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YOUNG
LADY ALBERT

IS

COURTING

DISASTER

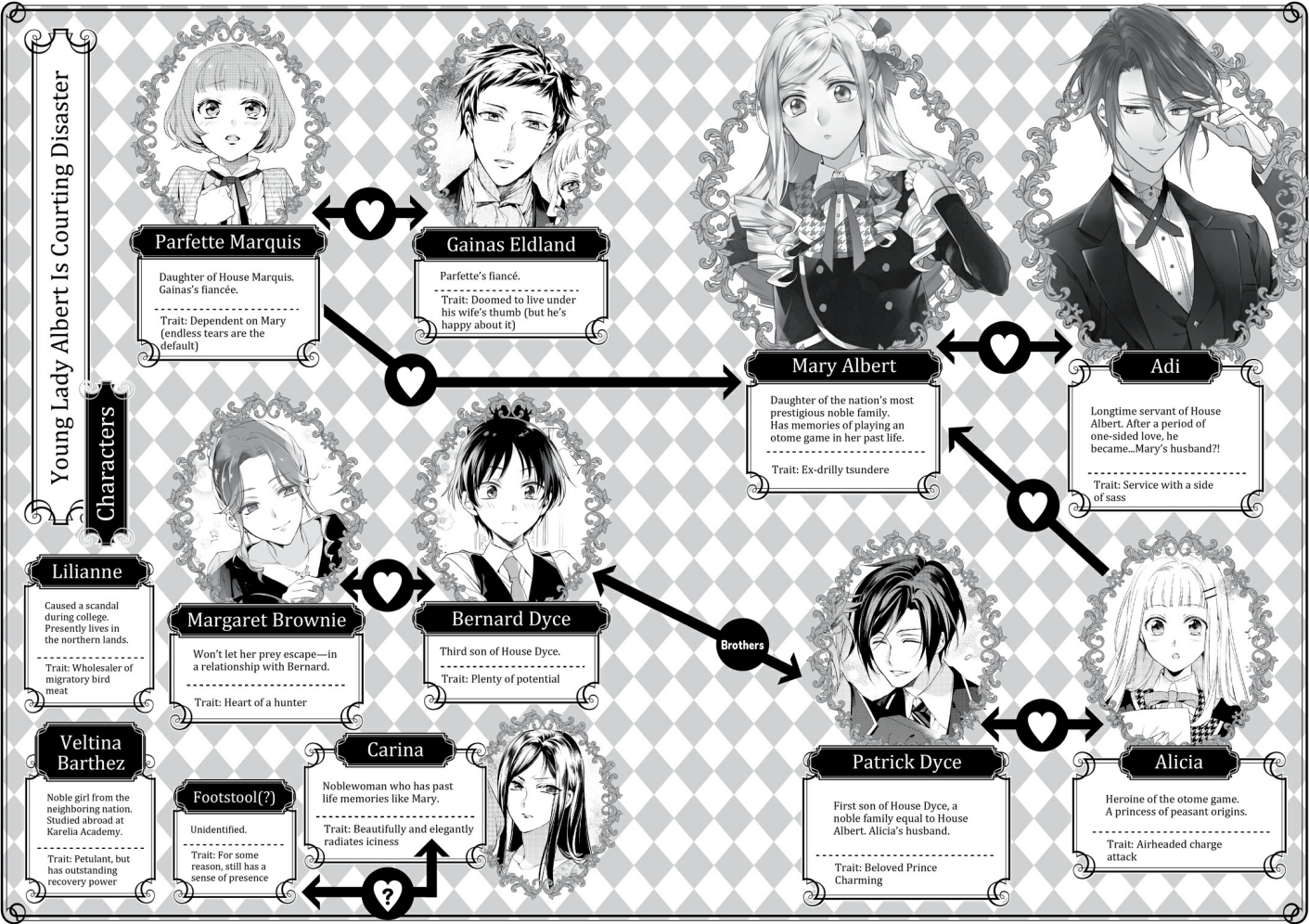


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Wishing for a Peaceful School Life

Sunlight poured gently over the gardens of Albert Manor. Beautifully blooming flowers swayed in the breeze, along with Mary's silver-thread hair. Indeed, her hair *swayed*. The wagging, tightly curled ringlets were now a thing of the past. Recalling those bygone days, Mary lovingly pushed down her hair, until the man sitting opposite her—Patrick—called out to her.

Alicia was sitting next to Patrick while munching away on some cake. Meanwhile Adi, who was next to Mary, kept glancing between Alicia's plate and the cake stand on the table. (Despite having wed Mary, Adi's servant-like disposition hadn't gone away. That said, he wasn't *trying* to get rid of it, and Mary and the rest of the folk at Albert Manor all thought things were fine as they were too.)

"By the way, Mary," Patrick said. "You also refused the offer to be an exchange student at Elysiana College, didn't you?"

"I was thankful for the offer, but there's a class at Karelia Academy that I'd like to take this time," Mary replied. "But the way you said that...sounds like *you* refused the offer too."

"I have a lot on my plate and no free time," he told her with a shrug of his shoulders.

Indeed, Patrick had already been occupied before with matters such as changing House Dyce's heir and entering the royal family. However, ever since he'd been officially tied to Alicia, things had reached a new height of busyness for him. Even so, he exhibited no signs of exhaustion and always properly showed up for tea, as expected of someone like him.

"Adi, didn't they extend the offer to you as well?" asked Patrick.

"Yes, the school spoke with me about that. I did marry into House Albert and all. But since milady refused, I had no interest in accepting either," Adi asserted, adding a second serving of cake to Alicia's plate. He then picked up one of the

strawberries from the table and placed it on the edge of Mary's plate with some cream.

Mary looked at him, wondering what he was doing. His rust-ringed pupils were watching her fixedly. The red strawberry led her gaze, and when she looked up, she met his rust-colored eyes.

"My place is by my lady's side. If she's staying in Karelia Academy, then so am I."

"Adi..." Mary's heart started pounding from the way he was looking at her.

How passionate and affectionate the air was between them! Had they been alone right now, though it was still daytime and they were in the gardens, they certainly would've at the very least exchanged a kiss. Unfortunately, they were *not* alone, and as such...

"Can you come back from your own world already?"

...Patrick cut in ruthlessly.

"No, Lord Patrick!" cried Alicia. "We're supposed to pretend we don't see anything at times like these. Let's turn the other way! We aren't seeing any of this at all!" she insisted, turning her chair around with a clatter and feigning ignorance.

Though Mary had been entranced, Alicia's actions promptly dampened her enthusiasm, and she let out a sigh. Adi, in contrast to his fervent declaration from moments ago, now smiled wryly. Mary then looked at the other pair and let out an openly displeased huff, as if to say, "*Stop getting in our way!*"

"I heard you refused as well, Alicia," Mary said. "What a shame. Such a perfect opportunity for you to be forcibly expatriated for reeking of the boonies, gone to waste."

"I wanted to see what it's like to attend Elysiana, but I've been busy with a lot of things myself!" Alicia responded.

"Oh really? I thought you were impudently inviting yourself over to other people's houses, but now I see you've been gracelessly running around all over the place."

“But I really don’t want to be apart from Lord Patrick... It’s because we’ve been so busy that I want to treasure the time we *do* get to spend together!”

“Not only are my cutting remarks completely ineffective, but you’re counterattacking by getting all lovey-dovey! And why do you look so happy, Patrick?!” Mary shrieked. “If you two want to treasure your time together so badly, don’t spend it drinking tea at somebody else’s place! I’ll start charging you for the tea and venue costs!”

But no matter how much Mary yelled, Alicia only smiled cheerfully. Mary’s efforts didn’t get through to her at all—though, by now, that much was stating the obvious.

“It’ll be so much fun to study together with everyone from Elysiana! Right, Lady Mary?” Alicia prompted.

“What fun?! You’re supposed to be the princess, so at least *try* not to stain the name of your school and country with your provincialism!”

“Hee hee! Okay!”

“Ugh! Get hurt already! You’re breaking *my* heart over here!” Mary appealed, while Adi and Patrick exchanged a look with each other and shrugged as if to say things were the same as always.

Their reactions only heightened Mary’s rage, but she told herself that screaming any more than that would only tire her out. She calmed her emotions by remembering the delicious taste of freshly fried croquettes.

Mary let out a curt sigh, and then once more glanced around the tea party attendees. There was Alicia, smiling away and enjoying herself, with Patrick gazing at her affectionately. Next to Mary was also her husband, Adi. It was the usual lineup of people.

However, once the study exchange program from Elysiana College began, Parfette and the others would join them. With everyone gathered together, the time they’d spend here would be even more boisterous, lively, and fun...

