

8

YOUNG
LADY ALBERT
IS **COURTING**
DISASTER

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba



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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

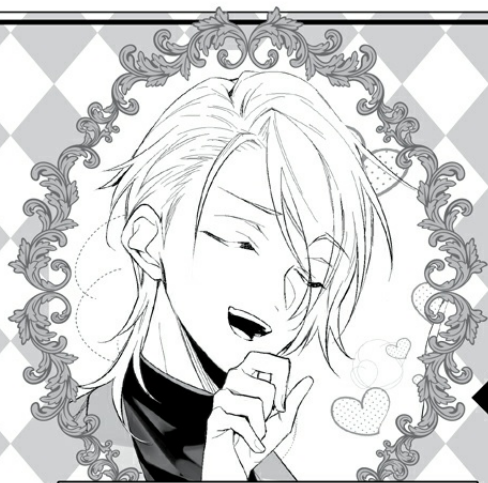
Heroine of the otome game. A princess of peasant origins.

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



Roxanne

Mary and Adi's daughter.

Trait: Softly fluttering snail-shell spirals

Child



Roberto

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

Trait: Curbs House Albert's charades

Gainas Eldland

Parfette's husband.

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

Parfette Eldland

Daughter of House Marquis. Gainas's wife.

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



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Prologue

“I did it!” shouted a little girl while raising an envelope high up in the air. The paper was beautiful, yet the address upon it was shoddily written, and there was a crooked drawing of a flower on the side of it. All this clumsiness made it evident at a glance that the girl had done everything herself.

There were a few other envelopes atop the table, which she had also made. For an adult, writing letters was more of a simple pastime, but for a child, it was quite the laborious task. The little girl exhaled deeply and wiped her brow, proudly showing off her work. She rotated her neck as if to imply her shoulders felt stiff, causing her silver curls to move softly in response.

“I knew I’d do a good job!” she said, boastfully praising herself. Next, she hurriedly slid off of her chair, grabbed the envelopes, and triumphantly walked out of the room.



“You want to deliver these letters by yourself?” Mary asked, unable to hide her surprise.

The little girl nodded enthusiastically. Her rust-colored eyes glimmered, and her chubby cheeks were a bit flushed. She was overflowing with confidence. Mary knew the expression upon the child’s face meant that she had made up her mind and would see her idea through to the end no matter what.

All Mary managed to get out was “But...” before the girl interrupted her, as if anticipating the rest of the statement.

“It’s okay!” she reassured Mary, drawing closer and standing on her tiptoes to make up for the height difference between them. She hadn’t interrupted Mary out of malice—rather, she simply couldn’t suppress her own excitement. If anything, it was impressive that she was still in the room, since she might as well have run off with the envelopes in hand. “I’m already six years old! I can go out by myself!”

“But there are many dangers outside,” Mary argued. “A stranger might try speaking to you. Wouldn’t that scare you?”

“Nope! I’ll punch them in the flank!”

Mary paused. “I wonder whose influence this is? How awful... Anyway, leaving that aside, what if you get lost on the way?”

“I’ll go by carriage, so that won’t happen! And I’ll bring a map with me too!”

“That’s fine, but at the very least let me and your father go with yo—”

“No! I’ll be okay!” the girl asserted, exiting the room without regard for Mary’s attempts to stop her. The child was so full of energy that Mary could only stare after her, dumbfounded. In fact, “exiting” felt like too lukewarm of a term to use here; it would’ve been more accurate to say the child had shot out of the room instead.

Mary reached out her arm in vain, her fingers grasping the vacant air. She drew it back, then shrugged and let out a deep sigh. “Year by year, she’s becoming more reckless and single-minded...” she grumbled with exasperation.

Someone chuckled at her words, and she glared in their direction. It was Adi, who quickly hid his mouth behind his hand when he noticed Mary’s glower. His gesture was incredibly put-on.

“There, there,” he soothed her, touching her shoulder. He gently rubbed it, but Mary didn’t let herself get caught up in the moment, smacking his hand away to show her objection. Naturally, this didn’t put Adi off in the slightest, and if anything, his smile grew larger. Instead of drawing his hand away, he pulled Mary closer. “She’ll be fine. I’ll inform the driver of what’s going on, and we can follow her carriage.”

“How can you be so relaxed about this?” Mary questioned. “Aren’t you worried about her?”

“Of course I am. However...” Adi looked to the door through which the girl had disappeared, and shrugged.

Most likely, she was walking enthusiastically through the mansion at this very moment, grinning proudly with her chest puffed out, all while her silver ringlets

swayed softly. She was sure to exclaim, “I’m going on an errand all by myself!” to any passing servants or maids.

They’d in turn say things like “Wow!” and “How incredible!” only emboldening her further.

The first thing she’d do is go to her room and change into her pink and white dress. Then, she’d put on a matching bonnet, and start choosing what to put into her white pochette with the gold embroidery. This outfit was her favorite lately.

All dressed up to go out, she’d triumphantly walk through the estate, her strides longer than usual on account of her pride. Her silver hair would sway elegantly the entire time.

Adi could easily picture her every move. After all...

“She’s just like you when you were her age,” he told Mary, looking to her for agreement.

Mary had no idea how to respond. His words made her happy, but they also irked her. If she agreed, she’d be admitting that *she* had been reckless and single-minded when she was younger. It was embarrassing, considering how Mary had behaved a few minutes ago. She was throwing stones while living in a glass house.

However, she couldn’t hide any part of her childhood from Adi. He knew her better than her parents or brothers—better than Mary knew herself, even.

She didn’t feel like nodding along, but she was aware of how she used to be in her youth, just a little bit. Really, only three or maybe four of her memories applied here. *That’s exactly why I should take the offensive now*, she decided.

“Of course she is!” Mary declared with a huff, flipping her hair from her shoulder. “She’s my daughter, after all. It’s only natural that she resembles me, no?” she prompted, causing Adi to smile wryly and nod. She pursed her lips at the adoring way he gazed at her. His smile was as composed as ever, even while she poked him in the chest with her finger. “But she’s also *your* daughter, so her recklessness and her one-track mind might have come from you, don’t you think?”

Adi's smile grew even more at her question.



Roxanne Albert was Mary and Adi's firstborn, and the start of House Albert's new generation. She had beautiful silver hair like her mother, and deep rust-colored eyes like her father. Her cheerful smile was as lovely as the sun, and if she stood still, she looked like a figure right out of a gorgeous painting. She could easily capture anyone's heart.

Her little body was crammed full of adorableness, as she often tried to act like a grown-up, complaining to her stuffed animals that she was sick of being treated like a child.

Roxanne had turned six just a few days ago, a fact which made her incredibly proud. The way she insisted that this made her an adult only amplified her cuteness. *I can't believe she's already this big...* Mary found herself thinking all the time, amazed at her precious daughter's growth.

"I can track her growth just by walking through the mansion... I see there's yet another new portrait," Mary said with a sigh, stopping to look at the painting hanging on the wall.

A beautiful little girl was smiling in the frame. The painter had used watercolors, giving the painting that delicate look, along with an ambiguous, fantastical background. It looked like an illustration from a book of fairy tales. The girl's silver hair, which appeared pale due to the paint, reflected the pink of her cheeks. Her eyes were gazing back at the viewer happily, as if she were on the verge of reaching her hand out towards them.

Needless to say, it was a painting of Roxanne.

Next to it was another, depicting Roxanne sitting in a swing, and on the other side was a painting of her right around the time she was born. The paintings weren't all done exclusively in watercolor, but using various methods and styles, and were displayed all over Albert Manor. (This didn't apply exclusively to the interior either, as currently the castle Roxanne had made out of dirt a few days ago was being safeguarded in the gardens.)

"Lord Lang and Lord Lucian summon an artist to paint Roxanne any time they

notice a free space,” Adi remarked. “My brother’s the one who makes the arrangements, so everything happens very quickly...”

“This is no longer Albert Manor. This is the Roxanne Historical Museum,” Mary replied. “Wait! The paintings that used to be here have been replaced with Roxanne’s animal drawings!”

“And here’s a display of her origami. Just how much did this frame cost...?” Adi muttered, staring at the lavish frame, the center of which housed a slightly clumsy origami figure. He could only describe this as surrealism. The apparent skill gap between the craftsmanship of the frame and what it displayed was so large that he could almost find an avant-garde artistry to it.

As for Mary, even if these items hadn’t been her daughter’s creations and she had seen them on display in another family’s mansion, she would still have gazed at them with a smile. In a hoarse voice, she would’ve praised them by saying, *“This is what love looks like.”*

Alas, everything here *had* been made by Roxanne—her beloved daughter and the cutest little girl in the whole world.

“She really is adorable. She looks so good in both watercolor and oil paints that I think every artist should try depicting her at least once,” Mary declared.

“I’m in full agreement with you,” Adi responded. “Just look at this origami. Roxanne has such tiny hands, yet she managed to fold this lovely flower. She must be a genius.”

Indeed, both of them had the same opinion when it came to the Roxanne Historical Museum. Of course, if Roxanne were to ever exclaim, *“I’m embarrassed!”* they would close the museum down instantly. However, that hadn’t been the case. In actuality, when Roxanne’s drawing or origami folding went well, she’d jump up and down and hold her creation out, shouting, *“Hang this one up too!”*

“Our sweet little Roxanne is going all by herself to hand out the invitations... I’m worried,” said Mary. “I have to go with her.”

“She insisted on going alone, but I’m sure nobody will listen to her. Ah, how nostalgic...” Adi trailed off. Apparently, when Mary was little, she had

proclaimed she would be going on an errand by herself too. When Adi asked if she remembered it, she nodded with discontent...

Back then, Mary was six years old, just like Roxanne. On that particular day, Albert Manor had hosted guests since the early morning. They were a married couple who had long been friends with her father, and Mary had seen them numerous times before. Each time they saw her, they'd compliment her and tell her how fast she was growing. They were kind people.

The guests had lunch with the Alberts, and left before evening. However, the woman had forgotten one of her gloves. Usually, they would've just sent a servant to take it to her, but little Mary, whose growth the couple had praised so much, volunteered to deliver it herself.

"I'm already a wonderful lady! I can do an errand by myself!" she declared, and flew out of the room without listening to her parents', brothers', or even Adi's protests. She then proudly went to her room, picked out her favorite dress to change into, and exultantly boarded a carriage. All the while, her silver ringlets had rocked to and fro...

The more Mary looked back, the more she realized Roxanne was just like her. "I see. Persuading her not to do it will be impossible," she admitted reluctantly. "But I can't let my child wander off all by herself. I know she'll be going via carriage, but something could happen on the way."

"That's why I think we should follow her," Adi said, adding that they ought to be secretive about it.

Mary frowned, wondering if that would work. She obviously wanted to go, but if Roxanne noticed them, her self-esteem would be wounded. It *was* troublesome that the child had decided to leave without listening to her parents, but this was part of her growth. Mary couldn't disregard that, no matter how worried she was.

Such was the source of her concern. Raising children was difficult, so she agonized over every single decision. Her room had a mountain of books about childcare, but would any of them include advice on what to do when one's child decided to go on an errand by themselves? Once Mary started thinking about child-rearing, her anxieties would mount, and on many occasions she had spent

the whole night reading through the books in search of answers.

Yet right now, she didn't have time to read a book from cover to cover. There was no right answer when it came to raising children, and in the time one spent worrying, the child grew up.

When Mary asked what she should do, Adi smiled and gently rubbed her shoulder, his eyes gazing into hers. "You're overthinking it, Mary. Roxanne won't notice us following her. Besides, children do have to run errands on their own eventually. Everything ended well back when you did it, remember?"

"True..." Mary said, her shoulders relaxing as she breathed a sigh of relief. She'd been so worried, yet his words made all of her apprehension vanish instantly. Instead, her heart was filled with unfiltered joy at the growth of her child.

She and Adi would follow Roxanne and watch over her. That they would get to witness their daughter's growth together made Mary euphoric.

"I'm sure everything will go well if you say so, Adi. Let's watch over her together."

"Indeed. I mean, back then you didn't notice either— Ahem, never mind. Let's go."

"Wait, did you follow me on that errand?" Mary asked.

"A carriage of simple make is best for the purposes of tailing someone. We should borrow Lord Lang and Lord Lucian's getaway vehicle. The exterior is plain, but the interior is first-class. How nostalgic... When we were tailing you, we also got onto the getaway vehi— Never mind."

"You did follow me, didn't you? And not just you, by the sounds of it. So even back then, my brothers had a getaway carriage, huh?" Mary asked, continuously pestering Adi.

But he pretended not to hear. "Let's get ready," he said before vacating the room. He was practically running away.

Mary glared at the door for a while after he'd left, before concluding, "Well, I suppose he and my brothers wouldn't have been able to just sit and wait for my

return.” With a shrug, she followed Adi outside.

Chapter 1

Roxanne's carriage rocked gently. The interior was stuffed to the brim with high-quality cushions, which Adi had bought one after another when Mary was pregnant. Mary had been certain that once the child was born, Adi's cushion mania would settle down, but if anything, his condition had only deteriorated further. He'd managed to build up techniques and contacts for getting cushions on the daily, to the point that he was basically a cushion collector.

"I can't tell if our carriages are supposed to transport people or cushions..." Mary complained with a sigh, picking up one of said cushions. Her and Adi's vehicle was following Roxanne's, both of which were filled with numerous cushions.

The one Mary had picked up was a new addition, and when she glanced at Adi, he nonchalantly informed her, "It arrived just the other day." Worse yet, he even began explaining all about its stuffing and design in detail. He really *was* a collector.

"I take it that House Albert is steadily collecting all of the world's cushions," Mary commented.

"Oh, of course not. I still have a long way before I can boast of doing that!"

"That wasn't a compliment, so stop acting all humble."

"Honestly, if my comrades heard you make that claim, I'd be a laughingstock. But I'm sure one day I'll get there, together with them all...!"

"Wait, is there a cushion community?! Are you and your comrades going global?!" Mary questioned, surprised by such lofty ambitions. However, Adi's amused laugh told her that he must've been joking (though, that wasn't necessarily guaranteed either).

Still, realizing how much he was enjoying himself, Mary glared at him. She then punched the cushion she'd been holding, but Adi just smiled, unperturbed. He didn't appear to be offended by her action. Mary sighed in exasperation,

flipping her hair off her shoulders.

“What if the world suffers a cushion shortage and House Albert takes the blame?” she inquired. “We might actually fall into ruin this time, because of our cushion monopoly.”

“That won’t happen. If somebody tried to sue us, it’d be the same as suing the royal family, and the country would collapse,” Adi reasoned, gazing out of the window with a dry smile. Mary did the same, watching as Roxanne stepped out of the carriage a little ways ahead of them.

The child walked slowly down the ramp, holding the driver’s hand for support. Her conduct was ladylike and elegant. *When did she become so calm and collected?* Mary mused, involuntarily tearing up at the sight.

When was the last time Mary had called out, “*Wait, you’ll fall!*” only to watch her excitable daughter fly out of the carriage anyway? Huh, Mary could’ve sworn it was the day before yesterday!

Regardless, Roxanne began gleefully heading towards a building that was even more lavish than Albert Manor: the royal palace. This place made ordinary citizens and aristocrats alike nervous, and feel the need to adjust their attire. Alas, Roxanne had come here often ever since she was a baby, so she wasn’t anxious in the slightest. She acted as if she were visiting relatives.

That said, she was neither frolicking nor sprinting towards the palace. Quite the opposite—bearing the mighty responsibility of her errand on her shoulders, she was conducting herself with even more primness than usual.

She’s so cute! Mary thought, pressing her hand to her chest. She wanted nothing more than to rush over to Roxanne and hug her, but she managed to stop herself. That would have to wait until they were back at Albert Manor.

“Children grow up so fast, don’t they, Adi? Just look at that dignified walk of hers!” Mary fawned. “I feel like it wasn’t so long ago that she’d jump out of the carriage and hop up and down in excitement, hurrying us along to the palace... Huh, when did that happen again?”

“That was the day before yesterday,” Adi replied. “How nostalgic...!”

“Such growth in just two days! That’s my daughter for you!”

“Look! The maids are greeting her, and now she’s holding her skirt and curtsying!”

Having stepped out of their carriage, Mary and Adi were whispering to each other as they cowered in the shadows and observed their daughter. They would’ve seemed like a very bizarre couple to any onlookers, and the sight of the suspicious duo did startle the passing staff members. But after their initial surprise wore off and they recognized the pair, the staff instantly let down their guard. Once they realized Roxanne was present, the servants smiled wryly and even played along.

I’m glad they’re quick on the uptake, Mary thought with gratitude.

“Roxanne!” someone shouted with delight, and soon enough Alicia rushed out of the palace. Patrick was beside her too.

Roxanne took a few steps closer to the couple, gathered her skirts, and curtsied. Her conduct was so graceful that Mary and Adi—still hidden—couldn’t stop themselves from sending her a round of applause.

“Good day, Lady Alicia and Lord Patrick.”

“Good day, Roxanne!” Alicia responded. “You look as cute as ever!”

“Sorry I came so sudde— I mean, my apologies for the unexpected visit. I got somethi— I brought over something for you. I’m here to make an en...in...inquiry.” Roxanne delivered her greeting politely, despite the occasional verbal stumble. When she finished speaking, she looked up and exhaled proudly, perhaps feeling accomplished.

The little girl was utterly adorable, and Alicia’s expression melted more and more as she listened. She looked to be on the verge of embracing Roxanne.

In contrast, Patrick just barely managed to keep up an appearance of calm. However, when Roxanne said, “Hold on,” then turned away and glanced down at a memo (it must’ve been a cheat sheet she’d secretly prepared on how to speak like a lady), Patrick couldn’t endure it, and his shoulders started shaking.

“Um, what do I say next...? I’m here to make an inquiry... Huh?” Roxanne tilted her head, wondering if she’d already said this part. Her silver ringlets fluttered with the movement. Alicia’s expression crumbled even further, and

Patrick's smile deepened.

"R-Right, so what did you bring for us, Roxanne?" he prompted gently.

Roxanne had been fixated upon her memo, but his question made her snap back to reality. She quickly hid her cheat sheet in her pochette so that the pair wouldn't see it, and then laughed elegantly to gloss it over. Alicia let out a strained sound, while Patrick's expression softened with affection, as though he were gazing at his own daughter.

The child opened her pochette again and took out two letters, reverently holding them out to the couple.

"What's this?"

"These are invitations for the party House Albert is hosting this month. I would be delighted to have you two attend...in attendance...so I brought the letters...in person...?"

"You mean, 'I'd like you two to attend, so I brought the letters over personally'?"

"Yes, that!" Roxanne's expression brightened when Patrick spoke on her behalf. In her mind, she was the one who'd just finished that statement. She looked proud, and puffed out her chest as if to say she'd just successfully completed a task.

The gesture was so cute that Alicia trembled in agony. When Roxanne held out the letter to her, Alicia grasped her tiny hand instead. The child giggled, as if that tickled her. She'd been trying to act mature, yet now she smiled brilliantly and exclaimed, "That tickles!"

At that moment, Alicia swept Roxanne up in a hug. Her cuteness endurance had reached its limit. Although Alicia was a slender woman of petite frame, Roxanne was even smaller, being a child. The embrace enveloped her entirely, but even so, she held the letter out through a gap between their bodies.

"This one's for you, Lord Patrick...!"

"Right, thanks for bringing it over. Alicia, you should let her go now."

"Five more minutes! Five more minutes!" Alicia argued like a grumpy child.

Meanwhile, Roxanne remained perfectly calm and even said, “I can spare five minutes.”

It was hard to tell which of them was the real child here, and Patrick’s shoulders sank. “Still, I can’t believe you made these invitations by hand, *and* brought them over personally,” he said.

“My mother always says that you have to give important invitations directly! And this party’s very special, because we’re making a wonderful announcement!” the child explained.

“A wonderful announcement, you say? I see, so this is about the migratory bird restaurant,” Patrick concluded. “It’s about time you branched out. What’s next? Beef? No, this is Mary we’re talking about, so she might come up with something seafood-base—”

“My, Lord Patrick! We wouldn’t make an announcement about the restaurant during a *party!*” Roxanne said with an elegant laugh, interpreting Patrick’s words as a joke.

“But in the past, your mother...” Patrick started to say something, then suddenly picked up that someone’s gaze was on him and looked up...before shutting his mouth. He noticed Mary staring at him from her hiding spot in the distance.

A great pressure emanated from her, and he thought he could hear her say, “*Don’t you dare tell my daughter such unnecessary things!*”



Patrick decided that was a wise policy and nodded slightly. “Never mind; it’s an old story,” he said, smoothing over his words. His smile was as handsome as always, and it sparkled even more than usual in his attempt to change the topic. His dazzle hadn’t diminished yet—if anything, it was getting stronger with each year.

Even the little Roxanne’s cheeks flushed at that. (As a side note, at that moment Patrick could’ve sworn he heard Adi say, *“Please don’t sparkle so much around my daughter.”*)

“So you came here all by yourself?” Patrick prompted.

“Yes! This is my first time out on my own, but I’ll see things through!” Roxanne declared.

“I’m still a bit worried, though. I’ll get one of our staff to go with yo—”

“I’ll be fine!” Roxanne insisted, vigorously rejecting Patrick’s proposal.

The man once more glanced to where Mary and Adi were hidden. They both shrugged and shook their heads in unison. Judging from their exasperation, he understood that their attempts at changing Roxanne’s mind had failed.

“Right, so that’s why they’re shadowing her...” Patrick muttered under his breath. Of course, Roxanne didn’t pick up on it. “Sorry, Roxanne, but do you mind if I step away for a bit?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Thanks. Look after Alicia for a while,” he said jokingly.

The girl giggled. “Leave it to me,” she said, trying to sound like a grown-up, and her words caused him to smile.

Alicia was dissatisfied with being treated like a child, but she didn’t let go of Roxanne. “Let’s head into the garden,” she suggested, full of enthusiasm.

Once they were gone, Patrick exhaled deeply. Then, he headed right on over to Mary and Adi’s hiding spot.

“Oh dear,” Mary murmured upon seeing his expression as he beelined towards them. Earlier when he’d been talking to the little girl, he was

glimmering, but right now his light dimmed with each step he took. Mary thought his ability to sparkle on demand was very impressive, but watching the glitter gradually fade away was equally so.

By the time Patrick made it over, he was exuding an aura of exasperation. Mary was much more used to seeing this side of him.

“Greetings, Mary and Adi. Could you temper your eccentricity when you’re at the palace, at the very least? Then again, I’ve already told you that countless times...”

“Greetings, Patrick. I won’t refuse if you decide to make my adorable daughter’s invitation into a national treasure,” Mary said in jest, instigating Patrick’s exasperation.

Adi was the only one who politely apologized for their unannounced visit. But a moment later, he added, “If you wish to display the invitations, I’ll arrange for the frame,” so in the end, he was on the same level as Mary.

“You’re a pair of overly fawning parents,” Patrick pronounced coolly.

Mary huffed. “How rude,” she complained, then suddenly took a step closer to him and smirked. “By the way, I’ve been wondering something lately. Between you and Adi, who’s bought the most cushions?”

“I...”

“I’d say it was a pretty close match. Since we’re already here, why don’t we find out?” Mary proposed with an impish grin, wondering out loud on whom she should bet.

Patrick scowled. It wasn’t like him to show so openly that he disliked a topic of conversation. But that just meant that Mary had hit a sore spot. Eventually, he looked away, feigning ignorance. Adi clapped his hand over his mouth while trembling. Noticing that Adi was laughing at him, Patrick glared at the other man.

“You’re in no position to be laughing at me, Adi.”

“That’s true, but I can admit that I’m an overly fawning father, so there’s no problem. In fact, I’m well aware of the present situation of cushion sales all

around the world!”

“And you’re proud of that?”

“I’ll wager that House Albert has more cushions!” Adi stated imposingly.

“What a thing to say,” Patrick muttered with exhaustion. Yet he sighed and shrugged his shoulders, knowing that arguing was useless. Then, he smirked, finally deciding to fight back. “Do you really think you can compete with the royal palace?” His question was loaded with instigation, and an alluring air drifted around him.

Though in his youth Patrick had been so beautiful that he was known as Prince Charming in the otome game, as he grew older, he began to smile more wickedly. Needless to say, this was also attractive.

“Don’t underestimate the collecting abilities of royalty,” Patrick continued. “We’ve already filled up two carriages, and we even have a cushion storage room.”

“Please, Lord Patrick. Do you truly think you can win with only that?” Adi fired back. “House Albert designed a special-order cushion with Roxanne’s handprint on it from when she was just born!”

“That sounds great—where can I get one?” Patrick asked, suddenly earnest.

Adi nodded, pulling out a notebook from his breast pocket. He then passed Patrick the business card of the supplier who produced said cushions.

Meanwhile, Mary observed this exchange coldly. Two men were grinning viciously while they incited one another. Indeed, this scene *looked* good from the outside. Adi and Patrick were both handsome, and their evil smirks had a different sort of charm from their usual selves.

Yet the topic was cushions. They were merely bragging about their cushions and exchanging supplier contacts.

They’re just throwing stones at each other while living in glass houses... These two men truly are idiots, Mary thought with a sigh. *These two men...? No, I should say these two fathers. And that Patrick is an overly fawning father himself,* she added inwardly with a wry smile.

Right then, a high-pitched voice called out, “Roxanne!”

Mary looked up, watching a young boy dart out from the palace entrance and run over to where Roxanne and Alicia were seated upon the edge of the fountain. His indigo hair swayed in the breeze, and his violet eyes shimmered joyfully. Though his features were still youthful, he shone with intelligence, and though he was still growing, his limbs were already long and slender, and his physique was excellent.

The boy was as beautiful as a work of art, and it was plain to see that his looks would only improve even further with age. When the day of his debut in high society arrived, he was sure to instantly snatch the hearts of every noblewoman.

Just like a certain someone once had.



“Prince Felix!” Roxanne exclaimed at the sight of the approaching boy. She stood up and offered him a ladylike bow. “Good day,” she greeted him nonchalantly.

(Mary and Adi, who were observing from afar, muttered, “Perfect score,” in unison.)

Felix also straightened his posture. He cleared his throat, giving Roxanne a bow in return. Although the gesture was still a little unrefined, it created a gentlemanly impression.

(Needless to say, Patrick wordlessly sent the boy a round of applause.)



“Roxanne, you should’ve said you were coming,” Felix told her. “I would’ve come out to greet you.”

“I wouldn’t want to pose...um...” Roxanne hesitated.

“Impose, you mean?”

“Yes! I wouldn’t want to impose on you, Prince Felix,” the girl corrected herself, taking on a humble attitude despite her reliance on the boy’s help. Then, she removed a letter from her pochette and held it out to him.

“What’s that?”

“An invitation to House Albert’s party. I made it myself.”

“You did?!”

“Yes. We’ll be making a wonderful announcement. I would love it if... I would be honored if...you could show up...?”

“In this situation, you might say, ‘I’d be honored if you could attend,’” Felix offered. “I feel like ‘It’d be my honor to have you as a guest,’ is also appropriate.”

“They’re both good phrases, so it’s hard to decide. But I like the sound of the first one, so let’s go with that. I’d be honored if you could attend!” Roxanne said with a smile, taking Felix’s advice.

The youth’s cheeks flushed instantly at the sight, and in a boyishly loud voice, he called out, “I’ll definitely be there!”

Roxanne’s eyes widened at his volume, but she nevertheless smiled gently and said, “I hope you look forward to it.”

Alicia watched the children’s exchange with a blissful expression, barely suppressing her laughter. “Felix, Roxanne is running an errand all by herself,” she informed him. “Isn’t she incredible? She’s already a grown-up!”

“W-Well, I can go out by myself too!” he grumbled.

“My, Prince Felix, that’s still too dangerous for you! I’m six now, so I’m an adult. That’s why I can do it,” Roxanne explained proudly, puffing out her chest and flipping her hair aside. The curls—not quite tight enough to be called

ringlets—swayed softly with the gesture. Alicia trembled at the adorableness of the little girl's high-handed attitude, pressing her hands to her cheeks.

In contrast, Felix pursed his lips, then sulkily appealed, "I'm an adult as well." This, too, was adorable.



Mary, Adi, and Patrick were observing the scene from their hiding spot a good distance away. Of course, Mary and Adi were practically writhing in agony at the cuteness of their daughter, while Patrick affectionately watched his beloved son's growth.

"Roxanne is the cutest person in the whole world," said Mary. "Look at her, puffing out her chest so proudly! She's about to topple over!"

"Yes, how cute!" Adi agreed. "She's just like you when you were little. You always puffed out your chest like that too. I used to worry that you might fall over at any second."

"I recall there was a period of time when you and my brothers used to randomly stand behind my back. I see, so that's *that* mystery solved. You were on standby in case I fell down from puffing out my chest too much," Mary said with a fond smile.

Patrick chuckled at their conversation. His expression said that they were acting the same as always.

Mary cast him a cool glance. "Here you are, laughing all by yourself, but I do hope you realize that Felix is just like you when you were younger too," she told him.

"Is he?" Patrick asked.

"Oh yes. You were a mild-mannered good boy, just like he is now. You were basically a model student. Composed, studious, gentlemanly, and sometimes you supported me... Humph, why are these all just compliments?!" Mary muttered, wondering if there was a stain in Patrick's childhood that she could bring up.

But as she cast her mind back, she realized that Patrick had been the perfect young boy. He'd listened to his parents, studied properly, and had great

etiquette despite his age. He had experienced the occasional childish failure, but considering his daily behavior back then, those were a part of his charm too. (On the other hand, the Albert trio had run rampant as children, and because Mary was part of said trio, Patrick's excellence stood out to her all the more.)

"No, it's hopeless. I can't remember you committing a single disgrace. As expected, Patrick. It's a blessing to this nation that your son is just like you," Mary said while clapping. Inwardly, she was waving the white flag of surrender.

