



5

YOUNG
LADY ALBERT

IS

COURTING

DISASTER

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba



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?!

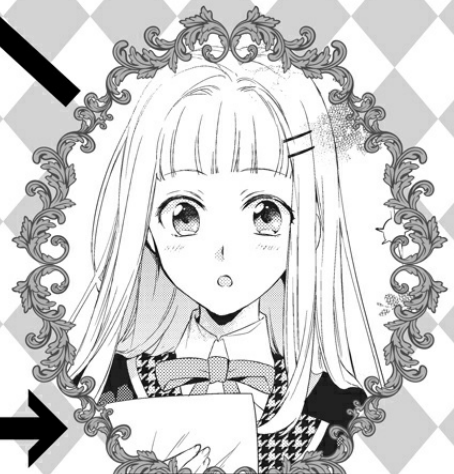
Trait: Service with a side of sass



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



Parfette Marquis

Daughter of House Marquis.
Gainas's fiancée.

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



Gainas Eldland

Parfette's fiancé.

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



Lang Albert

Mary's older brother.

Trait: Sister-obsessed optimist



Lucian Albert

Mary's older brother.

Trait: Sister-obsessed pessimist

Twins

Siblings

Carina

Noblewoman who
has past life memories
like Mary.

Trait: Beautifully and
elegantly radiates
iciness

Veltina
Barthez

Noble girl from the
neighboring nation.
Studied abroad at
Karelia Academy.

Trait: Petulant, but
has outstanding
recovery power



Roberto

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

Trait: Curbs House Albert's
charades



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Prologue

Mary Albert started her day late.

They were having a long vacation at college, so by the time Mary finally got out of bed, the sun was already high up, and the clock by her bed indicated it was almost noon. This was quite unbecoming of a lady her age, and when the maid came in to bid her good morning, she smiled wryly at Mary.

That expression made Mary feel awkward, as if she were a child who'd overslept. She glanced aside with a huff, and her slightly disarranged hair swayed.

Although she'd vacated her bed, there was still another mound under the covers. The mound moved up and down gently in time with the quiet sounds of breathing. Golden locks peeked through the gaps in the covers. It was almost as if someone else was sleeping in the bed.

The maid was completely unperturbed by this sight. "So it happened last night too?"

"We lost the defense," Mary responded. "Gracious! To think she'd just barge in like that so late last night and kick up a fuss about a sleepover. I can scarcely believe she's our princess! She's utterly disgraceful and bothersome, and I didn't get a wink of sleep because she was in the way." She scoffed at the mound (which was, of course, Alicia) while she complained.

The maid giggled at her words. "Indeed, I can tell you didn't sleep very well," she said, referring to the way Mary had stayed in bed until noon.

Having such a thing pointed out to her, Mary directed her anger at the bed, where Alicia was sleeping. Despite her harsh glare, however, the mound continued peacefully rising and falling.

Even though Alicia usually showed up first thing in the morning, now that her nocturnal assault had been a success, she was sleeping soundly atop someone else's bed. How maddening!

“If our princess lives by the peasantly schedule of waking up when the chicken crows, then I live by my own schedule as well,” Mary proclaimed. “If morning comes when the chicken crows, then I say morning comes when I wake up. So right now it’s morning, and I started mine early!”

“Indeed, you’ve woken up very early, Lady Mary,” the maid said by way of appeasement. “Now, what would you like for breakfast? Or would you prefer lunch?”

Mary paused. “Lunch, please... Let’s say that I was in my room reading all morning, and I got so absorbed in it that I forgot to have my breakfast.” As she devised her oversleeping cover-up plan, she finished changing clothes and seated herself at her dressing table.

Giggling again, the maid stood behind Mary and gently scooped up her hair. Mary’s bed hair was worse than usual due to her oversleeping, but it wasn’t on the level of drills. The maid started to comb through it.

“What kind of hairstyle would you like today, Lady Mary?”

“Since it’s a bit hot, I was thinking of a braided updo so I can keep cool.”

“Braided updo...? That would be fine, but...”

Wondering why the maid’s voice had suddenly lowered, Mary tried to gauge the woman’s appearance through the dresser’s mirror. The maid seemed to be struggling to find the right words, her expression troubled.

Perhaps there was some issue with Mary’s request? But it wasn’t as if the maid was contending with the steel drills of the past, which wouldn’t have accommodated even the slightest hairstyle change. (This brought up an abominable memory of when the maid had tried to braid Mary’s ringlets once, but they’d entwined around her fingers instead and had caused her to scream, “Oh no! I’m trapped...!”)

But all of that was history. Now Mary’s soft, gently swaying silver hair was well under control, whether it was being combed or braided.

“Is there a problem with having it braided up?” she asked the maid.

“No, it’s not an issue with the hairstyle itself...but it will expose the nape of

your neck,” the maid said gravely.

The amount of question marks floating around Mary increased. Indeed, her neck would be exposed—there was nothing unusual about that. She raised her hand to her nape, wondering what on earth the issue could’ve been. If anything, during her ringlet era, Mary often used to experiment by moving the ringlets around to try and get a nice breeze on her neck. (Although, the ringlets had been more like a heat-retaining wall.)

“What’s wrong with my neck being exposed?”

“It captivates Adi so much that he misses his footing and runs into walls. We refer to this as number seventy-five.”

“Ah, that would explain why he sometimes trips even if nothing’s in his way, gets caught in the door, falls into pits, or gets his head caught in a piece of cloth set up in the gap between the door and the wall.”

“We call those latter scenarios number fifty-eight.”

“I see... So the traps set up by my brothers are called number fifty-eight,” Mary surmised, to which the maid nodded in affirmation.

Mary already found it bothersome that matters pertaining to Adi were referred to as number seventy-five, but she felt all the more regretful to find out her brothers’ antics had a designation too. She expressed her appreciation for the servants’ efforts, and then grumbled, “I do wish they’d finally start acting like grown-ups.”

Or at least, she wanted them to stop setting up traps all over the mansion.

“Father should give them a good talking-to. It’s a shame he spoils us so much.”

“His Grace treasures his family greatly, so he wouldn’t do anything harsh,” the maid replied, chuckling at his compassionate nature as she combed Mary’s hair. The conduct she described might’ve been unexpected of the head of a distinguished noble family, but it was terribly fatherly.

The maid split Mary’s hair evenly, neatly braided it up, and attached a light-blue ribbon as a finishing touch. She then patted Mary on the head as if to

soothe her anger, and Mary felt the frustration that had risen up in her chest slowly fading away in response.

“All done, Lady Mary. As there are a lot of visitors today, I tied your hair a little tighter than usual so it won’t come apart. Please let me know if you feel any pain,” the maid said once the ribbon was in place, looking at Mary through the mirror.

Mary’s hair was braided beautifully, and each time she moved, her hair and the ribbon fluttered elegantly too. Normally, she would’ve smiled at the sight and thanked her attendant. But today, the maid’s words rang in her head.

“So there are lots of guests today too, huh...?” she murmured with a sigh, her shoulders sinking.

Anyone would’ve sighed if they were forced into a busy schedule right from the moment they first got up. Still, at least she’d been able to sleep until almost noon... That thought made her picture her father and brothers, who’d likely been preoccupied since morning.

Had nobody come to wake Mary up because they wanted to let her rest during her holiday? Or were they spoiling her? Or was it because Princess Alicia was here too? Whatever the case, if there were lots of visitors today, then Mary also had to play her part and entertain them.

Steeling herself, she took a moment to make sure her hair and outfit were looking good, and then turned towards the mound in her bed. Swiftly, she threw off the covers to find the still-dozing Alicia lying there. Mary lifted her index finger, and...

“It’s about time you start acting more princessly!”

...raised her voice, while at the same time poking the birthmark right next to Alicia’s belly button.

Alicia let out a high-pitched (and extremely idiotic) shriek and sprang up. She hurriedly covered her stomach and glanced around in confusion. Upon spotting Mary, she seemed to realize what had happened, and her expression lit up.

“Good morning, Lady Mary!”

“Here’s your good morning shot!” Mary responded, mercilessly flicking Alicia’s forehead.

Alicia’s hands, which had been on her abdomen, quickly moved up to cover her forehead instead. She puffed out her cheeks, looking displeased to have Mary enact violence upon her from the moment she woke up.

But Mary was more within her rights to be dissatisfied than Alicia. “How many times do I have to tell you to cease your nocturnal assaults? All your talk about sleepovers and pajama parties is just vulgar! Don’t you have any self-awareness as a princess?!”

“Those are two separate matters. My self-awareness as a princess and sleepovers go to different stomachs!”

“Don’t word it like sleepovers are some kind of dessert! Goodness, I can’t believe a country hick like you is supposed to be a princess,” Mary huffed, casting Alicia a dubious glare. “Could it be that you’re *not* actually a royal?”

“What?!” Alicia exclaimed in shock, her eyes growing wide and her hair swaying. Those purple eyes and golden locks were traits only the royalty could inherit, so Alicia was without a doubt the princess—the same princess who’d been abducted by a fortune teller when their prediction that the king and queen would have a son failed to come true.

However, that wasn’t the point of Mary’s complaints.

“I have some doubts. Are you truly Their Majesties’ child?”

“How cruel, Lady Mary! I am definitely my mother and father’s actual child!”

“No, I doubt that. You think it’s morning when a chicken crows, and you charge-attack like a wild boar. Your parents are obviously a chicken and a boar!” Mary determined, pointing a finger at Alicia.

Alicia gasped in astonishment. Her pupils and body were quivering, and her hair shook from the movement as well. “But...if my parents are a chicken and a boar...which one is the mother?”

“I don’t know, but if it’s the chicken, that means you came from an egg.”

“An egg...? So I *hatched*?!” Alicia whispered in a trembling voice, hugging her

own body tightly. She cast her gaze aside, her shapely lips shut in a hard line. Her eyes were swimming with doubt, her brows were slanted down, and she looked awfully fragile.

Seeing the other girl like this, Mary let out a sigh and closed her eyes for a moment. "I can't keep up with you," she muttered, flicking Alicia's forehead again. This signified the end of the charade. "I'm leaving now, and you should get out of bed too. I bet you plan on taking your lunch here? Go have a seat in the next room over."

"Unfortunately, I'm very busy today, so I'll have to head back to the palace right away," Alicia answered.

"My, is that so?"

"Yes... I'm really sorry that I can't take you up on that invitation..." She hung her head dispiritedly.

"I see..." Mary said, and then screeched, "Why are you making it out like I invited you?! If you're so busy, don't come to stay at someone else's house in the first place!"

With that, she once again attacked the other girl's forehead.

Chapter 1

That same day, Albert Manor was overflowing with visitors. Or perhaps it'd be more accurate to say, "today as well." Or even, "it's been happening constantly lately."

The guests consisted of those who lived far away and weren't on particularly close terms with the Alberts, and those with whom they'd only had a casual relationship until recently. There were even those with whom the Alberts had never spoken before, using their friends and contacts in order to pay a visit to Albert Manor.

The Alberts had also been receiving twice the usual amount of invitations to parties, and they'd even had to free up a room in the estate to accommodate all of the gifts they'd been given.

Leaving Alicia behind in the bedroom, Mary walked around Albert Manor. She noticed a few maids rushing about, and when she asked them what was going on, they hurriedly informed her about today's visitors.

Apparently, someone had arrived without prior notice, saying, "*I know you're probably busy, but I thought I'd at least stop by and say hello.*" It seemed that despite keeping a low profile, this person had no intention of backing down.

In fact, they'd probably visited *because* they knew the Alberts were busy. They must've thought that they might as well show up and see what happened, as they knew the Alberts couldn't just coldly ignore them. The individual's forceful methods were nothing praiseworthy, but it might've been a wise plan considering the current state at the mansion.

"Is that person hoping to see my father, or my brothers?" Mary inquired.

"It seems like anyone's fine. They just insisted that they wanted to greet *somebody...*"

"I see, so they're pushy and don't care about how rude they come off. Yesterday, father said he had some research to do, so I'll bet he's in his study.

My brothers should be in their room around this time, if they haven't already been caught by someone," Mary said with a shrug as the maid thanked her. "I do hope they *haven't* been caught, though..." she murmured under her breath with a hint of concern.

The head of House Albert and his sons were already plenty busy, even more so now that they were in constant demand by all these recent visitors. Catching a hold of any one of them was a nigh impossible task at this point. However, the Alberts couldn't just neglect the guests, and a lot of the manor's servants had been prowling the place lately in anxious search of them.

"I do need to get *someone*..." the maid said.

"If you can't find anyone else, then feel free to present the princess in my room," Mary suggested. "She claims she's busy, yet she still carries out her nocturnal assaults. She's the perfect sacrifice."

"Goodness, no! I couldn't be so rude towards Lady Alicia! However...a sacrifice might be a good idea. But rather than sacrificing Lady Alicia, Lady Mary might make for a better—"

"Don't you turn this around on me!"

Hearing the maid conjure up such unsettling schemes out of desperation, Mary made her displeasure evident. She then quickly retreated, as she didn't want to risk the maid going through with her plan. Mary escaped to a certain place, putting on a nonchalant facade as she walked through the mansion, to avoid being asked to do anything troublesome.



The servants' canteen had another alias: Mary's evacuation shelter.

It was almost lunchtime, so this cafeteria-slash-kitchen was all the more busy, with the chefs rushing to and fro. There was no way they could serve leftovers to an illustrious family like the Alberts, but because each member of the house was so busy, they often shifted their mealtimes around. As such, the chefs were locked in a constant battle against time.

That was why nobody paid Mary any attention (though perhaps that in itself should've been questioned to some degree). This busyness was exactly what

she'd been hoping for, and she smirked to herself. "Nobody's going to find me here! They'd never guess I'd be in the servants' canteen!"

"There you are, milady."

"I've been found in a flash!" Mary exclaimed in shock, turning around. "Why?!"

Adi gazed back at her with wide eyes. "Why...? I mean, this has always been the place you'd escape to."

"O-Oh, is that so?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "Just the other day, you said, 'That Alicia's even more excitable than usual... I can't handle it. I shall retreat at once!' and then ran over here."

"But she anticipated it, intercepted me, and hugged me anyway," Mary said, pressing a hand to her forehead. *What a tragic incident that was...*

Even as Mary had made her escape to the canteen, Alicia was already waiting for her with both arms spread open. Poor Mary hadn't even had the chance to put up a fight before those arms enveloped her, and the croquettes she'd eaten as Alicia clung to her tasted saltier than usual.

Mary narrowed her eyes at the memory. It made her want to go back to her bedroom just to smack Alicia's forehead one more time. When she told Adi as much, he gave an apology for the failed defense during last night's battle. He could never have imagined Alicia would show up at such an hour, and with such fervor... His expression was full of regret as he despaired over his inability to defend his wife's peaceful sleep.

"It's all right, Adi," Mary said to comfort him. "I avenged us by prodding her in the stomach this morning. I wish you could've heard the sound she made!"

"You may have taken your revenge, my lady, but please rest assured: next time, I *will* carry out a successful defense," Adi declared. "Once *that* is completed, we should be able to seal off Alicia with a secret ritual...!"

"Huh? Once *what* is completed?! What secret ritual?!" Mary shrieked, terrified of this battle for the sake of protecting her good night's sleep.

Seeing this, Adi let his suspicious grin fade away as he snapped back to his senses and patted her on the arm reassuringly. Touched by the gesture, Mary calmed herself down by deciding perhaps this was something she could accept after all. She had no idea what Adi meant by “that,” but everything he did was always for her sake. Though his unsettling choice of words piqued her curiosity, her trust in him won out in the end.

“Since it’s your idea, I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Mary concluded. “It’ll be a counterattack against Alicia, right? But...she does seem to have *some* moderation, since she always quietly goes back home if I’m in your room,” she pointed out, to which Adi nodded in agreement.

Although they were married, Mary and Adi still stayed in separate rooms. Mary slept in the main estate, while Adi in the dormitories. Things had always been this way, so it was hard to tell when they’d change.

Of course, they did spend time together in Adi’s room, but only stayed the night together about half the time. And whenever they did, Alicia always abandoned her nocturnal assault. According to those who dealt with her when she came by, she’d always excitedly ask where Mary was, but upon hearing that Mary was in Adi’s room, she’d giggle and leave all by herself.

“Based on the fact she doesn’t interrupt our time together, she seems to have a smidgen of understanding of moderation,” Mary said.

“W-Well in that case, this may not be the best time to propose this, but how about the two of us finally mo—”

“I know! I could give her an in-person lecture about common sense. It’s about time I drill some etiquette into that girl’s head, given she’s a member of high society now... Oh my, Adi. What’s wrong?” Mary asked. She’d been quite excited to share her own brilliant idea, until she noticed the way Adi’s shoulders were slumping.

“The two of us...” he mumbled, his tone of voice sounding melancholy.

Mary peered at his dejected countenance. “What were you trying to say earlier?”

“N-No, nothing... Don’t worry about it...”

“Really? Then let’s change topics. Otherwise, I’ll feel like blaming that girl for everything and rush back to my room to smack her,” Mary said. She was about to brush her fingers through her hair, before she recalled it was in a braided updo. She touched it delicately to fix it up, causing the light-blue ribbon to bounce.

This is no time to be lecturing a princess about common sense, Mary told herself before turning back to Adi. “By the way, you came here to find me, right? Is that because you’re planning to present me as a sacrifice?” she asked, giving him a mistrustful look.

But Adi just stared at her. Even when she called his name, he stood there vacantly and didn’t respond. Right as Mary was considering waving her hand in front of his face, he seemed to snap out of it, jolting in surprise as his eyes widened.

“Adi, were you listening?”

“Y-Yes... Something about a sacrifice? Why would I do that to you, milady?”

“Since my father and brothers are busy, I thought you were looking for me in order to send me out to the guests. The maids have been rushing about too, and I bet they’re after me.”

“We do have a particularly large number of visitors today,” Adi confirmed with a shrug. “Everyone’s been frantic, and you can occasionally hear them screaming.”

It was only noon, yet they already had a disaster at hand. Mary sighed—she could only wonder how much worse things would get in the latter half of the day. Recently, this had been the situation at Albert Manor from dawn till dusk. There was no way Mary would get any rest during her vacation if matters carried on like this.

“They should just decide already,” she murmured in exasperation.

By the way, what Mary was referring to was the very reason Albert Manor was so busy these days: the matter of deciding House Albert’s heir.

At present, Mary’s father was the head of the house. He was intelligent and highly esteemed, which made him worthy of ruling over the country’s most

illustrious family. Mary herself held a familial affection towards him, while also respecting him as a fellow member of high society. Whether in their nation or abroad, there was surely no man more exceptional than him.

That said, no matter how exceptional one was, nobody could win against time. Hence, the time to change the head of the house had come.

Considering the man's age, the timing seemed right. It would've made sense if he decided to step down as soon as tomorrow, or even today. Both his sons had talents similar to his, and there'd be nothing stopping them from following in his footsteps. It was in his best interest to yield his seat as soon as possible, and spend the remainder of his life taking it easy together with his wife—or so their relatives advised.

This led to the problem of which son should inherit the family. However, neither he nor the twins showed an inclination of making a decision anytime soon.

"Father's already advanced in age. Even if he doesn't want to retire yet, he could at least decide the heir," Mary complained. "Don't you agree, Adi?"

"Indeed, His Grace is aging like fine wine."

"Because he's shown no inclination of deciding, everyone else is confused since they don't know which of my brothers they should pay attention to. People are even making passes at me as a result, which is dreadfully inconvenient. Isn't that right, Adi?"

"Yes. His Grace's eyes, overflowing with affection, his gentle and soothing voice, and the dignity emanating from every single one of his gestures...!"

"Stop singing praises to my father while ignoring your wife standing here before your very eyes!" Mary rebuked sharply, which finally returned Adi to his senses as he awkwardly cleared his throat.

Adi had always been blindly devoted to the head of House Albert, but that became even more clear now that the man was his father-in-law. Adi would constantly say things like, *"How magnanimous of His Grace, to have permitted our marriage despite our rank differences!"* Mary just found it all off-putting.

To top things off, Patrick also agreed with Adi's sentiments. Lately, even

House Eldland's Gainas had started showing signs of blind devotion by saying things like, "*I wish to become a distinguished head of the house, just like him.*"

Considering all of that, Mary harbored some suspicions that her father was giving off some kind of pheromones which ensnared young men.

"But it's just as you say, my lady," Adi went on. "His Grace has become even more elegant and charming with age, yet he often mentions how he feels his stamina falling behind. He also said that it's taking him longer than usual to recover from his cold. His voice sounded pained because of his sore throat, and the low, husky tone of it carried a sense of mature dignity."

"I still detect some grossness in your words. But I suppose that's nothing new, and I clearly lost my final chance to do anything about it, so I'll give up. But goodness, father!" Mary said with a sigh.

In fact, the storm of visitors had first begun when her father had gotten sick. It wasn't anything serious—just a cold. Their family doctor had said it was nothing to worry about, and that the man would recover with a few days' rest. The sight of her father laughing while apologizing for having worried everyone had relieved Mary, and thus the incident had ended there.

Or at least, it *should* have.

However, for some reason, this little episode had caused a stir among high society. Everyone was convinced that the head of House Albert must've been feeling the effects of his advanced age, and had surely started considering retirement. This made them wonder which of the twins would inherit the family, as they all wanted to know which of the two they needed to be more careful of. Everything had been the result of the other nobles' senseless assumptions.

The most desperate of all were the families that had up until now been at a bit of a distance from House Albert. If the head of the Alberts would be changing, this was their prime opportunity to curry favor with them. Should these families make themselves known to the heir, they could earn the regard of the head of the next era's premier family. Of course, those who had already been close to House Albert shared similar sentiments, and wanted to stay near to the potential heir for the same reasons.

So despite the fact that the man himself never mentioned anything, attempts at predicting House Albert's next successor became a hot topic among high society. Everyone had busied themselves with trying to butter up the twins, leading to the present moment. Since nobody knew which one would be the heir, they were twice as busy with their attempts to flatter them both.

"And now they're trying to probe me for information too, even though I have nothing to do with it," Mary whined. "I can't stand it."

"Alas, this is the heir of House Albert we're talking about. It's not something that can be decided at the drop of a hat," Adi said.

"Then let them draw lots! We can make a replica of the pocket watch which signifies the head of the family, put it in a box along with the real one, and have my brothers draw from it. Whichever one pulls out the genuine watch will become the heir!" Mary declared proudly, her eyes shining.

If both of her brothers would make for equally capable heirs, then they might as well reach a decision quick and easy by drawing lots. They could even invite guests to an event called the "Lottery Party for Deciding House Albert's Heir." It was the perfect way to announce the succession.

Adi sighed upon hearing Mary's proposal. He looked at her with a deep level of exasperation unexpected from a man gazing at his beloved wife. He was about to offer a rebuttal, but before he could say anything, the sound of vigorous applause stopped him.

"Excellent idea! Bravo, Mary!" someone called out in praise. "Indeed, ruling over a family takes fortune too. You could even say that if someone doesn't possess the ability to draw fortune towards them, they aren't fit for being the head of the family. Your idea is both sharp and innovative!"

"Oh my. Hello, Lang," Mary said, turning around to face her brother.

He was Lang Albert, the older of the twins who were the center of high society's attention at present. He had silver hair and blue eyes, and there was still a trace of youthful innocence in his features. Combined with his small stature, this made him appear younger than his actual age. When he stood next to Mary, they almost looked like twins themselves.

“I see you made your escape to the canteen as well,” Mary remarked. “Unfortunately for you, Adi and I got here first. We’re over capacity.” She stuck out her tongue at him impishly.

Bewildered, Lang blinked a few times. Then, he took a moment to deliberate over something and finally turned to Adi, who was about a head taller than him. Lang stood on his tiptoes, desperately trying to shorten the gap.

“How deplorable! Just when did our adorable little Mary become so ill-tempered? It must be the fault of a certain someone who stole her from us! Don’t you think so too, Adi?! I wonder who on earth it could be?!”

“Er, no, I mean... I believe milady’s always been ill-tempered...”

“We always doted on her! She was so very cute when she was younger, and she adored us and followed us around everywhere... And yet, some poor suitor stuck to her out of nowhere! What do you say to that, Adi? I want to hear your opinion!” Lang demanded, couching his direct allusion in roundabout language.

“Well... If I had to say, it was you and your brother who always followed *milady* around...” Adi answered falteringly.

Originally they’d had a master-servant relationship, but ever since Adi and Mary’s wedding, Lang had become Adi’s brother-in-law. In other words, from Adi’s perspective, Lang was someone who outclassed him in both public and private life. Even leaving that aside, as the younger one, Adi had always been on the receiving end of the mischievous brothers’ pranks.

Mary was well aware of all of that, and unable to bear it any longer, she stepped in between them. She stood in front of Adi defensively, casting Lang a scowl. “Stop teasing him.”

“What is this...?! That sweet, adorable Mary is glaring at me!” Lang exclaimed. “But you see, the only reason I’m being strict is because I care about your happiness, Mary. All of this is for your sake,” he admonished softly.

Moved by his words, Mary felt her frown lessen as her expression morphed into a look of confusion. True enough, her brothers had always doted on her. Just a little bit, every now and then... Or in fact, it had been so very often that Mary openly loathed them for annoying her and skillfully shook them off her

trail. So when Lang had said he cared about her happiness, he couldn't have been lying.

And even as the twins adored their little sister, Mary, they also thought of Adi as their younger brother. (While they doted on Mary, they teased and pranked Adi—which was a form of doting when it came to male siblings.)

Now that Mary and Adi were wedded, it was possible that while the twins were happy for them, they also had complicated feelings on the matter. And those complexities must've only deepened given that Mary was a noblewoman, while Adi was a servant.

"I suppose you're right," Mary found herself saying.

This time, Adi called out to Lang first, giving him a hard stare. However, his gaze was directed downwards slightly because of their height difference.

"I know I have plenty of flaws, Lord Lang. However, when it comes to milady...or rather, my wife, my feelings are honest and true."

"Adi, I wish for my sister's happiness more than anything," Lang replied. "That's why I've always said I'd only accept a groom I could acknowledge as worthy of her. And yet, the one Mary chose was *you*..."

"I'm perfectly aware of the difference in our status."

"You're a servant, and I've seen you as my younger brother for a long time... When we were ten years old, you were our height. When we were eleven, you were taller than us. And now you're needlessly taller than us *and* everyone else besides! As if I'd ever acknowledge a man like you!!!"

Adi paused. "So you're *still* going on about that... That's the one thing I can do nothing about," he said, his shoulders drooping in unison with Mary's.

Where did Lang's earlier sincerity go...? Mary thought with a sigh.

Lang didn't seem to have noticed that he'd annoyed his younger sister, still glaring harshly at Adi. Because of their height difference, he was looking up, which must've been a further source of discontent for him.

"I truly do congratulate you two on your marriage. So shrink! Hurry up and *shrink!!!*"

“I told you that’s impossible.”

“Apart from your height, I acknowledge you. I know there’s no better man for Mary. But the *one* thing I cannot stand is that you’re taller than me!” Lang declared, continuing to command Adi to shrink.

Adi and Mary exchanged a helpless glance. Once Lang became like this, there was no easy way to stop him. Of course he understood that it’d be impossible for Adi to actually shrink—this was merely his way of taking his anger out on Adi due to his complex. He was also capitalizing on every opportunity to tease and ridicule his junior.

Adi knew this as well, so when Lang tried to pull his head down, he smiled wryly and stooped to appease him. The way Adi calmly went along with everything made it clear that he was used to this, as one might expect from someone who’d put up with it for over a decade.

Mary’s shoulders sagged at this boisterous scene. But in the next moment, she gasped as she sensed a change in the air. Everything suddenly grew chilly. Adi and Lang also seemed to have noticed this, as all the liveliness evaporated from them, and their expressions stiffened.

The two men were looking towards Mary. No... They were looking *behind* her.

Something is coming... No, it’s already here! Overcome with a sense of oppression, Mary slowly and fearfully turned around. What came into sight was...

“I will finish...preparing the tea...very soon...so please...take this to the courtyard.”

...one of the chefs, brandishing a knife in his hand as he addressed their group in a grave, serious tone of voice.

Terrified, the three of them promptly fled the canteen. They may have been the daughter, in-law, and first son of House Albert, but there was no way they could defy a chef during lunchtime. After they’d made their escape, they headed towards the second evacuation shelter: the laundry room.

Discomposed, Mary gasped to try and catch her breath. With graceful conduct, she wiped the sweat from the nape of her neck using a handkerchief.

Patting herself down from her nape to her shoulder, she grumbled, “Gracious! My hair’s a mess.” She tried to rearrange it, causing the ribbon in her hair to tremble.

Around the same time, she heard a loud sound somewhere behind her. Mary quickly turned around, only to see Adi crouching on the ground. He must’ve hit his foot on the table.

While he was squatting, a cloth softly fell on his head. It was white, fluttering on its way down to cover Adi’s head. Most conspicuous of all was the embroidery upon the cloth, which read, “Great Success.”

“Quick, someone! Get over here! We scored a combination of number seventy-five and fifty-eight!” Mary exclaimed, and on the other side of the door, she could hear her brother’s resounding laughter.



Mary and Adi were taking a stroll through the garden after lunch.

Alicia had already returned to the palace by that point, and for a postlunch dessert, she’d left a platter of cookies especially for Mary. There was even a sweet note attached to the plate, which read, “*Let’s have another sleepover again soon!*” The gift was entirely unsophisticated, and very much in character for Alicia.

When Mary had first laid eyes on the cookies, the rest of the Alberts had stared at her with knowing smiles. Overcome with embarrassment, Mary had no idea how to react. Eventually, she settled for grumbling, “She’s making House Albert look cheap, using cookies in place of her lodging charges!” while munching on them.

“How very cute of Alicia, to have left you some cookies as her parting gift,” Adi commented.

“She’s in for a shock if she thinks I’ll let her off the hook over some snacks!” Mary griped. “I don’t care whether she tries to give me cookies, muffins, or anything else next time—I’ll still kick her out!”

“What if she gives you croquettes?”

“Humph... N-No, I’ll kick her out anyway!” Mary insisted after a moment of hesitation, shaking her head. The light-blue ribbon in her hair bounced along with the movement.

She inhaled deeply to calm herself down, then surveyed her surroundings as though nothing had happened. It was obvious she was feigning ignorance, but surely there wouldn’t be a problem if she committed to it. When Adi smiled meaningfully, she shut him up by stomping on his foot before he could say anything.

The Albert gardens looked as gorgeous as ever today. The flowers were in full bloom, and it was the perfect place for a postmeal walk.

Unfortunately, however, the serenity of this place wasn’t enough to completely dispel the boisterousness from earlier. Even now, Mary could see a few visitors throughout the gardens, and she could hear her father’s and brothers’ voices in the vicinity.

In the end, the guests noticed her and started buttering her up as well. They’d stop and greet her, and then try to drag out the conversation, but she managed to make them leave one after another.

“They’re so tenacious,” Mary said. “Maybe it’s time to whip out the ‘I’m still a student, so I don’t get all this complicated stuff!’ excuse and pretend this has nothing to do with me.”

“I don’t think anyone would buy that, my lady. I mean, some people even think *you* will be the next heir of House Albert,” Adi pointed out.

“I’ve already said this countless times: there’s no chance I’m going to be the successor,” Mary appealed with frustration.

After all, House Albert had two excellent sons (whose adoration for their younger sister ought to be left aside). The idea of a daughter inheriting anything in this situation was preposterous. Mary had already pronounced this so many times that there might as well have been posters about it plastered all over the country.

Yet no matter what arguments she made, not everyone believed her words. Since the heir was still undecided, some people chose to wager on it being

Mary. They were acting purely out of greed and self-interest, and it almost felt like they were gambling.

Knowing she was caught in the middle of that maelstrom, Mary sighed and pressed her hand to her forehead. "It's one thing if a family doesn't have any sons, but why are they bringing *me* up when that isn't the case for us?"

"Because you're a stronger candidate than you realize, milady," said Adi. "And you're close with Alicia too."

"No, I'm not! I'd never be close with some princess who operates on a peasantly schedule and barges around like a boar!" Mary shrieked, insisting this wasn't some kind of joke.

"Indeed," Adi agreed with palpable insincerity. In a slight mutter, he purposely rectified his earlier statement: "You're not close with her, of course."

"She always makes a ruckus and hugs me without paying any heed to her surroundings!" Mary went on. "If people started to think I'm close with that graceless girl, it'd degrade my dignity! Just last night, she forced herself into my bed, and I didn't get a wink of sleep because of her!"

"Is that why you didn't get up until noon?"

"S-Seriously, I didn't get *any* sleep, okay?! Sometimes I dozed off for a bit, then fiddled with her hair, and then dozed off again! And before I knew it, it was noon!" Mary argued. She was about to flip her hair, having forgotten that it was tied up, and her hand cut across the empty air pointlessly.

Adi gazed at her with a fond smile, but then the both of them turned around at the sound of a familiar voice.

Patrick was heading towards them through the garden, led by a maid. His indigo hair fluttered in the breeze, making him look so dazzling that he outshone even the flowers at peak bloom. His well-proportioned features gave the impression of someone intelligent and courageous, and when they were taken together with his tall and slender frame, he truly looked like Prince Charming himself.

However, said Prince Charming's face was very grim today.

This was an unusual expression for Patrick to make, but it wasn't all that surprising, considering the young man who was lingering very close behind him as he walked. The melancholic air emanating from the man made it impossible for even Patrick to put up a good front.