Mary caught herself and quickly snapped out of her thoughts, pressing her hands to her cheeks in a fluster. She was looking forward to it from the bottom of her heart, and her true feelings had been reflected in her face for a moment.

She must've been smiling warmly at her thoughts, and the idea of anyone having seen her embarrassed her a little.

To smooth over what just happened, Mary reached for her teacup and slurped her tea with heavy gulps. It was unbecoming of a noble lady to act in such a way, but everyone here knew her well, so she wasn't bothered by it. Right now, her priority was to conceal her beaming smile at the thought of the exchange program.

Sensing what she was doing, Adi smiled wryly and poured her a new serving of tea. "It's going to be fun, milady."

At first, she had no idea how to respond to his encouraging words. Finally, she settled for saying, "I'm going to be fed up if things get even noisier!" as she looked away with another huff.

Chapter 1

The very first person who received the letter about the exchange program was Gainas Eldland. Having thanked the messengers from the academy, he promptly opened the envelope to check its contents.

The letter spelled out the details regarding the exchange program between Elysiana College and Karelia Academy, which he'd been aware of prior. He read through everything with a somber expression, and even let out a sigh as if he felt under pressure. He wasn't exactly the image of someone who had chosen to study abroad for himself.

However, Gainas had a reason to feel the way that he did.

The original purpose of this exchange program had been to deepen the friendly relations between the two schools, and to broaden the students' perspectives. Although the school term was short, developing relationships between nobles from different nations was beneficial for high society.

But things went even further for Elysiana College. They had another goal with this program, one which they seemed to value above all others.

It was a matter pertaining to Lilianne, a student who'd attended the college in the past. She was a peasant girl who'd been allowed to attend Elysiana as a special case, but she had ended up capturing the hearts of many of the aristocratic boys at the school, leading to the destruction of numerous betrothals.

Lilianne not only caused the daughter of House Albert to get wrapped up in the situation, but the motive behind her actions had been an illicit love towards the first son of House Dyce, Patrick. All of that had completely ruined the entire academy's reputation.

In other words, for Elysiana College, the exchange program was their opportunity to redeem themselves.

Recalling how the school staff had explained this to him, Gainas groaned

quietly. After all, he'd been one of the very people who'd fallen in love with Lilianne and followed her around. The memory of that alone made him feel pathetic and ashamed. Even when speaking to the staff, he'd kept his head lowered and murmured over and over again, *"I'm so sorry for causing you all that trouble."*

But that was exactly why he had to give his all in fulfilling the role he'd been assigned. Thinking as much, Gainas called to a nearby maid and arranged for a carriage to take him to House Marquis.

Under usual circumstances, Gainas was not the sort of person who'd choose to participate in a study abroad program. Yet he'd been selected for it under Elysiana's appeal to "reform the problem students from the previous incident." Gainas himself also understood why it was appropriate for the school to request this of him.

After all, most of the other men who'd been involved with Lilianne were still chasing their former fiancées around, or else desperately trying to make marriage proposals to other families. There was no way for them to go abroad right now.

And the one who had it worst of them all was...

"No... It's too late for him. He definitely can't leave the country...!" Gainas exclaimed, shuddering by himself inside the carriage.

He remembered one of his schoolmates who used to surround Lilianne, along with himself and the other men. Or to be more precise, he remembered the miserable state of said schoolmate, and the icy young lady who reigned over him.

Needless to say, he was thinking about Carina and her former fiancé.

How terrifying, indeed. A chill raced through Gainas's entire body, and he shivered involuntarily.

But he couldn't let himself catch a cold right before the study abroad program began. He told himself as much in his mind, putting the thoughts of those two away. Or rather, the lady in his mind was happily dragging the man away with her. The scene was strangely vivid, perhaps because Gainas had witnessed

exactly that just the other day.

When Gainas finally made it to House Marquis, hoping to find a bit of warmth, he instead found Parfette crying in the garden.

“Lady Mary...! Lady Mary...!” she sobbed.

The sight of a young girl crying in the sunlit garden while surrounded by pretty flowers was quite beautiful, stirring pain in the hearts of anyone who gazed upon her. Or that *should’ve* been the case, but the maids and gardeners simply went about their usual work without paying Parfette much attention.

In fact, one of the maids even said, “I’ll bring you some tea and cake,” as if knowing there was no use saying anything else to the girl.

It might’ve seemed cruel, but Parfette crying while thinking of Mary had become a daily occurrence within the Marquis mansion. (As a side note, Parfette had responded to the maid with, “Lady Mary, Lady Mary...! Chocolate cake, please... Lady Maaaryyy...!”)

“Parfette,” Gainas called out to her.

“Lady Mary...! Oh, Lord Gainas... Lady Mary? Lord Gainas...?”

“Don’t get confused; it’s me. Can I sit here?” he asked, and upon receiving permission, he sat down facing the sniffing Parfette.

The maid brought over the tea and snacks. Parfette drank some tea, ate a bite of the cake, and then wistfully whispered, “Lady Mary...”

“It’s too bad about the exchange program, Parfette,” Gainas told her.

“I wanted to study together with Lady Mary...” she lamented, lowering her head dejectedly.

Gainas tried to say some soothing words to her, and then handed over his share of the chocolate cake.

The reason Parfette was crying (alas, she was always crying, so it’d be more accurate to say, “the reason she was crying *right now*”) was because she hadn’t been chosen for the exchange program. And that was solely because House Marquis had a low standing in Elysiana College. The school was like a smaller version of high society itself, and the students’ ranks reflected how they were

treated.

But Parfette was doted on by Mary, and she was cake friends with Alicia. She'd been certain the school would want to pick her based on those factors. However, it turned out that if Elysiana had shown too much preference to someone's personal feelings, the other families would've caused a ruckus. Some of them might've insisted that their own family was a better choice than someone from House Marquis. All of this would've also occurred because the school was like a smaller version of high society. Hence, they hadn't spoken to Parfette about the exchange program—at least, not officially.

"Parfette, do you want me to speak to the principal?" asked Gainas.

"Huh? The principal?"

"Yeah. I'm sure he'd be willing to listen to me, and to keep things under wraps from other families."

"Is that really okay?"

"Of course. I mean...I was planning to do it from the start anyway," he said, murmuring the last part under his breath.

But his quiet words didn't reach Parfette, and her eyes lit up at his proposition, so much so that it was almost as if her tears from before were never even there. Surrounded by flowers, she looked dazzlingly beautiful to Gainas. He was spellbound by her for a moment, until he snapped out of it and cleared his throat. He straightened his posture, feigning tranquility in hopes she wouldn't notice his tension.

But however much he tried to put up a front, he was an awkward man at his core. When he muttered, "Still..." his voice sounded slightly shrill.

"What's wrong, Lord Gainas?"

"O-Of course, I don't mind speaking with the principal at all. If I'm going to be studying at Karelia, I'd like you there with me. But, well... Speaking with him will take time and effort, so..."

As he spoke incoherently, Parfette fixed her eyes on him. After a moment, she conjectured what he was trying to say, and let out a gasp. "I... I see! Lord

Gainas...!”

“Parfette, I...”

“I understand! In order to spend time with Lady Mary, I will marry you, Lord Gainas!”

“I know it’s a foolish thing to wish for, but I’d really like it if— *Marry?!* ” he spluttered.

“You were about to say, ‘If you want me to convince the principal, you’ll have to marry me,’ right?! I’ll agree, but only so that I can spend time with Lady Mary!”

“No! I’d never say something like that!”

“‘Something like that’?! Are you engaged to me with no intentions of marrying me, then?!” she asked incredulously.

“That’s not it either! I *do* want to marry you, very much so! But what I was *trying* to say was...”

“Yes?! ”

“I... I just wanted to ask you for a kiss! That’s all!” Gainas shouted in desperation, his face flushed bright red. But then he gave in to his embarrassment and hung his head.

There was an awkward silence between them. It was so still that they could even hear the footsteps of the maids and workers in the garden. After another moment, Gainas murmured, “Sorry. I know I’ve kissed you before, but you’ve never kissed *me*... That’s why I... But if you don’t want to, it’s fine. I’ll still speak with the principal...”

“All right, I’ll do it.”

“Parfette...!” Gainas exclaimed, his expression brightening.

He expected to see his adorable fiancée blush from being coaxed into kissing him, but that didn’t happen. So perhaps she would be determined, and charmingly approach him...but that wasn’t the case either. Instead...

“This is for the sake of spending time with Lady Mary! Prepare yourself, Lord

Gainas!”

...his fiancée, full of vigor, came flying at him with all her might.

The sound of a certain couple and two chairs tumbling to the ground echoed through the serene garden of the Marquis estate.

Right around the time when Parfette and Gainas hit the ground at House Marquis, two letters arrived at House Brownie’s mansion. One was addressed to their daughter, Margaret, and the other to Carina, whom Margaret had invited over for tea. The two opened their respective letters, and then smiled calmly.