Patrick didn't seem dissatisfied at her words. However, he wasn't happy because she had praised him, but rather because she'd said his son resembled him so much. He truly was an overly fawning father. He gazed at Felix, his eyes full of affection.

Indeed, Felix was Patrick and Alicia's firstborn son. He had a well-proportioned face, and though he was only five, his intelligence was endorsed by his private tutor. Nobody forced him to study either—he pursued knowledge of his own initiative, and he was ambitious enough to want to learn about everything. He was Patrick's son through and through. His violet eyes, which signified his royal blood, shimmered like gemstones, and his vigor and occasional childish frolicking all came from his mother.

Felix had inherited both of his parents' merits, and he was a beautiful, intelligent young boy with a very promising future. (Meanwhile, Mary often found herself thinking, *Given Patrick's intelligence and Alicia's boar-like charge attacks, I'm just relieved they didn't create a high-spec wild piglet together.*)

"Ah, but he's so obvious around Roxanne. His face is all red again..." Patrick smiled at his son's easy-to-read behavior.

Mary turned to look. Felix seemed very happy to be talking to Roxanne, and whenever she smiled at him, his cheeks flushed and he beamed at her. His affection for her was plain as day, which was bittersweet and frustrating to watch.

"I'm including that when I say he's just like you," Mary told Patrick with a smirk.

"What do you mean?"

“Felix being obvious around someone he likes is something he inherited from you. In high school, your eyes were always glued to Alicia, and your expression softened whenever you spoke to her. It doesn’t get any more obvious than that.”

Patrick paused. “I don’t recall.”

“My, my! Patrick, are you feeling all embarrassed? Adi, quick! Contact all of the previous student council members! Have them summoned at once so we can denounce Patrick together!”

“All right, fine! I admit it!” Patrick said hurriedly, trying to put a stop to Mary’s outburst. He must’ve remembered it after all, as he stared at Mary and Adi awkwardly for a while before clearing his throat. Then, he turned his gaze back to Alicia and the children in an attempt to evade the topic.

Roxanne was trying to act mature and elegant (while occasionally fumbling over her words), and Felix stared at her with dyed cheeks. Alicia was radiating a sense of euphoria while watching them.

Patrick’s face softened at the scene. “I know it may not be my place to say it, but Roxanne’s just like you too, Mary. Every time I look at her, she reminds me of you when you were little,” he said with a smile, sounding nostalgic.

Enticed by his words, Mary turned to the children again. A beautiful girl and boy were joyfully talking to each other. Indeed, they were very similar to her and Patrick’s younger selves.

“You’re right...” Mary whispered, sounding soft and emotional. She was reminded all over again of the fact that she was an adult with her own child. *What a ticklish yet blissful feeling*, she thought. However...

“Your hair used to be soft and curly like hers too. I remember thinking how the curls were getting tighter and tighter each year.”

...Patrick’s next words ruined everything.

To make matters worse, Adi joined in. “By her age, you already had those imposing drills, Mary. But Roxanne’s hair doesn’t look like drills. Her spirals are more on the level of snail shells,” he said, failing completely to read the room.

“Snail shells?!” Mary parroted in shock.

Patrick burst out laughing. Realizing he oughtn’t laugh so loudly, he quickly turned away. His shoulders trembled, and then he crouched down. Apparently, this exchange had walloped his funny bone.

“First, you have the gall to refer to my ringlets as drills, and as if that wasn’t enough, you claim Roxanne has snail shells for hair?!” Mary demanded.

“Indeed, those adorable one-and-a-half curls are like snail shells,” Adi insisted.

“I agree they’re adorable, but they are *not* snail shells! Don’t you dare say that in front of her, or she’ll get mad at you!”

“Actually, she came up with it herself. She was very excited when she saw a snail in a picture book.”

“My! So the one-and-a-half snail-shell spirals are not only adorable, but full of strength and inventiveness!” Mary declared proudly, praising both her and her daughter’s hair.

(As a side note, when Roxanne had burst into the room with the picture book in hand, Adi had been midconversation with Roberto, Lang, and Lucian. “*My hair is like snail shells!*” she’d proclaimed. Adi had instantly choked on the tea he’d been drinking, while the twins had both made a strained sound. Naturally, only Roberto had been able to remain calm, though his shoulders had trembled quite a lot.)

If Roxanne herself acknowledges it, then I suppose it’s fine, Mary decided, brushing her fingers through her hair. Her gentle silver waves fluttered under her touch. The days of her ringlets wagging about in the breeze were a thing of the distant past now. She used to be upset and frustrated with her indomitable ringlets, yet her beloved daughter had inherited them. Just like that, Mary began to look upon her ringlet era with fondness.

Alas, now was not the time to be discussing her steel drills or her daughter’s snail shells. With that, she turned to the squatting Patrick. “How much longer are you going to laugh?” she muttered, poking him with the tip of her shoe.

That must’ve finally snapped him back to his senses. “My bad,” he said, standing up. He still seemed to be suppressing his laughter, until he cleared his

throat and returned to his usual composed Prince—or, perhaps more appropriately, *King*—Charming self. It was as admirable as always.

“I see the things you two discuss haven’t changed to this day,” he remarked. “I just remembered the first time I heard Adi use the term ‘drills.’ Ah, how nostalgic.”

“Why are you acting like that’s some sort of beautiful memory? There’s nothing to feel nostalgic about,” Mary scoffed. “Anyway, it’s about time you returned to those three.”

If Patrick didn’t come back for a long time, the others might go out looking for him. Mary didn’t want Roxanne to discover her and Adi.

At Mary’s urging, Patrick started walking back to Alicia and the children. She glared at him and grumbled, “He made me recall something I wanted to forget,” under her breath.

It had happened a long time ago, back when they were still children. The moment Patrick had heard Adi say, “*Milady’s hair looks like drills*,” he suppressed his laughter by crouching down, just like he’d done earlier. Mary remembered that he had trembled while holding his stomach for quite some time.

Adi must’ve been thinking about that too. “How nostalgic,” he said in a foolishly sluggish voice.

In lieu of a reply, Mary punched him.



“Father!” Felix exclaimed. His expression lit up when he noticed the approaching Patrick. The boy rushed over to his father, whose expression softened. The man petted his son’s head affectionately. Both of their indigo locks swayed, making them look like a charming father and son duo. “Roxanne is out on an errand by herself. So...can I go with her?”

“You want to go?” Patrick asked with surprise.

Roxanne was even more startled. “Goodness, Prince!” she called out, trying to stop him. A prince accompanying a lady on an errand was unheard of. She appealed for Felix to refrain, not wanting to trouble him.

(To be more accurate, Roxanne said, “I wouldn’t want to po...pose...”)

(“Impose?” Felix asked, offering her a lifeline.)

(“Yes, that!” she replied, puffing out her chest. This was how she was trying to restrain him.)

“Felix, don’t you have a history lesson at five?” Patrick prompted.

“I’ll study after I get back home!” the boy promised, refusing to back down.

Patrick pretended to be troubled. He pressed his hand to his chin and glanced aside. His body language purposefully screamed, *“I’m not sure.”*

However, the earnest young boy truly believed that his father was deliberating, and stared up at him with a determined gaze. His violet eyes glimmered like jewels, always showing a sense of dignity as he looked straight at the person he was talking to. He had inherited those beautiful eyes from his mother.

And Patrick was the last person on earth who’d win against those very eyes. After making a display of his indecision to impishly tease his son, he finally patted the boy’s head and said, “Go, then.”

Felix’s face lit up. “Thank you!” he said and, overcome with emotion, hugged Patrick. It was very childlike.

Alicia smiled. “How lovely,” she said in a motherly voice, rubbing Felix’s cheek. With his father petting his head and his mother touching his cheek, the boy giggled as if the gestures tickled him.

“I’m letting you go because you’re earnest and you always work hard,” Patrick said. “Slacking off every now and then can be a good lesson too.”

“Slacking off can be a lesson...?” the boy echoed. “That doesn’t sound like you, father.”

“Earnestly devoting yourself to work all the time gets boring, doesn’t it? Someone once told me that. She said, ‘Your sincerity is a merit of yours, but as a man who stands above others, you ought to know what slackers feel like too. So this is a necessary slacking off!’ And then she took me out to eat croquettes,” Patrick recalled with a shrug. Knowing who he meant, Alicia chuckled.

Yet the children didn't understand who he was referring to. The thought that it might be her mother didn't even cross Roxanne's mind. "What an interesting person," she commented with a pleasant laugh. Her snail-shell spirals swayed as she did so.

"There you have it. So I hope you don't mind if Felix comes with you, Roxanne," Patrick went on. "I'm still worried about letting him go out on his own, but Alicia and I will feel heartened if he's with you," he added, creating the impression that he was making a request of her.

"Leave it to me!" the girl responded vigorously. She looked boastful, and she even turned to Felix and said, "You'll be safe with me."

Though the boy had seemed displeased to be treated like a child earlier, he surmised his father's intentions and smiled.

"In that case, you'd better get ready," Alicia advised.

"Yes, mother. Can you wait for a bit, Roxanne?" Felix inquired.

"Of course," she replied. "I'll let the driver know, and wait inside the carriage."

Felix bowed before quickly heading back into the palace. Roxanne watched him, then turned to Alicia and Patrick and lowered her head. She gathered her skirts to curtsy, and her polite attitude looked adorable to them.

"You can rest assured and leave Felix with me. I swear by House Albert's name that I will protect the prince."

"You're so reliable, Roxanne!" Alicia cooed. "You're already a splendid adult."

"Of course. I'm already six, after all!" the girl said triumphantly, flipping her hair. The locks smoothly flew off her shoulder.

("Snail shells..." Patrick mumbled under his breath, then quickly looked away. Thankfully, neither Roxanne nor Alicia had heard him.)

After exchanging farewells, Roxanne gracefully walked back to her carriage. A short while later, Felix came out of the palace and followed her. "I'm off!" he shouted spiritedly, his eyes glittering with excitement.

Once the children were both in the carriage, it slowly—*very* slowly, as if giving

another carriage enough time to prepare—began to move. Watching it depart, Patrick and Alicia exchanged a glance and nodded.

“All right, Alicia. Let’s follow them too.”

“Yes! Lady Maaary! Adi! Let us into your carriage, please!” Alicia yelled, waving her hand as she ran over to the couple.

One might’ve expected that Mary would respond to this with, “*You peasant girl!*” Yet that didn’t happen. Instead, she said, “Ah well, I suppose there’s no other way. Get in!” She brushed her hair off her shoulders and gallantly made her way towards the carriage. Her retreating figure looked proud and even courageous. She and Roxanne were like two peas in a pod.

Patrick and Adi looked at each other, and both tried to stifle their laughter.



House Albert’s carriage ran through the peaceful townscape. Another carriage, also property of House Albert, followed after the first a good distance away.

The first one, carrying Roxanne and Felix, was gorgeous. The second, with Mary and the others, was of such simple make that it was unthinkable for it to be owned by the nation’s most distinguished noble family. It wasn’t dirty or covered in grime, but it had no decorations to speak of and was extremely plain. While onlookers’ gazes were drawn to the first vehicle, they easily ignored the second. The carriages were so different from each other that nobody would have suspected that they were traveling together.

“This is quite the carriage,” said the mystified Patrick, surveying the interior. Alicia, who sat opposite him, nodded while petting the cat-shaped pillow on her lap as if it were a real cat.

Their wonderment was to be expected. After all, the carriage appeared entirely plain on the outside, but the interior was high-class enough to be worthy of the Albert name. The difference was so stark that Patrick and Alicia were left stunned.

“Indeed,” Mary replied casually, entrusting the explanation to Adi.

Rather than clinging to the window due to his motion sickness as usual, he

looked unperturbed. “This carriage belongs to Lord Lang and Lord Lucian,” he clarified. “It was made when they were little, so that they could use it to escape whenever they didn’t feel like studying. The exterior is simple so as to deceive the eyes of their pursuer.”

“Why are they like this...?” Patrick muttered.

“All that said, the interior has been regularly updated, and boasts state-of-the-art technology befitting House Albert.”

“I’m not sure what to say to the fact that their getaway vehicle is still in service. But why do you know all these details, Adi?”

“Well...I made the arrangements for the construction of this carriage.”

“Ah, I see. With Roberto as the pursuer, the twins had no choice but to ask for your help,” Patrick said with a nod. He then patted Adi’s shoulder to show his appreciation for the other man’s efforts.

Mary could only shrug at this conversation. There was no point in talking at length about her brothers’ antics. Even when she’d first found out about the getaway vehicle, she immediately brushed it off by exasperatedly saying, “*That sounds about right for them.*”

Regardless of the carriage’s original purpose, it made for a suitable tailing vehicle. It looked like any average carriage on the outside, while the inside was very pleasant. It was also filled with cushions, but even if they were to be taken out, the interior would still be comfortable. Additionally, the carriage practically didn’t vibrate when it moved.

It’s like I’m sitting on a sofa back home, Mary thought while petting the seat. This level of comfort was partly owing to her brothers. No, actually, one could say that the carriage was this comfortable *because* of them.

“It really is state of the art,” she reflected. “I can’t feel the vibrations at all.”

“True. I had no idea what Lang and Lucian were blabbering about when they said they wanted to focus on horse-drawn carriage development, but I can tell they really committed to it,” Patrick said. “I should’ve seen this coming.”

“I see you thought quite rudely of them. Alas, their list of previous convictions

is endless, so I can't blame you. I also collaborated with them on carriage development," Mary admitted.

"I know. That's exactly why I was skeptical of the idea in the beginning," Patrick responded with a pleasant smile. How dazzling it was, indeed!

Mary was ready to complain about his rudeness, but she stopped herself. She knew her own list of previous convictions was very long as well. It was clear as day that if she tried to deny it now, Patrick would dig up her history. Changing the topic was a wise course of action.

"This carriage's level of performance is the result of my brothers' love and effort," Mary proclaimed, petting the seat next to her again. There were no vibrations at all.

She thought back to when she was still pregnant, shortly after they had officially announced it. Lang and Lucian had started talking to her with serious expressions, so she had no idea what to expect. Yet out of nowhere, they had brought up the idea of carriage development. Mary still remembered how shocked she felt back then, but once she'd heard their reasoning, she had agreed instantly.

"I could feel their love when they said they wanted to research a means of creating a carriage that the adorable Roxanne could comfortably travel in, and so that I wouldn't be burdened with having to carry her in my arms," she explained. "I wonder if they were also thinking about Adi's motion sickness," she added, casting a glance at him. He smiled wryly and nodded.

The twins had worked hard on the development of carriages for the sake of their beloved Mary and Roxanne, but Adi was the one who had reaped the most benefits from it. Thanks to that, he hadn't been suffering from motion sickness lately. Alas, even if Mary were to bring it up to her brothers, they'd be sure to huffily claim that it was an unexpected result. They'd likely press Adi's head down while Roberto coolly observed. It would be the same old scene playing out again.

Recently, Roxanne taking up arms and determinedly demanding, "*Stop bullying my father!*" had become a part of the usual set pieces.

"Either way, even now my brothers are taking care of things with their

research,” Mary said.

“Taking care of things?” Patrick echoed. “I suppose you could say that, since traveling in this carriage is comfortable enough not to induce motion sickness.”

“Oh, that’s not what I meant. If it weren’t for the carriage my brothers researched, I wouldn’t be able to shadow Roxanne. So the fact that I’m here is thanks to them.”

“You’re saying they’re not taking care of Adi’s troubles, but specifically *yours*?” Patrick inquired, confused.

Mary’s smile grew deeper at his amusing expression. In the mood to tease him some more, she exaggeratedly added, “They’re helping so much!” expressing her gratitude for the twins who weren’t even here. Then, she looked out the window. Patrick and Alicia did the same.

They were slowly passing the scenery outside—indeed, slowly...*very* slowly.

“I *did* think we hadn’t been making much progress this whole time,” Patrick pointed out. Alicia expressed her agreement, appearing discontent.

Mary laughed elegantly. “That’s for my sake,” she answered. “The driver’s looking out for me.”

“For you? Not for the motion sick Adi?”

“Yes, for me. And what’s the issue in going slowly? We’re not in any rush, are we?” Mary asked, causing Patrick to affirm that she was right.

But even though he was nodding, he looked at Mary with a dubious expression. Patrick had no objection to the carriage’s slow pace. However, he did have some questions. In fact, his suspicion was only growing, and it was evident on his face.

Mary didn’t provide him with any details, and only responded by giggling gracefully. Her laughter practically said, “*I can’t tell you.*” Her smile was beautiful, but to those who knew her, it was obviously filled with mischief. She also cast a quick glance at Adi, and her eyes clearly said, “*You can’t tell them, even if they pester you about it.*”

Knowing her intentions (and her desire to tease the other two), Adi smiled

dryly and nodded.

Patrick creased his brows at their meaningful yet silent exchange. He tilted his head slightly, pondering something. Meanwhile, Alicia tugged on Mary's sleeve and requested answers.

"Lady Mary, my inner Lady Mary Sensor is telling me that you're hiding a very important secret. What is it?" she asked.

"If I was hiding something, I wouldn't tell you about it on such a boring occasion, inside of a carriage. Also, turn that sensor off and never use it again," Mary demanded flatly, smacking Alicia's hand away and ending the conversation there. She then smirked, amused to watch as Patrick and Alicia exchanged a dissatisfied glance with each other.

Seeing her expression, Adi shrugged and muttered, "You're the same as ever."

The tranquil conversation continued as the carriage gradually passed through the scenery, all while Mary and Adi splendidly evaded Patrick's and Alicia's attempts at getting more information out of them.

In the midst of that, the vehicle came to a sudden halt. Everyone peered out through the window, only to see that Roxanne's carriage had also stopped, and its driver was stepping out. From their point of view, it looked as though another, unfamiliar carriage had stopped next to Roxanne's. Both drivers were discussing something, but it was impossible to hear what they were saying at this distance.

"Did something happen?" Mary wondered.

"Roxanne and Felix haven't left their carriage. Perhaps some stranger is bothering them...?!" Alicia fretted, her breath hitching.

Adi and Patrick instantly tried to burst out of the carriage. Their overly fawning paternal reflexes were not to be underestimated, so Mary hurried to stop them. "It doesn't look like they're arguing, so let's see how things unfold. Besides, our presence would just hinder their driver if it came down to it," she explained.

“The driver? Isn’t that the same man who’s worked for House Albert for the past few years?” Adi inquired.

“Yes. My brothers hired him. Roxanne’s been leaving the mansion a lot ever since she turned two, so they found a strong coachman who excels at martial arts.”

“A *coachman* who’s a *martial arts expert*? Then again, now that I look at him, he does appear to be very muscular, even from here... In fact, his well-fitted vest is about to burst at the seams...!”

“Once, just for fun, all the Albert Manor staff tried to attack him. There was so much punching and throwing, it was like a scene straight out of the underworld...” Mary said, narrowing her eyes at the memory.

Indeed, the driver was almost too powerful for his profession. If anything, his strength made everyone question whether he really *was* a driver in the first place. He hadn’t been hired at the behest of Lang and Lucian alone either—Roberto had vetted him as well, so he was sure to be a reliable man of credible character. Just where had they managed to find such an individual?

Mary sighed at the overprotective fathers as she turned to check how things were going outside. She ignored the way Patrick and Adi immediately began talking, with the former saying, “I’d like to hire such a man myself,” and the latter replying, “I’ll ask my brother if there are any other suitable drivers.” Right now, Mary had to focus on what was happening with the carriage in front of them.

The men did the same, having returned to their senses. “Wait...” Adi muttered, noticing something. “I think I recognize that carriage...”

While he searched his memories, the carriage’s door opened, and a man stepped out. At the sight of him, both Patrick and Adi exclaimed in unison, “It’s House Lautrec!”

“Why are they here?” Adi questioned.

“I thought they’d finally learned their lesson and were staying quiet. I can’t believe they’re trying to talk to someone from House Albert’s carriage,” Patrick said.

“This is bad news. What if they attempt something unthinkable again?”

“Yeah. We can’t hear what they’re saying from here, though. Let’s be ready to step out at a moment’s notice.”

Adi and Patrick wore serious expressions as they discussed these events. They glared out the window, the air around them tense. This was potentially a rather explosive situation.

Alicia looked outside worriedly, perhaps because she sensed the tension in the air, or because she’d felt a sense of danger from the man who had exited the carriage. The unease in her eyes was blatant, and she looked desperate to go out and protect her son.

As for Mary, amid this disconcerting atmosphere...

“Who?”

...she was staring outside with a confused frown. She didn’t recognize the man at all, nor did his name ring a bell. “Is this supposed to be someone I know?” she asked Adi.

In lieu of a reply, her husband’s scowl deepened. This implied the answer was yes. But no matter how hard Mary racked her brain, she couldn’t recall a single thing about the man.

Unable to take it anymore, Adi sighed. “He’s from *House Lautrec*,” he emphasized.

Mary parroted the family name several times under her breath. Finally, her eyes lit up and she clapped her hands with a gasp. “I don’t know him!”

“You do! He tried to interfere when you were working to open the restaurant in the town center!”

“Huh, did that happen? I seem to recall that the whole country was abuzz with enthusiasm, and high society was impatiently looking forward to the grand opening.”

“Oof... You didn’t just forget; you have falsified memories about it...” Adi said with exasperation. His face was stiff, and his eyes were cold. This was no way to look at one’s wife, but it was proof of just how exasperated he was with her.

Sighing, he pressed his hand to his left eye. “I had to wear an eye patch for a while because he punched me. You really don’t remember?”

“Oh, you used to get stuck in the door because your field of vision was narrow! Some of the doors had to be cushioned because you kept bumping into them! So *that’s* who this man is... But why is he here now?!” Having finally recalled the incident with House Lautrec, Mary quickly turned to look outside.

Now that Adi had said it (although that alone hadn’t been effective enough in stirring her memory), she realized the man outside did indeed look like the head of House Lautrec. He seemed pleasant enough at first sight, but there was something shady about him, just like back then.

Though it was a bit delayed, Mary felt a sense of impending danger from him, and her eyes sharpened. She wondered if things were starting to go south, and shouted, “*Fine, go for it!*” in her mind, spurring the coachman on. He ought to sort it out with a single strike, and Mary wouldn’t mind if he ended up having to roll the man’s body to the side of the road in order to make way.

While she was caught up in her hostility, Adi and Patrick got ready to leave the carriage at any second. Right then, Alicia, who’d been looking in a different direction, whispered, “That’s...”

Yet another carriage had appeared, stopping next to House Albert’s and House Lautrec’s. It was a stately vehicle of good make, and looked familiar. The doors opened. Someone’s slender leg peeped outside, and one deep-crimson high heel stepped onto the ramp with a powerful *clack*. This person was...

“R-Run! House Lautrec, run away!” Mary screeched before she could stop herself. She’d felt hostile towards the man moments ago, yet that feeling had vanished without a trace. Now, she only felt a sense of impending doom...but not because of the man. No, it was centered on the person approaching him, and the end that was about to meet the man. Perhaps she even pitied him.

“It’s over,” Adi and Patrick said in unison, feeling that the matter was settled.

“Thank goodness!” Alicia sighed in relief.

Mary also felt that the incident was finished. She gazed out of the window, feeling a mix of pity and relief. Or to be more precise, she was observing as

Carina swiftly tied the head of House Lautrec's hands behind his back and stuffed the man into her carriage.

"Farewell, leader of House Lautrec. I won't forget you... *This* time I definitely won't forget you. Probably. I'll endeavor not to forget you," Mary vowed.

"You'll forget about him instantly, won't you?" Adi asked.

"It might be for the best. Anyway, I'm glad Roxanne and Felix are safe," Mary said, watching as the children stepped out of their carriage now that the situation had been resolved.



"Good day, Lady Carina." Roxanne offered a greeting along with an elegant curtsy. Felix placed a hand on his chest and bowed. Despite their young ages, there was a respective ladylike and princely air to their gestures, which only increased their innocent purity. Add to that the fact that both children were beautiful, and there was no person in this world whose heart wouldn't melt at the sight.

Until a few seconds ago, Carina had been emanating an icy air while she crammed a scoundrel into her carriage, yet even her face softened at the children. "Good day, Lady Roxanne and Lord Felix. Are you two on an outing today?"

"Yes! I'm handing out invitations!" Roxanne replied.

"Invitations?"

"They're for House Albert's party. My mother has always told me that I have to deliver important invitations directly. That's why I'm acting as her paro...prio..." Roxanne tilted her head, wondering how that word went. She then cast a questioning glance at Felix.

He contemplated for a while, before offering, "Proxy?"

Roxanne's face brightened. "That one!" she said enthusiastically, turning back to Carina. "I'm acting as my mother's proxy and handing out invitations."

"My, is that so? You're very capable," said Carina.

"Of course! I'm already six years old, after all!" the little girl responded with a

satisfied grin. Her silver curls swayed in the breeze. She felt like a full-fledged lady out on a mission. After a few moments of searching through her pochette, she held out a letter to Carina. The woman's name was written upon the high-quality paper in unsteady letters. Next to it was a drawing of a flower.

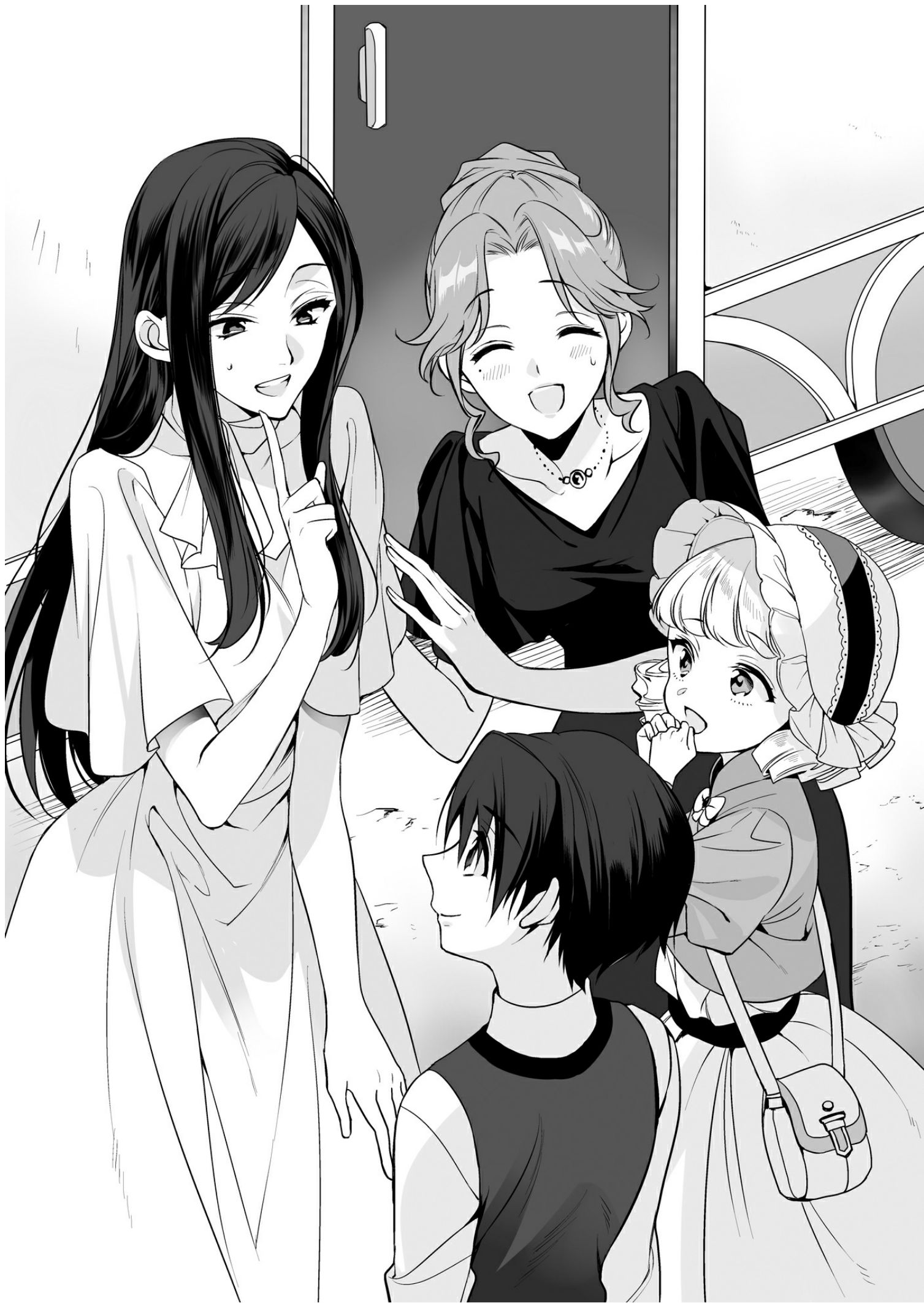
Carina smiled at this adorable sight, respectfully lowering her head before accepting the envelope. She then turned back to her carriage and knocked on the door twice. As it slowly opened...

"Could you please stop suddenly shoving men with tied hands into the carriage, Carina? Even I get startled by such things."

...Margaret stepped out, voicing her complaints. However, when she spotted Roxanne and Felix, she clapped her hand over her mouth, knowing that what she'd just said shouldn't be heard by children. She rushed to close the carriage door behind her so that they wouldn't see the awful spectacle within.

"It's been a while, Lady Margaret," Roxanne said in greeting. "What's that about tied hands?"

"Ah, well, that would be...cat's cradle! Yes, we were playing a game of cat's cradle inside the carriage. But then Carina suddenly left, and I was very startled," Margaret claimed, making a rather awkward attempt at deception.



“Really?! I love that game!” Roxanne said happily, remaining none the wiser. There wasn’t an ounce of disbelief about her, and she gazed upon Margaret with eyes full of trust. She even requested that they all play together next time. Roxanne must’ve been picturing all of them playing cat’s cradle inside a tent one sunny day in the gardens, getting as excited as if it were happening right now.

(“A tent in a garden?” Carina questioned momentarily, but then came to a conclusion by herself and added, “That must be Lady Alicia’s idea.”)