"Mary, Adi. I've been looking for you," Patrick spoke up to them. "I heard Alicia got in your way last night."

"Greetings, Patrick," Mary responded. "I'd like to complain about it, but can't we say we're in the same boat here?"

"You're right; let's call it a lose-lose situation. By the way, Lucian, won't you leave me alone already?"

At Patrick's words, the man behind him stepped away, then scuttled right over to Mary instead. He had silver hair and blue eyes, and his facial features were still slightly childish. When he stood next to Mary, it was easy to see they were siblings.

His name was Lucian Albert—he was Mary's other brother. Although he and Lang were twins, the air they each gave off was so completely different that they were almost like yin and yang. They looked like two peas in a pod, yet it was impossible to mistake one for the other even if they stood right next to each other.

The gloomy Lucian, and the cheerful Lang... Caught in between this yin and yang, Mary had always complained that she wanted to split them into three and then combine them into one balanced part (indeed, not two, but *three*).

"I see you made your escape to the gardens, Lucian," Mary addressed him.

Lucian groaned in response. "Ahh, the guests have been swarming since first thing in the morning, trying to suck up to me. I'm so sick of it... And to top things off, House Dyce's Prince Charming came in, waltzing around like he owned the place... It won't be long before he's seized House Albert for himself..."

"Oh, come on. Don't say such things," Mary rebuked him with exasperation. Lucian was always thinking of the worst-case scenario.

Mary's words didn't seem to have cleared his suspicions, for he continued

glaring at Patrick in vexation, his eyes full of malice. As a side note, Lucian was looking up at Patrick, in much the same way Lang had been looking up at Adi earlier.

“Our families have always been on good terms, and you’ve escorted Mary so many times, Patrick,” Lucian complained. “And yet, to think you’d cancel your engagement to our adorable Mary...”

“Lucian, I discussed that matter with Mary thoroughly at the time.”

“Everyone says Mary stepped aside of her own volition, but didn’t you basically dump her? To think you held her hand so many times, and then married some other woman... Besides, when you were ten years old, you were our height. When you turned twelve, you started growing taller and taller. Now, there’s no point even comparing our heights...”

“This, again?”

“I was asking you to shrink earlier as I walked behind you, and yet you haven’t shrunk even a millimeter...”

“As if I would,” Patrick muttered with exasperation, his shoulders sinking.

Feeling a sense of déjà vu, Mary breathed out a colossal sigh. Both of her brothers were overly concerned with their heights. In fact, it was *all* they seemed to care about, to the point that even Mary wanted to scold them and remind them this wasn’t the time for such ridiculous concerns.

With the head of House Albert showing no inclination of deciding an heir anytime soon, and his sons being what they were, it was truly no wonder everyone was kicking up a fuss about the succession problem.

“Lucian, this isn’t the time to be worrying about your height,” Mary told him. “All three of you should have a proper discussion and decide the heir already. Or if nothing else, then decide by drawing lots,” she urged, wanting Lucian to realize that dillydallying any longer was inexcusable (while also remembering to nonchalantly recommend the lottery solution).

Lucian jolted with surprise, turning to look at Mary. Unlike Lang, there was no vigor in his eyes, but he gazed at her with kindness reflected deep in his pupils.

“Drawing lots...?” he asked.

“Yes. We can make an imitation of the pocket watch signifying the head of the house, and put both of them in a box. You and Lang will draw at the same time, and whoever draws the real watch will become the heir!” Mary explained, her eyes glittering as though she’d just voiced a brilliant idea.

Patrick sighed. “What nonsense are you talking about?” he murmured, causing Adi to nod along in agreement.

Lucian, however, upon hearing Mary’s enthusiastic proclamation...

“What a novel thought! As expected of our adorable Mary!”

...lauded his younger sister’s idea with deep emotion.

“I know, right?!” Mary exclaimed. “Lang liked it too!”

“I would’ve never thought of that myself. I despise my own mediocre way of thinking... You’re a genius, Mary! I bet you’ll cause a revolution within high society!”

“My, that’s enough flattery!” Mary said, covering her cheeks in embarrassment now that both of her brothers had praised her so much. Indeed, it seemed drawing lots was a brilliant idea after all. Without pausing to think, Mary quickly proposed, “Let’s host a party and draw the lots in front of all the guests!”

Lucian, despite the gloomy look on his face, began clapping and nodding in response. “It’d be nice to use up all my life’s luck in a lottery,” he muttered. While his words were slightly disturbing, coming from him, they were equivalent to approval.

Having heard enough of this exchange, Patrick swiftly interrupted them. “Lucian, I’ve been saying this for a long time, but you need to stop affirming every little thing Mary says. You and Lang are the reason she’s so eccentric.”

“I can’t hear you all the way up there,” Lucian responded.

“What a shame,” Patrick said with a shrug. In a fed up tone of voice, he added, “You simply *must* invite me for the lottery party.” He may have just tried to give Lucian some advice, but by now he knew there was no way the other’s

favoritism of Mary could be cured.

House Albert and House Dyce had a long-standing relationship, and Patrick had known Mary and her twin brothers since a young age. As such, he had a very good grasp on their heights and how they'd developed. From a young age, the twins had also blindly adored their one and only little sister, showering her with praise and compliments constantly. If Mary rode a bicycle, the twins would say, *"Bravo, Mary! Such wonderful reflexes!"* while giving her applause. If Mary sat down on a bench in the town center to eat a croquette, they'd commend her by saying, *"Even by the roadside, you're exuding elegance!"*

The twins may have been completely contrasting forces of yin and yang, but they were united in their blind love for Mary. It was because of them that Mary's eccentricity had been allowed to freely unfold, and now here they were.

Even at present, Lucian's eyes were sparkling because of Mary's idea. "We should use jewels for the fake watch and make it really fancy. The box should be made of marble, and right as we're drawing, the orchestra will perform a number!" he decided, needlessly planning for an extravagant direction of the scene.

There's no stopping this now... Patrick thought while narrowing his eyes. (When he was younger, Patrick had tried to halt the twins' reckless antics, but he'd learned to give up quickly over the years.) "I suppose if both candidates are equal, deciding the succession by drawing lots might be a decent idea," he remarked.

"Oh, so now you've joined the lot-drawing faction too..." said Adi. "No, please don't give up yet, Lord Patrick. I can't stop Lord Lucian by myself."

"Neither can I. The only one who could..." Patrick trailed off, casting his gaze aside. "Right, he's finally come for retrieval," he said with a note of relief in his voice.

He was looking at two young men. One was Lang, and the other was a notably taller man with long red hair.

"Welcome, Lord Patrick," said the latter in greeting.

"Hey, Roberto," Patrick replied. "My bad for the bother."

“It’s no bother at all. Feel free to stay as long as you like,” Roberto said with a wry smile, responding to Patrick’s humorous words with humble sincerity.

Roberto was wearing a spotless, perfectly pressed butler’s outfit. His long bright-red hair swayed as he lowered his head, and while his eyes of the same shade were sharp and narrow, there was a gentleness in them as he looked at Patrick. He was tall and slender, yet his proportions were well-balanced, to the point that he could stand equal with someone like Patrick, who was lauded as high society’s Prince Charming.

“By the way, what is all this ruckus about?” he asked Patrick.

“The usual—the Mary Exaltation has begun. If things continue like this, House Albert’s heir will be decided by drawing lots,” Patrick explained tiredly.

“Lots...” Roberto muttered, and after a moment of consideration, added, “I see.”

Mary and Lucian had already been excited, and with the arrival of Lang, things had only grown more noisy. With the addition of phrases such as “Mary Exaltation” and “drawing lots,” Roberto must’ve conjectured the rest. In fact, every servant of House Albert would’ve been able to draw a similar conclusion upon being faced with this situation: Mary had once again blurted out some outrageous claim, and the twins started singing her praises.

After all, such scenes weren’t uncommon around Albert Manor. That was one of the reasons why croquettes and seafood rice bowls were regular meals during dinner, and why they had held the migratory bird restaurant’s food-tasting session here. There was even a bicycle parking lot behind the mansion.

However, Roberto must’ve concluded that deciding the succession by drawing lots was a step too far, for his eyes sharpened. Though intensely red in color, his eyes looked calm and cool most of the time, but when his expression hardened, he emanated a sense of solemnity.

“And that’s a senior’s dignity for you,” Patrick murmured, impressed at the sight.

Adi cast Patrick a perplexed look, for while he wasn’t the same age as Roberto, he was still older than Patrick. He was on the verge of complaining,

“You’ve never said anything like that about me...”

Right at that moment, though, Roberto spoke up, as if purposely cutting Adi off. “You should stop them at such times, Adi.”

“Don’t be absurd; I obviously can’t stop Lord Lucian. Besides, he and Lord Lang are *your* partners,” Adi responded, completely tossing aside his usual respectful manner of speech with his blunt rejection.

Roberto sighed. He was Adi’s older brother, and the eldest son of the family that had served House Albert for generations. He was the same age as the Albert twins, and even Patrick admired his presence of mind and his unbreakable composure.

“What a brat...” Roberto muttered under his breath, his tone of voice sounding the exact same as Adi’s whenever he was exasperated. Even the way he sighed and let his shoulders sink, coupled with his expression, was all similar to Adi.

You can really tell they’re brothers, Patrick thought with a dry smile.

Roberto noticed his expression, and cast him a dubious look. “Is something the matter, Lord Patrick?”

“No, I was just thinking how you two really are brothers. And it’s no surprise Adi can’t stop those two—he can’t be too harsh against two older masters.”

“Not so—House Albert’s servants mustn’t say that *anything* is impossible. Occasionally, we must correct our masters, even at our own risk. Such is a servant’s responsibility,” Roberto proclaimed dutifully.

Roberto and Adi came from a family of servants who waited upon a noble house even the other aristocrats obeyed. It would take more than ordinary resolve for them to correct their masters under such circumstances. They could be scolded for impudence, and in the worst-case scenario, their actions could incite their masters’ wrath and cause the servants to lose their jobs.

Even so, it wasn’t the role of a servant to blindly follow their master. There came times when they couldn’t balk at the threat of punishment, and had to sacrifice themselves to guide their masters, all for said masters’ sake.

Roberto's words were exemplary of a true servant. Although Patrick had a much higher social standing than him, he felt a genuine respect towards Roberto's conviction. Deeply moved, he watched Roberto while the latter turned his severe gaze towards the three siblings.

"Yeah, it's just as you say," Patrick told him. "So what are you going to do?"

"This would be the time to put one's life on the line and stop them...though it won't be *me* doing that," Roberto responded ominously, suddenly extending his arm. He grabbed the confused Adi by the scruff of his neck in a tight grip, pushing him forward.

Pitifully unprepared, Adi lost his balance and stumbled right towards Mary and the twins, who were still getting worked up over the idea of drawing lots. "What the—?! What are you doing, Roberto?!"

"Looks like you've gotten even taller, Adi. As your older brother, I'm delighted to see your growth."

"Taller? I guess so, but why are you...saying that...right...now..." Adi's voice grew quieter and quieter at the chilly air of intimidation emanating from behind him as he realized his brother's intent.

Behind him stood Lang and Lucian, who, rather than caring about the family succession or the fact that Adi had married their younger sister, cared more about their heights than anything else. The twins assumed a stance, murmuring, "Oh?" and "That's unforgivable." Their expressions were indescribably icy, with a surprising amount of intensity in them despite their youthful features. This was the kind of intimidation only a family's eldest sons could give off...though they were showing it off in a completely inane situation.

It was obvious that the idea of drawing lots had completely vacated the twins' minds. All that remained were thoughts of height and the unpardonable growth of a certain someone.

I see, thought Patrick with a nod. That really did change the subject...even if it's Adi's life being put on the line.

"Roberto, why would you do such a— Lord Lang, please stop trying to lower my head!" Adi exclaimed. "Th-This is way more force than usual...!"

“We have the right to make you shrink!” Lang declared.

“No, you don’t! Lord Lucian, why are you digging up the earth around my feet?!”

“I can’t allow your field of vision to be above ours... Even if we don’t have the right to make you shrink, we have the right to lower your field of vision...!”

“You don’t have that either! The gardener will get angry at *me* because of this, so please stop it!” Adi cried, putting up a weak resistance against the twins’ jealousy. It was a pathetic display, and yet not a single person offered him a lifeline, simply watching on.

Mary had been getting excited along with her brothers, but upon seeing this scene, she seemed to calm down substantially. “No, I suppose we can’t actually draw lots,” she concluded, having regained her presence of mind.

“I’m so glad to hear you’ve changed your mind, Lady Mary.”

“Thank you, Roberto. Sorry for giving you extra work there—I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“You care for House Albert more than anyone, so perhaps you got a little carried away out of excitement. It’s all because you’re thinking of your family first,” Roberto reassured her, delivering a perfectly supportive line one would expect from a servant. He didn’t blindly sing her praises like her brothers did, but rather soothed her after she’d realized the error of her ways.

Indeed, Roberto’s conduct was perfectly servant-like. That said, when he cast a sideways glance at the twins, he let out a quiet sigh.



“Compared to you, Lady Mary, those two are utterly deplorable...” Roberto went on. “It’s fine for now, since Adi is being sacrificed, but if they tried to take their anger out in this pitiable manner on the other nobles’ sons, it’d bring shame upon House Albert.”

“Actually, Lucian grumbled at me earlier too,” Patrick chimed in.

“He did? Gracious... My apologies. Adi, come over here and let Lord Patrick beat you up!” Roberto called out.

Adi, with one twin trying to push his head down and the other digging around his feet, naturally had no way of escaping and couldn’t respond to the summons. All he could do was shriek, “Why me?!”

Patrick shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, Roberto. I’ve known Adi for a long time, so I couldn’t possibly hit him.”

“A man of excellence as always, I see,” Roberto responded, impressed by Patrick’s kindness (despite how condescending it was in reality).

In the background, Adi, whom the brothers were still trying to shrink, screamed, “Why am I the one getting hit in this scenario?!” However, nobody was willing to answer him.

This was no matter of cruelty—such scenes were simply commonplace at Albert Manor.

Mary was in no mood to rescue Adi, but she didn’t want to watch his suffering either. Instead, she turned to face Roberto. He was the main culprit behind this disaster, yet he watched it unfold coolly and even complained, “Goodness, how noisy.”

Although he and Adi had eyes of the same color, Roberto’s were sharper and gave a more chilly impression. Yet his overall ambience was still similar to Adi’s, and his voice also sounded familiar when he asked Mary, “Is something the matter?”

“You two really are similar,” she asserted.

“Oh? Me and who?”

“Adi. It’s easy to tell you’re brothers.”

“I don’t think I can take being compared to my pathetic, easily victimized younger brother as a compliment,” Roberto said, glancing at Adi.

Mary turned to look as well, seeing the still-ongoing sight of her brothers trying to make Adi shrink. The hole under his feet had already reached his ankles. It was indeed pathetic. Adi was screaming and blaming Roberto, but there was no strength behind his words.

“Brothers sure have it rough,” Mary murmured under her breath.

“Things have always been peaceful between me and my brothers,” Patrick countered. He must’ve been trying to say that he didn’t want to be lumped together with them.

“Well, it is what it is. Adi can’t be saved anymore, so let’s just leave things be,” Mary decided.

“Are you sure about that, Mary?” Patrick asked her. “Your husband might shrink, you know.”

“I don’t mind. Even if he becomes smaller, my love for him won’t do the same,” Mary argued.

Patrick sighed in response, then turned towards Roberto. The latter showed no inclination of helping his brother escape his fate (alas, he was the cause of this situation), but when he noticed Patrick looking at him, Roberto smiled serenely.

His personality was slightly flawed, but he was a capable man. He was observing his brother’s misery partially in jest, but he was usually very composed. Roberto always kept watch over House Albert, sometimes as its servant, and sometimes by taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture.

“Who do you think should be the heir, Roberto?” Patrick asked him.

“Me?”

“You don’t have to think about your answer too hard. I’m just curious,” Patrick assured him nonchalantly.

Roberto turned to look at the twins. “Indeed, both Lord Lang and Lord Lucian have their faults, but they also have their merits. As for which should be the

head of the family..." he trailed off, smiling fondly.

His eyes reflected kindness, loyalty, and faith, as well as familial love and a deep sense of friendship. Roberto had grown up alongside the twins, and knew them better than anyone—in a way, he was just like their brother too. Unlike with Mary and Adi, there was no romantic love between them, but there was still a comparable emotional bond.

Feeling such emotions, Roberto slowly responded. "I know it's impossible, but I wish those two could be split into—"

"Three parts, right?!" Mary interjected.

"Your math is obviously off, Mary," Patrick said. "But yes—if you split them into two and took a part of each to make a new person, they'd be the most suitable heir for House Albert."

"Actually, I think we should split them into ten parts," Roberto opined.

"That wouldn't be my brothers anymore! Who would it even be?!" Mary protested, while Roberto chuckled in amusement.

Patrick shrugged his shoulders at this exchange. He'd always known Adi's attitude towards Mary wasn't servant-like at all, but the same was true for Roberto and the twins. In fact, since the three of them were all men, it felt like they were even tougher on each other.

However, Roberto wasn't about to change his attitude at this point. Instead, he checked the time and then muttered, "Oh, it's already this late." That must've meant Lang and Lucian were going to be having guests soon—most likely, it was more people looking to butter up House Albert's successor.

Such nobles often appeared one after another, with no consideration for the twins' plans. Judging by Roberto's sudden exhaustion, it seemed he had difficulty managing his masters' schedule. It was already challenging enough to attend to the usually busy Albert sons. With the addition of all the visitors, as well as Roberto's responsibilities of serving the twins and managing their time, he might've been the busiest person in Albert Manor at present.

The man turned towards his masters, who were still endeavoring to torment Adi. "Lord Lang, Lord Lucian, this game of charades is over. It's time to get back

to work,” he announced. “You too, Adi. How long are you going to go along with this farce?”

“Farce?! You’re the one who set it up...!” Adi whined.

“Huh. Have you actually shrunk in the time I wasn’t looking?”

“No! I haven’t shrunk—I’ve *sunk*!” Adi appealed in frustration. Needless to say, Roberto wasn’t moved by his words. (As a side note, Adi indeed hadn’t shrunk. But his hair had become tousled from being thoroughly pushed down, and the hole at his feet had reached to his shins, causing his field of vision to be a few centimeters lower than usual.)

Satisfied with Adi’s disastrous state, Lang and Lucian exchanged a look. They both brushed their hair aside and wiped the sweat from their brows as if to congratulate themselves on a job well done.

Their unified conduct truly did make them look like twins, but while one was dazzlingly cheerful, the other had a bewitching sense of languidness about him. Each of them was at the opposite end of the spectrum, yet they were both good-looking and charming. (Among high society, opinions were split as to which would be the heir, but when it came to the noble ladies of the twins’ age range, *their* opinions were split on which twin was more attractive.)

“We got to tease Adi...but it did make me sweat a little. I want to get changed before the guests arrive, and maybe eat something,” Lang decided. “But still, exercise really works wonders! I feel so refreshed!”

“Yeah, we bullied him... Moving around lifted my mood a bit,” Lucian said. “Let’s change, eat something, and then wait for the guests. Although...no matter who it is, they’ll just try to suck up to us.”

One spoke with glee, the other with gloom. Yet both of them issued instructions to Roberto about wanting the same things.

When the small-framed twins and the tall Roberto stood next to each other, the height difference between them was clear as day. Given the twins’ babyish features and Roberto’s mature outfit, it was almost impossible to guess the three of them were the same age just by looking at them.

Mary watched them converse for a while, smiling softly. “Now that I think

about it, I'm certain that the root cause of their complex is Roberto."

"Yeah," Patrick agreed. "No matter what, they always have to look up at him. Not just every day, but basically every *hour* of every day."

"And when it comes to venting their anger, Adi becomes a precious sacrifice... I *knew* my husband was an outstanding man."

"Sacrificing himself to dispel his masters' bad mood—he's the exemplary servant."

Having watched the spectacle from a short distance away, Mary and Patrick somehow managed to sum it all up as some moving tale as they nodded at each other.

The finally freed Adi's shoulders drooped as he listened to their exchange. "Flatter me all you want, but I'm still unhappy," he growled, exuding exasperation. His hair was a mess, and his shoes were soiled with mud from having been partially buried.

Yet he seemed unaware of the state he was in as he lifted his head to glare at Roberto. He and the twins were discussing the rest of their plans for the day, but occasionally Roberto's guise of courtesy slipped and violent language came flying out from his mouth. That said, this happened all the time.

"It's one thing for Roberto to treat me that way, but his attitude towards Lord Lang and Lord Lucian is unforgivable," Adi proclaimed.

"My, how belated," Mary responded. "Perhaps he does say rude things sometimes, but it seems to work out perfectly fine."

"Even so, he's still a servant! Behaving improperly is unforgivable for someone from a family lineage of servants."

Mary turned to Adi, surprised to hear him make such harsh statements. He was usually mild-mannered and kind, and his eyes often gazed at her with adoration. And when it came to Patrick and Alicia, he regarded them with a sense of friendship, yet right now, he was glaring at Roberto with severity.

He's acting a little manlier than usual... Mary thought. She let out a hot breath, and...

“Go look in a mirror at once!”

...made an icy declaration.

Of course, she meant to allude to the fact that Adi was guilty of the exact same thing. And yes, she did find his masculine side wonderful, but these were entirely separate matters. Actually, her desire to call him out was stronger, and therefore she wouldn't let herself be infatuated by his manliness.

“What do you mean, Your Ladyship?” Adi questioned. “I don't treat Lord Lang or Lord Lucian the way Roberto does.”

“No, you certainly don't. But what about *me*?!” Mary screeched. “Who was it that called my ringlets ‘drills’?!”

“Me!”

“And *you* were the one who came up with terms like ‘Drills Drillbert,’ ‘steel drills,’ and ‘Stylist-Killing Steel Drills’!”

“So you *did* know I coined that last term!”

“Of course I did! Nobody else comes up with these nicknames besides you!” Mary yelled, stomping on Adi's mud-slicked shoes.

However, Adi showed no concern over her fury, and only murmured, “Ah, that takes me back.” He seemed engrossed in his memories, as he was smiling warmly. This alone would've normally been enough to intensify Mary's wrath, but Adi decided to add even more fuel to the fire by saying, “If you get angry like that, your braids will drillify.”

Enraged further, Mary stomped on his foot again.

Witnessing this typical behavior, Patrick glanced away and pretended he couldn't see it.

Adi was bantering with Mary, while Roberto was uttering violent language, thinly disguised under some polite words, towards Lang and Lucian. Neither seemed like a master-servant type of exchange. It was a preposterous scene for the nation's most illustrious noble family, yet that was exactly what made it so very House Albert-esque.

“I bet House Albert has a special system in place in which they can tolerate a

servant's impudence, but only towards their own master," Patrick murmured to himself, nodding in understanding.

Naturally, there was no such system, but this was something Patrick had seen unfold before his own eyes for so many years that just thinking about it gave him a headache.

Roberto and the twins had left, and after a while of idle chatter, Patrick said he had plans and took his leave as well.

Mary and Adi were left on their own. They were having some tea in the courtyard and were supposed to be relaxing, when Mary suddenly cried out, "Oh, I know! If drawing lots is no good, then how about a treasure hunt? I'll hide the pocket watch somewhere in the mansion, and the one who finds it first will be the heir!"

"Why are you so dead set on adding entertainment value to this?" asked Adi. "And even if we did go through with that, where would you hide the watch?"

"I'll curl my hair back into ringlets, and hide it inside of them."

"That level of difficulty is way too high," Adi said, promptly dismissing Mary's proposition.

I thought it was a good idea... Mary sulked with a pout. Right then, she heard a chuckle from nearby, as someone clearly found this sight amusing.

Mary turned around and noticed a gently smiling woman walking over towards them—it was Keryl, her mother. Mary bid her a brief greeting, while Adi sprung to his feet in a fluster and lowered his head.

"Are you two having tea?" Keryl inquired.

"Would you like to join us, mother?" Mary suggested. "Tea is best enjoyed when you're not being buttered up."

"Goodness, Mary, you mustn't say it like that. Alas, thank you for the invite, but unfortunately I must attend said buttered-up tea soon. Just thinking about it exhausts me," Keryl said with a shrug. While she had rebuked Mary verbally, her conduct and the way she sighed made her real feelings very blatant.

Keryl had been plenty busy herself recently, even if it wasn't on the level of her husband or sons. Among high society, there were many nobles who tried to get something out of her by flattering her and putting her in a good mood. After all, she was the lady of House Albert, so if someone were to cajole her and make her like them, she might open up to them. There was also the possibility that the gossipy banter during tea parties might loosen her lips.

Based on such a line of thinking, plenty of other noblewomen invited Keryl to their tea parties, as if it were some competition.

"That said, I don't know anything, and I always tell them the heir should be decided among those it concerns. But they still try to get information out of me and press me, even though it's pointless... How maddening," Keryl complained.

"I know, right? We have nothing to do with the succession, but we keep getting mixed up in it anyway. I hate it," said Mary. "Maybe we really *should* decide it via a treasure hunt," she added ominously, making it sound like she was on the verge of saying it could even happen tomorrow.

Adi quickly settled her down. Obviously, they couldn't actually decide the heir through a treasure hunt—or drawing lots, for that matter.

Keryl watched them banter in amusement, and then suddenly remembered something as she pulled out a single envelope. "Mary, I can see you're full of pent-up resentment, so how about you and Adi go for a date?"

"Oh? What's this?" Mary asked, taking the envelope with great interest. Equally curious, Adi leaned in to have a look as well.

It was a high-quality envelope. Mary slowly opened it and removed a piece of paper. As she and Adi read the contents...

"Theater?"

...they both asked in unison, tilting their heads.

Indeed, the envelope contained two theater tickets. Moreover, they were for tonight.

Surprised by this short-term plan, Mary turned to look at her mother with wide eyes. Adi did the same, clearly confused as to why they were suddenly

being presented with such tickets.

“It seems really interesting, so I’d like for you to see it, Mary,” Keryl explained. “I actually arranged it a few days ago, but I drank too much tea and forgot all about it.”

“This is so sudden...” Mary remarked. “But it *is* very you, I suppose.”

“Well then, you should have an early dinner and then be off. Perhaps at a restaurant? That’s right, there’s a very nice one there. This is a special occasion, so you two should definitely go for it,” Keryl said, deciding one thing after another. She began giving out instructions to a nearby maid about arranging the restaurant booking without even waiting for Mary and Adi’s response.

“All right—have fun!” Keryl said at the end of it all, and then left the courtyard.

Mary and Adi hadn’t even said a word—in fact, everything had happened so fast that they *couldn’t* say a word. Before they even realized it, Keryl had already disappeared, and all that was left was the envelope sitting on the table between them.

“And I’m supposed to believe she’s exhausted?” Mary murmured.

“I’m sure madam is doing this out of care for you, milady. Since we have this chance, why don’t we just go along with it?” Adi proposed with a gentle smile. “It’s a date,” he added, and the words made Mary’s cheeks flush.

Those honeyed words of his always made her heart throb. It had already been some time since they’d gotten married, and they went on outings together practically all the time. But even so, hearing him say such things still made her heart beat faster.

Mary held the envelope tightly in both hands, then smiled and said, “You’re right. It’s a date, then.”

The play told the tragic love story of a young maiden, and had garnered such positive reception that it had even become popular abroad. When Mary first heard of it, she’d found herself wishing she would have the opportunity to see it

once for herself. She'd never imagined such an opportunity would be given to her by her mother—let alone with the woman insisting Mary just *had* to go and that she'd "definitely enjoy it."

Alas, even without all these visitors, Albert Manor was always bustling with activity, so going to the theater would be a nice change of pace. The restaurant Keryl had booked for Mary and Adi offered good food and a charming atmosphere too, and surely there was no greater experience than attending the theater on a pleasantly full stomach.

Such were Mary's thoughts as she took her seat in the auditorium, cheerfully clutching a handkerchief (she had it with her in preparation for tears, of course). Adi was next to her, and as he'd also heard about the play's reputation, he was thoroughly intrigued.

"It's a story about friendship and a tragic love, right?" Mary spoke up. "I'm looking forward to it!"

"It's about a young noblewoman and a prince who are engaged, and one day they meet a pitiable town girl... Wait, that sounds like..."

"What's the matter, Adi? It's about to begin!" Mary said, right as the stage lights dimmed. The idle chatter inside the chamber grew silent, and Mary squeezed her handkerchief tightly, then turned her gaze towards the stage.

"I must be imagining things," Adi muttered, and followed Mary's example, turning towards the stage as the curtains drew open...

The story followed a beautiful noble girl with straight silver hair on a journey through friendship and tragic love. Her status in society was so high that all envied her, and she was engaged to the nation's prince, who was also her childhood friend. A gorgeous silver-haired maiden, and a charming indigo-haired prince—the scene illustrated how very close they were before the play moved on.

The heroine loved the prince from the bottom of her heart, and thought the two of them would become a happy married couple. For that reason, she dedicated herself to learning impeccable manners and etiquette, and grew into a flawless young woman. Anyone who looked at the prince couldn't have imagined anyone other than her standing by his side.

One day, the silver-haired noblewoman met a certain miserable town girl. The girl was unsophisticated and pure of heart, with golden locks shining as brightly as the sun. She was timid because of their difference in social standing, but the noblewoman approached her first. Upon learning that the town girl longed to join high society, the noblewoman began to teach her proper manners and invited her to her own parties. The scene of the two girls bonding and growing close, their oppositely colored locks fluttering gently, was mesmerizing.

During one of the parties, the prince met the town girl too, and was completely taken with her. It was a love that surpassed rank differences.

The friendship and romance between the two respective pairs bloomed, until eventually the silver-haired noblewoman discovered that her best friend was also the love of the prince she so adored. She saw the two of them together from a distance, and the intimacy between them was obvious: she'd never seen him smile in such a tender, affectionate way before.

Trapped in the agony of jealousy, friendship, and love, the noblewoman soliloquized her grief to the tune of sorrowful music. Her straight silver hair was partly hidden in the shadows outside the dimly focused light source, emphasizing her suffering.

Once she'd made up her mind, the noblewoman spoke thusly to her beloved prince: "I was only engaged to you for political reasons." She masked her true feelings, pretending it had all been for politics, and supported the prince and the town girl, who had been ready to elope for the sake of their love, in getting together.

The beautiful couple held hands, snuggling close, while the lone noblewoman watched on from the terrace in the fading moonlight...

A gentle tune played on as the curtains slowly closed, and soon enough the chamber erupted in applause. Some people rose to their feet to extol the play, others grasped their chests with emotion, while still others gazed at the stage with tears in their eyes.

"What a tragic tale...!" Mary sobbed. Touched by the story, she continued to applaud even while clutching the dampened handkerchief in one hand.

Meanwhile, Adi's eyes had grown cloudy. While everyone around him was up

on their feet, he remained seated, radiating an air of iciness. “Milady, how can you cry over this?”

“What do you mean? That was heartrending... But what a wonderful noblewoman the heroine was! She lived for love—no, for love and friendship!”

“Well then, I guess they *did* change it up pretty good...”

“Change it up? Right, this is based on another story. Is the original version a book? If so, please place the order for it at once!”

“No, it’s not a book. It’s based on real events,” Adi pointed out.

“So such an eminent figure truly exists...?!” Mary exclaimed. “If she’s still alive, I’d love for her to tell me all about it!”

“Ah, I think that’d be difficult for you, my lady. Or perhaps you could use a mirror to do it?”

Mary had no idea what Adi meant by that, but before she could ask, the curtain once again lifted, as if in response to the vigorous demands for an encore. All the actors were lined up onstage together, causing the chamber to roar in joy.

Mary set her questions aside, rising to her feet as well to deliver an applause that reflected the deep emotions the play had stirred in her heart.



“I was the basis for the heroine?!” Mary shouted in astonishment.

She and Adi were in a horse-drawn carriage, on the way back home from the theater. Of course, Adi was sitting facing forward. After the play had ended, the two of them had boarded the waiting carriage, where Adi had delivered a series of explanations, leading to Mary’s present reaction.

“But how is that silver-haired woman supposed to be *me*? I’ve never had such straight hair in my whole entire life!”

“Well, that’s why it’s called an *adaptation*, you see.”

“Then who’s supposed to be the prince?!” Mary demanded.

“Obviously, that’s Lord Patrick.”

“So the golden-haired girl is...*Alicia*?!” Mary asked, her voice filled with wrath as she uttered the name.

Adi applauded her, as if to say she’d done a good job in getting the right answer.

It was true that Mary’s story from her high school days had been quite literally dramatized and then circled around as some touching tale. Said tale included Alicia and Patrick too.

There were all sorts of narratives about the three of them: “the noble lady who stepped aside for the sake of two people in love,” “the noble son who was ready to toss his family name aside for the sake of his peasant lover,” and “the princess raised in an orphanage who caught the heart of a nobleman.” Indeed, this version of events sounded very moving. It contained friendship, love, and tragedy—the three ideal ingredients for crafting a successful play.

(Of course, nobody could’ve guessed that among these three was also “the girl who bullied the princess in an attempt to chase her own ruin.” Otherwise, this tragic love story would’ve become a comedy.)

The result of these interpretations was the tragic tale Mary had just seen in the theater. Without realizing as much, Mary had felt touched by it, but now that she’d heard the truth, her face stiffened with disapproval.

“Look...” she began. “For the sake of the argument, I could understand Patrick being there. I admit that from an outsider’s perspective, our relationship did seem to be the way it was portrayed in the play... Though, I feel like it obviously wasn’t that way at all.”