“Tell the principal I look forward to attending,” said Margaret.

“Thank you for delivering this to me directly,” said Carina.

Both of them sounded appreciative. They could afford to feel so relaxed because they’d been told in advance about this. They hadn’t asked for all the particulars, but they had mostly predicted everything.

“I look forward to studying abroad,” Carina remarked.

“Me too; I’d like to go as soon as possible. Ever since he heard about the exchange program, Bernard has started to sign off all his letters to me with, ‘I’m waiting for you.’”

“Here we go again...”

“His grade doesn’t do exchange programs yet. But he told me, ‘Just this once, I’m glad to be the age that I am, because I can come and welcome you.’”

“Exchange programs start from high school, no? We’ll be graduating college around the time he begins high school. I’m sure they’ll select him for the program, and then it will be *your* turn to welcome him. What a good age difference you have!”

Margaret nodded in satisfaction at Carina’s words. She then smiled gently, perhaps thinking about seeing Bernard again soon, or perhaps imagining him when he’d be starting high school. Whatever the case, she certainly didn’t seem like a hunter right now.

Carina, unwilling to endure having to listen to any more of Margaret's love talk, swiftly changed the topic to packing for their move.

That said, as Carina and Margaret were both noble ladies, they wouldn't have to do the packing themselves. Everything would be left for the maids to take care of. So what they discussed instead was how many new clothes they should order, or where to have their suitcases made. The discussion was perfectly aristocratic.

In the middle of it, Carina suddenly muttered, "The luggage..." while lifting the tablecloth slightly to peer down at her feet.

Margaret continued quietly sipping her tea as she observed her friend. Though the tea was freshly poured, it seemed lukewarm, or maybe even entirely cold. Was it just her imagination?

"I wonder if my footstool will fit into the suitcase?" Carina inquired calmly, tilting her head.

Margaret took another sip of her drink. "In consideration of Elysiana's dignity, please do *not* bring that with you," she advised assertively, putting a stop to her friend's eccentric behavior before it could even begin. And all the while, she acted as if she couldn't see what, or rather *who*, the footstool beneath the table was.



On the first day of the exchange program, Mary stood by Albert Manor's entryway. The place where they'd be welcoming the visitors was as lavish as one would expect from the Alberts, but Mary was long used to the view. The same was true for Adi, who'd worked for House Albert for many years.

The same was also true for Alicia, who visited Albert Manor almost every day, and of course was here today as well. As a side note, it wasn't that she'd come here in the morning, but rather, she'd *been* here since the morning.

"By the way, Alicia..." said Mary. "You were having breakfast with my mother this morning like it was no big deal. But I wonder why you're here when I haven't summoned you?"

"When I heard that Parfette was coming, I just couldn't stay still! I had to

come!” Alicia replied enthusiastically.

Mary glared at her, then sighed. The other girl’s early morning visits were nothing new, and likewise, nothing Mary said now would do anything to change it, so she gave up on the idea.

Lately, it had become so normal for Alicia to hang around Albert Manor’s kitchens and assist with the cooking that it had gotten to the point where she had to notify the cooks if she *wouldn’t* be able to make it on any particular day, and they’d have leftovers just enough for one person. The rest of Albert Manor accepted Alicia’s visits as if they were par for the course, so it was no wonder that Mary’s heart was breaking.

But somebody like Mary Albert couldn’t let herself look defeated. “Visiting without an invitation? Such boorish manners!” she said as a last means of attack.

Adi, who was next to her, laughed quietly. “All that said, you woke up pretty early today yourself, milady. You were really looking forward to everyone coming over, weren’t you?”

“Not at all. I simply *happened* to wake up early. Besides, speak for yourself! You woke up early today too, didn’t you? The maids told me as much.”

“Alicia’s arrival woke me up...”

“I will avenge you!” Mary cried, and then lightly hit Alicia on the forehead.

“I was just so excited...!” Alicia exclaimed in her defense, which was so very much like her.

Glancing at the girls out of the corner of his eye, Adi let out a quiet yawn. But soon enough he was fixing his posture, for a horse-drawn carriage had arrived at the gates of House Albert. Though he may have been sleepy, his habit as a servant had taught him to snap out of it and not let such things show in front of visitors.

“Your Ladyship, a carriage of House Marquis has arrived. Lady Parfette is here. Seems like there’s one more carriage coming—who might that be? Lord Gainas is supposed to be completing the procedures at the school now, right? My lady...? Are you listening to me?”

“Wait! I want to get in at least two more blows...!” Mary vigorously smacked Alicia’s forehead twice, then exhaled a long breath. She straightened her skirt and went back to standing with an air of ladylike dignity. The change in her was extraordinary, and it was as if she hadn’t just been hitting someone. Nobody would’ve ever guessed that this beautiful young lady had just smacked the forehead of her nation’s princess moments ago.

The two carriages slowly came to a halt in front of the estate. The coachman rushed over, pausing briefly to bow to Mary and the others, before opening the carriage doors.

Of course, Parfette came bursting out from the other side. It was as if she simply couldn’t wait another second as she darted towards Mary with a cry of, “Lady Maaaryyy!”

She was truly like a puppy. That said, she was actually a little slow on her feet, so though she had a puppy’s brightness, she didn’t have the agility. If anything, it was stressful watching to see whether or not she’d fall over.

But that, too, was a part of her adorable charm, and Mary found herself smiling and spreading her arms open to greet her. (Seeing her sweet gesture, Alicia pursed her lips and complained: “Whenever I run at Lady Mary, she always gets angry and says it’s graceless!” she appealed.)

(“Perhaps it’s a matter of velocity,” Adi responded in an attempt to help, completely missing the point.)

Parfette finally made it to Mary, and threw herself into her arms. “Lady Mary!”

“Lord Adi!”

Mary smiled warmly. However, she frowned a moment later, realizing she’d heard another voice that wasn’t Parfette’s calling out at the same time. It was an unfamiliar, high-pitched voice, and the one it had called for was...Adi?

Mary glanced at him in confusion, only to see that a girl she didn’t recognize was hugging him. Mary blinked at the sight. “Adi, who is that...?”

“Who, indeed...?” responded Adi, his own eyes just as wide as he glanced down at the girl. Though he gently put his hands on her shoulders and tried to

encourage her to move away, she didn't seem to catch on. Meanwhile, Mary was dumbstruck by the scene before her, as was Parfette. Even Alicia, who'd taken advantage of the opportunity to cling to Mary, was stunned into silence.

Only the girl who was still clinging to Adi didn't seem to realize everyone's eyes were on her. "Goodness!" she exclaimed before letting go of Adi. She then grasped the hem of her skirt and bowed gracefully. The ribbon tying her chestnut hair together swayed with the movement.

"Pardon me! My name is Veltina Barthez."

Adi paused. "Lady Veltina, is it...? Excuse me, but have we met somewhere before?"



“No, this is our first time meeting. I’m sorry—I was just so happy that I finally got to meet you,” Veltina said, smiling amicably. Her eyes were fixed on Adi, and her cheeks were just a little pink. It was almost as if she were gazing at her beloved, not meeting someone for the first time in her life.

In contrast, Adi looked confuddled. He glanced Veltina over dubiously, and nonchalantly took a step closer to Mary. The unexpected embrace from a girl he’d never met before had made him put up his guard a bit. He found her strange, but based on her attire and conduct, it was clear that she was a noble lady of high standing. As such, Adi couldn’t be impolite towards her, and decided to at least gain some distance from her for now.

Just as he decided he should say something and opened his mouth, however, another carriage approached noisily, making him glance its way. Mary did the same while peeling off Alicia and Parfette.

Another horse-drawn carriage stopped in front of the extravagant Albert Manor. Soon enough, a man stepped out of it—the principal of Elysiana College. He rushed over to Veltina without offering any greetings, seeming relieved that he’d found her safe and sound. But then he snapped back to his senses and turned to Mary, apologizing for the sudden visit.

Mary still had no idea what was going on. First, she put her efforts into once again peeling off Alicia and Parfette, then looked at the principal and bid him an elegant greeting. (As soon as she was done, the two girls once again embraced her.)

“I’m so sorry for showing up unannounced, Lady Mary!” said the man.

“No, it’s fine... Come on, you two, we’re in front of the principal! Show some respect! Stop hugging me! And stop crying!” Mary huffed, rebuking the girls clinging to her.

“I’m just so happy to see you again, Lady Mary...!” sobbed Parfette bashfully.

“I just couldn’t help myself!” said Alicia, scratching her cheek. (Perhaps the same logic could’ve been applied to Alicia’s daily visits to Albert Manor.)

