaction over having determined her target, her expression making it obvious that she was Keryl's sister.

"She's just like my mother," Mary murmured under her breath.

"Welcome, Lord Adi," Karen greeted.

"Please spare me... But I'm glad to see you're both well, Lady Karen, Lord

Dan,” Adi responded, feeling awkward about being referred to in such a way.

Karen laughed pleasantly, and even that was the same as her sister. Dan then informed them that the other three were already inside the mansion, so Mary and Adi followed in their footsteps.

Chapter 2

The next day, someone in the area was holding an afternoon party. Karen and Dan put in a good word, and the host happily invited Mary and the others to attend. They may have been unexpected guests, but anyone would've been glad to open their doors to the candidates for House Albert's succession. Though Feydella was an insular nation, it wasn't as if diplomacy was forbidden. They simply weren't used to visiting other nations themselves, but the appearance of Mary and her family was their opportunity for diplomacy.

Mary also saw this as the perfect chance to show off her diplomatic skills, and she now stood outside the host's mansion, overflowing with motivation. "I'm going to make connections with Feydella's aristocracy by using my beautiful looks and elegant conduct! I'm sure my brothers will realize that I'm the most suited to be the heir once they see my splendid self."

"When you put your mind to it, you can act like the perfect noblewoman, Your Ladyship," Adi acknowledged. "I'm sure you'll be able to make nice with everyone."

"Right, and I'm sure it'd go even smoother if a certain someone stopped referring to me in that way. Don't you agree, darling?"

"W-Well... I will make an effort... Now, let's get going, M-Ma...House Albert's milady."

"That's the worst you've done yet," Mary said, her shoulders drooping when Adi still refused to call her by name. She could only wonder how long it'd take him to call her "Mary" naturally at this rate. "All right. Whatever you call me, I'm going to use this party to make my brothers see that I'm suited to being the head of the house!"

"Indeed...? I hope it goes well..." Adi mumbled evasively.

Mary glanced at him. "I *will* show them," she repeated for emphasis, and even she noticed that her voice sounded weaker than before.

She had two objectives during this event: diplomacy, and showing off said diplomatic skills to her brothers. Those were her intentions, at least. Feeling her mettle chipping away, Mary turned around. Standing beside the carriage that their group had ridden over in were Karen and Dan, who had come to see them off. They were clad in a stylish dress and suit respectively, and they were discussing something with a maid who had come out to greet them.

Mary then cast her eyes towards Adi, who was sporting an indecipherable expression. His suit had some red embroidery to match with Mary's red dress, and he looked fantastic. But when he noticed her eyeing him, he awkwardly glanced aside. The only ones who had arrived at the venue were Mary, Adi, Karen, and Dan.

Indeed, her brothers hadn't come. Or to be more precise, they had been left behind.

Their love for Mary was to blame. While departing, they'd begun arguing over which of them would get to escort Mary. Unable to just stand by and watch, she had asked Roberto to take care of them. He had responded by coldly stating, *"If we still haven't arrived an hour into the event, please don't be surprised."*

"S-Still, I'm sure it's fine. Lord Lang and Lord Lucian usually take diplomacy seriously," Adi said. "Considering their ability, it won't be a big deal even if they're late."

Mary only shrugged in response to his desperate attempt at making her feel better. It was true that the twins carried out diplomacy very well...as long as Mary wasn't around. Their conduct was flawless during such times, and even Mary had noticed they had a very high reputation as a result. Still, this was only the case if the requirement of Mary's absence was met.

"I'd really like to show off my skills to them..." she muttered. But for that to happen, the twins would have to actually attend the party. And it was beginning to look like that would take some time. There was even the possibility that they wouldn't show up at all. And even if they did, Mary would still be present.

The prospects are grim... she thought with a sigh.

Despite her worries, Mary told herself that her brothers' absence was an opportunity in its own right and renewed her fighting spirit. That two brothers had been unable to attend an event due to quarreling over their sister could be regarded as questionable for a distinguished family, but everything depended on one's frame of mind.

Feeling exultant once more, Mary entered the venue. However...

"Could you perchance be Lady Mary? No, you simply must be her! Your beauty speaks for itself!"

"When I heard you were attending, I dropped all my plans just for the chance of meeting you!"

"I've been looking forward to the day I'd be able to see you with my own eyes! What a wondrous day! The most glorious one of my whole life!"

Everyone was trying to talk to Mary, and before she knew it, she found herself surrounded by a throng of men. She had been leisurely thinking about how she wanted to greet those who were on good terms with Karen and Dan, but she hadn't expected to be faced with such a swarm. The movement of the crowd ended up pushing Adi away and leaving him on the outside of the group. Thanks to his tall stature, Mary didn't lose sight of his red hair, but he was exceptionally far away from her.

"Er... Won't you please calm yourselves, everyone? It's a little surprising to be approached so abruptly," she said.

"My apologies. When I heard you'd be coming, I just couldn't stand still."

"I-Is that so...? Um, could you give me some space...? Ah! There's more and more headed this way..."

"Even your voice is as beautiful as an angel's. I arranged this bouquet as a token of our friendship, but its beauty pales compared to you. Neither flowers nor the starry sky could rival your loveliness, Lady Mary!"

"Oh my... You're all so skilled with words... But this pressure is even more powerful..."

"I came here today to greet the beautiful Lady Karen, but to think I'd be able

to meet someone like you... It's as if I'm witnessing the goddess of beauty. I'm sure all the men in the world envy me right now!"

"G-Goddess of beauty?!" Mary's expression stiffened at being faced with so much admiration in rapid succession. She was used to having her looks complimented (mostly for the sake of flattery), but this was the first time someone had compared her to a goddess. Others compared her to the moon or the stars, enumerating praise as if they were poets. But at this point, it didn't even feel like she was being complimented anymore.

Caught in this storm of flowery words, Mary stood there and listened in a daze. But when one of the men grasped her hand, she snapped back to her senses. The man in question remarked on the gracefulness of her hand, and the softness of her skin, as he drew it closer to his lips to kiss it.

Mary let out a panicked shriek and pulled her hand back right before they made contact. "My escort is waiting for me!" she exclaimed, and hurriedly pushed through the crowd.

The way she had escaped must've appeared pathetic to onlookers. But even so, the men continued to praise her, their voices echoing behind her with remarks such as, "What a dainty back!" and "Her silver hair trails behind her so beautifully!" It was enough to leave her shaken up.

Having broken her way out of the swarm, Mary spotted Adi, who was trying to ascertain what was going on. She rushed over and clung to him. He let out a pained grunt, but Mary wasn't in the headspace to care.

"That was a tackle brilliant enough to challenge even a certain someone... No, never mind that! Milady, are you okay?!"

"A-Adi, this place is kind of strange..."

"What happened?" Adi asked, rubbing her arms soothingly.

Mary trembled at the recollection of what had happened earlier. She thought back to the excessive praise the men had showered her with. One had even called her the goddess of beauty.

Seeing the way she shivered, Adi asked her if she was cold. Mary shook her head. She *was* getting chills, but not for the reason he thought. It was a chill in

her heart.

“Adi, let’s evacuate from here.”

“Evacuate?”

“Yes. Otherwise, I’m going to become the goddess of beauty!”

“G-Goddess of beauty?!” Adi repeated, astonished at Mary’s outrageous claim.

But Mary didn’t feel like explaining. She just tugged on his arm, still intent on evacuating, and began searching for a place for them to escape to. But before she could find a suitable location, another man called out to her.

He was a man of slender build, with brown hair and matching eyes. He looked to be about Mary’s age, and though he was smartly dressed, something about him lacked sophistication. To put it nicely, he had a soft and simple aura. To put it less nicely, he was plain. Dan was by his side; most likely, the young man had requested for Mary’s uncle to introduce them.

“Mary, Adi, this is Mauro. He’s the son of House Noze. Mauro, these are Mary and Adi,” Dan said, acting as the intermediary.

Still standing close to Adi, Mary bid her greetings to Mauro. He was a very ordinary man, with nothing spectacular about his appearance. Mary had heard about his family a few times. His simpleness was enough to pacify her trembling. Surely, he wouldn’t sing her praises like those other men. Not to mention, Adi and Dan were with her now.

Coming to that conclusion, Mary allowed herself to smile, and...

“I felt a dazzling glimmer in the party, and having followed it, I’ve come face-to-face with the goddess of beauty. I was enchanted by you for a while, and when I found out you are Lady Mary of House Albert, I raced over to Dan and asked him to introduce us.”

...let out a shriek when she heard such flowery words from his mouth. Once again, she was being dubbed a goddess.

Adi froze in place. “Goddess of beauty...” he parroted in bewilderment.

Worse yet, Mauro grasped Mary’s hand, as if it were a completely normal

thing to do. He complimented her elegant, slender arms, and drew her hand towards his lips.



Remembering what had occurred earlier, Mary tried to pull her hand back. But her breath hitched when she realized Mauro's grip was so strong that she couldn't even budge. He was still smiling calmly, but the look in his eyes was utterly icy.

"Stop it...!" Mary cried out quietly, watching as Mauro's lips drew near to the back of her hand.

Seconds before they made contact, Adi growled, "*Don't touch Mary.*"

Mary felt her hand being enveloped by someone else's. The stranger's lips hadn't grazed her; instead, her husband's warm hand clasped hers. Adi squeezed it tightly, forbidding anyone else from touching her. Maybe it should've hurt, but Mary only found it comforting.

While she felt relieved that Adi had stepped between them, Mauro looked startled. Coldness still hid in the depths of his eyes, and his shocked expression looked somewhat put-on. It felt as if he were pretending.

"Oh...?" he muttered in apparent confusion.

Dan, who'd been watching the exchange, laughed lightly and patted Mauro's back. "Sorry about that. They only arrived in Feydella yesterday, and it's their first time visiting. They're not used to the way we greet one another yet."

"Ah, is that right? My apologies," Mauro said, nodding in understanding. He turned back to Mary with a smile, this time pressing his hand to his chest. He bowed his head deeply, and his conduct would've looked very gentlemanly if it hadn't been for his previous actions. Though he was plain, he was a mild-mannered and polite young man.

At least, that was how he would've come off to most. He definitely didn't look like the kind of man who'd forcibly grab a woman's hand and try to kiss it against her will.

Mary's eyes widened at his sudden change, while Mauro slowly straightened up. "I apologize for not taking your feelings into consideration, Lady Mary."

"No, it's fine... If anything, I apologize for my excessive reaction," she replied. She wasn't going to forgive him for trying to kiss her hand, but she couldn't just

brush off someone's seemingly modest apology.

When Mary smiled and claimed she wasn't angry, Mauro pressed his hand to his chest again and gasped in an almost exaggerated fashion. His gaze then shifted over to Adi, who had defended her. "A fine husband who protects his wife... I see. It's no wonder you were charmed by him, Lady Mary. But are you sure you're all right with just having a fine husband?"

"What's that supposed to mean...?" she asked.

"Husbands and lovers are different things entirely. You may have a fine husband who cares for you, but romantic love has a different taste. Someone like you could surely take a lover or two, Lady Mary..."

"*What?!*" Mary raised her voice without thinking. She couldn't believe someone would say such a thing right in front of her husband. Not to mention, said someone was smiling serenely and no doubt intending to recommend himself as one of her lovers.

This went beyond rudeness. It was an outright insult.

"Listening to your words has made me feel sick. I'm going to excuse myself here!" Mary declared, making it clear she had no intention of hearing anything else Mauro had to say. With Adi in tow, she began walking away.

At the last second, Mauro caught her by the shoulder. The abruptness caused her to lose her balance, and he drew her closer to himself. "We could share our secrets with each other," he whispered into her ear. His low, toneless voice rang in her ears, making a powerful chill run down her spine.

But she wasn't about to hesitate just because of that. "I don't want your insinuations *or* your secrets!" Mary responded, flatly rejecting him as she shrugged off his hand.

Together with Adi, she left the area without bothering to bid Mauro farewell. Her strides were longer than usual, but that was just a testament to her anger.

"Difference between husbands and lovers? What was he even talking about? What a chilling thing to say! I obviously have no interest in taking a lover!" Mary

shouted angrily. She and Adi had gone into a room that was a small distance away from the main hall. When she strained her ears, she could hear the music and chatter from the venue, but as long as she and Adi didn't make too much noise, nobody was likely to notice them.

After they had escaped from Mauro, Mary flagged the party host and claimed she felt dizzy. The host had arranged this room for her and Adi to rest in. It wasn't even that she was faking—she thought she really might feel a wave of vertigo after having listened to such chilling flowery language and insults.

The worst part was, when she'd mentioned she felt unwell, a number of men had volunteered to look after her. Even though Adi was with her, some men had offered their shoulders for her to lean on, and one even tried picking her up in a princess carry. When Adi began leading her away with his hand on her waist, some of the men had tried following them.

They might even be camping outside... Mary thought, glaring at the door. Just to be sure, Adi peeked outside to check. When he said nobody was around, Mary finally allowed herself a moment to breathe, rubbing her chest. Feydellan men were utterly obstinate.

"What is *with* them? People have tried to flatter me or pay me lip service by complimenting me in the past, but it was never this severe! And now I'm the goddess of beauty! Goddess of beauty!!!"

"Even setting that aside, trying to seduce a woman right in front of her husband is more than just a faux pas," Adi grumbled. "But Lord Dan didn't seem to care at all... And didn't he mention that we're unfamiliar with Feydella's greetings?"

"Are you telling me that was a greeting of theirs?! They kept trying to kiss my hand out of nowhere! For a second, I thought my hand must be producing soup!" Mary complained defensively, adding that her hands weren't some tasty snack.

All the men who had approached her had sung her praises, then tried to grab her right hand to kiss it. So far, she'd managed to prevent it by pulling her hand back at the last second, or having Adi protect her, but this was an alarming situation.

“And why did Mauro mention us sharing secrets...? Ugh, I don’t understand any of this! What is wrong with this country?!” she screeched angrily, and began (lightly, since it wasn’t her own possession) punching the cushion next to her.

Adi comforted her, but he also looked sour. Men had made advances towards his wife right in front of him, and one had even tried to volunteer himself as her lover. It would’ve been impossible for him to be unaffected by that. Though he was trying to soothe Mary, his own heart wasn’t at peace.

“Even if soup was coming out of your hand, I’m the only one allowed to touch and seduce you.”

“Exactly. To be clear, my hand *isn’t* making soup, but you’re the only one who can do that, Adi,” Mary said with a small smile, presenting her right hand to him, the same one so many men she didn’t even know had tried to kiss. Just remembering it irritated her, and she felt shivers at the thought of what would’ve happened if she hadn’t pulled back in time. She wanted to cover up those memories with a fresh coat of paint—a sweet and romantic one.

So she waved her hand lightly in front of Adi to entice him. Guessing her intentions, he relaxed his expression into a smile. His large hand grasped hers, slowly drawing it closer to himself. This time, she didn’t get the chills. If anything, her heart was filled with a tingling sense of expectation.

“If you need lovers, milady, then I will love you enough for two or three people, or however many it takes.”

“Indeed. But if a lover calls me ‘Mary,’ then I’d be willing to give it some thought.”

“Please don’t tell such jokes... I want to be your husband *and* your lover, Mary.” Adi’s rust-colored eyes gazed at her affectionately as he placed a kiss on the back of her hand. He kissed her knuckles, then her fingertips, as if he were asserting his claim over her. The way he’d said her name caused a surge of heat to light up in each spot he kissed. Mary felt like her whole body was melting.

The memories of what had happened earlier faded away together with her chills. Now, she just wanted to embrace Adi. However, they were in the middle of the party, and in a room they’d been allowed to enter after Mary claimed she

was dizzy. They couldn't go too far with their flirting here. Plus...

"Mary! I heard you felt unwell! Are you okay?! I bet it's because Adi is too tall, and you have to look up at him all the time!"

"To think you'd be sick... I bet it's all because there's a needlessly tall person next to you... A difference in altitude is bad for your health..."

...Lang and Lucian vigorously barged into the room, so the sweet atmosphere vanished in an instant.

Mary and Adi both froze in shock at the twins' sudden entrance...with Adi still kissing Mary's hand. Lang and Lucian must've been startled by this scene, as they also stopped in their tracks and stood there, dumbfounded.

Roberto belatedly stepped into the room. "Lady Mary is resting, you two. Stop being foolish and don't raise your voi— Oh dear. My apologies for the interruption," he said insincerely, and closed the door behind him with a thud.

In the uncomfortable silence, the clicking of the latch resounded with a strange gravitas. The muted noise of music and laughter seemed to be coming from another world.

At last, Lang approached Adi. His steps were uncertain, perhaps because of his anger. Looking carefully, Mary noticed his clenched fists were trembling.

"Adi, not only are you still refusing to give up on being taller than us, but you actually tried to assault Mary during a party! What an insolent, guilty, uselessly tall man you are!"

"C-Calm down, Lord Lang! I had a reason...!"

"I see..." Lucian murmured. "So you have a *reason* for shoving Mary into some room and trying to assault her... Very well, I will hear you out. But if it's not something I can approve of, I'll use all of House Albert's might to force you to shrink..."

"Hold on, Lord Lucian! You see, what happened was..." Adi trailed off. He cast his eyes down, sweat dripping from his temple as the brothers approached him. Yet suddenly he seemed to have been struck with an ingenious idea, and vigorously lifted his head. Said ingenious idea?

“M-Milady was on the verge of becoming a goddess!”

It was that.

The room once more fell into total silence. What eventually broke it were the low voices of the twins speaking in unison. “I see...”

They stood directly in front of Adi, and out of nowhere, both of them grabbed his shoulders. Lang had gone for the right, and Lucian for the left. Adi’s face stiffened as he was held down on both sides.

“That checks out! Mary is gorgeous and charming! But it’d be troublesome for me if my sister became the goddess of beauty!”

“E-Exactly, Lord Lang. If my wife became the goddess of beauty, I’d also be troubled...”

“It’s true that Mary is adorable and intelligent...” Lucian added. “I agree that she’s comparable to a goddess of beauty. But it’d be troublesome if she truly became one... I couldn’t take it if my sister was no longer human...”

“I’m so glad you understand, Lord Lucian. I also couldn’t take it if my wife wasn’t human,” Adi said, nodding with a strained smile. Even though he’d been the one to bring this topic up, he didn’t seem to understand why they were agreeing with him.

As for Roberto, he cast a sideways glance at Mary, looking her over.

“I won’t become one,” Mary assured him. As if she’d become some goddess!

Having finally confirmed that Mary was fine, the twins breathed out a sigh. They seemed slightly exhausted. “A bunch of women surrounded us the second we arrived at the party, and that was bothersome enough. We wanted to find you, Mary, but the ladies kept trying to talk to us. And when we finally *do* find out where you are, we’re told that you’re resting because you feel unwell! We were so worried,” Lang explained tiredly, and Lucian nodded.

Mary tilted her head, feeling a sense of discomfort. It wasn’t unusual for the twins, who were candidates for House Albert’s succession, to be surrounded by people. But the fact that only women had gone up to them was strange. Normally, the heads of other families would come over to greet them, as well as

other noble sons. Lately, those who wanted to uncover information about the heirship also tried their luck. All of these groups were mostly made up of men.

As for the women who usually approached the twins, they included the wives of other noblemen who wanted to greet them, or their close friends whom they spoke to on a regular basis. Women who yearned for them stayed nearby and waited for the twins to approach first, or asked their parents or acquaintances to introduce them. That was about it. (Alicia, who vigorously shouted greetings at them, and Parfette, who hesitantly drew nearer to them while quivering, were notable exceptions.)

“The pressure was a bit much,” Lang noted.

“So you guys felt it too,” Mary said. “The men here kept throwing compliments at me, called me the goddess of beauty, and even tried kissing the back of my hand!”

“I saw some random man kissing Aunt Karen’s hand too!” Lang revealed. “Don’t tell me she’s going to become a goddess too?!”

“Aunt Karen was a victim too?!”

“Yeah. Uncle Dan saw it, but he didn’t seem to care. She seemed to be in a good mood, and he didn’t say anything; meanwhile, the three of us were panicking,” Lang explained, turning to Lucian and Roberto for backup. The other two men affirmed they had witnessed these events as well. Their expressions were grave, so they didn’t seem to be joking around or lying.

Mary asked for more details, and Lang explained that Karen had been surrounded by a group of young men, some of whom had kissed her hand. Her husband had been by her side the entire time. Mary would’ve expected Karen to be angry in this situation, but apparently the woman had just laughed pleasantly.

Dan had seemed perfectly composed as he watched this, and made no attempt to protect his wife. Rather, when he’d noticed the state of panic Lang was in, he’d only inquired, “*What’s the matter?*” and even tried to calm him down.

“Adi...” Mary muttered. “Usually, if another man tried to seduce your wife

and kiss her hand, you'd be displeased, right?"

"That doesn't even begin to describe it."

"Right. So why...?" Mary furrowed her brows, unable to comprehend it.

Suddenly, someone lightly knocked on the door. Mary permitted them to enter, and when the door opened, Karen and Dan tentatively peered into the room. Noticing that Mary was sitting on the edge of the bed, they both relaxed. "Mary, how are you feeling?" Karen inquired.

"I'm much better now. Sorry to have worried you, auntie. I was just a bit overwhelmed..."

"Of course you were. You aren't used to Feydella's customs. We owe you an apology for not having explained everything sooner," Karen said softly as she and Dan sat down on the sofa. They looked like a perfectly happy couple together. Nobody would've thought they were a wife who'd had her hand kissed by another man, nor a husband who'd calmly witnessed it. It was surprising that such an event hadn't caused a quarrel, or at least created a tense atmosphere around them afterwards.

Mary truly couldn't understand it. The questions must've been evident in her eyes, for Karen smiled and said, "I'm certain you were surprised, all of you, but this is our custom."

"Custom? Really?"

"Yes. After all, this is Feydella, the land of many loves," Karen said with amusement, while everyone else looked startled.

According to Karen's explanation, in Feydella, it was perfectly normal for men to flirt with women. Complimenting a woman, flirting with her, and kissing her hand were all a part of the normal greeting customs of the nation. When it came to high-ranking noblewomen, the number of men they had after them was a mark of status.

"But it's still strange for someone to try to become my lover when I'm married," Mary complained. "It's an outrageous insult!"

"Here, people won't face criticism for having lovers, even if they're married.

It's normal for those with high social standing to have a few affairs," Karen replied with a casual laugh.

Her husband, Dan, listened calmly to her outlandish words. When Mary cast him a shocked glance, he looked back at her as if asking, *"Is something the matter?"*

Feydella was the country of many loves, where people weren't reproached for taking lovers. They had a free and liberal way of thinking, based on the concept of "If love is an uncontrollable emotion, then there's no need to suppress it." Having extramarital affairs was considered normal, but it wasn't polygamy. Rather, the idea was that one's marriage was monogamous, but lovers were a separate matter.

Mary was truly starting to feel dizzy upon hearing Karen's explanation. Her mind was spinning, and Adi hurriedly held her by the waist to support her. The news was simply *that* shocking to her. Should this matter truly be swept aside as a mere characteristic of this nation?

"I... I didn't realize that..." she murmured.

"We, as citizens of Feydella, are also aware that other countries find our customs hard to understand. That's why most people don't travel abroad."

"So that's why you don't engage in diplomacy much..." Mary said. "It's no wonder. It'd be very troublesome for visitors to act in this manner."