“You’re not suspending your disbelief very well, then, are you?”

“Anyway, the problem is Alicia! Why did the story make it look like I’m close friends with her?!” Mary screeched, refusing to agree with that portrayal.

Gazing out at the nighttime scenery through the window (as a countermeasure against motion sickness), Adi lazily responded with, “Indeed.” Mary’s fury only grew at his careless remark.

In the play, the silver-haired noblewoman met the wretched town girl, and treated her kindly in all sorts of ways. When the girl hesitated to speak up on

account of their rank difference, the noblewoman addressed her first. When the noblewoman found out that the girl had an interest in high society, she began teaching her etiquette and invited her to her parties. Based on that, anyone could easily tell they became close friends. The two beautiful girls had built a friendship which surpassed rank differences.

Recalling the events of the play, Mary once more emphasized that she disagreed with them. “That doesn’t even pass as an adaptation anymore—it’s just a *fabrication*! I’m not close with that girl at all!”

“Indeed... How about you make your complaints tomorrow to Alicia in person?” Adi proposed.

“You’re right. Tomorrow at breakfast, I’ll give her a piece of my mind!”

“You’ve come to accept her presence at breakfast without much of a fuss these days.”

“But I still won’t let her sit next to me!” Mary grumbled, insisting that part was nonnegotiable.

That said, lately Mary no longer complained about Alicia’s early morning visits, and whenever she heard the girl’s cheery greetings, she’d respond with, “*I see you’re early today as well.*” Even that time when Alicia had disguised herself as a maid and had come to wake Mary up, Mary hadn’t raised her voice. Still half asleep, she’d allowed Alicia to arrange her hair, and even after noticing their hairstyles were matching, Mary had simply let it go by saying, “*You really have a lot of free time.*”

If that’s not friendship, then what is it? Adi murmured inwardly. Naturally, he didn’t voice his thoughts, as he had no idea what would happen if he were to earn Mary’s wrath during the carriage ride. “Why don’t you forget about that play? I’m sure it’ll be enough if you just give her a piece of your mind tomorrow while we eat together,” he suggested.

“Fine... But she’s *not* getting to sit next to me!” Mary maintained, causing Adi to smile wryly and nod. His affectionate gaze had her brow furrowing.

His expression, and more specifically the look in his eyes, aggravated her discomfort. It was almost as if he were watching an obstinate child while

wearing an understanding smile that seemed to say, *“Why don’t you just acknowledge it already?”*

Full of indignation, Mary turned the other way with a huff, flipping her silver-thread locks. They weren’t ringlets, but rather gentle waves that fluttered from the movement. However, they couldn’t be referred to as “straight” by any standard either.

The heroine from the play is completely different from me. I have no interest in such a chummy tale. I’ll have to give Alicia a warning so she doesn’t get any ideas, Mary assured herself in her mind, feeling invigorated at the idea of giving Alicia a talking-to at tomorrow’s breakfast.

However, the following day, and the day after that, Alicia didn’t show up at Albert Manor even once.

Chapter 2

House Eldland was hosting a soiree.

Parfette, wearing a gorgeous gown, passed some time chatting with her friends while wondering when she'd have a moment to eat some cake. She glanced to the side, and could practically hear the delicious-looking dessert enticing her to eat it.

This particular cake was a favorite of hers, painstakingly prepared by House Eldland's pâtissier. It had a little flower petal decoration, and its taste was exquisite, thanks to the cream's sweetness combined with the refreshing fruit. Everything was made to perfectly fit Parfette's ideal, and the thought that Gainas had probably requested it for her sake just added to the sugariness of it all.

Since he arranged this for me, perhaps I'll invite him to the garden with me so we can enjoy the cake there. We could snuggle while stargazing... I'm sure nothing could be sweeter than that! The sugar content will reach its ultimate peak.

Parfette imagined the scene with an elated expression. However, as she surveyed the venue and her eyes landed on a certain group of people in the corner, her face slowly fell.

Ever since the soiree had started, the group's numbers hadn't diminished at all. Whenever someone left, another person came to replace them. Moreover, there were even a few people lingering in the vicinity, looking for the right time to join in on the conversation.

All these people were surrounding none other than Gainas Eldland. In fact, Parfette couldn't even see him; she'd only catch glimpses of his black hair peeking out from the middle of the group every now and then.

She'd only spoken with him right after the party had begun. Even then, they'd just exchanged a few words, when suddenly other people started showing up

one after another. Before Parfette knew it, she'd been excluded from the group.

"How cruel of Lord Gainas, to abandon me like this! I'll tell on him to Lady Mary," Parfette griped, then turned away moodily to look at the cake instead.

Her plans had changed. She'd forget all about Gainas and enjoy the cake while stargazing by herself. *Maybe I should eat his share too...* she mused impishly. *Such good cake is wasted on a man who heartlessly abandons his fiancée!*

That said, Parfette wasn't genuinely upset. She had faith that Gainas wasn't actually neglecting her, and she was aware of the reason so many people were surrounding him right now.

The other day, Gainas's father, the head of House Eldland, had announced that he was stepping down. They'd held a wholly extravagant party for the occasion, exactly to the standard one would imagine from a distinguished family announcing a change in leadership.

The previous head of House Eldland had given a speech while looking completely composed and showing no hint of concern, and even mentioned that he was looking forward to enjoying his retirement. He'd said it was a weight off his shoulders, and he was thinking of taking a trip with his spouse. He wanted them to visit several different places, and spend a few years relaxing at a retreat. His words had been the classic wishes of a man looking to retire after spending so many years keeping busy. All the guests had listened to him with smiles upon their faces.

But even before the announcement, Gainas had taken House Eldland's family business upon himself as the heir. It was no exaggeration to say that he'd already been acting the part of the head of the house recently, so nobody was surprised upon hearing the official news.

Recalling that particular party, Parfette let out a passionate breath. Gainas had looked so handsome, standing next to his father while giving his own speech. His large stature made him look dependable, and despite his young age, he already had a sense of majesty about him. Yet when Parfette had moved to stand next to him, he'd smiled gently, his majestic aura shifting to a warm sweetness. Parfette found that moment in time simply indescribable. It was

something that only she got to savor.

Those saccharine feelings filled her heart as she gazed lovingly at Gainas from a distance.

“Business is a sign that a family is flourishing. It’s a wonderful thing that so many people are eager to speak with and idolize him. What I should do in turn is watch over him and support his rulership from the shadows. That’s my role as his spouse,” Parfette told herself quietly with a tender smile.

Her countenance was calm and collected, and she looked so grown-up that it was almost as if her teary-eyed, shaky self had never existed. She and Gainas weren’t married yet, but her feelings already surpassed that of a fiancée, for she saw herself as his wife.

Even if she couldn’t be by his side, she could watch over him from a distance. This was something the wife of a busy husband had the leeway to do.

I feel like I’ve already become Lady Eldland...! Parfette thought, giggling to herself.

But in the end, she could only keep her spousal motivation up for a short while. To be more concrete, it lasted until she had her fill of the cake and stepped out into the sparsely populated courtyard.

First, Parfette tottered outside and looked around to ensure nobody was nearby. Then, in a complete switchover from her previously calm smile, she puffed out her cheeks. “It may be a wife’s duty to watch over her husband, but I’ll still tattle to Lady Mary about how he ignored me!” she appealed to the empty air.

(Right at that moment, Gainas, who was still surrounded by visitors, suddenly shuddered. But of course, Parfette had no way of knowing that.)

I know it’s a spouse’s duty to support their partner. But still, a supportive spouse is still a spouse! Parfette thought bitterly. Around the same time, a voice called out to her from behind.

It was a middle-aged acquaintance of hers. He had a long-standing relationship with House Eldland, and Parfette had spoken with him a few times herself in the past. However, he was infamous for enjoying gossip and idle

chatter, so once he started a conversation, it had the tendency to carry on for a long time. He was the type to talk incessantly from the moment a party started, and some people even complained about how he'd rambled to them all night long.

Oh no, I've been caught! Parfette found herself thinking. But she didn't let her emotions show on her face, only smiling and offering him a curtsy.

"Lady Parfette! Whyever are you by yourself? Where is Lord Gainas?" the man asked her.

"I'm just taking a small break," Parfette responded. "And Lord Gainas is speaking with others at present."

"I see... Dear me! I also bid my greetings to him, but he seemed incredibly busy, so we couldn't chat much. I've been waiting for the chance to speak with him for a long time, but I just couldn't find a good moment to join in, so I decided to come out here to enjoy the evening breeze. I almost find myself wishing that there was a ticketing system for those of us looking to speak to him."

"A ticketing system? My, what a humorous joke!" Parfette said to appease him. "I'm sure Lord Gainas is also regretful over the fact that he couldn't speak with you."

"I hope that's the case. But I've been meaning to speak with you as well, so it's a good thing I came to the garden. So...how have things been for you lately, Lady Parfette?" the man asked, before appending, "Especially regarding your friends."

Parfette tilted her head quizzically. "My friends?"

It wasn't uncommon for people to ask each other how they were doing, whether in high society or not. Asking about the other person, their family members, or their house was a surefire way to kick-start a conversation. These topics were entirely safe and inoffensive. However, being asked about one's *friends* seemed a little out of the ordinary.

Parfette regarded the man carefully, unsure of his motives. He glanced around the garden for a moment, before lowering his voice and continuing.

“Well, I’m aware you have some friends from abroad, Lady Parfette. I heard you take trips to visit them often.”

“Indeed. I also took part in a student exchange program.”

“Fantastic! Cultural exchanges are a wonderful thing. I even heard that you’ve become close with Lady Mary of House Albert.”

“Lady Mary is a kind and beautiful person, who treats even a crybaby like me with tender care. Oh, just remembering her has me tearing up...” Parfette sniffled quietly and wiped at the corners of her eyes as she pictured Mary. After a moment, she turned back to face the older man, who moved closer to her ever so slightly. The way he looked at her was oddly intense, causing Parfette to put her guard up.

“I see you really *are* close with her,” the man said. “In that case, have you perhaps heard anything about House Albert’s plans for the near future?”

“Their plans? Well, I know they’re going to be doing a spring cleaning soon. Their mansion’s very large, so it’s a big undertaking.”

“No, that’s not what I meant... I’m referring to the major decision they have to make very soon...”

“A decision?” Parfette echoed. “Oh, you mean the migratory bird restaurant’s branch. Unfortunately, they haven’t shared the opening day with me yet.”

“Not that either. I’m talking more about House Albert’s future. Their plan of action, so to speak... For example, the matter of deciding the successor. As you know, the Alberts have two sons: Lord Lang and Lord Lucian.”

“I...” Parfette hesitated, finally understanding the man’s aims upon hearing such direct language.

He seemed to take it as a sign that she knew something but couldn’t share it. His eyes glinted greedily, causing Parfette to subconsciously step back from him.

Parfette had always had a gentle temperament, and she’d often hidden behind Gainas ever since they were children. She had shown her strength once during the college incident, and occasionally she composed herself in her role as

Gainas's spouse, but at the end of the day, she was still a crybaby. Being hounded like this by a man dis comforted her greatly.

"Well, I..." she stammered weakly, taking half a step back. In response, the man coercively drew nearer to her again. "Lady Mary hasn't spoken to me about any of that..."

"Very well. You may not know all the details, but surely you've overheard *something*? Or perhaps you might've noticed any kind of change occurring at Albert Manor during your last visit? In fact, I heard you're close with the duke and duchess, and both their sons too. Do any of them seem to be acting different recently?"

"They just treat me kindly because I'm one of Lady Mary's friends. I really don't know anything..."

"So you say... In that case, I also happen to have heard that you're close with Princess Alicia," the man went on. "Have you heard any news from her? Perhaps regarding whether that rumor about her is true or not..."

"I... I..." Parfette's voice grew even weaker at the man's relentless interrogation. Her eyes welled up, her body trembled, and she was on the verge of bursting into tears.

Yet the man continued closing in on her. He was so absorbed in the topic that he seemed unaware of Parfette's fear. If his questions got him nowhere, he'd reword them slightly and try again, occasionally speaking to her soothingly to incite answers out of her. He wouldn't stop pestering her, determined to get the information he was after.

The man kept asking about House Albert's succession, the Albert twins' movements, and the rumor regarding Princess Alicia. The way he kept firing questions at her in quick succession made it evident how desperate he was. Each time Parfette took a step back, he followed after her as if refusing to let her get away.

There was no one else in the garden, and the man wasn't stopping. Parfette's terror only grew at the thought, and she quietly cried out Gainas's name, wishing he'd come to save her.

Right then, someone else joined in, saying, "Sorry for the interruption." Indeed, it was Gainas, who'd shown up with perfect timing. He addressed the other man in a low, manly voice, placing his large hand on Parfette's shoulder as he brought her closer to him. "I'd like for you to stop troubling my partner."

"Lord Gainas...!" Parfette called out, looking over her shoulder at him.

Gainas was glaring at the older man harshly. Although he was usually a mild-mannered and gracious man (who also meekly took on Parfette's bullying), right now his countenance was downright intimidating. Combining that with his large stature, he had a lot more edge to him than the gossipy man.

But when Parfette thought about how he was acting like this for the sake of protecting her, she let out a relieved breath. She didn't hide behind him like she used to when they were younger, but she allowed him to pull her closer all the same.

The older man's face paled slightly. Parfette could practically hear him cursing himself in his mind, as he finally realized that he'd frightened her.

"H-Hello, Lord Gainas... I didn't mean to trouble anyone," he appealed.

"I overheard a bit of what you were saying. I don't think that kind of conversation suits the mood of this party," Gainas responded.

"I-Indeed. You see, our conversation was so lively that I simply got a little carried away. It's a bad habit of mine. I think I should take a moment to compose myself," the man said, glossing over his actions with a dry smile before hurriedly walking away. It was painfully obvious he was making an escape.

Parfette watched him with puffed out cheeks, when the hand around her shoulders started to rub them gently. She looked up and was met with Gainas's usual expression. His intensity from before had vanished; now he was looking at her with concern.

"I'm sorry I left you all alone, Parfette," he told her.

"Gosh! That's the very reason someone like that man was able to catch hold of me. I'm going to tell Lady Mary about this in great detail."

"Ugh... Please, forgive me. I'm really sorry, and I regret my actions, so please

cheer up.”

“Hmm... I *was* going to tell her, but I suppose you *did* save me, Lord Gainas...” Parfette murmured meaningfully, nestling against his chest. She was acting like an affectionate kitten, and her conduct clearly sent a message: “*I’ll forgive you if you give me some attention.*”



Gainas's expression softened at his beloved's impish bullying, and his arms slid down to wrap around her waist. He held her gently, conveying that he wouldn't let go of her again.

A few people had followed Gainas into the garden, but upon seeing this scene, they smiled wryly and dispersed one by one. They muttered things like, "Let's give them some private time," and "How wonderful, to be so young!" Their words and smiles contained a hint of teasing. It was the job of aristocrats to butter up a noble family's heir, but it was also good manners to turn a blind eye to an intimate moment between two lovers.

"I'm sorry, Parfette," Gainas continued. "I won't let go of you for another second tonight, so please forgive me."

"How sweet of you, Lord Gainas... I'll give you two points," Parfette said with a happy sigh, blissfully snuggling into his chest.

Seeing her so completely enthralled, Gainas smiled fondly, and then led her deeper into the garden to avoid any more curious gazes. The entire way, he wondered, *Since when did we have a point system?*

Aside from that one incident with Parfette and the gossipy man, the soiree came to a peaceful end. The man seemed to have reflected on his actions, and he took the time to properly apologize to Parfette before leaving, at which she smiled softly. He may have been troublesome and prone to chatting incessantly, but he was a good person at his core.

Not to mention, he was far from the only one curious about House Albert's heir. Everyone was always on the lookout for opportunities to prod for more information on the topic, and this hadn't been the first time Parfette had been questioned about it (although it had never been quite so forceful in the past).

However, there was one thing that bothered Parfette. She was sitting alone in House Eldland's garden, having some warm tea, but she felt a strange sense of apprehension. She couldn't get herself to calm down, nor could she shake the bad aftertaste that party had left in her mind.

"There you are, Parfette."

“Oh, hello, Lord Gainas. Did you finish instructing everyone on the cleanup?”

“In a way. But everyone’s so used to doing it that I didn’t really need to give any instructions. The head maid listened to me while fighting back a smile,” he recalled.

“You’re no match for a veteran maid,” Parfette replied with a pleasant laugh, while Gainas scratched his head in embarrassment and took a seat next to her.

The music that had been playing not too long ago had faded by now, and the only sound left was the gentle wind rustling through the flowers. Half of the garden’s lights had been turned off, and the dim lighting was perfect for weary eyes.

Parfette let out a quiet sigh.

“What’s the matter?” Gainas asked.

“Something’s on my mind. It’s about when you saved me earlier...” Parfette explained.

Back then, the older man had been interrogating her on the matter of House Albert’s succession. Parfette could understand his feelings. It was a hot topic within high society, regardless of nation. Most importantly, House Eldland had changed its family head a few days ago without any issues, and the other noble families were starting to do the same.

However, House Albert’s heir was still undecided, leading to rumors. Precisely because other families’ successions were proceeding smoothly, everyone’s curiosity, expectations, and ambitions were all concentrated on the Alberts.

“I can understand all of that,” Parfette went on. “But I’m not aware of any rumors about Lady Alicia.”

“Lady Alicia?”

“Yes. You see, that gentleman mentioned...”

Parfette recounted the man’s words. He hadn’t mentioned any specifics, but she was sure he’d alluded to there being some rumor about Alicia. She also recalled that he’d been more vigilant about his surroundings when he brought up that topic, as opposed to when he’d asked her about House Albert’s

succession.

Precisely what could that rumor have been? And why did the man want Parfette to confirm its veracity?

“Lady Alicia is a wonderful person. She treats me kindly despite my family’s low standing, and in fact doesn’t seem to mind our ranks at all. I’ve never heard any shady rumors about her,” Parfette emphasized as she pictured Alicia’s sunny smile.

Back when Mary had first introduced the two girls to each other, Parfette had been tearful and trembling all over because of how nervous she felt. But upon experiencing Alicia’s unpretentious kindness, Parfette quickly opened up to her (and she was so happy to be able to do so that she was tearful and trembling in that moment too). Perhaps due to her nature and her origins before she’d discovered her identity as a princess, Alicia was a simple and honest woman, who treated everyone equally and amicably.

“The other day, when we were eating cake together in town, we saw a small child take a tumble. Alicia was the first person to rush to their side. She fussed over them and wiped their tears with her handkerchief. Meanwhile, I was so overcome with sympathy that I could do nothing but cry myself...” Parfette recalled. “I just can’t imagine there being any disturbing rumors about such a benevolent person.”

“You’re right that Princess Alicia is a kind woman,” Gainas agreed. “But everything’s in a state of chaos in their nation right now because of House Albert’s succession problem. It’s not all that surprising for there to be one or two unfounded rumors floating around.”

“I just have a bad feeling about it for some reason. Could you please look into it, Lord Gainas?” Parfette asked, tugging on his sleeve. She and Alicia may have been friends, but Alicia was still the princess of another country. Looking into information about her wouldn’t be so easy for someone like Parfette.

Plus, their good rapport was well known in both their nations. Parfette had no idea how far that rumor about Alicia had spread, but she could guess that the man who’d spoken to her at the party wasn’t the only one waiting for a chance to question her about it. If Parfette made a careless move, people might start

suspecting her of something and interrogate her again. And if things went poorly, she might accidentally say something that encouraged the rumor too.

However, many nobles were fearful of House Eldland, so they wouldn't act so forcefully towards Gainas. And even if *he* were to start looking into things a little, they might write it off as part of him being busy with the succession.

Based on both their situations and social standings, Gainas was the better candidate to carry out the investigation. He must've been aware of that too, for he gazed at Parfette fixedly and nodded. "If this is something you're concerned about, then I'll find out more about it at all costs."

"How reliable you are, Lord Gainas...! If you succeed, I'll give you ten points."

"I don't really understand how this works, but it sounds like this is my chance to get a bunch of those points. All right, I'll give it my all," Gainas declared, feeling fired up despite his uncertainty regarding the point system.

Parfette felt her anxiety slowly begin to alleviate as she watched him. After a moment, she cuddled up to him, and his large hands rubbed her shoulders. Their embrace filled her with a sense of relief.

She let out a passionate breath, and then announced, "For *this*, I'll give you one point."



A few days after the party, Mary was inside one of the rooms at Albert Manor...although she wished she could've been in its tranquil gardens instead.

The windows would've normally brought in a pleasant breeze, but right now they were closed tightly, with the curtains drawn to prevent sunlight from pouring in. Had the windows been open, a beautiful view of the clear sky and courtyard would've been visible. However, those present in the room were looking at each other as though they had no leisure to enjoy such sights.

The heavy atmosphere could've hardly been called an elegant tea party. Mary was sitting in a chair. She picked up her teacup and sipped, then cast a quick glance at the man who was opposite her.

"Pardon me for the sudden visit, Lady Mary," Gainas apologized while

lowering his head.

Sitting next to him was a sniffing Parfette, who mumbled weakly, “Lady Maaary...”

“It’s fine...” Mary responded. “Though, I was quite surprised when you directly handed me the letter about your upcoming visit.”

“I’m really sorry. I was going to mail it and wait for your reply, but Parfette insisted that she wanted to bring it herself, and threatened to deduct points from me...” Gainas explained.

“So that’s why you two brought it with you,” Mary remarked.

“Yes...”

“Perhaps I could pen my reply right now? I’ll write all about how you can visit whenever you like.”

In response to Mary’s joke, Gainas’s shoulders sank remorsefully. But anyone who showed up with a letter requesting a visit would’ve likely felt the same. After all, the usual course of action was to send the letter first, await a response, and *then* pay a visit (not counting a certain princess and a crybaby noblewoman).

No matter how urgent one’s business, arriving with the letter in hand was bad etiquette. Even leaving that aside, visiting with such a letter rendered its contents completely pointless. The letter Gainas and Parfette had brought lay upon the table, compelling an enigmatic sense of pathos from anyone who looked at it.

“I take it you must have truly urgent business. I have some time, so I’ll hear you out,” Mary said.

“Thank you so much.”

“However, if this turns out to be some daft lovers’ quarrel, then I shall have your mushy daily life adapted into a play with your real names in it.”

“A play?! That’d be so humiliating! I don’t think I could step outside ever again...” Gainas despaired, shuddering over Mary’s threat.

Right then, a knock on the door interrupted them. Mary gave permission to

enter, and soon enough Adi and Patrick came into the room.

In truth, when Gainas and Parfette had first arrived, they'd mentioned also wanting to speak with Patrick. Mary had no idea what was going on, but assuming it was an emergency, she'd had Adi fetch Patrick.

"I'm sorry to have called upon you so suddenly, Lord Patrick!" Gainas addressed him.

"No, it's fine. It sounds urgent, so what's going on?" Patrick inquired. "I hope this isn't just some lovers' quarrel..." he added skeptically, at which Gainas quickly shook his head.

Once everyone had taken their seats, the conversation began. Mary glanced around at those present. There was herself, Adi, and Patrick, as well as Gainas and Parfette, who had something major to share. All five of them were seated around one table.

Someone's missing... Mary found herself thinking.

Usually, Alicia would've been with them too. As soon as a tea party began at Albert Manor, the girl came flying, on occasion bringing with her handmade cakes or cookies. Yet today, she wasn't here.

Actually, it wasn't just today. Ever since the day Mary and Adi had gone to the theater, Alicia's so-called surprise attack visits hadn't happened even once. Mary had heard through the grapevine that Alicia was very busy lately, but no matter how busy the girl had been in the past, she'd still visit almost daily. (Mary could even recall that day when Alicia had said she was busy but had still stayed overnight at Albert Manor.)

Back when Gainas had first explained to Mary that he wanted to see Patrick, Mary reflexively brought up Alicia. She was certain that any matter related to Patrick must've been related to Alicia as well.

Yet Gainas had paused thoughtfully for a moment, and then explained, "*I only wish to speak to Lord Patrick.*"

"If you don't want Alicia to hear this, I assume it's about that rumor? To think it's spread that far..." Patrick said gravely.

Mary looked at him with surprise. He had a sour expression, much unlike the usual Prince Charming. Taking Gainas's silence as affirmation, Patrick's face grew even harsher.

But what rumor are they talking about?

Mary couldn't remember hearing any such thing. She didn't like the idea of this conversation continuing without her knowing what was going on, so she turned to Gainas. "What rumor?"

It was a rumor which Parfette had asked Gainas to pin down, and it went as follows: *"Princess Alicia might not be the real princess."*

Although Alicia was a princess, she'd been raised in an orphanage. When she was kidnapped as a baby, Duchess Keryl Albert had hidden an imperial seal in her clothes. Once it had been discovered and its authenticity confirmed, Alicia had reunited with her parents, the king and queen, leading up to the present.

But some people were having doubts about these events.

Was Alicia truly the lost princess? Her golden hair and purple eyes may have been a sign of royal heritage, but was that enough to confirm her identity? Perhaps she'd just happened to be born with such features by coincidence. She could've schemed to infiltrate the royal palace, knowing there was no heir to the throne. Or perhaps someone had found a girl with matching looks and brought her into the nation from elsewhere.

Her sudden appearance had led to a miraculous family reunion, and the bonds between the country's most powerful families had strengthened... Wasn't that just too good of a story to be true? It was almost as if someone were secretly pulling the strings.

Almost as if it was all a ploy crafted by the royal family, House Dyce, and House Albert...

"*Huh?*" Mary mumbled inanely. She couldn't help herself. She'd been grimly listening to Gainas, but out of nowhere her family had come up, and as some kind of scheming masterminds, no less. Gainas looked uncomfortable, but continued his explanation.

Of course, many in high society doubted this outrageous rumor. About half of

those who heard it laughed it off as foolish, while others were downright indignant about how disrespectful it was. Plenty of people spoke out against it, insisting that Alicia was the rightful daughter of Their Majesties, and that House Dyce and House Albert wouldn't play such tricks.

Yet some people weren't so quick to refute the rumor, and began wondering what if...

The rumor had come at a bad time, as right now, the aristocratic world was busy trying to conjecture House Albert's heir. Everyone was restless, wondering who it was they should pay attention to. Some were so desperate to butter up the future successor that they started to feel suspicious of other noble families' actions and therefore tried to outmaneuver them.

To make matters worse, Their Majesties were currently away on a diplomatic tour around other nations. Or perhaps...that was on purpose too. Even if malicious rumors were running rampant, it took time for a country to make a major move. On account of these overlapping events, a rumor that would've otherwise been brushed off as foolish gossip was spreading far and wide.

"How preposterous! Why would House Albert and House Dyce plot such a scheme?! Trying to curry favor is one thing, but for them to spread such rumors?!" Mary exclaimed furiously. Adi rubbed her arm to soothe her, but his expression was sour too.

Patrick, who'd been listening quietly, eased a sigh. He glanced aside for a moment, brows furrowing as he contemplated. "I did think they might say something," he stated eventually.

"About what?" Mary questioned.

"Our families. In the past, they used to be more or less in rank order. But now that House Albert and House Dyce have gained the royal family's favor, they all have equal authority."

"That's true." Mary looked at Patrick quizzically, as if asking, "*So what?*"

Patrick was silent for a thoughtful moment, before sighing again. "House Dyce and House Albert have become too big."

Mary's eyes widened. She quickly turned to look at Adi, who also stared at her

in surprise. He seemed on the verge of saying something, but then swallowed his words. There was something he just couldn't get out, most likely the same thing Mary was thinking right now.

What Patrick had just said was the very reason Mary had once pursued her own ruin.



During high school, Mary had devised a plan to cause House Albert's downfall. Based on her memories of the otome game *Heart High*, which she had played in her previous life, she'd mimicked the actions of the villainess Mary to pursue the path of ruin. The results were best left aside, but her reasoning at the time was, "*House Albert has grown too big.*"

They were the most powerful noble house, standing equal with the royalty. Rather than risk her family inciting the royalty's wrath, Mary had wanted to fall into ruin and be cast off into the northern lands by herself.

"To think this would actually become a problem now..." Mary said with a massive sigh, rolling around on the bed.

Not long after their conversation, Patrick, who'd been summoned quite suddenly in the first place, had to take his leave. Parfette and Gainas had been quick to follow.

Parfette had trembled tearfully as usual, and given Mary a big hug as goodbye. Caught in the other girl's frail embrace, Mary had soothed her while recalling the way a certain person always hugged her with much more strength.

But Mary hadn't had the time to wallow in sentiments. After seeing her guests off, she'd needed to entertain the visitors whom her father and brothers couldn't get around to, and put up with their attempts at flattery. It had been a very busy day for her, but things had finally settled down after dinner.

She was in Adi's room, which soothed her just as much as her own bedroom by this point. Having already changed into her pajamas, Mary had his bed under occupation as she rolled around on top of the covers.

Adi watched her slovenly behavior with a wry smile while sipping tea. He had dressed down by now too (he had done so because he was used to Mary's

presence, but seeing him in his casual clothes was still so unusual to her that it made her strangely self-conscious, and her heart throbbed).

“It’s quite troublesome, isn’t it?” Adi observed.

“Tell me about it. But I suppose it’s not surprising that some people have misgivings about the polarization of power,” Mary stated solemnly while still lying in bed.

At present, the nation’s authority was centralized in the royal family, House Albert, and House Dyce. As Alicia was a princess, Patrick had been the one to enter her family upon their marriage, causing House Dyce’s standing to elevate. House Albert had supported this development, and so House Dyce had come to stand equal to the royalty.

The authority and solidarity of these three key players was no longer something that other families could intervene in, and their bonds would only get stronger once the next generation took over leadership. As a result, some nobles had come to fear the sheer might these three families possessed.

Alicia had been kidnapped by the fortune teller as an infant and grown up in an orphanage. Her identity was a tempting target for the fearful parties to poke holes at. It was easy to see their malicious intentions, given that they’d aimed to start these rumors right when Their Majesties were absent.

“Could this have been started by a family who doesn’t have the Alberts’ favor? Or maybe they’re connected to House Dyce or the royals...” Mary mused. “We won’t be able to figure it out unless we find out where the rumor first began.”

“Yes. And given that Their Majesties are away... I’m sure whoever started it was waiting for just that,” Adi replied.

“Waiting for the king and queen to be away in order to start vile rumors... Such malevolence! If you’re already set on causing trouble, at least do it right!”

“There’s no point getting agitated, milady. And by the way... Please don’t come out and say something like, ‘I’ll use this chance to fall into ruin!’”

“Ruin? Stop joking around!” Mary yelled, unamused by Adi’s attempt at humor (that said, she was still lying in bed, so there was no palpable viciousness

to her anger). “I admit, I may have aimed for my own downfall, but I never even considered throwing that girl into such turmoil! Don’t lump me in with whoever’s going around spreading disturbing rumors to cause other people harm!” she proclaimed while puffing out her chest. Not that this was easy to see, considering she was lying down. In fact, because of her position, all of her angry and prideful movements simply resulted in her wriggling around on the bed.

For several moments, she kept her chest puffed out, but eventually she sunk back onto the covers as if losing strength. “If someone is trying to bring us down, then we’ll take them on.”

“What are you thinking, my lady?”

Mary once again puffed out her chest, then excitedly sat up. She’d finally realized that puffing out her chest while lying down wasn’t a good look. Moving to the edge of the bed, she adjusted her pajamas and hair, which had become disheveled, and then puffed up as if to say, “*Now I’m ready to get back on track.*”

She combed her hair with her fingers as she spoke. “The Albert name is in danger of being disgraced, because our insolent culprit has made it look like *we* were the ones who set up Alicia as the fake princess. So in that case...”

“Yes?” Adi prompted.

“House Albert will make that girl into a *real* princess!” Mary declared while still proudly puffing out her chest.

Question marks floated around Adi’s head. Just what could she have meant by that? If such a thing were truly possible, Adi reasoned they should do it immediately so they could dispel that malicious rumor. On the other hand, it sounded like difficult and risky business.

Alicia had been kidnapped as a baby and raised in an orphanage. Naturally, she had no memories of her infancy, so the only things she had to prove her identity were the imperial seal and her hair and eye colors, which could only be inherited by royalty. With even those factors being placed under suspicion, there was nothing left that could prove she was the real princess.

When Adi explained as much, Mary merely answered with, “That much is obvious.”

“Then what did you mean earlier?” Adi inquired.

“We will polish her into a flawless princess, one whom the others will have no choice but to acknowledge. Their Majesties are both magnificent, so there’s no way a charge-attacking country hick could imitate them without guidance. Since she looks exactly like the queen, as long as we can make her act with the same amount of grace and dignity as Her Majesty, nobody will be able to say anything.”

“I see, so you wish to silence everyone using Alicia herself.”

“Exactly. That much I can definitely do!” Mary exclaimed, vigorously getting to her feet. Her fists were clenched, her eyes blazed with fighting spirit, and there was an intensity to her even though she was wearing pajamas.

Seeing her so unusually motivated made something stir in Adi’s heart. Indeed, he could see it now: Mary, who knew all about playing the part of high society’s perfect noblewoman, was surely capable of making Alicia behave in a princessly manner. The same was true when it came to grace and dignity. All in all, Mary stood domineering at the very peak of high society, so there was no one better suited to mentoring the princess.

Alicia and the queen already looked like two peas in a pod. With Mary’s training, grace, and dignity to boot, the irrational rumor should be easily dispersed. Acknowledging such a possibility, Adi uttered, “As expected of *my* lady.”