Roxanne handed Margaret an invitation, and the woman accepted it with a sigh of relief. *Thank goodness I didn’t sully a sweet, adorable little girl’s mind...* she thought while patting her chest and inwardly praising herself for having shut the carriage curtains.

“This one’s for you, Lady Margaret. I’d be honored to have you as a guest,” Roxanne said.

“A party? I’ll certainly attend. You know, receiving the invitation directly like this reminds me of Lady Mary’s wedding,” Margaret pointed out wistfully. Carina’s face softened again, and she nodded...

It had happened when Mary was preparing for her wedding. Usually, invitations would be sent by the noble house itself, regardless of how close the families might be. However, Mary gave out the invitations directly while on campus. That said, she still didn’t reveal who her partner was.

Every person she gave an invitation to wanted to ask whom she was marrying, but she always smiled impishly and claimed, *“It’s a secret.”* Her cheeks flushed, and she looked happy. Despite her refusal to share her partner’s identity, it was plain to everyone that she was marrying the best person for her.

And so, after much teasing, the day finally arrived. As Mary stepped out into the venue, all eyes turned to her, only to see the girl with her usual servant by her side.

Both Carina and Margaret had question marks floating around their heads. Everyone had built up so much anticipation, but now they all sported foolish expressions (although, that was exactly what Mary and Adi had wished for).

While the crowd was confused and unable to comprehend the situation, Mary watched on as if she were having the most fun in her life...and then kissed Adi. The two had done the unthinkable for a mistress and her servant.

That moment had truly been a bolt from the blue. Nobody could utter a word, and had stood there, dumbfounded. Although, a few people had smiled in amusement...

Carina and Margaret felt nostalgic upon recalling the memory. Roxanne smiled at them, enjoying herself too. Each time she giggled, the snail shells at her shoulders fluttered.

“My parents’ wedding was lovely, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was perfectly suited for Lady Mary. Ah, will there be a surprise during this party too?” Carina asked, scanning her invitation. The childish, faltering script mentioned that the guests should look forward to a wonderful announcement during the event. Roxanne must’ve gotten excited while writing that part, as the letters grew bigger in that specific spot. It was adorable.

Margaret looked over her invitation too, and then the two women exchanged a glance.

“An announcement...? I wonder if Lady Mary will try dealing in beef next. Have you heard anything about it, Margaret?”

“No, nothing. But she’d need a different route for transporting beef than her migratory bird one. I wonder if she’s already secured it?”

Carina and Margaret tried to guess what the announcement would be about. More precisely, they wanted to figure out which part of the migratory bird restaurant business the announcement would pertain to.

“This again?!” Roxanne exclaimed. Earlier, Patrick had also mistakenly thought the announcement would be related to the restaurant.

“Are we wrong? What is it, then?” asked Carina.

“This is Lady Mary we’re talking about, so it’s sure to give us a surprise,” Margaret added. “Lady Roxanne, could you give us a little hint?”

The women smiled mischievously, trying to get information out of Roxanne.

Moreover, even Felix tugged on the girl's sleeve, coaxing her to tell them.

Yet Roxanne only huffed, refusing to answer them as she looked away. Then, as her snail spirals swayed, she gave an impish smile of her own and said, "It's a secret." Both her expression and gestures were identical to Mary's. She even added, "Please look forward to the day," to stir their anticipation. This, too, was just like Mary.

Carina and Margaret exchanged another glance, then shrugged and smiled. "So she wants to surprise us again. That's so Lady Mary," said Carina.

"Yes, truly. Well, let's have some fun and try to guess what kind of surprise it'll be this time," Margaret responded.

The two women were grinning, as though convinced that they'd be shocked on the day, no matter how hard they tried to guess.

Roxanne puffed out her chest. "Yes, I'm sure you'll be surprised!" she told them triumphantly.



Once the children had safely returned to their carriage, Carina and Margaret entered theirs as well. As they did so, they glanced towards Mary's vehicle and offered a gentle wave of their hands. The pair must've realized the parents were tailing Roxanne and Felix, and their wry smiles spoke for themselves.

And so, the ladies stepped into their carriage, Carina coolly and swiftly, and Margaret with her shoulders drooping. The difference in their attitudes was, of course, because the tied-up head of House Lautrec was inside.

"I'm glad everything ended well," Mary said. "Well, one person met with catastrophe, but I don't care."

"Indeed. Please don't think about that man anymore. As for Lady Carina and Lady Margaret, we should give them thank-you gifts at a later date," Adi proposed, and Mary nodded in agreement.

Patrick suggested that he and Alicia should do the same, and Alicia's face lit up. "I'll choose the gift, then! I know a really good shop, so leave it to me."

"Oh? Which shop would you recommend?" Mary prompted.

“There’s a new place in the town center with delicious, perfectly crisp cookies!” Alicia explained. Her spellbound expression showed just how tasty the cookies must’ve been.

“Ah, that place?” Patrick asked, not looking entirely dissatisfied. That was promising.

“Now that I think about it, you picked out the gift last time too. I’ll acknowledge your ability in choosing cookies, but *only* that,” Mary said emphatically with a huff.

As for the “last time” she referred to, it was when House Albert had experienced some trouble with House Lautrec. In order to negotiate a transport route for the migratory bird restaurant, Mary had brought cookies that Alicia recommended with her as a gift.

“Croquettes are essential this time as well. Let’s send Carina and Margaret cookies and croquettes as thanks,” Mary said decisively, sporting a contented grin. Their gratitude was sure to be expressed through the winning combination of cookies endorsed by the royalty and some delicious croquettes. “It’s the perfect lineup!” Mary boasted.

“Let’s go shopping for them together,” Alicia appealed, tugging on Mary’s sleeve.

As for Adi and Patrick...

“Well, I’m sure Lady Carina and Lady Margaret will surmise our intentions even with that kind of gift. Anyway, we should focus on following Roxanne and Felix for now.”

“Yeah, I agree. I wonder where we’re off to next?”

...they let their wives’ words go in one ear and out the other, turning their gazes to the children’s carriage, which raced off ahead.

Idle Memories: Part 1

“House Lautrec, huh? How nostalgic,” Mary whispered, gazing at the scenery outside.

“You had forgotten all about them,” Adi grumbled.

In response, Mary smiled brilliantly...and stomped on Adi’s foot with all her strength. “It just took me a little longer to recall them. Only a tiny bit longer.”

“No, you had completely forgo— Ow... Ow! Yowch! All right, already! It just took you a tiny bit longer to recall them!” Adi appealed, acknowledging his loss in face of the pain.

“As long as you understand,” Mary replied, looking victorious.

Alicia watched them happily. “But...” she spoke up suddenly. “It must’ve been difficult for you to be unable to use one eye, Adi.”

“The eye patch was a lot more trouble than the wound. It’s hard to get a sense of distance when your field of vision is narrow,” he explained with a sigh and a shrug.

“It *did* seem difficult,” Mary admitted, recalling those days.

Back when House Lautrec had caused them turmoil, Adi’s eye had been injured and he had to wear an eye patch for a while. The wound wasn’t grave, however; he’d just decided it was better to hide it than expose it to everyone. As such, he had to live with his field of vision limited for some time. Occasionally, he had gotten caught in doors, or failed to pick up a teacup. Many such little incidents had occurred.

“How nostalgic. I remember once I was having tea with my brothers, and you tripped when you were trying to clean up, spilling the tea onto them.”

“So you remember *that*, do you?” Adi asked, his expression souring at the painful memory.

His scrunched-up face only made Mary want to tease him more, and she

smirked. "It was such an ordeal," she said, sighing exaggeratedly.

Patrick's and Alicia's interest was stirred upon hearing of this incident (and due to Mary's exaggeration), and they prompted Mary to continue, asking what had happened next.

"Thankfully, the tea was cold, so nobody got burned. But Adi fell down with a great clamor, breaking lots of tableware. It was terrible," Mary explained.

"I'm sure Lang and Lucian must've been angry with him," Patrick said. "I can just picture them pushing Adi's head down while Roberto gazes on icily."

"You'd think so, right?" Mary said meaningfully, her smile deepening. She knew she must've had a wicked smirk on her face right now. She stole a glance at Adi, whose narrowed eyes glared at her. It was obvious that he wanted to ask her to be more considerate when she spoke of his personal matters. At the same time, he looked vaguely embarrassed.

Mary nodded triumphantly at him, before turning to look at the other two. They had also noticed Adi's expression, which only incited them to pester Mary for a continuation.

"So, Adi took a flashy fall while spilling cold tea on my brothers. I reflexively screamed when it happened. And at that very moment..."

"Yes?" Patrick asked impatiently.

Mary grinned. "My brothers and Roberto all shouted, 'Adi, are you okay?!' while springing to their feet!" The scene played itself out in her mind's eye as she spoke.

Lang and Lucian had been soaked in tea, yet they hadn't paid that any heed in their anxiety to check on Adi. Even Roberto, who usually referred to Adi as his "foolish younger brother," had called out Adi's name in momentary panic. But once the trio had ensured that Adi was safe and sound...

"Lang pushed Adi's head down from the right, and Lucian from the left, while Roberto grumbled that Adi was getting his just deserts," Mary finished.

"I see. After a brief interval, they went back to their usual selves," Patrick observed.

“It was so funny that I burst out laughing. But the more I laughed, the more my brothers pushed Adi’s head down to hide their embarrassment. Roberto made some excuse about cleaning the utensils and escaped.”

While Mary talked in good humor, Patrick smiled at the mental image her story had created for him. He looked amused, yet his expression was simultaneously full of mischief. Of course, this had its own charm about it.

“Are you all right, Adi?” Alicia interjected.

When Mary turned to look at Adi, she saw him curling in on a cushion and burying his face in it. Alicia was repeatedly patting his shoulder. At a glance, it seemed as though he was suffering from motion sickness. But he couldn’t hide his reddened ears, and Mary knew he couldn’t lift his head out of embarrassment. Perhaps he was ashamed of his own failure in falling down and spilling tea, or because of how the twins’ and Roberto’s sincere care for him had been made so clear at that moment.

Whatever the case, he didn’t respond even as Alicia poked him. His emotions must’ve been unbearable. If the group weren’t inside a carriage right now, he would’ve certainly made a run for it.

Mary and Patrick stared at him for a bit, then exchanged a look with each other. “Lang, Lucian, and Roberto bully Adi all the time, but in the end, they’re just as doting on their younger brother as they are on their younger sister,” Mary said. “They should just admit it already.”

“It’s not so easy for them to be honest,” Patrick replied. “But it’s clear that they treasure Adi, given how concerned they were for him.”

They were delivering a follow-up attack. (The two of them did this jointly—without consulting one another first—thanks to how similar their personalities were...or at least, that applied to the unpleasant aspects of their personalities.)

At their words, Adi buried his face even deeper into the cushion. Mary was almost tempted to ask him whether he could still breathe. His ears, which were peeking out from between strands of his hair, had gotten redder still. “Just drop it already...” he groaned, trying to make Mary and Patrick stop.

Mary laughed elegantly, while Patrick smiled dazzlingly. To outsiders, it

would've looked like a beautiful pair smiling pleasantly, but their expressions silently conveyed how satisfied they were with what they had done.

Alicia was the only one who, after glancing between everyone else, simply eased out a sigh. She thought back to those days when Adi had been inconvenienced by the eye patch. She remembered how Mary had always walked beside Adi and held him by the arm to guide him, and how Patrick had held doors open for him. But when she pointed that out, the other two's eyes widened.

"Did I do that?" Mary murmured. "Well, I suppose supporting your husband is part of a wife's duty."

"I guess that could've happened," Patrick said.

Their replies were short and blunt. They appeared uncomfortable, perhaps because of everything they'd said about the twins and Roberto. The two then quickly tried to change the topic.

Alicia shrugged her shoulders. "You're *all* contrarians," she whispered with a wry smile.

Chapter 2

Despite the earlier disturbance with House Lautrec, the carriages were proceeding onwards smoothly. Mary was about to estimate their destination by mentally consulting the map, when she abruptly tilted her head in realization. There was no need to think about it.

“We’re off to Parfette’s, aren’t we?” she asked.

“This *is* the direction of House Eldland’s holiday home. The newest of their four,” Patrick said, gazing outside.

House Eldland was a noble family from the neighboring nation, and they owned several villas. Of course, these residences hadn’t been built out of extravagance while the citizenry suffered in poverty or any such thing. They had been built out of necessity. Each time the Eldlands constructed a new villa, they invited the Alberts and others for a visit. Some were grand mansions in glamorous locations, while others were cozy little houses in secluded retreats. The family owned villas on the borders, and even within this country’s territory.

Indeed: they had even crossed the border. Or to be more accurate, they were still crossing it.

“House Eldland’s villas are steadily being built closer and closer to ours, huh?” Mary inquired.

“At this pace, after two more villas, they’ll erect one right next to Albert Manor. They might even put one on Albert Manor’s grounds eventually,” Patrick answered.

“Stop clowning around. It’s already a terrible joke that a mysterious yet sturdy tent has been erected in our gardens,” Mary said, glaring at Patrick as if to say, “*I wonder where that could have come from?*”

As for what she was referring to, it was exactly what it sounded like. A mysterious tent had suddenly appeared in Albert Manor’s gardens. It was sturdy, with a wide interior, and was placed in a suitable location underneath a

tree. Surrounded by flowers, the tent didn't destroy the appearance of the garden, but rather looked like the home of a fairy from a children's fable. However, its owner was unknown. Or at least, that's what Mary was choosing to believe.

"Something always drags Roxanne in, which is quite troublesome," she went on. "And I often hear familiar voices coming from inside."

"I see... How bizarre, indeed," said Patrick.

"I get dragged in too. You may not believe this, but there's a woman inside who looks just like the queen of our country, and she welcomes you with a muffin in hand. I wonder if that tent's connected to a different realm? I mean, it's *truly* mysterious."

"Fine, I acknowledge it. I'm sorry. I'll have it dismantled at once."

"It's good enough that you acknowledge it. Roxanne likes it, so leave it be. Oho ho!" Mary said with a victorious laugh.

Patrick's shoulders drooped over his loss.

As for the key culprit in this case, Alicia, she was happily telling Adi, "The other day, we played a board game inside the tent!" She didn't look ashamed in the slightest, nor did she think she had done anything wrong. Not that this was a surprise by this point. "Felix, Roxanne, and I were playing a card game, and a slight breeze came and made the tent shake! It was so much fun!"

"Well, it doesn't disrupt the garden's scenery, and most importantly of all, Roxanne enjoys it," Adi said. "So one or two tents would be—"

"But then it started to rain, so we rushed back inside the mansion," Alicia interrupted.

"Then what's the point of a tent?"

"Also, I was so surprised that just two hours after it was first pitched, there were already cushions inside it! Each time the cushions change, Felix and Roxanne wonder whether a cushion fairy lives in the gardens."

"What an adorable idea...!" Adi (incidentally also the cushion fairy) trembled at his daughter's childishness.

Watching them in her periphery, Mary sighed deeply. Yet her sigh was merely performative, showing her supposed frustration at having a tent erected in her garden without her permission. In reality, she wasn't dissatisfied with it.

When she had first laid eyes on the tent, she'd exclaimed, "*That gardener!*" She had wanted it dismantled at once, but Roxanne's eyes glimmered at the sight. The girl had crawled inside, and seeing her child like that had forced Mary to admit that it wasn't so bad after all. The sight of Roxanne's face peeking out from the tent's entrance and urging Mary to join in was indescribably cute.

The tent even saw use when its owner was absent. Roxanne had grown accustomed to the garden's scenery, so having the tent around made it seem to her like they were having a picnic. The little girl enjoyed it thoroughly.

Mary grudgingly admitted that despite her grievances, her daughter loved it. Alicia grinned at that. "Then Roxanne can be the tent's inheritor!"

"How dare you say that when the tent is in *our* garden? But if you wish to give it to Roxanne, then so be it. I'm sure she'll be pleased," Mary acquiesced. "Also...arrange for one more tent of the same kind."

"One more? So you want one too, Lady Mary?!" Alicia smirked, as if to say she had seen through Mary's words.

Mary shut her up by flinging a cushion at her. Alicia let out a scream, seemingly enjoying herself. Yet despite her reaction, she caught the cushion with ease.

The idle chatter continued, until eventually a familiar estate came into view. This was one of House Eldland's villas which were located close to Albert Manor. A couple of days ago, Parfette had sent a letter to let Mary know she was currently staying in this mansion (the paper had been damp, so she must've written it while crying). Mary had mentioned to Roxanne that they might visit Parfette.

The little girl must've remembered that conversation, and so headed towards this particular holiday home in hopes that Parfette was there. *Roxanne has such a good memory*, Mary thought, praising her beloved daughter.

A while later, Roxanne's carriage stopped in front of the mansion. The carriage bearing Mary and the others stopped a small distance behind them in a blind spot. The children shouldn't have been able to see them from here. Then again, given how Roxanne stepped out of her vehicle and proudly marched towards the estate, she probably wouldn't have noticed even if Mary had tailed her from only a few steps behind.

"Just look at her dignified, magnificent walk! She's so courageous that she feels no need to look back. She conducts herself like a big shot!" Mary exclaimed.

"The way she walks without paying attention to what's behind her is just like you when you were little," Adi reminisced. "You behaved the same way... Not that I tailed you."

"Oh please, just come clean already."

"No, I really didn't. But your brothers and Roberto competed to see how close behind you they could get without being noticed while you strutted around."

"So you're confessing to even more foul deeds?! Don't play with a girl who took an errand upon herself!" Mary commanded, angrily stomping on Adi's foot.

"The statute of limitations!" Adi cried, but she ignored him.

She could understand shadowing someone out of concern (that was what they were doing with Roxanne right now), but competing to see how close they could get to her was unacceptable. If they'd had the time to play such games, were they truly concerned for her in the first place? Then again, it *was* easy to imagine Lang and Lucian doing as much, given their personalities.

"Goodness! You've all been engaging in too much horseplay since forever! Look, we need to get Roxanne a servant who is loyal, values their mistress, and is never insolent," Mary declared.

"Don't you think that might be too much to ask of someone from my family?" Adi inquired.

"Why are you acting like your entire family is disrespectful? That's so rude to them. You and Roberto *are* insolent in the extreme, though."

“But I’m obedient when it comes to Lord Lang and Lord Lucian, while Roberto is obedient to you. And of course, we hold the utmost respect for His Grace and Madam!”

“Where exactly does this strange family system, in which you’re only allowed to be rude to your own masters, come from?” Mary asked, but Adi just laughed evasively. She sighed at him, before deciding to change the topic.

Patrick and Alicia were smiling as if to say Mary and Adi were the same as ever, which only irritated Mary further. *Perhaps I should stamp them all into the ground*, she thought, considering the use of military force. However, even she could admit that was immature of her, and shook her head to calm herself down.



Parfette stepped out of House Eldland’s holiday home. “Lady Roxanne! Lord Felix!” she cried out, her eyes glistening with excitement as she hurriedly approached them.

In response, Roxanne gave a ladylike greeting, while Felix delivered a princely one. Between the three of them, it was hard to tell which were the actual children.

“Welcome, you two! I’m so happy that you’ve decided to visit! My tears... No! I won’t cry!” Parfette’s eyes had teared up in joy, but she shut them tightly. Next, she slapped her own cheeks a few times to contain the waterworks. Soon enough, her expression brightened. “Did you need something? Are Lady Mary and the others with you?”

“No, only Prince Felix and I came to visit today,” Roxanne explained. “In my mother’s stead, I’ve come to extend you a cord...cordy...”

“A cordial invitation?” Felix suggested.

“Yes, that! Here you go.” Roxanne took advantage of the boy’s verbal support to remove a letter from her pochette.

“An invitation?! I’m so glad!” Parfette exclaimed tearfully, once more doing her utmost not to cry. She was trembling, but not in quite the same way as when she cried. Her trembling now was a result of her effort to keep her tears

in.

“You can do it!”

“Persevere!”

Roxanne and Felix reflexively shouted encouragements. Once Parfette had restrained her tears, the children sent her a round of applause. It was getting increasingly more difficult to discern who the actual adult was here.

As a side note, Mary and the others, who were observing this from afar, also clapped. Parfette had truly grown.

However, Parfette was embarrassed to have her efforts praised so much, and she stopped Roxanne and Felix from clapping. “Do you have a letter for Lord Gainas too?”

“Yes! And also...” Roxanne paused, her red eyes lighting up. She gazed at Gainas, who was approaching them...as well as the babies bundled in his arms. They were wrapped up in pink and light-blue blankets.

Roxanne very much wanted to see the babies, but she suppressed her urge to jump up and down in excitement. Instead, she greeted Gainas elegantly. The man surmised her wishes and, after returning her greeting, slowly crouched down.

He was holding two babies, one in each muscular arm. One child was dozing off, while the other stared right at Roxanne, moving its mouth as if trying to talk. They both looked happy and healthy.

Roxanne let out a squeal, before quickly clapping a hand over her mouth. She’d managed to stop herself from being loud and waking the sleeping babe at the last minute. “They’re so small, plump, and adorable!” she said in a sheepishly quiet tone of voice. Gainas smiled and nodded.

Felix peered at them from the side too, and gasped. “Wow...” he muttered in wonder. At present, he was the youngest child within both the palace and House Dyce. He was also the youngest among his family’s friends, such as House Albert. As a result, he was treated like a child wherever he went, and even Roxanne, who was only one year older than him, constantly insisted that she was more mature than him.

Yet now he was looking upon children who were even younger than him. In fact, they were infants. His astonishment and happiness mixed together, and though he himself was small, he adoringly muttered, “They’re so small.”

“Just minutes ago, they were both crying loudly. It was quite the ordeal,” Parfette revealed. “But as soon as the maid notified us that you two had arrived, the babies instantly stopped crying.”

“It’s because they wanted to meet us, right? That makes me so happy! I have invites for you both as well,” Roxanne informed them. She pulled two letters from her pochette, and began reading the addressees out loud. But of course, she couldn’t actually hand them the envelopes, and Gainas’s hands were full.

So Roxanne decided to give the invitations to Parfette. Yet when she turned back to the woman, Parfette was staring at a spot behind Roxanne and shaking all over.

“What’s wrong, Lady Parfette?” Roxanne inquired. “Did something happen? Why are you on the verge of tears?”

“Lady Ma— No, it’s nothing. Lady Roxanne, Lord Felix, we have plenty of sweets in the house. Please go ahead and have some,” Parfette offered. “The mansion’s practically buried in them,” she added, pleading in jest.

Roxanne tilted her head, causing her silver curls to sway. What a strange idea, for a mansion to be buried in confections. Yet it was no joke—House Eldland’s villa was filled with countless sweets. It wasn’t buried per se, but one of the rooms was filled up with pastry boxes. Additionally, sweets had been placed in every room in case of teatime, including the servants’ lounge. Hence, there was a near incalculable number of treats in the house, including options both foreign and domestic. They practically could’ve held their own confectionery exhibition.

As for why they had so many sweets—they were all gifts to celebrate the birth of the babies. House Eldland was a distinguished family with a long history. Upon the birth of the head’s first children, plenty of nobles had sent gifts, even those without any direct connection to the Eldlands. And while Parfette’s birth family, House Marquis, wasn’t necessarily distinguished, they were well-liked and had a wide circle of friends. Many people wanted to send

gifts their way as well.

Confections are a classic when it comes to gifts. Not to mention, everybody knew that Parfette loved sweets; therefore, it was only to be expected that she would receive new ones daily.

That said, even Parfette had her limits when it came to how much sweets she could eat. Yet the gifts kept on coming, with many people sending additional portions for the babies, even though they couldn't eat them yet. Since the babies were twins, the portions that arrived for them were doubled too.

Parfette and Gainas had distributed the sweets among their servants, but it still wasn't enough. The other day, one of the maids had shrieked, *"If you give me any more sweets, I'll gain weight and won't fit into my uniform!"*

"So for the sake of saving House Eldland, will you please have some sweets?" Parfette asked, peering at Roxanne intently.

"Of course!" the little girl responded, her eyes shining. But then she gasped and looked down at her pochette.

When she had left Albert Manor, the pochette was filled with letters, but it was quite empty by now. She'd given out nine invitations, so that made sense. And yet Roxanne's work wasn't done. She still had more invitations to give, and therefore more people to visit.

"N-No, I can't. I decided to give out invitations today," Roxanne said, showing restraint in light of her mission.

(Watching from afar, Mary and Adi began clapping. "Such force of will!" Mary cried.)

("She's all grown up!" Adi exclaimed. Of course, Roxanne and Felix didn't notice anything.)

"How wonderful...!" Parfette sobbed, deeply moved upon witnessing Roxanne overcome the enticement of sweets. Once again, she managed at the last second to stop herself from actually crying.

"I'm sorry I have to reject your invitation, Lady Parfette. But I have a mission I must fulfill," Roxanne said, delivering a joint apology and rejection. Such a

dignified attitude, indeed!

However, a moment later, a rumble resounded from her stomach. In contrast to her imposing conduct just now, Roxanne hurriedly pressed her hands to her abdomen. Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment, and she deliberated on how to gloss this matter over. Then, she turned her gaze to Felix beside her.

“M-My, Prince Felix! Are you hungry?”

“Huh? No, that was *your* stomach, Roxanne.”

“A gentleman should cover for a lady in this situation!”

“In that case, it was my stomach,” Felix said, immediately changing his tune. He even raised his hand in admission.

Everybody watching knew that it was Roxanne who was hungry. Actually, even if someone *hadn't* heard her stomach rumble, they would've been able to guess exactly what had happened. Yet Roxanne was convinced she'd managed to fool everyone, and even added, “There you have it.”

Parfette almost burst out laughing, before hurriedly covering her mouth. Usually, all her emotions turned into tears, but this time she trembled because she was suppressing her laughter instead. “In that case, I'll prepare a light packed lunch and sweets, so you can have it in the carriage.”

“Are you sure?” Roxanne inquired.

“Of course. I won't be able to pack anything too elaborate, but please do wait a moment!”

“W-Well, if you say so...” Roxanne consented hesitantly, perhaps because she was trying to act like a grown lady, or because she was trying to hide her joy. While she mostly managed to keep up an appearance of calm, she was a little fidgety. It was obvious she was happy, and that she was trying to conceal that.

Her stomach must've realized it was about to get some food, as it rumbled once more. Naturally, the little girl looked at Felix and placed the blame onto him.

Felix cast her a questioning glance, as if wondering whether he had to do this again. But in the end, to retain his gentlemanly etiquette, he raised his hand

and said, “That was my stomach.”

Parfette smiled at them, before looking at her husband. “Lord Gainas, please arrange for a light meal and sweets to be prepared for them. Since they’re here already, how about we let them choose the sweets themselves?”

“Right. Lady Roxanne, Lord Felix, please come with me,” Gainas urged, guiding the children towards the mansion. As he started walking, the baby in his right arm began crying, and he hurriedly rocked it. Either because of the movement or because it heard its sibling cry, the other baby also began wiggling.

One baby was crying, while the other flailed restlessly. Holding them both in his arms seemed difficult for Gainas. His hasty attempts at appeasing each of the infants had no trace of the usual majesty or intimidation one might see from the head of a family, but Parfette looked perfectly satisfied as she watched him.

Once everyone had disappeared into the villa, Parfette took a deep breath, and...

“Lady Mary! Lady Maaaryyy!”

...raised her voice, racing over to where Mary and the others were standing. All the while, she was crying.



“I’m so glad Lady Roxanne and Lord Felix paid us a surprise visit! Receiving Lady Roxanne’s handmade invitation is such an honor! And I even got to see *you*, Lady Mary... So much happened, I can’t stop my tears...!” Parfette wailed.

“You were doing so well earlier, but the moment Roxanne and Felix disappeared, you immediately started crying,” Mary remarked.

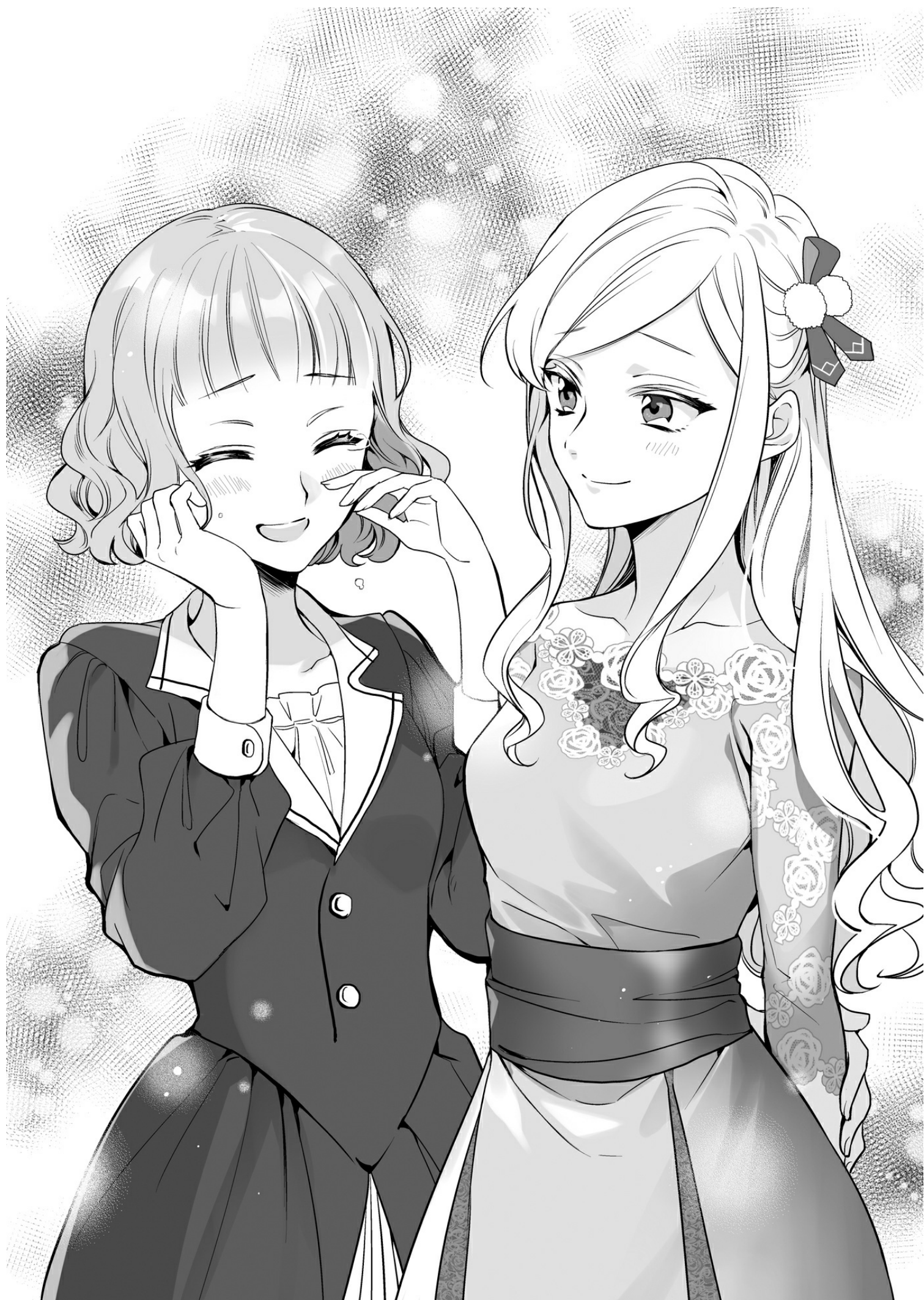
“I also received a pile of sweets this morning...!”