But upon Mary’s scolding, the girls finally snapped out of it and then greeted the principal politely, like a proper princess and noble lady respectively.

“Princess Alicia, my apologies for disturbing you when you’re spending time with your friends. I’m here because I was told one of the students from our school got lost,” he explained apologetically.

Veltina, realizing he was talking about her, joined in. “I did get lost, but I happened upon Lady Parfette’s carriage. I thought they were heading towards Karelia Academy, so I followed them. I never imagined they’d be heading to Albert Manor instead...” she said, modestly lowering her head and apologizing to Mary. But when she lifted her head again, her pupils strayed from Mary to glance at Adi momentarily.

It was the briefest of glances, after which she turned to face the principal again. “I still haven’t completed the procedures yet, sir. Would you mind showing me the way to Karelia Academy?”

“Of course, I don’t mind... Oh?” The principal looked aside, as if having noticed something.

Everyone else followed his line of sight, and saw that another carriage was approaching Albert Manor. Karelia Academy’s emblem was engraved into its side.

“My, we’re having plenty of guests today,” Mary remarked with a smile. Adi was restless, as if wondering whether he ought to fetch some tea. Meanwhile, Alicia and Parfette were meekly listening to the conversation...while also meekly and gradually stepping closer and closer to Mary.

The principal of Karelia Academy stepped out from the carriage. “There you are, Lady Veltina!”

“Even you came all this way... I’m so sorry, sir,” said the girl.

“It’s all right. I’m just glad you’re safe. Your schoolmates were worried when we lost sight of your carriage.”

“Gracious!” Veltina exclaimed with exaggerated concern. She turned to Mary and curtsied. “Lady Mary—and everyone else—I’m very sorry for disturbing you. I’ll be taking my leave now. I will come back at a later date to apologize properly. See you then.” Her words were perfectly ladylike, and she seemed sincere in her apology.

However, Mary was certain she wasn't imagining the way Veltina glanced sideways at Adi even as she spoke to Mary. In fact, when she'd said, "See you," she was mostly looking at Adi. He seemed to have noticed as much himself, and his expression was indescribable.

There was no sense in pointing that out for now, so Mary focused on seeing Veltina off. "No need to apologize," she said, sounding just as ladylike. "But since we made each other's acquaintance, please feel free to come visit in the future." Her honeyed words were simply lip service. Though she was feigning friendliness, she wasn't speaking from the heart.

(Mary had been addressing Veltina as she spoke, but two delighted voices cried out from the side. "Okay! I'll come by every day!")

("Waaah! What an honor...!")

Leaving Mary's doubts unconfirmed, Veltina curtsied once more and then walked towards her carriage. The two principals watched her, then each returned to his own carriage as well.

As they did so, both of them paused to bow at Mary at the same time. Their bald scalps reflected the sunlight's rays with a momentary glint. Mary squinted from the brightness, and in that instant, she remembered: this was no longer the world of an otome game...but in a small way, it was still the world of *Heart High*.



Heartthrob High School was an otome game Mary had played in her previous life, one where Alicia was the protagonist. There was the original game, the bonus content, and a sequel with a different setting and cast of characters. With those three products, the series had ended.

Or the *game* series had ended, to be precise.

"Adi, I want to discuss something," Mary said sometime before dinner.

After Veltina and the principals had left, she'd tried to get Alicia to leave and failed. She then went to have a tea party in Albert Manor, once more tried to get Alicia to leave, and failed again. For some reason, they then went on a tour of Alicia's favorite cake shops, and by the time dusk arrived, Mary had finally

foisted Alicia and Parfette off to Patrick and Gainas, who'd come to collect their respective partners.

Mary's day had been busy, but she'd at last found a moment of peace and quiet before dinnertime. However, rather than being peaceful, her tone of voice was grave when she spoke up to Adi, who tilted his head at her.

"Very well. Shall we go to my room?" he suggested.

"No need. Let's go to that room over there for a bit."

"Let us go to my room."

"Like I said, there's no need. We could even go to the garden."

"My room—"

"Where's your restraint?" Mary asked, tightening her fist.

Sensing the impending danger, Adi quickly said, "I'm so sorry! Let's head to the garden! I'll prepare some tea!" He rushed away, holding on to his flank as if he could still remember the pain of being dealt Mary's fist of moderation. One could even say he was a little traumatized.

Mary shrugged as she watched him leave, and then made her way to the garden.

"An...animation?" Adi asked slowly, as if he were saying the word of a foreign language. Huge question marks flitted about his head. The evening breeze swayed his rust-colored hair, but there was no time to appreciate that right now. "I think you mentioned it before, but just what is this 'animation' thing?"

"Animation, or anime, is...basically, it's moving pictures created using lots of amazing technology," Mary told him.

"That's so vague that I don't really understand, but you're saying that *Heart High* became an anime, yes?"

"That's right. When they first broadcast it, my previous self should've seen it... At least, I *think* so. Probably."

"You don't sound very certain about that," Adi pointed out.

“I may have memories of my past life, but they’re mostly fragmented,” Mary explained, sipping her tea. “How troublesome...” she added, though her tone didn’t sound particularly concerned. It seemed she wasn’t trying to force herself to recall the details.

After all, ever since she’d first recalled her past life back in high school, she hadn’t much cared for her memories of that time. Regardless of who she was in another life, and regardless of what sort of character the original Mary Albert had, Mary was still her own self. She pitied the original Mary, but had no sympathy towards her, nor did she have any reasons to yield any aspects of herself.

Though she may have obtained her past life memories, she had only used them to pursue her own ambition.

Plus, by now things had diverged greatly from the game. Obsessing over her past life or the otome game would’ve been meaningless at this stage.

Except...

“That girl’s attitude was a bit concerning,” Mary murmured, referring to Veltina. She recalled how the girl had thrown her arms around Adi, how her cheeks had been flushed, and how she’d gazed at Adi as if enraptured. Even when she’d been talking to Mary and the principals, she kept stealing glances at Adi.

If things had gone according to the anime, Veltina should’ve looked to someone else... Right, it should’ve been *Alicia*. But Veltina hadn’t taken any notice of Alicia at all.

“That’s why I found it strange. But my memories are pretty hazy, so I might be misremembering things. What do you think, Adi?” Mary asked, pausing. “Adi...?” she repeated, prompting him for an answer.

However, Adi sipped his tea with a grim expression on his face. After a moment, he placed the cup back on its saucer, and then plugged both of his ears. He looked excessively foolish as he did so, and contrasted completely with the garden’s beautiful scenery, but it was very clear that he didn’t want to hear a word of what Mary was saying.

“What are you doing?!” Mary questioned. She went up to him, grabbing his arms and trying to pull them away from his ears.

“I’m not listening!” he insisted, stubbornly resisting her attempts.

“Your wife and mistress is asking you for advice here! What kind of attitude is that? Listen to me!”

“No! Absolutely not!”

“You’re so rude! And insolent! And unloving!”

“I’m overflowing with love for you, but I will *not* listen to this! Rudeness is no object!”

“You’ve gone and said it! Fine, if that’s how it’s going to be... Wait, we’ve been conversing this entire time! So you *can* hear me!” Mary screeched, hitting Adi’s arm.

She then regulated her slightly heavy breathing and returned to her seat. Adi was still resolutely plugging his ears, but Mary knew she wouldn’t win against him in a contest of physical strength. Nonetheless, they were able to keep talking even like this, so it was no problem.

Though, Mary still glared at Adi for his disrespectful behavior. “Why are you so unwilling to listen to me?”

“Every time you remember something about your past life, the number of people who love you increases.”

“What are you talking about? There’s hardly any people who’d like me.”

“If I climb to the roof of Albert Manor and shine a bright light three times, a carriage with Alicia will rush over from the royal palace.”

“That girl isn’t really— Wait, what kind of a system is *that*?! When did you even implement it?!” Mary shrieked, hurriedly looking towards the roof of the estate.

House Albert was the most powerful family in the nation. Though they stood equal to the royals, even the royalty couldn’t do much to hinder them. As such, naturally Albert Manor was very luxurious, and also very large. If one were to have climbed to its roof and shined a light, it would’ve been seen even from a

great distance.

That much Mary knew, but she didn't want such a disadvantageous system in place.

"Veltina from *Heart High's* anime, and now a strange system implemented in my own mansion... I have so much to think about that I feel sick," she lamented.

"How saddening."

"It really is troublesome... And my husband is still adamantly covering his ears."

"I can't hear a thing." Though Adi was responding to her, he refused to change his posture.

Mary shrugged at the sight. "I'm going to invite Carina over tomorrow," she decided. Like her, Carina also had past life memories. There was no guarantee that she'd remember the *Heart High* anime, but Mary hoped she'd at least be of more help than the ear-plugging Adi.