After all, even if such behavior was allowed within Feydella, that didn't mean other nations would tolerate it. It was problematic for someone to come on to a married person, and even unmarried girls would still feel affronted if they were touched needlessly by strangers. In the worst-case scenario, such behavior could result in problems between the different families, or even an international conflict.

The citizens of Feydella were aware of this, hence why they kept their relationships within the nation. And whenever a sudden visitor like Mary appeared, the citizens would unintentionally overwhelm them.

"Auntie, you moved to Feydella when you married Uncle Dan, right? Wasn't it difficult for you?" Mary asked.

“Feydella’s customs suit me just fine.”

Mary paused. “I see... That’s a relief, then. But for me, it’s a no-go. I feel like I’ve stepped into a really absurd country...” she said, holding her head with her hand.

Karen patted Mary’s shoulder. “Surely you exaggerate,” she said. That must’ve been what those deeply embedded in Feydella’s culture thought.

Adi frowned at the state his wife was in, while Lang and Lucian exchanged a glance that said, *“We came to an awful country.”* Even Roberto looked puzzled. But no matter how dizzy Mary got, or how much Adi paled, it didn’t change the fact that this was how Feydella operated. And, unbelievably, the country of many loves was doing just fine for itself.

Those who couldn’t stand the nation’s customs stayed out of it, whereas people like Karen adapted to and partook in them. Feydella didn’t chase after those who left, nor did it refuse new arrivals. Everything sounded so easy on paper.

“But don’t worry, Mary. Nobody’s going to coerce you into anything,” Karen reassured her. “Everything they do is casual, which is why they’re easy to evade. If you brush them off, they’ll fly to the next person instead.”

“But auntie...”

“Listen to me, Mary. And you too, Lang and Lucian. You all came on this trip to determine House Albert’s heir, did you not? If something inconsequential like this is enough for you to kick up a fuss, how can you hope to inherit anything?” Karen questioned harshly, instigating the siblings.

Mary deliberated for a few seconds, and then her eyes suddenly lit up. Karen was right. Mary had arrived in this country for the sake of the succession war. She wanted to bring down her brothers and take the seat of heir for herself. Allowing one or two people’s flirtations to intimidate her simply wouldn’t do.

Even if Feydella had customs she was unfamiliar with, Mary still wanted to continue carrying out her diplomacy and show off how good she was at it. If she couldn’t brush off all the men swarming around her with one hand, then she wasn’t fit to be the next head of House Albert.

Telling herself as much, Mary clenched her fist and vigorously sprang to her feet. She tightened her right hand, the same one the men had tried to kiss earlier, the one she'd allowed Adi to kiss to overwrite those memories. She felt a burning determination light up within her. Her dizziness had completely faded.

"That's right! Whatever kind of country Feydella might be, I will still excel at diplomacy! Lang, Lucian, if you two can't stand the customs here, you're welcome to go home early!" Mary puffed out her chest, as if she were proclaiming victory.

The twins exchanged a look with each other. "We went out of our way to arrange this friendly family tri—I mean, this succession battle trip with you, Mary," Lang said. "We're not going to withdraw now!"

"Also, it's a brother's job to fend off any insects swarming around his sister..." Lucian added. "Even if it costs us our lives—or our right hands—we will protect you, Mary!"

Her brothers showed renewed vigor as they once more entered the stage. Mary nodded in satisfaction. Although she planned to kick them down, there'd be no tension if they gave up right away. Not to mention, she'd definitely feel heartened to have them by her side. They might've been loud, mischievous, and tiresome, but there was no denying that they genuinely treasured her. Now that they were in the country of many loves, where everyone was certain to try making passes at Mary, the twins' doting affection for her would surely prove useful.

Of course, she wasn't about to admit any of that out loud. She knew that if she did, the twins would create a massive ruckus that would make any diplomacy impossible.

"All right, I'm going to throw down the gauntlet and get back to the party," Mary decided. "Aunt Karen, please act as my intermediary. Now that I know Feydella is the country of many loves, I won't get startled or run away anymore!"

"Such power! That's our Mary!" Lang cheered. "We're not giving up either! But I'm still worried, so don't stray too far from my side."

“We won’t let anyone touch our adorable Mary’s right hand...” Lucian assured her. “So we won’t leave your side for even a moment...!”

Each sibling motivated themselves in a different way as they exited the room. All three of them were brimming with fighting spirit, and their silver hair fluttered behind them, as if trying to imitate the flames that burned within them.

They were the three Albert children. There was no doubt that, among those who started friendships with them, some would try to seduce Mary or become her lover. Thinking of facing off against such Feydellans, Mary clenched her fists. The party was still going, and the succession battle trip had only just begun. However...

“Only Adi is allowed to kiss my hand!”

When she whispered as much to herself, her brothers both smiled wryly.



After Mary left the room, Adi’s shoulders sank, and he breathed out a massive sigh. In contrast, Roberto was looking at the door without a care in the world.

“Bit cold here, isn’t it?” Dan remarked with a small smile.

“I want to go back home already! So why...?” Adi lamented.

“Lady Karen instigated them splendidly,” Roberto commented. “Their determination returned in a flash. How wonderful!”

“Obviously you’d think that, since it doesn’t concern you...” Adi replied resentfully, glaring at his brother.

The glare didn’t affect Roberto at all. He merely patted Adi’s shoulder and flippantly said, “Good luck.”

Adi felt his bitterness intensify. He despised knowing that other men would hit on his wife, but since this was Feydella’s custom, he had no choice but to tolerate it. He had no outlet for his loathing, so he directed it at his brother.

When Adi mentioned as much, Dan burst into laughter. “Karen’s really happy you all have finally visited. I’m sure she wants you to stay a little longer.”

“I know, but...”

“Don’t fret so much. Like Karen said, the men in Feydella are usually lighthearted, so I doubt there’s going to be a problem. If Mary wants to stay, you should trust her and stand firmly by her side.”

“I just can’t calm down...” Adi murmured with a sigh.

When he exited the room, he immediately found Mary surrounded by a bunch of men. He wanted to rush over and rescue her, but...

“Oh, look over there! A refined, elegant, lovely goddess of beauty is walking around all by herself!” Mary exclaimed, her voice hollow. Her delivery was so stiff that if an actor had been present in the crowd, they would’ve surely been struck dizzy with astonishment.

There was no chance she’d fool anyone at this rate. No, even if someone *did* believe her, just what was the point of her saying all that? With such thoughts in mind, Adi stepped closer to help her.

Yet right at that moment, all the men who’d been around Mary suddenly receded in a great wave. They headed in the same direction—the one where Mary had said a “goddess” was walking around. *Seriously, Feydella?* Adi wondered in bewilderment, frozen to the spot.

Mary, having successfully caused the men to scatter, approached him. She looked proud. “Did you see that?! I got them to leave!”

“Indeed, it was mind-bogglingly effective...”

“The men here are really casual, just like Aunt Karen said. Many of them grabbed my hand, but when I responded to it calmly, there was no problem.”

“Y-Your hand?!” Adi echoed. “Are you okay?!”

“Yes. They’d take it, but if I lightly pulled back, they let it go right away. And they didn’t seem to mind either.”

Since the flirting was nonchalant, rejection was seen in the same way. If one kept that in mind and brushed the men off, they truly did move on swiftly.

“But...there was one exception,” Mary muttered under her breath. Catching the words, Adi asked her what was wrong. However, instead of replying, she suddenly looked in another direction. Adi followed her line of sight, only to see

several men sidling up to her. “For now, let’s get through this party. Adi, please keep count of how many times ‘goddess of beauty’ gets dropped.”

“Why is that my job...? Anyway, even if you know how to avoid their advances now, please don’t let it go too far.”

“Indeed. You should stay by my side the entire time,” Mary said, nestling against his arm.

Adi nodded, and the two of them rejoined the party...or they would have, if not for the throng of men surrounding them.



After the party ended, everyone returned to Karen and Dan’s estate.

The pressure Mary had felt during the event was incomparable to any other party she’d attended. She was in a foreign country, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, all while trying to engage in diplomacy to determine House Albert’s heir. On top of that, any time she showed an opening, a bunch of men would surround her and sing her praises. Unable to bluntly reject them, she could only smile and listen, but their endless barrage of sickly sweet compliments made her face stiffen. She’d gotten the chills so many times during the party that she worried she might’ve caught a cold.

Mary’s hope had been that she could finally take a breather now that the event had ended, but she entered her room with a depressed countenance. In her hand, she held a small note that read, “I would like to take a moment of your time tonight. I will be waiting by the moonlit fountain, so please come by yourself.” A gentle, sweet fragrance wafted from the invitation.

But Mary didn’t fancy the scent, and she waved it away with her hand. It tickled her nose.

“Adi, someone invited me to a secret meeting. I wonder if the fountain they’re referring to is the one in this estate’s gardens?” She fluttered the note about as she addressed Adi, who was putting away her dress and shoes.

Anyone would’ve been disgusted if some stranger had forced an invitation to a secret meeting into their wife’s hand. Well, anyone except for the men of Feydella.

“Such crude work,” Adi huffed. “I would’ve written you a much more compelling invitation.”

“*That’s* what you’re getting competitive over?”

“I would’ve picked a design you like, and in beautiful lettering I would’ve written, ‘I will be waiting on the daylight park bench with croquettes, so please come by when you feel peckish,’” Adi proclaimed proudly.

Mary could only shrug in exasperation. Where in the world was a noblewoman who’d agree to a secret meeting that involved croquettes? Besides herself, that is. “Jokes aside, I’ll go to the meeting spot. If anything happens, I want you to rush in and help me, so stay within earshot and be on standby.”

“You’re really going?” Adi inquired with surprise.

Glancing back down at the note, Mary sighed. Somebody had slipped it into her hand when she was distracted by the crowd of men extolling her from every direction. It had happened so casually, and when Mary had asked her aunt about it, she’d found out that such invitations were commonplace in Feydella. However frustrated Mary might’ve been, this was another country’s culture, so it would’ve been unwise for her to complain. She had no interest in playing along, but...

“The sender is Mauro Noze. I’m curious what this secret meeting of his is all about,” Mary said, before exiting the room to head to the garden. On the way, she ripped the letter in half and flung it into the trash.

A small, simple fountain stood in the garden, its water trickling quietly even in the evening. It wasn’t as large or extravagant as the one in Albert Manor, but it had its own charm. The gentle rush of the water was comforting and refreshing. Mary watched it for a while, until someone called out to her. “So you came.”

She turned around. Mauro was standing next to her—perhaps he’d concealed the sound of his footsteps when he arrived, since this was supposed to be a secret meeting. Bathed in the moonlight and surrounded by darkness, he looked quite good. Though, he wasn’t as eye-catching as one might be, likely

because of his ordinary appearance and physique.

If Adi had been standing here in Mauro's place, his rust-colored hair would've stood out in the dark, and his eyes would've captivated her instantly. Mary was sure she wouldn't even have been able to hear the fountain anymore, and the only sound that would reverberate in her mind would be Adi's voice calling her name.

It went without saying that Patrick would've looked breathtaking in this scene too. The sight of a man who personified handsomeness, awash in moonlight, would've made any girl's heart throb. Even Mary would've admitted that this was the perfect complement for him, and would've sent him a round of applause while exclaiming, "*A god of beauty!*" (It was unclear whether Patrick would've actually been glad to receive said applause, however.)

Mauro had no such glamour. His extremely ordinary appearance was only slightly improved by the moon gleaming behind his back. Mary didn't care for the sight of him at all, and before long, she returned her gaze to the fountain. The water flickered with a soft sound, the reflection of the moon wavering across its surface.

"I'm just taking a stroll in the park. I don't recall accepting your invitation," Mary said.

"But for you to come here at all counts as acceptance in Feydella," Mauro countered.

"What an egotistical custom. Anyway, what did you want to talk about?" she inquired sharply, getting right to business. She was in no mood for idle chatter.

Mauro shrugged at her emotionless urging. Yet it seemed like he hadn't expected this meeting to turn into some tryst, and there was no anger or disappointment in his reaction to Mary's tone. With a calm smile, he took a step closer to her and said, "I know about your secret."

"Secret...?"

"Yes. The secret which you cannot share with anyone. The secret which proves that you, the daughter of House Albert, didn't rise to the top because of your intelligence or popularity."

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I’ve no interest in your drivel. I’d rather have the other gentlemen sing my praises than listen to you,” Mary stated bluntly. Deciding this conversation was over, she began heading back to the estate.

But when she felt Mauro, who should’ve been a few steps away from her, suddenly appear behind her, her body stiffened. She turned back to look at him and accidentally knocked into him. She hurriedly tried to back away from him, but the heel of her shoe bumped against the fountain. Caught between him and the fountain, she had no way of escape, and inwardly she cursed her own carelessness.

In contrast to her panic, Mauro still smiled calmly. It was a strange, uncanny smile, with only the corners of his lips raised up. “Careful,” he admonished, purposely grabbing Mary’s arm. Even though on the outside this appeared to be a gentleman saving a girl who’d been about to fall into the fountain, his grip was so strong that it was almost painful. “I’m not surprised to see you can act this well. Incredible, Lady Mary.”

“I wonder what that’s supposed to mean?”

“There’s no need to be so defensive. I’m simply complimenting your skills. I mean...to think that you, who should’ve fallen into ruin like in the game, would enter the candidacy for House Albert’s succession...”

Mary’s breath hitched at those words. There was only one thing Mauro could’ve been referring to: the otome game that Mary had memories of playing in her past life.

Indeed, in the game, House Albert fell into ruin. The protagonist, Alicia, was bullied relentlessly by Mary, and upon finding out she was the princess, she had Mary pay for her actions. The in-game Mary shouldered all the responsibility, and was cast out into the northern lands by herself. She never appeared in the game again.

“Why do you—?” Mary muttered. “But I don’t remember anyone like you.”

“Of course you don’t. I didn’t exist in the game.”

“Didn’t exist...? What do you mean?”

“Lady Mary, do you recall the term ‘NPC’? A mixed group of people bearing no special mention: the nameless characters playing minor roles... I am one of them.”

Mary’s expression soured. NPCs—or non-player characters—played small parts in the series they appeared in, like extras on a movie set. In games, they usually didn’t have a name or a portrait, and some didn’t even have dialogue lines. They might be referred to as something like “Academy Student.”

I see, so that’s why he looks so plain, Mary thought. Of course, she couldn’t say that out loud in this situation.

“I lament my circumstances,” Mauro went on. “Remembering the game means nothing for an NPC with no story to follow, and because I was born in Feydella, I can’t connect with the main cast. But...things are different for you. You used Mary Albert’s story to your advantage.” He sounded envious as he spoke. He must’ve been convinced that Mary had used her past life memories to avoid ruin and climb to her current position.

Mary flinched away from him slightly. But she told herself she couldn’t afford to show that she was shaken. Putting up a cold front, she glared at Mauro. “Could you stop with your foolish prattle? I wonder if Feydellan men always start spouting nonsense when their compliments don’t land.”

“You were the first to speak to Alicia, were you not? Even though she was unaware of her origin at the time, and everyone should’ve seen her as a commoner attending an aristocratic academy. You did that because you believed that she was the princess, no?” he argued.

“Whom I speak to has no relation to any of this,” Mary asserted. “At the time, I simply saw an unfamiliar peasant gracelessly wandering lost around the academy, and I spoke to her because I was afraid our school’s dignity might suffer because of her.”

“Later, when her identity as the princess was called into question, you allied yourself with her even before any proof was present. If you had made one wrong move, your entire family’s position would’ve been in jeopardy. You of all people would know that very well, Lady Mary.”

“Well, surprisingly enough, I put a high value on friendship. That must’ve been

why I did that.”

“You approached Princess Alicia yourself during high school, yet during college, you were very passive when it came to Lilianne. Mary Albert didn’t appear in the game’s sequel, so you must’ve been biding your time because you were uncertain on how to act,” Mauro said firmly, as though he’d finally exposed the truth about Mary. Then, he smiled once more, and his grip on her arm loosened. When he spoke next, his tone was kind and gentlemanly as he took Mary’s hand into his own. “What do you think would happen if people found out about this? Some might find it bizarre, and some might even call you a coward.”

“Coward...?”

“Yes. After all, you knew everything in advance, so there’s no word more fitting. You alone had this knowledge, yet you kept quiet about it so you could use it to your benefit.”

“That’s not true...”

“Isn’t it? In that case, why didn’t you save Miss Parfette during college? You knew that her engagement would be canceled, did you not?” Mauro questioned, purposefully speaking in an exaggerated manner.

Mary’s expression darkened. She recalled the way Parfette had sorrowfully revealed that Gainas had broken off their engagement. Mary had stayed quiet and listened, but she’d known how things would turn out from the start. Yes, she should’ve saved Parfette back then. Even if the cancellation of the engagement had been inevitable, Mary could’ve warned the other girl and given her some time to prepare. Maybe she would’ve even been able to stop Lilianne altogether.

Seeing the growing discomfort on Mary’s face, Mauro loudly delivered the decisive blow. “I pity Princess Alicia most of all. I’m sure she’d be heartbroken to discover the friendship between you two was a setup.”

Mary hesitated upon hearing that name. Alicia had no idea that Mary had past life memories, nor did she realize that she was the protagonist of an otome game or anything along those lines. She probably didn’t even know “otome games” existed in the first place. The girl was fully convinced that her meeting

with Mary and the way Mary had believed in her when her identity had been put into question were all part of an honest friendship.

What would Alicia think if she were to discover Mary had past life memories...? Even Mary's childhood friend, Patrick, would've found it outrageous if Mary blurted out something like, *"I have past life memories, and I know what will happen in advance."* And even her doting brothers were unlikely to take such news easily.

"I... But..." Mary stammered.

"Don't you think relationships built by omitting the truth are pointless?" Mauro cut in. "Lady Mary, I understand how it feels to have past life memories. I am most suited to being your husband, for you can share your secret with me, and I can support you for the rest of your life," he whispered, his voice carrying a note of passion. Though his words constituted a sweet invitation, he was exuding an indescribable pressure.

Mary reflexively tried to step back. But she was trapped between Mauro and the fountain, with no means of retreat. Worse yet, he was slowly but surely pulling her hand closer to his mouth. He must've intended to kiss it. The gesture almost seemed like the proof of a contract to Mary, which caused a wave of unease to stir within her.

However, in the next moment, Mary felt a wave of relief instead when she noticed Adi had appeared behind Mauro. His bright hair drew her eye in the darkness, and the way he towered above Mauro added a sense of reliability to him. Instead of his usually calm expression, Adi was scowling sharply at the other man.

Unwilling to tolerate this further, Adi grabbed Mauro's shoulder to stop him. Mauro had been certain this was a secret meeting, so when he felt something suddenly grasp him, he let Mary go out of surprise. Finally freed, Mary stumbled backwards. As the wind whistled past the trees, the two men's glaring match heightened in intensity (at the same time, a small splash was drowned out by the rustling leaves).

"What a surprise! So you've been hiding around here?" Mauro asked Adi. "In Feydella, interrupting a secret meeting is a breach of manners."

“Milady was simply visiting the garden. She didn’t come here because she agreed to meet with you,” Adi replied coolly. “Besides, I’m not a Feydellan, so I won’t allow any other man to get close to her.”

“My, how frightening. You’re telling me you want to hog Lady Mary all to yourself, despite your wretched origins?”

“Regardless of my origins, milady—Mary has chosen me, and *only* me,” Adi asserted icily.

Hesitating, Mauro took a step back. Yet he was still bold enough to pat Adi’s shoulder and say, “Let’s see if you can still say that once you know everything.” With that warning delivered, he walked away. He must’ve been trying to show his superiority against Adi in knowing Mary’s secret, while at the same time threatening Mary by implying he’d tell Adi the truth.

Adi glared at the retreating man’s back until he finally disappeared in the distance. Only then did he turn around. “My lady, I’m glad you’re all ri—” But his words died in his throat. Then, he stooped and held his hand out to Mary. “I’m glad you’re all right...more or less,” he finished, glancing away as if he couldn’t bear the sight before his eyes.

Mary took his hand and stood up. Indeed, she *stood up*, for she had fallen onto her backside earlier. Her skirt was drenched, and even her shoes were wet. Droplets of water fell from the hem of her skirt once she was back on her feet. She began wringing it out, and a stream of water splashed against the ground.

When Mauro had released her earlier, Mary had lost her balance and fallen down—tragically, right into the fountain. Perhaps she should’ve just been grateful that it wasn’t very deep. However, since she hadn’t wanted to interrupt Adi and Mauro’s glaring match, she had watched them in silence while feeling her skirt soak up more and more water by the second. Alas, Mary Albert simply couldn’t cut into such an atmosphere with her skirt drenched.

She truly resented that the two men had fought over her while she was in the fountain. But nothing infuriated her more than Mauro’s threat. While she angrily flapped her skirt to shake off the water, Adi let out a troubled sigh.

“I’m supposed to be in the middle of a succession war here, but Feydella’s

men keep flirting with me, and now someone's threatening me because of my past life memories! And to make matters worse, the goddess of beauty is drenched! I hate this!" she complained, wiping her hands on Adi's jacket (the end of his tailcoat was perfect for it). Once her hands were dry, her face hardened with renewed determination. "But very well. If flirting and threatening is how they do things here in Feydella, then from now on, I'll do things *my way*."

"Meaning?" Adi inquired.

"I've no interest in having to constantly brush off Feydellan men. Let's see if they're really a match for me, Mary Albert!" she exclaimed with a smirk.

Adi frowned upon seeing that. But no matter how bad of a premonition that look on her face gave him, he was in no position to refuse. The most he could do was ask, "What do you plan to do?"

In response, Mary laughed boldly and began gallantly walking away. Her skirt fluttered behind her... No, sadly, this wasn't the case. That would've been a great look, but unfortunately the wet skirt only clung to her legs.

"I shall summon my strongest shield. The Feydellans will face a clean sweep!" Mary declared, her resolute voice echoing in the night.

Chapter 3

The next morning, Mary and her brothers went out on an inspection of Feydella. Using the handbook as reference, they had breakfast at the café with seasonal tarts, then climbed up a large hill that overlooked the entire city. They made plenty of stops in other places too, peering into shops that drew their curiosities. The three siblings got along well, chatting often, jesting around, and having an all-around pleasant time.

“This is a harsh journey for the succession war, right?” Mary murmured with a frown while staring at the cover of the handbook. As usual, the heavy lettering on it read, *“Handbook for the Next Family Head’s International Tour.”* Anyone who glanced at it would’ve felt their chest tighten, inferring that the tome detailed a severe journey.

Mary looked over her shoulder, where her brothers were sitting on a bench. They were having a casual conversation, and when they noticed her looking, they waved. She was certain that if she approached them, they would give her a warm, doting welcome. Nobody would’ve thought this was a scene from the middle of a succession war. If anything, it was closer to a friendly family trip.

“I feel really uncomfortable right now, Adi...”

“R-Really? I feel not even an ounce of discomfort right now.”

“You’re feigning ignorance, aren’t you?” Mary glowered at him, and he openly avoided her gaze.

He ummed and aahed incomprehensibly for several seconds, then finally smiled serenely and rubbed her shoulder. His eyes were fixed on her. “You’re just a worrywart, Mary. Come on, let’s get back to your brothers.”

In response to his usual methods, Mary glared at him. “You’re not fooling me,” she told him. She wouldn’t let him deceive her just because he’d used her name. To make her point, she hardened her glare even more.