“So you’re lumping that together with the rest of the reasons for your tears? How very questionable.”

“And all the sweets are so tasty...!!!”

While Parfette sniffled and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief, Mary’s shoulders drooped. Earlier, Parfette had shown such growth in restraining her

tears, yet the second she let down her guard, she immediately turned back into a crybaby. If anything, her adding “there are too many delicious sweets” to her list of reasons for weeping suggested she’d only deteriorated.



Can she really handle being a mother to two children? Mary wondered.

Eventually, Parfette calmed down and sighed, looking refreshed. "It's been a while since I cried," she said. Alas, it seemed she had been playing the part of a mother without having shed tears for quite some time. Crying might've been a form of stress relief for her at this point.

"If that's the case, there's no reason to force you to change," Mary said while nodding.

Patrick sighed, exasperated. "Is that really true?"

"It is. If anything, a Parfette who doesn't cry wouldn't be Parfette at all," Mary argued.

"So crying's a part of her identity, huh? Still, despite your tears, I'm glad you seem to be doing well," Patrick told Parfette as he smiled at her.

"Your smile is so dazzling...!" she exclaimed, once more on the verge of crying. But after trembling for a moment, she calmed down and then returned his smile. Parfette was still a crybaby, but in her own way, she was getting better at switching up her reactions.

This is another sign of her growth, Mary thought, watching her friend with a smile.

When Mary had first heard the news of Parfette's pregnancy, she had almost cried herself. She had reflexively wanted to embrace Parfette, before quickly stopping herself. Instead, Mary hugged Alicia, who was lying in wait to the side with her arms already spread open. Moreover, Parfette later gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, so Mary's joy was doubled.

At the same time, she was worried. Mary already knew how hard it was to be a mother, so she couldn't imagine what it'd be like to have two babies at the same time. To her, this was uncharted territory. Could a crybaby like Parfette even withstand something like this?

Such were Mary's worries, but they had turned out to be unfounded. After all, though Parfette was like a tearful, quivering small animal, at critical moments,

she had always shown an unbreakable strength. Plus...

“Lord Gainas looked quite good, holding two babies at once,” Mary pointed out teasingly. Parfette laughed.

Back when Mary had rushed to visit the Eldlands to congratulate them on the birth, Gainas still hadn’t been sure how to treat his newborn children. He had held them cautiously and nervously. Whenever he picked one of the babies up, he would go rigid. Of course, he only held one at a time. It would’ve been unthinkable for him to hold one baby in each arm while rocking them both.

Yet earlier, Gainas hadn’t appeared to be afraid anymore. He held the infants as though he was used to it, and though he panicked a little when they started moving about, he reacted without turning stiff.

“It looks like he makes for a reliable father,” Mary remarked.

“Yes, Lord Gainas is a very good father,” Parfette confirmed.

“I suppose I must recognize his efforts. I’ll give him a hundred points for his growth as a father.”

“A hundred?! I’m sure he’ll be so glad to hear your praise, Lady Mary! I know, I’ll go switch shifts with him, so please say hello to the little ones!” Parfette bowed before walking away.

A while later, Gainas came out of the estate. The babies were still in his arms. “I assume you don’t want your children to know you’re here?” he asked as he approached. He must’ve surmised Mary and the others were tailing Roxanne and Felix. When everyone nodded in response to his question, his shoulders drooped. “I knew it... It’s one thing for Lady Mary and Lady Alicia to be shadowing them, but I can’t believe Lord Adi and Lord Patrick are doing it too.”

“Oh? What are you trying to say about me and Alicia?” Mary demanded.

“N-Nothing! Anyway, uh, this carriage is very good for camouflage, isn’t it? I wouldn’t have thought you all would ride in such an ordinary vehicle.”

“Once your children are grown up and decide to leave on an errand by themselves, you’ll understand, Gainas,” Mary told him. “When that happens, I’ll lend you House Albert’s treasured getaway vehicle. Though it’s meant for

sneaking out, it's also perfect for tailing. Incredible, isn't it?"

"R-Right. Thank you... Wait, *House Albert's* treasured getaway vehicle?" Gainas repeated with astonishment, once more turning to look at the carriage. He hadn't expected it to belong to House Albert, let alone be their getaway vehicle. "Y-Yes, it's truly wonderful..." he added, clearly struggling to compliment it. His face was stiff, but Mary pretended she didn't notice and laughed elegantly.

She knew what he wanted to say, and that was why she wouldn't let him. Instead, she cast her gaze on the twins in his arms, putting an end to the previous topic.

One of the twins was dozing off, while the other was sucking on the blanket with single-minded devotion. The baby's oddly serious face combined with the drool-soaked wrap was adorable.

Alicia gently stroked the infant's cheek. Mary did the same, and felt a soft, delicate sensation against her finger. It was as if she were touching a cloud. Gainas was overflowing with fondness for his babies, and when Mary and Alicia said they were cute, he smiled as if they had praised him. It was the expression of an adoring father.

Yet a second later, he looked up quickly with a hint of panic. "Parfette has left the mansion. She's sending a signal, so Roxanne and Felix must be right behind her."

"Oh no. They'll get mad if they spot us... But I can't stop! I can't stop my finger from poking the baby's cheek!" Mary exclaimed. She poked the child's soft, plump skin, and it shrieked happily in response, as though her touch tickled. It was adorable.

Gainas paused, uncertain of what to do, before turning to Adi and Patrick and silently imploring them for help. However...

"When Roxanne was a baby, her pink cheeks were cute too. Whenever she looked at me, she'd get so happy, and that made her cheeks look even more plump... Of course, she's still adorable now, and she gets prettier by the day."

"Felix also smiled whenever I poked his cheeks as a baby. It was cute.

Sometimes, he'd catch my finger and then laugh. It was so endearing, I could hardly bear it. Of course, he's still endearing now, and gets even more so by the day."

...both men were currently submerged in past memories of their own children.

This is impossible... Gainas thought, narrowing his eyes. He was well aware that once those two got started, there was no stopping them. He'd listened to them fawning over their kids on countless occasions.

Alas, they truly couldn't continue like this right now. Gainas looked up, noticing that Parfette was rushing over to them and waving her hand. She looked panicked, so Roxanne and Felix must've been close by. Gainas could almost hear her screaming, *"Please hurry and run...!"*

"E-Everyone, please return to your carriage! They're almost here!" Gainas shouted.

"As a baby, Roxanne was as beautiful as a work of art... Ah! You're right. This isn't the time to be talking about this. Mary, let's head back before they notice us!"

"Even when he was a baby, you could tell that Felix was intelligent... No, we need to focus on the tailing! Alicia, let's hurry back!"

Adi and Patrick snapped back to their senses around the same time. Mary and Alicia were still having their fill of poking the infants' cheeks, so the men guided their wives back into the carriage.

Gainas breathed a sigh of relief. "That was close," he told the babies in his arms before he could stop himself.

Mary peered out of the window at him. "Sorry, Gainas. Those charming cheeks took all of my attention. They're devilish things that make you forget yourself."

"Please don't assign strange attributes to my children. But I admit: they're both cute, and their cheeks are... No, now's not the time!" Gainas managed to stop himself from repeating the sins of the fathers who had gone before him. Roxanne and Felix might notice if he were to speak aloud like this. Perhaps his

children really did have devilish cheeks, for making their father lose his reason. With that on his mind, Gainas looked between the two infants in his arms.

Mary laughed at the sight. “A hundred points,” she proclaimed.

Gainas looked up at her with surprise. “A hundred...?”

“Yes. It’s for embracing your children, and supporting Parfette as her husband.”

“This is the most points you’ve ever given me, Lady Mary...” Gainas said and then gasped. He understood Mary’s intentions, yet he still gazed at her with disbelief.

Until now, Mary had never given Gainas more than ten points at a time. Parfette, who should’ve been the strictest, often granted him nonsensical points by saying things like “*Good morning. Ten points.*” But even while the others gave him high scores, Mary’s grading had remained unsparing. If anything, she’d even subtracted points from him many a time.

But here she was now, giving him a hundred points. It was an unprecedented amount.

“You have overcome your errors, and now you’re fulfilling your role as Parfette’s husband and the father of your children. You deserve those hundred points,” Mary announced.

“Y-You mean...?” Gainas trailed off. His eyes silently asked Mary whether she had forgiven him for his past transgression. She smiled calmly and nodded. “Lady Mary! Thank you so much...!”

“It’s fine. More importantly, if I bully you, those twins with devilish cheeks might get mad at me,” Mary explained, gently admonishing Gainas after hearing his earnest gratitude.

Adi and Patrick were watching this exchange while smiling. “I also jumped on the bandwagon and gave Gainas points every now and then. How many did he end up getting, again?” Adi wondered.

“I tried to keep count and add them all up out of sheer curiosity, but when Parfette said she gave him three hundred and fifty points because she’d had a

nice dream, I gave up,” Patrick responded.

Alicia noticed something then. “They’re here!” she said, raising her voice while trying to hide inside the carriage.

Roxanne and Felix had left the mansion. Mary glanced outside, before immediately withdrawing and closing the curtain. The touching atmosphere from before had disappeared.

“Excuse me,” Gainas said quietly, before walking towards Parfette.

“The devilish cheeks enchanted us, but we somehow managed to get away without being discovered,” Mary said, sighing. She opened the curtain slightly and checked to see what was going on. Roxanne and Felix were climbing into their carriage. In each hand, they were both holding bags of sweets.

Parfette was wiping the corners of her eyes. Perhaps she was saddened by the departure, or maybe she was relieved that they’d managed to get rid of some of the confections.

Once the children’s carriage left, Parfette and Gainas looked towards Mary’s and bowed. Mary responded by waving. Simultaneously, their vehicle kicked into motion.

The carriage raced past the Eldland estate’s gates. Mary tried to conjecture where they would go next. While she was busy thinking about it, she realized there was another carriage heading towards them from the opposite direction. It looked familiar, and Mary peeked outside the window.

“That’s Veltina,” she whispered, watching as the other vehicle passed them by.

Veltina was inside the carriage, and her husband, Luke, sat facing her. Mary had only glimpsed them for a second, but they looked like they were enjoying themselves.

When Mary had first met Veltina, the girl had worn a large ribbon in her hair. But as she’d gotten older, the ribbons had progressively gotten smaller. These days, she just tied her hair with a string.

(Each time they met and as Mary watched the ribbons becoming smaller, she found herself thinking, *I wonder if her body is growing by absorbing the ribbons?*)

(As a side note, when Adi heard that idea, he'd said, "*That's limited to your drills, milady,*" and shut her down.)

"I'm sure they're off to see Parfette," Mary said.

"I'm glad they get along so well," Adi replied, smiling wryly as he recalled their past turmoil. He must've felt that way because he had been the catalyst for that situation.

Back then, Parfette and Veltina had tried to intimidate each other by having a "cheeks puff-off." It was a fiery confrontation, filled with tension (from the contestants' point of view). Even once the strife was resolved, the two girls continued puffing their cheeks out at each other. This would often occur during parties, while they were both holding cakes and exchanging information about delicious cookies.

Nevertheless, after a few years, the girls had relaxed and reconciled. Now, they were friends. They discussed those days together, saying that they were friends precisely because they had clashed with each other so many times.

"*You always seemed close, though,*" was what everyone found themselves thinking, but stopped short of saying out loud. If they did, Parfette and Veltina would puff out their cheeks. Nowadays, Parfette's twins might follow in their mother's example and those devilish cheeks might become puffy too.

"Anyway, I'm just glad it's going well for them. By the way, Adi, did you see inside the carriage?" Mary inquired.

"I did. There was a massive pile of boxes next to Veltina..."

"They must be filled with sweets." There was no doubt about it; the sweets were a gift for Parfette. Although, the amount was quite excessive, all things considered. If Mary had to guess, it was twice the amount of treats that Roxanne and Felix had taken with them. And that was just based on a brief glance through the window. Perhaps there was even more confectionery in there.

Mary pictured Parfette shaking as she said, *“If I look to my right, I see sweets, and if I look to my left, I see more sweets...”* Surely she wouldn’t be able to endure it and would burst into tears.

“Perhaps we should hold a cushion-and-sweets exchange,” Mary proposed.

“In that case, I’ll get some new cushions for the occasion,” Adi threw in. “I just happened to acquire a new design recently. The cloth is very soft too. I’ll commission it from my supplier...”

“If I look to my right, I see cushions, and if I look to my left, I see more cushions,” Mary muttered. *Rather than resolving the confectionery situation at the Eldland villa, maybe I should focus on addressing the cushion problem within my own home,* she thought while stroking the cushion in her lap.

Idle Memories: Part 2

For a while after they passed Veltina, the carriage was filled with the aroma of desserts. Mary picked one up and bit into it. It was a delicious cookie, and before she knew it, she was already reaching for another one.

"I feel bad that they gave us sweets too. Perhaps we should send them a gift," Mary said in good humor. Confectionery arrived at the Eldland estate on the daily (more was currently on the way), so Parfette had given some to Mary as well before they left.

"It's a shame we can't enjoy them together, Lady Mary!" Parfette had said. *"At least let this remind you of me...!"*

"But it'll go into my stomach. Are you sure?" Mary had asked.

"If it's your stomach, then gladly so...!"

Parfette had made some incomprehensible statements at the time of Mary's departure, but that was nothing new. Mary smiled wryly at the memory as she ate another sweet.

Patrick nodded in agreement, shrugging his shoulders. "I really do get knocked off my stride when it comes to her."

"Now that I think about it, Parfette pushed you around the first time you met her," Mary recalled.

"I'll always remember what you said back then," Patrick responded with a dry smile. Mary remembered that day.

Mary had first met Parfette while studying abroad at Elysiana Academy. It was when Mary had gotten wrapped up in the conflict created by Lilianne's reverse harem. Right as that uproar came to a close, Patrick visited the academy for an unrelated reason. That was when he had first met Parfette...or the *crying* Parfette, as it were.

"She cried no matter what I said to her. When I invited her to a meal, she also

cried. Even during the meal, she cried because of how tasty the food was..." Patrick listed.

"How nostalgic. She made quick work of those croquettes while crying over how delicious they were," Mary added.

"And I never thought I'd make someone cry because 'the way I eat croquettes is beautiful,' apparently."

Mary and Patrick laughed as they reminisced.

"While we're on that subject," Patrick said. "It was pretty difficult after that. Everyone kept questioning me about who your new friend was."

"You mean Parfette?" Mary asked.

"Yeah. I met her first, so I had to put up with a barrage of questions from the others," he responded, pointedly glancing at Adi and Alicia.

The two smiled remorsefully. They must've recalled how much they had questioned Patrick at the time. They even started making excuses. "It wasn't *just us*," Adi said.

"Exactly," Alicia agreed. Most likely, Mary's brothers had also hounded Patrick for answers.

Alas, since he had been the first to meet Parfette, it was only natural that everyone else was curious and wanted to ask him about her, as she was Mary's friend. Mary's descriptions of Parfette had consisted of "*There's no distinction between her crying and not crying*," and "*It's not that she's perpetually in the midst of one big cry, but rather she intermittently finds new reasons to cry*." That had only made everyone all the more curious.

Patrick, being the only other source of information, had faced a rapid barrage of questions about who Parfette was and whether she really cried all the time. "*It's not that she cries often; it's that she smiles sometimes*," he had explained, borrowing Mary's words.

His answer only confused everyone, further deepening their interest in the girl.

And once Adi and Alicia finally met Parfette for the first time...

“Right. It’s not that she cries often; it’s that she smiles sometimes.”

...they had jointly understood the situation. Of course, Parfette had been quivering and crying at that time too.

Chapter 3

“I wonder where we’re going?” Alicia whispered while gazing out of the carriage window. Quite some time had passed since they’d left House Eldland’s holiday home. The vehicle ahead of theirs showed no signs of stopping, and they followed behind at a decent distance.

The outside view was gradually changing, with more nature coloring the scenery. This area wasn’t necessarily depopulated, but nor was it prospering. To put things nicely, it was serene. To put things less nicely, it was the middle of nowhere. Simply gazing at the tranquil scenery put one’s heart at ease, yet Alicia was full of dubiousness. Influenced by her, Patrick also looked outside with curiosity.

“To Anna’s place,” Mary answered. “Helene and Anna live in this area.”

“They do? So they moved from Sylvino to here, did they?” Alicia asked.

Helene and Anna were a mother and daughter duo Mary had met in the past. They used to live in poverty under the rule of a feudal lord who believed that one’s birth circumstances determined everything, and their district had been deteriorated beyond recognition. The buildings were once decrepit, with broken windows and crumbling walls. The area had been entirely unfit to house people. It was the picture of poverty, and when Mary had first visited it, the sight had left her furious.

However, she and her friends had managed to oust the feudal lord. Ever since someone else had been put in charge, Sylvino had changed. The citizens were now able to find work without having to abandon their families, and children were able to attend school. The new management had established a functional infrastructure to support the populace’s livelihoods, and they were now focusing on renovating the houses and buildings.

“Helene and Anna’s house was demolished, so they took the chance to move here,” Mary explained with a smile, adding that this land was very nice. It was tranquil and peaceful. She liked the lively town center and the luxurious high

society, but she could see the appeal in passing time in a place like this.

Alicia and Patrick looked outside too, now appearing calm. “It does seem to be a peaceful place to live,” Patrick said.

“My brothers have been coming here for a long time to relax as well... Or rather, this is the place they often escape to,” Mary explained.

“I see. It does look like a good destination to flee to,” he replied, a little exasperated.

The area was full of nature, and it was the perfect place for parents and children to enjoy a calm life. (It also happened to be the perfect place for a pair of twins, exhausted by their studies or family business, to escape to in their getaway vehicle and get their brief fill of freedom.) Since Helene and Anna had lived in terrible conditions for so long, this was their chance to heal and recover. They were able to pass their time together, surrounded by nature and tranquility.

“This area isn’t far from Albert Manor, so it’s easy for us to visit each other,” Mary said.

“Yeah? Now that I think about it, I do see those two often whenever I visit you,” Patrick responded.

“The other day, Anna went into the tent with Roxanne, and they had some tea and sweets together.”

That got Alicia and Patrick talking about the times they’d seen Anna and her mother at Albert Manor. But they were such a frequent sight that it made everyone question whether or not it was just a coincidence. Indeed, the family of two visited whenever Mary asked them to, but many times they were already in the mansion without Mary having ever sent an invitation. That said, Helene and Anna weren’t carelessly gate-crashing—it was Lang and Lucian who invited them instead, saying they had business or something to discuss.

“Do they really have business *that* often?” Patrick questioned.

“I don’t know. I never ask for details. But Anna plays together with Roxanne, which is very helpful. Roxanne is really attached to her too. Whenever Anna visits, Roxanne follows her around and calls her a big sister,” Mary said, smiling

at the memory.

When Mary had first met Anna, the little girl was around the same age as Roxanne. Six years had passed since then, so Anna was now eleven years old. Each time the two girls walked together while holding hands, they looked like a pair of close sisters.

A few days ago, Roxanne had gotten soaked while playing by the fountain in Albert Manor's gardens. Anna had dried the other girl with a towel, procured her a new change of clothes, fixed up her hair, and given her some warm tea to drink so Roxanne wouldn't catch a chill. The older girl was so efficient and diligent that it put the maids to shame.

"Also, when Anna's around, Roxanne can't run from her tutor," Mary added. "She's more motivated to study when they're together."

"Does the private tutor instruct Anna too?" Patrick asked.

"Yes. My brothers explained the situation to him, and he agreed to instruct both of the girls."

Alas, Anna didn't have her own private tutor; she attended a school near her home. However, a school in the countryside wasn't able to provide as thorough an education as Karelia Academy. On top of that, Anna only attended class once every couple of days. In between that time, Anna was studying together with Roxanne, and whenever she didn't understand something, she could ask Roxanne's tutor to explain it to her.

Once Mary finished saying as much, Patrick muttered, "I see..." while looking thoughtful. "Lang and Lucian are really looking out for her, aren't they?"

"Now that you mention it, I suppose you're right. I help out too, but most of the time, they get everything done before me," Mary answered.

When it came to Helene and Anna's new home, Anna's studies, or even more trivial matters—such as deciding how to celebrate their birthdays each year—Mary almost always heard about it just moments before everything was arranged. Often, she only found out about these things when Helene looked at her apologetically and said, *"I'm much obliged to you all."*

And yet, so long as the mother and daughter's lives were going well, Mary

didn't mind who made the arrangements. She said as much, causing Alicia and Patrick to exchange a glance with each other. It seemed they had something to say. After a moment, they both turned to look at Adi.

Rather than enjoying the journey in the new carriage, which implemented state-of-the-art technology to reduce motion sickness, Adi reclined against three cushions. As he noticed that the others were gazing at him, he sluggishly lifted his head, appearing a little pallid. His motion sickness must've returned after all.

While the area was beautiful and full of nature, its roads weren't well maintained. The road was only just wide enough to allow two vehicles to pass each other, but it was rough, with gravel scattered here and there. Traveling out this way meant that vibrations were unavoidable.

Nevertheless, they *were* inside a refurbished carriage equipped with House Albert's latest technology. The vibrations were so minimal that Mary, Alicia, and Patrick hardly noticed them. In other words, only Adi was able to sense the vehicle's shaking. The less someone's able to handle something, the more sensitive they are to it.

"Adi!" Alicia cried out with exaggerated heartbreak. She took a folding fan out of her bag and began fanning him.

Mary also wanted to minimize the vibrations he felt, so she stuffed the cushion she'd been holding between him and the carriage interior.

"Regarding what you were discussing...there's a lot going on there..." Adi mumbled.

"Are you well enough to talk, Adi?" Mary asked. "What do you mean, 'a lot going on'?"

"My brother and the twins...they're...they're... Ah, it's no use... I'm going to faint..." he said, resting his head back on the cushion. The sound produced upon impact made it clear how soft the cushion was. He muttered something under his breath, and if Mary strained her ears, she thought she could hear him asking, "Are you all right, milady...?"

It was obvious to everyone that *Adi* was the one not doing all right at the

moment. And yet he was looking out for Mary, which filled her with joy. She rubbed his arm and said, "I'll ask the driver to slow down a little." They already knew where Roxanne was going. Even if Mary and the others arrived a little late, Helene and the driver would be tactful enough to buy them some time.

After Mary suggested as much, Patrick was about to instruct the driver to slow down, when...

"Number seventy-one!"

...Alicia exclaimed loudly while leaning out of the opposite window, causing Mary to narrow her eyes. Or more accurately, she narrowed her eyes when the driver instantly slowed the vehicle upon hearing Alicia's words.

Alicia looked triumphant. "You should be fine now!" she reassured Adi. He murmured a word of gratitude, but Mary was scowling.

"Why do you know the codes House Albert's servants use?!" she demanded.

"They taught them to me, since I'm the gardener. By the way, the code for my early morning visits is one hundred and twenty-three!"

"Don't boast about it!" Mary yelled wrathfully, throwing a cushion at Alicia. She then looked away with a huff because Alicia hadn't paid her any early morning visits lately.

Ever since Mary's pregnancy, Alicia had ceased visiting out of nowhere, and only stopped by to check how Mary was doing. Sometimes, she changed up the days of her visits, or simply left after a short time, which was her own way of showing care towards Mary.

"How nostalgic," Mary whispered before she could stop herself.

Alicia's purple eyes lit up at that. "Then how about we resume number one hundred and twenty-three?!"

"Absolutely not," Mary replied. "Just like a certain someone, Roxanne doesn't do well in the mornings, and she's always grumpy. If some peasant arrives first thing in the morning, she'll cry!"

"Just like...a certain someone...?"

"Cease making that face at once," Mary ordered, threatening Alicia with a

cushion as if to say, “*Do you want another one?!*”

Alicia giggled, before raising both her hands in surrender. She looked like she was enjoying herself, which caused Mary to sigh as she put the cushion back down onto her lap. Soon enough, she recalled the previous topic of conversation. “Oh right,” she said and turned to look at Adi.

He appeared weary, and cast her a questioning gaze. Earlier, he’d been on the verge of saying something about why Roberto and the twins were looking after Helene and Anna so much.

“Did you mean to say there’s a reason those three are acting like that? Hmm...” Mary was lost in thought for a bit. The other passengers gazed at her curiously, which confused her. Their gazes were expectant, as if they were waiting to witness a child growing up. This made her slightly uncomfortable, but she had to prioritize uncovering the truth for now. While reassuring herself inwardly, Mary began reflecting on the brothers’ actions in relation to Helene and Anna recently.

Indeed, the twins were taking care of the mother and daughter’s every need. Helene and Anna visited Albert Manor frequently—very frequently, if Mary truly thought about it. (Alas, given Alicia’s near-daily visits, and the crying Parfette showing up at every occasion, Mary’s senses in this regard had grown dull. Having someone over once a day was normal for her. Twice a day was a little more than average.)

Realizing that she’d become less prone to noticing these things, Mary reconsidered the facts. Her brothers were meddlesome, and constantly invited Helene and Anna over.

A moment later, Mary looked up with a gasp. “I see! So *that’s* what’s going on!”

“Adi! Lady Mary already understands what’s going on, so it’s okay now! And well done on guessing, Lady Mary!” Alicia exclaimed.

“My brothers see little me in Anna! It’s no wonder. When I was a child, I was just as emphatic, diligent, well-mannered, ambitious, kind, and full of consideration for others as her!”

“It was a false alarm, Adi! Lady Mary will be Lady Mary eternally!”

Mary glared at Alicia for her rudeness. She chucked a cushion at her, and Alicia let out a happy shriek. “We’re almost there!” Mary added, forcibly trying to change the subject. She really couldn’t think of any other reason behind her brothers’ behavior.

Alicia knew what Mary was trying to do, and she smirked. Even Patrick was smiling impishly at her.

“What on earth...?” Mary lamented. The other two’s smiles grew wider.

As if coming to her rescue, the carriage, which had already been moving slowly, grew still. They truly *had* arrived at their destination. Mary posed triumphantly in her mind. Such perfect timing! She almost wanted to high-five the coachman.

“Let’s step outside carefully, so they don’t spot us,” she said, acting as if the previous conversation hadn’t happened. She peered outside, but Roxanne and Felix hadn’t left their vehicle. Or perhaps they’d already gone into Helene’s home?

While Mary was trying to ascertain what was going on, one of the drivers knocked on the door.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Well, Lady Roxanne and Lord Felix are...” As the coachman spoke with bewilderment and a wry smile, everyone else’s eyes widened.

At the driver’s urging, Mary and the others walked over towards Roxanne and Felix’s carriage. Mary opened the door. “What an adorable sight!” she whispered in wonderment. She pressed her hand to her chest, her breath hitching.

The inside of the carriage was covered in cushions. Among them, Roxanne and Felix were nestled against each other, fast asleep.

This had been the children’s first trip out on their own. The excitement and nervousness, the exhaustion of traveling around, and a full stomach after

having been given a light meal and some sweets—all those feelings must've transformed into sleepiness. If Mary strained her ears, she could hear Roxanne and Felix breathing deeply. They must've been in a deep slumber, and showed no signs of waking up anytime soon.

Usually, Roxanne tried to act mature and ladylike, while Felix behaved in a composed and sensible manner. Yet the way they appeared when asleep made them look exactly like the children they were.

"They worked hard, so it's no wonder they got tired," Mary said. "Our carriage has towel blankets, so cover them with those."

"Very well," the driver responded.

"We'll go visit Helene. If Roxanne and Felix wake up, let us know," Mary ordered, and the man lowered his head in understanding.

Mary and her friends made their way into Helene's house. However, Mary found herself startled when they got inside.

"Hey, Mary! I didn't think I'd run into you like this. Our sibling bond must be bringing us together! Even Queen Alicia is here—what luck! But those two taller figures in the back are an eyesore!"

"Mary, you're here too...? I saw you this morning, and I'm glad I can see you again now. Plus, being able to meet with Queen Alicia... I'm so happy now that I'm worried about the rest of my life. By the way, why are those two tall people with you?"

"What a coincidence that we're all here."

Thus spoke three very familiar men. Needless to say, they were Mary's brothers: Lang and Lucian. Roberto was present too and sitting on the sofa. All three had grandiose attitudes, behaving as if they owned the place. The sight caused Mary to blink repeatedly, dumbstruck.

Helene quickly got to her feet and bowed, while Anna happily skipped over to Mary. "Welcome, everyone!" the little girl said.