In response to his praise, Mary was filled with more confidence, and puffed out her chest even further. If she kept going in this direction, she’d lose her balance soon and tumble back down into bed.

“So how exactly will this work?” Adi asked her. “If there’s anything that needs to be done, I’ll get the preparations underway immediately.”

“Don’t rush it, Adi. Besides, the preparations are already complete. I’m sure all the knowledge I’ve accumulated over the years has been for this very moment.”

“What knowledge?”

“Discipline! I *knew* it was worth it to read every single issue of the monthly dog training magazine since it began publication!” Mary shouted, rousing her spirit.

Adi’s eyes, which had been full of expectations, dimmed slightly. “Let’s go to sleep,” he declared coolly, then started cleaning up the table.

Chapter 3

The next morning, Adi woke up early. He glanced to the side, where Mary was soundly asleep in his arms. Her lovely eyes were shut, and she was breathing softly through her slightly parted lips.

She must've been in a deep sleep, as even when Adi brushed his hand through her hair to test the waters, she didn't react. He curled her locks around his fingers and played with them, but she was none the wiser. Seeing her like this while she rested on his arm filled him with fondness, and he gently patted her head, drawing her closer to him.

This finally made her stir. She mumbled something incomprehensible under her breath, and then returned to her peaceful slumber.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, milady, but I'll be getting up now," Adi whispered, his voice filled with the contrasting intentions of not wanting to wake Mary up, yet wanting to let her know what he was doing. He would often harbor such complicated feelings, but soon enough he backed away from Mary.

Her eyes cracked open. "Adi...?" she murmured sleepily. "Is it already time to get up?"

"No. It's still early, so you can stay in bed. But I have something to take care of, so I'll be leaving soon."

"Okay... Then I'm gonna keep..."

"*Keep sleeping,*" she'd been meaning to say, before her head fell back upon the pillow. Considering how quickly she fell back asleep, it was accurate to say that she hadn't woken up just now, but had only temporarily regained consciousness.

Adi smiled wryly, and watched Mary while getting ready for the day. In his familiar old room and bed, his beloved spouse was curled up, asleep under the covers. "Milady's asleep in my very own bed... It's not a dream, is it?" Adi murmured while pressing his fist to his mouth, all because he'd been one-

sidedly in love with her for such a long time.

He'd loved her, pined for her, given up on her, and at the end of things was the sight before his eyes. He still found himself overcome with euphoria at random intervals, and viewed it all as some kind of a miracle. Adi could hide it well in public, but there was no need to play down his emotions in the privacy of his bedroom. As he breathed a sigh, his expression softened.

Perhaps having heard him, Mary once again stirred and opened her eyes. "What are you talking about...? Obviously it's not a dream."

"M-My lady, you've been awake?!"

"You could say I've been both awake and asleep at the same time..."

"Sleep well, then."

"Good night..." Mary muttered idly, then lay back down.

Adi quietly left the room, careful so as not to wake her. Once outside, he uttered sweetly, "I'm off, dear."

As reluctant as Adi was to leave Mary behind, he nonetheless pulled himself together and departed for House Dyce.

Due to the early hour, there weren't any other visitors yet, and Adi could see that the maids and staff who occasionally passed him by were still at ease. Things were usually quiet at this time, and only the gardeners and the kitchen staff who were preparing breakfast were busy.

Adi stopped a passing servant, asking him to send a message. Not long after, Patrick arrived to greet him.

Despite how early it was, Patrick looked as dignified as ever. He was perfectly dressed, and in fact appeared very awake. *A capable man starts his day early*, Adi thought with amusement while giving Patrick a small applause.

(At the same time, Adi recalled how Mary had looked curled up in bed. He could practically see her poking her head out from the covers, like a snail peeking out of its shell, and whining, "*Don't lump me in with Patrick.*")

Leaving the Mary of his imagination aside (to which she responded, *"If you're just going to leave me aside, don't call me to mind in the first place!"* while nestling back under the covers), Adi faced Patrick.

The latter surmised Adi had something important to say, and his expression grew solemn. "It's about Alicia, isn't it?"

"Yes. Since you already guessed as much, I was wondering if you had any ideas on what we could do. Milady's... Ahem. I am trying to cooperate with her, but..." Adi trailed off, casting his gaze aside as if to say *"It's not exactly working out."*

He recalled the way Mary had excitedly chattered about dog training last night, even as they were getting into bed. When Adi had encouraged her to go to sleep, she'd been quiet for a bit. But then suddenly, she remembered something and enthusiastically exclaimed, *"Oh, but in the March issue...!"* as she resumed her rambling.

This happened multiple times, until finally Adi had embraced her and pulled the covers over her head, which made her fall asleep. But even then, her countenance had still been lit up with a dog trainer's flare.

It was fine if she was excited to teach Alicia to act more like a princess, but Adi had some doubts as to whether her methods would go anywhere. Actually, Mary's sheer enthusiasm could lead to some disastrous results. Adi, who'd watched Mary longer than anyone (and had often been wrapped up in her ideas), knew that best.

In any case, the malicious rumor that was spreading had been designed to bring down both Alicia and House Albert. That meant that Alicia acting like a dignified princess alone wouldn't cut it.

When Adi voiced his thoughts, Patrick nodded thoughtfully. "I see. I have a few things to say on the idea of dog training, but still, I'm grateful that you're cooperating with Mary. However, you're right: that alone won't be enough."

"Indeed. That's why I came to ask if you had any ideas," Adi said.

Back during the group discussion, Patrick had looked contemplative. It was almost as if he'd expected for something like this to happen. Based on that, it

was nigh impossible that Patrick wouldn't try to come up with some countermeasure.

"You're giving me too much credit," Patrick said when Adi mentioned this. "I do have some ideas, but they're not any better than Mary's. Although, I don't read dog training magazines."

"But you *have* thought of a counterplan, no?"

"Yeah. But someone might overhear us here, so let's discuss this in my room." As they began walking, Patrick asked a nearby maid to arrange tea.

"I just realized this is my first time visiting your room," Adi remarked, curiously surveying the space.

"Oh yeah?" Patrick murmured as he pulled a few documents out of the desk drawer.

The room resembled its owner very closely. Everything was neat and tidy, and the bookshelves were filled to the brim. Just glancing around the room conveyed Patrick's intelligence and diligence.

Yet there were a few things scattered around that didn't match the elegant ambience of the room, such as a clumsily embroidered handkerchief, which looked to be the work of an amateur, and some flower vases. What really caught Adi's eye, however, was a snow globe placed atop the desk. Among various documents and books which suggested a capable man's working space, this cute knickknack didn't quite fit in.

Those not in the know might've assumed that Patrick's character was off-balance based on this room. They might have criticized the place by saying that the little decorations ruined its elegance.

But Adi, who knew exactly why the room was so mismatched, merely found it heartwarming. Glancing at the globe, he knew that a certain someone had gifted it to Patrick, which had him smirking and feeling compelled to tease Patrick about it.

"Goodness, this room truly reflects you, Lord Patrick. I should've expected as

much. I find this snow globe especially stylish.”

“Well, Mary told me that you have something called a ‘Cover-up Mountain’ in *your* bedroom, Adi. I’d love to see it, so show me around your room next time.”

“I already switched rooms with my brother!” Adi cried frantically. He’d tried teasing Patrick, yet the other man had brilliantly countered him.

Patrick smiled victoriously. “You started it,” he said, while placing the documents on his desk. He then sat down and took a sip of tea. How graceful his conduct was! Alas, perhaps there was a slight flush in his cheeks, but tragically, Adi didn’t have the leisure of pointing that out. “I have no doubts regarding Alicia. I believe from the bottom of my heart that she is Their Majesties’ rightful daughter. But just saying that I believe something isn’t good enough proof.”

“Exactly. If someone’s trying to bring her down, then we’ll need to come up with irrevocable proof of her identity.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’ve been looking into some way of proving that Alicia is the real princess, other than things like her hair or eye color...” Patrick explained, reading over the documents. The handwriting on the fine paper was small, and there was a signature of someone from the palace. It was obvious at a glance that this was something important.

Adi assumed it must’ve been related to the birth of the princess. Normally, this information would’ve been under strict guard and not easy to get a hold of, but considering Patrick’s reputation, he must’ve gotten the manager’s agreement. Adi wondered if the manager had told Patrick, “*I hope this will be of use,*” and entrusted not only the documents into his care, but also the responsibility of resolving this situation.

Patrick was looking at the first page. Likely, it was the notification the doctor had written at the time of the princess’s birth. He traced his finger over the page numbers, and the date upon which it had originally been delivered.

Adi glanced between the two sets of numbers for several seconds, then suddenly tilted his head in puzzlement. “This should be the first page, but it’s dated later than the others.”

“Yeah, I know. I asked the manager about it, but he said that only the first page had gotten lost somehow, and a new one had to be made.”

“A document concerning the palace, lost? And only the first page?” Adi asked dubiously.

All documents regarding the palace’s affairs were managed very strictly, and not many people could get a hold of them. Only those with direct connections to the palace, or those with an equally comparable amount of authority, could see such documents. Or perhaps someone who had earned great favor from Their Majesties themselves would’ve been able to.

For a single page from a set to go missing despite such strict guard... Indeed, it was very suspicious. Adi furrowed his brows at the ominous atmosphere.

Patrick’s expression soured as well, indicating that the man shared Adi’s sentiments. Then, Patrick cleared his throat and surveyed their surroundings. Adi looked up, noticing the way Patrick’s eyes moved between the window and the door. It seemed he had something important to say that he didn’t want anyone else overhearing.

“Don’t tell me you’ve actually got an idea about who could’ve done this?” Adi asked.

“I can’t be sure of it yet. I visited the doctor in question already, but he’s retired and didn’t remember much about the documents,” Patrick said with a sigh.

Adi’s shoulders drooped as well. The documents may have been important in that they were about the princess, but twenty years had passed since their making. For those concerned who had already retired, they were little more than a nostalgic memory, and there was no way they’d recall the details about how the document had been rewritten. Moreover, given that the princess had been tragically kidnapped around that time, everyone must’ve repressed those memories because of how painful they were.

Forcing the doctor to remember such things was out of the question. Patrick affirmed as much before continuing. “The princess was kidnapped shortly after the document was rewritten. I believe these two incidents are connected.”

“You mean the document didn’t go missing...but someone *stole* it?”

“It must’ve been the fortune teller who abducted Alicia. I already looked into it—at the time, Their Majesties trusted that fortune teller greatly, and they had permission to access various documents for the sake of fortune-telling.” Though they didn’t have decisive evidence, Patrick spoke with such grave, calm conviction in his voice that Adi felt awed.

In the past, purple eyes and golden hair were considered a sign of royalty. However, that was just tradition. Now, there was no way to refute a claim that someone had simply brought in a person of matching description from another nation, nor an argument that someone could’ve been born with such traits by coincidence. They couldn’t just go around investigating every single person in existence to prove that nobody else had these traits.

The belief had been passed down because of the royal family’s power and the trust of the people. It worked precisely because nobody had been suspicious about their circumstances of birth. But at a critical time such as this, things like hair and eye color were a very fragile “proof” of anything. The fortune teller must’ve been aware of that too.

“They might’ve been betting on the fact that the princess’s identity couldn’t be confirmed based on such folktales. That might also be why they stole the document,” Patrick said.

“Right. If so, that document might contain some kind of irrefutable proof,” Adi responded.

“Still, it happened twenty years ago. We have no way of tracking down that fortune teller.”

“Perhaps we should ask somebody for a fortune?” Adi proposed in jest as his shoulders sank again.

In response, Patrick just shook his head exasperatedly. He wasn’t in the mood to even go along with the joke.



Adi watched Patrick for a few moments, contemplating. Suddenly, he recalled something Mary had said. It had happened back during high school, when she was still pursuing her ruin. She'd mentioned that in the otome game she'd played, *Heart High*, there was a CG of Alicia's kidnapping. Sneaking up towards the little baby was a person with...

"Drills..." Adi muttered.

"Mary's ringlets? What about them?" Patrick inquired, looking up from the document (to nobody's surprise, he'd guessed right away that the term "drills" was referring to Mary's hair).

"I heard at some point that the fortune teller had ringlets just as powerful as milady's were in the past."

"Just as powerful, you say...? But even with that knowledge, it'd be difficult to track them. It'd take a long time."

After all, just because someone had ringlets as sturdy as Mary's, that didn't mean they'd be able to locate said person easily. It would've been one thing if they'd had more time to spare, but the rumor was still spreading even now, so they couldn't afford to take it easy. If they were to at least have something else to go off of, other than the fortune teller's hairstyle...

While Patrick muttered all of that under his breath, Adi continued. "I'm sure you already know this, Lord Patrick, but once upon a time, milady's ringlets defeated many a hairstylist and made them toss away their scissors."

"Yeah. The same was true for my family's favorite hairdresser."

"It was truly a sad era... But among those stylists, there were those who rose back up and championed the overthrown ringlets."

"Right, Mary's hair is different now. That means...!" Patrick exclaimed, his eyes glinting as he surmised what Adi had meant.

Among the defeated stylists had been those who'd managed to get back on their feet. Having brushed up on their skills, they then wanted to take on the challenge of the ringlets once more. However, Mary's powerful ringlets had been lost. Now, her hair was made up of gentle waves, and could no longer be

called the “Stylist-Killing Steel Drills.”

If that was the case, then where would these hairdressers have directed their fighting spirit? Wishing to find ringlets comparable to Mary’s past ones, they might’ve decided to try facing off against another opponent.

“Some people at Albert Manor still have contact with the hairstylists who left. I could try asking them about a fortune teller,” Adi suggested.

“True... But still, how can I investigate it?” Patrick asked, his countenance still sour even though they’d found a small hint.

As it turned out, Patrick wasn’t able to move around freely, because ever since the rumor had begun, he was being constantly sought out by visitors. Even getting the documents from the palace had been difficult. He’d gotten up especially early today to be able to talk with Adi, but the mansion would be filled with visitors after breakfast.

Patrick was also part of the new generation taking over, so there were plenty of people looking to butter him up. Some of those people might’ve believed in the rumors and been trying to monitor him. Unfortunately, Patrick wasn’t able to distinguish such guests from others, nor could he leave. There was no way he’d be able to search around for someone with ringlets.

“What now...?” Patrick murmured. “I’d like to ask someone to assist, but everyone in my social circle is in a frenzy right now, so I don’t know who’d be the right person to ask. Besides, all of this is just my speculation. Even if I ask for help, I could still turn out to be wrong, which would be problematic...”

“In the worst-case scenario, you could be made to look like an accomplice of the fake princess,” Adi noted.

“Exactly. I can’t ask anyone else to do it,” Patrick said with a deep sigh. His expression grew even more severe as he grappled with the reality that he had to do this alone. He seemed to be filled with both determination and apprehension.

Adi shrugged. *Looking back on it, he’s always been capable, and that’s why he’s hardly asked anyone for help.* He recalled that as a child, Patrick had always been praised for his flawlessness, and taken such compliments in stride. Not

only did he put adults to shame with how reliable he was, but in fact, he'd had adults asking *him* for help.

In that, Patrick was quite similar to Mary, who set herself apart from others by playing the role of the perfect noble lady. *I can't decide if they're competent, or clumsy...* Adi thought with a chuckle, which caused Patrick to look at him curiously.

"What is it?"

"I was just reminiscing. Anyway, allow me to present you with a suggestion, Lord Patrick. In times like these, you should ask a reliable elder for help," Adi said meaningfully.

Patrick's eyes widened. "A reliable elder..." he echoed quietly. "You mean Lang or Lucian? They're wrapped up in the succession problem, and they have even less freedom to act than me. The same goes for Roberto. And I'd rather have them keeping everyone distracted, anyway."

"Not them. I'm talking about someone closer to you."

"Closer...? Gainas, then? Or Miss Margaret and Miss Carina. There's also those who were in the student council together with me. Which one of them was older than me, again?"

"Wrong again. I'm not talking about a minuscule age difference like that; it's even bigger. If I had to specify, it's someone five years older than you," Adi explained impatiently, offering more obvious hints.

"Five...?" Patrick glanced aside in thought. "A reliable elder, five years older than me..." he muttered, tilting his head. His body language seemed to say, *"Such a person doesn't exist."* He even started wondering whether or not Adi was talking about a human being.

Adi frowned. "Come on, realize it already!" he insisted, but Patrick continued to ponder. "You *do* have a reliable elder of five years!"

"In that case, let's find this elder first. Or should I try getting a fortune told about it?"

"What fortune?! I'm right in front of you!" Adi exclaimed, vigorously springing

to his feet.

Patrick looked shocked. When understanding finally dawned on him, he burst out laughing. “Sorry...” he uttered shakily. Adi’s expression was a mix of sulky exasperation and disgruntlement, and Patrick placed his hand on his shoulder, giving it a few pats. “My bad. Don’t get so mad. It’s not that I forgot about you. You’re more reliable than anyone I know. It’s just that...”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking of you as a troublesome younger brother,” Patrick said with a smile. There was a spark in his eyes, and his shapely lips were gently curved up. It was as if he were shining, and his sheer brilliance was indescribable. Adi was being faced with the perfect prince’s first-rate smile.

Any woman’s heart would’ve fluttered immediately at the sight, and everything they’d just discussed would’ve flown right out of their heads. In fact, even other men would’ve been captivated by Patrick’s dignity, and their minds might’ve grown hazy too.

Alas, the one on the receiving end of this smile was Adi. “That doesn’t work on me,” he declared coolly while glaring at Patrick.

Instantly, Patrick’s radiance dissipated, and his serious expression returned. Even so, he truly was as good at faking it as Mary was. His countenance was so different now that it was as if his smile had never been there as he calmly said, “When did you even get up?” With that, he began guiding Adi back to his seat.

Adi let out a long sigh and sat back down.

“All right. Shall we make some plans?” Patrick proposed. “I don’t have much time left.”

“Yes, yes. As you wish,” Adi replied grumpily, at which Patrick smiled.

He patted Adi’s shoulder again. “If you calm down, I’ll treat you to some alcohol,” he said, trying to console Adi. His words didn’t befit Prince Charming at all, yet they were exactly what one friend would say to another.



It was noon. Mary was in Albert Manor’s gardens, feeling invigorated after

getting plenty of sleep. The restless Alicia was sitting across from her at the table.

“Um, Lady Mary... What is this letter for?” the girl asked, staring at the paper in her hands. The letter, penned in beautiful handwriting, read, “*Princess Alicia’s First Reinforcement Training*.” Mary Albert was the host, and Albert Manor’s gardens were the venue. The opening time of the event was, in fact, right now.

While Alicia stared at the note in confusion, Mary proudly puffed out her chest. Of course, she had written the letter herself, and only she knew what it contained. Well, to be more precise, *Adi* had been the one to write it after Mary had jostled him from his sleep last night and made him do it, but that ought to be omitted.

Following her good night’s rest in Adi’s bedroom, Mary took the letter in hand and departed for the royal palace. Then, she all but kidnapped Alicia and brought her back here (such a sudden visit and abduction of the princess could’ve been considered disrespectful, but everyone at the palace simply watched it happen with smiles on their faces).

Meanwhile, Adi, who had shown such great technique in penning the letter, wasn’t anywhere in sight. He’d left early that morning and hadn’t been back since. According to the message he’d left with one of the maids, he wouldn’t return until evening.

Adi was always with her, so Mary felt a little frazzled without him around. Even so, she gathered her motivation and fixed her gaze on Alicia.

The girl was fidgeting, her brows drawn in a frail expression. She seemed fearful of the other visitors’ curious looks, as she’d glance at them briefly and then hurriedly cast her gaze down. She was the portrait of a beautiful, fragile girl, but there was no trace of princessly dignity about her. Mary couldn’t allow that.

“Listen up. I’m going to forge you into a proper princess,” she told Alicia. “A charming princess to anyone’s eyes, one whom everyone will feel compelled to prostrate themselves before. Well, not that *I’d* prostrate myself before a country hick!”

“Lady Mary... You must’ve heard that rumor, then...”

“Oh, I see you’re aware of it too.”

“Yes. I heard it being discussed at the palace...” Alicia admitted, hanging her head.

Mary faltered. Whether because Alicia had learned about the unsettling rumor concerning herself, or because the girl felt remorseful for making Mary worry, she was acting oddly meek today.

Back when Mary had visited the palace, Alicia hadn’t embraced her as usual either. Rather, she’d seemed mindful of their surroundings. And now, she kept glancing at the other guests nervously, unable to hide her anxiety and fear. It was all so very unlike her.

“You have a lot of visitors today, so...maybe we could move elsewhere...” Alicia proposed quietly.

“The weather’s so good today; there’s no better place to have tea than the courtyard. If those rubbernecks wish to look, let them.”

“But if you’re seen with me, it might lead to some bad rumors...”

“My, so *that’s* why you haven’t been visiting lately. Even a peasant like you can learn some tact, huh? But tough luck—I, Mary Albert, don’t give a hoot about some vulgar mob’s petty gossip!” Mary asserted.

Alicia’s eyes lit up. “Lady Mary...! Thank you so much! I’ll give it my all for you!”

The other girl seemed to have returned to her usual energetic self, which once again caused Mary to falter. She had managed to cheer Alicia up one way or another, but that discomforted her. It felt wrong to see Alicia so meek, but her being all chirpy just annoyed Mary. At the end of the day, she was only going to polish Alicia into a princess to save House Albert from being disgraced.

Although Mary felt a sense of patriotism and loyalty when it came to Their Majesties, she had no investment in cheering up Alicia in the slightest. In fact, she would’ve gone as far as to say that her feelings were purely those of a determined dog trainer looking to correct a reckless pup.

“Don’t get the wrong idea here. I’m not doing this for *you*. I, Mary Albert, wouldn’t take action for some peasant like you.”

“Thank you, Lady Mary! I’m okay now! I can do this! Let’s start!”

“There you go, making so much noise. The way you rapidly switch between depression and elation is unsightly. Be *moderately* depressed.”

“Okay! But for now, let’s have a few days’ worth of hugs!”

“No thanks!” Mary shouted, smacking away Alicia’s looming arms. Right then, she heard the sound of laughter from nearby, and looked around.

She noticed her older brothers, Lang and Lucian, with their servant Roberto standing behind them. Seeing them together like this made their height differences all the more obvious, with Roberto being around two heads taller than the twins. In contrast to the brothers’ baby faces, Roberto actually looked his age, making it nearly impossible to tell at a glance that the three of them were the same age.

And that’s the very cause of their complex... Mary thought. Adi was always the target of said complex. What a cruel world this was, indeed.

Deciding it was no time for deploration, however, Mary cleared her throat as a means to reproach her gently smiling brothers. “Pardon me for summoning you two at such a busy time.”

“Not at all. Actually, I was deeply moved to have received such a beautiful letter from you, Mary!” Lang exclaimed. “You’re so skilled, just as expected of our little sister! I’m going to have that letter framed and hung up in my room! It shall be preserved unto eternity!”

“And the fact that you sent us both individual letters too... It must’ve been so bothersome, sending separate letters to people who share the same face and address. Yet you did it anyway; what a kind sister we have...” Lucian said, commending her. “But paper deteriorates so easily... Oh, I know. I’ll have it framed. Yes, it’ll be preserved unto eternity...”

“Sorry, you two, but Adi wrote those letters,” Mary informed them.

The twins had been favorably discussing the letters in completely contrasting

tones, until Mary mercilessly cut in. The instant they heard her words, their faces turned icy, and then they both handed their letters to Roberto.

“First it was researching how to make delicious croquettes, then learning how to handle migratory birds, and now letter writing. Just what is he trying to do?” Roberto muttered sourly, lamenting his younger brother’s eccentric behavior (all the more so because the penmanship was so beautiful).

But soon enough, his expression returned to normal as he put the letters away in his jacket, because he had surmised that whatever Adi was doing, it must’ve been for Mary’s sake. Without a doubt, the two of them were brothers, and Roberto could see right through Adi’s every move.

Once Lang and Lucian had sat down around the table, Mary clapped her hands to get things back on track. Alicia straightened up in her seat as if she were about to fly off.

“Lang, Lucian,” Mary began. “I want you two to give Alicia advice on how to become a wonderful princess. Give her strict guidance on the topics of etiquette, conduct, speech, and countenance!”

“You’re such a good friend, Mary! If that’s what you want, I’ll give it my all!” Lang declared.

“The adorable Mary, relying on *me*...? I bet this won’t happen a second time. I’ll do anything for you, even if it’s committing *lèse-majesté*...!” Lucian proclaimed.

“Roberto, please stand behind Alicia,” Mary went on. “I’d like you to give her some coaching on her form.”

“Very well,” he responded.

Seeing her brothers so enthused was getting Mary all fired up as well. She cast a side glance at Alicia, and saw that a fighting spirit had lit up in her eyes. Her hands were clenched, and perhaps feeling a little *too* worked up...

“I’m going to become a perfect princess!!!”

...she raised her voice while pumping her fist in the air.

“You’re already losing your grace! Cease this at once!” Mary screeched,

flicking Alicia's forehead.

The princess reinforcement training had begun, and the first aspects in need of training were Alicia's etiquette and elegance. That said, the meeting was a little too quiet to call it "training," as it felt no different from an ordinary tea party. With everyone having their fill of tea and tarts, the idle chatter was blooming.

The visitors, stealing curious glances, also saw the scene as nothing more than a typical tea party. One after another, the guests passed by to check out what was going on, before hurriedly leaving again.

But Mary paid careful attention to each of Alicia's movements. When the girl took a large spoonful of tart and stuffed her cheeks, Mary spoke up. "Alicia, it's proper to cut your tart into smaller pieces. For peasants, it might be normal to devour tasty food in one gulp, but in high society, that's bad manners."

"Okay! I'll be more mindful! But this tart is so yummy...!"

"Of course it is. It was handmade by House Albert's very own pâtissier. Cutting it into small pieces and eating it properly shows respect towards them... Hey! I'm not trying to imply you should cut it up and then hand the pieces over to me! Stop trying to make me eat it... I'm not going to open my mouth... Enough...!"

Mary's words were cut short as the tart was stuffed into her mouth. In revenge, she smacked Alicia's hand. Scolding a blunder as soon as it happened was one of the foundational basics described in the very first issue of the dog training magazine.

But Alicia just rubbed her hand and happily responded with, "Okaaay!" It was unclear whether she actually realized that she'd been scolded. Still, she cut her tart into a smaller piece, so she must've been listening to Mary.

Having cut the tart, Alicia ate a spoonful. Had it not been for her previous conduct, her manners now would've seemed lovely. Mary nodded to herself in satisfaction. She'd give Alicia a passing grade for this.

"Don't you guys have anything to say?" Mary turned her gaze to Lang and

Lucian as she encouraged them.

The twins had been watching the girls happily, but now that they'd been addressed, they exchanged a look with each other. "I still sense some awkwardness, but overall, Princess Alicia's conduct is splendid," Lang remarked. "It's like looking at Mary when she was little again. Back then, she was so eager to use the manners she had just learned. It was so cute..."

"So Lady Mary was like this once too?! Please, tell me more!" Alicia implored, shifting closer to Lang in her excitement to hear about a part of Mary's past she didn't know of. Her etiquette had all but vanished.

"This isn't the time for such talk!" Mary rebuked.

But despite her efforts, Alicia's eyes were glittering, and the twins, having realized their chance, were getting ready to speak. Mary's words wouldn't have been able to stop them now.

"Ah, how nostalgic! Mary used to pull etiquette blunders too, and she'd tear up over her own immaturity. How laudable of her!" Lang shared excitedly.

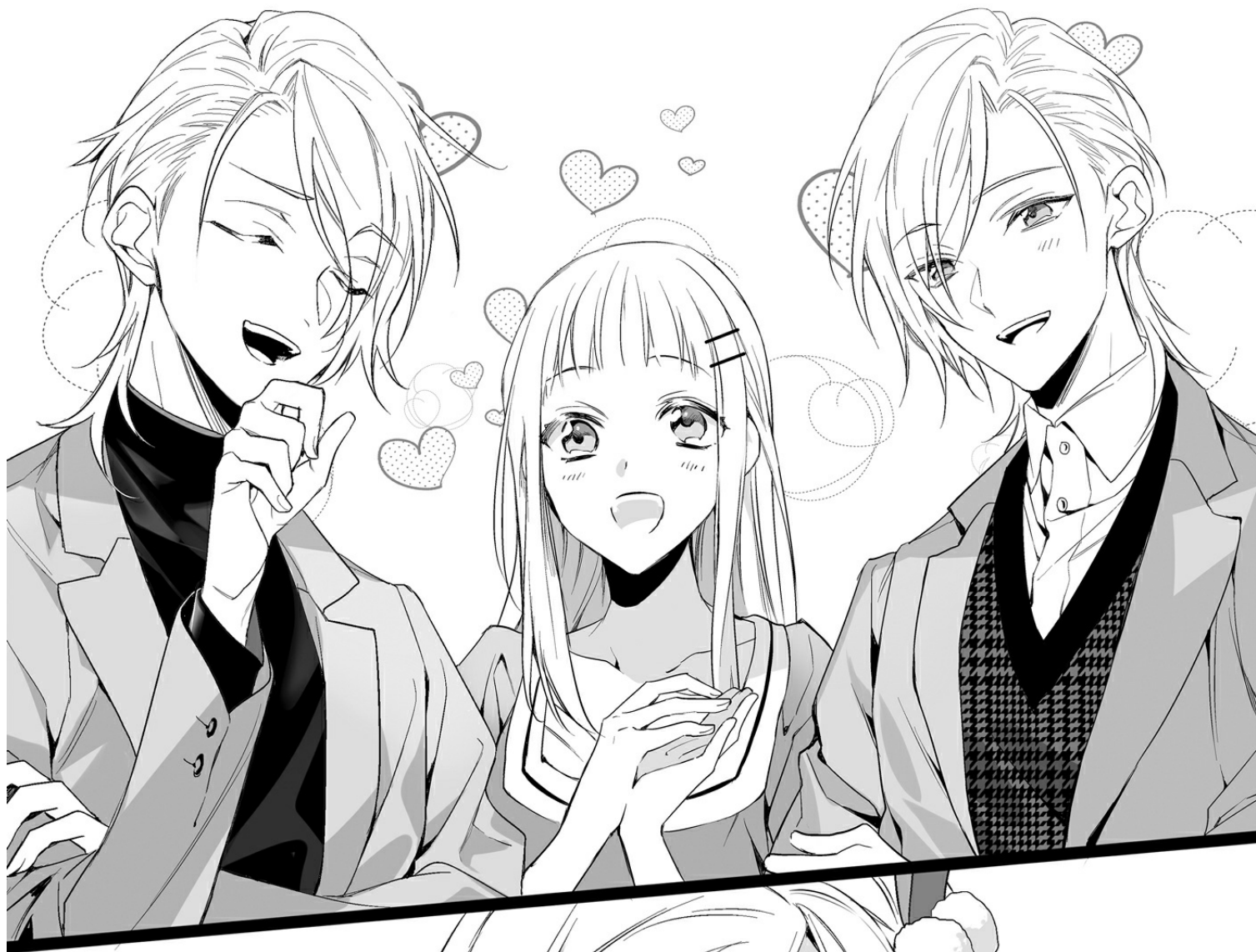
"But she was determined not to cry in front of us, and only did it in front of Adi..." Lucian recalled.

"Really?! Tee hee! Oh, Lady Mary!" Alicia giggled.

"And one day, she suddenly declared she wanted to have lessons in the 'Etiquette for Elegantly Eating Fried Food with Your Hands'! We had no idea what she was talking about, but little Mary was always mindful of her manners! Such a magnificent girl!"

"Well, in the end, that was just for the sake of eating croquettes with Adi... But it was really sweet, how invested she was in her manners..."

"Oh goodness! Hee hee!"



Alicia couldn't fight back her laughter upon hearing such things. She kept giggling with a cherishing smile, which displeased Mary greatly.

"What a creepy laugh," she reproached. Of course, this had no effect. She was even beginning to doubt if her words had gotten through to the trio at all.

Alicia opened up her notebook and began vigorously scribbling away. When Mary tried to take a peek, the other girl screamed in a high-pitched voice and quickly hid the notebook behind her back.

Mary found it all very suspicious, but now was not the time for exposing Alicia's notes. She cast a cool glare at her brothers, who were still chatting about her, before looking over her shoulder.

Roberto was standing there, his ponytail swaying in the breeze. He stood with his back straight, painting the picture of the perfect butler. Day in and day out, no matter how much Lang and Lucian acted out or fawned over Mary, Roberto always remained aloof. Even though the others had begun discussing her childhood, Mary knew that Roberto would still provide strict and accurate advice (*My brothers are useless now*, Mary bluntly declared in her mind).

"Roberto, have *you* noticed anything?"

"Indeed... Perhaps Lady Alicia is focusing too much on her hands, for she is moving her legs around needlessly. It looks fidgety, so it might be best for her to stay mindful of that."

"I knew I could count on you!" Mary rejoiced. "Anything else?"

"I believe that once she fixes that problem, her conduct will look beautiful. Though, if I had to say..."

"Yes? Go on, say as much as you like. No need to hold back: whatever you say here won't be counted as disrespectful," Mary said, instigating Roberto. After all, this was just an etiquette training session. Alicia's status as the princess was under scrutiny, so this wasn't the time to sugarcoat things.

Alicia readied herself too. "Go for it, Roberto!" she said enthusiastically. Her eyes signaled that she was prepared to take on whatever he might say to her.