Adi moved his hand from her shoulder to her waist. She was about to ask

what he was doing, when he suddenly pulled her closer, and her body bumped into his. “Don’t be so cold. Come, Mary. Let’s go,” he encouraged, his voice slightly lower than usual. The sound of it tickled her ear, and then Adi began walking, still holding her close.

Mary couldn’t resist him easily like this, and so could only rush after him in an attempt to keep up with his large strides. “Ugh! Just so you know, I’m not going to fall in love with you all over again and let you deceive me when you’re being so pushy!” she complained while being completely coaxed and deceived.

Needless to say, Adi was inwardly striking a celebratory pose. And although he’d managed to gloss over his previous words by being coercive, his ears had gotten just as red as his hair.

Once Mary got back to her brothers, she had intended on chatting to them a bit longer. But instead, other people’s voices interrupted them.

A group of men approached, claiming that they happened to be passing by. A few of them held up their hands in a friendly gesture, while others only bowed from afar. Mauro was among the group, and the sight of him immediately made Mary put up her guard. However, he only smiled and bid the siblings a greeting. It was as if last night had never happened.

The men surrounded Mary and began extolling her, at which she could only let out a colossal sigh. It was painfully obvious how she felt by the way her shoulders sank. Not that anyone could blame her—starting from their first stop at the café, these men had constantly appeared and surrounded her like this. Technically they weren’t causing her any harm, but they were truly bothersome.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen you outdoors, Lady Mary! Ah, the way your silver hair shines in the sunlight is so beautiful...!”

“My, you don’t say...”

“There are two suns within Feydella right now: the one shining in the sky, and you, Lady Mary!”

“Woow...”

The more the men praised her, the more the emotion drained from Mary’s

voice. Her eyes grew cloudy, staring vacantly at the bottom of her teacup. She didn't even have the willpower to lift her head.

In the midst of all that, Adi cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but we're about to discuss the matter of House Albert's heirship. I'm sure we'll all have the opportunity to speak at a later date," he said, indirectly urging them to leave.

The men collectively nodded in understanding and apologized for the interruption. A few even shrewdly invited Mary for tea at some point. They were all nonchalant, and none seemed offended at the rejection. Indeed, Feydellan men were casual, so if someone brushed them off, they quickly moved on. They weren't angry to be shooed off, and after a while, they'd surely slink by again.

I can't decide if they're easy to deal with, or tenacious... Mary thought with a shrug.

"The heirship, is it?" Someone's voice cut in. Unlike the men who scattered away leisurely, this one sounded discontent. "You've come a long way to be able to discuss such topics, haven't you, Lord Adi?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Lord Mauro?" Adi asked.

"You managed to take Mary as your wife despite being a servant, and now you're monopolizing her. It's unthinkable here in Feydella. And now you're even going to join in the discussion about succession without any regard to your origins. Don't you think that's a little greedy?" Mauro questioned harshly.

Adi's breath hitched slightly, and he hesitated. Mary's eyes glinted. She was about to rise to her feet to retort, when...

"Members of House Albert get to discuss the succession. I think that much should be *extremely* obvious."

"The next head of the family will be one of us... So we get to decide who participates in the discussion."

...Lang and Lucian spoke up flatly, causing Mary to collapse back into her chair.

The twins' voices had been calm, and to any outsiders, they would've seemed

perfectly composed. The Feydellans hurriedly murmured things like, “Exactly, so excuse me...” and “Perhaps another time, then...” as they dispersed. By that sight alone, it was easy to believe the two were amiable brothers.

Despite their yin-and-yang personalities, Lang and Lucian looked like two peas in a pod. On top of that, their smiles right now were almost exactly the same as Mary’s; their faces were nearly identical to hers. It was like looking at a *trompe l’oeil*, and their beauty was enough to give anyone the shivers.

Yet only those who knew the twins well would pick up on the iciness around them. Though they were managing to keep up appearances with their smiles perfectly, it was obvious they weren’t in the mood to smile at all. Even those who didn’t notice would at least be impressed with how identical their expressions were.

This was especially the case for the Feydellan men. Without suspecting anything, they smiled back at the brothers and readily vacated the area. Mauro, too, surmising he was at a disadvantage, took the opportunity to retreat. Lang and Lucian watched everyone leave without ever breaking the beautiful smiles on their faces.

“They must be really angry,” Mary muttered under her breath. To her, their expressions were very shady.

The twins were usually boisterous, and wore their hearts on their sleeves, but when something nonnegotiable had been infringed upon, they would only smile silently. For individuals not in the know, these were smiles charming enough to be enchanting. Only during times such as the present did the contrasting twins make the exact same face. And once they had reached this level of anger, they wouldn’t be quelled easily. The only people who could suppress them now were their parents, their beloved sister, Mary, and...

“At least you two can be surprisingly reliable at a time like this. Well done, Lord Lang and Lord Lucian. Now, I wonder which is which?”

...Roberto, who leisurely praised the twins and sent them a round of applause.

Those dispassionate words broke the tension in the air, and everyone’s bodies relaxed at the same time. Roberto’s clapping managed to disperse all the anger

and malice.

Lang and Lucian exchanged a glance. “What a nasty man.”

“Yeah, he was detestable...”

The twins grumbled to each other, but that was it. Their expressions were back to normal too. At this point, surely anyone would’ve been able to tell them apart.

Inwardly, Mary also sent Roberto a round of applause for a job well done. Had he not stepped in, the twins would’ve likely made an enemy of Mauro or perhaps his entire family, waging open war against House Noze. No, they might’ve even used the entirety of House Albert’s might to crush the other family completely. Their beautiful smiles were a testament to how angry they’d been.

However, Roberto had managed to clear the atmosphere. Lang and Lucian’s fury had dissipated, and now they were happily browsing the handbook and suggesting a place to go eat some gelato. (*Their handbook seems different from mine...* Mary thought, narrowing her eyes as she stared at it. But for now, she decided not to mention it.)

“I’m glad he managed to settle them down. As expected of Roberto,” she told Adi.

“My brother’s an animal tamer... Oops, excuse me. I meant to say, he handled that magnificently.”

“High society should respect House Albert, but they also ought to pay respect to your family, Adi.”

“Mine?” he inquired, tilting his head.

Now that Mary and Adi were married, she had become relatives with his family, who’d served House Albert for generations. Although they were outstanding among their peers, they still held a position of servitude within high society. No matter how magnificently Roberto had handled (or tamed) the situation, at the end of the day, he was only a servant. Saying that high society should respect him or Adi was nonsensical.

In response to Adi's question, Mary shrugged as she watched the scene before her. The twins were browsing the handbook while Roberto watched over them. As usual, Lang was gleeful and Lucian gloomy, and they were smiling in their typical ways, as opposed to their beautifully icy smiles from before.

"Why do you think they should pay respect to my family?" Adi asked her.

"If you two didn't settle things down, more than half of the noble houses in high society would be gone by now, don't you think?" Mary prompted.

Adi considered this for a while, and finally smiled wryly. Mary's words must've rung true for him. After all, he'd quelled her anger many times before too. For example, it was thanks to him that back in high school, the student council narrowly avoided death when they'd confronted Mary. His carefree words, which hadn't suited the tense atmosphere, had managed to calm Mary down, and though the council had made false accusations against her, she'd decided to forgive them. It was just like the scene that had played out minutes ago.

"Still, even if high society dwindled by half, and something happened to House Noze after they earned my brothers' wrath, it'd be no skin off our nose," Mary remarked. "Actually, things might feel like they've been refreshed when there's fewer people around."

"You just casually said a very frightening thing..."

"I'm angry to have seen you treated unfairly too, you know. But my brothers outpaced me, so now my anger has nowhere to go and is looking for a way out."

Adi's smile grew at her words. "Do you think some delicious gelato would bring an end to said anger?"

"It's hard to say. The anger of Mary Albert might not be quelled with a tasty snack alone."

"What if I were to get some as well, and give you half?"

"If you also feed me while calling me by my name, I'm sure my anger will dissipate."

"I will...take the appropriate measures," Adi replied, on the verge of saying

Mary was making unreasonable demands.

Mary smirked and punched his arm. "I have high expectations!"

And so the touring—or rather, inspection of Feydella came to an end, and everyone returned to the mansion. As a side note, when they were having gelato, Adi underwent strenuous efforts while attempting to say Mary's name, but had ended up blurting out, "M-Ma... Lady Keryl's milady." It was so far from the goal that he had ended up all the way in her parents' generation.

On top of that, when her brothers had seen Adi give her his gelato, they'd offered theirs to her as well. With three people offering her ice cream, each time she took a bite from one, someone else encouraged her to go for theirs next. In the end, the flavors had mixed together so much she couldn't even tell them apart.

However, the inspection itself had been tremendously useful. Feydella didn't usually engage in diplomacy, but they had lots of beautiful scenery and local specialties, so if they managed to build a good relationship, there was no doubt it would be mutually beneficial. As long as visitors could handle the whole "many loves" custom, that is.

"Everywhere we went today, the goddess of beauty was name-dropped. And when it got cloudy halfway through the day, they made it out to be my fault," Mary reminisced.

"Right, because the sun was hiding out of jealousy for your beauty. Last night, the moon was hiding out of envy too. Someone even said, 'The sun must be sad to part with you, Lady Mary, for I feel it's setting slower than usual.'"

"I was impressed that they managed to come up with that. If Feydella really begins participating in diplomacy, we should make a glossary of their flowery language! I'm sure it'll sell!" Mary said, her eyes glittering.

The Feydellan men had kept appearing out of nowhere, surrounding Mary and singing her praises. She'd been dubbed the goddess of beauty last night, compared to the sun during the day, and likened to the moon and stars by the evening. If the wind blew, the men praised Mary, and if the birds chirped, they

praised her too. While she was eating gelato, they'd even said things like, *"Her lips are so lovely when she tastes the ice cream!"*

Mary had gone beyond feeling fed up. Her eyes had clouded over, and she'd let their words go in one ear and out the other.

However, the variety in their compliments was impressive. If Mary were to make a glossary of them, she was sure it would be popular among shy gentlemen who didn't know how to approach their person of interest, and the awkward ones who struggled with their word choices.

"If I included compliments to say to a tearful, trembling girl, I'm sure Gainas would buy it as well," Mary said with a mischievous smirk. She'd been feeling exhausted after getting so thoroughly praised, but now that she'd thought of a way to put the experience to use, her exhaustion changed to motivation. She had no interest in becoming the goddess of beauty, but she'd happily be the savior of shy and awkward men.

The migratory bird restaurant was enjoying stable sales, so when she'd found a manager to succeed her, she would make a glossary of compliments to use during diplomatic talks with Feydella.

Once it was published, Mary was certain that Alicia would praise her for it and rush over to the nearest bookstore while completely forgetting her status as the princess. In contrast, Patrick would probably sigh in exasperation upon witnessing another one of Mary's antics. Parfette would definitely quiver as usual, and Gainas would comfort her while sneakily expressing his gratitude for the glossary. Mary could easily picture her friends' faces.

But then she sighed deeply, collapsing onto the bed. She grabbed one of the cushions and tugged it closer to her. "It's possible that the only reason I'm able to relax like this, and have been able to enter House Albert's heirship candidacy, is because I have past life memories..."

"Your Ladyship, what's wrong?"

"Maybe I'm dishonest..." Mary whispered weakly, hugging the cushion tightly to her chest. She recalled what Mauro had said last night: how she'd only been able to get to where she was by using her past life memories, and that she was a coward.

Of course, her present situation had nothing to do with her memories. It was the result of the fact that she was alive. Even this trip for the succession war hadn't ever appeared in the otome game. However, the foundation for her current rank and the reason she'd been able to go down the best possible path in store for her was, indeed, thanks to her knowledge of the game. It had been the basis of her friendship with Alicia, had helped her in overcoming the strife in college, and had led her to a resolution with Veltina.

Not *everything* was the result of relying on her memories, as Mary had still acted out of her own volition. But...

"It *is* true that I had the knowledge and used it to my advantage. Is that unfair...?" Mary murmured, burying her face in the pillow.

It was too late to start caring about it now, and though she did have past life memories, she had never once changed her way of thinking based on them. She'd only ever seen them as something useful. Yet just having such memories in the first place amounted to heresy. If the people around her were to find out, they might think it peculiar and question the basis of her friendship with them.

Mary's trust in her friends mixed with an inevitable feeling of unease. She didn't doubt their friendship, but the idea of her having past life memories was simply too far-fetched a story for her to mention.

Unable to settle her thoughts, she let out another quiet groan, when something gently touched her head. It patted her lightly a few times, then combed through her hair. It was Adi's hand.

"You have nothing to worry about," he said.

"Adi..."

"I can affirm that, as the one who has been watching you more closely than anyone since the moment you were born. Whether you have past life memories or not, it doesn't change anything about who you are. Even if everyone found out about your memories, they would stay by your side the same as always."

"Really...?"

"Yes. After all, I'd fallen in love with you before you had those memories, and I married you after they returned to you. At the very least, I won't be going

anywhere,” Adi reassured her softly.

Mary glanced up at him, her cheeks flushing slightly. Indeed, the way he treated her was completely unrelated to her past life memories. When she first brought them up, he’d said, “*That’s impossible!*” Yet he believed her despite that, went along with her plans, and had become her husband. Even if Mary hadn’t recalled her past life, Adi would’ve surely loved her all the same and remained by her side.

Her feelings cleared at the thought, and she suddenly sat up with great force. “That’s right! I’m me, and nothing will change that! Whether I have those memories or not, I’m still Mary Albert!”

“Exactly,” Adi said with a smile, glad to see her back to her usual self. And with that same calm smile, he slowly pushed her back down on the bed.

Mary, who’d only just sat up, found herself falling back onto the covers. “Oh my,” she said in a foolish tone of voice. Before she knew it, Adi had climbed on top of her. His face drew closer to hers, his eyes narrowed seductively. Realizing what he was doing, Mary prepared to deliver a blow to his flank and demand he restrain himself, but...

“I know you better than anyone... So don’t worry, and sleep easy, Mary,” Adi said, placing a kiss on her forehead.

Mary’s eyes widened. Even though they were married, Adi had kissed her like a parent putting their child to sleep. This wasn’t what she’d been expecting, and she was completely dumbstruck.

Meanwhile, Adi drew away and quickly pulled the covers over her. His cheeks were a little red, likely because he was embarrassed about the kiss. Once he swiftly finished the preparations, he walked over to the door and gave her a bow. “W-Well then, good night,” he said, which didn’t sound like a husband talking to his wife. Although he’d called her by her name earlier, now he was suddenly back to acting like her servant.

Mary’s expression softened. “Good night, Adi. I love you,” she said purposefully, watching as he walked out of the room.



The next day, Mary decided she and Adi would separate from the rest of the group and go around Feydella by themselves. (The twins' disappointment when she mentioned this had been immeasurable. However, Mary was tired of being with them all the time. She needed a bit of distance for a while.)

Unfortunately, although she was with Adi, the Feydellan men continued shadowing them. Whenever they changed locations, the men appeared out of nowhere. Mary was starting to think all the men in the country were amassing in her location. Mauro was among them too, and his attempts at feigning ignorance and talking to her casually were shady at best.

As one might expect, however, three days was enough for Mary to get used to all this, and she was able to calmly respond whenever someone dubbed her the goddess of beauty. So she continued her inspection of Feydella while the men surrounded her at times and scattered at others, until she eventually arrived at a particular café in the city center.

The staff took her and Adi to the terrace seats, where the wind blew pleasantly and they could watch the bustling streets. Though, the terrace seating enabled the men to continue surrounding Mary. While browsing the handbook and reading about the special limited strawberry tart, of which only ten were sold per day, Mary inwardly murmured, *I've got a big haul this time.*

Usually, being surrounded by the men irritated her, but this time was different. The more of them that came, the better.

"I knew visiting this café was the right choice. It's popular due to its limited menu, and its location in the city center makes it easy for people to come here. The Feydellan men are practically swarming this place!" she exclaimed.

Adi paused. "Well, as long as you're happy."

"You sound frustrated. Don't worry: we only have to endure this for a little bit longer," she said. While the Feydellans continued praising her from every direction, she cut a piece of the tart and presented it to Adi. Despite his dejected expression, he still ate it, which meant at least he wasn't completely at his wit's end.

Witnessing this, the men extolled Mary's kindness, expressed jealousy towards the tart, praised her selection of the snack, and even said things like,

“Just one bite isn’t enough. Let me at least have half of that love...” The way they adjusted their compliments into pickup lines depending on the moment would be very useful for the glossary.

This continued for a while, until a new arrival’s voice interjected. “Sorry I’m late.”

The Feydellans glanced to the side at the other man who had appeared, and instantly their eyes widened. Although they’d been surrounding Mary, now they parted to make way for him. Not that this was a surprise, as the one who had appeared was on an entirely different level compared to these men, which made them grow timid.

“Sorry I asked you to come so suddenly, Patrick,” Mary said, happily welcoming him. A stir surged through the crowd of men, since Patrick was also someone well-known abroad, just like Mary herself.

Patrick was aware of this too, and precisely because he knew the reason Mary had summoned him, he smiled calmly and approached her. His indigo hair fluttered in the breeze, shimmering under the sunlight. The goddess of beauty’s pupils would’ve surely changed into hearts at the sight.

The Feydellans shrunk back from him, exchanging awkward glances with each other. Mary watched them with a grin. *He’s going to do a clean sweep!* she thought enthusiastically, as this was all a part of her plan. “I know my request for your presence came out of nowhere. I hope I didn’t cause you too much trouble?” she asked him.

“No matter how busy I might be, if you call for me, I’ll drop everything and do whatever I can to meet you.”

“My, I’m so glad!”

“I’m your friend, so that much is obvious.”

“Right, I should introduce you to everyone!” Mary rubbed Patrick’s arm to show off their closeness as she turned to face the Feydellans.

At a glance, this would’ve looked like her introducing her friend to them. However, the men’s faces were visibly stiff, whereas Patrick appeared as relaxed as ever. He was so beautiful that even a first-class painter wouldn’t

have been able to capture it on canvas, and their brush would've snapped if they tried.

"I'm sure you all know by now, but this is my friend Patrick," Mary announced.

"This is my first time visiting Feydella. I hope this will be a good opportunity to create some new friendships," Patrick said, introducing himself with a pleasant smile. It was gorgeous enough to cause any woman to faint; all of the women who happened to be passing by stopped to stare at him enchantedly, letting out dreamy sighs.

Directly confronted with Patrick's visage, the Feydellan men's faces stiffened. If this had been a casual chat, they would've likely offered Patrick a warm welcome, but right now, they were competing over Mary. This was more than just a powerful new enemy appearing: there was no chance they'd be able to seduce a woman right in front of Patrick. All of the ladies' gazes were fixated on him, and even if a girl were to look at one of the Feydellans, there was no comparison between them and Patrick. They had zero hope of success.



After all, their opponent was Patrick. He was handsome, accomplished in both academics and sports, and possessed of irreproachable conduct. Though he was the first son of the distinguished House Dyce, he'd chosen his love for Alicia over his rank before her true identity was uncovered, and once she was established as the princess, he had entered the royal family as her husband.

Everything about him was perfect. Moreover, he sparkled even more than usual today, having guessed the present situation. He was downright dazzling. No man could win against him. Or rather, no man would've taken up the challenge in the first place. Even if they did, being compared to someone like Patrick would only decrease their odds of winning tremendously.

"A-As expected, with Lord Patrick standing next to Lady Mary, it truly looks like a painting..."

"Goodness, to think Lord Patrick is actually here... I-It's an honor to meet you. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"I see that Lady Mary wants to spend some time with her friend, so I shouldn't interrupt. Until we meet again."

Having grown hesitant in the face of Patrick's presence, the Feydellan men bid inoffensive words of farewell and made their escape. They didn't try to specify a date for their next meeting, nor did they waste time on delivering excessive goodbyes. Patrick being here was truly effective.

Seemingly aware of everything, Patrick kept that dazzling smile on his face as he watched the men scurry off. His hair continued fluttering in the wind, and his eyes creased softly. He really was a good-looking man, and his charming smile caused all the other men to vanish from sight.

Once they were gone, Patrick turned to Mary. His perfect features were tinted with dismay, and all the sparkles from before were nowhere to be seen. "Good grief. You sent an urgent message for me, so I was worried at first. But to think you summoned me to Feydella just to have me chase away some men..." he said flatly.

"Oh? I thought you'd drop everything just to answer my call, yes?" Mary countered, shrugging her shoulders.

“Yeah, I would. That’s why I’m here right now. But I *will* complain about it.”

Just where had that charming, pleasant, sparkling young man from before gone off to? In front of Mary was an exasperated man, who ordered tea and tarts at House Albert’s expense as payment. Of course his appearance and conduct were good, but he wasn’t glimmering.

“Well, complain if you like. I’m just glad you came. Become my shield and drive away the men of Feydella for me, will you?”

“Shield?” Patrick echoed sourly, looking discontented. Yet when he sensed another man approaching them, his glittering smile from before returned in a flash. His radiance and beauty made the man who’d been about to flirt with Mary hesitate.

If one couldn’t say that Patrick was serving as Mary’s shield right now, then what other phrase would have possibly described the situation better? Everything was going as planned, and Mary smirked to herself.

Once the other man left, Patrick went back to his usual (though perhaps slightly more exasperated) countenance. Any time a Feydellan was about to approach, his smile came back; this kept happening over and over.

Mary found his switchovers magnificent, and she sent him a round of applause. But no matter how much Mary praised him, his sparkles always disappeared whenever he turned back to face her.

This cycle continued for a while, so Mary let out a relieved breath at how well Patrick was driving the men away. “Your effectiveness is immense, Patrick. Just as I thought.”

“Why, I’m so glad to hear that. I’m just happy to help... But leaving sarcasm aside, I see Feydella is exactly as the rumors say,” he replied, sounding beyond exasperated.

Apparently, Patrick had heard about Feydella being the country of many loves, but he hadn’t guessed it would be this bad. He’d thought it would be more the case that Feydella held romantic love in high esteem, so men and women were at less of a distance compared to other nations. He never

would've imagined that the men here would unabashedly try to seduce Mary in broad daylight, let alone in front of her husband, Adi. He couldn't believe his eyes.

"I know it's hard to believe, but this is the norm here," Mary told him. "They even called me the goddess of beauty."

"G-Goddess of beauty?!"

"Yes. I came here for the sake of the harsh succession war, but I just feel fed up."

"So that's why you asked me to—" Patrick cut himself off, glancing to the side. Another man was heading their way. Patrick sighed, and before the other man could say a word, he turned around, smiling his brilliant, dazzling smile.

The man left, and so did Patrick's sparkles. Mary was honestly impressed. Patrick wasn't just feigning friendliness—even his acting glittered.

"Incredible. I see I still have a long way to go in feigning friendliness!" Mary remarked.

"Rude in the extreme of you to say that."

"I meant that this makes you reliable, Patrick. Anyway, you didn't bring *that* girl along, just like I asked in the letter, right?"

Patrick glanced away at her question.

Mary had sent him a letter when she'd first decided to summon her shield. She wrote about Feydella being a country of many loves, how the men kept surrounding and wooing her, and how she wanted Patrick's help. After Mary had explained everything to Karen, the other woman had one of her messengers deliver the letter urgently.

The very end of the missive also mentioned in large letters, "*I can't be bothered to deal with her while abroad, so vow to me that under no circumstances will you bring Alicia along.*" Mary had expressed herself very clearly, and even underlined the text in red. If Patrick was in Feydella, it meant he must've read the letter, so there was no doubt that he hadn't brought Alicia.