"A-Anna..." Mary stammered. "I apologize that we showed up without any

notice.”

“Not at all. Please make yourselves at home. I’ll get you some drinks.” After smiling dazzlingly, Anna left the room with her mother to make tea. The sight of them together was heartwarming, and neither looked as pitiful as they once had. Helene, who used to look like she was hanging on to her life by a thread, was now smiling merrily while chatting with her daughter.

This was proof that they were now able to live peacefully. Mary’s face softened as she watched them. Honestly speaking, Mary missed the days when Anna had referred to her and the others as “big sister” and “big brother.” But the fact that Anna had stopped was also a sign of her growth.

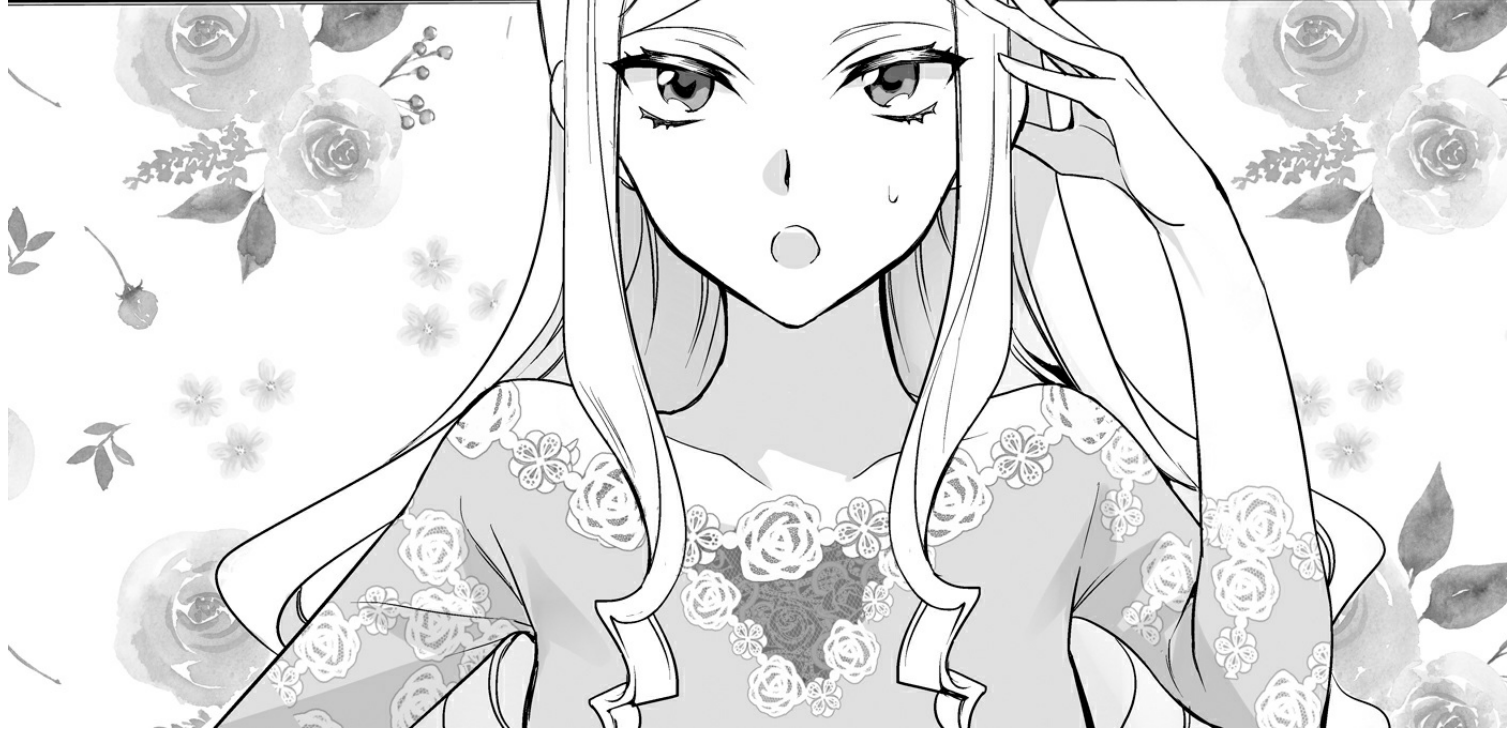
Deciding to leave that aside for now, Mary turned her gaze to the row of men sitting on the sofa. They were acting as bold as ever, and looked completely relaxed to be here. (Even Roberto, who usually behaved in a servant-like manner around Mary, looked at ease. Was he off duty today? Unlike Adi, who’d served Mary for all her life, Roberto kept his private affairs completely separate from his work. In other words, when he wasn’t on duty, he made every effort to rest.)

“Why are you all here?” Mary questioned.

“Why? Well, because today’s a holiday,” Lang replied. “Right, Lucian?”

“Yeah. We finished all our work, so don’t worry. Roberto’s on holiday too...”

“Indeed. As such, we’ve decided to visit Helene. What brings you all here?” Roberto prompted. The men were behaving as if they belonged here, which caused Mary to press her hand to her forehead. Their attitudes were as majestic as if they were homeowners welcoming guests.



Perhaps by some chance, this isn't actually Helene's home, but House Albert's? Or maybe my brothers' personal office? Mary thought, deluding herself. She even surveyed her surroundings in search of confirmation.

But no, this was Helene and Anna's home, which the twins had provided for them. Mary almost thought the place was a little too big for a single mother and daughter, but she supposed a spacious house was better than a small one. The furniture was of good quality, and the living room boasted two large sofas. They could comfortably seat five or maybe six people. There were plenty of tea utensils and tableware, enough to go around between the trio of men and Mary's uninvited group. In fact, each member of the trio was using his favorite cup, which they apparently kept in the house.

Mary tilted her head. This felt like an odd residence for a mother and daughter. It was almost as if it had been designed to fit several more people... Or rather, it was as if the house was designed with the twins and Roberto's frequent visits in mind...

"S-Something's wrong... Why do I feel so uncomfortable?" Mary murmured, scowling.

"Have you realized it, Lady Mary?!" Alicia inquired, staring at Mary with shining eyes.

After a while, an idea presented itself to Mary. With a deep breath, she vigorously raised her head. "House Albert couldn't possibly grant someone a small home! And we visit frequently, so the number of people this house can accommodate is reasonable!"

"I knew it! You really are thickheaded! If anything, you wouldn't be yourself if you were perceptive!"

"Don't just interrupt someone's soliloquy to pick a fight!"

"Well, do you understand this situation, Lady Mary? Your brothers are visiting Anna all the time."

"Right. I wonder if they bring presents each time? No matter how often members of House Albert visit, we'd never come empty-handed! Ah, I'm so tactful!" Mary declared, puffing out her chest proudly.

Alicia's shoulders sank. But soon enough, she looked up again and softly grasped Mary's hand. Her disappointment quickly shifted into a bright smile; Alicia's expressions had always changed at the drop of a hat. "That's why you're you, Lady Mary. I love you for being your thickheaded, dull, unperceptive, ignorant self!"

"Just how rude can you get?! And no matter how you put it, you're still calling me dull!"

"Roxanne...inherited milady's thickheadedness...along with her drills... This is the drill curse..."

"Be quiet, Adi! I thought you were supposed to be resting because of your motion sickness?!" Mary screeched angrily while pulling her hand free from Alicia's grasp. She then brushed her hair (which was *not* afflicted with any kind of drill curse!) off her shoulders, sighed, and glanced around the room. Adi was walking towards the sofa as he moaned, and Alicia and Patrick exchanged a glance with each other.

"Lady Mary, I'm going to step outside for a bit," Alicia said. "Anna told me they have a wonderful flower bed, so I'd like to take a look."

"Is that so? Just what I'd expect from a gardener," Mary responded.

"I'll go with her," Patrick added. "Mary, you should take your time to carefully, calmly, and meticulously listen to every minute detail of the conversation."

"I feel a tremendous amount of pressure," Mary said, sensing that Patrick was trying to tell her something. She frowned again before adding, "See you two later."

Alicia called Anna over, and together with Patrick, the three of them went outside. That left Mary, Adi, Lang, Lucian, Roberto, and Helene in the living room. A strange silence settled between them following Patrick's words. However, Mary felt that there was no need to be nervous in front of this lineup of people, and casually sat down on the sofa.

Tea utensils were laid out before her, and a warm aroma drifted in the air. "This tea..." she trailed off, realizing that she recognized the fragrance. It was

Lang and Lucian's favorite black tea. Moreover, the cookies on the table were from Roberto's favorite shop. Had they brought them as gifts?

Yet when Mary asked them that, the three men shook their heads and replied that these cookies and tea were always in the house, as if this were par for the course. They even added that they kept more things on hand around here.

"Oh right," Lang said, having realized something. "Mary, you prefer hot lemonade over tea, right?" he asked, and when Mary replied in the affirmative, he turned to Helene. "Do we have any?"

But instead of Helene, it was Lucian who answered. "Anna likes it too, so we always have it in stock. Roberto, you should make some," he said, casting a glance at the other man.

"Very well," Roberto said with a nod, standing up. Although he usually didn't do work when he was on holiday, he still agreed to do this for Mary. "Lady Mary, please wait a moment," he told her before heading into the kitchen.

This left Mary briefly dumbfounded. "Right, thanks..." she muttered at last.

The twins and Roberto were conversing smoothly while showing care towards their younger sister. If they had been in Albert Manor, Mary would've gratefully had her fill of the lemonade. However, this was *Helene's* place. As such, the trio's words and deeds stuck out to Mary. Even she found herself frowning dubiously.

"Adi, I feel like there's something I should've realized by now."

"Indeed. If anything, I think your realization is very belated."

"My brothers and Roberto arranged for this house, and all their favorite things and snacks are always at the ready. They know whether hot lemonade's available, and Roberto's preparing it in the kitchen as if he's used to doing so. If I had to predict what's going on based on that..." After listing every hint out loud, Mary looked between each of the three men. They were acting like their usual selves, yet all were quick to avoid her gaze. Was she just imagining it, or did they look mighty uncomfortable?

Mary's frown deepened. *Something's going on after all*, she thought while racking her brain. Finally, she raised her voice. "So *that's* what it is!"

“Did you finally notice it?!” Adi exclaimed.

“This house is their hideout! They do say that all men want to have a secret base of their own!”

“Never mind... Just stop thinking and focus on what they’re saying, Mary.”

“You’ve gone past disappointment, and now you’re trying to get me to give up thinking at all, huh?”

“Roberto, just explain things already, before Mary goes even more off the rails in her thickheaded interpretations,” Adi urged, leaning back against the sofa.

Mary decided to stay quiet and listen. Of course, she hadn’t forgotten to elbow Adi in the flank for calling her thickheaded. She would listen, but she’d also make sure to poke him. She looked at the trio expectantly, and they all glanced between each other. They must’ve been trying to decide which one of them ought to explain.

However, it was Helene who got the ball rolling. She placed a few postcards on the table, pushing them towards Mary. They looked new, but they were also ripped in half.

“What are these, Helene?”

“Postcards from my husband,” the woman replied quietly with a pained look on her face.

(At that moment, a trio of masculine voices amended, “Ex-husband.” Mary ignored them.)

Helene’s ex-husband was Anna’s father. He had left home to find work when Sylvino was suffering from poverty. He’d then made a new family and turned his back on his previous wife and daughter. He was a heartless man. What had happened after that was fresh in Mary’s memory. After Helene had collapsed from illness, the little Anna had set out by herself to find help from her father. She had found Adi, who had the same hair color as her father, and called him her “daddy,” leading up to the present.

Helene once mentioned that her husband had stopped sending postcards a

few years before those events. Yet recently, he'd begun contacting them again. His letters expressed his regret over what had happened and his concern for Helene and Anna's well-being, as well as a desire to reconcile. He must've found out about the women's friendship with House Albert and how they were now living in better circumstances. As such, he was trying to get close to them again.

How shameless! Mary thought while glaring at the postcards. Despite her anger, she also felt exhilarated to see how easily the cards crumpled and tore in half. This showed that Helene felt no ounce of hesitation over the matter.

"It's a good thing you don't have any lingering attachment," Mary told her while flipping through the card pieces.

Helene nodded, adding that she hadn't sent the man a single reply. Yet simply ignoring the letters wasn't enough to settle her emotions, and she'd ended up ripping them in two a few days ago.

Mary breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing that, before thinking everything over. Helene had no fondness left for her ex-husband, and had cut ties with him. She had begun a new life in this home together with her daughter. And Lang, Lucian, and Roberto frequented the place...

I see! Mary thought with a flash, clapping her hands. Adi, who'd been relaxing on the sofa, looked up with a glimmer of hope. "You three frequent this place because you're concerned about Helene and Anna! We may have good public order here, but two women living alone is still cause for unease. That's my brothers for you!"

"All right. Please stop talking."

"I'm allowed to talk!" Mary huffed, elbowing Adi again. Apparently, her guess was incorrect once more.

Adi was giving her a hard stare. She could practically hear him saying, "*Then do you understand?*" This made her clear her throat evasively. She cast her gaze at the trio expectantly.

Acting as the representative, Lang spoke up. "Mary, we're all of a good age right now."

"That's true," she responded. "You're not getting any more mature, but

you're of a good age."

"That's our beloved sister! Your cutting words are sharper than any blade. But we're thinking of settling down. And so..." Lang paused, glancing aside...right at Helene.

The woman drew her eyebrows down, making an indescribable expression. When her eyes met Mary's, she hung her head down. At this point, even Mary was able to surmise what was going on (or rather, if things hadn't gotten to this point, she would never have been able to guess).

Mary's eyes grew wide. "Is that right?!" she shouted. "L-Lang, you and Helene are...!" She sprung to her feet in surprise. At the same time, Lucian and Roberto also came forward.

In other words, the three men were fighting over Helene.

Mary's mouth hung open. She was stupefied. She knew she must've looked like a fool, but her shock was simply that great. After all, her brothers had feelings for the same woman!

"I can't believe you're in love, Lang! Just earlier this year, you were going around the fountain, catching frogs. I thought you'd internally stay a ten-year-old boy forever!" Mary exclaimed.

"Is *that* what you're surprised about? And anyway, I catch frogs out of the kindness of my heart, so they don't scare you and Roxanne," Lang claimed.

"And you too, Lucian! I didn't think you'd ever feel a shred of a positive emotion such as romantic love!"

"Mary, could you be a little less harsh? Even I experience positive emotions. Although, I do think it's quite rare..." Lucian muttered.

"And Roberto! You finally have a human heart! How wonderful!"

"Your jokes are excellent, Lady Mary. I have always had a human heart... Stop laughing, foolish brother," Roberto snapped.

Each of the men admonished Mary in turn over her excitement, but she simply couldn't believe it. To think that love had been blooming right under her nose! And it involved strife over a single woman, no less.

Once she sorted her thoughts out, Mary sat back down. She exhaled deeply and took a sip of her slightly cool lemonade. “I was surprised initially, but thinking it over, it *does* make sense for you to be boisterous even in love. If anything, there’s no way you’d behave in line with my expectations.”

“I can agree with that,” Adi interjected, perhaps having recovered.

“Adi, you go back down!” Mary demanded, elbowing him again and causing him to sink back into the sofa. She then clapped her hands to freshen her mood, and her expression softened.

In contrast to her, Helene still looked downcast. Remorse radiated from her entire being. “I’m a nobody...” she whispered weakly.

Mary looked between the woman and her brothers. Indeed, there was an obvious rank difference between them. The twins were sons of House Albert, so they ought to marry women of suitable social standing. If one of them were to try and marry Helene, a common citizen—and a foreigner who had been born into poverty, no less—that wouldn’t merely shock people. Some might actively try to stop it from happening, especially given that Helene was older than them, and already had a daughter. The nobles would be in disbelief, and a few would even laugh the matter off as some bad joke.

At least, that would’ve been the case under normal circumstances. However, House Albert had never been normal.

“High society’s in for a surprise, aren’t they? But that’s fine,” Mary said. “Actually, it’s been quiet for the past few years, so they must’ve let their guard down. It’s about time to give them the shock of their lives!”

“I thought you’d say that, Mary,” Lang responded.

“I mean, I did get married to Adi. You all ought to marry someone you love too... Ah, did I poke him too hard?” Mary wondered with a laugh. She was still hitting Adi’s back while he buried his face in the sofa.

She then turned to look at Helene, drawing close to the other woman. Mary’s eyes were shimmering. No matter how old one was, or whether they had children or not, talking about love was fun and exciting. “So, who will you choose, Helene? As for my opinion, if you wish to spend your life having fun,

choose Lang. If you wish to live quietly and serenely, choose Lucian. And if you wish to live in security and peace, choose Roberto.”

“Lady Mary, I couldn’t possibly...”

“Well, then you might as well stick with all three of them. You’d get to experience both fun and quietude. That’s a great way of life!”

In her excitement, Mary had offered a package deal, and Helene modestly tried to speak up. Yet Mary couldn’t stop herself from continuing to talk. It wasn’t until Adi, whose face was still buried in the sofa, tapped her arm that she snapped back to her senses.

“Oho ho ho!” Mary laughed to cover up her recklessness. “Right, so anyway... I suppose we’d best hear what you have to say, Helene. Who do you prefer? Feel free to decide according to your preferences. You get to pick and choose here!”

“About that... I’m sorry, but I cannot accept this,” Helene responded feebly.

“Right, I respect your feelings... Huh?” Mary paused, wondering if she’d heard correctly. Surprised, she turned to look at her brothers. She’d said Helene had the right to choose, but she hadn’t expected the woman to dump the trio.

Regardless of Mary’s advice, the twins were both good-looking. They were on the shorter side, sure, but this was offset by their athletic builds and handsome features. (It was mostly just the fact that Roberto and Adi, who were always around the twins, were tall, which had turned into resentment.) Meanwhile, though Roberto was a servant and of lower rank than the twins, he was a tall, slender man whose composure was his charm point. His salary as House Albert’s servant was a lot higher than the average income.

On top of all that, the trio were gentlemanly towards ladies. Surely no woman would be able to find something to complain about here. So when Mary asked Helene why she’d rejected them, the other woman looked out the window in discomfiture. She was gazing at Anna. The little girl was talking about the flower bed to Alicia and Patrick, and when she noticed her mother looking at her, she smiled and waved happily.

“It was my weakness that caused Anna to experience such hardship,” Helene

finally said. “That’s why she’s my priority right now. I want to put her first, and devote myself to being her mother.”

“Helene... You’re right. Anna’s a great daughter,” Mary responded. “I understand that you want to give it your all for her sake.”

“My apologies. I know it’s rude of me to refuse when I owe you all more than I could ever repay. But please understand where I’m coming from...”

“It’s fine. You don’t need to apologize. If anything, as a fellow mother, I understand your feelings and decision, and I know how loving and virtuous you are.”

“Thank you, Lady Mary. So, if you don’t mind, please stop sending me a marriage proposal once every ten days...” Helene told the trio.

“My! This is something we ought to apologize for! Once every ten days is way too much, you three!” Mary yelled, chiding the brothers.

In response, they proposed a compromise of once every month. It was clear that they had no intention of giving up. In fact, the trio even claimed they had reasons of their own to do as they had. Mary glared at them, but she was willing to hear them out. “Go on, then,” she huffed after a pause, granting them permission to explain.

Lang was the first to speak up. He glanced between Helene and Anna, before turning his attention to Mary. Though he was usually jovial and optimistic, he looked uncharacteristically serious right now. “Look, Mary. I’m aware of my own cheerful spirit. And that’s what made me think that maybe my optimism exists to save the less fortunate... Yes! That is my duty as a gleeful man!”

“Your duty as a gleeful man?!” Mary echoed. “For all your cheerfulness, you sure have a higher sense of responsibility than most!”

“Indeed, that is my duty. So, cheerful man that I am, I’d like to be the one to save Helene and Anna!”

“Right... I can’t tell if your words hold a lot of weight or none at all. But I suppose you got your feelings across...” Mary said, overawed by Lang’s fervor. *I understand what he’s trying to say... Probably.*

In an exasperated tone of voice, Adi muttered, “You’re as simpleminded as ever.” That made Mary a little uncertain, but then Lucian began talking.

“As for me...” he said, his voice as quiet and low-spirited as always. However, he firmly fixed his gaze on Mary, radiating an unshakable determination.

Since Lang had made an argument about his duty as a gleeful man, perhaps Lucian would claim he had a duty as the gloomy one? Mary asked as much, and Lucian nodded in affirmation.

“Mary, I know my face, conduct, and speech all come across as ill-fated. But I’m not actually unfortunate. If anything, claiming to be unlucky when I was born into House Albert would be a punishable deed,” he explained.

“Exactly,” Mary agreed. “Despite your melancholic words and actions, you’re actually quite lucky.”

“That’s why I refer to myself as pseudo ill-fated.”

“Pseudo ill-fated?”

“And that’s what made me think that maybe I ought to save those who are truly ill-fated... Bringing happiness to others is a pseudo ill-fated man’s duty!” Lucian asserted with unusual vigor.

“For a pseudo ill-fated man, you’re overflowing with a sense of responsibility!” Mary exclaimed, finding herself absorbed in his words and even feeling moved by them. If she had retained her cool, she surely would’ve questioned what “pseudo ill-fated” was even supposed to mean. Alas, she was not keeping her cool at the moment.

Intending to add another blow to the fleeing enemy, Roberto lightly cleared his throat to announce that it was his turn. “My family has served House Albert for generations. Yet ever since Lady Roxanne was born six years ago, there’s been no one in my family to serve her.”

“That’s true,” Mary acknowledged. “But she has me, Adi, and you, Roberto. So I think there’s no need to rush. We should take our time and choose an appropriate person to be Roxanne’s servant.”

“You’re kind as always, Lady Mary. But I was actually considering Anna for

that role,” Roberto went on. “She’s diligent and a fast learner. She already looks after Lady Roxanne as it is, and they get along. I’d love to have her as my daughter, and see her eventually become Lady Roxanne’s personal attendant.”

“I see,” Mary said, nodding. That *was* a clever idea. If Anna were to become Roxanne’s attendant, Mary would know her daughter was in good hands. Yet that was only the case if Anna herself agreed to it. For that reason, Mary asked Roberto what would happen if the girl were to choose a different path for herself.

“I’d give her my full support as her father,” he replied readily.

After hearing the three men’s appeals, Mary was lost in thought for a while. Each of their lines of reasoning made sense, and they were all doing it for Helene and Anna’s sakes. They were each taking the matter into consideration in their own ways...or at least, such were their *official* stances.

Mary lifted her head and glanced between the trio once more. They gazed back at her earnestly. If anyone unfamiliar with them were to have seen them at this moment, they’d have been convinced that the men had voiced their true motives. This might’ve seemed like the trio’s show of passion for one woman despite their rank differences.

Of course, Mary didn’t think they were lying. Lang, Lucian, and Roberto had opened their hearts as to their intentions, and their feelings were genuine. Plus, Mary didn’t think any of them would lie to themselves. It was just that she couldn’t believe the basis for their reasons was *that* deep.

“I understand all your points,” she told them. “So, what is the *actual* truth?”

“We fell for Helene!” Lang shouted.

“And that’s why you want to marry her?”

“But she keeps rejecting us...” Lucian muttered.

“Do you want to give up?”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s any need for that,” Roberto asserted.

Each of the men’s words were clearer than before. Whatever they had said about duty or attendants, the reality was that they had fallen in love with

Helene, wanted to marry her, and weren't willing to give up despite her continuous refusals. As could be expected of the trio who'd been together for so long, they had the same tastes and were equally unwilling to give up. (Roberto disliked the idea of being lumped together with the twins, but he had no room to voice a complaint in these circumstances.)

Mary's shoulders drooped. *They should've just been honest from the start*, she thought. She then turned to Helene. The woman still looked remorseful. "I'm sorry for all the trouble they're causing you, Helene."

"N-Not at all. I know I ought to think of this as an honor. I'm terribly sorry for being so rude to members of House Albert..."

"Like I said, there's no need to apologize. But if you don't mind, I'd advise you to look at this in the long term. I'll also get them to cut the marriage proposals down from once every ten days to once every two months or so," Mary said, promising to stop her brothers herself if it came down to it.

Helene smiled wryly and nodded. The woman looked relieved and embarrassed, but she didn't seem to hate the situation she'd been put in. She may have wanted to dedicate herself to being Anna's mother for now, but she didn't appear dissatisfied to be receiving marriage proposals from the trio. It might take time, but her future looked bright.

Mary sighed. Right at that same moment, someone called out, "Lady Mary!" Hurriedly, Mary turned her attention to the door.

It was Alicia, who came flying into the room with a panicked look on her face. Patrick and Anna were right behind her. "Lady Mary, I have bad news! Felix and Roxanne are awake!"

"Oh no! We need to get out of here!" Mary yelled. "And you three. I'm sure you've overstayed your welcome, so take your leave too," she added, urging Lang, Lucian, and Roberto to stand.

"Back in the carriage again...?" Adi groaned, having only just started to feel better. Unfortunately, there was no other choice.

Helene and Anna were surprised to see the others' panic. "Don't tell Roxanne and Felix we were here," Mary requested. The two women caught on to what

was happening, and suggested that the group leave through the back door. Mary was sure that they'd be able to conceal this incident from the children. "I leave the rest to you two!"

"Of course. Take care, all of you," Helene responded.

"Patrick, help Adi out," Mary instructed. "Alicia, the back door's this way."

"Right! Thanks for having us, Helene and Anna! I'll bring you some sweets next time around!" Alicia promised.

"Lang, Lucian... Oh no, they've gone out to see Roxanne. We have to leave them behind! Now let's go!" Mary exclaimed, firing herself up. That said, she was psyching herself up to run out the back door while hiding from her daughter, whom she'd been tailing, so the whole situation was a little questionable.



Once the group had escaped to a safe distance, they watched Roxanne and Felix enter Helene's house as they boarded their carriage. Roxanne looked utterly adorable walking in a sleepy stupor. Felix held her hand to guide her. That doubled or possibly even tripled the cuteness of the scene; in truth, it might've increased it by tenfold.

"We're on standby until they come back out," Mary decided. "Also, my brothers have shocked me as usual."

"Yeah," Patrick replied. "But more than that, the rest of us were shocked by your thickheadedness, Mary."

"Sink this man, Alicia," Mary ordered, handing the other girl a cushion. She wanted Alicia to bring Patrick down with it.

Alicia shakily accepted the cushion, but shook her head. "I can't..." she whispered frailly. Patrick squeezed her trembling hand. She called out his name with deep emotion, and he responded by calling her name in turn.

"What a farce," Mary scoffed dismissively. Nonetheless, the entire exchange was nothing more than a joke from her perspective too. Although she had started it herself, she gave up on it quickly enough and glanced out of the window.

Alas, her brothers' behavior truly surprised her every time. Yet what a wonderful story it was all the same!

"My brothers have finally experienced the fashionable feeling of longing for a woman," she said. "I thought their slider only went between doting on their younger sister and doting on their niece."

"I know they're your family, but that's still a dubious way to put things," Patrick told her.

"I can't help it. I mean, lately my brothers have been devotedly spoiling Roxanne, decorating Albert Manor with articles related to her, and summoning artists to paint her whenever they have a free moment."

Ever since Roxanne was born—no, ever since Mary had announced her pregnancy, the twins had been explosive with joy. Every day, they did something for the sake of their new relative. Occasionally, their actions could spiral out of control. The technologically advanced carriage Mary was inside of was one such example.

Even though her brothers often exasperated her, she respected their choices. Sometimes an outsider might butt in and say things like *"Perhaps they should calm down a bit,"* or *"They're members of House Albert, after all,"* but Mary didn't want to hear it. Lang and Lucian were who they were, and they had the right to live freely according to their beliefs.

"I want them to be able to follow whatever path they choose, just as they allowed me to do. Whether that's developing a new carriage for their beloved niece, or marrying Helene and adopting Anna, as long as it's something they choose for themselves, I will welcome it with open arms," Mary declared.

Outsiders were sure to whisper behind their backs. When Mary and Adi had gotten married, people who weren't in the know had made up all kinds of things too.

But in the end, that was just the drivel of outsiders. Mary was ready to accept her brothers' decisions, and she was prepared to protect Helene and Anna from indecent gossip. In fact, if anyone were to say anything malicious about the women, Mary thought it would be best to simply crush them.

When she voiced her thoughts, Alicia began clapping. “That’s Lady Mary for you!”

Adi smiled wryly, and Patrick seemed impressed as he replied, “Yes, it is.”

“Anyway, no matter how much House Albert shakes up high society, everything will be fine so long as House Dyce, who is equal to us, gives their okay!”

“Could you not use my house to try and balance things out for yourself?” Patrick asked, his expression instantly morphing from impressed to exhausted.

“Your house?” Mary questioned, unable to let that choice of words pass. She glared at him and his wife, Alicia. “I said *House Dyce*. I wasn’t referring to a certain someone who was the son and heir of a distinguished family, but fell in love with a peasant and was ready to throw his family name away for her sake.”

“Well...”

“We managed to prove she was the princess, so the tale turned into ‘the eldest son of an eminent family and a princess married each other,’ but what if that hadn’t happened? You have no right to criticize House Albert, Patrick, because if there was a championship for shaking up high society, you’d be in the running too.”

“What’s that about a championship, now?” Patrick murmured.

“I admit, the Alberts would take first place. We’d win by a landslide. But if it were an individual competition, you’d score pretty high too!” Mary told him.

“A-All right, let’s leave that aside. It’s good to live without being bound by status or lineage. I’ll give your brothers my support,” Patrick said with a dazzling smile, having sensed that he was at a disadvantage.

Had someone unfamiliar with his true nature seen this sparkling grin, they would’ve surely nodded in assent and said, “*Exactly*.” Alas, not a single person in this carriage was deluded by his brilliance by this point.

“How insincere,” Mary grumbled, intending to deliver a follow-up attack. However, Adi rubbed her shoulder to pacify her.