Roberto nodded in assent, and his sharp eyes moved towards Alicia. "Well

then, pardon me for what I'm about to say. Lady Alicia, you glance at Lady Mary too often. Also, Lord Lang, your conduct and gestures become completely graceless whenever you talk about Lady Mary. It's unseemly, so please stop it immediately. Besides, how dare you leave so much of your work from this morning unfinished only to take it easy and drink tea? Lord Lucian, you're dispirited and glum, as usual. I couldn't believe your nerve yesterday when you decided to put off all your work until the next morning."

"As soon as you heard you didn't have to hold back, you went right for my brothers," Mary noted.

"It may be a bit painful to hear, but I would appreciate it if you used my words as a reference," Roberto said, lowering his head as though he'd never said anything rude. He had perfect elegance, and by looks alone, one could've easily judged him to be a loyal and charming servant.

Even Alicia was slightly surprised by this, while Mary only sighed and murmured, "He just acts as he pleases."

The twins, however, were so used to hearing such things from Roberto that they shrugged them right off. Roberto sighed and clicked his tongue (though, he still looked charming as he did so), but Mary decided to overlook his impudence and not say anything.

And thus, "Princess Alicia's First Reinforcement Training" ended in failure. In the courtyard, filled with onlookers and flowers, only the topic of Mary's past had bloomed, all while Mary herself had been kept out of the conversation.

Eventually, Lang and Lucian had some visitors, so Roberto urged them to leave. Alicia went back to the palace as well, and Mary was called over by a maid to entertain some guests again. The spectators who'd been watching the group clocked what was going on and dispersed as well.

After dinner, Adi returned to the mansion. He and Mary decided to have tea in the garden, leading up to the present moment. They were holding a review meeting, which also served as a postmortem session. This was how they were spending their time as husband and wife.

The wind felt chillier in the evening, but that only made the tea taste all the better. With just a single sip, the warmth spread down one's throat, and the way it warmed the body up from the inside was quite pleasant.

On top of that, the croquettes, which served as the teatime snack, were suited for the night as well. Biting into the slightly steaming pankō, Mary let out a relieved breath. Croquettes were delicious at noon, and just as delicious under the starry sky. How wonderful, indeed!

As a side note, Mary's conduct while she ate the croquette was flawless, just as elegant as if she were eating a first-rate meal during a party. This was the result of the "Etiquette for Elegantly Eating Fried Food with Your Hands," which she had devised herself.

(When she had demonstrated her conduct to the owner of a delicatessen she liked, he'd said, *"You eat our croquettes with such elegance, it's almost like you're some fancy lady!"* Alas, he still hadn't realized the true identity of the silver-haired girl who frequented his establishment. Not that he could be blamed for that.)

"Adi, you've been out all day today. What were you doing?" Mary questioned.

"I went around to a few different places in search of something," Adi told her. "Unfortunately, I'll have to be out again tomorrow. I'll ask one of the maids to look after you."

"We're all busy, huh? I'll be holding the second training session tomorrow myself, so please arrange the letters later."

Adi smiled wryly and nodded. But the way he sighed a moment later as he drank his tea seemed full of exhaustion. Mary peered at him curiously. He had said that he'd gone to various places, so he must've run himself ragged. He'd even mentioned that he'd ridden in a horse-drawn carriage, which he so despised.

"You must be tired, Adi. Leave this to me!"

"Hmm?" Adi looked at her in confusion, and then his eyes widened.

Mary had picked up a croquette and then moved closer to him. The croquette was neatly wrapped in a high-quality handkerchief, and Mary held it out

towards Adi like a parent trying to force their child to eat something. She might as well have said, “Say ‘Ahh’!” (Also, her conduct was still very elegant.)

Adi’s face flushed when he realized what Mary was doing. His cheeks were redder than his hair, and even in the darkness of night, it was still obvious that he was blushing. “M-Milady?!”

“Go on, have a big old bite! Croquettes are a cure-all medicine!”

“B-But this is...”

“It’s fine; nobody’s watching!” Mary said, urging him on.

Adi looked around just to be sure. In resignation, he drew closer and bit into the croquette Mary was holding. The warmth and umami flavor spread inside his mouth... Except that right now, Adi wasn’t able to pay attention to any of that.

“To think we’d do something so intimate after all this time... It’s incredibly embarrassing,” he murmured.

“Tasty food alleviates fatigue, right? This is an alleviating croquette, filled to the brim with love!” Mary proclaimed proudly.

Although Adi hadn’t been able to taste the croquette at all, he realized with a laugh that it had, in fact, alleviated him. Then, he picked another croquette up off the plate and held it out towards Mary. The way he was mimicking her actions from earlier made it obvious what his intentions were.

“Let us both alleviate each other, and work hard again tomorrow,” he said with a chuckle.

In good humor, Mary took a bite. Croquettes were indeed delicious, whether during the day or night, but they were remarkably more so when filled with the appreciation of her beloved spouse.



The next morning, the table in the lovely gardens of Albert Manor was once again put to use. Sitting there were Mary, Lang, and Lucian. There was also Alicia, whom Mary had gone to fetch from the palace this morning, clasping the invitation letter in both hands as she went. Behind Alicia stood Roberto.

The visitors who had come by without prior announcement were again stealing glances at the group. Everything was very similar to the events of the previous day.

There was a note lying atop the table. Of course, the beautiful writing read, “*Princess Alicia’s Second Reinforcement Training.*” The font was slightly larger for emphasis this time, showcasing Mary’s determination.

Mary clapped her hands once, her hair swaying. “Lang, Lucian... I *especially* need your help today!”

“The fact you actually asked us for help two days in a row... It’s time to show my stuff! Leave it all to me, Mary! You just sit back and relax!” Lang exclaimed.

“If I fail now, I bet she’ll never ask me for anything again... I’ll put my life on the line to meet her expectations...!” Lucian muttered.

“You’re both as exhausting as always. I want to split you into three,” Mary declared with a frown in response to the twins’ enthusiasm.

Alas, this wasn’t the time to be lamenting their ways. Rather, Mary believed it was her role to channel their enthusiasm into success. With renewed motivation, she turned to face Alicia.

Alicia’s purple eyes brimmed with fighting spirit too. Her fists were tightly clenched, and she was on the verge of raising them overhead. However, she must’ve remembered how Mary had scolded her for this yesterday, as this time she placed them on the table.

“We *will* teach you how to behave like a princess today,” Mary announced. “I want my brothers to share how they, as men, believe a lady should act.”

Lang and Lucian looked at each other. They were the sons of House Albert, existing at the top of high society. Their names had spread within the aristocratic world even before they were born, and there wasn’t a person around who didn’t know who they were. Having been a part of high society for so long, the twins had interacted with noble ladies countless times. Gentlemen were bound to discuss among each other what they thought made a good woman, and what sort of demeanor they liked. Their perspective on this would naturally be different from Mary’s.

Lang nodded in acknowledgment when he realized Mary wanted to hear his opinion. He contemplated for a while, and eventually murmured, “Selfishness,” under his breath, a rather unexpected word. “It’s a problem if it goes overboard, but I’d say being selfish is essential for a noble lady.”

Mary and Alicia both looked surprised at his words. Manners and grace were required for women of high society. They had to have decorum, intelligence, and elegance. They also had to be thoughtful and considerate when supporting their husband and family. However, what could Lang have meant by bringing up selfishness?

Mary stared at Lang in confusion. Noticing this, he seemed amused as he puffed out his chest. “Listen up,” he began, putting on airs. He looked very proud of himself, and the gentle breeze swept past his silver hair.

“He looks just like Lady Mary!” Alicia giggled. Mary discreetly kicked Alicia’s leg under the table. The girl let out a brief shriek.

“I shall pretend I didn’t see any of that,” Roberto said, assisting them in covering it up.

“Yes, Lang? What’s this about selfishness?” Mary prompted.

“High society consists of those age-old boasting battles,” Lang explained. “The women always say things like, ‘I pestered my husband until he bought this for me!’ and ‘I’ll have my husband build a new villa for our anniversary this year.’ They’re always boasting to each other.”

“Yes, all they ever get excited about is gossip and bragging. How tiresome,” Mary remarked.

“I know it annoys you, but that’s a part of the wife’s job. They need to do it, or they’ll be in hot water.”

Lucian seemed to be in agreement with Lang, and even Roberto affirmed him by saying, “As long as it’s within reason.”

Mary considered their words for a while. “You’re right,” she decided at last with a nod.

Alicia turned to her in shock. She hadn’t expected Mary to agree with them.

“What do you mean, Lady Mary? It’s no good to be selfish.”

“We’re not talking about the childish sort of selfishness you’re imagining,” Mary replied. “When noblewomen boast about themselves, it’s a way to show that their families have enough financial resources to make their selfish wishes come true. Flashy dresses and extravagant spending are proof of affluence. In order to display your rank and wealth, you have to be a bit of a selfish spender, and then brag about it.”

Having finally understood the concept, Alicia nodded. A wife’s selfish boasting was connected to her family flaunting its wealth. For a noblewoman, bragging about extravagant jewelry that her husband bought for her was part of her job. In a way, the lady of the house clad in glitter and gold was like the family’s billboard.

On the flip side, listening to another person’s bragging was a way of learning about their situation at home. Indulging the stories of a wife whose family one wanted to get close to and singing her praises both put her in a good mood and strengthened the families’ bonds.

But as Roberto had said, it had to be done to a reasonable degree. Letting one’s greed get out of hand, demanding expensive things to brag about, and making one’s house fall as a result was putting the cart before the horse. In other words, while bragging was a way of displaying a family’s standing, it had to be done at a level that didn’t pressure said family’s finances or business too much. At times, one needed to possess the humility to play the role of listener to the boasts instead.

In *Heart High*, the villainess Mary grabbed a hold of every little thing in sight while claiming, “*It all belongs to me!*” She cut off anyone else who tried to boast, making everything about her. Her selfishness was on a whole different level.

I see, this isn’t just about mere selfishness... Mary thought. “Alicia, you must become a professional braggart. Do your best!”

“Professional braggart...? But that’d be really difficult for me, Lady Mary!”

“Well, it’s impossible for me. I can’t exactly brag about being a croquette-loving cyclist,” Mary declared, deciding she wouldn’t be of any help in this

matter.

“But...” Alicia trailed off pitifully. Then, she turned to Lang and Lucian, her eyes evidently pleading them for help.

The twins, embodying opposing forces of yin and yang despite looking like two peas in a pod, glanced at each other. “Right, it might be difficult for you to act selfish, Lady Alicia,” Lang admitted. “Our adorable Mary too—ever since she was a little girl, she was a good listener who hardly said anything egotistical.”

“Yeah... We told her to be more selfish, but she was fine with just listening, and she was always so meek...” Lucian recalled. “She wouldn’t brag in the slightest, nor would she rely on her older brothers for anything...”

“Please, you two! Tell me more!” Alicia exclaimed.

“Well, there was *one* time Mary acted selfish as a child. It was when Adi went to stay with another family to help them out. Remember, Lucian?”

“Yeah, that really was something... Mary was truly selfish that time...”

“I’d like to hear all the details! My notebook is primed and ready!” Alicia said with a glint in her eye, eager to hear about the young Mary’s selfishness. She’d procured a writing utensil in her hand at some point, and her hesitation from before had vanished in place of excitement.

Mary wanted to prevent things from getting derailed again, but there was no way she could stop the twins from obsessing over their memories of her. Instead, she tried snatching away Alicia’s notebook, only for the other girl to smoothly dodge her hand.

“How nostalgic...” Lang said. “Mary was still so little back then.”

“Oho ho! How little are we talking? What size were her ringlets?” Alicia pestered.

“They weren’t even the size of my fist, and I think she had about two rings per lock of hair.”

“I see! Around seven years old, then!” Alicia concluded, noting something down.

Mary lost the will to try and stop them. “Don’t treat my drills like tree rings,”

she complained, even though she knew her words wouldn't get through to anyone. Then, she decided to ask Roberto for a second serving of tea.

"Adi was sent out to help another family, but it had gotten late, so he had to stay the night with them," Lang began. "As usual, everyone was impressed with how much of a hard worker he was. Anyway, once night had set..."

"Yes...?!" Alicia squeaked.

"Mary disappeared! We searched around and eventually found her crying in the corner of the garden! She was so upset that Adi hadn't returned that she didn't care about the mud getting on her skirt and just squatted down, bawling. She was so very fragile at that moment!" Lang said in a high-pitched voice, as if he were recounting a dramatic tale. At times, his shoulders sank; at others, he sighed and shook his head; and finally, he spread out his arms, gesticulating splendidly.

"Goodness, Lady Mary...!" Alicia cried in shock. Despite the tone of her voice, her eyes were simultaneously blazing and glittering, and she scribbled away in her notebook furiously. She even drew a line with a red pen. Mary could only guess what she found important enough to highlight.

"Mary wouldn't listen to anything Lucian or I told her. She just kept crying that Adi wasn't there and that he hadn't come home. Her eyes were all red from how much she'd wiped them, and sometimes she used her ringlets as tissues. I thought my heart would burst, seeing her like that!"

"I see, I see... And what happened after that? What did the endlessly crying Lady Mary do?!"

"It was really rough..." Lucian spoke up. "We kept telling her that Adi would come back tomorrow, but she wouldn't stop crying. We finally managed to bring her back into the mansion. At that point, she was exhausted from crying. In a daze, she took Adi's jacket, wrapped herself up in it, and finally fell asleep..."

"And then? How did Adi react to that?!"

This time, both of the twins responded in unison: "That part ticks me off, so I won't tell you!"

“Ahhh!!!” Alicia screamed in disappointment, dejectedly closing her notebook. Then, as if having wrapped the matter up, she exhaled deeply and took a sip of her tea. Her pale throat bobbed as she drank, before she set the cup back on its saucer. Her conduct was so calm that it was as if she’d never been excited in the first place. Taking one more deep breath, Alicia turned to the brothers with a soft smile. “That was extremely helpful. Thank you, Lord Lang and Lord Lucian.” The girl bowed her head in gratitude, her golden locks swaying.

In response to that charming gesture, the twins smiled as well, and nodded. “We’re honored to be of help to you, Princess Alicia,” Lang said. His words were warm and filled with a sense of friendship and sincerity.

As the three of them began enjoying their drinks, the atmosphere around them was perfectly serene. They were emanating the satisfaction of a job well done. Occasionally, the trio jested and laughed together, and praised each other for today’s achievements. If someone had happened to pass them by, they might’ve thought this was a tea party held to celebrate some kind of an accomplishment (but only if they hadn’t caught a word of the previous conversation). Indeed, the air around them was positively refreshing. The water from the fountain twinkled beautifully in the background.

As for Mary, who was also seated at the table...

“You just ripped my heart to pieces.”

...she was sipping her tea with a thousand-yard stare.

Meanwhile, Roberto, who was supposed to be standing behind Alicia, had at some point begun tending to the garden. He must’ve decided he didn’t need to hear that conversation. On top of that, he’d judged that tinkering with the soil was a better use of his time than listening to Mary’s past being meaninglessly exposed.

Mary could’ve scolded him for this...but she wasn’t feeling up to it. Caught between the sound of the shovel digging at the dirt behind her and the celebratory tea party before her eyes, she only refilled her empty cup.

And thus, “Princess Alicia’s Second Reinforcement Training” ended in failure as well. The meeting had just turned into a battle of exposing Mary’s past.

Mary decided to leave the cheerful trio to their chatter. She stood next to Roberto, watching him tend the garden, until more visitors arrived, signaling the end of the meeting. The onlookers clocked this as well and dispersed, going to meet with their desired parties.

With two failed attempts in a row, Mary was starting to reconsider things. *Perhaps I’m approaching this in the wrong way*, she thought as she closed the special issue of the monthly dog training magazine she’d been reading. “I thought Alicia needed some discipline, but maybe I was mistaken...” she murmured weakly, turning her gaze to Adi, who was reading a book.

It was after dinner, and she was having another review session in his room. This time, Mary was sitting in a chair, while Adi was on the edge of the bed. Although this was an unusual arrangement, it wasn’t the first time it’d happened. They were both in their pajamas, and each was doing their own thing.

“You were out again today, Adi,” Mary pointed out.

When Mary asked him where he’d been, he looked up from the map he’d been reading with surprise. He must’ve been absorbed in it, for he looked at her quizzically and asked, “What’s that about me?”

“I said that you were out again today, right?”

“Yes, I was meeting with some old acquaintances,” Adi responded, listing a few names.

At this, Mary’s eyes lit up, her previous melancholy disappearing in a flash. She recognized those names: they were the hairstylists who used to be employed by House Albert. Or more accurately, they were the hairstylists who’d once worked for them, but had been defeated by the powerful ringlets and departed with broken hearts.

Mary was immersed in nostalgia while Adi informed her that they were all doing well. One of them had even begun working as a hairdresser again.

“The indomitable soul of the hairstylist!” Mary shouted.

“Although they gave up once, they decided the life of a hairstylist was the only one for them. They refined their techniques even more, but they were frustrated when they realized that you no longer have your drills, milady.”

“If I did, that would’ve been a great chance for them to take revenge for their loss,” Mary said, brushing her fingers through her hair. The gentle waves on her head showed no sign of the ringlets she once had. Those ringlets wouldn’t have budged if she tried brushing them with her hand. If anything, she could’ve picked them up, shaken them, and swung them around, and they’d still have remained solid.

“They’ve narrowly escaped death,” Mary told her hair jokingly, before closing the special issue of the magazine. “Thank you for telling me about that, Adi. It was lovely to hear.”

“Everyone still said they’d like to see you again, even without your ringlets. Once things have calmed down a bit, we should pay them a visit,” Adi proposed. “I’m sure they’d be glad.”

“Right. Giving up after one or two failures is just plain wrong.”

“Huh? My lady?”

“‘This is the only life for me...’ Yes, that’s it. In my case, a dog trainer’s life is the only one for me!” Mary asserted, getting to her feet with her fists clenched. Her eyes were blazing with a fighting spirit. Though her dog trainer’s soul had been on the verge of giving up, hearing about the hairstylist who’d decided to take up the scissors anew had resonated with her, and she was fired up once more.

She was so very determined that one could practically hear the encouraging cries of the world’s dog trainers cheering her on. Even her silver waves looked like the flickering of a burning flame.

“I’ve got this, Adi! I’m going to fulfill my duty as a dog trainer no matter what!”

“Whatever it is you do, so long as you’re at Albert Manor, I can leave the mansion without worrying.”

“Oh, you’re heading out again?” Mary asked him, and he regretfully informed

her that he had to leave first thing tomorrow morning.

Apparently, Adi would be traveling quite far tomorrow, so he would have to get up before sunrise. He must've been planning to leave without waking her, because he assured her she could stay in bed. Her shoulders drooped at his words.

"You're heading out, I have my duty as a dog trainer, and lately Patrick, Parfette, and the others haven't been showing up at all. Alicia always hurries back to the palace too, and because of all the guests, the reinforcement training has a bunch of spectators... I guess we're all busy with our own matters right now."

"There's a lot of issues piled up, so we must persevere until we've resolved everything," Adi said. "Once it's all wrapped up, we can enjoy tea with everyone again."

"You're right," Mary said, but she sighed as she wondered just when that would be.

Albert Manor was brimming with visitors as usual, and the maids had been in a rush this morning because people had once more shown up without prior appointment, insisting on greeting someone. Many of the visitors purposefully visited the courtyard as well in order to see what was happening.

The head of House Albert and his sons were very busy. The twins just went out of their way to make extra time for Mary's reinforcement training because she was their adorable sister (though, the results should be left aside). Mary, too, was busy, and she was often in demand after the training sessions.

Some people decided that if they couldn't see her father or brothers, then they wanted to at least greet her. Others believed she'd be the heir and tried buttering her up. Yet others wanted to sound her out for the truth behind the rumor about Alicia. Mary was so busy that she hardly had the time to reread her dog training magazines.

Alicia was busy as well. In the past, she used to have her breakfast, lunch, snack time, and dinner in Albert Manor, but these days, as soon as the reinforcement training was over, she went back home. Worried about what the mansion's visitors might think of her, she got into her carriage as quickly as if

she were making an escape. She didn't even embrace Mary whenever she departed.

Patrick, Parfette, and the others also seemed occupied. The relaxing tea they'd all shared a few days ago already seemed like a distant memory.

Mary couldn't stop herself from sighing. Adi smiled wryly at this and beckoned to her. "*Come here,*" his gesture seemed to say, as if he were calling over a child. Mary approached the bed, and Adi wrapped his arms around her waist, hugging her.

"I'd love to stay at your side, Your Ladyship. But I have something very important to do, so I have to leave tomorrow. I vowed to be at your side, and yet I'm leaving you alone without being able to explain why. I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. I can tell you're working hard too. I don't know what you're doing, but since it's you, I know it has to be for my sake," Mary said, hugging Adi back. His grip on her tightened in response.

Mary knew she'd feel lonely without him, and she wanted someone to help her with all the things she had to do. But Adi was trying to accomplish something too, and even if she didn't know what it was, it was her duty as his wife to support him. Plus, Adi had insisted that he'd tell her everything once the matter concerning Alicia was resolved. This meant that what he was doing had something to do with affirming her identity as the princess. It was very typical of him to convey information in a roundabout manner. Mary found the way he couldn't hide things from her—nor really tried to—adorable.

"I look forward to having tea with everyone. But I'd also like to spend time with my husband," Mary said, at which Adi smiled seductively and kissed her.

Mary closed her eyes and kissed him back. How sweet this time was! Her exhaustion was melting away. However, while they kissed, Adi placed his hand on her shoulder, causing her eyebrows to twitch. Slowly, his grip on her strengthened, and when he started pushing her back, she frowned. It seemed he was on the verge of pushing her down onto the bed...

Oh dear, Mary muttered inwardly. "You're getting up early tomorrow, so show some restraint!" she shrieked, firing a powerful blow at his flank. Her fist sunk in magnificently, and Adi crumpled down. Of course, Mary paid him no

mind, lying down and snuggling under the covers. “Good night, Adi,” she said, closing her eyes.

After all, it was also a wife’s duty to prevent her husband from oversleeping.

Chapter 4

Early the next morning, Adi departed from Albert Manor. Unlike the extravagant mansion or the lively town center, the place he arrived at was completely silent. There were no estates or even streetlights in sight across the vast expanse of land, only a solitary hut. Although the structure looked sizable enough to live in, its surroundings were eerily bleak. Perhaps the quietude would've made this a decent place for retirement or recuperation, but on the other hand, it seemed like an inconvenient location.

"So this is the place, is it?" Adi inquired, and the woman standing next to him nodded. The two of them had grave expressions on their faces. The air around them was heavy, in contrast to the serene scenery surrounding them.

Yet it was only natural for them to be in this state of mind. After all, they hadn't come here for an outdoor picnic, nor for a date. There was only one reason for their presence here.

"This hut belongs to that fortune teller..." Adi murmured.

"That's right. This is the home of the person with ringlets as powerful as Lady Mary's," replied the woman.

They both glared at the hut, one intending to help resolve a certain incident, the other burning up with the indomitable hairstylist's spirit.

"I don't know why you wish to see this person, Adi, but those ringlets are *my* prey."

"Be my guest."

"I'm going to defeat them, and then make my grand return as the hairdresser at Albert Manor!" the woman declared passionately, to which Adi offered an apathetic applause.

Thanks to her—or rather, thanks to her indomitable fighting spirit—they'd been able to locate the fortune teller's residence. *Once all is said and done, I'll put in a good word to help her find a job*, Adi thought. Then again, seeing her

sheer determination, he could easily picture her returning to Albert Manor after defeating the ringlets, and then working at a hair salon the next day as if it were a matter of course.

Adi shook his head at that mental image. This wasn't the time to be having such thoughts. He had to focus on finding a way to clear Alicia's name. Telling himself as much, Adi pulled himself together and began walking towards the hut.

Though it was daytime, the inside of the hut was dimly lit, its thick curtains obscuring the sunlight. The place must've hardly seen any cleaning, as everything was covered in a layer of dust. The air was gloomy and dreary, a stark contrast to the scenic nature outside.

A woman who looked to be about the same age as Adi's or Mary's parents had been the one to open the door, leading the two guests inside. Her simple, drab dress, combined with the air inside the room, made her look all the more sullen. Her complexion was so pale that Adi jokingly found himself thinking he'd stepped into a witch's abode. The plain, melancholy woman truly did give that impression.

However, each time she moved, her gorgeous jet-black ringlets waggled. Those tight curls didn't suit her unsophisticated attire. It was as if her hair alone were floating. An uninitiated stranger might've wondered why the woman wouldn't dress up to match her hair, or else keep her hairstyle simple to fit with the rest of her clothes.

But Adi, knowing those ringlets weren't a voluntary hair arrangement, gulped as he wondered if he'd finally found the person he'd been looking for. Meanwhile, the stylist next to him was already spreading out the tools of her trade, eager to get to work.

"Apologies for the sudden visit," Adi spoke up.

"No, it's all right..." the woman responded as she guided them inside. Both her tone of voice and countenance were cautious and uncertain.

That didn't surprise Adi, but he continued giving her a hard stare. Normally,

he would've put on a forced smile to ease the other party's tension, but given who he was talking to, he just couldn't bring himself to do that. It was already impressive enough that he wasn't openly glaring at her.

At the woman's beckoning, they all sat down around a table. Dubiously, she glanced between her guests and inquired, "So how may I help you...?"

"I'm here to straighten your hair."

"Be quiet for a moment, would you?" Adi scolded the stylist, before turning back to the woman. "I came here to question you about something. It's about Alicia—or rather, Princess Alicia. Tell me everything you know about her," he demanded, fixing his eyes on her.

The woman's breath hitched in recognition. When she turned her face away to escape his gaze, her jet-black curls wagged once more. (Seeing this, the hairstylist took out her comb in a flash. But her other hand gripped her wrist and lowered it. She must've been inwardly suppressing her fighting spirit until the conversation was over.)

"Princess Alicia, you say...?"

"I'm not here to punish you. That should be left to Alicia herself. I just want you to tell me what you know, and what happened back then," Adi said sternly.

The woman cast her eyes down for several moments, and then slowly stood up. With feeble steps, she approached a worn shelf. It must've been left untouched for a long time, as a white cloud of dust rose into the air when she reached for it. She pulled out a small box, and just as frailly made her way back.

After placing the box on the table, the woman took a single piece of paper out of it. The entire time, she kept her head lowered. Her face had grown pale and sickly, as though she were awaiting her final judgment. Perhaps she was reflecting on her misdeeds, or felt afraid of being punished for them. Whatever the case, she offered no resistance as she handed Adi the slip of paper.

Its degraded state was a testament to how long it had been kept in that box, but the contents were still readable. The paper was covered in wrinkles, as if it had been rolled up many times, indicating that the woman might've regretted taking it and tried to discard it. The edges had small rips on them, as if someone

had been about to tear the page up, but hesitated and stopped in the end.

Overwhelmed with guilt and fear, the woman must've tried to get rid of the document countless times, but each time she was about to rip it, she'd grown afraid and stopped herself. This single piece of paper reflected her many days of turmoil.

"This must be the princess's birth certificate," said Adi. "You stole it, and a new one had to be written."

"Indeed... Before kidnapping the princess, I took it from the office..." In a faltering voice, the woman admitted to her own crime.

Adi inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. *I have no idea what I would've done if she'd played dumb.* He had no proof that the woman had stolen the document, so if she had feigned ignorance, that would've been the end of that. A little belatedly, he realized just what kind of a gamble this had been.

At the same time, he also found himself thinking, *If she had played dumb, the hairdresser would've decided the conversation was over and attacked her with a comb and scissors. I truly have no idea what I would've done then either.*

Regardless, Adi's fears turned out to be unfounded. The woman had admitted her guilt, and remorsefully began her retelling of the events of that fateful day...

"Their Majesties will have a son."

Refusing to acknowledge that the prophecy had been wrong, the woman abducted Alicia. Once Their Majesties gave up on the search and had their next child—a son—the fortune teller would've had proof that her prophecy had been correct.

However, the biggest obstacle to that was Alicia herself. The fortune teller despised how that golden hair and those purple eyes seemed to flaunt the falsity of her prophecy. That was precisely why she kidnapped the baby.

Even if Alicia showed up at the palace one day in the future, some people would deem it ridiculous to ascertain her royalty by her hair and eye colors alone. Honestly, the girl *deserved* to be put under such suspicion for having interfered with the fortune teller's grand prophecy...

“Looking back on it all, I often thought to myself: How could I have been so conceited?” the woman said, sounding frustrated with her past behavior. The horror and regret in her voice were tangible. She spoke with her head hanging down, and she was so pale that she looked to be on the verge of collapsing.

But Adi was in no mood to sympathize with her nor offer her words of comfort. He only responded to her story with a deep sigh, which caused her shoulders to jolt.

The fortune teller had kidnapped Alicia, but she didn’t have it in her to either hurt or look after a child. Hence, she’d left the baby in a faraway orphanage, and ended up drifting to these lands in order to keep her identity hidden. The powerful emotions which had driven her to commit such heinous acts had gradually faded away, and the more time passed, the more frightened she grew over the extent of her own actions. Unable to come forward even after all this time, she spent her days quivering in fear, away from the public eye.

Adi half listened to the woman’s shaky recounting while gazing down at the document. In truth, he had no interest in her remorse or atonement. He was in no position to punish her himself, and no matter how regretful she sounded, his heart was unmoved. The document in his hand was much more important. There must’ve been a reason she had only stolen this page.

Searching for some kind of a clue, Adi’s eyes scanned the paper until his gaze stopped at one particular detail.

A few hours later, Patrick was frowning in his room as Adi told him what had happened earlier that day. Patrick breathed a massive sigh, and just that sound alone was filled with disgust. This severe manner of expression was unlike him, but there was nobody else in the room except for Adi, so there was no reason for him to be putting up a front.

Adi related the story without any sugarcoating and placed the document on the table. “I know there’s a lot to consider, but we should prioritize officially proving that Alicia is the rightful princess.”

“Yeah, I agree. When that’s done, I’ll have that fortune teller with the ringlets punished. Well...*does* she still have ringlets?”

“Half ringlets, you could say.”

“I see, so the second round ended in a fifty-fifty.”

Despite this humorous exchange, the two men’s grave expressions remained in place as they turned their attention to the documents. There was the worn slip of paper Adi had taken from the fortune teller, and the rewritten page which Patrick had brought from the palace. The contents looked almost identical, but as they compared them line by line...

“A moon-shaped birthmark?” Patrick murmured in puzzlement.

Adi nodded. “It’s only on the original document, but a note was hastily written which states that the princess has a moon-shaped birthmark. But it doesn’t say where, and it’s possible that it’s already faded away...”

That was the only difference between the two papers. However, there was no guarantee this would become irrevocable proof of Alicia’s identity. Adi muttered as much dispiritedly. Everything was still so uncertain.

But in contrast to Adi’s depressed state, Patrick lifted his head with high hopes. “No, she *does* have that birthmark!”

“Wait, really?! Where?!”

“Beside her belly button. I’ve always thought it was a strange shape, but to think she’s had it since birth... Adi?” Patrick called out quizzically.

Adi mightily averted his gaze. ““Her belly button,’ huh?” he murmured. ““Always,’ huh?” he went on.

For a while, Patrick didn’t catch on to what Adi was implying. He stared at Adi with wide eyes, until gradually his face began to flush and he glanced aside. Even his ears had reddened, which were nicely offset by his indigo hair. The two of them continued to stare to the side for a few moments.

Eventually, Adi cleared his throat and decided to get things back on track. “Anyway, if we show this to the doctor, I’m sure that’ll jostle his memory. Since Alicia still has the birthmark, we can use all of this as evidence.”

“R-Right.”

Surely even those who still harbored doubts wouldn’t be able to refute the

original report of the princess's birth and the doctor's testimony. And if they kept persisting with their arguments, the opposing side could instead demand that they provide proof that Alicia was a fake. Having found the first step to the solution, Adi and Patrick exchanged a look.

Right at that moment, they were informed that a short-notice council regarding Alicia's identity would soon begin.

The baseless rumor about Alicia and all the succession speculation had left high society in a stir. The ripples had even crossed national borders, so there was no chance the country of their origin could ignore the situation.

The matter concerning House Albert's succession, however, was purely a family issue. It was up to the Alberts to discuss it among themselves and for the head of the house to announce the heir. The other aristocrats could've gossiped and buttered up the candidates all they liked, but regardless of how much of a stir this situation created among noble circles, it wasn't something outsiders could intervene in.

But when it came to Alicia's identity, it was a whole different story. Allowing the rumor about her to run amok could've put the nation's dignity at risk. Sending out a princess with dubious origins for diplomatic meetings could've also led to international problems. Hence, the council concerning her identity had been opened in haste. Although reaching a conclusion would be difficult with Their Majesties absent, everyone could at least show that they were making attempts to find a solution.

"But still, holding the council *tomorrow*? That's a little rushed, isn't it?" Adi muttered with a sigh.

"Gracious!" Mary yelled, tearing up the invitation letters to "*Princess Alicia's Third Reinforcement Training*" to relieve her stress. The two of them were in Adi's room, holding another review meeting. Mary was ripping the letters because the third training session had also ended in failure.

Earlier that day, Mary had once again kidnapped Alicia first thing in the morning and held another meeting with the same lineup as usual. But it hadn't been long before Lang started fawning over Mary. Lucian had followed suit,

Alicia had listened to them both with immeasurable interest, and Roberto had brought everything to a close with some abusive language.