With that on her mind, she cast him another glance. "You can't hear me, right?"

"Indeed, I cannot hear anything."

"What a shame. And here I wanted to discuss the matter of that system you mentioned, in your room."

"In my room?!"

"If the talk went on for too long, I'd thought about skipping dinner and staying with you, just the two of us... That was my plan, but you can't hear me. Oh well," Mary murmured purposely, standing up from her seat.

Adi sprung to his feet around the same time. He was no longer covering his ears, but Mary pretended not to see. She feigned indifference with a huff and began walking away, ignoring his attempts to stop her. She was walking a little faster than usual, and Adi hurriedly chased after her.

"All right, it's almost dinnertime," she remarked.

"My lady! Let's have dinner in my room!"

“After the meal, I think I’d like to read a book. Ah, that’s right; I still need to write up a few questions for the dog trainer.”

“You can do that in my room!”

Mary walked on in soliloquy, while Adi followed after her clingingly. He tried all sorts of ways to get her attention, from pulling on her arm to touching her shoulders. He also reached for her hair, but then grumbled, “The drills were way easier to grab.” (The fact that he’d brought up her drills made Mary suspicious about whether it was her attention he was after, or her anger.)

She pondered whether to give in yet, or hold out for a little longer. Maybe this time *she* should plug her ears. While thinking as much, she told Adi, “I can’t hear a thing!” with an impish smile.



The next morning, Mary promptly invited Carina over to Albert Manor. Thankfully this time, Alicia didn’t pay them an early morning visit, so Mary and Carina could converse in peace.

After they exchanged greetings, Mary brought up the topic of the *Heart High* anime. At that, Carina’s breath hitched, and her expression turned grave. It seemed that Mary’s words had stirred her memories.

“How much do you remember?” Mary inquired. “It’s all quite vague to me... I recall Alicia was the protagonist of the anime, as it was based on the original game, and Veltina was Alicia’s friend... Also, I recall that the croquettes were fantastic and the vichyssoise was the best in the nation.”

“Milady, those are memories from last night’s dinner,” Adi commented.

“I don’t remember the details either,” said Carina. “I believe that the anime didn’t focus on one specific route, but rather incorporated key elements from all the routes equally... Also, I wore very high heels to step on—”

“Lady Carina, please stop trying to remember anything at all,” Adi interjected calmly.

Mary and Carina exchanged a look and nodded at each other. Their past life memories were so faint that if they forcibly tried to recall them, the memories of their present incarnations wound up muddling their minds. That being the

case, it was wiser to use whatever information they had available to them right now to put things in order. Not to mention, Mary also didn't want to hear any more of Carina's talk.

The two girls continued discussing their fragmented memories, and Mary once again remembered that this was still the world of *Heart High*...even if only a little bit.

The *Heart High* anime began in the same way the game had, with heroine Alicia first entering Karelia Academy's senior high school. Though the events were based on the original game, the anime was different in that Alicia didn't get together with anyone by the end. This wasn't treated as a bad ending, however, nor was there a reverse harem route like in the sequel game. It was a story of love and youth, with the romantic aspects only vaguely implied.

On top of such microdoses of romance, the anime also featured interactions between the main male characters, which the game hadn't depicted. Elements of the game's sequel were also incorporated, bridging the gap between the separate casts of characters and allowing them to appear together. Such things captivated the viewers' interest, and the anime turned out to be a great success.

Veltina Barthez was the anime's original character. She referred to Alicia as a "sister," playing the role of an adoring younger sister. Veltina was supposed to support Alicia when the latter worried about her love life and the rank differences between herself and the other students. The girl didn't appear as often as the main cast due to her younger age, but she was portrayed as a carefree spirit, throwing her arms around Alicia whenever she did show up.

At the very least, that was how Mary and Carina remembered it.

"I don't think she was shown to embrace Adi, was she...?" Mary mused.

"No, she should've done that to Alicia instead," Carina confirmed.

"Then why did she hug him?" Mary sighed, sipping her tea. It was warm, with an elegant taste. Of course, Adi had been the one to prepare it for her.

Observing him, Mary recalled yesterday's events. Veltina had hugged Adi very tightly back then—normally, people wouldn't stick that close to each other even

during a dance. The girl had said she was happy to see Adi, even though that was their very first meeting, and she'd supposedly ended up at Albert Manor after getting lost on the way to Karelia.

It was a strange tale by any standards. To top it off, she constantly stole glances at Adi during the entire conversation.

"It could be that Lady Veltina has past life memories, just like us. What do you think, Lady Mary?" Carina asked, pausing. "Lady Mary...?"

"Huh? O-Oh, sorry. I was a little lost in thought," Mary responded. "But you're right. She could have past life memories too."

If that were the case, it would explain why Veltina had been so happy to see Adi. The girl must've been overcome with emotion upon seeing him.

However, that would mean...

Mary pressed her hand to her chest. For some reason, there was an unpleasant feeling within her. It was as if a cloud of discomforting heat were twining around her chest and stomach.

"My lady, what's wrong?" Adi asked with concern, quickly noticing that something was amiss.

"No, nothing. I just felt a little strange for a moment. It's probably because I'm forcing myself to remember things," she said.

"Ah, so your brain's overheating."

"Be quiet, Adi. Carina, how about we step outside for a bit? I think a small breeze would do me well," Mary proposed, rising from her seat. As she did so, she also stomped harshly on Adi's foot because of what he'd said.

Carina also stood up, but her body swayed suddenly. She cried out, perhaps having missed her footing. Mary gasped, extending her hand to try and catch her. But she didn't make it in time, and Carina was on the verge of collapsing.

However, right before she fell, Adi reached out both his arms and caught her.

With wide eyes, Carina clung to Adi's arms and waist. The open astonishment in her expression and her awkward posture were both completely out of character for her, but she looked equally surprised about it herself.

“Lady Carina, are you hurt?” Adi asked her.

“N-No... I’m fine.” Carina slowly got back on her feet, but she still looked a little anxious.

Perhaps wanting to ensure she was fine, Adi kept his arm around her for support, talking to her to calm her down. His hand rested on her back, most likely to catch her again if she lost her balance a second time.

Mary, too, would’ve done the same for Carina if she’d been closer during the other girl’s fall. If anything, she should’ve been grateful that Adi’s quick reflexes had saved her friend.

And yet, why was a mist clouding over her heart again?

In her mind’s eye, Mary saw the image of Veltina clinging to Adi. She quickly shook her head in an attempt to erase the scene, and then turned to Carina in concern. “Are you all right? Are you hurting anywhere?”

“No, I’m fine. Sorry to have worried you—I just slipped as I was standing up... I usually have my footstool with me, so I stood up with that expectation in mind...”

“Right... A...footstool...”

“Yes. I wanted to bring him with me today, but Margaret stopped me.”

“Hold it! I don’t want to hear any more!” Mary exclaimed, cutting Carina off from continuing.

In the past, Carina had referred to her footstool as “it.” Mary could only wonder why Carina had said “him” this time—almost as if her footstool were a living creature. Indeed, a living creature, or perhaps a human being, or perhaps her ex-fiancé...

The moment Mary surmised this, a chill ran down her spine.

Adi must’ve noticed it too, for he withdrew his arm from Carina and started gaining distance from her step by step. The way he’d removed his hand from her back was almost as if she were an untouchable existence... Though, Carina certainly felt like someone who shouldn’t be touched.

“Anyway, I’m glad he’s...doing as well as he can be, on the wrong path,” said

Mary.

“Would you like to hear more?”

“No!” Mary denied promptly.

Carina giggled. Perhaps thinking of her footstool, she smiled beautifully, although there was also an unspeakable iciness to that smile.

Mary’s shoulders drooped as she watched the other girl. “This really has nothing to do with *Heart High* anymore, huh?” she murmured.

There was Mary herself, who, instead of falling into ruin and being cast out into the northern provinces, had befriended the royal family and opened a business in those very provinces. And there was also Carina, who was proceeding on a new path of her own. Everything was already outside of the scope of the game. Not only that, but both Mary and Carina had managed to find their own happiness.

All that considered, some silly anime shouldn’t have mattered at this point. And yet...

“I just can’t calm down,” Mary whispered, pressing a hand to her heart.

Chapter 2

Exchange program or not, Mary's school life at Karelia Academy shouldn't have changed much... *Shouldn't* being the operative word.

Yes, her friends were coming from abroad, and as the daughter of House Albert, she knew everyone would expect her to interact with the exchange students, which she was prepared for. This would also be her opportunity to make connections for the sake of expanding her migratory bird restaurant, and she wanted to put her plan of launching an international branch into action. Mary expected things to get a little busier and livelier than normal, but that was it.

However...