As for Alicia, her cheeks were a little flushed, and she was smiling, apparently

pleased to be recalling past events. Mary sighed in exasperation, but agreed to let this conversation end here. And with nothing else to do, she once again turned her attention to the outside.

Roxanne and Felix had only just entered the house, so they wouldn't be back for a while. If Mary and the others heedlessly stepped outside, they might be discovered. *I'm bored...* Mary thought, letting out a yawn. That was when she noticed another carriage, which made its departure from the residence.

"That carriage belongs to House Albert," she said. "It must be those three. I'm glad they behaved themselves and went home for today."

"I'd like to agree with you...but they've already changed course," Patrick pointed out.

"So my statement about them wasn't true for even ten seconds... I should stop having any expectations of them. But I wonder what's going on?" she pondered.

Her brothers' carriage should've gone straight, but instead it had turned. It was a forceful maneuver, one that would've caused any ordinary vehicle to overturn. Yet the well-made carriage, highly trained horses, and the first-class driver all played a part in making this move successful. As for what lay in the direction the vehicle was now heading...it was another carriage. Now, two carriages ran along the quiet road at slightly disproportionate speeds.

House Albert's pristine and beautiful vehicle was in pursuit. The carriage they were chasing, in contrast, looked rickety. The family crest emblazoned on it suggested that it was privately owned, but if they were all headed to the same destination, it would've been better for the passengers to ride together in one vehicle.

"That crest..." Adi whispered. "The carriage looks damaged, but isn't that House Noze's family crest?"

"House Noze?" Mary repeated. "Oh, so my brothers have spotted an acquaintance and are going over to say hello."

Her words were met with utter silence, and three pairs of eyes glared at her coldly. Although Adi, Alicia, and Patrick each had different colored eyes, right

now, all of them were overflowing with the same mix of iciness and exasperation. Mary would've rather they had said something harsh to her.

"Wh-What...?" she asked.

"We're talking about House Noze? Do you not remember?" Adi inquired in turn.

"House Noze... It must be the restaura— No, they're unrelated to that. Thank you for shaking your head with all your might, Alicia. In that case, maybe croquettes...? No, that isn't it either. Patrick, I know you think me being thickheaded is funny, but don't enjoy it so much that you're sparkling." Mary paused, racking her brain. She listed a few other words which came to mind: bicycles, seafood rice bowls, cushions, cookies, tea.

What else is there? she wondered, checking the others' reactions to see if she had hit the mark. Yet none of her guesses seemed correct, and she was getting no responses. Finally, the second she said, "Seafood and migratory bird rice bowl half-and-half with croquettes on the side," all three of them turned to look out the window. That hurt. "House Noze, right? House Noze... Are they crispy and delicious...?"

"No. You're just describing croquettes," Adi said.

"R-Right, I know. So House Noze must be...tender meat which soaks up the flavor, whetting your appetite...?"

"That's the restaurant. And you just referred to a family as meat."

"I know! I-It was a joke! But...what else is left?"

"Have you really forgotten about Feydella?"

"Oh, I get it! This is about the Feydellan flowery language dictionary!" Mary exclaimed. "It was very well received, and we're preparing to publish the fourth volume! House Noze must be related to the publication!"

"No."

Mary groaned at Adi's flat denial. She was so convinced she had finally arrived at the right answer after hearing the hint. "Then what is it? I'm all out of guesses." She reluctantly lifted both hands to signal her surrender.

Adi let out a colossal sigh. “I can’t believe you really forgot... It’s Mauro Noze.”

“Mauro Noze?”

“The man who knew you had past life memories, and threatened to reveal that to everyone?”

“Past life...memories...?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot about that too?!” Adi raised his voice.

“That *was* a joke,” Mary replied, smiling in satisfaction. It was her revenge for how exasperated Adi had become with her.

Naturally, she knew he was referring to the special memories she possessed about how this world was the setting of an otome game she’d played in a past life, and how everything had played out according to the game’s plot...more or less, anyway. Right now, they were way beyond the events depicted in the game, and Mary had long outgrown those memories.

She had also revealed the existence of her past life memories publicly, and nobody said anything about it these days. Every now and then, someone casually inquired about them during a tea party, but that was about it. Since everything had moved past the script of the game, her past life memories were virtually equivalent to a daydream.

“Past life memories... Ah right. He did threaten me. I remember now,” she said.

“You really did forget about Mauro Noze, and the head of House Lautrec too, huh?” Adi asked.

“If I let those kinds of men take up space in my mind, then my memories of my precious daughter’s growth might disappear!”

“I concur,” Adi replied, affirming Mary’s statement as one over-doting parent to another.

Even Alicia and Patrick, who had been listening to this exchange with exasperation, now agreed. “Right, that makes sense,” they said in unison while nodding. Although everyone in the carriage was a different level of

thickheaded, at the end of the day, they were all over-fawning parents.

“Mauro Noze, is it?” Mary whispered, glancing outside. Her brothers must’ve been chasing his family’s carriage at that very moment. It wasn’t clear whether the two had found House Noze’s carriage by accident, or whether they had specifically aimed for it from the start, but Mary was sure there’d be no problems if she left the matter in their hands. (To be more accurate, the single shred of hope that House Noze had left was in the process of being mercilessly cut, but this was beyond Mary’s control.)

No matter. Right now, she was simply waiting for Roxanne to come out of the house. As soon as she said that, the door opened and Felix stepped out. Behind him was Helene, who was carrying a sleeping Roxanne in her arms.

What an adorable sight! In order for this memory to better stay with her, Mary decided to forget all about Mauro Noze.

Idle Memories: Part 3

Mary might've forgotten about Mauro Noze, but she *did* remember Feydella's troublesome customs. Feydella was called the country of many loves, and due to its open-mindedness about matters of romantic love, the men complimented the women at every opportunity. During Mary's stay there, she had been drowned in praise, and was even dubbed the goddess of beauty.

Recalling all those compliments made a shiver run down her spine. She had felt appalled at the corny praise the men had given her, claiming that the moon, stars, and sun were jealous of her beauty.

Alas, Mary wasn't the type to let things end by shuddering at the men's attempts to woo her. She had found a way to turn the tables on Feydella's view of love, and she had published a dictionary of the men's poetic, flowery language. The book was received with greater acclaim than anticipated, and Mary had finalized plans for the publication of a fourth volume a few days ago.

"I have no interest in being the goddess of beauty, but I'll accept being called the goddess of business acumen," Mary declared as she puffed out her chest, recognizing her own genius all over again.

Adi and Patrick exchanged a look with each other that said, "*How do these things even sell?*" From the men's perspective, the Feydellans' compliments were nothing but thinly veiled flattery. Since Mary was involved in the publication, Adi had looked through the book, and it was still fresh in her memory how he'd shivered and claimed it gave him chills.

"Obviously, those kinds of pickup lines also give me the shivers," she added. "But if true love is present, it might be a different story... Adi, you must remember at least one of those phrases, right? Tell me one!"

"What? Me?!" Adi exclaimed, his eyes wide. He was quite frantic in his insistence that for him to do that was an impossible ask.

Mary paused upon hearing his resolute refusal. Then, she turned her

attention to Alicia. “Can you try to get Patrick to tell you one of Feydella’s poetic, romantic pickup lines?”

“Okay! Lord Patrick, please tell me one!”

“M-Me too?!” Patrick spluttered, unable to keep up his usual appearance of calm in the face of this instigation.

But Alicia wasn’t the type to be put off by that. Her purple eyes twinkled as she shuffled closer to Patrick. “Just once!” she coaxed him.

Mary cackled, glad to have an ally. They were now two versus two. The winning side was obvious.

Despite his reluctance, Patrick caved in quickly. “I-If it’s just the one time...” he muttered. He stole a glance at Adi, as if to suggest that if he was going to die, then they ought to go down together. Adi groaned in response, his shoulders sinking. This meant he had caved in too.

Since the husbands would be complimenting their wives using the Feydellans’ flowery language as a reference, then it was agreed that Mary and Adi would plug their ears when it was Patrick’s turn, and vice versa for Adi’s turn. Mary was dying to hear Patrick say such sugary things, but she knew that would be asking too much of him. She yielded when Adi appealed, “If we listen to him, *they’ll* listen to *me* doing it too!”

Patrick was up first, so Mary went to cover her ears. But before she could do so herself, Adi did it for her, plugging her ears firmly. *He’s desperate for me not to hear it*, Mary thought as she returned the favor and plugged Adi’s ears.

Alas, though they couldn’t hear what was happening, they could still see it. They watched as Patrick turned to face Alicia. He hesitated a few times, awkwardly scratching his head. Eventually, he steeled his resolve and clasped Alicia’s hand. He gently scooped up a lock of her golden hair and said something to her. As he spoke, his cheeks gradually grew redder and redder, and the same was true for Alicia.

The way the two looked at each other bashfully was reminiscent of a young and innocent couple. Patrick, who’d hesitated moments ago, now didn’t seem to hate this all so much with Alicia smiling at him happily. Even without any

sound, it was plain that they were in their own world.

Adi pulled his hands away from Mary. It was time to switch, so Patrick plugged Alicia's ears. She did the same to him. This was supposed to be a countermeasure against eavesdropping, but their shy expressions made it look like they were flirting with each other. Mary watched them for a bit, before turning to Adi.

He was frowning, and Mary could almost hear his mental gears turning in preparation for his turn. "I wonder how you'll try to seduce me?" she mused. "If *you* call me the goddess of beauty, I'll happily accept."

"You're just trying to instigate me..." Adi grumbled sourly.

Mary found his expression endearing. She was about to fan the flames even further, when Adi suddenly pressed his index finger against her lips. Her words died on her tongue, and her eyes widened. After a moment, he drew his hand away and gently held hers. He pulled her hand closer before placing a kiss on the back of it.

"Y-You are as beautiful as the moon. You shine like the stars, and you're as dazzling as the sun."

"Adi..."

"Even if the sky were to be swallowed up by darkness, I know I wouldn't lose my way so long as you're by my side. So please, don't let go of my hand," Adi said, his rust-colored eyes gazing into Mary's, even though his voice was a little shrill.

The sight of that, combined with his words of devotion, filled Mary with yearning. Spellbound, she called out his name hotly. Yet in the next moment...

"Right! That's enough of that!!!"

...his excessively loud proclamation made her blink in shock. The saccharine air from before evaporated in an instant. If the sky *had* been swallowed up by darkness, the sun would've rushed back into place out of confusion.

Mary had wanted to soak up that feeling for a little longer, so she glared at Adi sulkily. He was so embarrassed that his ears had turned red, and he was

blatantly avoiding her gaze. Worse yet, when she tried to say something...

“A-Anyway! Lord Patrick! Um... About the cushion dealers!”

“R-Right! Cushions! I also have a few things I want to ask you about in regards to that!”

...the two men joined forces to interrupt her, yelling with needless volume.

Mary and Alicia exchanged a look. “After this is all over, shall we check which part of the dictionary they quoted their words from?” Mary proposed.

“That sounds fun! I’m in!” Alicia replied, and both women laughed.

The two men’s desperate voices resounded within the carriage as they screamed in unison, “Anything but that!!!”

Chapter 4

Since Roxanne had fallen asleep, her and Felix's carriage was moving even slower than usual. The carriage bearing Mary and the rest followed at a similarly languid pace. As such, the sun began to fall on the horizon, and everything was growing dark. When Mary looked outside the window, she could see a few stars twinkling in the sky.

"This trip has gone on longer than I thought," she said.

"Indeed," Patrick replied. "Still, I hadn't expected for Felix to ask Lang and Lucian to send us a message. When he realized he'd be getting home late, Felix must've known that we'd be worried. He's as kind as you are, Alicia."

"Right..." Mary muttered.

"He's only five, yet he's already so tactful! He's got your intelligence, Lord Patrick!" Alicia joined in.

"Uh-huh..." Mary glared at the couple as they praised their son and each other at the same time.

The message they were referring to had been delivered a while ago, shortly after they had left Helene's home. While their carriage was moving slowly down the road, a servant from the palace had caught up with them. When the group leaned out of the window to inquire what on earth had happened, the servant had informed them that Lang and Lucian had passed on a message from Felix: *"I'll be coming home late. Don't worry about me."*

The servant had intended to pass this message on to Alicia and Patrick, but the two hadn't been present in the palace. In fact, they were in the middle of tailing Felix, so they obviously knew he'd be returning home late. The palace staff were uncertain of what to do, but had eventually decided to inform the parents that they had received a message from the prince. Everything had taken double the effort as a result, but the staff wanted to ensure that Alicia and Patrick knew about Felix's message, and that he was considerate enough to

avoid worrying his parents.

“But we must be reaching the end of the trip. We’re about to head to Albert Ma—” Mary cut herself off. She had thought Roxanne’s carriage was heading home, but instead it took a different turn. The group’s vehicle continued its pursuit. The road they were traveling down was familiar to her; she had traversed it many times in the past. “Are we heading to Karelia Academy?”

Adi and Patrick looked outside before nodding in affirmation. Alicia must’ve forgotten about being cautious, as she stuck her head out of the window, her eyes sparkling. Her golden hair swayed in the wind, looking just the same as it had in her high school days. Combined with the scenery outside, it was as if that younger version of Alicia had appeared before the others’ eyes.

Karelia Academy, Mary’s alma mater, awaited at the end of this road. The carriage ahead of them raced right towards it, passing through its large gate. Naturally, the appearance of unexpected visitors at such a late hour caused the guards to step out. Yet where they would’ve usually been strict in their questioning, upon seeing House Albert’s carriage with Roxanne and Felix inside, they only exchanged a few shocked words before allowing them through.

The same was true for Mary’s carriage. As soon as she and the rest showed their faces, the guards grasped the situation and even smiled. Mary thanked them, while Adi lightly lowered his head. Meanwhile, Patrick was restraining the enthusiastic Alicia, who was overcome with nostalgia.

“What a trip down memory lane...” Mary remarked. “But why did they come here? Did Roxanne forget something at kindergarten?”

“I don’t think so,” Adi replied. “We’re not heading towards the kindergarten, but the high school.”

The academy’s premises were large, yet the children’s carriage was confidently moving towards the high school section. As the buildings came into view, the vehicle slowed to a halt. The driver pacified the horses, and soon enough the doors opened. Roxanne and Felix stepped outside. Their nap must’ve rejuvenated them, as they hopped down the ramp in high spirits.

The children discussed something for a few seconds. Then, Roxanne suddenly turned to face Mary’s carriage and made her way towards it. *Oh no!* Mary

thought, hurrying to close the curtain. But it was already too late.

“Mother! Father! I know you’re there!!!”

Roxanne knocked on the carriage door. She must’ve been furious with the group inside, for her small, adorable fist banged so loudly that Mary was both shocked and impressed. If the carriage had been as plainly built as it looked on the outside, the door would’ve creaked.

“We’ve raised a strong girl, for her to be able to hit so hard,” Mary said, reflexively acknowledging her daughter’s growth. Meanwhile, Roxanne continued to yell and pound on the door.

“I think it’s time to accept our fates and surrender, Mary,” said Adi.

“You’re right. Otherwise, Roxanne’s tiny, cute little hands might get hurt.”

Once they’d both steeled their resolve, Adi opened the door.

“Father!!!” Roxanne shouted, barging into the carriage. She sprung at Adi as if wanting to seize him.

Alas, no matter how forceful she was trying to be, she was no match for him. “Oof, you surprised me,” he said in a monotone. He couldn’t hold back a smile at his daughter’s adorable expression as she clung to him.

Yet his grin only served to vex Roxanne further. She held on to Adi’s arm with a powerful, reproachful grip, and then glared at Mary as if accusing her of being equally guilty. “Father! Mother! Why did you follow me?!”

“We weren’t following you, Roxanne,” Mary answered. “We just wanted to walk through the academy grounds, and that’s when we saw you—”

“You’re lying! I know you’ve been following me this whole time!” the little girl screeched. The more she raised her voice, the more her one-and-a-half-length curls shook, matching the extent of her rage.

“I see, so this is how the ringlets shake in anger...” Mary muttered under her breath. (Unfortunately, Patrick overheard her words, and hastily looked away with a muffled sound.) “We did follow you, Roxanne. I’m sorry. Your father and I were just worried about you.”

“I told you I’d be fine on my own!” Roxanne interrupted, clearly offended.

At this rate, Mary wouldn't be able to get through to her daughter. If she told Roxanne to calm down, that'd only add fuel to the fire. The little girl might even burst into tears.

Finally, Roxanne screamed, "I hate you both!!!"

That hurt beyond description. *What to do...?* Mary wondered in confusion.

Adi, to whom Roxanne was still clinging, called out his daughter's name, his expression softening. He placed his hand on her head and gently stroked it. "You're right, Roxanne. You're fully capable of going on errands by yourself. Your mother and I just didn't want to be apart from you."

"You didn't?"

"Being apart from you for over half of the day... It's been so lonely, I could cry..." Adi said in a purposefully feeble voice as he lowered his head. He even rubbed the corner of his eye with his knuckle. Such an obvious performance! No one would be tricked by this transparent show...

"Father! Don't cry!!!"

...except for one person. Adi's adorable daughter fell right into his trap, which assuaged her anger. Mary inwardly praised Roxanne's unsuspecting purity. Part of her was worried that her daughter might be tricked by someone else in the future, but it would be fine so long as she and Adi eliminated such people themselves.

(Mary would later bring this topic up in a conversation with Patrick. "Your family and mine are all her guardian angels, so she'll be just fine," he would assure her with a dazzling smile. Mary would understand exactly what he was implying.)

Regardless, all that mattered was that Roxanne's mood had improved. Just to be sure, Mary called out to her. The little girl turned to look at her mother. Her rust-colored eyes still retained traces of doubt, but her wrath had diminished considerably.

"Is it true? Did you feel lonely without me too, mother?" Roxanne asked.

"Yes, I did. Without you around, I feel so lonely that I can't eat my meals, or

even sweets.”

“It’s no wonder. You and father are both easily prone to loneliness!” the little girl said with an exasperated smile. She hopped out onto the ramp and left the carriage. Her expression implied that she felt fond of her parents the way one would feel fond of the imperfections of children. She looked proud, and more than anything, adorable. Everyone smiled at her wryly and then followed her out of the vehicle.

Mary spread her arms, and Roxanne happily embraced her. Her little hands even patted Mary’s back to comfort her. “You carried out your errand very well,” Mary told her. “You gave out all the invitations, right? Is your pochette empty?”

“I handed them all out, but there are some sweets in my pochette,” Roxanne replied, merrily adding that there were now many more sweets than there had been letters.

“Well done,” Mary said, patting her daughter’s head. Roxanne puffed out her chest at the praise and nodded. She looked triumphant to have completed her task.

Indeed, though there had been many twists and turns, Roxanne and Felix had finished delivering the invitations splendidly. They’d even figured out that their parents were tailing them. They were within their rights to feel proud.

“How did you know we were following you?” Mary inquired.

“Because of the towel blanket.”

“Towel blanket?” Mary repeated. She exchanged a look with Adi, and question marks floated around both of their heads.

“Ah, I see,” murmured Patrick. He looked regretful, so he must’ve realized where his party had failed. As a side note, Alicia was standing next to him and patting Felix on the head while the boy clung to her waist. In his case, being spoiled by his parents won out over blaming them for shadowing him. He might’ve usually been a composed prince, but the sight of him snuggling up to his mother after half a day apart showed that he was still a child when all was said and done.

However, Mary didn't have the time to fawn over Felix right now. She turned her questioning gaze to Patrick.

"It was when we arrived at Helene's," he said in reply to her silent question. "We had Felix and Roxanne covered by a towel blanket, remember?"

"Right... Ah, that blanket came from *our* carriage," Mary said, frustrated with her own blunder. Adi and Alicia nodded, grasping the situation, while the children grinned victoriously.

Roxanne went on to explain that after she and Felix had woken up and noticed the unfamiliar blanket around them, they deliberated on it for a while. Their carriage didn't have any towel blankets, so where had this one come from? Had the driver gotten a hold of it somewhere? Or maybe Helene had brought it out from her house?

The children continued to ponder as they folded the blanket. Then, they got the idea that perhaps their parents were shadowing them. They hurriedly jumped out of the carriage and surveyed their surroundings. As predicted, there was another vehicle that belonged to House Albert—despite not looking the part—parked a short distance away.

Yet rather than search for their parents, the children decided to prioritize finishing the delivery of the invitations. Afterwards, they headed to Karelia Academy so that their parents couldn't escape. Had they gone anywhere else, the adults would've claimed they were there by coincidence or on business. But they wouldn't be able to come up with an excuse for arriving at their alma mater at night.

Lastly, when Felix had given Lang and Lucian his message, he did so with the intention to inform the palace staff that both he and his parents, who were shadowing him, would return home late.

Such was Roxanne's triumphant retelling of the events. She puffed out her chest so much she was on the verge of toppling over, and she brushed her silver curls aside as they swayed in the wind. *When did she grow up into such a fine young lady?* Mary thought, her heart swelling with emotion. She was glad that her daughter had grown this much, yet it also made her feel lonely. The sensation was so hard to describe; however, moments like these are what being

a parent is all about.

While Mary was lost in sentimentality, Roxanne laughed. “Mother, you’re a spoiled child who easily gives in to loneliness.”

“You already said that,” Mary replied. When she hugged Roxanne tighter, the little girl let out a joyful shriek and slipped out of her arms.

“By the way, can we walk around the academy for a bit?”

“No, Roxanne. It’s already late, and we need to get home in time for dinner,” Mary responded.

“Just for a bit! I’ve never been to the high school area. So let’s stay a little longer! Please!” Roxanne begged, gazing up at her mother with those rust-colored eyes. They were the same shade as her father’s, and Mary had always been weak to those eyes. (When Felix had been pleading with Patrick, Mary had thought, *There’s no way he can say no*. But the same was true for her. That was precisely why she knew she couldn’t refuse either.)

Even so, Mary managed to stop herself from nodding. “Ask your father,” she proposed instead. She delegated the whole matter to Adi.

Roxanne stepped up to him. She pretended not to hear Adi’s mutter of, “You’re running away, Mary...”

“Come on, father! Let’s walk around here just for a bit!” Roxanne coaxed him.

“But it’s already so late... You can have a field trip to see the high school some other ti—”

“Please!” the little girl interjected, staring up at Adi while hugging him. Her silver curls fluttered, looking just like her mother’s. The eyes that gazed at him were identical to his. All of her features bore a close resemblance to both of her parents. It was obvious by her looks alone that she was his and Mary’s child. Adi managed to resist his adorable daughter’s gaze for a few moments, but...

“Just for a bit, then. I’ll take you around, so hold my hand and don’t let go.”

...her persistence outlasted him, and he nodded. It was the obvious outcome, but alas, Roxanne had magnificently won the battle.

“You spoil her, Adi,” Mary said with a dry smile. Of course, she’d known things

would end like this, which was why she herself had thrown in the towel.

Roxanne let out a delighted scream and hopped up and down before taking Adi's hand. After watching her, Felix turned to look up at Patrick. "I want to go too..." he said, his words reserved but nevertheless pleading. He might've been intelligent and listened to his parents, but he was still a five-year-old child. He was excited by the prospect of walking around a place he hadn't been to before, and at a late hour during which he'd usually be home.

Patrick smiled, patting Felix's head. "All right. I'll go have a word with the security. Adi, look after these two. I'll catch up with you."

"Very well," Adi agreed. "Let's go, Roxanne. Lord Felix, is there a specific place you'd like to visit?"

"I want to see the cafeteria!" Roxanne spoke up. "That's where mother always ate seafood rice bowls, right?"

"I'd like to go to the auditorium," Felix added. "I heard my father often gave speeches there when he was the student council president."

The children stood on either side of Adi, each making their own request. Mary sighed softly as she watched them and Patrick, who headed towards the guard post. She had been worried when Roxanne had discovered they were following her, but everything had turned out fine. *Thank goodness*, she thought, right as someone grabbed her arm. Obviously, it was Alicia. Her eyes were sparkling even more than Roxanne's and Felix's had.

"What?" Mary demanded.

"Lady Mary, let's take a walk too!!!"

"Excuse me? Why do I have to walk around with you? Go loiter over there by yourself." Mary waved her hand as if she were shooing an animal. This was an extremely rude gesture to give to the country's queen, but there was nobody else around. Even if there had been, nobody would've blamed her for it at this point.

(One time, Alicia had gotten tired of Mary's indifferent attitude and said, "*You must act like you care! It's an order from your queen!*")

(However, Mary had flatly responded with, *"I'm going to emigrate."*)

"Come on, Lady Mary!" Alicia continued. "It's been so long since we were last here. Let's take a tour down memory lane!"

"Memory lane? I have no memories with you. The memories of my high school life consist of the bicycle parking lot I made for myself, the cafeteria where I ate seafood rice bowls, and the terrace where I ate the croquettes I bought in town."

"That's not true! There are many places where we both have memories... Now, let's go!" Alicia began walking and pulling Mary by the arm. This was all the same old exchange.

Yet no matter how many times it happened, Mary resisted. "You peasant...!" she shouted resentfully, all the while allowing Alicia to drag her along.

The two women walked through the dark academy. But this was a school for nobles, so it didn't feel gloomy with all the lanterns lit intermittently, providing a dim source of light. If anything, the faintly lit surroundings created an almost beautiful contrast with the starry sky.

Alicia observed the place with a twinkle in her eye. Everything she saw brought back memories and made her feel nostalgic. In contrast, Mary was huffy, and any time Alicia reminisced, Mary indifferently responded with "Did that happen?" and "I guess so."

In spite of the cold front she was putting up, Mary felt nostalgic as well. Walking side by side with Alicia here made her feel like she was back in high school. Not that she missed those days or wanted to join Alicia in reminiscing, though. She could simply afford to tolerate accompanying the other girl and making the odd sound of acknowledgment.

As they strolled through the premises, Alicia suddenly exclaimed, "Oh! This is where we first met, Lady Mary!"

"I forgot all about that."

"I was lost, and you gallantly came to my rescue. I was so surprised when

someone who was as beautiful as a doll appeared before me in my time of need!”

“I may have forgotten about it, but I’ll agree with you that I’m as beautiful as a doll,” Mary said, accepting the compliment as she flipped her hair. It fluttered softly.

Alicia watched her joyfully. “That’s the gesture!” she said, perhaps recalling Mary having done something similar in the past. Then again, in those days Mary had steel drills. They hadn’t fluttered, but rather tremendously waggled about.

Alicia was excited by the memory, so Mary smacked her arm and told her to calm down. She then looked around and sighed. Indeed, this was the place she had first met Alicia. Mary’s memories of the otome game had told her that the other girl would walk through here, so she and Adi had camped behind a corner and waited. *How nostalgic... I still remember the exchange we had back then. But...* Mary thought, stealing a glance at Alicia.

Immersed in her memories, Alicia was enthusiastically speaking about their meeting. However, their meeting was no accident—Mary had arranged it based on her past life knowledge. Since Mary had already revealed that, Alicia should’ve been aware of it. Yet she spoke with such bliss that their first meeting must’ve been a beautiful memory as far as she was concerned.

After watching the girl for a while, Mary smirked. She wasn’t about to let this become some happy memory of them walking through the academy together and reminiscing. “Mm-hmm, how nostalgic. Isn’t that right, Alicia?”

“Yes! And speaking to you here now really feels like we’re back in high school!”

“Yes, quite. But now that we’re alone, I’d like to take this opportunity to tell you the truth.”

“The truth?” Alicia echoed.

“I wanted you to hate me,” Mary admitted with a mean, cold smile.

Alicia, who had been walking, suddenly froze. The darkness of the night, the starlight, and the lanterns—everything reflected off of her golden hair beautifully. Her purple eyes were open wide, and her shapely lips sounded out

a hesitant noise of shock. “Huh?” Not only did she seem surprised, but it was almost as if she didn’t understand what Mary had said.

Yet such was the truth. The public never doubted Mary’s friendship with Alicia, and even believed that Mary had supported the other girl when she was just a commoner. The play based on their lives was popular to this day, and though Mary disapproved, she felt the work was worthy of acknowledgment. (In fact, whenever there was a new production or a second showing, she frequented the theater.)

Nobody would’ve ever thought that Mary had actually wanted Alicia to hate her. That was also true of Alicia herself. She was the last person to have suspected such a thing.

That’s why I’m going to turn her idea upside down right here, right now, Mary thought. As Alicia stared at her in confusion, Mary laughed dismissively. “Yes, I wanted you to hate me. That’s why I said so many terrible things to you.”

“Is... Is this about the past life memories of the villainess Mary you mentioned?” Alicia inquired.

“That’s right. I planned to tell you awful things just like in the game so that you would loathe me and personally exile me,” Mary explained. She had wished to fall into ruin like she had in the game, so she’d made her moves in accordance with that. Mary had planned to take the blame for hurting the princess and be banished to the northern boonies.

After Mary revealed her past intentions, Alicia stood there dumbfounded. “I see...” she murmured after a while of pondering. Then, she hung her head, causing her golden locks to flutter.

Did that wound her? Mary wondered. Yet once she had planned not to just hurt Alicia, but be hated by her.

“Are you disappointed because I sullied your pretty little memories? Besides, our meeting wasn’t an accident. It was all a part of my scheme. And now you know I wanted you to hate me, so it’s no wonder you’re depressed.”

“Doesn’t that mean that your plan didn’t work out at all, Lady Mary?”

Mary groaned at Alicia hitting a sore spot. “Ugh... W-Well, I suppose not.”

Alicia's face lit up. Instead of looking upset or angered to have had her understanding flipped upside down, the girl smiled brightly. Her eyes were shimmering. Mary looked surprised by this unexpected reaction. She'd been convinced that Alicia would be hurt by her revelation, but Mary only sensed joy from her. Alicia looked as bright—or even brighter—than usual.

“Wh-What...?” Mary asked.

“Lady Mary, do you know why your plan to make me hate you didn't work out?”