At this point, one could say that was the standard flow of events. And of course, the courtyard had once more been filled with spectators. They kept stealing glances at the tea party, and when Mary and the others dispersed, they followed suit.

As a side note, Mary had intended to teach Alicia about conversing like a proper lady today. However, the discussion had quickly deviated into how there'd been a time in Mary's childhood when she was fixated on the idea of secrets, and how adorable she'd been when she'd insisted on whispering into people's ears whenever she had anything to say. When Lang explained Mary's ringlets had been the size of his thumb and that she'd had about one and a half curls per lock of hair, Alicia had immediately responded with, *"Ah, so she was five years old!"*

"That girl is one thing, but I'm starting to get the feeling I'll have to do something about my brothers sooner or later as well," Mary told Adi.

"Come on, let's forget about that for now," he appealed. "Let's focus on Alicia. What shall we do about tomorrow's council?"

"Hmm... Actually, I'd like to ask *you* about that," Mary said, casting a sideways glance at Adi. She was silently asking him, *"How did things pan out on your end?"*

In reply, Adi nodded. Patrick had advised him to keep his cards close to his chest for the time being, just in case. But right after he'd said it, Patrick's expression had shifted into a wry smile and he'd added, *"Well, as much as you can."* Patrick and Adi had known each other for a long time, so Patrick understood better than anyone that Adi couldn't keep a secret from Mary.

Seeing Adi's nod was enough for Mary. A smile crept onto her face; it wasn't exactly a sweet smile, but rather one that implied she was scheming something, and that said scheme was succeeding so far. It was an expression unbecoming of a noblewoman, yet it was so very Mary Albert.



“I’m glad. It looks like summoning Alicia, getting my brothers’ cooperation, and holding those training sessions has all been worth it,” Mary declared.

“Indeed. It’s all thanks to the fact that you’ve been keeping all the people wrapped up in rumors together in one place,” Adi affirmed, letting her know how easy it had been for him to move around.

Mary proudly flipped her silver-thread hair off her shoulder. She had purposefully been going to the palace to fetch Alicia, whose identity was under suspicion, and bringing the girl back to Albert Manor. There, they’d have a tea party with the twin sons of House Albert, who were caught up in the rumors regarding their family’s succession.

Naturally, the other nobles’ curiosity had been piqued, from those who were simply curious to see such an extravagant lineup of people, to those who conjectured they were having consultation meetings about the succession. This also drew the eye of those who doubted Alicia’s identity and suspected that she was having confidential discussions with the Alberts on the matter.

Each person who’d gathered in Albert Manor’s courtyard under the pretext of being a visitor had their own motives for doing so. As a result, they weren’t paying as much attention to Patrick and Adi.

You’ve all been had! Mary thought with a self-satisfied huff. But her elated expression soon dimmed, and her brows creased. “There’s still the matter of that girl herself... I’ve got to give her one last whack for good measure.”

“You mean Alicia?”

“Yes. It’ll be the finishing touch. Adi, could you send a message to the palace asking that girl to come to Albert Manor tomorrow before the council begins?”

“Very well. I’ll go to the roof at once.”

Mary paused. “Just don’t slip,” she eventually advised. Adi nodded and told her to leave this to him—how manly he was at that moment...

Needless to say, he’d be climbing the mansion’s roof and using the lights to transmit a message to the palace.

Incidentally, when Adi returned, he informed her that he’d gotten a message

back from the palace specifying the exact time at which Alicia would show up tomorrow. When Mary heard that, she glanced up at the ceiling as if she were trying to look at the roof herself. “I see the messages now come in exceptional detail,” she remarked, narrowing her eyes at this ever-improving method of communication.



Early the following morning, Alicia stepped out of the carriage that had arrived at Albert Manor. Normally, she would’ve flown out of the vehicle with great enthusiasm and hugged Mary with just as much intensity. But today, her movements were timid. Conscious of her surroundings, she only trotted up to Mary.

The girl lacked any vigor. Alas, anyone in her shoes would’ve found it difficult to conceal their anxiety when in a few hours’ time, a council meeting to question their rank would be held. Alicia must’ve had all sorts of mixed feelings: unease about what would happen next, frustration at her inability to prove her own identity, and fear over the simple fact that she was under suspicion.

But Mary wouldn’t concern herself with such things. “You’re a disgrace!” she exclaimed, scolding Alicia for her frightened appearance. The girl didn’t possess even an ounce of majesty right now. “Why are you looking around so much? Are you trying to rotate your head all the way around? You’re already a chicken and a boar, so stop trying to add owl to the mix as well.”

“Lady Maaary...”

“What? And don’t you snivel at me; it’s deplorable!”

“My mother and father are both gone... Lord Patrick told me not to worry, because he has an idea, but still...” Alicia said weakly, casting her eyes down. Even her hair, which normally shone brilliantly in the sunlight, seemed to lack its luster today. Where once she would radiate kindness and camaraderie with her whole body, right now she was full of nothing but worry and distress.

Seeing the other girl act the complete opposite of her usual self caused Mary to falter. (Meanwhile Adi, who was witnessing this exchange while standing next to Mary, thought to himself, “*Ah, so Lord Patrick can’t keep a secret from Alicia either.*” He inwardly laughed at how they both had that in common.)

“What should I do, Lady Mary...?”

“Obviously, you’re going to go to that council meeting. If you don’t believe in yourself, you won’t be able to prove anything,” Mary scoffed. “Well, you’re a peasant no matter what you do.”

“That’s true... Maybe I’m not a princess, but just a peasant...”

“Stop getting hurt by such words now of all times! What happened to that loud and annoying vigor of yours?!”

“Right, I’m loud and annoying... Someone like me doesn’t have the caliber to be a princess,” Alicia murmured.

“Ugh! I’m about to lose my mind!” Mary screeched. “Look, just go back to being a boisterous peasant!”

“Yes, I’m a boisterous peasant... That’s why everyone’s suspecting me. Maybe this whole thing about me being a princess is just a mistake...”

“This is just depressing! That’s it; I’m taking a shot!” Mary flicked Alicia’s forehead with an audible smack.

Alicia, who hadn’t expected to be hit under such circumstances, looked startled. She pressed both hands to her forehead, and in a moronic tone of voice, asked, “Lady Mary?”

Mary allowed a moment of silence to pass as she brushed her fingers through her hair. Her sharp gaze was fixed on Alicia, whose eyes were filled with deep apprehension. But even that sight didn’t make Mary feel inclined to offer some meaningless words of comfort like, *“It’ll be okay.”* She wasn’t about to rub Alicia’s back either, let alone embrace her. She had no reason to do any of that; that was Patrick’s job. And she—she was none other than Mary Albert.

As for the person standing before her...

“Yes, you are a peasant girl. That much is true,” Mary began. “You operate on a schedule based around a chicken crowing, and you charge people like a wild boar. And whether or not you’re truly the princess has nothing to do with me.”

“Lady Mary...”

“But there’s one thing I need you to remember. Whether you’re a princess or

not..." Mary paused momentarily. Finally, she took a deep breath, and...

"It won't change the fact that you're *my* best friend."

...made her declaration while tightly clasping Alicia's hand.

Alicia's eyes widened, then welled up with tears. Her anxious countenance crumpled pitifully, and in a shaky voice, she called out, "Lady Maaaryyy...!" She held out her arms and slowly approached Mary, intending to hug her.

Usually, Mary would've scolded her and resisted. But just for today, she only smiled wryly and allowed Alicia to embrace her. The way those arms squeezed her so tightly did annoy her, yet it also felt nostalgic at the same time. Spurred on by such feelings, Mary told herself that this was a onetime exception and softly patted Alicia's back.

"Listen, if you act all pathetic during the council, nobody will take you seriously," Mary said, giving Alicia a pep talk.

"Right... I'm okay now!" Alicia replied reassuringly. Though she still sounded tearful, there was a clear strength in her tone of voice. Her eyes were still damp too, but they were no longer full of anxiety. The girl gave Mary one more squeeze, then decisively stepped away. "Thank you, Lady Mary! I'll give it my all!"

"I'm glad to see your enthusiasm, but don't forget your elegance and dignity. You're the best friend of Mary Albert, so you'd better act the part."

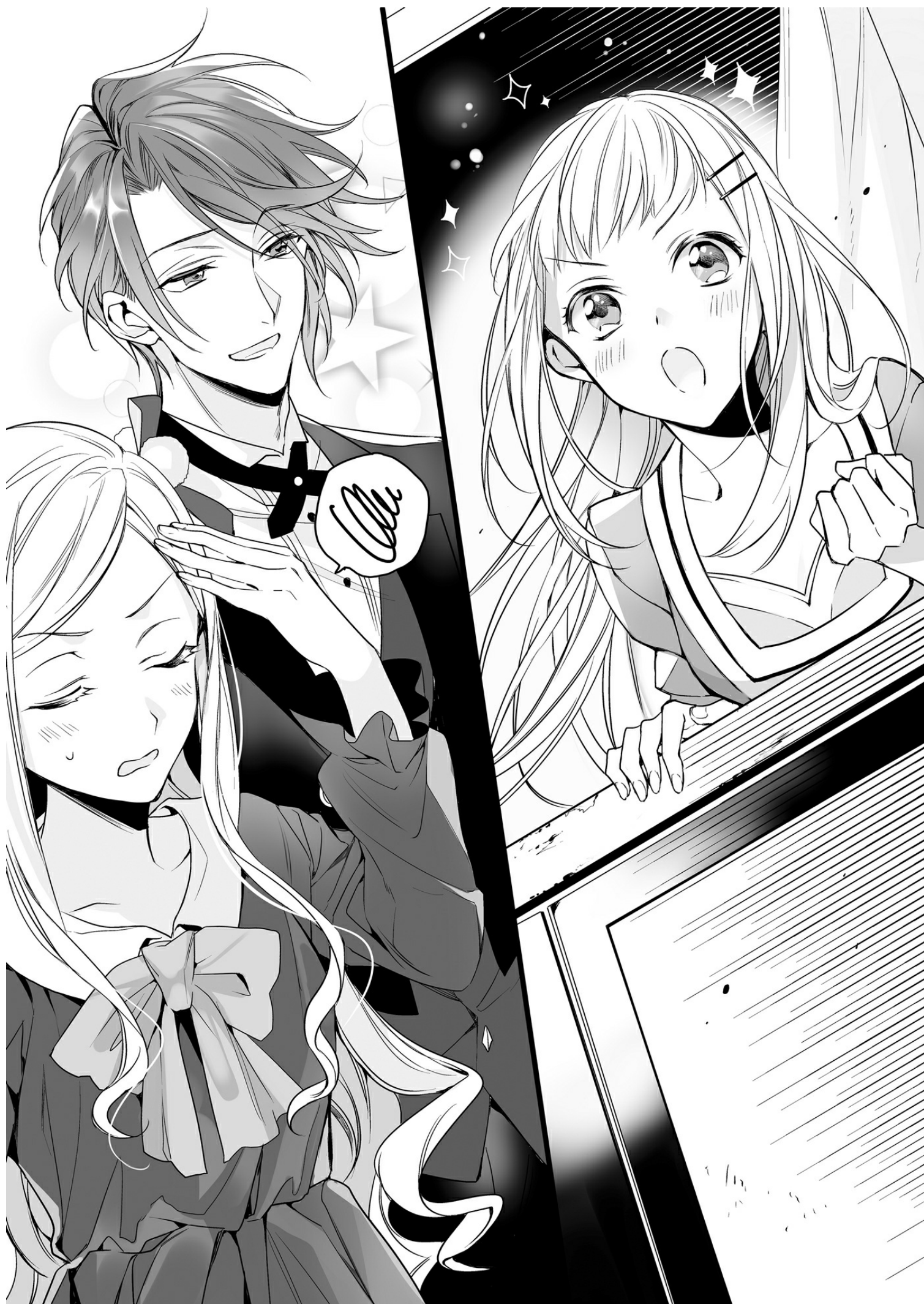
"Yes!!! I got it!!! I'll get through this!!!"

"She's louder than ever before..." Mary muttered, fed up with Alicia's excessive cheer. It would've been distasteful if Alicia were to behave pitifully during the council, but having her act even livelier than usual was troublesome in its own right. Her previous proclamation all but forgotten, Mary once more smacked Alicia's forehead.

"Lady Mary, I'll do my best! I'm your best friend, after all!!!!" Alicia exclaimed loudly while Mary and Adi pushed her into the carriage. They somehow managed to pin her down when she tried to peer out the window, and ordered

the coachman to go.

The carriage passed through Albert Manor's gates and grew smaller in the distance. Mary sighed as she watched it recede, and the frustrated sound caused someone to chuckle at her. Of course, it was Adi. When Mary turned to glare at him, he tried to hide his laughter by forcing the corners of his mouth down, but it wasn't working.



“What? If you have something to say, then spit it out already,” Mary demanded.

“I was thinking about how you’ve finally become more honest, my lady... No, just kidding. I didn’t have any such thoughts.”

“Good. You’d better not,” Mary grumbled sulkily.

Adi’s smile grew. He pressed his hand to his mouth to conceal it, but the laughter in his eyes was obvious. His attempts at covering it up were painfully insincere.

Irritated, Mary stomped on his foot. “We need to get ready!” she urged.

“Get ready?”

“What, did you think I’d just stay home, kick my feet up, and wait around until the council meeting was over?”

“I wouldn’t go quite that far, but...” Adi trailed off. He meant to imply, *“There’s nothing more you can do now.”*

It was true. The council had summoned the nation’s leaders, as well as each noble family’s head of the house. Mary may have been an Albert, but she wasn’t the heir, so there’d be no seat waiting for her.

This upcoming meeting would be just like the one that happened during their high school years, when everyone had been trying to ascertain Alicia’s identity as the princess. The moment Adi recalled that, his breath hitched. “Wait, milady... Don’t tell me you plan to charge in just like madam did back then?!”

“Calm down; it’s nothing that extreme. But I’m not going to sit around and wait for things to blow over,” Mary decided, walking towards the mansion.

Adi wondered where she was going, but even when he asked her as much, she just stepped inside the manor. “Your Ladyship, where are you going? What do you plan to do?”

“If you really think about it, whether that girl is a princess or not has nothing to do with me. But...” Mary stopped walking suddenly.

She was standing in front of the doors to a certain room. Every part of the

estate was gorgeous, yet even so, these doors stood out in their sheer extravagance. One glance was enough to determine that they led to a very important place: Duke Albert's room.

Mary stepped inside, greeted by the sight of her father and brothers. Roberto was present as well. As the servant of House Albert's eldest sons, he was often seen around the mansion grounds multiple times a day.

"You're attending, aren't you?" Mary murmured under her breath when she noticed that her father was wearing attire much more formal than usual. Most likely, the twins were seeing him off before he departed for the council meeting. With such thoughts in her mind, Mary approached them.

"Greetings, Mary," her father said kindly, but his eyes widened in surprise when she responded in a perfunctory manner.

"Father, you're attending the council, yes?"

"I am. I don't know when I'll be back, so I'd like to ask you to do a few things while I'm—"

"Please, father! You must be on Alicia's...no, on my best friend's side!" Mary pleaded, cutting the man off. His eyes grew even wider, but Mary just kept gazing at him intently. She was all but begging him.

After a moment, her father slowly placed his large hand on her shoulder, rubbing it gently. "Calm yourself, Mary. House Albert has always backed Princess Alicia."

"I know, but that's not what I mean. Even if she's not the princess— I mean, we definitely should endorse the fact that she *is* the princess, but... She's my best friend, so... I..." Mary stammered, mumbling incoherently.

Her father smiled. Lang and Lucian exchanged a look with each other and chuckled too. Although Mary herself couldn't figure out what she was trying to say, the three men conjectured it right away. It was as if she wanted them to tell *her* what she was attempting to convey.

"It's not 'Princess Alicia'—rather, you wish to save your precious best friend," the head of House Albert proclaimed.

“Y-Yes... That’s right.”

“In that case, you should go. Help your best friend through your own means.” With that, her father pulled out a pocket watch from the breast pocket of his jacket. House Albert’s emblem was engraved upon the lid, which was decorated with small gemstones. The timepiece looked fitting in her father’s masculine hand, for while it was lavish, it also had an air of solemnity.

It was no mere pocket watch—this was the symbol of the head of House Albert.

When the man held it out to her, Mary glanced between the watch and her father with a confused frown. She knew what this meant, yet she couldn’t comprehend it. After all, by giving this to her...

“Father...?”

“If you wish to save your best friend, go do it yourself. However, only the head of each family is allowed to attend the council. Mary, you understand, don’t you?” Smiling softly, her father traced his fingers over the pocket watch. The golden chain swayed with a quiet rattle. The sound weighed heavily on Mary’s heart.

It was almost as if the watch itself were urging her to hurry up and take it into her own hands. Yet it was precisely because she knew what taking it would mean that her arms didn’t budge. Her fingers twitched slightly, but that was all.

Accepting the pocket watch would’ve settled the matter of House Albert’s heir... Alas, no, things were not quite that simple. The head of the family still had to have a proper discussion about it, proceed with the official formalities, and only after much careful preparation would the role be handed over.

However, by taking the watch, Mary would become one of the candidates for succession. And if she attended the council meeting with this in hand, that would make her a stronger contender than either of her brothers. In fact, everyone would likely perceive her as the guaranteed heir. That meant Mary would no longer be able to act like a bystander to the succession.

“Father, I...”

“Don’t worry. Even if you take it, you won’t have to decide right away. But

there's a way for you to get your hands on this too."

"But I'm a woman, and our family has older sons..."

"This has nothing to do with gender or age. The title of heir will go to the one who ought to have it. I want you to know that you have a chance of becoming the head of House Albert too," her father said, gently persuading her.

Mary met his kindly eyes. He was looking at her with affection, proud of all the growth she'd been through. Those eyes were ready to witness his daughter's future.

She then turned her gaze to her brothers, who were smiling serenely. Lang looked cheerful as always, while Lucian was calm. Even Roberto's usually sharp countenance had softened into a gentle smile as he gazed at her.

Everyone was eager to see Mary accept the pocket watch. Perhaps the reason that they'd shown no hint of deciding the heir despite all the rumors and predictions swirling around them was because they were waiting for Mary to take the stage. Yet she just couldn't make up her mind.

What I want to do, and what I should do... I don't know. I can't sort my thoughts out at all. Her confused gaze moved to Adi, who was standing next to her. He smiled fondly at her.

"I'm torn, Adi..."

"Of course you are. This is a big decision."

"But I want to accept this pocket watch. I don't want to have to rely on my father for the council meeting. I wish to go myself."

"Indeed. And I know you can handle it."

"Yes... You're right! I can do this!" Mary's expression brightened at Adi's encouragement. All the hesitation vanished from her face, and her eyes twinkled as she looked at Adi. Talking to him really did help her sort out her thoughts. With his tender gaze, he was seeing the answers she already had inside of her. "I don't need to ask my father to do this for me. I want to go to the council and have the right to speak for myself! In fact, it's not just that I want to—I *will* do it!"

And with that grand declaration, Mary picked up the pocket watch. It felt heavy in her hands, and not just because of its physical weight. However, this was a weight she could bear. She looked at it for a few moments, until Adi reached for the watch and helped to fasten it around her wrist.

The moment Mary felt it secured in place, relief washed over her. She clasped Adi's hand tightly and exclaimed, "Now, let's go!" while enthusiastically pulling him along.



After Mary and Adi lurched out of the room (with Adi's pitiful cries of, "*Are we seriously going right now?!*" echoing behind them), the door closed. From among those left behind, someone let out a sigh.

The one who eventually spoke up was Roberto. "Was that the right decision?" His eyes were still on the door, and it was unclear whom exactly he was addressing. Yet the other three men all shrugged and smiled wryly, then nodded.

"I'll do *anything* for my adorable Mary! I'd sacrifice my very life to support her!"

"I'll put my life on the line for my sweet Mary...! I hope she's smiling when I breathe my last...!"

"I was foolish to even bother asking you two," Roberto murmured. "Your devotion to her is as sickening as always. But Your Grace, what about you?"

At the question, the head of House Albert smiled peacefully. His expression was appropriate for the leader of a distinguished family, while at the same time being that of a father who was thinking of his daughter's future.

"Ah, it's not all decided just yet. But rather than choosing between Lang or Lucian, I'd prefer to add Mary to the mix and have a three-way succession battle. High society's going to be in an uproar for quite some time now!" the man said with a hearty laugh.

The twins burst into laughter as well. The three men were acting like this precisely because they knew what a storm these events would cause among noble circles. Roberto wondered if he should feel impressed to see the air of

utter leisure they had, or if he should be exasperated at this troublesome bloodline.

His shoulders drooped reflexively. But if he really thought it over, this was a very Albert-esque tale. Roberto had decided to check in with them just in case, but in the end he wasn't surprised by any of it. "Indeed, since that foolish younger brother of mine is a specialist when it comes to supporting Lady Mary, I'm sure things will go well. But...no matter what, he's my *foolish* younger brother," he said, emphasizing the last part.

At this, the rest of the men could only shrug in resignation, as if to say, "*He's the same as always too.*"

Chapter 5

The air outside the chamber doors was oppressively heavy, perhaps due to the nature of what was being discussed on the other side. The maid who had led Mary and Adi here was acting stiff and nervous too, but even so, she weakly called out to them before they could enter. "Um..."

Mary and Adi turned to look at her in surprise. She peeked back at them and timidly continued, "Pardon my insolence, but please do what you can to support Lady Alicia."

"Alicia?" Mary echoed.

"Yes. I know it's not my place to say any of this as a maid. But Lady Alicia always treats even someone as insignificant as me with utter kindness..." Indeed, that same kind Alicia was in a predicament right now, yet the maid had no way of helping her. She must've been frustrated with her own powerlessness.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mary caught sight of the other staff who were trying to stay hidden behind a corner. There were maids as well as other palace employees among them. All of them were worried for Alicia, and though they couldn't attend the council, the least they could do was keep watch. When they noticed Mary looking at them, several people bowed deeply and called out, "Please help Lady Alicia!"

Sensing their sincerity, Mary brushed her fingers through the hair resting on her shoulder. She straightened her back and brought forth the pocket watch that she'd received from her father. It was the symbol of the family head, with House Albert's emblem engraved on it. When Mary had first arrived at the palace, she'd simply presented the watch, and without needing to explain anything, she'd been led directly to the council chamber. Such was the sheer gravitas of this item. One had to be fully prepared to bear its weight.

"Right now, the responsibility for the Albert name rests with me. I can't act based on friendship alone," Mary announced.

“O-Of course. My deepest apologies for saying something so rude...” the maid said, hurriedly lowering her head as she reflected on her own actions.

Mary watched her with a smile, and then puffed out her chest. She looked just like the head of the house, unashamed of the pocket watch in her possession. “But rest assured. House Albert fully supports Princess Alicia. This isn’t based on just friendship. It’s a decision made by the nation’s most distinguished family, and we’re putting our name on the line for it. Besides...”

The maid peered curiously at Mary, awaiting the continuation. Her eyes were swimming with doubt and anxiety, and she looked utterly frail.

Mary looked back at her steadily and nodded. “I must teach them all a lesson in what happens when you dare to hurt Mary Albert’s best friend!”

At that wrathful proclamation, the maid’s expression began to gradually brighten. Her anxiety made way for a look of relief and hope, and she cried out, “Thank you so much!”

The woman was acting as if everything had already been resolved. When Mary smiled at her hasty conclusion, the maid snapped back to her senses as her cheeks flushed. Then, she offered one last bow and quickly trotted away. The rest of the staff must’ve figured out that the conversation had ended, for by the time Mary looked back towards the corner, they’d all disappeared too.

Mary nodded to herself in satisfaction, and then turned to Adi. “Wasn’t I really cool just now, Adi?!”

“Yes, you seemed just like the head of House Albert. Though, when compared to His Grace’s elegance, majesty, and the benevolence he exudes... M-Milady, throwing a silent punch counts as a...foul...!”

“You were being so gross that my fist moved before I could say anything. My right hand’s certainly terrifying...” Mary said, rubbing her knuckles. She’d sunk her fist into Adi’s flank without any conscious thought on her part. Perhaps this was the harmful influence of the pocket watch she had in her custody. In exchange for the head rank of the house, she couldn’t control her right hand’s aggression.

Mary muttered a few such things under her breath, then smiled smugly and

said, “Anyway,” to change the topic. Of course, everything she’d said previously had been a joke. But she still felt bad for hitting Adi with no prior warning, so she rubbed his side soothingly. After a few moments, she tugged on the sleeve of his jacket.

Adi turned his eyes to her curiously. He looked slightly concerned, and Mary was sure it was because he could see the unease reflected in her own eyes.

“Adi...”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just wondering... Hypothetically speaking, if Alicia *isn’t* the princess, what should I do...?” Mary murmured. Minutes ago, she’d spoken to the maid with sharp assertiveness, yet now she looked very frail.

Adi peered at her, trying to ascertain her emotions. “My lady?”

Although his rust-colored eyes were gazing at her, the apprehension within her chest remained. She hung her head to escape his eyes. In her current state, even Adi’s gaze felt difficult to endure. He must’ve been wondering why she was acting like this now, after they’d come all this way. Perhaps he’d ask why she was hesitating when there was no going back. Or maybe he’d feel disappointed in her for losing her nerve at the eleventh hour.

But Mary was about to throw down the gauntlet at the council while representing the Albert name. Precisely because she understood the importance of that responsibility, her hand now wavered by the door instead of knocking on it.

She had no intentions of relying on her memories of the otome game she’d played in her past life either. That was already history to her. In fact, it felt like those memories had nothing to do with her as a person anymore. Right now, she was here as Mary Albert, and she’d rely on her own thoughts and ideas. Yet that was exactly why she felt such unease.

Adi must’ve discerned her feelings. “Indeed,” he muttered slowly. Unlike Mary, whose anxiety had been palpable in her voice as she expressed her feelings, Adi’s demeanor was quite detached. “If Alicia isn’t the princess, it’d mean House Albert was backing a fake.”

“E-Exactly. That’s a serious crime...”

“And all the responsibility would fall on you, as the one who bears the head of the house’s authority.”

“Right, I’d be held accountable... Maybe they’ll charge me for the crime and cast me into ruin...” Mary whispered sorrowfully.

Adi placed his hand on her shoulder to soothe her. She could feel a bit of his warmth seeping into her. Spurred on by the sensation, Mary slowly looked up at him. His calm eyes were gazing back at her. When he next spoke...

“Then you’ll have achieved your biggest wish.”

...it was a cheerful proclamation that didn’t suit the current situation in the slightest.

Mary’s eyes widened. “My wish?” she repeated, her voice sounding foolish even to her own ears.

However, Adi remained perfectly composed. If anything, he sounded pleased, going so far as to say things like, “What a journey this was,” and “Here we are at last.” He was making it sound like Mary had been wishing for her own ruin for a very long time.

“Adi...?” she asked, staring at him in perplexity as she wondered what he was talking about.

Rather than explaining anything, Adi looked back at her as if he was wondering what *Mary* was talking about. He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, if Alicia isn’t the princess, you’d have to bear that responsibility as House Albert’s representative. But House Albert itself could claim it was acting out of loyalty towards the country, and would probably get away with only a little of the blame.”

“R-Right...” Mary responded plainly, nodding along to Adi’s words while clearly not yet grasping the full picture of what he was trying to tell her.

However, everything he’d said was correct. If the council concluded that Alicia wasn’t the princess, it would look as if House Albert had supported a fake. They’d impose the responsibility for that on Mary, as she’d be attending in the

role of head of the Alberts. After all, the ones with the most power were often the first to be put on blast when things went south.

Nonetheless, House Albert hadn't been acting out of malice. So long as they made claims such as, *"House Albert supported the fake princess because of our loyalty towards Their Majesties,"* and *"Mary, who wields a lot of authority, acted based on her friendship with the fake princess,"* the family itself shouldn't face too much censure.

House Albert was the country's most illustrious noble family. If they were to be crushed so easily, the aftereffects would even cross national borders. Whatever the goal of those who'd started up this incident, it was unlikely that they'd been aiming to make the Alberts fall into total ruin. Chipping away some of their power would've been perfectly satisfactory.

"House Albert's power would diminish, and you'd face the punishment," Adi went on. "If that happens..."

"Yes?" Mary prompted.

"Since the northern lands already have a guest, you and I can be banished to the southern island together, milady," he concluded, as if sharing a brilliant idea.

Mary stared at him blankly, her eyes round with shock. But indeed, whether to the northern lands or the southern island, they'd face the banishment *together*. As she realized what Adi was trying to say, all of the doubt, anxiety, and hesitation within her vanished instantly. Instead, she smiled at him.

Just as Adi had explained, if Alicia wasn't the princess, House Albert would face censure, and Mary would bear the responsibility. But wasn't that the very same ruin she'd once been aiming for? If so, then why should she fear anything?

"Indeed. You shall follow me even to the southern island," Mary decreed.

"Of course," Adi answered happily, glad to see Mary had returned to her usual self.

Encouraged by his composed gaze, Mary clenched her fists with determination and turned to the doors.

Once upon a time, she had been present during a very similar council meeting. But that hadn't been of her own volition, nor had she been in official attendance at the time. That meeting had been held to investigate the imperial seal that Alicia had found in her possession, and Mary's mother, Keryl, had forcibly brought Mary along with her.

Back then, Mary had been a high school student, and merely the daughter of House Albert. She'd barged into a place where she hadn't belonged (although the public, who loved a good story, spread tales of this event as Mary barging in for the sake of friendship).

However, things were different now. Mary hadn't come to the palace at her mother's bidding. She had made the choice to board the carriage herself. This time, she wouldn't be a powerless noble girl completely out of her depth. She had the official right to attend the council.

And unlike the last time, Mary harbored friendship towards Alicia. That would've been unimaginable for her past self, who'd been aiming for her own ruin.

Mary entered the chamber. Most of the attendees were already present, and the air was silent. But her entrance caused a slight stir among the people. Some beheld her with shock, while others seemed to look right past her, searching for the actual head of the house. A few people were simply staring at her in mute disbelief. But despite everyone's obvious incredulity, they decided not to risk saying anything out of line, and so nobody addressed her.

Among the attendees, Mary caught sight of Patrick, and smiled upon seeing his surprised expression. "Perhaps I should wave?" she said jokingly to Adi.

"Please don't," he replied, his shoulders sinking.

"But it's so unusual to see Patrick pull that face. Even the flawless Prince Charming can look like he's seen a ghost, huh?"

"I think *you're* the one doing the haunting, milady... Anyway, let's just take our seats. I'm so nervous I can barely stand."

Such was their exchange as a maid guided them through the chamber. In just that short amount of time, Patrick managed to fix his expression into a dignified

one, which was so like him. His indigo eyes were brimming with determination and readiness, so he looked even manlier than usual as he gazed at those sitting across from him.

And next to him is... Mary thought, and her breath hitched at the sight.

It was Alicia. She was sitting in her chair imposingly, looking straight at those who were putting her under suspicion. Her purple irises were clearer than usual, and her golden hair glimmered beautifully in the chamber's lights. However, she was simply sitting there. She wasn't glaring at anyone, nor was there a trace of anger about her. It wasn't that she was putting on a brave front either. But she looked elegant, and there was even an intimidating air around her. Standing in front of Alicia at this moment would've been enough to overwhelm anyone.

That's the stature of a princess, Mary told herself, and then grinned boldly. *Well, I came here bearing House Albert's name. It wouldn't do if she didn't brandish a similar level of grace.* With that, she and Adi followed the maid to their seats.

Once they sat down, a deep voice resonated within the chamber. "What's this about?" asked one of the men, his expression clearly requesting an explanation for why Mary was here. No, most likely he already knew what this meant, but he seemed to want to hear it from Mary herself.

Mary smiled elegantly and pulled out the pocket watch from her jacket. "I apologize for my late arrival. I am attending today's council."

"Is that so...? We all assumed your father would be coming..."

"I've already spoken with him. Please take my comments as House Albert's collective input," Mary explained frankly. Her words conveyed the fact that her father wouldn't be attending, and that she was taking the seat meant for the head of House Albert.

News of this was sure to spread through the aristocratic world in a flash. It might even impact high society to the same extent as whatever conclusion about Alicia's identity would be reached today. *I bet they'll make this into another moving tale...* Mary muttered inwardly. Perhaps the next theater play would be a success story about how the heartbroken maiden awakened her

talent for business and inherited her family. *Well, that sounds pretty fun too.*

Mary inhaled deeply right as the facilitator cleared his throat, signaling the start of the council.

The council regarding Princess Alicia was a solemn affair, but it proceeded without any conclusive evidence. However, as those theorizing were people of high social standing, their arguments seemed sound and credible at first. High-ranking individuals needed to know their way around the art of conversation in order to put pressure on any opposing parties. The maids standing in the corner were absorbed by these arguments, their expressions periodically shifting between grave and hopeful.

Eventually, Mary's turn to speak had arrived. It wasn't as if people were speaking in perfect order one after another, but the council members' eyes settled on Mary at one point as they awaited her words. Alicia, who'd remained frigid even as the discussion switched continuously between affirmations and denials of her identity, also turned to look at Mary.

Feeling the weight of everyone's gazes, Mary slowly spoke up. "House Albert believes that Princess Alicia is of royal blood, and as such, supports her completely."

Nobody was surprised to hear her assertion at this point, but one of the attendees countered, "Do you have any conclusive evidence to back that claim?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't...? I believe you and Princess Alicia are very close, though." The man's words alluded to his suspicion that Mary was speaking purely on the basis of her friendship with Alicia, rather than any actual conviction.