Or at least, that was what Mary wanted to believe.

“Patrick, look me in the eyes and answer me. The boisterous princess is house-sitting as we speak, right?”

“Such nice weather we’re having today.”

“I’ll make the sun hide behind clouds out of jealousy. Anyway, could you tell me why you ordered two servings of tea and tarts? Your smile and sparkles won’t fool me,” Mary said, pressing Patrick for answers while glaring at him.

As for Adi, he must’ve surmised something from Patrick’s smile, for he ordered one more tea. It was almost as if another person was about to arrive.

“You’ve betrayed me, haven’t you, Patrick?” Mary asked, sounding heartbroken.

However, her voice was drowned out by another, cheerfully shouting, “Lady Mary!” Someone then hugged Mary from behind, though their identity was beyond obvious by now.

“I didn’t ask you to come!” Mary despaired, pushing Alicia off. “Why are you here? I only requested Patrick!”

Alicia exhaled deeply, and quietly sat down in one of the chairs. In an elegant movement, she picked up the teacup and took a sip. She was behaving so calmly that it was as if she hadn’t just vigorously embraced Mary. If anything, she had the dignity of a true princess. As her golden locks fluttered in the breeze, Alicia slowly turned to look at Mary.

Those purple eyes bored right into her. They carried a note of majesty and earnestness, causing Mary to shiver slightly as she waited for the other girl to speak.

While retaining that solemn conduct of a princess, Alicia calmly said, “Lady Mary...” as if admonishing her. “Actually, *I’m* wondering why you only invited Patrick, and why you thought I wouldn’t come,” she said inquiringly, with a serious expression.

“Oh no! This girl’s finally fighting back and asking *me* for an explanation!” Mary cried, flicking Alicia’s forehead as she called her frightening.

Alicia giggled in response. Her dignity vanished without a trace, leaving

behind her usual boisterous peasant self.

Mary could only shrug helplessly. Honestly, she'd been preparing for something like this ever since she wrote that letter to Patrick. Still, as revenge, she stole the strawberry from Alicia's tart, which was the dessert's main highlight. As Mary popped it into her mouth, Alicia let out a pitiful shriek.

With that, they were even. Although Mary still felt like things wouldn't improve at this rate, she decided to leave that problem for later.



By the time Mary brought Patrick and Alicia back to the estate, her brothers had finished their inspection. The twins didn't seem surprised by the two new arrivals. If anything, they acted as though Patrick had been in Feydella all along, and glared at him because of his tall stature.

After Patrick and Alicia met Mary's aunt and uncle, everyone had dinner together. Now that Mary was surrounded by familiar faces, she'd almost forgotten that she was still in a foreign nation. She stole a sideways glance at Alicia.

The other girl elegantly sipped her soup. "It's delicious!" she said with a smile.

"Lang, Lucian, as members of your country's most distinguished family, you ought to scold this girl's conduct. It's unheard-of for a princess to just wander off to another country on a whim," Mary appealed with disgruntlement, glaring at Alicia. But then she noticed the waiter had brought over croquettes, and she exclaimed, "Oh my!"

They looked divine. Surely just one bite would be enough to cleanse away all of Mary's exhaustion in an instant. She was well acquainted with their delicious taste.

Seeing the way Mary's expression had relaxed, Alicia happily explained. "We stopped at the usual delicatessen on the way here and bought these for you, Lady Mary. I also wanted to invite Lady Karen and Lord Dan to try them."

"Ah, so it's a gift. That's surprisingly tactful of you. I accept," Mary replied, touched by the croquettes' deliciousness. Everyone else smiled wryly.

This was the effectiveness of a good gift. It was the very same idea Mary had

discussed prior to the trip, and now she was demonstrating its efficacy herself.

Once dinner was over, Mary had intended to rest. However, Lang and Lucian had something they wanted to talk to everyone about. They all went into a room, and Mary cast her brothers an inquisitive look.

“When you and Adi were on a date—I mean, out on inspection, we were sightseeing—I mean, were on our own inspection as well,” Lang began. “Obviously, we weren’t surrounded by men. Right, Lucian?”

“They’d bid us greetings, but we wouldn’t exchange more than two or three words before it was over. They’re not interested in us at all...” Lucian affirmed. “Not that I’d *want* to be surrounded by men singing my praises...”

“I know this is the country of many loves, but I think they’re being a bit excessive,” Lang remarked.

The difference in the way that the Feydellan men treated the siblings was blatant. Patrick nodded along as he listened. He also felt that the difference was odd, based on what he’d heard about Feydella. As this was a country that didn’t participate in foreign diplomacy much, it wasn’t too out of the question for there to be some discrepancies, but the men here flocked to Mary excessively. It was as if they were desperate.

If this country of many loves was indeed so uninhibited, then it would’ve made sense for Lang and Lucian to be surrounded by women who complimented and flirted with them. They were the eldest sons of House Albert. Becoming one of their lovers would not only guarantee one a lifetime of peace and security, but could even offer a chance of becoming their legal wife, as they were both bachelors.

But apparently, while women did flock to the twins, they didn’t push themselves onto the pair. Initially they might make light passes at or praise the twins, but when they realized the brothers weren’t interested, they immediately changed the topic of discussion to something unrelated to love. Some even began diplomacy talks.

“From our perspective, we might think, ‘Feydellan women are certainly bold,’

but that's about it," Lang explained. "They're not forceful or tenacious. If anything, the way they discuss diplomacy and their lineages is eloquent and impressive."

"We thought it was strange, so we ended our sightseeing—I mean, our inspection early and investigated..." Lucian followed up.

According to their research, Feydella's male-to-female ratio had started falling out of balance a few decades ago, and nowadays, the country had an overwhelming number of men. This was reflected in high society too, which contained many young, unmarried noblemen. Claiming that there were too many men might've seemed in poor taste, but that was the actual situation at hand.

On top of that, Feydella's national characteristics dictated that marriage was monogamous, but lovers were a different matter. A lot of love led to a lot of children, and there were many families with more than ten offspring. As a result, fights for succession were even more severe, and the losers still had to compete with each other over the distribution of dowries and land. The more often one lost, the less they got, and the worse their standing and marriage possibilities became.

"They call it the country of many loves, but in reality, only a few people can do as they please: those who win succession wars, or those who have a good dowry and marry into a reputable family," Lang said.

"So the people who fail to do that become the lovers of the married ones?" Mary asked.

"Yeah, that seems to be how the Feydellan men see it. Instead of marrying into the family of some far-off bride with a poor dowry, they'd much rather be the lover of a noblewoman from a good family."

Mary nodded in understanding. She had thought Feydella was a burdensome country, but their situation was more dire than she'd imagined.

Patrick exhaled deeply. His countenance was grave, carrying a hint of sourness, but even so, he nodded as well. "I suppose it makes sense," he assented.

Mary gave him a surprised look. “Patrick, don’t tell me you plan on taking a lover?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m just saying I understand the situation,” he responded with exasperation. He squeezed Alicia’s hand, as if in reassurance. “You’re the only one for me,” he told her, which was so very sweet. Alicia smiled and cuddled up to him.

They’d been in the middle of a discussion, yet here those two were, getting all lovey-dovey right in front of Mary’s eyes. Unwilling to see any more, she pulled them apart sternly, then directed her gaze at Patrick to continue the conversation.

“Mary, high society is more unsparing than you think,” he told her. “Heirships are hardly ever decided peacefully. You and your brothers getting along, or my younger brothers agreeing to support me—those are very unusual circumstances.”

“Oh, but House Albert’s in the middle of a harsh and greatly acclaimed succession war. We’re all awash with blood. Right, my brothers?” Mary prompted, seeking agreement.

“Of course,” the twins respond in unison. Their grins didn’t imply that they were in the midst of any such war. Who would’ve been convinced by their reactions? Only Roberto’s irritated sigh echoed in the room. The temperature seemed to have decreased threefold in the span of seconds.

Patrick was apparently in no mood to comment on any of this, and cleared his throat to get the topic back on track. “Yes, succession wars are harsh. But there are also cases of sons who cannot even become candidates because they’re too young compared to their brothers. If the heirship is decided before they’ve come of age, they’ll have no chance of ever competing.”

“You have a point. It wouldn’t have been surprising if House Albert’s heir had been decided before I entered the candidacy,” Mary agreed.

Battles for succession were often relentless, with brothers dragging each other down in the race to the singular seat. However, only those who were of similar age could compete against each other. If one was a decade younger than his siblings, the family heir could be officially named before he was even old

enough to enter the candidacy.

The same was true for House Albert. Mary's brothers were seven years older than her, and both were equally fit to inherit the family. Taking high society's accepted customs into consideration, she understood that the succession could've been decided way before she ever stepped into the competition.

Yet her father and brothers hadn't ever expressed interest in deciding the heir, nor did the twins seem to be fighting each other. This unpredictability had thrown high society into a frenzy. As a result, Mary had entered the candidacy, and the succession war had begun at last.

Her brothers had waited for her. The thought filled her with gratitude, and she cast her gaze towards them...but then she noticed the handbooks they were holding. She frowned and squinted at them. The covers looked bright and showy...

Right as she was about to comment on that, Adi realized what was happening with a gasp. Before Mary could say anything, he quickly raised his voice and addressed Patrick. "So! All that's left for the sons who cannot enter the candidacy is marrying into some distant bride's family, right? Who would've thought Feydella's in such a state! It's shocking, don't you think, milady?!"

"I suppose so, but I'm more interested in the covers of those handbooks..."

"Surely your surprise is so overwhelming that you no longer care about that! Right?!"

"R-Right... Feydella's situation is astounding..." Mary said with a nod, giving in to the pressure Adi was putting on her. "This is more important than the handbooks," she murmured under her breath, causing Adi to let out a sigh of relief.

Lang and Lucian hurriedly put their guides away into their bags. What was that all about? And Roberto gave Adi a thumbs-up. What was he praising him for? The mystery only grew deeper. But for now, Mary decided the topic of Feydella took priority.

Patrick, who'd been watching this scene with exhaustion, spoke up again once Mary looked at him. "This is why Feydellan men are running to and fro. It's

nothing worthy of admiration, but I do understand where they're coming from." He sighed deeply again. He must've wanted to end the topic there.

Lang and Lucian exchanged a glance with each other, then explained that their findings were the same. Mary frowned as she listened to them. Up until this moment, she'd been displeased with the men of Feydella, but now her feelings extended to the entirety of the nation. How was this the country of many loves? Their supposed "love" hid nothing but self-interest behind it. However...

"I can respect their mettle," she asserted with a smirk.

Instead of being forced to join some unknown bride's family, the men flirted their way into becoming the lovers of high-ranking noblewomen. Indeed, perhaps such behavior wasn't exactly commendable, but at least they had the backbone to carve out their own paths. And yes, they did flock from one person to another and sing each woman's praises, but it wasn't as if that caused any real harm. If this was their way of doing things, then so be it.

Of course, Mary had no intention of taking a lover. She snuggled up closer to Adi to let him know as much. Sensing what she was trying to say, he smiled at her.

("But when I did it, you pulled Lord Patrick and me apart!" Alicia complained resentfully. Needless to say, Mary ignored her.)

"I wonder if that means Mauro's in a similar situation?" Mary mused. "Does anyone know anything about House Noze?"

"I do!" Alicia shouted, energetically raising her hand. "I heard about them when I was studying diplomacy."

"Oh really? You do have your uses, on occasion," Mary replied. "So what can you tell me about Mauro Noze?"

"He's the sixth son!" Alicia exclaimed ecstatically, perhaps because she was simply so glad to be of use to Mary.

Meanwhile, the shocked Mary echoed, "*Sixth* son?!"

As was the custom in their country, House Noze's husband and wife each had

a few lovers of their own. They'd also had children with said lovers, and as a result, House Noze boasted six sons and six daughters. Mauro was the legitimate son of the husband and wife, but he was the youngest, and by the time he'd been born, one of his older brothers had already been named heir. It wasn't even that he'd had a late start—he'd never had the chance to fight for the seat in the first place.

As such, the plan was for him to marry into some woman's family, but since he was the youngest of twelve children, he wasn't likely to have a good dowry, nor find a favorable marriage. So, like the other noblemen in his position, he'd decided that rather than being unwillingly married off, he'd try to find himself a high-ranked noblewoman and become her lover.

Mary nodded upon hearing Alicia's explanation. She didn't know what kind of details Mauro had remembered about the otome game, but it was very unlikely that those memories could've benefited him in any way. He possessed memories of a game in which he might not even have existed. Add in the fact that he found himself in a distant country the actual cast had never interacted with, and the possibility of him using those memories was nigh nonexistent.

Yet even if he tried to live as Mauro Noze, being the youngest of twelve children meant that he had no future. That was why he'd sought to use his past life memories and had threatened Mary.

Mary now understood the state Feydella was in, and why the men here were so frantic. She also understood Mauro's situation, and his desperation to intimidate her. Indeed, she *understood* it...but no more than that. It didn't stir her emotions, nor did she feel any sympathy for him. Obviously, she had no plans of taking him as her lover either.

"I understand Feydella's situation now. But it's none of my concern, and I'm sick of being surrounded by these men," she said, turning away with a huff. She'd made her opinion clear: just because she understood it didn't mean she would take it into consideration.

Everyone else shrugged at her being her usual self. Patrick and Alicia exchanged a glance with each other as if to say, "*And that's Mary for you.*"

"I owe you a debt, so I can at least drive away those men for you," Patrick

said.

“I’ll help too! Only Adi’s allowed to flirt with you, Lady Mary!” Alicia added.

Mary was about to smile at their enthusiasm, but when she suddenly remembered Mauro’s words, her expression fell. “*Coward.*” She recalled it so vividly that it was almost as if he was whispering it to her right at this moment.

Before Mary were Patrick and Alicia—two of her precious friends, who were taking action for her sake. Lang and Lucian were determined to keep the unsavory people away from her too. But none of them knew that she possessed past life memories. She’d used those memories, made friendships based on them, and even entered the candidacy for House Albert’s heirship.

“Am I dishonest...?”

“What’s wrong, milady?” Adi asked.

Mary snapped back to her senses. “N-Nothing... I was just lost in thought,” she replied, smiling to smooth over her behavior. Then, she stood up from her seat and called it a day.

After Mary went back to her room, she intended to get some shut-eye. But she kept mulling things over and over in her mind and just couldn’t fall asleep. She tried to settle her thoughts, but nothing was working, and she couldn’t even put them in order.

She recalled Patrick’s explanation as to why the men of Feydella were so desperate. At the time, she’d mentioned she was fed up with it, but on the inside, she couldn’t just brush it off as someone else’s problem. After all, once upon a time, she’d been engaged to Patrick herself. There was no love between them, but they had a bond of friendship. This technically made their situation different from Feydella’s political marriages...but it had certainly been proposed on the basis of self-interest.

And even after she’d canceled her engagement with Patrick, it wouldn’t have been unexpected for her to be married off to some other noble house. Fortunately, her parents and brothers respected Mary’s volition and accepted her marriage with Adi, but the same couldn’t be said for other aristocratic

families.

When she and Adi had first gotten married, the people around them murmured about how it was a waste, and how every family had wanted to take Mary in as their bride. Before that, she'd received countless marriage proposals, and over half of them had been from men she'd never even seen before. One of the biggest reasons she had been able to overcome this situation was because her parents respected her choices—that, and the fact that she'd accomplished her own great deed in supporting Alicia.

Without knowing about Alicia's true identity, Mary had supported the girl's love for Patrick and stepped aside so the two of them could be together (regardless of the truth, that was the version of events believed by the public). As a result, House Albert went from being the second-most powerful house in the country to standing equal with royalty, and a strong sense of solidarity flourished between them.

From her parents' point of view, Mary's great deed brought more merit than a political marriage would have. "But...all of that was due to my past life memories," she muttered under her breath, lightly punching the pillow.

The faces of the Feydellan men flashed through her mind and disappeared again. They were desperate too, because they wanted to avoid being married off to someone they barely knew. The solution they'd arrived at was complimenting and flirting with women in hopes of becoming their lovers. Compared to their circumstances, Mary was unbelievably blessed.

"Maybe I *am* playing unfair... Can a dishonest person like me really become the heir?"

Should that truly be allowed? Mary's chest hurt at the thought of how her brothers would feel if that were to happen. Actually, what *would* her brothers do if she were to become heir?

No matter how much she ruminated on everything, she still couldn't put her thoughts in order. And this time, Adi wasn't there to hear her out. Mary wasn't even feeling sleepy anymore. Deciding there was no point in lying around, she grabbed her jacket from the nearby chair and walked out of the room.

Mary headed towards Lang's room. It was adjacent to Lucian's room, and its door was slightly ajar. She could see light pouring out through the little gap, and a few voices resounded from within. Mary knocked on the door lightly and pushed it open.

Lang was inside the room together with Lucian. Roberto and Adi were present too. A bottle of alcohol was on the table, along with a few glasses. Apparently, the four of them were drinking and chatting before retiring for the night. All of them looked startled when Mary appeared...and quickly hid away the handbooks that were on the table.

It was utterly suspicious. Mary couldn't hold back her scowl, and she glared at their hands as they moved to put the guides away. But once Adi called out to her, she decided to postpone the matter and went over to sit down next to him. She didn't feel like discussing the handbooks right now, anyway.

"What's wrong, milady?"

"I couldn't sleep... And what about you guys? What are you talking about at such a late hour?" Mary inquired. She was hesitant to discuss how lost she felt, so instead she changed the topic.

Her question caused everyone else in the room to grow nervous. Lang smiled dryly and glanced away, while Lucian directed his gaze down to the book in his hands. Roberto stared out the window, and Adi declared that he'd make her some tea and escaped to the corner of the room.

Their reactions were beyond suspicious. "Tell me!" Mary groaned, delivering a follow-up attack. But nobody replied. Quite the opposite: everyone blatantly turned away from her. "Lucian, just what were you discussing?"

"Well... A very serious and grave matter... *That* very matter, indeed..."

"That' matter? I don't understand," Mary complained. "Lang, why don't you tell me?"

"All right, Mary! Since you asked, I shall tell you. We were having a meeting about shrinking Adi."

"What?!" Mary exclaimed upon hearing Lang's outrageous claim. She turned to look at Adi. He was preparing tea, but even at this distance, she could see

that his face had stiffened. “Adi, you attended a meeting about decreasing your own height?!”

“Why must we always go back to this topic...? Y-Yes, I did!” Adi affirmed in an anguished voice. (Behind Mary, Lang was silently directing a tremendous amount of pressure towards Adi, but of course she couldn’t see that.)

“So you authorized it...” Mary murmured.

The idea of holding a meeting to shrink someone was preposterous, yet Adi was in attendance. To top it off, Roberto even followed up with, “It was a very heated debate.”

“I see...” Mary said. “Well, if Adi authorized it, then it’s fine. It’s not something I should meddle with...right?”

“So there you have it; that’s what we’ve been up to. But what about you, Mary? You said you can’t sleep?” Lang asked her with concern evident in his voice.

Mary fell silent. Lucian gazed at her too. Despite their contrasting countenances, the twins were both worried for her. “I was just thinking about some things...” she said at last. The frail sound of her words surprised even her. “If I become the heir... No, it’s not an if. I *will* become the heir. But once I do, what will happen to you two...?”

“To us?”

“Well, if I’m the heir, then that means neither of you will inherit House Albert. I already knew that from the start, but...I never considered what would happen *afterwards*.”

Up until now, Mary hadn’t thought much about what happened to the sons who didn’t succeed their families. Succession wars could lead the unsuccessful parties to all kinds of futures. There were those who decided to support their families by becoming the heir’s right-hand man, while some were adopted by other families. Through that, some people were able to live as they liked, or even take up the offensive and pave their own path to success.

However, many would also face an unwanted conclusion. If someone who had been certain he’d inherit the family was overturned at the last second, his

emotional state would be beyond complicated. Mary was certain that among those who plotted to become her lovers were sons who had thought they would inherit their houses, only to be suddenly overtaken. Succession struggles were harsh enough as it was, all the more so in Feydella with its overabundance of men.

Would Mary be forcing her brothers down such a path upon inheriting? Was she stealing the seat that should've belonged to one of them instead? If so, they might be forced to choose a future they didn't want for themselves. The thought filled Mary's chest with a suffocating sense of remorse.

"What will you two do if I succeed the family? What if you'll have to marry into some distant woman's family as a result...?"

Naturally, even if Lang and Lucian didn't inherit, it wouldn't change the fact that they were part of House Albert. Just like Mary had in the past, the twins received innumerable marriage proposals. They were in great demand. There would be no need for them to desperately try to become some woman's lover. However, those futures still didn't hold any love in them, perhaps not even friendship.

Besides, it would be impossible for the twins to both marry into the same family. They'd been together since they were born. If the two of them were to suddenly separate, what would become of Roberto?

"What if you're all forced to separate because of me? It'd be my fault. Also, I..."

"I've been unfairly using my past life memories like a coward," Mary had almost said, before shutting her mouth. She couldn't bring up something like that. Yet though she couldn't say it, keeping quiet about it made the guilt within her intensify. How much lighter her chest would feel if she could just spill the truth!

Mary hung her head, overcome with discomfiture and breathlessness. Then, something lightly patted her shoulder. It was Lang's hand. Lucian also rubbed her arm to comfort her.

"You really are kind to have thought about us so much, Mary," Lang said.

“That’s not true,” she replied. “I’m just stealing your guys’ seat from the side...”

“You’re not stealing anything. If you do inherit the family, Lucian and I will be happier than anyone, and we’ll support you. We’re twins, so instead of getting a right-hand man, you’d get one for each arm!”

“Really...? You’ll support me?” Mary inquired softly. “You won’t go off to a distant place in search of profit and marry some unknown girl, or become the lover of some noblewoman?”

“No, of course we won’t. We’ll stay by your side, Mary,” Lang reassured her.

“Lang...” Mary felt touched by his words, and her expression began brightening. Promising to stay with her like that—what a reliable brother he was, indeed. Lucian, too, smiled at her calmly in affirmation.