"Lady Mary, let's have some tea before going back home today! Parfette, you should come too!"

"Waaah! The princess herself has invited me... I'm so honored, I can't stop my tears...!"

"Parfette and I were thinking of making croquettes today, Lady Mary! Right, Parfette?"

"I'll try to make them to your liking, Lady Mary...!"

Alicia was clinging to Mary's right arm cheerfully. In contrast, Parfette clung to Mary's left arm while tearing up and trembling all over. On one side was a sunlike smile, and on the other constant tears. To top it off, while Alicia swung Mary's arm around with high spirits, Parfette was in a permanent state of microvibrations.

Trapped between the two girls, Mary couldn't bear it. She had no idea which one of them to start her scolding with, and she was beginning to feel sick from the vibrations on either side. All she could do was cry out, "Someone, save me!"

But nobody came to her rescue, and in fact nobody even bothered responding to her. Realizing that today, too, no help was coming, Mary tried to turn

around, and came face-to-face with...

“Lady Mary, I’m so sorry! Parfette was looking forward to spending time with you so much, I couldn’t possibly stop her!”

...a powerless, apologetic Gainas. Beside him...

“I feel better when I think about how Alicia isn’t the only one causing you trouble.”

...was a pleasantly smiling Patrick. And of course...

“Well, I suppose they can have you during school hours, milady. I’ve already given up. I’m glad your life has gotten so busy, you see. But...they can *only* have you during school! If I must specify, only until the evening!”

...there was Adi, appealing for his right to spend time with Mary. He turned to Patrick and Gainas to emphasize this to them, implying that Alicia and Parfette could only be with Mary on the condition that their partners would retrieve them when the time came.

Seeing him in such desperation, Mary murmured, “What a possessive man!” with a small smile. However, her fond feelings disappeared in the next instant at the sound of a certain voice interrupting them all.

“Greetings, everyone! Hello, Lord Adi!”

Mary recognized that high-pitched voice, and indeed, when she turned to look, she spotted Veltina. The girl had a large white ribbon in her hair, and she was standing with a ladylike magnitude of dignity. It was hard to tell if her posture was owing to a high-handed personality, or if she was trying to look a little more intimidating because of her small stature.

Veltina approached Adi and gave him an elegant bow. Her affectionate smile was directed only at him, and in a sweet tone of voice, she said, “Lovely weather we’re having today, don’t you think?”

However, Adi’s expression was a little stiff as he replied, “Yes... Quite.” His words were audibly apathetic. It wasn’t the sort of attitude with which one should treat a noble lady from abroad, but Veltina was being crude herself. She stared fixedly at him, and even inquired what sort of classes he’d had today. Of

course, she was still only addressing Adi.

A few other girls watched this exchange from a short distance—they were Veltina’s cronies. It seemed they were staying away for now, but keeping a careful eye on how things would pan out for her.

Veltina asked Adi all about Karelia Academy and the senior high school classes, while he gave her curt replies. After a while of conversing with him, Veltina seemed satisfied and turned to face Mary instead. The moment she did, her face grew stern. Though, given her small, childish features, the force of her glare wasn’t all that impressive.

“By the way, Lady Mary. You may be a student of Karelia Academy, but aren’t you making a little too much noise? It wouldn’t be going too far to say that you’re acting like you own the place.”

“Actually, I agree with you on that,” Mary replied.

“One of my teachers used to tell me that I should look up to my seniors and become a fine lady by emulating them. But the idea of emulating this is just embarrassing—there’s no way I could do it. I’m not wrong, am I, Lady Mary?”

“Indeed...” Mary murmured, casting her eyes down at Veltina’s thorny words. How snide the other girl’s remarks were! Each time she said Mary’s name, the dislike in her voice was palpable.

I wonder how I should respond to her? Mary pondered. She glanced to the right, then turned back to Veltina.

“You’re right,” she said, agreeing with the girl’s biting words. “However, could you aim your complaints at the princess of my nation and the daughter of House Marquis, neither of whom will let go of my arms? Also, you can air your grievances at the eldest son of House Dyce and prince consort, Patrick—as well as the first son of your country’s distinguished House Eldland, Gainas, for their negligent supervision. I, the daughter of House Albert, am simply getting dragged into this, so I’m innocent.”

Mary was making a display of all the family names and ranks of those around her.

Veltina groaned quietly at her words. Using family names was an

uncharacteristic tactic for Mary, but it was overwhelmingly effective. The other girl shivered slightly, and her followers seemed to have judged the situation wasn't going well, for they called out to her in an attempt to urge her to withdraw: "Lady Veltina, perhaps we should get going for now..."

Veltina's family, House Barthez, did have a decent standing in her own country, but no more than that. They ranked above House Marquis, but below House Eldland. Of course, they were nowhere near close to House Albert or the royalty either.

The girl must've grasped as much herself, for while she glared at Mary in frustration, she had no rebuttal. In the end, she turned away with a huff. "I don't have enough free time on my hands to be concerning myself with you, Lady Mary! Excuse me!"

Having said her piece, Veltina promptly walked away, her cronies chasing after her.

It was a postdefeat retreat. Veltina's white ribbon almost looked like the flag of surrender to Mary, and she shrugged as she watched the girl leave.

Veltina's attitude was very blatant, and it was easy for everyone to see that while she liked Adi, she also loathed Mary. She didn't even try to conceal her feelings; her candor made Mary feel more astonishment than anger. Of course, she wasn't hurt by the girl's words in the slightest.

After all, for many years Mary had been called an eccentric behind her back, and had been the target of burning jealousy from the other noblewomen who thought she'd stolen Patrick from them. Compared to that, a younger girl openly getting all huffy and puffy in front of Mary was downright adorable.

However...

"I won't tolerate the way she treats you, Lady Mary!" Alicia shouted angrily, still clinging to Mary's right arm. In the *Heart High* anime, Veltina had idolized Alicia as her older sister figure, while Alicia saw Veltina as a cute younger sister. But right now, Alicia held no such sentiments, and glared in the direction Veltina had gone with a sulky pout.

"Quit your pouting. It's disgraceful," Mary responded. "You're lowering the

dignity of the school, just as Veltina said. In fact, you're bringing shame to our whole country!"

"She hurled abuse at you... I'll have to tell my parents about this!"

"What are you *talking* about? Your parents are the king and queen! Don't just casually turn this into an international affair!"

"For you, Lady Mary, I wouldn't mind mobilizing the entire country!" Alicia declared, saying terrifying things about Mary's importance.

"You *should* mind!" Mary scolded, flicking Alicia's forehead. But then something pulled on her left arm, and she turned to look.

Parfette's eyes were full of both tears and a fighting spirit. "I would do the same for you...! Though, House Marquis can't mobilize a country like Lady Alicia can..."

"I don't *want* you to do that anyway!" said Mary.

"Since it's come to this, I'll marry Lord Gainas, become the lady of the renowned House Eldland, and fight for your sake, Lady Mary!" Parfette asserted, looking ready to follow through on her words.

"We'll fight together!" Alicia exclaimed in support, perhaps feeling fired up by Parfette's ardor.

They exchanged a passionate handshake before Mary's eyes. Sandwiched between the two revved up girls, Mary let out a sigh and raised both her arms. "Don't you dare rouse the country over my personal matters!" she yelled, and with two loud smacks, she hit both their heads.

Witnessing this, Patrick remarked, "Resolving international issues—as expected of the daughter of House Albert," complimenting Mary with obvious insincerity.

"Lady Mary, please let her off the hook with a single blow, I beg of you...!" Gainas pleaded, appealing for Mary's compassion.

Glaring at the men, Adi coolly said, "*You* two should be putting a stop to them yourselves."

Two hours had passed since Veltina's withdrawal by the time they ran into her again. It happened right as Mary and Adi were leisurely walking inside the campus, on the way to class.

Veltina was acting high-handed, as though her earlier escape had never even occurred. Her large white ribbon bounced with each step as she approached Mary and gave her an ostentatious yet brusque greeting.

A mere moment later, Veltina smiled sweetly as she turned to Adi instead and touched his arm. The change in her was quite impressive, though Adi's expression soured. "Lord Adi, are you busy today?" she asked him. "If you're free, I was thinking we could spend some time together after school..."

"My apologies, but I already have plans for the day. Excuse me."

"Then how about tomorrow?" Veltina persisted. "I'd like to take a walk around the town center. Perhaps you could show me around? I wouldn't mind going the day after tomorrow instead, if that works better for you."

"My schedule is going to be very full for the duration of the exchange program. Now then, pardon me," Adi said with a stiff smile, firmly refusing her. He took her hand for a brief moment in order to extract it from his arm, and then stepped closer to Mary. He was clearly trying to get away from Veltina.