Mary stared back at him calmly. She picked up the pocket watch she had placed on the table in front of her earlier. Its profound weight could've only been borne by the heir of the nation's most distinguished family, House Albert. One could even say that whomever possessed it was as significant as the royal heir.

Yes, House Albert has become too big... Mary muttered in her mind, tightening her grip on the watch. That was the very reason she'd chased her own ruin during high school. She'd been worried that the polarization of power would put the Alberts at risk of incurring the royal family's wrath.

And now, although the situation had shifted, even Patrick shared her sentiments. Just as he'd suspected, their families were on the verge of capsizing together with the royals. The eyes of the man who was questioning Mary blazed with a hostile desire to wheedle answers out of her.

No, it wasn't just him. Harsh glares from all around the chamber were directed at Mary. Afraid of House Albert's power, these people were attempting to lure them into a trap. They intended to kick Mary down for making decisions based on friendship alone. This was the extent to which the other nobles regarded the Alberts as a threat. The most powerful family in the nation, on par with the royalty...

But that was exactly why Mary had to wonder: Why were they trying to sideline the decision of *House Albert*? After all, the Alberts were such major players that no ordinary person could've hoped to fight against them, let alone intervene in their actions.

"I admit, I don't have any conclusive evidence about Princess Alicia's identity," Mary said.

"Then you should rethink your idea of supporting her and—"

"No. House Albert supports Princess Alicia, and that's all there is to it. If you object to my family's decision, then say it outright."

"I... I never said *that*..."

"Then what *are* you trying to say?" Mary prompted. "Do you find my words difficult to understand?"

"No, it's just..."

"It seems like you do, so let me say it one more time. House Albert supports Princess Alicia. That's my final word on this topic," Mary announced, her statement both frank and clear.

House Albert supported Alicia as the princess. They didn't have concrete proof to back that claim, but unlike the other families, they wouldn't spew some convenient excuses and hypotheses to make their case. The one thing House Albert *did* have here was its authority—and that was more than enough to laugh off these empty arguments.

“What else would you like to hear from me?” Mary inquired sharply, by which she meant, *“Don't even bother.”*

Her words caused the ambience inside the chamber to shift slightly. Some in attendance looked relieved, others disgruntled. The former were those who supported Alicia as well, and were relieved to see that not only was the country's apex family on their side, they were its very ringleaders. The latter, meanwhile, were those who'd realized that such a prominent family had turned against them, and were beginning to rethink their positions. A few of the attendees still hadn't decided their allegiance, but Mary's caustic words must have impressed them, for they started nodding in assent.

From within the chamber came a quiet whisper: “Lady Mary...” It was Alicia. Her countenance had remained dignified throughout the whole council, and her eyes had refused to waver regardless of what others had said. They softened ever so slightly for a moment, but then widened in surprise when someone muttered...

“Spoiled little girl...” Of course, the speaker was referring to Mary.

Alicia, unwilling to let this pass, was on the verge of standing up as she called out, “Who said that...?!”

But before that could happen, Mary herself sprung to her feet with enough force to make her chair rattle. Her hair flowed behind her, and she glared in the direction of the voice. “*What* did you just call *me*?!”

Nobody replied to her indignant remark.

Adi, who would've usually rushed to pacify her, only narrowed his eyes. There was a scowl on his face, and he would've liked to object to the derogatory words someone had just hurled at his wife, but said wife had jumped into the fray all by herself. (Adi would later say, *“I wanted to stand up as well, but I decided to leave it to your lightning reflexes, milady.”*)

In any case, while Mary was overcome with rage, the rest of the chamber was so silent one could've heard a pin drop. Obviously, whoever had insulted Mary had no intention of coming forward.

Mary swept her eyes over the crowd once, and then spiritedly exclaimed, "You might be right. But I want you to remember something: I am *House Albert's* little girl! If you wish to insult me, be prepared to make an enemy of my family name, authority, and wealth!"

In response to her furious roar, the chamber was once again silent. Everyone openly avoided her gaze, and those on the opposite side of the argument began sweating profusely.

Eventually, someone cleared their throat. It was plain that they were trying to ease the oppressive atmosphere within the room. Mary glared at them momentarily, before sitting back down with a displeased "Humph!" Her actions were much more forceful than usual, signifying her anger. But there was a nuance to her conduct that said, "*I'll give you the floor.*"

For the one who had cleared his throat was Patrick. Surprised by this development, everyone turned to look at him. Those who had been sweating mere moments ago looked relieved at the prospect of the topic changing. They almost seemed thankful for his interruption.

But it was clear from Patrick's expression that their gratitude was misplaced. Though he looked calm, his eyes were full of animosity. He was exuding an even icier air than normal, and those who knew him could even sense his wrath. Yet he was still able to repress his anger and retain a Prince Charming-esque demeanor—just as one would expect from someone like Patrick.

"If I poke him once or twice, I bet he'll explode," Mary observed conspiratorially before she could stop herself.

"Please don't," Adi said, pacifying her. He even held her hand to prevent her from getting up a second time.

Unable to move, Mary stayed put and cast her eyes towards Patrick. He took out an envelope from his jacket pocket, and held it out to the council's facilitator. It looked to be of high quality and was sealed with wax, so it must've come from a befitting family. The wax seal, however, belonged neither to the

royalty nor House Dyce.

Reading through the contents, the facilitator's eyes grew wide. "This is..." he uttered, making it clear that this wasn't just some ordinary letter. "This is an authorization for House Albert to make the final decision by proxy concerning today's matter."

"An authorization? From who?" Mary asked in bewilderment. As far as she could tell, all the figureheads of the country were present at this council. There were a few people who hadn't been able to make it because they were away in distant nations, but it wasn't anyone with whom the Alberts were on good enough terms to explain this letter.

Who on earth would've written such a thing...? Mary wondered right as the facilitator began reading the listed names out loud, causing a buzz among the attendees. Such was the power these names contained—indeed, they were on par with those present in the chamber.

The very first was House Eldland. The letter had been signed by the head of the house, with a note stating he was ready to take full responsibility in the event of an emergency.

Once the facilitator had read that part out loud, someone suddenly called out to Patrick. This new speaker looked tense, indicating he was on the side who purported that Alicia was the fake princess. "Why did you have that, Lord Patrick...?"

"The head of House Eldland brought it to me personally this morning. Feel free to go to House Dyce yourself to confirm that, if you don't believe me. He said he'll stay until the council is over, so I bet he's enjoying some tea right about now." Patrick had a leisurely smile on his face as he replied, signifying that he was telling the truth.

Mary pictured Gainas relaxing at the Dyce estate. Of course, Parfette was by his side, and Mary could easily imagine Gainas muttering, *"Why did we have to come all this way?"* Parfette would then respond with, *"Because we had to give the letter to Lord Patrick in person!"*

Mary felt her gratitude towards them swell at this mental image, and with a chuckle she thought, *Perhaps he deserves twenty points for this.*

House Eldland was just one of the families listed in the letter. As the facilitator read on, Mary was reminded of all of her friends.

There was House Barthez, Veltina's family. Mary pictured the selfish, huffy girl with her fluttering ribbon exclaiming, *"I negotiated with my father just for you, big sis!"* Acting self-absorbed for someone else's benefit was very out of character for Veltina, and Mary was certain that the rest of the girl's family and her spouse had all smiled softly and nodded upon seeing it.

Margaret's family, House Brownie, had also signed the letter, and the same was true for Carina's family. Both houses had a rich history, and their influence extended even abroad. In Mary's imagination, the beautiful girls had looked at each other with gorgeous smiles, saying things like, *"Isn't it wonderful how we can do someone a favor even from abroad?"* and *"Oh yes, this is how you use your authority!"* A small shiver ran down Mary's spine at the image.

(Naturally, Carina's footstool was also there. Mary had only seen such a scene once, but her ability to still recall it so vividly was a testament to how traumatic it had been for her. The image was practically imprinted onto her mind.)

Mary's mental images aside, the authorization letter yielding the final say to Mary showed just how much faith her friends put in her. It seemed like Alicia hadn't been aware of the letter either, for she smiled fondly upon hearing the names. Under usual circumstances, her eyes would've welled up with tears and she'd have raised her voice in thanks. She'd probably have sprung to her feet and raced off towards House Dyce then and there to throw her arms around Parfette. But needless to say, she didn't do any of that right now.

"As the head of House Eldland handed this to me directly, I'd like for you to give it due regard," Patrick appealed. Despite the nonchalance in his voice, he was indirectly saying that the council couldn't afford to ignore the letter. Mary was sure that he was cackling on the inside.

The facilitator understood what Patrick had meant, and handed the envelope back with reverent care. His hand moved with a peculiar slowness, likely because he feared the names listed in the letter and knew he couldn't leave a single stain on it. "I will take this under advisement."

"By all means. And...that's not all I wanted to show you," Patrick said, his tone

of voice lowering as he pulled out a document.

Unfortunately, from her vantage point, Mary couldn't see what kind of document it was. Alicia, who was sitting right next to Patrick, also didn't seem to know what it was as she glanced between the paper and him curiously. Then, in a strained voice, she unassumingly asked, "What is this, Lord Patrick?"

"This is a note written by the doctor at the time of your birth," he responded.

"A doctor?" Alicia repeated, still gazing at him in confusion.

Mary couldn't understand why Patrick had brought such a thing either. Not to mention, the document looked strangely damaged. The paper was conspicuously deteriorated, and must've been kept very poorly.

Everyone else had similar doubts, but Patrick soon explained that this document hadn't been kept in the country's official archives. Rather, it had been missing all along.

"A batch of documents relating to the princess's birth was kept at the palace. One of the pages from this batch went missing, and had to be rewritten," Patrick explained. "What I'm holding in my hand right now is the original, lost page."

His words caused a stir within the chamber. Yet the document bore the royal signature and the managing body's official seal. The original doctor had confirmed that he'd undoubtedly signed the document himself as well, and there was an attached note from him stating as much. Indeed, Patrick had prepared everything thoroughly.

"You really found such a thing...?" Alicia asked.

"Yeah. That said, I'm not the one who went looking for it," he replied, glancing to the side. His gaze landed on Adi.

Mary couldn't hide her surprise. She turned to him so vigorously that her hair flowed with the movement. "Adi?" she asked. "Is that what you were doing?"

Feeling uncomfortable at the way everyone's eyes bored into him, Adi smiled dryly. "It wasn't anything difficult. But I decided that I had to play my part too, so I cooperated with Lord Patrick."

“So *that’s* why you were so busy. As expected of you,” Mary told him, and the humble Adi smiled at her awkwardly. Mary hadn’t known the details of what he’d been doing, but she trusted him and had allowed him to get on with it. Now it was clear that her trust in him had been well-placed.

Still, what was the point in locating the original document? she pondered. Everyone else gazed at Patrick expectantly as well, and he nodded in response.

“It’ll be faster if we just compare the documents. I have the rewritten version with me as well,” Patrick said as he handed the papers to the facilitator.

The restless attendees jumped to their feet and approached. Standing up during such a grave meeting was hardly acceptable, but nobody paid this any mind right now. The solemnity of the council had already vanished all the way back when Mary had made her caustic remarks. Now, everybody wanted to see the answers as soon as possible.

Mary began standing up as well, but then dropped back into her seat with a thump.

“Don’t you want to go look, Your Ladyship?” Adi asked her.

“No, I’m fine. You found that document, right? In that case, I’m sure this is the definitive evidence we need to prove Alicia’s identity. I believe that, and so I’ll stay in my seat and wait for them to explain it.”

“Milady...”

“Besides, all these tall men are gathered together. Even if I went up there, I wouldn’t be able to see a thing! But I suppose I’ll go if you give me a piggyback ride. Ah, I have a late start!” Mary exclaimed suddenly.

Adi had been moved by her words, yet now his shoulders sank in exasperation. But then someone muttered, “Birthmark...?” and Adi’s lips quirked up. When Mary echoed the word, Adi’s smile only intensified. He’d already read the documents, so he knew what was happening.

In fact, only he and Patrick were aware of everything. Watching as all these bigwigs exchanged shocked glances, and receiving questioning looks from Mary and Alicia, the two men felt pretty good about themselves. It was the superiority of those in the know.

“What are you grinning for? How nasty!” Mary scolded, elbowing Adi. She was very much frustrated with the fact that he knew everything while she still had no idea what was going on.

Equally unaware, Alicia was fidgeting nervously. Her own position was at stake, and so her eyes swam with anxiety as they shifted between the leadership figures and Patrick. It seemed she had reached her limit when it came to acting as the cool, dignified princess.

Urged on by the state she was in, Patrick decided to put things to an end. “I hope you’ve gotten a good look,” he called out, which of course was his way of telling everyone to get back to their seats.

The attendees, who’d been discussing things among each other in shock, finally snapped back to their senses. Embarrassed over the ruckus they had created during such a grave event, they all hurried back to their original seats.

Afterwards, Patrick took one more look at the documents he held and then handed them over to Mary. “Go on,” he told Alicia gently, and the girl glanced at him anxiously before standing up and trotting over to Mary.

“Lady Mary... You really came...” Alicia said tearfully.

“It’s not like I did this for *your* sake... No, I guess I can’t say that now,” Mary responded, soothing the other girl. “Anyway, let’s focus on these documents,” she added, peering down at the two papers in her hands.

Just as Patrick had said, these were the notes written by the doctor at the time of the princess’s birth. Beyond a small difference in font, nothing really stood out at first. But then Mary noticed one particular line, which said...

“A moon-shaped birthmark?” she murmured. Indeed, the original document had a hastily written note which stated that the princess had a moon-shaped birthmark. The rewritten document, however, made no mention of that. *What could this mean?* Mary asked herself, at which point Adi took the reins in explaining things.

“After discovering the original document, we went to speak with the doctor who attended Princess Alicia’s birth and asked him why the new one didn’t mention the birthmark. He explained that it was because there were fears that

information could put the princess in danger.”

“Who decided that?” Mary inquired.

“A person whom Their Majesties trusted greatly, and the very same one responsible for kidnapping the princess.”

“The fortune teller... Right, the drills!” Mary shouted, connecting the dots. Adi nodded.

Having grasped most of the events, the council attendees turned to look at Alicia. The girl, who’d been listening to everything dumbfounded, let out a gasp. Frantically, she grasped at her own abdomen. “I do... I have it! A moon-shaped birthmark, next to my belly button!”

Her faltering cry caused another buzz within the chamber. Not only did Alicia have the golden hair and purple eyes that only royalty could inherit, but also a birthmark the likes of which was recorded on the princess’s birth certificate. That would indeed make for decisive evidence. The resolution was close at hand.

Mary was full of conviction, but all of a sudden, she heard a certain sound. It was almost as if something were being torn. If she had to specify, it sounded like the screaming of threads being ripped. *Don’t tell me...!* As Mary turned to look, she was met with the sight of Alicia trying to pull apart the clothing that covered her abdomen. The poor garment was stretched on both sides, and the buttons looked seconds away from bursting open.

“I... I will show you...in a moment...!”

“If you take off your clothes right now, on top of recognizing you as the rightful princess, House Albert will use all of our power to tear you down,” Mary declared icily.

Those words were enough to snap Alicia out of it. She quickly removed her hands from her clothes, and her cheeks reddened due to her momentary loss of composure. “I didn’t mean to...” she whispered. She was acting like her usual self again.

Mary glanced down at her pocket watch. “Looks like cram study sessions can only go so far, but I suppose you’ve got the spirit,” she praised sarcastically.

Next on the agenda was indeed confirming Alicia's birthmark, but given where they were, she obviously couldn't expose it just like that. Instead, a few of the female palace staff were called over, as well as several high-ranking noblemen. Mary requested to be present too, and the staff guided the group to a different room.



“Now, show us your belly with grace. You need to do it carefully and with dignity, so as not to cause the other party any offense. This is part of etiquette as well,” Mary instructed.

“Th-The proper etiquette for showing one’s belly...” Alicia mumbled, her body stiff with nerves.

“That doesn’t exist,” Patrick chimed in to comfort her. He’d also requested to be present for this.

Alicia breathed a sigh of relief, and then slowly undid a button. Thankfully, she was wearing a shirt today, so if she did this right, she’d only reveal her abdomen—hopefully without any tearing either.

As she moved the fabric out of the way, her pale skin and shapely belly button came into view. And indeed, there was a birthmark next to it. Its curved shape matched the document’s description. “My caregiver at the orphanage mentioned that I had this back when I was first left there,” Alicia explained.

“It really does look like the moon. Pardon me,” Mary huffed, poking the birthmark. Alicia shrieked at the ticklish sensation.

Obviously, nobody dared to mimic Mary’s action. The men had only briefly glanced at the mark when Alicia first revealed it, and now they were openly looking away. The female staff, meanwhile, couldn’t treat Alicia with any disrespect. This meant that it was up to Mary to scrupulously examine the birthmark.

“I’m doing this on behalf of high society—nay, the whole country!” Mary prefaced, implying there was no use in Alicia arguing about it. With that, she began repeatedly poking the girl’s abdomen. “Oops, my finger slipped!” she added while prodding a different part of the girl’s body. Naturally, it *was* an honest mistake. Mary’s hand had just accidentally gone off course. It wasn’t as if she’d done it to cheer up the still-nervous Alicia.

This went on for a while, until finally Mary cleared her throat. She made a show of wiping her fingers with a handkerchief, while Alicia puffed out her cheeks in her peripheral vision. “Surely this confirms it, everyone? I prodded it for my own satisfactio—I mean, for the sake of confirming it. It’s a real

birthmark, and it looks just like the one described by the doctor,” Mary said, appearing much refreshed after having thoroughly poked Alicia.

The others nodded at her words. Half of them looked relieved, the other half somewhat uncomfortable. The group left the room and was about to return to the chamber, when someone called out, “Alicia!”

Everyone turned around and spotted Their Majesties rushing over. The queen made no effort to appear like a solemn ruler, and didn’t even greet anyone else as she hugged Alicia tightly. The king also wrapped his arms around them both, before finally turning his gaze towards the others.

Mary grasped her skirt and lowered her head. The rest quickly greeted Their Majesties in a similar manner, though some of them moved with notable stiffness. Just as the council had confirmed that Alicia was the true princess, the king and queen had returned. In other words, just as these men had realized they were at a disadvantage, the very people who could hand out an immediate judgment upon them had appeared.

Those who had disavowed Alicia now awkwardly tried to spin tales in obvious attempts at covering up their blunder. But none of them could come up with any convincing deception, and they all blabbered little more than nonsense.

“I’m sorry this happened while we were away, Alicia...” said the king.

“It’s okay, father.”

“We tried to make it back as soon as we heard what was happening. It must’ve been so scary for you...But it’s okay now,” he assured, petting her head.

“Yes, it’s okay now,” Alicia echoed with a relieved giggle.

His Majesty had been so concerned for her that he’d been hugging her and speaking one-sidedly, but his eyes widened at her response. “Is it?” he asked with surprise. Although Alicia and her mother were like two peas in a pod, her father’s expression closely resembled Alicia’s whenever she was shocked. How could it have ever been in doubt that she was their rightful daughter, indeed?

This was all so utterly ludicrous... Another awful farce has come to pass, Mary thought with a colossal sigh. But as she watched Alicia happily giggling away,

she smiled to herself.



Their Majesties embraced Alicia for a while longer, and once they'd heard about everything that had happened, they called over Patrick. His Majesty placed a hand on the young man's shoulder, and the four of them formed a small circle. Patrick looked a little bashful to be included in this appreciative embrace.

Those who hadn't been swayed by the rumors and had supported Alicia all along now gave an emotional round of applause. At some point, the maids and other employees had rushed over as well and joined in the clapping. A few people were even wiping tears from the corners of their eyes, relieved that everything had ended well.

Indeed, the grand finale had come to a happy conclusion. Mary wouldn't have been surprised to see flowers softly floating through the air around the scene.

However, a portion of the crowd wasn't exactly basking in the moment. Needless to say, it was those who had suspected Alicia and harshly targeted her. They were now keenly aware that they had not only incurred Mary's wrath, but also made powerful enemies abroad, as evidenced by House Eldland's letter. On top of that, Adi and Patrick had irrevocably proven that Alicia was the kidnapped princess, and the once-doubtful parties were witnessing the heartfelt family hug happening before their very eyes.

Their expressions were easy to read, as they practically screamed, "*I've screwed up.*" They were sure to be blamed for disrespecting Alicia, and earn the royal family's ire. At this point, they couldn't even hope for a lifeline from the houses who had managed to escape danger. Falling into ruin was a real possibility for them.

"My, my! I wonder if she'll have them banished to the northern lands?" Mary asked with a lovely laugh, joining the applause as she watched the royals embrace. She wasn't clapping because she was moved at the sight or overcome with emotion, but purely for the sake of fitting in with the others (and the fact that she occasionally got bored of it and sneaked in a rhythm was for the sake of entertaining herself).

“I’m glad everything ended well,” Adi said with a gentle smile.

“You played a great part in that, Adi. Be sure to stress how exhausting this has all been for you so that the royals feel indebted to you.”

“There you go again... But my lady, you gave the crowd a splendid tongue-lashing. I wouldn’t expect any less from the head of House Albert.”

“The head...? I wonder about that...” Mary glanced down at the pocket watch in her hand. The chain swung between her fingers. The inlaid gemstones and engraved emblem were both beautiful, and it was obvious at a glance that this was a costly article. Some would’ve surely refused to possess it out of fear of what it meant. It symbolized the leader of the nation’s most powerful noble family. Even a mountain of jewels wouldn’t have matched this watch’s value.

“I took it on the spur of the moment, but should I really have this?” Mary mused. “I haven’t studied the family business, and nobody’s discussed this with me properly yet. And it’s not like I hit the jackpot or found it after it had been hidden.”

“Why are you just casually reviving the lottery and treasure hunt schemes?”

“And I haven’t eaten that many croquettes either.”

“Is that some new idea that even I haven’t heard of yet?! Are you going to suggest an eating contest next?!” Adi exclaimed, hurriedly trying to put a stop to Mary.

She stuck out her tongue. “I was joking!” she replied. Obviously, she wouldn’t have actually suggested something as ridiculous as an eating contest to decide the family heir.

“Mary.”

At the sudden sound of her name, Mary turned around and noticed her father and brothers. The palace must have informed them about what had occurred, and they’d decided to show up. “Father!” Mary rushed over to him.

The man placed his large hand on top of her head. “You did well, Mary. I heard all about how your magnificently caustic words silenced some of those people. One of the maids who was present for it told me you were so wrathful

and intimidating that it gave her goose bumps. I knew you could do it if you put your mind to it.”

“I have mixed feelings about you singing my praises for *that* particular point, but I suppose I’ll take it. And Adi did well too... Adi? Oh, right. My brothers’ complex is still the same, even at the palace,” Mary murmured, narrowing her eyes at the scene before her.

“I heard that the value of your contribution was proportional to your impertinent height!”

“Excluding your height, I’ll commend you...”

While Lang patted Adi’s head, Lucian did the same to his shoulder. They both put so much strength into their actions that it didn’t look like they were praising Adi at all. Adi was letting out pained groans due to the force exerted upon his body.

The only person who was able to stop them—Roberto—simply gazed on and remarked, “You did as well as you are foolish.” Despite the praise, he showed no inkling of a desire to lend Adi a helping hand.

“Let’s ignore them,” Mary decided. “Father, about *this*...” She held up the pocket watch for him to see. The man had given this to her earlier, declaring that she should go save Alicia for herself. There was absolutely no chance that someone like him hadn’t realized what this meant and what results it would yield.

Mary then glanced towards her brothers, who were still bullying Adi. They’d been present when she received the watch too. It had happened right in front of them, and they had seen her off when she’d rushed outside with the item in hand. Neither of them had tried to stop her from taking the watch, nor had they objected to the idea of her attending the council. No, they’d simply gazed on as if that was how things should’ve been.

Mary had always insisted that she wasn’t involved with the succession. She was a woman with two brothers, so she wouldn’t become the heir. Nor did she want to. Such had been her claims. However, now it seemed she was the only one who’d thought that way.

“You all believed I could become a candidate for heirship, didn’t you?” Mary asked her father.

“Of course,” the man affirmed. “You are my sweet child. I’d never take that choice away from you just because of your gender.”

“Thank you, father... That’s exactly why I’ll be returning this to you.” Mary held the pocket watch out towards him. His eyes grew wide at this unforeseen development.

Even the twins turned around in shock and approached them. “Why are you giving it back, Mary?” Lang questioned. “You should just inherit the family. We’ll do everything we can to support our adorable little sister’s succession! House Albert’s future will be full of prosperity if the three of us work together! The height of three people combined cannot lose to anyone!”

“Right, that’ll resolve the succession problem...” Lucian added. “Or is this because you can’t rely on me? You don’t want any support from me, huh...? Is it my height? Is it because of my height...?!”

“Calm down, you two,” Mary told them. “Forget about your height for a minute. I’m just giving it back to father *for now*.” Emphasizing the last part, she all but forced the watch into the duke’s hands.

Still at a loss, her father, brothers, and even Roberto stared at her in confusion. Only Adi, who seemed to have guessed her intentions, chuckled and said, “As expected, milady.” He stood next to her, his calm, gentle eyes affirming her decision without need for any words. Meeting his gaze was enough to flood Mary’s chest with relief.

Even if she had been banished to the northern boonies after pursuing her own ruin, and even after her plan had failed and she’d attended college, she had maintained the belief that things wouldn’t be so bad if Adi was with her. Indeed, she’d *always* believed that. It was true now, and it would be true in the future.

“Adi, if you’re with me, then no matter what happens, it won’t be so bad. And I know the two of us can do this!”

“Yes, that’s right. You and I can do anything, milady.”

As the pair gazed at and validated each other, everyone else watched them and wondered what on earth they were talking about.

Sensing the others' eyes on her, Mary grandly puffed out her chest. Her hand was empty. She wasn't holding the pocket watch that signified the head of House Albert. Her taking that seat during the council had merely been an emergency measure. That was why she now made an announcement:

"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!"

The others stared at her, dumbfounded by her decision. But, moments later, they all burst out laughing because this was just so *her*. They looked at Mary affectionately, and her father's eyes were full of warmth and love, having witnessed his daughter's growth. He looked very happy indeed as he put the pocket watch away into his jacket.

"If that's how you want to do it, then I'll keep working hard for a little longer. High society's going to be stormy for the next while."

"If it makes them forget about our succession, I'd say it's a good thing," Mary responded with a pleasant laugh, at which her father smiled in amusement as well.

The aristocratic world might've been in an uproar over the Albert succession dilemma, arguments swirling left and right as to which of their children was the most worthy. But to the nation's most prestigious family, such turmoil was little more than a passing breeze. All Mary had to do was stand tall while the others kicked up a fuss. And when the right moment came, she'd once again take hold of that pocket watch.

Recalling the weight of it in her hand from minutes ago, Mary clenched her fist. She'd issued a grand declaration of war to her brothers. Now, she would have to work hard to make herself appear like the head of the house, and that would keep her busy.

"I still have some things that I need to do, so I can't inherit anything right away," she revealed. "We're very busy, aren't we, Adi?"

“Ah, yes... Are we?”

“Yes! Besides, I don’t want to become the head of the house just yet. I want to be your bride for a while longer...”

“M-My lady...! In that case, rather than staying in Albert Manor, how about the two of us—”

“And most importantly, I have a duty to uphold as the migratory bird restaurant’s manager! I want to open more branches, set the business on the right trajectory, and find an official successor! Otherwise, I can’t take over House Albert.”

“Right... Of...course...”

Mary looked Adi over curiously when his shoulders drooped visibly. Was it something she’d said? But even when she asked as much, Adi didn’t reply, opting to adjust his posture instead. She wasn’t sure if she was imagining the slight glint in his eyes.

“I’ve made up my mind. Milady, we must take over House Albert no matter what! And then Albert Manor will be *our* house!” Adi declared with sudden determination.

Mary felt a little overawed, but she responded in kind, clenching her fists. “Y-Yes, exactly... Let’s give it our all!”



“My vote goes to Lady Mary!” someone exclaimed authoritatively. Meanwhile, a pair of arms wrapped around Mary’s waist. This powerful embrace could’ve only come from...

“Alicia, we won’t be deciding anything by vote. It’s been a while since you’ve hugged me in this way, and I’ll respond to it by force! It’s graceless, so quit it at once!” Mary demanded, flicking Alicia’s forehead.

With a giggle, Alicia slowly pulled away. She placed her hand over her forehead, but she still looked quite happy, considering she’d just been smacked.

“Goodness, it shames our nation that a country hick like you is our princess. I’d rather have you replaced by a refined, docile woman,” Mary huffed, hurling verbal abuse at Alicia.

Of course, such words caused Alicia no hurt at this point. Instead, she happily clasped Mary’s hand.

To think she acted so frail this morning... Mary murmured inwardly, remembering how anxious and weak the tearful girl had looked. Since it had been an unparalleled opportunity, perhaps Mary should’ve tried harder to cause her pain during that time.

“It really does irritate me when you’re so energetic. Calm yourself a little.”

“Once you become the head of House Albert, let’s work together to support our country, Lady Mary!”

“Patrick! Come fetch her at once!” Mary screeched.

Patrick smiled wryly and walked over, placing his hand on Alicia’s shoulder. He gently guided her to face him, and then slowly slid his hand down towards her waist.

Mary glared at them. “I said to fetch her, not to flirt with her,” she complained. But the couple, who were by now snuggled together and smiling at each other, didn’t hear her words.

“I’m thankful to both of you from the bottom of my heart,” Patrick said, addressing Mary and Adi. “Of course, my vote also goes to Mary.”

“I told you: we’re not doing this by vote!”

“If you were fine with a lottery, then why not a voting system? Honestly, you might as well decide it by height— Oops, pardon me.” Patrick covered his mouth with his hand. His attempt to conceal his “slipup” was clearly insincere.

Lucian and Lang whipped around to face Patrick with wide eyes the moment they heard him say the word “height.” Then, their gazes shifted...towards Adi, of course. Having a premonition that the same scene that had been occurring since their childhood—and even just a few minutes ago—was about to play out again, Adi’s face stiffened. He cast Patrick a spiteful glare.

“Excuse me; it was a slip of the tongue,” Patrick claimed with a sweet smile. A breeze seemed to manifest out of nowhere to flutter his indigo hair, making his expression look downright refreshing.

The sweeter Patrick’s smile grew, the more Adi’s expression soured, while the twins crept towards him. “If we’re deciding it by height, you’re the tallest, Adi!” Lang shouted. “I refuse to hand over the heir’s seat to some tall guy! Hurry up and shrink!”

“S-Stop it, Lord Lang!” Adi pleaded. “I have no intention of inheriting via my height! I’m fine with just supporting milady!”

“You have no intention of inheriting?” Lucian echoed. “So you married Mary while harboring such half-hearted sentiments... This is unforgivable. You seriously need to shrink...”

“I didn’t mean it like tha— Lord Lucian! Please stop pushing my shoulders down!” Adi cried as Lucian pressed down on his shoulders, and Lang on his head.

As she witnessed the outbreak (or rather, yet another outbreak), Mary’s shoulders likewise sank. She then stepped between the two parties, shielding Adi. “Listen up, Lang and Lucian! Once I inherit House Albert, I will ban the topic of height within the mansion!”

“Your Ladyship... You decided that for my sake...?”

“Rest assured, Adi. Once I’m in charge, I will do everything in my power to protect you—er, your *height*, that is!” Mary proclaimed vigorously. Adi smiled in response. He reached his arm out towards her, perhaps intending to embrace

her, but...

“How benevolent! Making up a rule just so that we won’t fight! That’s our Mary; she intends to become an affectionate leader! In that case...” Lang trailed off.

“Sometimes conflict is necessary... But if Mary commands us as the head of the house, we’ll obey her. That’s why...” Lucian paused.

Then, the twins bellowed in unison, “Let’s shrink Adi while we still can!” With that, they once more pounced upon Adi, intending to shrink him before Mary inherited.

“Good gracious!” Mary roared.

Everything was so boisterous now that it was as if the solemn council—and even the storm of malicious rumors—had never happened. Part of the watching crowd was smiling, while part of them sighed in exasperation. A few gazed at the scene as if to say that it was proof of peace. Among them all were Alicia and Patrick, still embracing as they observed the spectacle with grins on their faces.

“What do you think will happen, Alicia?” Patrick asked her.

“Me? Hmm...” Alicia turned to regard Mary and the others with a serious look on her face. She’d been watching them as their friend, but now she viewed them as the country’s princess. “I think that as long as it’s Lady Mary, everything will be fine. I mean, it’s Lady Mary, after all! Right, Lady Mary?” Alicia shouted loudly as she approached Mary.

Mary, whose guard was down, let out a furious scream when those powerful arms gripped her in an embrace.

Epilogue

Beautiful flowers were in full bloom around Albert Manor's gardens. This serene scenery presently served as the venue for a befittingly elegant tea party.

The host, Mary, took a sip of her tea and smiled in satisfaction at its taste. These tea leaves were her favorite, and their aroma and depth of flavor were the best in existence.

Sitting next to her was the cheerful Alicia, who was gazing at the invitation letter to today's party. Mary had shown up at the palace bearing this missive just after noon, and brought Alicia back with her to Albert Manor while brooking no room for argument. Yet Alicia had made no attempts to resist, and joyfully went along with it.

Next to Alicia was Parfette. The girl took a bite of her cake and quivered at its deliciousness, then took another and quivered once more... Her microvibrations showed no signs of stopping. Finally, she had a sip of tea, and quivered at its deliciousness too.