“Because you were too dull to figure out what I was saying to you. You didn't understand because you were a cheeky peasant with no sense of other people's personal bubbles,” Mary replied, wanting to at least say a few hurtful words in revenge.

“How mean,” Alicia said sulkily. Yet her expression brightened again soon enough, and she told Mary she was wrong.

Mary glared at her to urge Alicia to continue. Her eyes were sharp enough that they seemed to say, *“Stop wasting time and just get on with it.”*

“The reason your plan failed is because you are you, Lady Mary. You're not the Mary from the game,” Alicia said. “And I'm not the Alicia from the game either.”

“So...?”

“The Mary and Alicia from the game aren't here. You and I are the ones who met each other. That's all there is to it.”

Mary paused. “Ridiculous. Taking you seriously was a waste of time,” she said with a scoff, turning on her heel and walking away. Alicia had dragged her all over the place, so it was already completely dark around them. Surely Adi and the others had gotten back from their walk by now. Mary had no time to listen to Alicia's prattle. She declared as much and tried to get away from the girl.

“Lady Mary!” Alicia cried, catching up and grabbing Mary by the arm.

“You country hick!” Mary flicked Alicia's forehead without hesitation.

But Alicia paid this no heed. She was still grinning. “Lady Mary, do you even

know why you told me about all this now?"

"Why, you ask? Because seeing you so foolishly happy made me want to hurt you—that's why. Yet I'm the one feeling dejected, because instead of being upset, you just rambled on about some nonsense."

"That's wrong. You are you, and that's why you wanted to talk to me. Because you're Lady Mary!" Alicia asserted with great delight. She then started to walk, still holding on to Mary.

What an incomprehensible thing to say! 'Because I'm me'? Well that's obvious! In fact, it was so obvious that saying it out loud was utterly foolish. *Is she drunk or something?* Mary wondered, glaring at Alicia. The other girl was smiling pleasantly, her locks swaying in the breeze. Mary's breath caught in her throat. Her eyes widened a little.

Mary recalled watching Alicia gaze at the scenery in front of her a long time ago. It had been right here, before they'd ever spoken to one another. Lying in wait behind a corner, Mary had explained to Adi that they were looking at the heroine of the game. "How nostalgic..." she whispered to herself.

That had been the beginning of everything... No, that wasn't true. Even before that, Mary had been living her own life, and so had Alicia. It was neither the beginning of the game nor of Mary's past life memories. It was simply the beginning of her and Alicia's friendship. She and Adi hadn't been looking at the heroine of the game, but rather a lost peasant. What a simple tale it was.

Reflexively, Mary smiled and glanced at Alicia. Her golden locks were fluttering. Mary's were surely doing the same. Their gold and silver hair glistening in the moonlight must've looked like something out of a painting. Mary's smile deepened; she wasn't entirely displeased by the image in her mind.

"You say some interesting things, Alicia."

"And that's not at all. The reason you confided in me is because you love and trust me."

"How exhausting. I compliment you once, and you immediately get carried away," Mary said as her shoulders drooped.

Alicia giggled. "You told Adi right away when you recalled your past life memories, right?"

"I did. I knew he'd believe me. No matter what I say, he won't deny my words, but will instead think everything over together with me. Anyway, I would always tell him everything. Now that I think about it, we already had a deep bond, even back then."

"If you boast about your love life three more times, I'll go home!" Alicia said, referencing something Mary had once told her in the past.

"Then go," Mary responded, unwilling to play this game.

"Aww!" Alicia cried pitifully when Mary didn't reply in the way she wanted her to. Mary just looked away with a huff.

This was nostalgic too. It was back when Mary still hadn't realized how she felt about Adi, yet she had still planned on marrying him. Adi had proposed to her after they'd already signed the marriage registration, and in her confusion, Mary had run to Alicia's side. And it was Alicia who had made Mary understand everything.

While advising Mary, Alicia had mentioned her own feelings for Patrick. That was when Mary had said, *"If you show off about your love life three more times, I'm leaving."* (In the end, she really had gone home after Alicia bragged three times. Although that had only happened after everything was resolved.)

Gratitude filled Mary's chest as she reminisced. She used to be unfamiliar with both friendship and romantic love, and everyone around her had to support her a lot. But instead of being honest, Mary remained a contrarian as she said, "I have nothing to be grateful to you for."

Alicia's grin grew bigger. "But it wasn't just that I helped you. You helped me out a lot too, Lady Mary!"

"True. It's not even a fifty-fifty. I'm the one who helps you all the time. Be grateful," Mary ordered condescendingly, flipping the situation around after hearing Alicia's compliment.

"You trusted Adi, which is why you told him about your past life," Alicia went on. "And now you trust me, which is why you told me that you once wanted me

to hate you. But even if you tell me that now, there's no way I could hate you, Lady Mary! And you told me because you know that!"

"Your mindset is so easygoing. It's a wonder you've made it this far."

"It'd be impossible for me to hate you, because you're not the Mary from the game, and I'm not the Alicia from the game!"

"And now you're just playing around. Talking with you is a waste of time. What are you actually trying to say?" Mary demanded to hear Alicia's conclusion.

Alicia's grip moved from Mary's arm to her hand. She squeezed it, causing Mary to frown. But she didn't pull away.

"Ever since I first met you here, and until this very moment, I loved you. And I will always love you forever!"

"*What?*" Mary groaned. How absurd! Alicia had reminisced and prattled on about Mary's past life memories, only to say the same thing as always in the end. That Alicia had loved Mary since they met, and would always love her... "I've been painfully aware of that for a long time."

Mary began walking away huffily. She considered shaking Alicia's hand off, but then decided it was fine if the other girl obediently followed her, so she squeezed it instead. It was time to end this charade and take the radiantly smiling Alicia back to the carriage. It wasn't that they were holding hands, but rather Mary was dragging Alicia with her. At least, that was what Mary told herself.



“If we could go back to the past, there’s something I’d like to tell the beautiful young lady hiding behind that corner,” Mary said.

“What is it?” Alicia inquired.

“That she’ll have a noisy, tenacious girl following her around from now on, so she should get ready. But...I suppose it’s not so bad, so I wouldn’t stop her from meeting that girl.”

“Oh my! You wouldn’t tell her that she should cherish the noisy, tenacious girl she’s about to meet, because she will be her lifelong friend and the only person with whom she’ll have an irreplaceable bond?” Alicia asked jokingly, imitating Mary’s high-handed manner of speaking.

Mary glared at her sharply. “You idiot. The only person with whom I share an irreplaceable bond is Adi.”

“You’re bragging! Two more times and I’ll go home!” Alicia called out cheerfully.

“I already told you to go. In fact, we *are* going home,” Mary replied with a great sigh.



“Oh my.”

“My, my!”

Mary and Alicia made foolish declarations simultaneously once they returned to where the carriages were parked. Adi and Patrick were already there waiting for them. The men smiled warmly at their respective wives, each holding his child in his arms. With the way Adi was holding Roxanne up, it was obvious at a glance that she was asleep.

Mary approached them and called out her daughter’s name, but the little girl didn’t even stir, let alone respond. She must’ve been in a deep slumber. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing steadily through her slightly parted mouth.

Meanwhile, Felix was still clinging to consciousness. Even as Patrick held the boy in his arms, he sleepily muttered, “Mother...?” Felix sluggishly rubbed his

eyes, his head almost dropping a couple of times. He might as well have been asleep. "I'm awake..." he insisted when Alicia petted his hair, and then his head fell back against Patrick's shoulder.

"I see they tired themselves out," Mary commented.

"At first, they were very excited," Adi responded. "But then we sat down on a bench to rest, and they were out like a light." He exchanged a glance with Patrick, and both men laughed.

Apparently, Roxanne and Felix had been quite sprightly at the start of their walk. When Patrick had caught up with them, the children energetically waved and called out to him. Felix even ran up to his father and hugged him.

The children were excited to walk around an unfamiliar place so late at night. Their eyes glittered as the young pair looked around left and right, barraging their fathers with questions about the school and its facilities. When the men answered and reminisced about the past, it only boosted the children's enthusiasm.

And so, the fathers held their children's hands as they walked around the high school premises, until they eventually decided to take a break on the bench. Roxanne and Felix had started yawning, and right about the same time, they had fallen asleep against their respective fathers.

"They were talking so excitedly until then, and suddenly they were out," Adi said, smiling fondly at their childlike behavior. He gazed at the sleeping Roxanne in his arms with adoration.

Roxanne always played for as long as she could, and once she was out of energy, she promptly fell asleep. Her parents had seen her curled up in a ball next to her toys and picture books so many times, knowing she must've exhausted herself in the middle of playtime. The little girl often dozed off without taking any notice of where she was at the time. Once, she had even laid out her handkerchief on a landing between the stairs in Albert Manor, and fallen asleep right there.

How nostalgic. Roberto had found her by coincidence while walking past. He had smiled dryly, picked her up, and brought her to her parents. "*Lady Roxanne has crashed*," he'd told them. Ever since then, if Roxanne fell asleep anywhere

outside her room, Roberto always said the same thing whenever he brought her to Mary or Adi.

When Mary told the story, Alicia and Patrick laughed. They said that Felix was much the same. Although he often resisted any onset of drowsiness whenever his parents made him go to his room, he usually fell asleep on the way there.

The other day, he had fallen asleep in front of the door to his bedroom, and his parents carried him to bed. Once he'd woken up and found them, he had proudly told them, *"I was too sleepy to remember how it happened, but I slept properly in my room this time!"*

On one hand, there was Roxanne, who put a handkerchief on a stair landing to sleep on. On the other, there was Felix, who did his best to get back to his room in time. Each of the children had different personalities, but they both fell asleep instantly once they used up all their strength. Indeed, all children play around until the very moment they run out of energy, and then fall asleep in the blink of an eye.

"I bet everything they see around them makes them happy, and they enjoy every second of it. It's no wonder that this happens," Mary said with a soft smile as she stroked the sleeping Roxanne's forehead.

Idle Memories: Just the Two of Us

“We can look after the kids for now, so why don’t you two take a walk?” Patrick suggested.

“A walk?” Mary echoed in surprise. They had just put the sleeping children into the carriage and were about to head home when Patrick had addressed her and Adi. Her confusion was obvious, but Patrick just smiled calmly.

“You might as well take this chance, since we’re at the high school for the first time in a long while.” Patrick put his arm around Alicia, who snuggled up to him.

“I see...” Mary murmured. Patrick had seemed like he’d come up with his idea for her and Adi’s sakes, but in reality, he just wanted some alone time with his wife. While he’d been walking around the academy grounds earlier, he must’ve thought back to the old days and wanted to reminisce with Alicia. For her part, Alicia looked equally eager, smiling while cuddling him.

I suppose we have no choice, Mary thought with a shrug. “Let’s go along with it and take a walk, Adi. Patrick, I’ll entrust Roxanne to you in the meantime. Both of you need to look after the children. *Both* of you!”

“F-Fine, I got it. We will.”

“You can immerse yourselves in your own world all you like, but keep an eye on them,” Mary added for emphasis. Patrick smiled dryly in response. He knew that her words had meant *“I’m aware of your ulterior motives!”* He laughed stiffly to gloss over it, and waved as Mary and Adi walked away.

“Let’s go,” Mary said, grabbing Adi’s hand.

Mary and Adi walked side by side through the high school grounds. Mary was nostalgic, but she also felt a strange, indescribable emotion. As a student, she’d never stayed at the academy this late. The sight of the school buildings cast in darkness was a mix of new yet familiar. She mentioned as much, and Adi nodded.

“It’s also strange for me to walk here while holding hands with you,” he told her.

“Oh? Why?”

“Well... When I was a student, I thought my love was unrequited.” Adi scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

Mary felt her cheeks redden slightly. “Right,” she said, her voice a little shrill.

This was a familiar path, one she had walked down countless times. But back then, she and Adi had simply been mistress and servant. Her past self would’ve never guessed that Adi had romantic feelings for her. Looking back on it, she felt exasperated with her own thickheaded tendencies.

“So you finally acknowledge you’re thickheaded,” Adi commented when she said as much. He smiled wryly, but he was definitely doing so in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. His cheeks were flushed just like Mary’s.

He’s so obvious, she thought with a laugh. “Hey...” she called out, before looking up at him and closing her eyes.

There was a pause. The breeze blew past them.

“*Huh?!*” Adi exclaimed eventually in a foolish tone.

Mary opened one eye to steal a glance at him. He’d been blushing a bit before, but now his face was completely red. Why? Because Mary was coaxing him for a kiss, of course. That said, they had already been married for a few years, and they had a child together. Adi wouldn’t get embarrassed simply due to Mary asking for a kiss. Usually, he would’ve smiled and answered her expectations. However, they were at Karelia Academy right now.

“Wh-What are you doing? We’re at school!” he pointed out.

“I know. But there’s nobody else around, so it’s fine.”

“But...”

“It feels strange for us just to walk here together. Think how much weirder it’ll feel if we kiss!”

Mary should’ve been used to the sight of the school, yet it was transfigured

by the night scenery. She and Adi were here just like in the past, except now they were married. It was a strange feeling that Mary couldn't find the words to describe. It was as though something were tickling her heart. If she already felt like this, what would happen if she and Adi were to kiss?

"Let's give this a thorough investigation!" she exclaimed, and Adi sighed in exasperation.

Yet soon enough, he cleared his throat and said, "If you insist." He must've been afflicted by this strange sensation as well, if he was giving in so quickly. After ensuring there was nobody else in sight, he placed his hand on Mary's cheek. She closed her eyes again, and heard him call her name. He sounded happy and affectionate.

Adi rubbed her cheek a few times. Then, Mary sensed him leaning closer, until something soft touched her lips. It was just a light touch at first, but it deepened after a moment. They were kissing at school during the night. This would've been unthinkable for them in their student days. How peculiar it felt! It was slightly embarrassing, yet the act filled Mary with joy.



However, though Mary was spellbound by how pleasant it felt, she found herself frowning after a while. She knew she had asked for this herself, but Adi kept kissing her over and over, and his kisses were lasting longer and longer too. It wasn't that she disliked it—if they hadn't been at Karelia, she would've gladly gone along with it. But they *were* at the academy, so it was getting to be a little much. Mary placed her hand on Adi's shoulder and gently pushed to indicate that it was time to stop.

Yet instead, Adi wrapped his arm around her waist and held her close. Mary's fist tightened at this. She was about to punch his flank and yell at him to show some restraint...but then her fist loosened.

"Aren't you going to stop me?!" Adi shouted in shock while pulling away from her. He'd been all too happy to get carried away with the kissing, but when Mary didn't inhibit him, he instantly became flustered. This was in total defiance of his expectations, so he was greatly disoriented.

Meanwhile, Mary's smile deepened. "No, I won't," she said, as if that should've been obvious. "You can kiss me some more, you know," she added invitingly, closing her eyes. She waited, but when she didn't get any more kisses, she opened her eyes again.

Adi was looking at her with a defeated countenance. He was blushing, and he looked frustrated at the fact that she'd beaten him. "I really am no match for you, Mary," he said, hanging his head in capitulation.

Mary laughed elegantly in response, grabbed his hand, and started walking again.

Chapter 5

House Albert's party was, as usual, incredibly extravagant. The food, the music, the decorations, the staff—no matter where one looked, everything was first-class. And as the venue had recently started to welcome children, there was also a designated play area for the little ones. At present, a beloved children's theater troupe was performing a sweet story about animals out in the gardens. Childish shouts of joy resounded within the venue every now and then, livening the place up.

The guests grinned at this cheerful atmosphere while waiting with bated breath for the earlier mentioned "wonderful announcement." After all, if the party was this glamorous, it meant the announcement must've been something major. Whatever it was, the visitors were certain their expectations would be exceeded. The reason for this was simple: until now, Mary had always completely astonished her guests. Everyone knew that whatever announcement *that* Mary Albert made wouldn't be anything ordinary.

"I still think it's going to be a new beef-based menu for the restaurant. The poultry is good, but beef has a different taste and mouthfeel. The only question is where she'll source it from."

"Personally, I think it might be a new branch. She already has a few branches, but they're all within the neighboring countries. Their business is booming, so perhaps they're looking to expand across the ocean as well."

Patrick and Gainas were earnestly discussing the possibilities. Now that they were both fathers, their looks were better than ever; they both radiated a sense of composed, sober charm. They had the presence of true adults.

The noblewomen watched the pair with rapt attention and flushed cheeks, letting out dreamy sighs. Yet these two men, despite their serious expressions, chose to eat cake often preferred by children and had kids' toys peeking out of their pockets. When the ladies noticed that, their passionate countenances shifted to warm smiles.

“Greetings,” someone addressed the pair. They turned around to see Margaret and Carina, each clad in a gorgeous dress. “I thought you might know what this announcement is all about, Lord Patrick, but based on your conversation, I see that isn’t the case,” said Carina.

“I tried asking Mary about it, but she dodged my questions,” he responded.

“Whatever it is, I plan to fully support her,” Margaret added. “I’m sure my husband— Oh dear! That’s hasty of me to say... We’re not married yet, after all. But I’m sure Bernard feels the same way.” She laughed gracefully to cover up her own impatience. Obviously, she’d let this slip on purpose. By “accidentally” referring to Bernard as her husband, she was flaunting the progress they’d been making, and the fact they were very close to getting married.

If Mary were here, her expression would’ve soured, and in a cold voice, she might’ve said, “*Good for you.*” Unfortunately, however, there was nobody present who would point out Margaret’s plain appeal. It wasn’t anything new, and everyone was more curious about what Mary’s upcoming announcement was.

Would it be a new menu for the restaurant? Or the opening of a new branch? Would the business finally be crossing the sea? No, since Mary was involved, the announcement must’ve been something even greater than that. It wouldn’t be about the restaurant, but something even more unexpected...

The visitors were gossiping along those lines, until everyone suddenly grew silent. Many of them exchanged looks with each other, before directing their gazes outside. From here, they could see the fountain in Albert Manor’s gardens. In front of it, the theater troupe was singing and dancing while the children sat and watched. A little farther away, tables had been set up for the parents, who were in the middle of a tea party as they kept an eye on the little ones.

Among them were Mary and Adi. The couple was sitting at a table together with Alicia and Parfette. All of them were smiling and enjoying lighthearted conversation. The guests couldn’t hear the topic at this distance, but judging by the way the parents glanced towards the kids now and then, they must’ve been talking about child-rearing.

Was everyone just imagining it, or was Mary's stomach slightly larger than usual? Her abdomen had a gentle curve, and rather than tie something around it to cover it up, she was wearing a slightly loose dress. It wasn't cold today, yet she had a thick shawl folded over her lap and legs. There was a cushion against the backrest of her chair. To top it all off, Adi occasionally checked in on her, and even took off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. All of this seemed like...

"No, it can't be," murmured Patrick.

"Surely not..." Gainas added.

The men exchanged a look. Carina and Margaret voiced their agreement: based on Mary's appearance, there was only one possibility here. She was still at an appropriate age for it, and this was the sort of thing that would be announced at a party. Even so, everyone shook their heads to drown out the idea.

"Mary wouldn't announce something that can be so easily guessed," Patrick said, stating everyone's thoughts out loud. The other three nodded.

In the past, Mary had hid the identity of her partner until the day of her wedding, where she had shocked the attendees by kissing him in front of them. After that, she'd worked in secret on something, so everyone had assumed she had entered House Albert's succession war. Instead, she had proclaimed the opening of her restaurant. Then, she had suddenly announced herself as her family's heir, and publicly revealed her past life memories. Even when it came to her pregnancy announcement, though most of the guests had seen it coming, Patrick had still been relatively shocked when he heard about it.

Mary's announcements always exceeded everyone's expectations. Whether she planned for it or not, her words surprised the guests and rattled high society. And while everyone was astonished, she would giggle in satisfaction. When her friends told her what their predictions had been, she burst out laughing and said, *"As if I'd announce that!"*

"There's no way she'll announce something as ordinary as her second pregnancy," Patrick went on. "It'll be something more shocking than that. It must be. I'm sure of it."

“Lord Patrick, aren’t you being overly suspicious?” Gainas asked.

“Out of all of us, I’ve known Mary the longest. She’s fooled me the most times,” Patrick groaned.

After a pause, Gainas sympathetically responded with, “I feel your pain.”

Indeed, Patrick and Mary were childhood friends. Before he’d met Alicia, he would always escort Mary to events, and many people had claimed that he and Mary were a perfect match. He’d known her longer than anyone present in this conversation. As such, he’d also been wrapped up in her antics the most often.

“The worst one was when a ladybug got stuck in her ringlets,” Patrick recalled.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It was so bad... Adi fled the scene. Meanwhile, Mary dispassionately ran commentary while another ladybug arrived.” As he reminisced, Patrick looked off to the side. His shoulders were trembling, which meant he still felt the psychological shock of the event. However, he quickly cleared his throat and feigned indifference. “Anyway, getting back on track,” he said, managing to keep his composure. Classic Patrick. “Uhh, so... Right, about Mary’s announcement. The play’s getting ready to end, so maybe she’ll make it then.”

Patrick patted Gainas’s shoulder, encouraging the other man to accompany him to where Alicia and Parfette were—and to their adorable children, of course. Gainas nodded, and the two bid Carina and Margaret a brief farewell before leaving. Right as they started walking, the play outside ended, and the venue resounded with applause and the shouts of children.



Whether family successions, marriage announcements, or way more trivial matters, it was common for the nobility to find any excuse to hold a party and reveal the news there. It wasn’t as if House Albert was unusual in this regard. For that reason, it was fairly easy to guess when the announcement was coming. The waitstaff refilled attendees’ glasses for the toast, and the orchestra began playing a different tune. This was a signal for those in the know to implicitly encourage the hosts to meet them on the same page.

This was the present state of affairs within the venue. However, it would've been boorish for anyone to say as much out loud. Rather, everyone pretended they hadn't noticed, and continued their idle chatter even as they headed to where they could hear a certain someone's voice. They were all excited by the prospect of Mary Albert's announcement, and by how it would surely surpass their expectations.

Once the guests of honor had been greeted, Roxanne raised her voice. "Dear guests!"

The visitors had been staring at Mary, but their gazes shifted towards her daughter instead. Ordinarily, a child might've grown nervous upon becoming the center of such a crowd's attention. But Roxanne was the daughter of a distinguished family. She flipped her silver curls and proudly puffed out her chest.

(Patrick, who was nearby, murmured, "The snail shells are bouncing...!" while trying to hold in his laugh. The stray bullet also hit Gainas next to him, who swiftly turned his face aside.)

"We have a wonderful announcement for you today!" Roxanne continued loudly.

The audience smiled at her. The little girl's majestic attitude and manner of speaking were exactly like Mary's when she was younger. Some people even whispered among themselves, saying, "How nostalgic!" and "They're identical." Their expectations were growing even further.

As their gazes focused on Roxanne, she looked up at her parents, who were standing on each side of her. "It's time!" she said, her eyes sparkling. Mary nodded, while Adi encouragingly patted Roxanne's head. After receiving their support, the little girl faced the crowd, inhaled deeply, and...

"I'm going to be a big sister!"

...announced the conception of House Albert's second child.



"I can't believe that after all of that, you made such a straightforward announcement," Patrick said.

Mary frowned in response, while Adi pacified her. Patrick's unreadable expression implied he must've been looking back on her past announcements. Indeed, after Roxanne's words, a silence had settled over the venue, paired with an indescribable atmosphere.

It was great that Mary was pregnant. Right now, she was joyfully patting her belly, and Adi had placed his hand on her shoulder with an adoring expression. Triumphant standing between them was Roxanne, who had played a major part in the event. The three of them together were the picture of a happy family. That they'd soon have a new addition made things all the better.

Lang and Lucian, too, were delighted that a new angel would soon be born. Lang immediately proposed a parade, upon which Lucian began devising a route. Roberto was the only one who kept his cool, but after saying, "I'd better ring the bells, then," he walked away with a lighter step than usual.

As soon as the news was out, the Alberts' mood turned celebratory...while everyone else simply couldn't hop aboard. The difference in temperature between the family and the guests was palpable.

"My, how rude!" Mary complained. "You all made your predictions, and then even predicted that I'd exceed them. You did it to yourselves—I don't care whether I exceeded your expectations or not!"

"I suppose so... Yeah, you're right," Patrick acquiesced. "It was our own fault for expecting you to surpass our expectations. And in a way, you did exactly that." He nodded, adding that this was just like her too. He'd gotten his expectations up, had them betrayed, and then had arbitrarily conceded. Moreover, he even cheerfully told Mary, "Congratulations."

Mary couldn't find it in herself to feel grateful for his words. "Thanks," she said coolly.

Roxanne, who was sitting next to her, giggled impishly at that blunt reply. "Goodness, mother!" She then politely thanked Patrick herself to make up for Mary's unfriendly attitude.

Just then, someone called out to Mary. She looked up and noticed that Alicia and Felix were heading her way. The boy was holding three small bouquets of flowers, and once he reached Mary and the others, he stopped and bowed. The

indigo hair which he'd inherited from his father swayed, and when he looked up, the purple eyes he'd gotten from his mother were shining.

Felix fidgeted with the bouquets for a second, before swiftly holding one out to Mary. It was a bunch of roses surrounded by smaller white flowers, and it was lovely. "Congratulations!" he exclaimed.

"Why, thank you," Mary said, accepting the bouquet. As she took it, the flowers fluttered softly. Felix must've hastily arranged for them after hearing Roxanne's announcement. Gladdened by the flowers and how considerate he was, Mary patted his head.

Next, the boy handed Adi another bouquet. Adi's eyes widened in surprise. "You got one for me too?" he asked, nevertheless accepting it. He looked down at the bunch of flowers with slight embarrassment.

The last bouquet was full of pink flowers tightened with a ribbon. Felix stared at it for a brief moment with a serious expression, before turning to look at Roxanne. "C-Congratulations, Roxanne!"

"Thank you. These flowers are wonderful."

"You're going to become a big sister, right? Well, I... I'd like to tell you something today..." Felix stammered, hesitating. Yet soon enough, he steeled his resolve and looked up again. "Roxanne! Um... O-Once we're adults, please marry me!" he shouted, his conspicuously loud voice ringing throughout the lively garden.

The guests turned to look at him in shock. But once they surmised what had happened, they smiled fondly. A few began affectionately muttering things like "They're a perfect match!" and "How adorable!"

Ordinarily, a prince publicly proposing to a noblewoman would've shaken the entire nation. There would've been an uproar, and everyone would've rushed over to congratulate them. However, Roxanne and Felix were still children. While this might've been an earnest proposal in their eyes, to all the adults, this was simply a cute exchange between kids. Rather than making a fuss, everyone watched them warmly.

Everyone...with *some* exceptions...

“Wow, Prince Felix! How bold of you to propose to our beloved angel, Roxanne!”

“I’m shocked... I can’t believe a prince proposed to her...”

Lang and Lucian had appeared out of nowhere. Obviously, they wouldn’t show animosity towards a child. But despite their attempts at restraining themselves, they couldn’t hide the edge in their voices.

Behind them, Roberto looked as calm as ever, but he was muttering under his breath, “I see, so he’s after Lady Roxanne...” He must’ve felt the same way as the twins.

“Here we go,” Mary said before she could stop herself. She could’ve seen this coming from a mile away.

“Sorry, Prince Felix, but two years ago on my birthday, Roxanne told me, ‘I’ll marry Unkie Lang!’ Ah, how unfortunate for you!”

“Last year on my birthday, Roxanne said, ‘If I’m going to marry anyone, it’ll be you, Unkie Lucian.’ Too bad for you, Prince...”

“I never would’ve thought Prince Felix would become my rival in love. I can’t imagine a greater tragedy. In fact, this year on my birthday, Roxanne also told me, ‘If I ever get married, you’re a good choice, Uncle Roberto.’”

Each of the brothers came forward as a candidate. Mary could only sigh at their immaturity. *What on earth are they competing over?*

Before she could say anything, Adi cleared his throat to stop the trio. Mary turned to him, and saw that he was calmly gazing at Roxanne. When he looked at Felix next, Mary felt relieved. He must’ve stopped them because he wanted to help the boy out. Though he was used to his role as the younger brother and being cared for by the others, at times like these, he assumed the figure of a reliable father. Thinking as much, Mary decided to leave this to him and simply watch...

“Prince Felix, if you wish to marry Roxanne, you’ll have to defeat me first.”

...but at this serious statement, her shoulders drooped.

Worse yet, the trio joined in on the idea. “You’ll have to defeat us too!”

Mary face-palmed. *They're old enough to know better...* she thought with exasperation.

At the same time, Patrick called Felix's name. He placed his hand on his son's head, gazing at him with calm, gentle eyes. "Don't worry about them, Felix."

"Yes, Patrick's right," Mary added. "You don't have to listen to what they're saying, Prince."

"I will give you my support, so rest assured. Together, the two of us will defeat the men of House Albert. I think our first target should be Adi."

"You're hopeless too..." Mary grumbled. Every single man was being unreasonable beyond belief. Exhausted, Mary glared at them as they brimmed with the will to fight. Then, she turned to look at Roxanne.

The little girl was clutching the bouquet, her eyes round with shock. Felix had suddenly proposed to her, but before she could reply, the trio of brothers had butted in. Even her father, Adi, was blocking Felix's way. At last, Patrick had joined in the fray. Although the matter concerned Roxanne herself, the conversation continued at such a dizzying speed that she had no chance to interject. It was no wonder that she was flabbergasted.

Mary softly rubbed her daughter's cheek. That was enough to snap her back to reality. Mary urged Roxanne to approach her before embracing the little girl. She could sense that Roxanne was still not quite there.

"Are you okay, Roxanne?"

"Mother, I..."

"You must be shocked. Of course you are. Don't listen to what your father and the others are saying," Mary said, stroking her daughter's head to soothe her.

Having finally calmed down, Roxanne took a deep breath and gazed at the bouquet in her hands. She blinked a few times, then looked at Felix. She must've been embarrassed, as she shuffled a little closer to Mary. She hid her face in the flowers, peering at Felix from behind them. It was adorable.