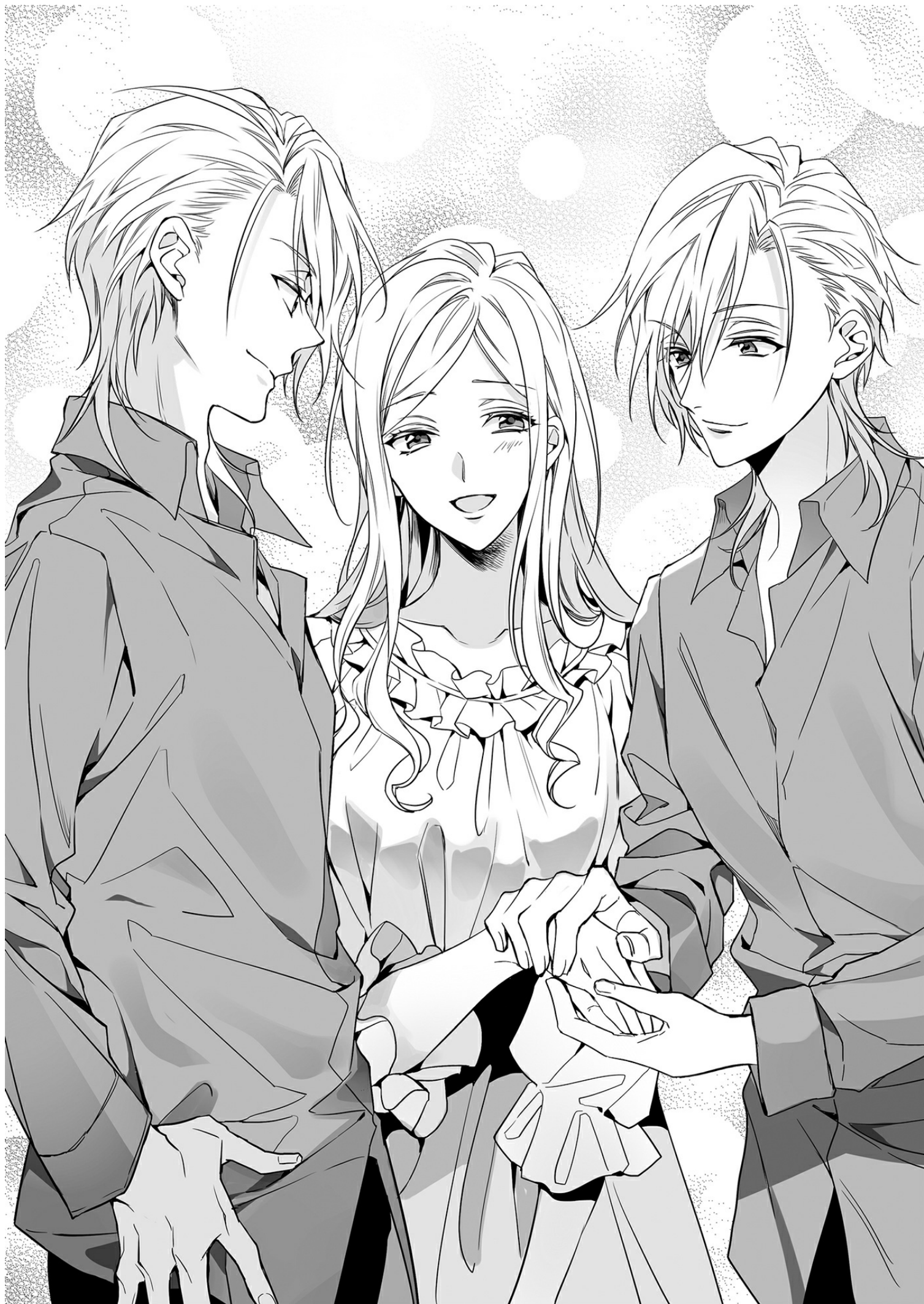
The yin-and-yang twins had boisterous, troublesome personalities. But their love for Mary was true, and they stood out as excellent noblemen among their peers. During times of diplomacy, they had unparalleled conduct regardless of whom they were speaking with, and when it came to the family business, they had skills on par with their father.

Those very two people would stay close by Mary’s side and support her. She felt the fog within her chest dissipating at the thought.

“If I become the head of House Albert, you’ll both stay with me and support me, right?”

“Of course! Plus...”

“Yes?” Mary prompted, awaiting Lang’s words with anticipation.



Understanding how she felt, Lang nodded vigorously. “I have plans to hear your child say to me, ‘Unkie Lang, I lob you!’” he declared loudly. He puffed out his chest and looked extremely proud as he made his majestic proclamation. Lucian, wearing an uncharacteristically self-assured expression, nodded along.

“Unkie...” Mary parroted, dumbstruck. But indeed, if she were to have a child, Lang would be their uncle. It wasn’t an entirely absurd idea, but it was definitely jumping the gun.

“I bet your child will be so cute!” Lang went on. “They’ll be an angel! It’s my dream to watch that angel grow up and hear them call me their ‘unkie.’ I can’t afford to marry into some noblewoman’s family!”

“Mary’s child...would be so adorable that my mind isn’t capable of imagining them...” Lucian murmured. “And I bet they’ll grow up to be a kind person, just like you. If they called me ‘unkie,’ I bet even my gloomy self would light up with a sunny smile... That’s my dream. I can’t afford to become some noblewoman’s lover...”

Though they expressed themselves in contrasting manners, the twins spoke with equal vigor and passion. Mary listened to their fervent speeches in astonishment. “I’m going back to my room,” she decided, and downed all of her tea in one go.

Meanwhile, her brothers continued discussing her potential child. Their eyes were shining, their cheeks flushed, and it was obvious at a glance that they were excited. The usually talkative and gleeful Lang was all the more so, and the usually taciturn and gloomy Lucian was now speaking enthusiastically.

Trying to stop them would be a backbreaking effort. Mary didn’t even attempt it. Allowing them to chat as they pleased was the more peaceful option. With that on her mind, she stood up, and Adi did the same.

“Oh, are you going too, Adi? What about the height-shrinking meeting?”

“This no longer has anything to do with my height, and trying to contribute to their current topic would be quite difficult for me. So yes, I’m heading back too. I leave the rest to you, Roberto,” Adi said, and Mary nodded in agreement.

After all, Lang and Lucian were discussing Mary and Adi’s future child. It was a

very uncomfortable topic for Adi. Not to mention, he'd heard the twins resentfully saying, "So how tall would they be?" The two were starting to discuss whether the child would resemble their petite mother, or their tall father.

Of course, even if the child was tall, the twins' love for them wouldn't diminish...but the pair's loathing of Adi *would* increase instead.

"I think foisting those two off—I mean, leaving them to my brother is the best course of action here," Adi opined.

"I agree," Mary responded. "Roberto, please take care of them. It's already late, so make sure they get to bed on time."

As Mary entrusted her brothers to Roberto, he lowered his head reverently. "Understood," he said in an entirely composed tone of voice. Although he'd partaken in the alcohol as well, he was still so very dependable, unlike the twins. His ponytail swayed lightly as he bowed, and when he straightened up again, his eyes met Mary's. "Leave this to me. Once the right time comes, I'll drink them under the table."

"Go easy on them if you can."

"In that case, I'll raise my voice slightly at first. If that's not enough, I'll drink them down instantly. And by the way, Lady Mary..."

At that, Mary glanced at him curiously. His rust-colored eyes were the same shade as Adi's. But Roberto's eyes were narrower, which gave him a cold and severe look. (That said, he only *appeared* to be that way. In reality, he was cold and severe exclusively towards Lang and Lucian, whom he served. Then again, should that really have been overlooked?)

Mary inquired what it was that Roberto wanted to tell her. When he responded with, "I apologize for the insolence of what I'm about to say," Mary felt a small shiver. Her brothers were happy that she was competing with them over the succession, and they'd even said they would support her if she won. But what about Roberto?

He had been born into a family that had served House Albert for generations, and he attended Lang and Lucian, one of whom everyone had believed would

inherit the family. Roberto was set to support the next head of the family, and the effort he had undoubtedly put into retaining his role must've been extraordinary. Yet all of that had capsized once Mary entered the candidacy. And just like Lang and Lucian, Roberto was facing a different future from the one he'd envisioned.

Mary once again felt overcome with regret at the thought. She gazed at him apprehensively, awaiting his words. After spending so long seeing him as one of her brothers, she felt afraid of hearing his true feelings. But she had to accept whatever he'd say next.

"Wh-What is it...?" she prompted.

"Lady Mary, I am different from Lord Lang and Lord Lucian. That's why..."

"Right. You have your own way of thinking."

"I do. That's why I'd rather be called 'uncle,'" Roberto said with a straight face.

Mary could only stand there, dumbfounded. Yet indeed, Roberto would also be uncle to Mary and Adi's child. And considering his character, it made sense that he'd rather be called "uncle" than "unkie."

Or did it really? Mary's shoulders sank with an almost audible noise. Still, she found it in herself to consent. "Very well," she replied.

After that, she bid her brothers good night (they were still caught up in a heated discussion, so she couldn't tell if her words even reached them), and vacated the room together with Adi. Once the door closed behind them, Mary breathed out a sigh. "Goodness. I feel like a fool for thinking so hard about everything."

"I told you, didn't I? Everyone treasures you, milady. That won't change no matter what," Adi said.

"Yes, it doesn't seem like it'll change even if I succeed the family."

"Nor will it change if they find out you have past life memories."

Mary blinked in surprise at those words, then looked up at Adi. He smiled at her tenderly and gently wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He must've

realized what she'd been worrying about. Mary snuggled up against him as they began walking slowly. Shortly thereafter, they reached the door to her room, where they both stopped.

They were staying in Karen and Dan's mansion. Everyone's individual rooms were close to each other, so Mary and Adi's alone time came to an end very quickly. Mary almost felt like continuing on to the garden and taking an evening stroll while bantering with Adi. Yet just moments ago, she'd been the one to remind her brothers that it was late and they had to get to bed. She shouldn't stay up either.

When Mary said as much and expressed her regret, Adi smiled cheerfully. "You must be tired. Now that your mind's free from worries, I hope you can sleep well."

"Yes, I think I'll be able to fall asleep. But...I feel like something's missing for me to be able to sleep *well*," Mary said, making a show of wondering what that something could possibly be. As he surmised the meaning in her words, Adi's cheeks steadily grew red. He was so easy to read, and Mary smirked upon seeing his reaction.

She was talking about a good night kiss. However, they were in Karen and Dan's estate, and in a hallway, where anyone could pass by at any moment. Mary said that a forehead kiss would be enough, the same as last night. Adi scratched the back of his head in resignation. His hair fluttered, and his cheeks were almost the same shade of red.

But Mary gazed at him insistently to coax him, and he sighed as if he'd made up his mind. He surveyed their surroundings to ensure nobody was around. "If I give you a good night kiss, you'll sleep well, yes?"

"Indeed. I'll sleep so well that I'll doze for an extra thirty minutes when you come to wake me up tomorrow morning."

"Please get up on time tomorrow if you can. Still, if that's how well you'll sleep..." Adi cleared his throat, then stepped closer to her and stooped over. Mary closed her eyes and waited.

Right before his lips touched her forehead, her eyes suddenly flashed open and she lifted her head to kiss him on the lips. Adi was caught off guard, his

eyes widening. As soon as he realized what was happening, he hurriedly stepped back. His face was even redder than before.

“M-My lady! What are you doing?!”

“My, can’t a wife kiss her own husband?”

“But we’re in Lady Karen and Lord Dan’s place right now!”

“I know. But we’re also in Feydella, the country of many loves. A married couple kissing isn’t anything to get embarrassed about,” Mary said with a triumphant laugh. “Good night,” she added, and stepped into her room, leaving the flushed Adi alone in the hallway.

Chapter 4

The morning dew glistened in the sunlight, and the gentle breeze carried with it the scent of flowers. It was a very refreshing start to the day. The birds were singing, and one small bird landed by Mary's feet with a chirp. It bounced around for a bit, then flew off again with another high-pitched cry. This little moment just added to the morning's freshness.

Due to the early hour, there usually would've been nobody around in the garden except for the gardener. But today was different: Mary was here, together with Alicia, whom she'd woken up by smacking before dragging her out here.

Alicia rubbed her sleepy eyes, yawning loudly. "Lady Mary, why are we here so early in the morning?"

"I'm surprised you even understand the concept of an 'early morning.' Most of the time, you show up at Albert Manor right when the birds start singing and wake me up, so sometimes I want to be the one to wake *you* up."

"Waking up on my own and having someone else wake me up are two entirely different matters..." Alicia responded sluggishly, yawning again. Her words were utterly selfish, and Mary glared at her in protest.

However, no amount of glaring would cause the other girl to stop her early morning visits, so this conversation was a waste of time. Deciding as much (indeed, it was her *deciding*, not giving up...probably), Mary glanced aside. She sat down on the edge of the fountain, and Alicia sat next to her. Despite her constant yawning and the violent way in which she'd been woken up, she seemed happy to take a morning walk together with Mary, and gave her a dazzling smile.

The morning light shone down on Alicia's golden hair, creating the impression that it truly was made of that precious metal. No, even gold didn't flicker so beautifully. Enraptured by this glimmer, Mary reached her hand out as if in compulsion. She twisted a lock of Alicia's hair around her finger and then let it

slip through. It was soft and glossy, and touching it tickled Mary's skin.

"You have lovely hair," she remarked. "I'll give you that, but only that."

"Your hair is lovely too, Lady Mary! Your waves are very pretty, and in the past, your ringlets were so quaint."

"Don't call my ringlets quaint," Mary replied, offended. She tugged on Alicia's hair, which was entwined around her fingers. The other girl shrieked, but she seemed to be having fun. From an outsider's perspective, it looked like the two of them were just making merry.

For a while, Mary pulled on Alicia's hair mischievously...and finally let out a sigh. She released the golden tufts and drew her hand away.

The thought of her ringlets made her feel nostalgic. They had been so firm that they'd even been dubbed "drills." No matter what she did, the locks had always curled back up again and cast her into despair. When she'd gotten her past life memories back, she realized the ringlets were a symbol of the villainess Mary.

And once Mary remembered her past life, the first thing she'd done was speak to Alicia. She even recalled saying that she had to greet the protagonist of the game. Mary had known which way Alicia would walk, and made it seem like she'd been there by coincidence. What would Alicia think if she were to find this out?

In contrast to the clear morning, a heavy fog swelled within Mary's chest. But Mary brushed it off with a shake of her head. Whether she had past life memories or not, she was Mary Albert. She wouldn't let anyone call her a coward. Theirs wasn't a friendship built so weakly that it would crumble from something like this.

Mary mentally reassured herself and sighed again. Then, she turned to face the other girl. "Alicia... You're my friend, aren't you?"

"Yes! Your best friend!" Alicia responded vibrantly.

"Right. I'm glad you said that. I just wanted to double-check."

"I'll tell you however many times you like! We're the bestest of friends, Lady

Mary!”

“Thank you. And hypothetically speaking...” Mary paused for a moment. “Would our relationship change if you were to find out about a very important fact?”

“No, it wouldn’t. You and I are sisters at heart, Lady Mary!”

“Stop taking advantage of the situation to close the distance between us,” Mary scolded flatly, at which Alicia laughed.

The girl took Mary’s hand and gave it a light squeeze. Alicia’s hand was warm. Just like her hair, her skin was soft and pleasant to the touch. “Whatever happens, my feelings towards you won’t change, Lady Mary.”

“Alicia... But... What if, for example, us meeting and becoming close was all a setup...?” Mary inquired, the fragile sound of her voice surprising her.

Alicia’s eyes widened. “A setup?”

Mary’s chest ached. She glanced away to escape Alicia’s gaze, looking at the fountain instead. The sun’s reflection shimmered in the water. She worried that Alicia would doubt their friendship, and the thought pained her.

Yet in opposition to Mary’s anxiety, Alicia called out, “Who do I have to thank?!”

“Thank...?”

“Yes! If someone set us up, then I have to show them my gratitude! If she’s a girl, I’ll even give her a hug!”

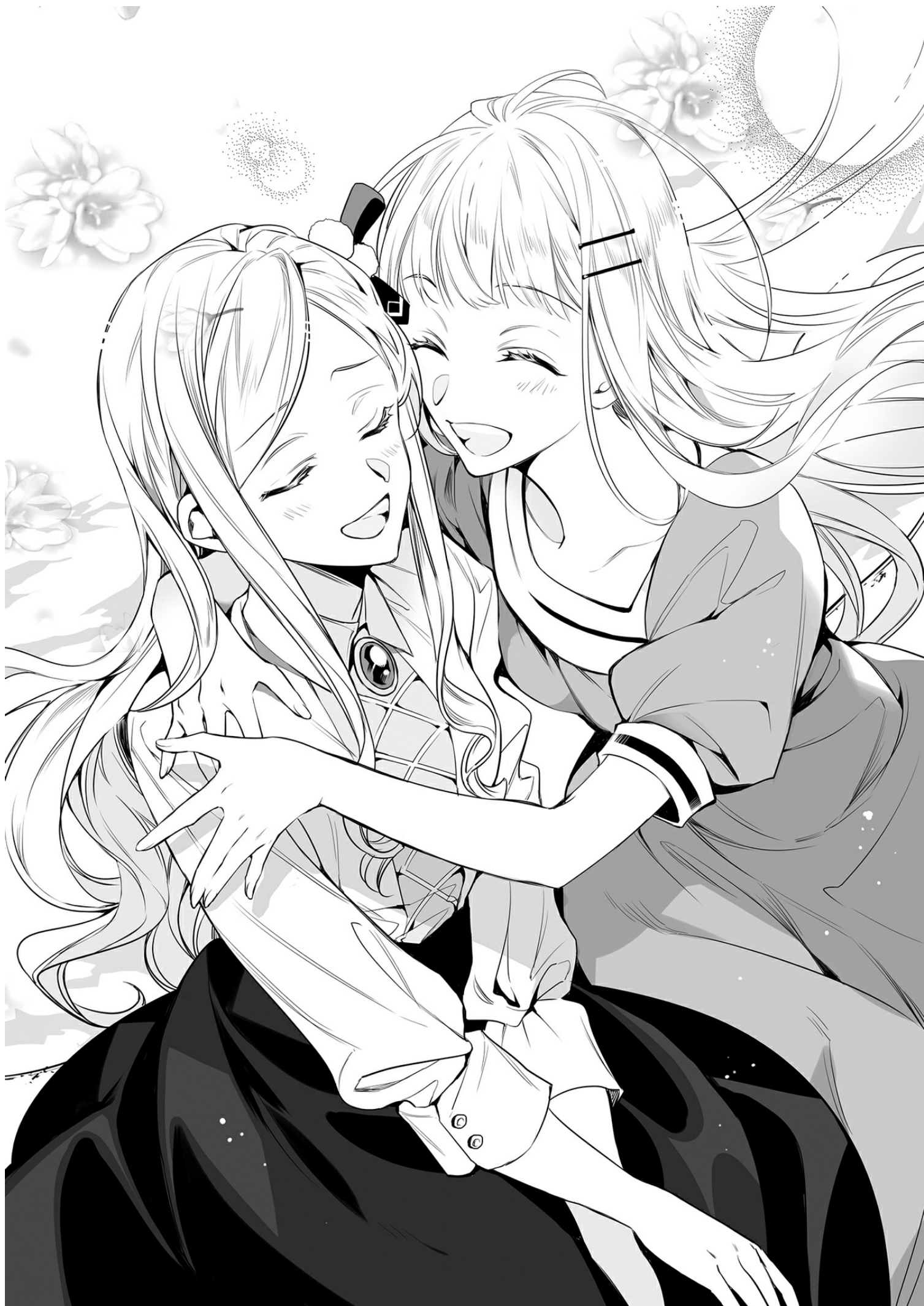
“No, it’s not someone else... It’s me. I... What if I spoke to you because I knew you were the lost princess? It might’ve been a dastardly thing to—”

“*Thing to do,*” Mary had been meaning to say, but stopped when Alicia suddenly embraced her. She almost fell back into the fountain again, and hurriedly clung to Alicia to keep her balance. She didn’t want to get drenched twice.

“So you knew about me, and spoke to me because you wanted us to get along!” Alicia exclaimed.

“N-No, that’s not it... I mean, I *did* know about you, but... Don’t you think it’s unfair? I spoke to you because I knew who you were.”

“It’s not unfair at all! That just means you chose me! Now I like you even more, Lady Mary!” Alicia said happily, hugging Mary.



Mary's eyes widened. She had thought Alicia would be shocked or doubtful upon learning the truth. She'd been worried that Alicia might think of her as cowardly or sneaky. But instead, Alicia was smiling and hugging her. It was the exact opposite reaction of what Mary had been expecting.

Confused, Mary blinked a few times. Then, she smiled softly and wrapped her arms around Alicia. She embraced the other girl tightly, and Alicia did the same in return. Her golden hair grazed Mary's cheek. It shimmered brightly in her peripheral vision, tickling her skin. That silky hair smoothly melted away the fog within Mary's heart.

"Thank you, Alicia. I like you even more now too."

"Lady Mary...!" The delighted Alicia hugged Mary even tighter.

Mary, who had a petite frame to begin with, was completely enveloped by the other girl. She found it almost hard to breathe. Yet right now, even that gladdened her, and she patted Alicia's back as if she were humoring a child. "All right, I get it, so no need to hug me so tightly. I might lose my balance. Hey...! I'm serious; I'm going to—!"

Right before Mary finished her sentence, her body bent backwards. Alicia, who was still holding her, was pulled along by the motion.

And so, together with Mary's pitiful cry, a tremendous splash echoed in the garden.



Although she had once again become drenched, Mary was in high spirits. Her brothers had vowed to stay by her side if she were to inherit House Albert, and Alicia had expressed an even stronger sense of friendship towards her after learning the truth. Their words had made all of Mary's anxiety vanish, as though she'd never been worried in the first place. Now she just thought she should've come out with the truth sooner.

She took her breakfast while her head was filled with such thoughts, and once she went back to her room with Adi, she decided to lounge around in bed. She couldn't stop herself from smiling when she recalled her brothers' and Alicia's words.

“Everything turned out just as you said it would, Adi. I’ll have to thank them all,” she said.

“Indeed. Then again, even if you’d wanted to earlier, Lord Lang and Lord Lucian weren’t present for breakfast.”

“I wonder if they were drunk under the table...”

“I’m sure they were.”

Mary furrowed her brows, recalling what Roberto had said last night. The twins hadn’t shown up to breakfast, but the nonchalant Roberto had been there. When Patrick and Alicia, who hadn’t heard his statement from last night, inquired where Lang and Lucian were, Roberto had smiled calmly. *“Those two are still asleep, so I’ll bring them their meals later,”* he’d claimed, sounding like a proper butler.

He’d been painfully disingenuous. While Patrick and Alicia were completely fooled, Mary could only smile stiffly.

Nevertheless, her brothers were very reliable when it came to business. They’d studied diligently in order to inherit the family, and plans were in place for Roberto to serve the next head of the house. None of them held a grudge against Mary for disrupting their efforts, and the three had told her they would use all the skills they’d fostered until now to support her.

Mary was truly thankful to them. Her apprehension was gone, and she acknowledged once again just how blessed she was. At the same time, fury welled up within her. Now that her insecurity had been resolved, she was all the angrier that she’d been made to feel insecure in the first place.

She was none other than Mary Albert. She wouldn’t simply say, *“Phew, what a relief!”* and brush the matter off.

Filled with resolution, Mary suddenly stood up and tightened her fists. Her eyes were brimming with fighting spirit. “I’ve made up my mind. Beware, Mauro, and all the men of Feydella! I’m going to show you!”

“Oh? Do you plan to summon someone besides Lord Patrick?” Adi inquired mildly. “The ones most likely to respond to a sudden call from you are Lord Gainas and Lord Bernard, I’d imagine.”

“The personnel selection of the crybaby and the hunter, huh? But no, not those two. Or rather...not *just* those two,” Mary rectified with a daring grin.

“Not ‘just’ them...?” Adi asked in confusion.

Mary’s smirk grew, and she struck a daunting pose atop the covers. The soft, springy bed was a bit difficult to stand on, but she maintained her balance by straining her leg muscles. Her haughty stance was just like that of a villainess...even though she did occasionally wobble back and forth.

“Adi, since you’re eventually going to become husband to the head of House Albert, I’ll tell you!”

“Tell me what?” he asked with exasperation.

Mary’s smile only strengthened even more, and she brushed her hair off her shoulder. The shining silver locks fluttered. She looked haughty enough at this point, but she wouldn’t have minded having her ringlets right now. Their hearty wagging would’ve added to her high-handedness in this moment.