His behavior was very telling, and he even hid behind Mary. That said, Adi and Mary's size difference was quite substantial, so despite the fact that he stood behind Mary, most of him was still perfectly visible.

Adi was emanating an aura of intense dislike. His whole body seemed to appeal for Veltina to stay away from him. But Veltina didn't seem to notice this as she turned to look at Mary. "Oh my!" the girl said with exaggeration. "Are those textbooks for your class, Lady Mary?"

"Yes, that's right," Mary answered.

"You're not making Lord Adi carry them for you?"

"Adi...? But they're *my* textbooks. Obviously, I should be the one to carry my own belongings."

Veltina looked confused by Mary's response. She muttered things like "Huh?"

and “But why?” under her breath, and seemed sincerely shocked, as if question marks were about to float around her person. When she tilted her head, her ribbon swayed with the movement.

As a side note, Veltina was most likely on her way to class too, but she wasn’t carrying anything. Mary assumed her followers carried everything for her on a daily basis.

“All right, then!” Veltina said at last. “In that case, could you lend me one of those textbooks? I’m curious about college-level classes.” Following this, the girl held out her hand expectantly. Her attitude was insolent and completely unlike someone asking for a favor.

Just what is she thinking? Mary wondered, gazing at Veltina dubiously. Then, Adi held out his own textbook instead. Despite his dislike of Veltina, it seemed he still didn’t want Mary to hand over her own belongings.

“My, how kind you are, Lord Adi!” Veltina exclaimed. “But I’d like to borrow it from Lady Mary.”

“Our textbooks are the same,” Adi told her.

“In that case, I’d like to take a look at Lady Mary’s notes,” Veltina said, passing on Adi’s offer as she gestured with her outstretched hand to urge Mary on.

She seemed specifically after Mary’s items. It was all very suspicious, and Mary knew it meant the other girl was plotting something. But there was only so much one could do with a book. Soil it or rip it up—that’s about it. These were no more than cheap efforts at harassment.

Though, for the daughter of House Albert, losing a textbook or two wouldn’t be any serious blow. It wouldn’t hurt her feelings, nor would it even count as harassment in her eyes. Having thought that far, Mary suddenly snapped back to her senses when Veltina called her name.

“Will you not let me borrow it, Lady Mary? How nasty you are!”

“Oh, my apologies. I was lost in thought. Here you go,” Mary said, holding out one of her textbooks. She had picked one of the college-grade books at random from the top of the pile she was carrying.

The second Veltina took the book in her hands, she suddenly let out a high-pitched scream. “Oh no! I just accidentally tore it up!” she shrieked purposefully.

Hearing her words, Mary realized she’d been right in her assumptions—Veltina really *had* intended to rip up her textbook. What a mediocre attempt at bullying. It was akin to graceless child’s play, exactly the likes of which a certain villainess would’ve done.

Though, in Veltina’s case...

“Come on... Rip...! Ugh, it’s so hard...”

...she was desperately trying to tear the book up while complaining miserably.

Why on earth was she attempting to tear the entire book all at once? She was completely ignoring its construction too and doing it from the spine.

Veltina was evidently trying very hard, so much so that her arms were shaking. Even the ribbon in her hair was quivering. Yet the book didn’t budge an inch.

Alas, that was to be expected—this was Karelia Academy’s textbook, after all. The cover was sturdy and made from thick material. Not to mention, it consisted of 500 pages. It wasn’t exactly something a young girl could accidentally rip up.

“It’s...so...tough...!”

“It’s impossible. Stop trying to rip the whole thing up,” Mary said. “I mostly have the first ten pages memorized, so try tearing those out.”

“No! I’m going to accidentally rip this textbook...! Ow, my hands!” Veltina cried, still gripping the book.

Even Mary was at a loss for what to do here. She peered at the rest of her books to see if any of them looked easier to tear. Something softly made that a sheltered girl like Veltina could easily destroy...

Of course I don’t have anything like that! Perhaps my notes would do instead?

Thinking as much, Mary took out her notes and was about to test for herself if the pages would tear easily. But right at that instant, a voice called out.

“What is going on here?”

It was Patrick. He was looking between Mary and Veltina with a bewildered expression. This didn't help him to grasp the situation, so he turned to look at Adi next. His indigo pupils were clearly asking for an explanation.

“Er, it's a long story... Actually, no it's not.”

“No?”

“Lady Veltina is just trying to accidentally rip up milady's textbook.”

“That's so brief it's entirely unhelpful. But... I see, so she's trying to tear this book?” Patrick inquired as he glanced at Veltina's hands.

Indeed, the girl was holding one of Mary's textbooks. She was desperately trying to tear it up, but it was a Karelia Academy book, so of course it wasn't budging. If anything, it was Veltina's hands that were trembling from the effort. “Why won't it work...?” she lamented, now sounding more heartbroken than anything.

Patrick sighed at her. “You seem to hold a serious grudge against that book, Lady Veltina,” he stated, sounding somewhat cold, and even a little strict.

Adi turned to look at him in surprise. Even Mary, who'd been concerned for Veltina, picked up on his demeanor and did the same. The way Patrick was staring—no, *looking down* at Veltina right now was very out of character for him.

“An acquaintance of mine wrote that book,” Patrick said. “He's an extremely diligent person, and when I mentioned I have an interest in his field, he went out of his way to make some time for me so we could discuss it.”

“O-Oh really?” asked Veltina.

“He told me that finishing it was very taxing for him. He had to visit various places and gather heaps of materials, which he had to scour through. He poured his heart and soul into writing that book...” Patrick's voice was getting lower and lower as he spoke.

Right now, he was just like the cold-blooded Patrick from *Heart High*: ruthlessly cutting down those he deemed beneath him, while reserving his

warm smile for the heroine alone. His disposition had long surpassed the term “freezing.” Mary recalled that his iciness had been alive and well in the anime adaptation too, which had caused his fan base to overheat in turn.

Indeed, the present Patrick was exactly like his in-game self. Mary, however, wasn’t used to seeing him like this. He almost seemed like a completely different person from the man she knew.

Veltina must’ve felt his coldness too, for she shivered.

Yet as if he still hadn’t had enough, Patrick cast her a sharp glare and let out a deep sigh. It was so heavy that it went beyond exasperation and sounded downright scornful. “You’re trying to tear up his masterpiece? How pathetic you are, to not know the worth of such things.”

“Wh-What...?” Veltina stammered. “That’s not the case at all...”

“House Barthez, was it? I’m ashamed on your behalf as someone who shares your social circle,” Patrick asserted decisively, casting his eyes down thoughtfully. Then, he spoke in a voice so quiet it would normally have been missed, yet was still perfectly audible in the deafening silence his intimidating presence had created. “You’re expendable...”

Veltina let out a shriek. “You really *are* cold-blooded after all, Lord Patrick...!” she cried out fearfully, and then shoved the textbook back into Mary’s hands. “I have no use for this—this worthy textbook!”

“Veltina, the way you said ‘after all’ just now...” Mary said.

“I have a class to get to! Excuse me!” Elegance all but forgotten, Veltina hurriedly made her evacuation, her cronies following after her.

Once the girls had vanished, Patrick exhaled a long breath. “So how did it even get to this?” he asked, turning back to Mary and Adi. His manner of speech and tone of voice were back to that of his usual self. There was still a note of exasperation in his words, but it was nowhere near the detached iciness he’d been giving off earlier.

Even Mary had to admit she was impressed. Though she could disguise herself as the perfect lady and feign friendliness, her acting skills were certainly not on par with Patrick’s. (Those were her thoughts, but in reality Patrick was thinking,

I didn't put on as good of an act as Mary, while his shoulders drooped. How very in character of them both.)

"That was incredible, Patrick," Mary commented. "You came off as truly heartless back there."

"I have decent acting skills. So what did Miss Veltina want?"

"Just a little prank." Mary shrugged her shoulders as if to say she found it cute. She caressed the textbook Veltina had returned to her, and needless to say, it wasn't torn up at all. There wasn't so much as a single mark on it.

Veltina had wanted to rip it, just like some cheap villainess. Plus...

"Right, Miss Veltina said I 'really am cold-blooded after all' at the time of her escape. What was that 'after all' supposed to mean?" Patrick mused.

Mary paused. "Indeed... I don't have a clue."

"I wonder if I've garnered a strange reputation abroad," he theorized, frowning in concern.

Patrick's supposed cold-bloodedness had been no more than a performance. It wasn't an act he went around showing carelessly. And whenever he did, he always had a good reason for it. He could be strict, yes, but it was for the good of whoever he was talking to. His reputation held that despite being ever cool and collected, he was surprisingly compassionate.

After all, he had chosen love over status, and had been prepared to cast his family name aside for the sake of being with Alicia, who was once thought to be a commoner. On top of that, he'd also fully supported Adi in his desire to be wedded to Mary. There was no way somebody like him would've been known as "cold-blooded."