"Everything's so tasty, I can't stop my tears... And to know that Lady Alicia's problem was resolved, and that Lady Mary is a candidate for House Albert's succession... I'm so relieved, astonished, and full of anticipation that my tears are just...!"

"In a way, it's quite impressive that you can lump everything together under the umbrella of 'tears.' Not that there's any point in saying that now..." Mary murmured. "Anyway, thank you for coming all the way here, Parfette. I'm glad we can have tea together. Right, Alicia?"

"Yes! Since this is a celebratory tea party, I really wanted Parfette to join us. Oh, right! Would you like to see the birthmark next to my belly button?!"

"Don't just go around frivolously exposing your navel!" Mary reproached.

"I really...*really* want to see it. Just once... Oh, the rumored birthmark...! It truly does look like the moon! My tears...!"

While Alicia unashamedly revealed her stomach and Parfette trembled with emotion, Mary yelled, “Behave yourselves!”

The scene was clamorous, yet it was enough to bring a smile to one’s face. That the girls were making so much noise just showed how great of a turmoil they’d managed to overcome. This was a tea party between friends who’d saved the princess from turbulent rumors. The girls had decided to leave punishing those responsible for the rumors and ultimately settling the matter up to Their Majesties and other leadership figures of their parents’ generation, but there was no doubt that *they* had been the ones to resolve the situation. Who would ever dare to interrupt a tea party being held for such circumstances?

(Regarding the topic of punishment, Alicia and Adi had smiled calmly and excused themselves from any further conversation regarding the matter. “I’m just glad it’s resolved. That’s enough for me!” Alicia had said.)

(“I was only lending my support,” Adi had explained.)

(Meanwhile, Mary and Patrick had a confidential talk on the matter. “Our parents’ generation will be able to dish out a much harsher punishment than anything we could come up with,” Mary had argued.)

(“You make a good point,” Patrick had responded, and the two of them had cackled while also excusing themselves from the matter.)

Following the boisterous scene, someone called out to the girls. Lang, Lucian, and Roberto were approaching. They must’ve heard that Mary was holding a tea party in the garden, and decided to show their faces. The twins looked pleased, as they weren’t here to greet House Albert’s guests, but rather say hello to their younger sister’s friends. When Parfette was about to hurriedly get to her feet at the sight of them, they stopped her.

“It’s good to see you’re having fun, Mary. But how about you spend time with us after dinner today?” Lang proposed. “Let’s play some board games! Show a little thanks to your brothers!”

“If you don’t want to play a board game, then a card game would be fine too,” added Lucian. “As long as you give us your time... There’s no better reward in our eyes. So keep us company, I implore you...”

As usual, the brothers were requesting the same thing in completely contrasting yin-and-yang ways. Mary's shoulders drooped. "You've finally decided to take the offensive... I'll pass on the games. You two can just play together."

"No, this won't be mere playtime. It'll be a succession battle!"

"A succession battle?! All right, I'm in!" Mary said, accepting the challenge as a fighting spirit blazed in her eyes. "After dinner it is!"

The heir still hadn't been decided, and the same held true for the selection method. Hence, whether it was a board game or a card game, Mary had no intention of losing. Nor would she take a loss by default for refusing to participate.

While Mary was all fired up, Roberto calmly said, "I shall make the preparations." Behind him, the twins high-fived in celebration of their success. Unfortunately, Mary didn't catch that, as her eyes followed Roberto's line of sight.

He was gazing at a nearby table. His narrow eyes were cold—freezing cold, in fact. "Right as I'd begun to reconsider how I viewed him, that foolish brother of mine..." he muttered, his tone of voice dark.

Mary also looked exasperated in turn. Alas, anyone would've become fed up, were they to look over at the table where two miserable men were sitting and face-palming.

"Strange... We were just drinking normally at first... When did it turn into a drinking contest...?" Patrick mumbled. He had his elbows propped uncharacteristically on the table as his hand pressed against his forehead. His voice was hoarse, and he moaned at intervals. If one didn't know he was hungover, they might've mistaken his appearance for languid sexiness.

This was the first time he'd drunk this much (the flawless Prince Charming's life obviously didn't present any opportunities for drinking contests), and he could hardly move. The pain that now tormented him was even palpable in the sound of his voice.

"I don't know... I feel like we might've opened one bottle of strong alcohol

after another, but...my memories are a blur..." Adi answered with a groan. That said, since he wasn't sure of his memories, it was unclear whether his words counted as an actual answer or not.

Either way, Adi was suffering from a hangover as well. He tried lifting his head to look at Patrick, but it rocked back and forth before he hurriedly grasped a hold of it again. "The sun is too bright..." he whined pathetically, at which Patrick offered a tiny nod as he cast his gaze down.

Someone placed two cups on the table before them. But it wasn't tea, just plain water. The one who'd brought the cups was Gainas, who stared at the other two men with incredulity. "I see, so I've been summoned to be a nurse..." he murmured wistfully, as if he were philosophizing.

Forcing the head of a distinguished noble family to look after drunkards could've led to an international problem. But Mary just laughed lightheartedly and wrote it off by telling him, "I'm counting on you, Gainas."

To top it off, Parfette administered the coup de grâce by adding, "I'll give you five points for this."

Gainas had no right of veto in this situation, and continued looking after Patrick and Adi, who grumbled things like, "To think that / of all people would be hungover..." and "We'll need someone to curb us next time..." (Gainas had a terrible premonition when he heard the last part about someone having to curb them, which needless to say, would later turn out to be entirely accurate.)

"But you know, Lord Patrick, I drank more than you... Probably. The last few memories are hazy, but I won... I'm pretty sure..."

"Don't be daft... I drank more... I think... All right, let's get the person who'll curb us next time to be the judge."

"Guys, let's just set aside the matter of who won for now," Gainas said with a sigh, consoling the two competing yet suffering men.

After stealing a glance at the men's table, Mary exhaled quietly. She muttered to herself about how relieved she was that she'd separated the tables, and inwardly applauded herself for her spur-of-the-moment decision. (Said decision had been made based on two factors. First, Adi had groaned and refused to eat

during breakfast. Second, although Patrick had indeed shown up after Mary had summoned him, his movements had been painfully sluggish.)

In contrast to the exasperated Mary, Alicia was giggling away. She seemed to be having plenty of fun.

“My, I see you’re enjoying yourself while your husband is suffering,” Mary said. “Patrick, seeing you suffer puts this girl in a good mood. She’s surprisingly cruel.”

“Oh, Lady Mary! If anything, *you’re* cruel! I’m just happy to be able to have tea with everyone,” Alicia responded. “It’s thanks to you all that I’m still here.” As if in appreciation for the newfound peace, the girl placed her hand atop Mary’s, which had been resting on the table. Alicia’s hand was thin and elegant. It was also warm, though Mary didn’t know whether that quality was inherent, or because the girl had just drunk warm tea.

Parfette exclaimed in admiration at the sight. Her eyes were glittering, and she was on the verge of giving them an applause.

This was the scene where Mary would reaffirm her and Alicia’s friendship by squeezing the other girl’s hand. Or at least, that would’ve been the case if this were a theater play. However, someone like Mary Albert wouldn’t do such a thing.

“Don’t touch me so casually, you peasant!” she shouted, retracting her hand and smacking Alicia’s instead.

The Crybaby Lady's Point System

"We have to do something to help Lady Mary and Lady Alicia!" Parfette firmly decided. It was the day after she'd informed Mary and the rest about the rumor, and presently she was visiting House Eldland. Though yesterday she'd been pale and trembling, today her eyes were lit up with a fighting spirit. That said, she was also trembling because of that.

Gainas looked startled, for this was the first thing Parfette had said to him upon arriving. Seeing his worked up yet still quivering fiancée, he placed his hand on her shoulder. "Did you have some kind of idea, Parfette?"

"No, but we have to do *something*! Don't tell me you plan to sit around and wait until everything's resolved, Lord Gainas?! If so, I'll deduct twenty points from you!"

"I don't really know what that means, but losing points would be bad... I suppose? Anyway, calm down, Parfette. I've given this some serious thought too," he assured, rubbing her shoulder. He explained that he'd been about to go see someone to discuss his idea.

Parfette's eyes twinkled. "You already thought of something? I knew I could count on you! Then let's go right away! Come on!" she urged impatiently, pulling on his jacket.

Gainas smiled wryly and nodded, then led her over to the horse-drawn carriage.

"Letter of authorization?" Veltina asked, tilting her head at his unexpected phrase. As always, she had a large ribbon in her hair, which fluttered with her movements.

Gainas and Parfette both nodded, the former with a serious expression, and the latter with slightly puffed-out cheeks. "We may not be able to exert any direct influence across the border. But they might at least take us into

consideration if we form an alliance and grant House Albert authorization to act as our power of attorney on the matter,” Gainas explained.

“That’s true. Putting names like House Eldland and House Barthez together should yield results, unlike some weak little family!” Veltina huffed proudly while posturing.

Knowing the other girl meant her, Parfette gasped. She puffed her cheeks out even more in a threatening manner. The air between her and Veltina was tense...more or less. Their adorable looks got in the way of that, and outsiders would’ve simply seen it as some huffing and puffing.

“A-Anyway, I was hoping you’d speak with your father on the matter,” Gainas interjected.

“Since you’re the one asking, Lord Gainas. Still... I wonder if my father will tolerate the idea of having *our* name next to some puny house.” Veltina smiled maliciously as she voiced her disapproval. Of course, she was trying to spite Parfette.

“Behave yourself.” Luke, who was sitting next to Veltina, lightly knocked her on the head.

In an instant, the girl’s unkind expression changed into a pitiful one. “How mean of you to hit me! You’ve been too violent recently, Lord Luke!”

“This isn’t violence. I’m just giving you guidance as your fiancé. Your father permitted it as well,” he asserted sternly. He wasn’t as willing to spoil her and overlook her selfishness as he had in the past. It seemed that the previous incident had caused him to change his mind, and he’d become stricter with her.

However, when Veltina hung her head dejectedly, he quickly patted her instead. Alas, he couldn’t truly change himself at his core. Not to mention, though Veltina had dubbed his action “hitting,” it had been such a light prod that all it had really done was make her ribbon flutter slightly.

“Veltina, you owe a debt to Lady Mary,” Luke reminded her. “I’ll join the negotiations with your father, so cooperate with me on this.”

“I suppose I must, since it’s for big sis. I’m still discontent to be included alongside some puny house, but... You hit me again!” Veltina protested when

Luke once more knocked her on the head.

Nonetheless, she must've been willing to go along with the plan, as even though she was pouting, she called over a maid. She asked the maid where her father was, and upon hearing that he was in his study, she requested for him to be summoned as soon as possible. The way she'd demanded his presence without considering his schedule just proved she was the same selfish girl as always.

But a moment later, Veltina seemed to have realized what she'd done. "If he's busy, I can go to see him instead!" she added, hurriedly offering a compromise. Perhaps Luke's guidance was going decently well after all. Still, the way she went right back to her huffy self indicated that long-term coaching was necessary.

"My father is bound to agree if I ask him to do it," she declared. "I'm sure he'll sign the letter right away!"

"Right, thank you," Gainas replied. "You have my gratitude."

"Don't misunderstand. I'm agreeing to this because of big sis Mary. It's not like I'm doing this for *you*, Lord Gainas. Let alone some weak family like the Marqui— Er, never mind!" Veltina exclaimed, retracting her words in anticipation of another small thump. She cast Luke a nervous side glance, and when he nodded and patted her head, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Gainas did his best to restrain his laughter at the sight. Somehow managing to smooth his expression, he once again thanked Veltina. Parfette was smiling as well.

"I'm sure this will help Lady Mary and the others. Right, Parfette?" Gainas prompted.

"Yes. I'm a bit dissatisfied, but the more names, the better. Still, I *am* a bit dissatisfied!"

"Don't you instigate it too, Parfette," Gainas said, pacifying her. Unlike Luke, however, he couldn't give Parfette any guidance, nor did he have a way of dealing with her puffed-out cheeks.

But however much they might've instigated each other, Parfette and Veltina

would only puff out their cheeks and glare at one another. It was impossible for things to escalate to a dangerous degree between a fainthearted girl and a sheltered one.

In a way, this could mean they're actually pretty close... Gainas thought right as the two girls relaxed their cheeks, took a moment to breathe, and then threatened each other by puffing up again.

And so for a while, Gainas and Luke chatted, while Parfette and Veltina intimidated each other with their puffed-out cheeks, until eventually the maid from earlier returned. Following her was Veltina's father, the head of House Barthez. After hearing of the situation, the man immediately agreed and signed the letter then and there.

House Barthez's signature now stood next to House Eldland's. Few would've been able to defy even just these two names together. Quite the opposite—some families would've much rather added their names to the list simply to align themselves with these two houses.

"It's reassuring to have House Barthez's support. You have my thanks for your cooperation," Gainas told Veltina's father. The other man nodded, and the two of them shook hands. The head of House Barthez was entrusting his family name to Gainas, while also showing approval of Gainas's first move as his own family's leader.

Their strong handshake had an air of significance about it. Parfette observed Gainas as though enchanted. *He's so wonderful and imposing...* she thought in admiration. "I'll give you three points, Lord Gainas."

"I don't really get it, but it sounds like I earned some points. That's good... I suppose?" he responded, tentatively showing his gratitude.

"Only three?" Veltina questioned, fanning the flames once more. "I'll give you *ten* points, Lord Gainas!"

"Please don't be so excessive!" Parfette objected. "It'll throw things off-balance!"

"Does that mean I can earn points from outside sources, Parfette?"

"Come on, Veltina. Don't cause them too much trouble," Luke cut in. "I'm

sorry about her, you two. As a way of apologizing for my fiancée, I'll give you three points."

"You get it, Lord Luke! Three points is just right," said Parfette. "Isn't that so, Lord Gainas?"

"Hmm...? Well, if you say so, then I guess that's the case. It's actually quite scary to get a bunch of points in one go," Gainas agreed even as he tilted his head in confusion, causing Parfette to smile at him.

Then, after expressing their thanks a final time, the two of them departed from the Barthez estate.

"My, is that what happened when you visited House Barthez? How very exhausting!" Carina exclaimed with an elegant smile.

Gainas found himself nodding in relief when he saw that her expression was slightly less chilly than usual.

"However, I can see how a letter of authorization would be very effective," the girl went on to say. "With House Eldland headlining the list, the other families are sure to cooperate. I'll ask my father to sign it as well." With that, the calmly smiling Carina asked a maid to take a message to the head of her family.

Overjoyed at receiving Carina's support, Parfette grinned and expressed her thanks. Then, she abruptly peered beneath the tablecloth and added, "But we don't want *your* help!" as if someone was there.

"Parfette, don't speak under the table," Gainas advised, keeping his head facing forward (and doing all he could to ensure that his eyes wouldn't stray downwards). He then shifted his gaze towards Margaret, who was sitting next to Carina and had been listening to their discussion.

"Please stop by House Brownie on your way back," she said. "I'll assist you as well, since this is for Lady Mary's sake. Besides, we're practically relatives of House Dyce now. If anything, this is just one step closer to the countdown."

In response to her casually showing off how close she was with her lover,

Gainas only expressed his gratitude for her cooperation.

While Carina and Margaret both came from reputable noble houses, they were still women. This meant that they wielded no authority over their families. But surely if they appealed to their fathers, the men would be persuaded to agree.

Gainas and Parfette exchanged a relieved glance. Now the authorization letter would be even more influential. Encouraged by this, Parfette once more moved the tablecloth aside. "Lady Carina and Lady Margaret are such wonderful individuals. Unlike a certain *someone*!"

"Parfette, I'll let you eat my share of the cookies, so please stop sassing under the table."

"Oh, thank you, Lord Gainas...! And there are no cookies here for *you*!"

"Please, Parfette. I've already convinced myself that there's nobody under there," Gainas emphasized with a strained expression, still refusing to glance beneath the table.

"You're right," Parfette agreed with a sweet smile.

Gainas found it rather terrifying that neither Carina nor Margaret had interfered with this conversation at all, but of course, there was no way he'd say that out loud.

"A-Anyway, I'm just grateful to have both of your support."

Margaret told him that he was exaggerating, and that it was her and Carina who wanted to thank him instead. The rumor circulating within the neighboring nation had naturally reached their ears too, and they had been deliberating on whether there was anything they could do to help.

"I believe that if the request comes from House Eldland, our fathers will have no reason to object," Margaret said. "I'm thankful to you for taking action, Lord Gainas. I'll give you five points. Don't you agree, Lady Carina?"

"Indeed. It'll be more effective if we all move as one, as opposed to trying to take individual action. Since you're spearheading this, I'll give you one point in place of my gratitude."

“R-Right... Thank you. I’ll take those...?” Gainas muttered, confused to be receiving points from Margaret and Carina.

Parfette smiled at him mischievously. Still puzzled, Gainas glanced between her smirking face and the other two girls. Margaret and Carina exchanged a questioning look with each other. Their expressions seemed to say, *“Could it be that she hasn’t told him?”*

However, a moment later they nodded at each other. A silent conversation took place, in which one said, *“Well, this is their business.”*

The other replied, *“Yes, let’s leave it aside.”*

After all, though Gainas and Parfette were still only betrothed, they were essentially as good as married; they flaunted their newlywed flirting on a regular basis. With that in mind, it was fine to leave them be—or such was the girls’ conclusion.

That said, they were also thinking something along the lines of, *“If we allude to their situation, we’ll be forced to listen to them being all lovey-dovey, which would be unbearable.”* In fact, such was their primary motivation for not mentioning it.

And so the four of them chatted for a while longer, and once the authorization letter had gained another signature, Gainas and Parfette departed.

After they’d gone back and forth all day to gather the other families’ support, it was already late at night by the time Gainas and Parfette returned to House Eldland. Gainas had been about to hand over the letter to a messenger, when Parfette snatched it out of his hand and raced off, insisting they had to deliver it in person. Gainas had frantically chased after her, and now here they were in the departing carriage.

It was dark outside. They would be lucky to find lodging; frankly, it was possible that they’d have to spend the night in the carriage. But even when Gainas tried explaining as much to Parfette, she stubbornly insisted that they had to hand the letter over personally. His shoulders sank in resignation.

“You’re right. It’s best to take it to them in person,” he conceded. “Let’s find somewhere to stay the night, and then go to House Dyce first thing in the morning. I’m sure Lord Patrick will put the letter to good use.”

“We won’t be giving it to Lady Mary?” Parfette questioned.

“I thought about doing that at first, but apparently they’re holding a council regarding Lady Alicia tomorrow. Obviously, House Albert’s representative will be the head of the family.”

At the end of the day, Mary was House Albert’s daughter, and the ultimate decision rested in the hands of the family’s leader. Gainas had also taken this into account while writing the letter, entrusting the power of proxy to House Albert as a whole, rather than Mary specifically. He’d been on the verge of addressing it to her, when he remembered that her father would be the one attending the council. In that case, handing the letter over to Patrick would be the better option, especially given that they knew each other.

“I informed each house who signed the document that it’d be given to Lord Patrick,” Gainas continued. “They all gave their consent. Besides, thinking of how he must feel right now...” He trailed off with a frown.

Alicia’s identity as the princess was under suspicion, which also meant that House Dyce, who backed her, was placed under similar scrutiny. Both Patrick’s family and his spouse were under suspicion, and now a council would be held to address the matter, with each family’s head and the leaders of the nation present.

Gainas was certain that the mental burden must’ve weighed on Patrick heavily. *If I were in his shoes...* he thought, his scowl deepening. Just imagining it made him want to make a break for it.

There was no way to guarantee how effective the authorization letter would prove to be. But it was better than nothing, and it would surely be able to assist Patrick at least a little bit. They had to try and support him in his battle against the council.

When Gainas explained his thoughts, Parfette stared at him fixedly for several moments. Then, she smiled serenely. She found the way he took action as House Eldland’s leader praiseworthy, but his true motivation was based in

friendship. What a wonderful tale this was, indeed!

“Five points, Lord Gainas.”

“I don’t quite understand the criteria, but I’ll take it. By the way, Parfette, I’m clearly the only one who doesn’t know about this point system. Can’t you just explain it to me already?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve decided that I’ll only give you an explanation once you reach a hundred points, as a way of celebrating,” Parfette declared.

“I... I see, so that’s your decision... All right, I’ll save up my points. First, I must reach one hundred.” Though he still couldn’t figure out how the system worked, Gainas sounded determined now that he had a goal in mind.

Parfette seemed to be enjoying herself as she smiled at him leisurely. When the moving carriage rattled and shook, she took advantage of the opportunity to snuggle closer to him. His burly arm gently touched her shoulder, in a gesture close to an embrace.

“P-Parfette...” Gainas murmured. “Uh, once everything is resolved, perhaps we should go ahead with our marriage—”

“Goodness, Lord Gainas!”

“No? If you think it’s too soon, I’ll wait however long it takes...”

“I can’t believe you’d just bring up something important like that... And you’re being much too hasty!” Parfette asserted.

“R-Right. I should do it in an appropriate location.”

“You can propose to me once you reach five thousand points! You will get my reply at ten thousand points! And we can get married at twenty thousand points!”

“Got it! I’ll do everything I can to save up!!!” Gainas decided resolutely.

Parfette blushed at his enthusiasm, and cuddled up closer to him. “You get five points for your determination,” she said, her voice sounding sweet and affectionate.

Gainas was about to embrace and kiss her, but paused. “Will I lose points for

this?" he questioned, just to be sure.

But Parfette, whose cheeks were pink and whose eyes were closed ecstatically, didn't need to reply.

Later, Mary listened to their story...or rather, the lovey-dovey prattle... To be precise, she was *forced* to listen to it. "If you plan to get married at twenty thousand points anyway, it means you've basically already accepted his proposal," she grumbled.

"Please don't say that!" Parfette appealed in response, flushing and trembling.

But it was already too late, for Gainas had heard them, and his grin was entirely conspicuous.

Beneath the Starry Sky

Once the matter regarding Alicia had been cleared up, the nation returned to peace. That said, House Albert's succession problem continued wrecking its way through high society. If anything, now that Mary's name had officially entered the pool, there was more of an uproar than ever.

"I crushed them both during today's succession battle!" Mary proclaimed proudly, referring to the game of chess she'd played with her brothers that afternoon under the pretext of it being a battle for heirship. She began enthusiastically retelling how she'd maneuvered her own pieces, all about her brothers' countermoves, and her triumphant victory.

Sitting opposite her and sipping tea, Adi smiled and praised his wife. "As expected of you, milady."

They were in his room at present, passing their time in the usual manner before bed.

"That move I pulled was fantastic, if I do say so myself!" Mary went on. "Poor Lang looked frustrated to have lost... Except not really! If anything, he looked pleased."

"It was a battle, so I'm sure he was just concealing his frustration."

"You're right. It's only natural to be frustrated if you lose a succession battle. And I won against Lucian afterwards too. He was so sad... Except he wasn't! If anything, I think he prepared for the rematch with unusual spiritedness," Mary said, muttering to herself about how strange it was.

What had occurred that day had undoubtedly been a battle for the seat of heir, so it was normal and expected that the participants would feel happy at their victory, or sad at their loss. It definitely *wasn't* normal for someone to be happy at their loss and say something like, "*Come on, our sweet Mary! Let's have a rematch!*"

At least, that was Mary's viewpoint. But looking back on it, she found that her

brothers had been elated nonetheless. The already gleeful Lang became even more excitable than usual, and the typically glum Lucian had a shine in his eyes during the game. The twins had praised her, enjoyed each and every chess match, and seemed perfectly happy to lose them all.

Eventually, Roberto had appeared to notify them of some visitors. Lang and Lucian had promised they would stage another battle tomorrow, before taking their leave. The duo's steps had seemed lighter than ever as they walked out of the room.

This wasn't the first time such a thing had happened either. Yesterday, and the day before that—actually, ever since Mary had entered the candidacy, they'd all competed against each other every day, but the twins always looked delighted about it.

Is that truly how succession battles should be? Mary wondered, troubled. *Shouldn't those two be more fierce and try harder to hinder me?*

While Mary was lost in thought, Adi hurriedly called out in an attempt to distract her. "Milady! When you and your brothers play—er, I mean, have succession battles, I think you look truly splendid. You had a heated game of chess today, with one close match after another."

"R-Really? Yes, you're right. It *was* a proper battle. But I feel like you and Roberto were watching over everything with such leisurely smiles..."

"That couldn't be! We were on the edge of our seats to see which one of you would seize victory."

"Is that so? But Roberto left in the middle of the game, saying he was more interested in the flower beds."

"H-He..." Adi hesitated. "He just can't bear watching such fierce battles. He left because it hurt his heart to see siblings competing against each other like that."

Mary fixed her gaze on Adi for several seconds after hearing his desperate attempt at making an excuse. A moment later, she exclaimed, "You're right!" as the doubt left her eyes and her expression brightened.

Today's game of chess, yesterday's lottery, the day before yesterday's

treasure hunt: these were all indisputably battles for succession. It was a cutthroat war between siblings vying for the heir's seat. Mary couldn't afford to lose. Determined to have another sweeping victory tomorrow, she raised her tightened fist in the air while Adi applauded her (needless to say, his clapping was awfully disingenuous).

"Lang and Lucian are being belligerent too! They said we'll have a card game tomorrow," Mary added.

"A card game? Mm-hmm, sounds like another intense battle is ahead."

"Honestly! I didn't expect the succession war to be this relentless," Mary said, exhaling as she picked up her teacup.

Although in the past the twins hadn't shown any interest in inheriting, as soon as Mary had declared war on them, they'd begun proposing one contest after another. However, this was obviously because they had been longing to play games with their beloved younger sister. The three of them might've claimed they were holding succession battles, but to everyone else, it just looked like harmonious siblings having fun together. Those at House Albert simply watched them with smiles on their faces. Adi, too, opted not to fill Mary in on the truth and just kept instigating her by telling her to do her best in the matches.

Mary, who'd been full of fighting spirit at the idea of tomorrow's game, suddenly remembered something. "Oh, I promised to see Alicia tomorrow. I'm supposed to have the battle with my brothers in the morning, and see Alicia in the afternoon. As long as that girl comes on time, it shouldn't overlap..."

"She'll definitely come first thing in the morning," said Adi.

Both of them pictured Alicia energetically arriving at Albert Manor right as the birds began chirping. "*I've come for our afternoon appointment!*" she'd shout. They could envision it with perfect clarity, as they'd been faced with such preemptive action from her many times ("preemptive action" sounds rather good in theory, but there's a limit to the things that can be done ahead of time).

Mary breathed a sigh, while Adi smiled wryly and stood up. "I'm sure Alicia will be mindful of the time if she knows you'll be having a succession battle with your brothers. I'll send a message to the palace."

“From the rooftop...?”

“Yes?” Adi responded, as if it should’ve been obvious. He tilted his head, implicitly asking, *“Is there something wrong with that?”* His curious expression showed that he didn’t feel a sliver of discomfort or doubt about this communication method.

Mary was about to say something, but then just murmured, “Be careful,” while her shoulders drooped. It would’ve been tactless of her to raise complaints about this by now.

“Don’t worry. The stairs have banisters, and the roof also has fall-protection measures,” Adi assured her.

“Our roof has a better safety design than I thought. Hmm... In that case, can I come too?”

“You want to come, my lady?” Adi parroted, surprised to hear her suggestion.

Mary nodded firmly. She’d always been curious about this communication method, and on occasion she watched the twinkling lights from ground level. Now that she knew the roof was safe, there was no way she’d miss the opportunity to go there herself.

After explaining her reasoning, she began to pester Adi about it. He looked conflicted for a while, before finally conceding. “But please be careful,” he said while fetching Mary’s jacket for her.

Albert Manor was large, and had numerous rooms. Some, such as the family’s bedrooms and various guest rooms, were used on a daily basis, but there were plenty that barely saw any use. The attic was one such place, and though this was Mary’s own house, she hadn’t been up here in years. Her eyes widened when she first stepped inside.

To think we have to pass through here to get to the roof...

The stairs leading up had firm banisters in place, and there was a fence around the roof itself to prevent falls. The safety measures were much better than she’d expected. Even so, Adi held her hand to guide her as they climbed.

Once they reached the roof, a sky full of stars greeted them. They both sat down at the fixed position for communication, and Mary gazed up at the stars with a sigh. The mansion's roof was high up, so there was nothing in the way to block the view. The night sky that she saw from her window couldn't even compete. Here, her whole field of vision was filled with stars.

"It's beautiful..." Mary uttered, her voice breathy as if she were spellbound.

Adi squeezed her hand. "Please watch out, just in case. Don't let go of my hand no matter what."

"You're holding my hand so tight, I couldn't let go if I wanted to. But you'll need to use your hands to send the message via the lights, won't you?"

"Yes, but I can do it with one hand, so don't let go," Adi insisted.

"Such a worrywart," Mary said lightheartedly, yet squeezed his hand in return all the same.

Slightly reassured, Adi lifted the lamp in his other hand above his head. What a marvelous sight it was, to see the flickering of a man-made light beneath the starry sky. A single light in the distance lit up as well, as if the two were hailing each other. Adi moved the lamp left and right. Sometimes the light blinked on and off, and other times it flashed brightly. Adi maneuvered it in a variety of ways.

"I get it now. You can spell out letters by flicking the lamp on and off," Mary noted.

"Yes. It's quite convenient once you've memorized it. Now please wait a moment; I'm sending a message to Alicia... All right, there we go."

Adi had moved the lamp around for a while, but this time the other light in the distance began flickering. That must've been the response. The communication continued back and forth for a while, until following three flicks, both lights swiftly went out.

"I'm all done sending the messages. What would you like to do, milady?" Adi inquired. "Shall we go back inside?"

"I'd like to stay here for a bit longer. Adi, be sure to hold my hand properly,"

Mary told him, squeezing his hand again.

Adi, surmising what she meant, smiled and tightened his grip on her hand in return. Actually, he even closed the distance between them, and had been about to wrap his arm around her shoulder...before suddenly mumbling, "Darn," under his breath.

"What's wrong?"

"I wanted to wrap my arm around you, but I can't do it if we're holding hands. I could do it if I let go of your hand, but *I'm* the one who was telling you not to let go earlier..." Adi explained, jokingly despairing over what he should do.

They were sitting side by side, clasping each other's closest hands. If Adi were to put his arm around Mary, it would have to be that one, hence he was troubled about what to do.

At first, Mary was surprised, and then said, "You fool," with a quiet laugh. "Who do you think I am? There's no way that I, Mary Albert, would fall off the roof."

"Even if I let go of your hand?"

"Of course. I won't fall off, even if you let go of my hand. So..." Mary trailed off, gazing up at Adi with a smile.

He smiled softly in return. "That's a relief to hear," he replied. Though his tone of voice was partially humorous, he released Mary's hand and touched her shoulder.

At his urging, Mary shuffled closer to him, not just a little, but enough that they were nice and snug together. In fact, she was practically leaning against him. Adi's hand still urged her closer, and she responded by wrapping her own arm around his back, her fingers grasping his clothes.

"Isn't this much safer than holding hands?" she proposed.

"Yes. You are correct as always, milady. But I'm still worried, so..." Adi held out his hand towards her. Rather than the one that was around her shoulders, he reached with the one he'd used earlier to send a message with the lights.

Conjecturing what he was after, Mary held out her other hand. Indeed, that

hand was free, so there was only one thing to do with it. She placed her hand in Adi's, and he held it tightly in response. His hand was slightly warmer than normal, and Mary wondered if that was because he'd been holding the lamp, or because he was a little embarrassed.

"Wanting to wrap your arm around me, but also hold my hand... Adi, you're surprisingly greedy, aren't you?" Mary asked him impishly.

He awkwardly averted his gaze. If it were daytime, perhaps Mary would've been able to see the flush in his face. But even so, he didn't retract his arm or let go of her hand. The two of them were pressed up close together, and every part of their bodies that could touch was touching.

Adi must've eventually concluded that he couldn't conceal anything under these circumstances, as after a few moments of staring to the side, he smiled. "Yes, exactly. I'm a greedy man, so this still isn't enough," he said. His face slowly drew nearer to Mary's, his eyes narrowing seductively.

Mary's vision had been full of stars, but now she felt engulfed in the red of his irises as she closed her eyes.

But after a while, Adi continued asking for more kisses than usual. Mary wondered if he was being so assertive because there was nobody else on the roof, or because he thought of this as his home base, or...

"Just because we're under the night sky doesn't mean I won't tell you to restrain yourself— Ah! I can't throw careless punches here!" Mary exclaimed. Indeed, perhaps Adi's true reason was that he knew Mary wouldn't hit him here, because she was too worried about falling off.

Adi smirked and once more tried to kiss her. Mary's clenched fist wavered, until Adi halted both her hand and the complaint she was about to make.

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Saki.

Thank you very much for purchasing the fifth volume of my novel, *Young Lady Albert is Courting Disaster*! This time around, Mary became aware of friendship.

In the first volume, Mary was thickheaded enough not to notice Adi's romantic feelings towards her, her own feelings towards him, or the friendship Alicia and Patrick showed her. But finally, she's grown enough to make it this far...

With the belated introduction of her brothers, this book became all the more boisterous. I wonder if you enjoyed it?

The manga is currently being serialized, so it'd be wonderful if you gave it a try as well.

To the artist, Ms. Futaba, my manager, and everyone who reads this book: thank you very much!

Saki



5

YOUNG
LADY ALBERT

IS

COURTING

DISASTER

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba



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Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster: Volume 5

by Saki

Translated by Ray Krycki Edited by Casey Pritt

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