Mary, still smiling daringly, spoke up again. “I’m going to tell you how nobles pick a fight!” she declared loudly, and Adi only shook his head, as if to imply he couldn’t comprehend a single thing she was saying.

As soon as she’d made her decision, Mary headed towards Patrick’s room. She knocked on the door and entered, noticing Alicia was inside as well. The girl warmly welcomed Mary with a bright smile on her face, as though she’d forgotten all about how Mary had forcibly dragged her down into the fountain along with her. How irritatingly brilliant her smile was, indeed.

But now was not the time for making complaints. Mary suppressed her resentment and greeted Patrick with a serious look on her face. He must’ve sensed that she was here on urgent business, and returned her greeting with an equally solemn tone of voice. At his invitation, Mary sat down upon the sofa, and Adi did the same next to her.

And so with a deep breath, Mary made her announcement.

“I want to throw a party!”

And that...was it.

Patrick's expression instantly soured as he wondered what she was saying out of nowhere. Adi looked disappointed at this anticlimactic proclamation as well. Mary had no idea what he'd been imagining, but seeing his expression, she quickly asserted, "This *is* how nobles pick fights."

Only Alicia was enthused. "A party?!" she exclaimed, but Mary splendidly ignored her and continued staring at Patrick.

"I wish to host the party myself," Mary clarified. "I want it to be on a grand scale, with as many people in attendance as possible, and make it the most extravagant party in history!"

"During your stay in Feydella?" Patrick asked.

"Yes, that's right. The day before returning home, I want to express my thanks towards those who looked after me. I know it's sudden, but I hope everyone can make it..." Mary cast her gaze down, whispering weakly about how troubled she'd be if nobody attended.

(She continued ignoring Alicia when the other girl assured her, "I'll definitely come!")

Alas, it was only natural for Mary to be anxious. She'd attended countless parties until now, but this was the first time she would be hosting one herself. Moreover, as she'd scheduled it for her last full day in Feydella, she didn't have much time to inform everyone, and some people might be unable to attend on such short notice.

The lack of time was the biggest problem. She might come off as inadequate, or as someone who didn't take other people's schedules into consideration. Those with high regard for etiquette might even find this rude. If someone had invited Mary herself to such a short-notice party, she would've probably said, "*Oh dear, what a poor sense of scope.*"

However, the aforementioned scenario was only the case when it came to an average party.

"Why would you even say that?" Patrick scoffed. "If you're hosting your first party, people will drop everything they're doing just to attend."

“My, do you think so? That reassures me,” Mary replied purposely with a giggle. Patrick shrugged in exasperation.

(“I’ll come no matter what!” Alicia insisted desperately, but Mary once again ignored her.)

Only Adi remained frowning and shook his head. His expression suggested that he had a hard time following the conversation. He understood that Mary throwing a party related back to the whole “how nobles pick a fight” matter, but that was all.

Unable to stop herself, Mary smiled wryly and patted his arm. “Adi, we’re going to be very busy from now on.”

“Yes, apparently. I don’t really get it, but if you wish to throw a party, then so be it, milady,” Adi responded evasively. He might’ve been in the dark, but if this was something Mary wanted to do, that was enough justification for him. To any outsiders, he might’ve seemed unreliable in this moment, and some might’ve questioned whether his way of thinking was truly correct. But to Mary, his reply was incredibly encouraging.

Patrick was talking about beginning preparations, and Alicia emphasized that she’d help too. Yet more than their words, Adi responding while his shoulders drooped stood out in Mary’s mind the most.

When she first brought up her past life memories, he’d made the very same dubious expression as now, and though he couldn’t understand her plan to chase her own ruin, he had nevertheless said, “*I’ll go along with it.*” Those words were what had put her plan into motion and led up to the present.

“All right, Adi. Let’s talk to my brothers first,” Mary proposed. “I’m sure they’ll cooperate! Well...as long as they’ve recovered.”

“Yes, I’m sure they’ll be happy to assist with your first ever party, Your Ladyship. Well...as long as they’re still conscious.”

Having both appended their statements with disturbing murmurs, Mary and Adi stood up. Mary cast a quick glance at Patrick. “Since this is a special occasion, I’d really like for *all* sorts of people to attend...” she said, which was her way of pestering him.

Surmising what she meant, Patrick smiled dryly and nodded. Next to him, Alicia was innocently getting excited for the party, so the meaning in this exchange must've flown over her head. Nonetheless, Patrick's smile implied that there would be no problem. Without a doubt, he would be able to use Alicia and her connections to their advantage. After all, when it came to social connections, nobody could rival Alicia. *How very reliable...* Mary thought, but of course, she refused to say it out loud.

Mary and Adi went to see the twins and explained the situation. That said, the brothers were propped up in their beds and unable to move. As their groans echoed in the room, Roberto calmly read a book. It would be more accurate to say that Mary and Adi had addressed *him* rather than Lang and Lucian.

Indeed, he had drunk them down, just as he'd said. In fact, he even nonchalantly stated, "Since they complained so loudly about being unable to have breakfast with you this morning, Lady Mary, I gave them a little something called the hair of the dog and got them drunk under the table again."

Mary was exasperated, and decided not to mention just how in character this was for the twins. Usually, no noble would've forgiven their servant for drinking them under the table. Alas, this was House Albert, and so they did. Plus, Mary was sure her brothers must've made quite the racket. So for now, she decided to direct the conversation to the main topic.

Looking over Lang and Lucian, she couldn't be sure if her words made it through to them, but Roberto was listening, so all was well. (Lately, Mary had begun to think that as long as her words got through to *one* person between Lang, Lucian, and Roberto, that was good enough for her.)

"There you have it: I want to throw a grand party! Lang, will you help me out?"

"Ugh... Guh... I feel sick..."

"Lady Mary, Lord Lang says that he'll be happy to cooperate," Roberto supplied.

"Thank you for the translation, Roberto," Mary said. "I'm so happy to hear

that. What about you, Lucian?”

“My head hurts... Everything is spinning... The apocalypse has come...”

“Lord Lucian says that he’ll assist you in making the grandest party possible.”

“What a relief! I mean, this is my first time throwing a party, so I hope you two can teach me all about it.” Mary’s expression lit up at the twins’ (or rather, Roberto’s) replies.

After all, Lang and Lucian were the sons of House Albert. Unlike Mary, who’d entered the succession war halfway through, the twins had been striving to inherit the family since their childhood. They worked hard by studying each day (although, they did run away on occasion), and had been trying to build relations among high society without relying on their father. Whenever she heard about their endeavors, Mary was always impressed. Yet she didn’t praise them directly, or it would cause a clamor. Either way, she was no match when it came to their knowledge and skills.

“For now, the harsh succession war will call a truce,” she decided.

“Indeed. Lord Lang and Lord Lucian agree to the armistice,” Roberto responded.

“You replied before they even moaned anything. Well, fine. Let’s get the preparations underway. This is going to be the grandest, most extravagant party ever!” Mary shouted enthusiastically, clenching her fists.

Roberto smiled calmly and applauded her. As a side note, behind him, the twins had their faces buried in their pillows and groaned, “Mary, keep it down please...” Unable to endure it any longer, Adi nursed the two by pouring them some water and rubbing their backs.

Next up is... Mary thought after she’d visited her brothers, and smirked mischievously. It was the very expression she made whenever she was scheming something.

Adi looked at her suspiciously. “What are you plotting?” he inquired.

“Just come along with me!” Mary demanded, walking towards Karen’s room.

Dan was in the room too, and the couple looked surprised at Mary's sudden visit. Nonetheless, they listened to her explanation. Then, with smiles on their faces, they expressed their consent. "Sounds like this will be quite the undertaking. We'll chip in with the preparations, so let us know if you need anything," Karen said with a smile.

"Thank you, auntie!" Mary said, hugging the woman. Her aunt was a freewheeling lady who said that Feydella's customs suited her, but her composure and broad-mindedness reminded Mary of her mother, Keryl. It was obvious they were sisters.

Mary then turned to her uncle. Her expression involuntarily morphed into a smirk as she did so, but it seemed like Dan didn't notice anything. He showed his agreement with a deep nod.

Dan was a native Feydellan. Mary didn't want to ask whether he had any lovers or not, but he was the one who understood Feydella's customs best out of them all. Based on that, Mary had a favor to ask of him. It was something that made her smirk despite herself.

"Listen, uncle. There's something I'd like to ask of you..." she said quietly. There was nobody else in the room, so Mary had no need to stay quiet. Yet her scheme naturally caused her to whisper. When she explained everything to him, Dan also smirked in satisfaction.



There were only a few days left until the party, and it would be held in Feydella, a country that hadn't mingled much with other nations until now. As such, it wouldn't have been surprising for some people to refuse the invitation. Some of them might have already had plans, and others may have had no interest in visiting a nation without any connections to their own. Others yet might've found such a short-notice invitation rude and refused it based on that. Under such circumstances, people would typically send apology letters, spelling out some inoffensive excuse as grounds for refusal.

Mary knew all of that, and she was prepared for a portion of the invites to be rejected. However...

"How wonderful to see that everyone's on board," she said with a nod,

feeling deeply moved. On the desk in front of her was a pile of letters, and a second pile of gifts. The letters expressed the senders' gratitude for the invitation, and how they looked forward to attending. The items weren't apology gifts, but rather tokens of gratitude as well.

Looks like this will go well, Mary thought with a smile. In contrast, Adi, who was sitting next to her, looked pale. He had a guest list in his hand, and he could see that they'd already received replies from over half of them.

"This can't even be called a party anymore, with this kind of lineup," he murmured.

"My, really? But a party's a party. We can eat delicious food, drink tasty alcoholic beverages, have fun conversations, and enjoy some dancing." Mary spun around, feeling in high spirits. In her heart, she was already in the middle of the party, calmly dancing along to the music.

But when she held out her hand to Adi, he only shrugged in response. Stubbornly, Mary kept holding her hand out, until he stood up with resignation and took it. She intended for them to pretend as if they were dancing in the ballroom...but after spinning her around twice, Adi used the momentum to make her plop down on the sofa. "Oh dear," she muttered in a foolish tone of voice.

Adi had appeased her so masterfully and elegantly. He then presented her with tea and cookies, which did indeed interrupt the dance party. Mary meekly sipped the tea, casting a glance at the table with the letters. "We've got a band lined up as well, right?"

"Yes, Lord Lucian asked a band he knows to attend," Adi explained. "They're world-famous, so they're very busy, but when Lord Lucian reached out to them, they agreed to rush right over."

"As expected of my brother. But what about the entertainment? It's a flashy party, so we need something equally exciting."

"Lord Lang has arranged for a famous singer and theater troupe. They agreed to do a public performance exclusively for this party after Lord Lang spoke to them."

“Goodness, I look forward to it! Oh, but what about the cooking and waiters...?”

“My brother’s organizing that, so you have nothing to worry about. The party’s scale may be the grandest in history, but several noble families, including House Dyce, are assisting as well.”

“So everything’s excellent from beginning to end. Mm-hmm, I have a good feeling about this. All that’s left is...” Mary trailed off, turning to gaze out the window.

She could see the garden, where Alicia and Patrick were taking a walk right now. Even at this distance, she could tell the air between them was saccharine. They walked slowly, as if wanting to enjoy their time together for as long as possible. At times, Alicia took a few steps ahead, and Patrick lovingly pulled her back and held her close. Though the garden was small, it would take them a long time to make a single round at this rate.

“They’re acting like they’re alone in this world. But I have something I want to ask Patrick about. What to do?” Mary lamented.

“Indeed, disturbing them now would be awkward. If it’s not urgent, how about you postpone it?”

“Right, since they’re trying to have some alone time, I won’t get in their way... Yeah, right! As if *I’d* say something like that!” Mary vigorously threw the window open and screeched, “Patrick, you should shove that girl into the fountain!!!”

Alicia whipped around. “Lady Mary!” she exclaimed happily, running off and leaving the blatantly stiff-faced Patrick behind. Needless to say, the sweet air between them had shattered instantaneously.

Mary smirked, satisfied with herself. She once again called out to Patrick, who followed after Alicia with a sigh. Based on the tone of Mary’s voice, he conjectured that she had something important to say to him (she wouldn’t have interrupted their alone time without a reason), and his expression shifted to a serious look.

“Patrick, I asked you to take care of the invites, right?”

“You sure did.”

“The design and lettering were fantastic, as expected of you.”

“Adi did the lettering,” Patrick said, turning to Adi in search of agreement. Adi smiled wryly and nodded. He looked embarrassed, yet proud of his work at the same time.

“His skills have gone up again...” Mary muttered. The letters’ design was impeccable for a first-class party, and the writing in particular showed outstanding taste. It was stylish without sacrificing readability, and its gorgeousness had captivated Mary at a glance. Although she was the sender, she couldn’t help but wish to receive such a letter herself. *To think that was Adi’s work...* she mused, glancing at him.

He smiled calmly and told her, “I’m studying design right now.” It seemed that he intended to get even better.

Mary admired his desire for self-improvement (though, she wasn’t sure where he was headed with it), then turned back to Patrick. She’d almost forgotten the key issue. “Patrick, you invited everyone who used to be on the student council back in our high school days, right?”

“Of course. They all said they’ll happily attend,” he replied. “But I’m surprised you sent them personalized invitations. Are you close with them?”

“A little bit,” Mary said to dodge the question, smiling impishly.

The members of the student council had once wrongly accused Mary of bullying Alicia and tried to publicly pin the blame on her. Mary had almost decided to corner their families because of these baseless accusations, but once Adi had dispelled the tension between all parties, she’d accepted their apologies and allowed the matter to be settled there. Since then, she had maintained a good relationship with them in high society, but she wasn’t so close to them as to send specifically designated invitations.

Patrick gazed at her curiously, and Mary wondered what to say to him. The members of the student council from high school... No, based on her past life memories, she should have referred to them as the otome game’s love interests. They were all characters from the game. Each had a route of his own

where he would fall in love with Alicia. (Of course, the present Alicia only had eyes for Patrick, and hadn't even considered the possibility of romantic love between herself and the other men.)

However, obviously Mary couldn't say that out loud. For a while, she deliberated the matter. She recalled the student council members' faces, as well as the face of Mauro, who had claimed to be an NPC. The difference between romanceable characters and those with minor roles in the game was clear. Their appearances would be the most immediate indicator of said difference.

Taking that into account, Mary declared, "They have good-looking faces," with a serious expression. Indeed, the game's romanceable cast were all good-looking. That was a major point of distinction between them and someone like Mauro.

"What a thing to say about my friends," Patrick murmured.

"Well, for now let's leave it there. I'm going to make a big announcement on the day, so I need them present no matter what."

"A big announcement?" Patrick asked, puzzled. He was frowning, and his voice was slightly lower than usual. What a suspicious attitude he had, indeed. It was almost unimaginable that he was the same man who had sparkled so much the other day.

"How rude," Mary remarked upon seeing his unconcealed dubiousness, and glanced away with a huff.

("It's a natural reaction, considering everything that's happened until now," Adi said, but Mary ignored him.)

"Are you opening a branch of the restaurant in Feydella?" Patrick guessed.

"Unfortunately, you're off."

"Did you come up with some other business idea, then?"

"I'm thinking of selling a dictionary of the Feydellan men's flowery language, but that has nothing to do with my announcement. It's completely unrelated, and it's not something you'll be able to guess. You'll definitely be surprised,

Patrick,” Mary said, implying she couldn’t tell him about it now.

He still looked suspicious. Next to him stood Alicia, eyes glittering. “What sort of announcement?!” she asked excitedly. Their reactions were totally different from each other, yet so very much like them.

Mary smiled as she looked at the pair. Despite their contrasting reactions, both of them were irreplaceable friends whom she cherished dearly. She wanted them to hear her announcement more than anyone else. Part of her felt that way, though another part was filled with unease.

Perhaps sensing her anxiety, Adi placed his hand on Mary’s waist. He gently pulled her closer, and she snuggled up to him. “Adi...”

“I’m sure everyone will be surprised, but there won’t be any issues,” he said, letting her know that she didn’t need to be worried. Maybe he was trying to comfort her in the face of Patrick’s suspicion, or maybe he wanted to alleviate her fear. Either way, his words were meant just for her.

Mary cuddled into him sweetly. She nuzzled against him like a kitten, and in response, his arm tightened around her waist, pulling her even closer. Mary gazed up at Adi invitingly, and he smiled at her with his cheeks slightly flushed. He looked at her affectionately, causing her own expression to soften.

Alicia giggled as the air turned saccharine. “We shouldn’t interrupt,” she said, pulling on Patrick’s arm.

“But they interrupted *us*...” Patrick grumbled in response, which only intensified Alicia’s smile.

Their teasing words warmed Mary’s heart. “I’m sure it’ll be fine... You’ll stay by my side no matter what happens, right, Adi?”

“Of course,” he affirmed, calmly and tenderly.

Enraptured, Mary closed her eyes and accepted Adi’s kiss, which he offered to her as if in lieu of a vow.



The first party Mary hosted was on such a large scale that it couldn’t even be called a “party” anymore. The venue’s interior design, the food, and the events

were all out of the ordinary. There were no flaws in its perfect organization, and everyone had a pleasant, graceful, and enjoyable time.

“Thank you for inviting me, Lady Mary...” said Parfette as she timidly approached Mary. The crybaby noblewoman delivered an elegant, ladylike greeting...and then suddenly trembled as her eyes filled with tears. “Thank you very much,” she appealed desperately, squeezing her own hands. She was so adorable that Mary couldn’t help but smile.

Gainas stood next to Parfette. Unlike his crybaby beloved, he gave Mary a proper greeting, before gently pulling the sniffing Parfette closer.

“I apologize for the sudden invitation. And I’m glad you were able to bring some of your friends along,” Mary said with a smirk.

In the invitation she’d sent to Gainas, she mentioned that she wanted him to bring some of his acquaintances to the party. It was a small favor she’d asked of him—just a *small* one. Still, she had made sure to write that part in a font that exuded unmistakable pressure, and underlined it in red.

Surely no person would’ve been able to oppose that. This was all the more so the case considering Mary and Gainas’s relationship. Although she had worded it as a request, it must’ve felt like a command to him, which he couldn’t refuse. Regardless, the letter had been effective, for he’d brought along several of the people Mary had named.

“I’ll give you three points,” Mary declared.

As if finally sensing the indescribable pressure fade away, Gainas breathed a sigh of relief. “I was really surprised when you requested their presence, Lady Mary. Since they caused you trouble... Well, I did as well... They all wanted to keep away from you. Well, I did as well...” The moment he tried explaining himself, his voice faltered.

Parfette puffed out her cheeks at his words, displeased, and began stomping on his foot. (That said, she stepped so lightly on the tips of Gainas’s shoe that he probably didn’t even feel any pain. It was akin to having a small bird prance around on top of his toes.)

Alas, Parfette couldn’t be blamed for her reaction, as the people Gainas

brought with him were Elysiana Academy students. They were the very same gentlemen who'd been involved in the scandal during Mary's study abroad period. They had broken off their engagements and flocked to Lilianne. As a result, some had been exiled from high society, while others had been forgiven for their foolishness and allowed to remain. None of them had managed to repair their standing to the extent that Gainas had, but they seemed penitent, and so were treated in line with that.

From their point of view, Mary was a foreign noblewoman whom they had caused trouble. On top of that, she might even become the head of her country's most distinguished noble house, so there was no doubt that they would do their utmost to keep their distance from her. Otherwise, if they were to meet with her, they would recall some uncomfortable memories, and in the worst-case scenario, she might dig up the old scandal.

Yet they had been invited to this event, and so had no choice but to accept. Now, their wisest policy was to devote themselves to apologizing to Mary when they saw her. Listening to their greetings (which were, in reality, apologies), Mary shrugged her shoulders. She couldn't have cared any less for insincere apologies, but she had to respond in an acceptable manner.

"How dare you apologize to Lady Mary after everything you've done?!" Parfette huffed angrily while Mary soothed her.

In the midst of all that, somebody called Mary's name. She turned around, only to come face-to-face with Patrick, who'd brought with him the student council members from their high school era. However, Mary had been seeing them around college and within high society, so it wasn't as if this was some kind of nostalgic reunion. She gave them a neutral greeting.

And so the idle chat continued, with new people arriving sometimes, and others leaving at intervals.

At one point, a fight broke out between Veltina and Parfette. But all it amounted to was the girls glaring at each other, one with her ribbon bobbing on top of her head, and the other munching on some cake. The sight was purely heartwarming. (As a side note, this conflict ended with Veltina earnestly asking, "So where did you get that cake?")

While Veltina happily pulled Luke along to get some cake, Parfette watched them with a victorious smile. The criteria for a victory were unclear, but apparently this battle went to Parfette.

Observing them, Margaret and Carina exchanged a glance and shrugged, as if to say this was par for the course. They said things like “It went quite well today,” and “Last time, they glared at each other for three minutes before one of them sneezed and broke it up.” Such conversations had become the norm by now.

Alicia was running around too. Lang and Lucian were present together with their friends, and Mary’s surroundings became very lively. As some people left, others showed up to replace them, and after a while, those who’d left would return again. It was bustling and fun, and Mary thought that she’d like to always spend her time like this.

That’s why... Mary thought, glancing at Adi and tugging on his clothes. “It’s time we greet the Feydellans,” she said. To those not in the know, or rather, to anyone other than Adi, this would’ve sounded like a simple suggestion.

Yet Adi understood this to be a cue and smiled calmly. “Let’s go, Mary.” He tightened his grip around her waist, pulling her closer, before the two of them began walking. It was as if he was supporting Mary’s determination, and vowing that he’d never leave her side.

They headed towards the Feydellan men, where they came across a crowd of people. It looked like everything was a success, and the excitement caused Mary to smirk. In contrast, Adi looked exasperated, as if he couldn’t understand this at all.

Dan, who’d been managing the crowd, spotted Mary and approached her. He had a grin upon his face, and before Mary could even ask anything, he said, “It’s a great success! I can’t believe Feydellan pickup lines are *this* popular!”

“Once you get used to the excessive praise, it becomes quite fun to listen to them. I’d say the Feydellans’ compliments especially are on a whole different level,” Mary replied.

“Indeed. Some ladies get embarrassed, while others laugh in delight. Even men are asking for compliments!”

As Dan spoke of the success, Mary nodded in satisfaction. She glanced over at the crowd to see that the men had surrounded a woman and were praising her. She was married, but it wouldn't be a problem so long as she returned to her husband's side after she'd had her fill of compliments.

Mary had become fed up with the Feydellan men's tenacity. But they had their own circumstances, and their behavior was permitted within their country, so she had no intention of stopping them. It would've been uncouth of her to make careless remarks about another nation's customs. Indeed—it would have been downright impudent of her if she'd made the choice to come to a country she knew very little of and then said things like, *"This place is awful! You're all bothering me!"*

However, she also didn't feel inclined to write Feydella off as an odd country and be done with it. She'd come here for diplomacy, so she wanted to put this place's customs to use against those who were unfamiliar with them.

With that as her goal, Mary had explained Feydella's situation in her party invitations. She'd included a heads-up, but written it so as to incite the invitee's interest. In addition, she'd also had Dan and Karen explain to the men of Feydella that their way of doing things wouldn't always go over well with foreigners. That said, their compliments were first-class, and made for perfect entertainment.