"Prince..."

“S-Sorry for saying that out of nowhere. You don’t have to reply right away, so...” Felix mumbled, his face bright red. His indigo hair made his flushed cheeks stand out all the more. Even his ears were red, as if they were on the verge of letting out steam.

Roxanne giggled at Felix. “You’re all red,” she told him, but she didn’t sound put off or uncomfortable. If anything, she looked satisfied. She informed him that she would give her reply once she was a little older, at which the flustered boy nodded hurriedly. “Prince, it looks like another play is starting. Why don’t you acco...accompa...”

“Accompany?”

“Yes, that. Why don’t you accompany me together?”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound quite right. I think, ‘Why don’t you accompany me?’ is enough.”

“Then let’s go with that.” After their usual exchange, the flushed Roxanne held out her hand to the equally flushed Felix. Seeing their tiny hands clasped together was utterly heartwarming. “Bye-bye!” Roxanne told the others, before she and Felix ran off.

Mary sighed in relief as she watched them. She and Alicia smiled at each other. “Wasn’t that the cutest proposal ever, Lady Mary?”

“It was. As expected of Prince Felix, he even arranged for bouquets. By the way, what are *they* doing?” Mary inquired, casting a sideways glance at the men.

Initially, they had become hostile to each other because of Felix’s proposal. But at some point, they had delved into a deep conversation. They were discussing something quite excitedly, and when Mary strained her ears, she overheard things like “House Albert will send out Adi as the vanguard...” and “In that case, House Dyce will align with House Eldland...”

At some point, the men had started a war simulation. And they seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly too.

Mary shrugged in exasperation. Still, trying to stop them would be bothersome, so she had no intention of doing so. “It’s best to just leave them to

it. It'll be nice and quiet, at least. Anyway, since we're at a party, how about we go have some cake?" she suggested, glancing at Alicia. She then held out her hand.

Alicia's violet eyes lit up with a glimmer, and she firmly grasped Mary's hand in hers.



The party ended, and night drew near. Mary had her dinner and prepared for bed. All that was left to do was go to sleep.

"Roxanne, can you sleep by yourself?" she asked her daughter.

"I'll be fine. I'm to be an older sister, after all!" the girl answered, puffing out her chest. She brushed her hair off her shoulders, and her adorable one-and-a-half-length curls fluttered gently. Mary and Adi both smiled wryly at Roxanne's imposing attitude.

They were all standing outside of the girl's room. There was a nameplate on her door, where her name was written in golden letters. Ever since Roxanne had found out about Mary's pregnancy, she had started becoming more conscious of her impending role as an older sister. As such, she'd begun insisting that she sleep by herself, and at night, she would return to her bedroom.

That said, she wasn't left completely alone. Either Mary or Adi stayed by her side and read her a storybook until she fell asleep. Also, whenever she woke up in the middle of the night and felt lonely, she'd scramble into her parents' bedroom. She was able to sleep through the night on her own about once every three days. The more that happened, the more used to it she was becoming.

The way she would occasionally peer into her parents' room and say, "Actually, can I sleep with you?" was adorable. And the way she'd glow with pride on the nights she did manage to sleep by herself was equally cute.

"I recall we finished that book last night, right? What should we read tonight?" Mary pondered.

"Big sis Anna gave me new books the other day. I want to read them!" Roxanne said, excitedly listing a couple of titles. Even though she was supposed

to choose a book to fall asleep to, she was getting a bit too animated about it, missing the point a little.

Mary and Adi pacified her with a reminder that they'd read one book at a time. Meanwhile, someone must've been drawn in by this cheerful scene, as a voice called out, "Roxanne, are you off to sleep?" It was Lang. Lucian followed from behind a corner.

"Oh?" another person asked, and Roberto also appeared as the three men approached the family.

(The trio were already older adults, and though they called themselves Mary's deputies, they were carrying out the work of the head of the house. That didn't mean they *always* acted together...but right now, this was exactly the case.)

Roxanne's face lit up at the sight of her uncles. "Did you finish your work, Unkie Lang?"

"I did, all right. I finished the work that absolutely *had* to be done today, that is."

"What about you, Unkie Lucian?"

"I've finished it all too...all except for the parts that I can turn in tomorrow instead."

"I don't really get it, but it sounds like you two finished your work," Roxanne said, showing appreciation for the twins without picking up on the meaning in their words.

Mary and Adi only shrugged at this. Roberto scowled, his expression souring, but he refrained from saying anything. Perhaps choosing not to lower Roxanne's appraisal of the brothers was his version of kindness.

"Unkie Lang, Unkie Lucian! Let's read tonight's bedtime story together!" the little girl proposed, grabbing their hands and leading them into her room.

The twins' expressions instantly melted at that. They followed Roxanne, with one saying, "This is a critical mission!" and the other, "It's a grave responsibility..."

Adi followed them, possibly to ensure that the brothers wouldn't excite

Roxanne any further. Yet as they entered, the little girl rushed over to her bookcase and began spiritedly explaining all her books. Soothing her might've been impossible at the moment.

Once the door closed, Mary sighed quietly. "I had to push my work onto my brothers again..." she whispered remorsefully, rubbing her belly.

"What do you mean?" Roberto inquired, tilting his head.

After the bloody feud between siblings (in the participants' eyes), Mary had become the head of House Albert, while her brothers yielded their seats to her. However, Mary had already been pregnant with Roxanne at the time, so despite her new title, she had devoted all her time to child-rearing. Everyone around her, and especially her brothers, took care of everything else so that she could focus on that.

Of course, it wasn't that Mary did nothing. But she only performed simple tasks that could be completed in between childcare activities. The majority of the work that should've been done by the head of the house was left to the twins. They dealt with the complicated and time-consuming tasks, and Mary only heard reports about them after everything had been wrapped up.

And now that Roxanne was finally getting bigger and Mary was about to take over the family business...she'd ended up pregnant again. She would have to once more focus on raising her child, while the twins would continue her work.

Originally, Lang and Lucian had striven to become the next head of the family. Mary had no qualms about their capabilities when it came to the job itself. True, they did frequently procrastinate, but there were no flaws in what they did complete. If one were to look purely at the results, the pair managed everything perfectly.

(Roberto always mentioned that if they actually put the effort in, they'd be able to do the work even more quickly and efficiently. Alas, despite all the postponement and slacking off, the twins' job was finished flawlessly. Asking any more than that was plain unrealistic.)

It was the very fact that the twins did the job perfectly that pained Mary's heart. In the end, she had cut in from the side and stolen the title of leader for herself while foisting her work onto her brothers. This was exactly what it

meant to have the best of both worlds. Surely anyone would find her actions selfish. Even Mary herself thought so.

When she said as much, Roberto smiled dryly. “Lord Lang and Lord Lucian endeavored to inherit the family, it’s true.”

“Right...”

“And all of the effort they put into striving for the title of heir, they did *together*.”

“Together?” Mary echoed, glancing at Roberto curiously.

As he stared at the door to Roxanne’s bedroom, his red eyes narrowed slightly. Perhaps he was reminiscing, as he looked a little nostalgic.

Just like Roberto had said, Lang and Lucian had been born together, and had always endeavored together. Their yin-and-yang differences in character hadn’t stopped them from being close, and they were both equally capable. Mary had often heard outsiders mention that no matter which brother inherited the family, House Albert was in good hands.

Yet regardless of how excellent and suitable they were, there was only one seat for the successor, meaning only one of them could inherit. They might’ve both been the sons of House Albert, but the second the heirship was decided, they would respectively become “the head of House Albert” and “the son who had failed the succession battle.”

“Naturally, both of them were aware of this,” Roberto explained. “Each knew he was a suitable heir, but acknowledged that so was his brother. Neither would give in, nor did they want the other to yield. I often heard them say such things to each other.”

“Being caught in between must’ve been tough.”

“Very much so.” Roberto shrugged at Mary’s words of appreciation.

Once it had been decided which twin was the heir and which was not, Roberto would’ve then become the butler of the new head of House Albert. It would’ve still been possible for him to serve them both, but not forever. As one’s title changes, so do their responsibilities, and eventually the place where

they belong.

They couldn't have remained a trio forever. One day, they would've had to go their separate ways. And that split would've happened on the basis of the twins' merits.

"Lord Lang and Lord Lucian saw this coming, but they didn't become despondent or fearful as a result," Roberto continued. "Quite the opposite: each boldly thought he should become the heir for that very reason."

"Right. I can't imagine my brothers hesitating. Still, I..."

"That was when you emerged, Lady Mary. Lord Lang and Lord Lucian held high hopes, and you proclaimed you would become the heir yourself. It was a splendid declaration." Roberto smiled in amusement, remembering the event.

Mary also thought back on that time. It had happened when Alicia's identity as the princess had been called into question. When Mary had decided to attend the council meeting herself, her father had given her his pocket watch, the symbol of the head of House Albert. He and the twins had then told her that there was a way for her to become the heir.

With the pocket watch in hand, Mary had gone to the council, saved Alicia, and then returned the heirloom to her father. She still remembered his and her brothers' expressions as she handed the watch back. They couldn't hide their surprise, and in disbelief, they'd asked her why.

In response, Mary had told them, *"It's not the time for me to receive it now. I have no interest in succeeding the family as a result of this mess. Instead, I'm going to prove that I'm better suited for the title of heir than either of my brothers! I may have returned the watch to father for now, but by the end of things, it's going to belong to me!"* Indeed, Mary recalled loudly proclaiming as much.

How nostalgic! That had been the start of the cruel, bloody family feud. (Looking back on it, she had some doubts about whether it truly had been a harsh conflict. But ah well! It wasn't anything to concern herself with by this point.)

"My caustic words *were* splendid and majestic, if I do say so myself," Mary

admitted.

“Indeed, they were,” Roberto agreed. “Your brothers were truly glad to hear them.”

Lang and Lucian had been delighted by Mary stepping forward. Although they would’ve never given in to each other, when she joined the candidacy, they decided to yield the heirship to her instead. With a good-humored smile, Roberto informed her that the twins had made that decision instantly.

“I know this might be rich coming from me, but I’m surprised their doting on their younger sister would go so far,” Mary remarked. “For them to give up the seat of heir over something like that...”

“No, I don’t think even they would act based purely on that,” Roberto replied. “They did it because they had definitive evidence that you possessed the makings of a leader. And...”

“Yes?”

The man chuckled. “Perhaps we could say that you put a new spin on things.”

“A new spin?” Mary questioned, pointing at herself inquiringly.

Roberto nodded, looking thoroughly amused. “A new spin,” he emphasized, gazing at her happily. He must’ve been talking about Mary herself. “A distinguished family like House Albert is now ruled by a woman. On top of that, her partner of choice is not a fellow noble, but rather, her servant with whom she has shared many years of hardship and joy. This is indeed putting a new spin on things within high society.”

“I admit, many of my actions certainly had no precedent. I’m aware that I am a storm that rattles through high society.”

“Lord Lang and Lord Lucian find this greatly entertaining. On top of that, you even granted them the title of uncle. They can dedicate all of their hard work and efforts to their adorable younger sister, sweet niece, and even my foolish brother, who is always a handful. They constantly say that they couldn’t be any happier,” Roberto told Mary, smiling. He was explaining how the twins felt, but he must’ve been referring to his own feelings as well. After all, the three of them were always together.

Mary was about to show her gratitude for what he'd said, when...

"Playtime's over! Mother, father, let's go to sleep!"

"Phew, what a surprise! You're an avid reader, to have this many books on your shelf, Roxanne!"

"She's a bookworm, yet she still spent time with us... What a benevolent girl..."

"Well, there was no chance I could've stopped these three from getting all excited."

Roxanne flew out of the room, with the twins and Adi right behind her. The vigor of the group's reappearance overawed Mary, and she swallowed her words. The calm atmosphere from before vanished instantaneously, and Mary gazed off to the side with a thousand-yard stare.

"Let's go to sleep!" Roxanne insisted enthusiastically, even though she didn't seem sleepy in the slightest. Lang and Lucian were worked up as well. Based on their behavior, nobody would've guessed that bedtime was approaching—quite the opposite, if anything.

Adi's shoulders were drooping spinelessly, but even Mary didn't have it in her to pacify the twins and her daughter. The only one capable of doing so was Roberto. Even then, he'd have to suppress the twins using force. It was a last resort.

"Thank you for keeping Roxanne company," Mary told Lang and Lucian. "But please calm down a bit."

"Roxanne really has an eye for books. I've never seen such an adorable bookshelf before! And she even asked me to go shopping with her for new books tomorrow. I'm going to purchase every bookstore in the country!"

"I understand, Lang. But if you don't tone it down a bit, Roxanne won't be able to sleep from all the excitement," Mary reasoned.

"Roxanne told me about her favorite book, and she even said she would read it to me tomorrow... How wonderful. I'm going to make tomorrow into Roxanne's Reading Out Loud Commemoration Day..."

“Lucian, you also need to stop getting fired up in your own gloomy way. Roxanne’s practically frolicking. Look, she’s hopping up and down.”

“That this should happen right after I praised those two...” Roberto muttered. “Those three need to calm down a little, don’t they? Lady Mary, please pacify Lady Roxanne. And...please ensure that she doesn’t look this way no matter what.”

“I leave it to you,” the fed up Mary said in response to those disturbing words. Roxanne was elatedly talking about her plans for tomorrow, so Mary called her over. She rubbed the girl’s cheeks and head, trying to calm her. Roxanne’s face was a little flushed, making it clear that she was excited.

A moment later, Mary heard two muffled cries of “Ugh!” and “Gah!” Roberto must’ve composed the twins. Mary had no interest in finding out how.

Adi’s comment of “No hesitation or mercy whatsoever. That’s my brother for you,” told the whole story.

Of course, Mary had plugged Roxanne’s ears at the appropriate moment. Her daughter looked surprised, and her eyes silently asked Mary, “*What’s going on?*” She then looked over at Adi when he called out to her.

“Roxanne, it’s time for bed. Give everyone a good night kiss,” he told her, patting her head.

The little girl, who had calmed down to some extent, walked over to the twins. They squatted down and spread their arms, and she hugged them tightly. “Good night, Unkie Lang. Let’s go book shopping tomorrow.”

“Good night, Roxanne,” he replied. “I’ll be your perfect escort.”

“Unkie Lucian, good night. If the weather’s good tomorrow, I’ll read you that book in the tent.”

“Good night, Roxanne. You’re so cute; I’m sure the weather will be perfect for it...”

After exchanging their respective promises, Roxanne kissed each of the twins’ cheeks. The way she somewhat clumsily pressed her lips to their faces was endearing, and the pair looked blissful. Their personalities were the exact

opposite of each other, but their faces looked identical when they were enchanted by their sweet niece.

Next, Roxanne headed towards Roberto. She looked up at him with puckered lips. Naturally, she also wanted to bid him good night.

“Lady Roxanne, I’ve told you before: there’s no need...”

“Mmm!” Roxanne appealed, her lips still pursed. She grabbed his jacket and stood on her tiptoes, urging him as she tried to close the distance as best she could. When it came to things like this, she was incredibly stubborn. Roberto, who had watched over her since she was born, knew this very well. He was reminded of it each time they repeated this exchange.

Everyone else shared a look that said, *“It’s starting again.”* Mary shrugged, while the three men grinned. They’d definitely make fun of Roberto later. This, too, was part of the usual flow of events.

“Lady Roxanne, you can simply *tell* me good night...”

“Mmph!” The girl’s pursed lips looked like a little bird’s beak as she continued to urge Roberto. At this rate, she might even jump at him. She might ignore the bewildered Roberto’s attempts at inhibiting her and clamber up his body to forcibly kiss his cheek. Mary pictured her daughter behaving in such a valiant and tomboyish manner. She was sure that Adi and the twins would burst into laughter at the sight.

Roberto must’ve imagined a similar scenario, as after a moment of pained deliberation, he sighed. “Very well,” he relented irritably. He’d surrendered entirely, which was a rare sight from someone like him. That embarrassed and uncomfortable countenance was out of character for him as well. Then again, this happened on a nightly basis, so Mary and the others were used to seeing him succumb to Roxanne’s persistence.

The man reluctantly squatted, accepting Roxanne’s hug. But as she wetly smooched his cheek, his expression softened. In the end, he, too, fawned over his niece.

“Good night, Uncle Roberto. Please wake up my unkie tomorrow.”

“Good night, Lady Roxanne. I’ll certainly take up that responsibility,” Roberto

replied, looking a little bashful. Satisfied, Roxanne stepped away from him.

After bidding everyone a final farewell, she walked into her bedroom. Mary and Adi followed her. As Mary went to close the door, she said, “If you’re going to make a ruckus, do it somewhere else.” That was because Lang and Lucian were still grinning, while Roberto glared at them sharply. Mary could easily picture what would happen next. But it was part of the usual flow, so she didn’t feel like stopping it. As long as the adorable Roxanne’s slumber wasn’t disturbed, nothing else mattered to her.

Once Mary closed the door, she headed into the room. Roxanne was already in bed. There were two chairs next to it. One was for Adi, while the other, supplied with a cushion and a lap blanket, was for Mary.

“Mother, if you don’t hurry, I’ll fall asleep!”

“Come on, Mary.”

Mary’s adorable daughter called out to her, while Adi extended his hand to help her sit. Feeling true happiness, Mary smiled and leafed through the book Roxanne had handed to her.



Epilogue

Two months had passed since the party which announced Mary's second pregnancy. As always, Albert Manor was decorated with Roxanne's drawings and handcrafts. Each day, the number of cushions increased as well. Not to mention, countless congratulatory gifts had arrived since the announcement, so the mansion was in a greater state of disorder than ever. Alongside the continuously running Roxanne's Historical Museum and the Cushion Exhibition, a Gift Gallery had also opened.

The other day, they had held a cushion-and-sweets exchange with House Eldland. Adi ordered extra cushions for the event, and once Patrick caught wind of it, he visited with cushions of his own meant as gifts for both families. Alicia brought sweets with her too, so the whole thing was a mess. (In the end, House Albert and House Eldland ended up with even more cushions and sweets than they'd started with. Talk about putting the cart before the horse! Obviously, Parfette cried.)

"I'm sure this will come to be known as the Fluffy-Cushion Period within our family's history," Mary opined.

"Fluffy-Cushion Period... It sounds like we've finally found peace after enduring the harsh Steel-Drill Era, doesn't it?"

"Indeed... Now eat this!" Mary screeched, stabbing her elbow into Adi's flank.

"Ugh!" Adi groaned miserably.

He must've been in a lot of pain, but Mary paid this no heed. "You reap what you sow," she told him nonchalantly. She even took a sip of her hot lemonade while observing his suffering. It was the perfect blend of sweet and sour, and tasted delicious.

The couple was sitting at a table within Albert Manor's gardens. They were spending the evening together, which was a long-lasting tradition between them. Originally, they would do this after dinner, but recently it happened after

they'd lulled Roxanne to sleep. In the past, they would also sit facing each other, but at some point, they'd started sitting side by side instead.

There was a tea set upon the table, as well as some sweets. It was a familiar sight, except that instead of tea, Mary's cup was filled with hot lemonade. This was out of concern for the baby in her belly. Some things had changed, and others hadn't. Even so, this was a perfectly pleasant way to spend time. When Mary mentioned as much, the groaning Adi slowly looked up.

"You've hit my flank too many times recently, milady... At the very least, you could evenly distribute the places where you attack me."

"This would all be solved if you didn't make me *want* to attack you in the first place," Mary declared flatly.

"Wise words," Adi said, petting his side. He'd been moaning in pain moments ago, yet he was still coming up with these snarky retorts. Clearly, he wasn't as desperate as he was making himself out to be.

Mary could only sigh and shrug at his attitude. She was about to voice a complaint about it, when he placed his hand on her shoulder. He rubbed it warmly, causing her discontent to quickly recede. Although she wasn't entirely pleased, she found herself smiling. "Goodness," she murmured, and her own voice sounded so sweet to her ears.

Mary glanced away with a huff, hoping that Adi wouldn't notice she'd been fettered by his gesture. He smiled wryly at that. He gently pulled on her shoulder, encouraging her to lean against him. She pondered upon her next course of action, then smirked mischievously. She flicked his hand to signal her refusal.

Even so, Adi's smile only grew. He knew that Mary wasn't truly angry with him, but rather just putting on a show. In other words, she was implicitly telling him, "*Pamper me and put me in a good mood!*" If anyone could pick up on that, it was Adi. His hand moved to touch her hair. He combed his fingers through it, occasionally entwining a lock around them.

Mary closed her eyes at this sweet gesture. She was swiftly bound by the sensation, and thought, *Maybe leaning against him won't be so bad after all.* Perhaps she was so easily swayed by the quiet time they spent together

because their daily lives were so boisterous. However...

“When I touch your hair like this, it reminds me of your ringlet era, milady. If I pulled on them a bit, they’d spring right back into place. How nostalgic...”

...when Adi reminisced about her hair, Mary’s heart, which had been warmed by his affections, instantly turned cold. She had no idea why Adi was speaking about that particular memory so fondly.

Mary’s eyes had been full of love, but now they narrowed with something else (it resembled exasperation and anger). “The dark steel-drill ages,” she grumbled under her breath. Then, she glowered at Adi. “Yes, how nostalgic. I have *such* great memories of you wretchedly making fun of my ringlets!!!”

“I wasn’t making fun of them! I loved you and every single one of your drills, you know!”

“The reason I never realized your feelings was because your attitude towards me on a daily basis was rude in the extreme!” Mary screamed, flipping her hair so that it fell out of Adi’s hands. Since she no longer had ringlets, her locks fluttered softly. They didn’t spring back into shape or any such thing.

After releasing a hot breath, Mary glanced down and scooped up her silver hair. It glistened in the moonlight. When she was in high school, those soft waves had been shaped like firm ringlets. No matter how hard she’d tried, they had refused to straighten. They’d left many hairstylists in tears, and even Mary herself had feared them. These memories were objectionable, but still somewhat nostalgic.

Mary glanced at Adi. He didn’t look regretful over their exchange in the slightest as he calmly sipped his tea. When he noticed her looking at him, he tilted his head. “Hmm?”

Instead of feeling nostalgic about her hairstyle, perhaps it was this kind of banter with Adi that made her feel that way. At this time of day, they’d often have the same old frivolous talk. Naturally, they did have sweet moments together as a couple, but those happened about once every three days. It was the same frequency as Roxanne managing to sleep through the night by herself.

And the reason for that is... Mary thought, staring at Adi. “Hey,” she spoke up.

“Call out to me.”

“Call out to you?”

“Yes. Do it.” Mary pestered him with a giggle.

Adi looked confused, but nevertheless did as she asked. “Milady.”

The sound of that word was both nostalgic and slightly ticklish. Adi had finally managed to call her by name in recent years, but it was only during this time that he called her “milady.” He did it as if it were par for the course, the same way he’d done it in the past. Was it because it was just the two of them? Was this his way of sweetly spending time with his wife? Mary wasn’t sure, but either way, it both embarrassed and pleased her.

She liked when Adi said her name, and she also felt happy whenever he referred to her as “mother” when speaking to Roxanne. But hearing him call her “milady” when they were alone had its own distinct sweetness to it.

These emotions made Mary rest her head against Adi’s shoulder. “Do it again,” she said to coax him.

Adi must’ve surmised her feelings, or else assumed that her good mood had returned. He smiled and said, “Milady.”

“Maybe I should book a hairdresser and bring back my ringlets for a day,” Mary mused. “Roxanne might be happy to match with me.”

“A mother with drills and a daughter with snail shells... No, never mind. Yes, I’m sure Roxanne will be pleased. And so will Alicia and the others.”

It was easy to imagine. Roxanne would jump up and down and exclaim, “*Mother and I are matching!*” Lang and Lucian would start reminiscing. Patrick would likely crouch down while trying to suppress his laughter at the sight of the ringlelet duo. But the one person who’d be the most gladdened by it would be Alicia. Mary bitterly muttered that Alicia was sure to frolic noisily, which caused Adi to laugh.

“Perhaps I should curl my hair and duel Alicia. It’s time for the villainess’s revenge!” Mary declared.

“What are you saying? You’ve been able to openly admit that she’s your best

friend lately.”

“Indeed, I acknowledge it. She *is* my best friend. But these are entirely separate matters!”

“Such a deeply rooted grudge...!”

“We can’t battle in front of Felix, though,” Mary went on. “I can’t let a little boy see his mother being defeated. I’m going to fight Alicia somewhere one-on-one, and leave her speechless!”

“Deeply rooted though it is, it’s a rather gentle grudge, isn’t it?” Adi said with a shrug. He was better off leaving her to it and focusing on cleaning up the table instead.

Meanwhile, Mary continued excitedly detailing her plans (that said, wanting to render her best friend speechless was a rather questionable objective). Adi simply responded with “Yes, yes,” and “I see,” to appease her. He wasn’t even trying to hide that he was letting her words go in one ear and out the other. Once he’d finished clearing the table, Mary finally reached the conclusion of her speech.

“Basically, I’m trying to say that my relationship with Alicia has nothing to do with my past life memories or me being a villainess. Alicia and I are the ones living in this world, not the heroine and the villainess. It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“Darn, I stopped listening halfway through...” Adi mumbled. “Just how did that grudge speech shift into a heartwarming story?”

“I want to tell her that and render her speechless in defeat. This is my personal— No, it’s my and Alicia’s goal for each other!”

“Right as things were starting to look good, your tale took a sharp turn, and your grudge returned in full force. All right already, I understand. Let’s leave this here for tonight. Another troublesome situation might happen if you keep going on about your villainy and all the rest of it.”

“Troublesome situation? Do you even know how many years have passed since the plot of the otome game?” Mary asked, laughing Adi’s words off. But Adi must’ve wanted to end the topic, as he cast her a disapproving glare. Mary shrugged and acquiesced. Tonight’s tea party had drawn to a close.

All that was left was to go check on Roxanne, and then return to their shared bedroom. This meant that their alone time would continue from here on out. For that reason, Mary felt no remorse over the tea party having ended. Adi took her hand, helping her up. “Let’s go, milady,” he said, causing her to feel that ticklish sensation again.

Once they returned to the mansion, they stopped by their daughter’s room. Yet as they drew near it, they saw that light was pouring out of the small gaps between the door and the wall. The couple exchanged a look with each other.

“Is she still awake?” Mary wondered.

“We lulled her to sleep, but she might’ve woken up.”

“If so, let’s read her another book. Or she might fall asleep faster if we bring her to our bedroom.”

They hadn’t entered the room yet, but their voices were already hushed as they conversed. Quietly, they stepped towards the door and slowly turned the knob. They pushed the door open and gingerly peered inside to find Roxanne sitting at her desk. Her diary lay open before her. Roxanne had started keeping it since around the time she began learning to write. Mary had tried to read it a few times. Though the handwriting was unsteady, the sentences spelled out how happy, fun, and exciting Roxanne’s days were. It was so cute.

“She must be writing today’s entry,” Mary whispered. “What an earnest child.”

“She’s so resolute, to be able to write in her diary every day without fail,” Adi replied.

The parents quietly praised their daughter while watching her from behind the door. Roxanne was concentrating on her task with a grave expression, so she didn’t notice them. She mumbled under her breath as she wrote, until she finally shouted “Okay!” After that, she straightened up, so she must’ve finished. Her curls bounced around her shoulders as she sat up.

“So adorable,” Mary and Adi whispered in unison. They observed their sweet child, and...

“I won’t lose to anyone just because I’m a villainous daughter! I will be the

one to protect House Albert!”

...when they heard her spirited proclamation, their eyes widened as they turned to look at each other in shock.

Afterword

Hello, this is Saki.

Thank you for purchasing the eighth volume of my series, *Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster!*

Mary and Adi had a child together in the previous book. I mentioned in the afterword that I hoped to introduce her to you soon. I wrote this volume keeping conscious of the idea that Roxanne is a precocious little girl. She's so adorable that your expression softens just from looking at her.

Alicia and Patrick also had a son, Felix. And then Parfette and Gainas had children too... I hope it was fun for everyone to picture this lively new generation.

Of course, things also got busy for the grown-ups. If anything, now that they've gained the powers of overly fawning parents, things are noisier and more boisterous than ever.

After eight light novel volumes, the House Albert series concludes here. Since it's been so lively and fun up until now, I wanted the conclusion to feel the same way. There's no composure in sight—it leaves you thinking, “Huh...?”

Mary's life will continue to be as tumultuous as ever, but I hope you can sense from the final scene that together with Adi, her family, and all her friends, she will overcome those hurdles. I came up with the final scene quite a while ago, so seeing it finally published and knowing everyone will read it makes me truly happy. Thank you so much.

Although the light novels end here, the manga is still ongoing. Thankfully, I have received confirmation that volume two of the light novel will receive a manga adaptation. I'd like to let you know that it fills me with joy and pride to see the book's romantic elements turned into art. Even as the author, I'm aware that the first volume was a rom-com with too much focus on the comedy aspect...

Ms. Haduki Futaba, who was in charge of the illustrations: thank you for providing the eighth volume with your lovely artwork too. The cover was reminiscent of the first volume, and I could feel Mary and Adi's growth from looking at it. I still can't forget how deeply moved I was when I saw volume one's cover for the first time. The cute Mary was puffing out her cheeks, while the cool Adi smiled calmly. One look was all it took for me to fall for them instantly.

To my manager, whom I caused all kinds of trouble and delays: thank you for guiding me to this point!

Thank you also to my family, who supported me when I was down.

More than anything, to everyone who has read this series and watched over Mary's life and growth: thank you so much! I was able to get this far thanks to you all.

I would be glad if you continued to watch over Mary in the manga adaptation.

Once again, I'm grateful to everyone from the bottom of my heart.

I hope we can meet again in the future.

Saki



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YOUNG
LADY ALBERT

IS **COURTING**

DISASTER

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba



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Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster: Volume 8

by Saki

Translated by Ray Krycki Edited by Casey Pritt

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