Compliments alone wouldn't cause any harm, and were fun to hear if one took them at face value. Upon hearing praise that went above their expectations, the visiting women grew shy or laughed, and the local men looked at them admiringly. Some people even went up to the Feydellans and inquired, "How do you give such good compliments?"

Mary's smile intensified as her prediction came true. *There was no mistake in my point of view! If I publish a dictionary of their praises, it'll definitely sell well!*

"Earlier, the theater troupe's playwright approached a few of the Feydellans, saying he wanted to use them as reference," Dan said cheerfully. Mary panicked for a moment, worried someone else was ahead of her. Some people even started saying they wanted to introduce the Feydellans to their author friends, so she thought she might have to speed up the dictionary plan.

While Mary was considering all of that, she heard a loud sigh next to her. She looked up to find that Adi seemed to be at his wit's end. "What a terrible attitude you have," she told him. "This is the first step in commemorating our diplomacy with Feydella."

"The first step is a trade show for compliments?" he questioned.

"If things go well, the first step won't matter. Anyway, I'm counting on you, Uncle Dan. I don't mind if you give some advice to the playwright, but if anyone tries to propose the idea of releasing a dictionary, please reject them!" Mary said, insisting that she wanted to create such a book herself.

Dan laughed at her words. He then walked back to the crowd, and Mary watched him with satisfaction.

Next up, she was headed for Mauro Noze. He'd been conversing with a few people, and when he noticed Mary, he gave her a polite greeting. It was slightly exaggerated, but to any outsiders, it would've seemed pleasant. *How insincere*, Mary murmured in her mind.

Mauro had been talking to members of House Noze, as well as a few other nobles. All of them approached Mary to send her compliments about the party.

Before she knew it, Mauro walked up to her with a thin, cold smile on his face. "What a wonderful party this is! As expected of you, Lady Mary."

"My, it's thanks to all the help I had from those around me," she responded.

"Those around you? I'd love to become one such person," he said with a calm smile.

Mary opened her mouth to reply, but right then, Adi grabbed her waist and pulled her closer. The words she'd been about to say turned into a surprised sound, which was muffled as she bumped into Adi's body. How forceful he'd been, indeed. Mary glanced at him in confusion, and a small gasp escaped her.

Adi stared right at Mauro. His expression was calm, and there was even a hint of a smile on his face. Adi was already good-looking to begin with, and now he smiled in a mature, even majestic manner. "Lord Mauro, everyone. We apologize for the sudden invitation."

“Not at all...”

“Thank you for your attendance. Mary and I would like to greet all the guests, so I hope you enjoy yourselves in the meantime.” Adi’s conduct as he spoke was splendid. It was so imposing that Mary found herself enchanted, and couldn’t muster a statement of her own. His appearance and attitude were so regal that nobody would have guessed he was a servant.

“You’re...Adi, aren’t you?” Mary muttered doubtfully. Perhaps Patrick had possessed Adi in this moment—such was the majesty of his deportment. Nonetheless, the hand at her waist was most definitely Adi’s.

“Mary has something she’d like to share with you. Isn’t that right?” Adi prompted.

“Y-Yes... Indeed... I hope you’ll all listen,” Mary responded at his urging. The group stared at her curiously.

“Well then, let’s go, Mary.”

“Right. Until later.” Mary gave a small bow, and left together with Adi, who was still holding her waist.

All who gazed at them said things like “What a harmonious couple!” and “They look beautiful together.” Everyone’s praise was bright and sunny—everyone...except for Mauro.

While this appeared to be normal couple behavior to the others, Mauro seemed to have a bad feeling about what Mary wanted to share. Or perhaps he simply hadn’t appreciated Adi’s behavior. Whatever the case, he alone gazed after Mary and Adi with a sour expression.

This only pleased Mary, and she drew closer to Adi as the taste of victory swelled within her. “The way you behaved just now was wonderful.”

“I-Is that so?”

“Yes. You even called me by my name. You can do it now, right?”

“Since you made up your mind, milady, I decided I should act accordingly. It’s all for your sake.”

“You reverted back as soon as I praised you,” Mary said with regret, her

shoulders sinking.

Adi just smiled dryly to smooth over his words. His behavior now was that of his usual self. The young man so full of majesty and composure had disappeared in a flash, and he scratched his reddened cheeks at Mary's teasing. "Since you're hosting this party, I thought that as your husband, I ought to play my part too. So last night, I had Lord Patrick give me some advice."

"Patrick?"

"Yes, he instructed me..."

As it turned out, last night Adi had visited Patrick's room and asked him for advice on how to conduct himself so that Adi could stand next to the party's hostess. However, at that point, there were only a few hours left until the event, so it wasn't as if Adi could've learned conduct or the appropriate expressions. And if he were to act inadequately, he might just make things worse.

Patrick had been aware of that, and with a serious expression he told Adi, *"I'm only going to teach you one thing. Remember: no matter what, do not lower your head."*

It was unclear whether this passed for advice. Adi's eyes had widened, and he tilted his head questioningly.

But Patrick had only insisted further. *"When you apologize for the sudden invitation, and when you thank the guests, do not lower your head. Do not look remorseful—express both your apologies and gratitude with a smile on your face."*

Doing so wouldn't come across as apologetic or grateful. Yet that was exactly the attitude of high-ranking individuals. Whether they apologized to someone or thanked them, the hierarchy didn't change. Their conduct showed that in spite of their words, they themselves were superior in rank.

Such actions could've been taken as arrogant if they had come from an average aristocrat, and might have even incited anger in the other party. But House Albert was permitted to act however they pleased, and to show that Adi belonged with them, he couldn't lower his head before others...

“Classic Patrick. That does sound like something he’d say,” Mary commented.

“I can’t thank him enough. Also, when I was going back to my room...”

After getting advice from Patrick, Adi had gone back to his room. However, Lang and Lucian had been standing in front of his door. They began questioning where he’d been.

“Lord Lang said, ‘How about that sunny look on his face!’ Then Lord Lucian said, ‘He stole the initiative... And he went to Patrick, didn’t he?!’ They both sounded bitter, and ran off together.”

“Sounds like my brothers wanted to give you advice too,” Mary said. “I hope you consider their feelings, at least.”

Lang and Lucian had wanted to support Adi, but Adi had made a move before they could act. And the one he’d sought advice from was none other than Patrick. Such terrible timing the twins had! They were sure to complain about this matter for some time to come.

Adi knew this too. “For a while, I’ll let them push my head down without objecting,” he decided with a nod, sounding slightly pleased.

When it was finally time, Mary made her way to the center of the venue. She could tell that everyone was focused on her. That said, in the next moment, the crowd’s gaze turned to Alicia and Parfette, who each had a slice of cake in hand. They were standing close to Mary, eagerly awaiting her announcement. Behind the girls were Patrick and Gainas.

Mary had asked her friends to implicitly tell the guests that she had an announcement to make. Her brothers and Roberto had been working on the same task, so now the entire venue fell into silence as everyone waited for Mary’s words.

With all eyes on her, Mary took a deep breath. Anxiety struck her for a moment, but it was blown away completely by the feel of Adi’s hand on her waist. “I have something I’d like to inform you all about,” she began. Then...

“I have past life memories!”

...the place was cast into total stillness following her announcement.

Mary recalled her past life memories, including the otome game she'd played in said past life. The player controlled the heroine, Alicia, and the game was about her and the romanceable male characters falling in love with each other. Mary disclosed everything, but since she couldn't mention all the details about the game, she explained it as a creative work of fiction from her previous life. After all, nobody would've understood her if she had spoken too much about game mechanics or different routes. It would've just caused needless chaos. (Only Adi was able to listen to all the details and conclude that while he didn't understand everything, if Mary said that was how things had worked, then he'd accept it.)

The events that happened at Karelia Academy, Alicia's origins, the scandal in Elysiana Academy, the incident with Veltina—Mary explained that she'd known these things would occur in advance due to her past life knowledge. One might even call it precognition. Even as she spoke of it, she thought about how strange this all was. Yet it was true that everything had proceeded in accordance with her past life memories.

After she was finished, silence once more overtook the venue. Though at times the crowd had buzzed with noise during her speech, now nobody made a sound. The guests exhibited a variety of reactions; some people stood there dumbstruck, while others exchanged confused glances. In the stifling silence, Mary swallowed heavily. The air had grown so silent that it seemed like even the sound of her gulping echoed in the stillness.

What finally broke that silence was someone asking, "Why?"

Everyone's eyes immediately shifted to the source of the voice. It was Mauro. He looked shocked as he took a few steps closer to Mary, glaring at her.

"Why would you...make such a foolish announcement...?!"

"Because I have nothing to hide," Mary replied. "I am me. Whether I have past life memories or not, it doesn't change the fact that I am Mary Albert."

"Even so, to say all that in such a place—!"

"I'm saying it here on purpose. When I make an announcement, I want as

many people as possible to hear it. I'd hate for someone to mistake this for me admitting my weakness and try to threaten me over it," Mary asserted as Mauro glowered at her.



The exchange finally caused the crowd to erupt into noise again. Some people were still confused, and began questioning what was going on, while others praised Mary for her caustic words, which were so like her. A few people even conjectured that Mauro must've threatened Mary over this matter, and voiced their disgust for his foolish actions.

In the midst of that, Mary cast the discouraged Mauro a glance. "You were wrong when you threatened me back then."

"Wrong?" he echoed.

"Yes. You thought I hadn't told anyone about my past life memories, no? That's why you threatened me."

"Th-That's right. It'd be awful to have people find out about such a thing..."

"Unfortunately, I don't care if people know about it. And..." Mary paused, turning to Adi, who was standing next to her. She made a display of cuddling up to him, and Adi responded by embracing her. Mary placed her head on his shoulder, then cast Mauro a cold look. "I told Adi about my past life memories from the moment I recalled them. I'm afraid that when it comes to lovers, husbands, and sharing secrets, Adi's the only one for me."

Mauro stared at her vacantly for a moment. Finally, his shoulders sank. He must've understood his mistake, and that his plan had ended in failure. One of the members of House Noze hurried over to his side. The man interrupted the exchange with a frantic look on his face, and gave Mary and Adi a forced smile before quickly taking Mauro away.

Indeed, anyone would've done the same if they had seen their son arguing with one of House Albert's succession candidates. Given that Mauro had threatened Mary, his relatives must've felt extremely uncomfortable. They likely wanted to stop Mauro before he said something even worse.

But as Mauro's father grabbed his arm and tried to take him away, the dejected Mauro suddenly lifted his head. "It's unfair that you used your past life memories to your advantage—it makes you a coward! Those memories didn't do *me* any good!"

"That's because you were born as Mauro Noze, right? Past life memories are

still just memories. They won't change who you are in reality," Mary said.

"House Albert should've fallen into ruin! Everyone, listen! She knew about Princess Alicia's identity from the very beginning, and only got closer to her for her own benefit! She could've stopped the scandal at Elysiana College from ever occurring, but she just looked on without doing a thing!" Mauro yelled, appealing about how unfair it was. He looked desperate, his voice cracking at times, and he ignored his family as they tried to stop him. His sheer intensity was quite powerful.

House Noze dragged Mauro away. They didn't care about what he was saying. The most important thing in their eyes was taking Mauro away as quickly as possible, to stop him from causing harm to a member of House Albert. Not to mention, they were still in the middle of a party, so their son's failure had been exposed for all to see. The grumblings of a loser would only tarnish their family name at this point.

Mauro's family forcibly removed him from the venue. He looked pathetic, and nobody replied to his screams. They only watched on coolly until he was gone.

Mary let out a quiet, relieved sigh. She felt no sympathy for Mauro, nor did she feel like offering a lifeline to House Noze—she merely watched it all happen. Besides, there was someone more important than him weighing on her mind.

"Lady Mary, about your announcement..." Alicia muttered, her voice hoarse. Patrick stood next to her, and Parfette and Gainas were nearby too. They all looked visibly bewildered, and as Alicia approached Mary, her steps were a little uncertain.

Carina and Veltina, who also had past life memories, stared at her apprehensively, concerned about the judgment she had made to reveal the truth. There was no doubt in Mary's mind that if she had consulted them about this, they would've both advised her against it.

Yet Mary had already gone through with it, and she couldn't take back her words. On top of that, retracting something she'd already made up her mind about went against her principles. And more than anything, she believed in her friends. She believed that they would stay by her side despite knowing about

her past life memories, and that they liked her for who she was.

“Alicia, you heard everything, didn’t you?” Mary inquired.

“Y-Yes... Of course. You have past life memories, and you already knew about me and that I was a princess... And, um...” Alicia murmured, trying to put together everything Mary had said. But she couldn’t fully follow the story, and she couldn’t find a way to express herself, which frustrated her.

Patrick, unable to watch her like this any longer, gently patted her shoulders. Then, he stepped towards Mary, as if addressing her in Alicia’s stead. He met Mary’s eyes and said, “Mary, I’ll be honest with you. I don’t believe a word of what you said.”

“I don’t blame you. If I’d heard something like that, I would’ve probably laughed it off as preposterous,” Mary responded with a self-deprecating smile.

“This is a fictional world from my previous life, and I know what will happen in the future.” Who would’ve believed such words? They’d only laugh and think it was some kind of joke.

Patrick looked at Mary dubiously. His expression was quite severe, and even though he didn’t speak another word, Mary could practically hear him saying, *“What on earth is this girl talking about?”* Mary had known Patrick since they were children, yet this was the first time she’d ever seen such a suspicious look on his face...

Alas, no, that wasn’t the case. If anything, he cast such suspicious looks at her quite often. This had been true even before Mary remembered her past life. Actually, yesterday and the day before yesterday, he had looked at her with very similar expressions.

“How strange,” Mary remarked. “For some reason, I can remember having seen that doubtful look you’re giving me right now for a very long time.”

“Just to be clear, you’re saying you recalled your past life and have had foresight and such since high school?”

“Yes. To be precise, my memories are from the time Alicia transferred to Karelia, up to the incident with Veltina.”

“I see. Well, that’s a relief. I’ve always questioned your line of thinking since way before then,” Patrick said curtly.

“And that’s friendship for you,” Mary affirmed. They’d known each other since they were young, so they understood one another well.

Then, Patrick smiled his dazzling smile and declared, “This doesn’t change my impression of you.” How bright and refreshing he looked! Yet at the same time, his smile was oddly shady. Mary didn’t even want to ask what kind of impression he had of her. Yet that in itself was part of their friendship, she concluded.

“Lady Mary...” Alicia called out, having finally calmed down. “You knew about me from the start, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Though I only knew the version of you that existed in the work of fiction.”

“And you knew that I was the lost princess...”

“I did,” Mary confirmed.

Alicia once more contemplated something. Her countenance was serious, and her purple eyes looked sharp. Mary’s chest tightened as she watched the other girl deliberate. She believed in their friendship, but Alicia’s expression clearly showed how foolish she found Mary’s tale. Even if Alicia understood it all, she might question Mary’s actions up until now, considering that Mary had known about her true identity.

What would happen next was entirely up to Alicia. Hence, Mary had no choice but to wait for the girl’s judgment. Mary told herself as much as she looked at Alicia, until the latter finally lifted her head, having reached a conclusion.

“In other words, we’ve been best friends since your past life!”

“No.”

“I see! Does that mean we’ll be best friends in the next life too?!”

“Stop proceeding with your own interpretation,” Mary scolded. “I absolutely refuse to have anything to do with you in three different lives. At least let me have a break for *one* life!”

“No! I’ll definitely be your best friend in our future lives too! And next time, I’ll find you first, Lady Mary!”

“Goodness! This girl is terrifying!” Mary screamed, rushing to hide behind Adi’s back.

But Alicia chased after her, and gripped her hand tightly. “Even if you have such mysterious knowledge, Lady Mary, the fact that we’re best friends is unshakable!”

“Alicia... You’re right,” Mary agreed. “We’re best friends. That won’t be shaken by such a trivial matter.”

“Yes, we’re best frie— We’re sisters at heart!”

“Don’t take the opportunity to go a step further just because I admitted we’re best friends!” Mary slipped her hand free to flick Alicia’s forehead.

Alicia put her hands over her forehead and laughed. Patrick, who’d been watching this in exasperation, smiled wryly and shrugged. It was his usual smile, which was familiar to both girls. Seeing it made Mary feel even more relieved. She exhaled deeply, and right then, someone tugged on her sleeve.

It was Parfette who had approached Mary in this mild-mannered way. She trembled as she looked at Mary, her teary eyes filled with anxiousness. Gainas was next to her to offer support, but he also looked perplexed.

“Lady Mary, I can’t understand the things you said... I’m really sorry...” Parfette appealed.

“There’s no need for that, Parfette. I’m the one who owes you an apology,” Mary responded. “Just like Mauro said, I knew in advance that Gainas would break off your engagement.”

“R-Really...?”

“Yes. But I didn’t say anything... I’m truly sorry.”

If Mary had told Parfette about what would happen, she could’ve saved the girl from being hurt by the cancellation of her engagement. And even if the cancellation itself couldn’t have been avoided, Parfette could’ve at least braced herself for what was coming. Mary apologized to Parfette for that reason.

Despite her initial surprise, Parfette soon smiled warmly and rubbed Mary's arm. "You have nothing to apologize for, Lady Mary. That was a matter between me and Lord Gainas. It only happened because he was so busy with another woman that he neglected his fiancée. That means Lord Gainas loses twenty points! Right, Lord Gainas?!"

"Losing twenty points is painful, but it's due to my own folly, so I'll accept," he said. "I'm sorry that my shallow actions distressed you for so long, Lady Mary." As he apologized, Gainas lowered his head.

Mary smiled wryly at this, while Parfette nestled closer to him. "For your sincere apology, you get thirty points," she told him.

As these conversations went on, the other guests began settling down as well. Some were still confused about the idea of a past life, but upon hearing an explanation of the concept, they simply concluded, "Oh, how strange."

Then, someone would say, "Speaking of strange things, just the other day..." and the topic would change. All the excitement would then shift over to the new matter being discussed.

Not a single person reproached Mary, nor did they call her unfair or a coward. Rather, everyone happily went back to enjoying the party and chatting idly, and the band resumed playing an appropriately light tune. Soon enough, the typical jovial atmosphere returned, as if Mary's announcement had just been another one of the party's entertainment events. If anything, it felt like this particular event had ended rather abruptly; it was paltry in comparison to the roaring success of the Feydellan men's compliment fair.

Mary hadn't expected this outcome. She'd assumed that people would ask for more explanations and barrage her with questions. "Wh-What on earth...? I prepared myself for much more of an uproar..." she muttered before she could stop herself.

Adi, who had stood by her side and supported her the entire time, couldn't take it anymore and burst into laughter. When Mary glared at him, he quickly tried to put up a good front, but the corners of his mouth were still raised.

"How rude of you to laugh at me," she complained. "This was a conflicting and anxiety-inducing announcement for me to make, you know."

“You had no need to feel that way, my lady. I told you from the start that everyone likes you for who you are, and that wouldn’t change even if you told them the truth.”

“Yes, everything turned out just as you said, Adi. You know even more about me than I do. As expected of my husband,” Mary said, praising Adi as she drew close to him.

He gripped her waist a little tighter. Mary allowed this, closing the distance between them entirely as she cuddled up to him. It was hard to tell if they were embracing or snuggling at this point.

Mary felt liberated now that she’d finally disclosed the truth, and everyone’s acceptance relieved her. While those feelings filled her, the way Adi held Mary affirmed his unchanging love for her, which warmed her heart. It was all so very sweet and tender. However...

“But it’s still rude to laugh at your wife’s resolve!” Mary asserted, smoothly slipping out of Adi’s grasp.

“Huh?!” he exclaimed foolishly when he realized his arms were empty. His wife, who’d been cuddling with him just moments ago, had suddenly escaped from him with blinding speed.

Mary smiled mischievously, then quickly raised her hand. “I feel peckish after making that huge announcement. Isn’t there someone who could escort me to some delicious cake?” she asked nobody in particular.

“I will!” Alicia cried out, leaping towards Mary’s outstretched hand with great velocity. The cake was straight ahead. Alicia didn’t run, but she was so happy as she pulled Mary along that she lacked the grace necessary to make this any kind of escort.

“The cake isn’t going anywhere, so escort me properly! This is unsightly!” Mary rebuked.

“The cake may still be there, but its freshness is another matter!” Alicia asserted.

“Hmm, I see... No, stop it! You almost got me to agree with you!” Mary screeched while walking alongside the other girl.

Adi and Patrick watched them leave with dry smiles on their faces before exchanging a look. The former seemed to say, *"We've got a lot of work ahead of us,"* while the latter replied, *"We're in the same boat."* The two were silently showing appreciation for their efforts by signaling each other with their eyes.

The teary Parfette was still quivering, and Gainas soothed her as the two of them walked after the girls. Veltina was pulling on Luke's arm as she exclaimed, "I want to eat cake with big sis too!" Only Carina and Margaret walked elegantly, but they followed Mary as well.

It was as if Mary hadn't made any sort of big announcement. The liveliness was just the same as always.



Mauro was visibly dejected as his father led him out of the party venue and towards their horse-drawn carriage. The party's extravagance and its guest list were both a way for Mary to show off their difference in rank and personal connections. On top of that, she had even made a grand proclamation in front of everyone, detailing her past life memories. In contrast to her, Mauro had lost his composure and barked like a cornered dog; how pointlessly stubborn he'd been, indeed...

It wasn't until he found himself outside, staring at his family's pallid faces, that he finally realized his blunder. But by then, it was much too late.

He'd suffered a crushing defeat. The frustration made his chest seize. However...

"It wasn't only her..." Mauro murmured, the corners of his lips lifting as he watched his father, who was dragging him by the arm.

He recalled what had happened when Mary revealed the truth about her past life. Obviously, the guests had appeared astonished to hear such news, especially since Mary hadn't seemed to be joking when she gave her majestic speech. She had looked composed and beautiful as she spoke, which was exactly what had thrown everyone into a frenzy. Right before Mauro raised his voice to interject, two people in his peripheral vision had caught his attention.

They were Carina and Veltina. While everyone else had looked shocked, those

two had displayed a different disposition. At first, they'd looked just as startled as everyone else, but shortly after, they looked uneasy as they began gauging the crowd's reaction. Carina had seemed especially focused on her friend Margaret's reaction, while Veltina on her fiancé, Luke's.

Afterwards, Mauro had rebutted Mary's speech, leading up to the present. But looking back on it, he realized Carina's and Veltina's expressions had been blatantly obvious. It was as if they, too, had past life memories, and were picturing themselves in Mary's shoes. What substantiated Mauro's theory even more was that both of these girls were characters who had appeared in the otome game's sequel and its related works.

Indeed, it wasn't necessarily the case that Mauro and Mary were the only ones to have recalled their past lives. This meant that Carina and Veltina had past life memories as well.

"It's fine. It'll go better next time..."

They may not have been on House Albert's level, but Carina's and Veltina's families were still large and held a lot of influence. All Mauro had to do now was stay quiet and seem repentant until the situation blew over. Then, he'd approach those two. His first attempt may have been a failure, but he could still use his past life memories to his advantage next time. Things couldn't end with him simply being the youngest of twelve children and getting the smallest share.

Deciding as much, Mauro planned to first apologize to his family and have them arrange for him to remain in Feydella. If he incurred their wrath and they cast him away to someplace far from here, he'd never be able to rise to the top, let alone get close to Carina and Veltina.

But just as Mauro was about to address his father, someone called out from behind, "This party's a very special occasion. Are House Noze taking their leave already?"

"Looks like the party didn't suit their tastes..."

The first voice was so cheerful that it seemed out of place, while the second sounded dark and gloomy. Mauro turned around and then paled immediately. Even his father, whose cheeks had reddened in anger over his son's foolishness,

lost all color in his face. Standing in front of them were Lang and Lucian, with Roberto bringing up the rear.



As one would expect with identical twins, they looked like two peas in a pod, each smiling beautifully. In contrast, Roberto's face was icily blank. This difference in temperatures was enough to give anyone who beheld them a chill. Mauro felt his face and blood run cold.

His father, the head of House Noze, spoke up. "M-My apologies for the disturbance during the party. And I'm sorry to have caused Lady Mary such trouble..." The frailty in his voice made his fear of the trio evident.

However, anyone would've been nervous when faced with the Albert twins. That was all the more so the case for Mauro's father, whose son had threatened the brothers' beloved younger sister. Not to mention, this was right after he'd seen the grand scope of the party, which displayed House Albert's might, so his state of mind must've been unfathomable. He probably wanted to make a run for it. Or, to be more accurate, the twins had stopped him right as he was making his escape.

In response, Lang and Lucian continued smiling like mirror reflections of each other. "Our Mary is magnanimous, so she'd be willing to let things slide," Lang said.

"Our adorable Mary is full of love, so she wouldn't wish a punishment on anyone..." Lucian added.

"Honestly, her kindness and sweetness are troublesome. Sometimes, a harsh punishment is necessary. I'm sure she's got nothing but love in her heart."

"Yeah... Compared to me, her magnificence is dazzling. I'm sure that 'revenge' isn't even in her lexicon—it's filled purely with bright, sunny words..."

The brothers smiled charmingly as they spoke of Mary. They were fawning over her as usual. Their smiles, however, were not the same as usual. Their countenances were perfect reflections of each other: beautiful, but without a hint of warmth. Yet their smiles slowly faded away, replaced by grim expressions. Their eyes were cold, and piercingly sharp.

Anyone would've been at a loss for words now, and the head of House Noze was no different. He could feel the twins' anger radiating from them like cold air, and must've sensed there was no way out after incurring their wrath to this

degree.

Roberto, the only one with the power to resolve this all amicably, stood behind the twins and blankly listened to them speak of Mary. When he finally opened his mouth...

“My foolish brother always falls short at the last moment, so when it comes to a final judgment, I’m sure his kindness would make him go easy on you.”

...it was to lament Adi’s softheartedness as he shrugged his shoulders, exasperated. Nobody offered a counterargument. Lang and Lucian naturally wouldn’t, whereas Mauro and his father were in no position to argue. The trio was dropping dangerous words the likes of “punishment” and “revenge,” and anyone would’ve paled and kept their mouth shut if they’d known it was their family’s future on the line.

Indeed, anyone in high society would’ve been speechless at the thought of what Mauro and his father were going through, and then sighed in relief that it wasn’t them. There were surely no families willing to protect House Noze after they’d made enemies with House Albert, especially given that the main offender was their youngest and lowest-ranking child. Rather than jumping to House Noze’s defense, it was much more beneficial to stay on the Alberts’ side and deepen future relations with them.

Right now, it was as if House Noze were a mere frog being stared down by a snake. This was no ordinary snake either, but the very serpent which reigned over high society. Said serpent glared coolly at House Noze for a while, and a peculiar silence settled over the scene. Sounds of the party carried on the wind, but they didn’t reach the ears of those present here.

Lang sighed, finally breaking the oppressive silence. “Mary and Adi are too lenient when it comes to these things. Alas, it’s a brother’s duty to support his sweet and kind sister from the shadows.”

“Exactly...” Lucian joined in. “There’s no need for her to get her hands dirty; that’s our job. For the sake of protecting her purity, I’ll happily crush a family or two...”

The twins exchanged a glance and nodded at each other, affirming their determination. To outsiders, it would’ve looked like a promise made between

two charming brothers. But contrary to their nonchalant words, the pair were passing judgment on House Noze. Given House Albert's power, one might even call it a death sentence.

The members of House Noze stood still, thinking about what awaited them. "But..." Mauro muttered. He seemed to want to appeal that he'd only threatened Mary and no one else. He couldn't speak clearly, but he falteringly made his argument.

The brothers' eyes only grew sharper. "Mary is aiming to be a leader of the next generation. Once you threaten her, we're obviously going to step in."

"If Mary is to carry our family name, then an insult to her is an insult to House Albert itself... And if you besmirch our family name, you'll have to pay your dues..."

Lang and Lucian made their harsh declarations. Then, they glanced over at Roberto, and Lang ordered, "Now, you continue."

Roberto shrugged in response. His expression said plainly that he had no interest in this. Yet he couldn't blatantly refuse an order from his master, so with no other choice, he slowly turned his gaze to Mauro. One might've expected his rust-colored eyes to emanate a fiery zeal, but instead they were sharp enough to cause a case of the shivers.

"Indeed," he said slowly, putting up a composed front. However, deep within his eyes swirled a quiet fury that caused Mauro's breath to grow shallower with every passing second. Without so much as a greeting, Roberto addressed him. "As a servant, it isn't my place to interject in House Albert's matters. But I'd like to say just one thing." His cold voice became lower with every word as he glared at Mauro.

"Only an older brother has the right to make a fool of his younger brother. That is all," Roberto asserted, his voice carrying an uncharacteristic note of anger. Yet he cleared his throat to conceal it, and quickly ended his speech there. His attitude was painfully insincere. Though the twins smirked at Roberto as if wanting to say something, he ignored them entirely. How easy he was to read right now. But despite his unruffled expression, he seemed somewhat restless. "Let's bring this to an end," he declared, forcing the topic back on

track.

Lang and Lucian, who had been staring at Roberto in an almost teasing manner, now exchanged a look and nodded. Indeed, bringing things to an end took priority now. And what was it that they would be ending?

Why, the insolent house who had tried to threaten House Albert's precious succession candidate, of course.



"Where have you been?" Mary walked up to her brothers when she noticed them appear out of nowhere.

For some reason, the twins looked to be in high spirits, and when Mary stopped in front of them, they patted her head. With Lang and Lucian patting the left and right sides respectively, Mary's head spun around out of her control. What on earth was going on? Mary couldn't comprehend this at all, and opened her mouth to question it.

Her brothers must've read her expression, but they didn't elaborate. They only continued petting her head, making her vision swim.

"Listen, you two... Just like...I said earlier...I have memories of... Stop petting my head..."

"On top of being adorable, our sister has different memories from others!" Lang exclaimed. "Just as expected—that's our adorable Mary, past life memories and all!"

"I'm glad you're...receptive to it...Lang... But stop...petting my head..."

"You're outstanding compared to someone mediocre like me, who only remembers this life..." Lucian said. "You're incredible, Mary, past life memories included!"

"Thank you...Lucian... I'm glad... But seriously...stop...petting...my...head!" Mary dashed away from her brothers, muttering that she felt nauseous.

She was genuinely happy that her brothers were open to the idea of her recalling her past life. They were acting like their usual selves and fawning over her, and she was grateful that their attitudes towards her hadn't changed. But

she couldn't let them keep petting her head. Her brain was spinning around together with all of her past life memories, making her feel nauseous. Hence, she ran from them and headed for Roberto instead.

He looked somewhat radiant, but of course he didn't try to pat Mary's head. "Big brother Roberto, you're allowed to pat my head too, you know?" she told him with a mischievous smile, adding that she'd accept it as long as he didn't do it so much as to make her feel sick.

At first, Roberto looked surprised, before smiling awkwardly. "Perhaps another time," he replied, rejecting the suggestion.

Lang and Lucian requested that Roberto return Mary if he wasn't going to pet her head. Roberto looked exasperated at their words, and placed his hand on Mary's shoulder. He gently rubbed it, perhaps in place of patting her head. "I was surprised to hear your story, Lady Mary, but I'm of the same opinion as Lord Lang and Lord Lucian."

"So you accept that I have past life memories too?"

"Yes, of course. You're still you, so there's no reason for me not to accept it. Besides..." With a composed smile, Roberto lightly pushed Mary—not towards her brothers, but to Adi. She went along with the movement, and this time Adi placed his hand on her shoulder. "Looking at my foolish brother, it's evident at a glance that you haven't changed a bit, Lady Mary."

"Looking at Adi?" Mary inquired.

"Yes. He has always looked only to you, long before you ever recalled your past life. Yet nothing has changed about him now, and he still only has eyes for you. That's the ultimate proof that you are still the same Lady Mary as always," Roberto explained calmly.

Mary nodded in understanding. It was the same thing Adi had told her before: that she was still herself, regardless of her past life memories, and that his love for her was proof of that. And this wasn't just validation for the two of them, as it had also become evidence for others. That was embarrassing, yet it made her feel happy at the same time.

Mary looked up at Adi to find him glaring at Roberto with an uncomfortable

countenance. His cheeks were quite flushed. “He’s saying this in front of everyone on purpose...”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said Mary. “I think it’s a beautiful story.”

“A beautiful story?”

“That’s right. Everyone who looks at you will see me reflected in your eyes. You’re a mirror that reflects me, Adi,” Mary explained ecstatically, snuggling close to him. She looked up at Adi to show him that just putting his hand on her shoulder wasn’t enough.

Adi’s expression broke into a broad smile. His hand slid down to her waist, pulling her gently into his arms. Mary allowed him to do so, stepping closer. The air between the two turned sweet in an instant, and they seemed on the verge of kissing. The thoughtful onlookers smiled wryly and walked away...with one exception.

“Alicia, how about you interrupt those two and ask Mary for a dance? I think she’s in the mood for some dancing right about now. Call it a childhood friend’s intuition,” Patrick claimed, attempting to destroy Mary and Adi’s coupley time.

“Really? To me, it seems like she and Adi are gazing at each other...” Alicia said in confusion, glancing between Mary and Patrick.

Lang and Lucian joined the pair, bearing impish smirks. “Princess Alicia, it’s just as Patrick says,” Lang spoke up. “Mary really wants to dance right now—with *you*, her best friend! As her older brother, I would know. So go on, break them up and carry Mary off to the dance floor!”

“Yeah, Mary’s just waiting to be invited for a dance...” Lucian said. “But not by us... It looks like she’s waiting for someone to sweep her away. I would know. We can’t sweep her away, but you, Princess Alicia, are a different story...!”

The twins instigated Alicia with their exaggerated speech. She looked even more confused, glancing between Mary and Adi, Patrick, and Lang and Lucian. Her head jerked around as she turned from one person to another. Finally, her eyes landed on Roberto, who was coolly observing this exchange.

Sensing Alicia’s state of mind, he smiled and nodded. “Have fun, Lady Alicia.”

His words affirmed the other men's statements, which was the final push Alicia needed. "All right!" she said enthusiastically, before rushing over to Mary and Adi. She burst right into their saccharine air while exclaiming, "Sorry to keep you waiting! It's time to dance!"

With that, she grabbed Mary's hand and pulled her away. Her swiftness was out of this world. Adi could only stand there dumbstruck for a moment as he witnessed his wife's kidnapping. Then, he snapped back to his senses and chased after the girls. As for Mary, she was unable to offer up any meaningful resistance, and could only scream furiously.

"Please, Alicia! Let us be alone for a little longer—I'm begging you!" Adi negotiated pathetically.

"Exactly! And it's not like I was waiting around for you!!!" Mary followed up, enraged.

Just like that, the sweet atmosphere from before was gone, leaving behind a ruckus. Naturally, those who had instigated Alicia watched on while smiling in satisfaction for achieving their aims. A group of young, beautiful men smiling mischievously was like something out of a painting, but at the same time, they looked a bit like a bunch of kids celebrating a successful prank.

"Past life memories have nothing to do with our friendship... How standoffish of you not to tell me this whole time," Patrick muttered, as if declaring that this was his revenge for that. The others nodded in agreement at his implicit meaning, before all of them followed after Mary and the others.

Epilogue

Mary was in her room within Albert Manor. A large pile of letters lay atop her well-made desk. The senders were many, but all the envelopes were addressed to her. Next to them was an even bigger pile of presents, but that wasn't even the main one. Mary had gotten so many presents that they had to be stored in a different room, and those on her desk were just the most notable gifts, which she had picked out and placed here.

The letters and presents were all expressions of gratitude for the party she'd hosted a few days ago. Once Mary and the others had returned home from Feydella, the items had begun pouring in one after another, and even though only a few days had passed, this was the state of things. More were still arriving, as Mary often saw servants and maids carrying boxes around.

Adi came in with four letters in hand. He walked up to Mary, who was lounging in bed, and placed them on top of her stomach. Ten envelopes were already piled up on her abdomen.

"They're all being very conscientious..." she remarked.

"Of course. Nobody wants to miss out on this opportunity, given that this was the first party of House Albert's next generation," Adi said. "The letters I brought just now were from the same family, but the head, the wife, and their two children sent them individually."

"I wish they'd just get along with each other and send everything in one letter..." Mary muttered hoarsely, picking up one of the envelopes from atop her abdomen and opening it.

The letter began with an inoffensive greeting. It went on to compliment the party, Mary as the hostess, and her brothers' assistance, concluding with the desire to create a good relationship between their families. All the letters that had arrived recently sounded the exact same, with only minor differences here and there.

I wonder if they're using some kind of template... Mary mused as she picked up another envelope. The thought of seeing the same old contents depressed her, but reading these messages was her duty as the hostess. Answering the letters and sending gifts in return were all an extension of the party.

“This one’s the same too... Ah, but the wife mentioned my past life memories.”

“What did she say?” Adi inquired.

“It says, ‘I’d love to hear more about your miraculous knowledge, Lady Mary. As such, I’d like to invite you to a tea party...’ I see, so it’s a tea party invitation,” Mary said with a massive sigh, placing the letter back onto her stomach. As she went to sit up, Adi retrieved the pile of envelopes and handed her a cup of tea instead, before seating himself on the edge of the bed.

Many of the letters did indeed mention Mary’s grave announcement. There were a variety of reactions: some people expressed their shock, others their curiosity, and yet others explained how the news had stirred their emotions. Yet in spite of this variety, the letters didn’t show more than a polite interest. The senders were mostly looking for a way to strike up a friendship with her by saying they’d like to know more details about her past life memories.

While expressing how they’d like to hear more, some people even went as far as to request that Mary bring her friends along too. Mary alone apparently wasn’t enough for them, as they listed off other important figures whom they wished to befriend, like Princess Alicia; her husband, Patrick; and Gainas. Mary could only admire their avarice.

That was the extent of everyone’s reaction to Mary’s past life recollections. They only saw it as an excuse to invite her to parties and other events. Even the letters from Mary’s friends were similar in nature.

Parfette’s letter had a few blots on it (she must’ve cried while writing it because of how badly she wanted to see Mary again). In it, she’d asked, “Do you have memories of sweets and cakes that we don’t have here?”

Meanwhile, Gainas had gone in an even worse direction, as he had written, “Is the secret sauce from your migratory bird restaurant an idea from your past life?”

(In her reply to him, Mary had written, “Minus ten points,” all over the letter.)

Ninety percent of Margaret’s letter was just her fawning over Bernard. Dutifully, Mary had read everything until the end, before weakly picking up a pen and feebly whispering, “*I have to reply to this, don’t I...?*” It had been arguably the most mind-boggling letter of Mary’s life.

Alicia’s letter had been as erratic as expected, and it mostly amounted to her inviting Mary for tea to hear more about Mary’s past life. It was the exact same thing Mary had already read countless times. So many of the letters piled up on her desk had these very same themes.

But one difference was that Alicia had visited Albert Manor to deliver her letter in person. Once she’d handed Mary the envelope, Alicia had clasped Mary’s hand and pulled her along back to the palace. In the end, Mary had read Alicia’s letter during the very tea party that the letter was inviting her to. Mary hadn’t even felt like replying, and settled for stealing a bite from Alicia’s cake.

Lang and Lucian had responded in the same way. Though they’d claimed that they wanted to hear more about Mary’s past life, they had just ended up chatting idly away from beginning to end. Towards the end of the conversation, the twins had even brought out a map and started discussing where they should do their next inspection.

“I was so anxious over revealing it, yet this is all it amounts to for everyone,” Mary said with a sigh at this anticlimactic conclusion.

Adi, who was sitting next to her, smiled wryly. “That’s because they all treasure the present you more than that of your past life, milady. You are who you are.”

“I am who I am, huh?”

“And I’ll keep supporting you so that you can continue to be yourself,” Adi added, causing Mary to smile. His hand wrapped around her waist. Those hands had always supported her until now, and they would continue to do so forever. How warm and reliable they were.

Adi had stood by her side and supported her when they’d been mistress and servant. He did so even after she had recalled her past life and acted based on

those memories. And now that they were married, he was still here, holding her close and supporting her. If she continued to be herself, then Adi would continue to remain by her side. This had been their relationship from the very beginning, and past life memories wouldn't change a thing.

"It's as you say, Adi—I'll just be myself. So I suppose we can stick to 'milady' for the time being," Mary said with an impish smile.

"Milady," Adi called out, and she placed a light kiss upon his lips.

Look to the Future, Not the Past

Ever since Mary had returned from Feydella, her days were very busy. She'd finished responding to the thank-you letters for the party, but now she started getting replies to her replies, so she had to deal with those. Amid all of that, she continued receiving invitations to events and tea parties too.

Of course, she couldn't neglect her schoolwork or the management of her restaurant. She also couldn't lose to her brothers when it came to studying to become the next heir, or at diplomacy. As such, she barely had the time to breathe.

However, Mary had been prepared for all of that. She'd known from the start that hosting such a massive party would excite high society. On top of that, she'd publicly revealed her past life memories during the party, so now her busyness was out of the ordinary.

Still, even Mary Albert was prone to complaining in face of such busyness.

"I was so busy today that I didn't have any time to rest again," Mary muttered bitterly during her after-dinner time with Adi.

Since it was a pleasant evening, she'd requested to have tea and dessert outside. The moon and stars were twinkling in the sky, which should've made the tea taste better than ever. Thankfully, the moon wasn't jealous of Mary tonight, and there were no clouds for it to hide behind.

Yet Mary wasn't captivated by this scenery, which was a testament to her exhaustion. Reflecting on the day she'd had, she could only sigh. After exhaling deeply, she took a sip of her tea. It was as sweet as always, seeping into her body alongside the realization that she could finally unwind.

"We've had a constant stream of visitors today, so you must be tired," Adi commented. "There were also all those scholars who wanted to ask about your past life."

"Yes. Past life memories are valuable knowledge, so it's no wonder they were

fascinated. But...I'm not sure why they felt the need to ask for Alicia and Patrick to be there."

"I'm sure they had their reasons. Karelia Academy's principal came too, didn't he?"

"My past life memories are related to the academy, so he wanted to hear more about them. But...I do think it's strange that he requested for my brothers and father to be present as well."

"Well..."

"And for some reason, all the scholars and the principal ended up drinking tea. None of them even talked about my past life during that whole time," Mary added with a confused frown, while Adi gave an awkward and evasive response.

The guests had all initially asked Mary about her past life, but the topic would then (very quickly, in fact) shift to something else. They'd ask Alicia and Patrick about the state of the country, while the head of House Albert and the twins received questions about the family heirship. They had also asked Mary for her future diplomacy plans following her trip to Feydella. Before long, nobody was talking about Mary's past life, and if anything, the scholars exhibited greater interest during the other discussions. Their curiosity had been just an excuse for them to visit Albert Manor.

Concluding as much, Mary sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "Are they really not interested in my past life memories? I mean, I also have precognition!"

"Even so, that's all water under the bridge now. Rather than the past, everyone's looking to the future," Adi responded.

"I suppose so... But I'm still dissatisfied," Mary declared with a pout.

Adi burst into laughter. He hid his mouth behind his hand, but his shoulders trembled, which only heightened Mary's displeasure. She expressed her unhappiness by stealing one of his cookies. Noticing this, Adi hurriedly apologized. Yet he was still laughing, causing Mary's scowl to deepen.

"How rude! Perhaps I should summon my brothers? I'm sure if I raised my voice and complained that you're laughing at me, they'd swoop right in."

“A-Anything but that...! H-Here, Your Ladyship, have another serving of tea! Should I bring more snacks too?!” Adi proposed, trying to lift Mary’s mood. His panic was understandable, since if Mary called for her brothers, they were sure to appear in a flash. He didn’t want to think of what they’d do if they found out he had been rude to their beloved younger sister. Adi knew it’d be much worse than just stomping on his foot; his face paled.

Mary felt better upon seeing his reaction, and smirked as she made a show of making up her mind. In the mood for mischief, she took a deep breath. “Lang, Lu—!”

“Milady! It’s gotten so cold! How about we go back inside?!” Adi exclaimed, springing to his feet with a clatter. He hurried over to Mary’s side while urging her to go back to the mansion, surmising that she wouldn’t call her brothers if they did that.

His desperation lifted Mary’s mood even more. “Hmm, should we?” she mused purposefully, imploring Adi to keep trying.

Adi picked up on that; he placed his hand on her shoulder and rubbed it gently. Mary’s heart throbbed when his masculine, thick-knuckled fingers twined around her silver locks.

“I don’t mind going back, but it’s still early,” she continued. “Maybe we should stop by my brothers’ room first. I’m sure they’d listen to me talk about my past life memories.” Mary smirked and got to her feet. She listed each topic she wanted to discuss while Adi stared at her with a grave expression.

His eyes seemed to be asking, *“Is your past life truly the only thing you want to discuss with them?”* He must’ve had misgivings about her intentions, worried that Mary would accidentally mention how rude he had been to her (which would, of course, be a very purposeful accident). Mary was aware of his fears, which was why she was putting on airs.

Adi’s hand untwined from around her hair, before he touched her cheek. His thumb traced her lips, which were curved into a wicked smile. “How about we go to *my* room instead, my lady?”

“I appreciate the invitation, but unfortunately I have to refuse. Your ‘lady’ is off to visit her brothers,” Mary replied with a giggle.

Adi smiled as well, leaning in closer. “Don’t be so mean, Mary. Let’s go to my room, and talk about the future rather than the past,” he whispered into her ear, his voice a little lower than usual. It held an unexplainable charm, which matched well with the darkness of the evening.

Mary’s heart instantly throbbed hotly at this sweet exchange, and her heartbeats reverberated throughout her body. Urged by that sound, she moved closer and rested her head against Adi’s chest. In response, Adi’s hand slid down from her cheek to her waist. He lightly pulled her closer, then started walking. Matching her steps to his, Mary walked alongside Adi. They were headed for his room.

“The future is more important than the past. Rather than my past life memories, I should consider where I’ll wake up tomorrow morning,” Mary asserted with a laugh.

Adi smiled wryly at her words, and nodded.

Afterword

Hello, everyone, this is Saki.

Thank you for buying the sixth volume of *Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster*!

Back in the first volume, Mary used to deny her friendship with Alicia with all her might. But now, she calls Alicia her best friend, and she can take action because of her faith in their bond. And though Mary used to be so ignorant when it came to romantic love, now she can drift along on cloud nine. She has truly grown a lot.

What did you think about Mary and her friends' story this time?

Thank you to Haduki Futaba for the illustrations. I'd also like to thank my manager.

More than anything, to everyone who reads this volume: thank you very much!

The manga's being published right now, so I hope you enjoy it as well.

Saki

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 6

by Saki

Translated by Ray Krycki Edited by Casey Pritt

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