That is, not unless someone only had an impression of him based on a *different* Patrick Dyce.

"Perhaps I should aim to improve my image at Elysiana College during this exchange program. By the way, Adi, about the class earlier... Adi?" Patrick called out in confusion, turning to look at the other man.

Mary, who'd been lost in thought until now, snapped back to her senses.

Following Patrick's voice, she turned to Adi as well.

Adi stood there petrified. "Please pardon all of my impoliteness until now, Lord Patrick," he said, and gave the other man an exceedingly formal and deep bow. His rust-colored eyes, full of trepidation, seemed unable to meet Patrick's.

"Adi?!"

"To think that you'd have no trouble at all crushing my family... I apologize for all my past and future impoliteness. Just do not lay a hand on my family, I implore you...!"

"What's with this coldness? Don't you say things that could damage my reputation like that," Patrick retorted. "Wait... What do you mean by 'future impoliteness'?"

"I mean, speaking to you coldly also counts as impolite, no?" Adi pointed out, returning to his usual self at Patrick's complaint.

Well, well, isn't he an actor too? Mary thought. She nodded to herself, realizing this was the "future impoliteness" Adi had been referring to.

Eventually, Mary explained everything that had happened with Veltina to Patrick. Hearing her explanation, he looked puzzled. As it turned out, House Dyce and House Barthez had a connection, and Patrick had heard tales of Veltina in the past.

She was the stereotypical selfish aristocrat. She had her group of cronies, she put on airs in front of those ranked lower than her, and no matter who she spoke with, she was always pompous. Her parents spoiled her, her followers flattered her, and though she annoyed those around her, she'd never gone through any hardships. Her attitude was a result of all of that.

However, she never went past being an annoyance. Among high society, such people were far from unusual. Just hearing such a description brought up the faces of several similar people in Mary's mind.

"But I've never heard of her acting in such an irrational manner," Patrick said, tilting his head as though to say he found it strange.

Mary cast him a sidelong glance and then let out a sigh. Wondering when

she'd finally be able to enjoy a peaceful school life, she stroked her unblemished textbook.



Similar interactions between Mary, Adi, and Veltina continued to occur for several days—in fact, they'd occur *several times a day*, at which point even Mary was fed up.

Today, too, Veltina pestered Mary repeatedly, until finally Mary and Adi got a moment to themselves. But the topic of conversation soon turned to Veltina anyway, and Mary let out a sigh as she murmured, “Yet another troublesome girl has shown up.”

Veltina constantly sent forth lines such as “*You were being so noisy that I thought the circus had arrived!*” and “*Even kindergartners are quieter than you!*” She was full of spite.

It went even further—sometimes, Veltina purposely bumped into Mary, or pretended to slip and stomped on her foot. Immediately after, she'd say something like, “*My, how terribly rude of me!*” and apologize.

In response, Mary would only smile and say, “*Don't worry about it.*”

If Mary blew up at her and reproached Veltina, everyone else might see *Mary* as the ridiculous one instead. Not to mention, since Mary was used to enduring Alicia's high-speed tackles on a daily basis, having a young girl like Veltina bump into her was almost unnoticeable in comparison.

“It's because you're made of steel, Your Ladyship,” Adi proclaimed.

“My *ringlets* used to be made of steel... Wait, no they weren't!” Mary shouted, scolding him for his impudence.

Feigning ignorance, Adi just turned to look the other way. Mary glared at him for a while, but finally sighed again.

“Anyway, since I have to deal with a peasant girl's charge attacks and a man who constantly assaults me with frivolous talk, my body and mind are both very resilient,” she stated.

“So you wouldn't be where you are now if it weren't for me... This is love!”

“What love?!” Mary scoffed, glaring at him. Compared to Adi’s frivolousness that she’d had to put up with for so many years, Veltina’s direct nastiness was like the cry of a kitten. *My biggest enemy is right here*, Mary thought. She was about to rebuke him, when Adi spoke up first, reverting back to their previous topic.

“But if you truly find any of this difficult to bear, please let me know. I’ll do anything for you, my lady.”

“Adi...”

“Besides, I’m sure if I spoke to Lady Veltina myself, she’d hear me out.”

“No!” Mary raised her voice in a fluster, quickly grasping Adi by the arm.

His rust-colored eyes widened as he looked at her with surprise. “What’s the matter, milady?”

“N-No... It’s nothing,” she replied, letting go of him. But even she was aware that her voice sounded a bit hollow, akin to an incoherent mutter. Adi examined her with concern, but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything else.

Mary herself didn’t understand why she’d been so panicked when she stopped him. The instant Adi had said Veltina’s name, a mist swirled within Mary’s chest. An image of Veltina embracing Adi floated in her mind, which only made the mist intensify. Driven by such an unexplainable discomfort, she’d ended up grasping Adi’s arm.

“I’ve felt a little odd recently. I wonder if I’m exhausted by how lively things have been...” she murmured.

“Are you okay?” asked Adi.

“I’ll take it easy at home,” Mary said. Surely if she rested up a bit, the mist inside of her would settle. Telling herself as much, she began walking home with Adi.

After they’d been walking for a while, a voice called out to them, making them stop in their tracks.

“My, hello there!”

It was a high-pitched and high-handed voice. Mary recognized it at once and felt herself grow fed up as she turned around, coming face-to-face with Veltina. As always, the girl was standing tall with her cronies in tow. Mary's shoulders drooped at the sight as she replied with, "It's been an hour, huh?"

Indeed, an hour ago, Veltina had appeared just like now, aired her grievances for a while, and then run away. Though her punches were weak, she was quick to make her comebacks.

Veltina was posturing proudly and acting as though her previous retreat had never happened. In the next moment, she held out a canteen as if intent on showing it off. It was a perfectly ordinary object.

"I truly have no interest in this and don't want to ask, but I'll indulge you. What have you got there, Veltina?" Mary prompted.

"This is called a canteen, an item used by the commoners," Veltina explained. "Inside of it, there's cheap tea which the commoners drink. I ordered it so I could learn about their way of life. I heard that you're into boorish things like this, so I thought I'd see if this is to your tastes."

The girl then purposely poured the drink into a cup right before Mary's eyes. Perhaps she wanted Mary to drink it—or perhaps the girl was anticipating Mary rejecting her.

How predictable it all was. Mary's shoulders sagged, and she held out her hand to take the offered cup. Of course, she knew what Veltina would do next. The second before Mary took the cup, the younger girl would drop it, and the tea would spill all over Mary's skirt. As usual, it was a cheap method of harassment.

Having imagined all of this, Mary touched the cup. In that instant, three voices resounded at about the same time.

"Oops, silly me! I dropped the cup!"

"Please move aside, milady."

"Lady Mary, there you ar— Ah!"

The first one belonged to Veltina, who insincerely scolded herself over her

supposed carelessness.

The second one was Adi, trying to lead Mary away.

But at the sound of the last voice, Mary's eyes grew wide with shock. She didn't even have the time to utter a single word, for in that exact moment, Veltina had dropped her cup, just as Mary had predicted.

Mary's skirt should've been soiled from the spilled tea, but something had quickly pulled her aside right in the nick of time.

She blinked a few times, then glanced down at her skirt and saw not a single stain upon it. Instead, a pair of arms she knew very well were wrapped around her waist, and her back was pressed up against something. It was almost as if someone was embracing her from behind.

"Adi..." Mary murmured.

"Are you all right, my lady?"

Mary looked over her shoulder. Adi was smiling warmly as he returned the look, having pulled her back to protect her. Mary's cheeks flushed at the thought of just how dependable he was.

Both her heart and body should've been brimming with warmth from the way he'd protected her. She definitely *shouldn't* have felt petrifyingly cold air surrounding her. Her heart was supposed to melt from the effect of Adi's love, but...

"No, I can't turn a blind eye to this any longer," she said. "You have truly shown up with impeccable timing, Carina. What happened?" she inquired, remaining in Adi's embrace (one could even say they were warming each other up).

Carina was standing there with an air of grace, as icy and gorgeous as ever. However, her ivory dress had a brown stain upon it. Indeed, it was tea.

As to how this had happened, it was because the cup ended up hitting Carina right as Mary dodged it.

Mary couldn't stop herself from whispering, "Such terrible timing..."

Adi seemed unable to speak at all, and he only hugged Mary even tighter.

For her part, Veltina seemed to sense that the situation was bad, but even so, she continued appealing, “It was purely by accident!”

Meanwhile, Carina was smiling in a shockingly beautiful manner. If a complete stranger unfamiliar with her nature had looked at her right now, they would’ve surely fallen for her in an instant. She even gave off a motherly aura. The ivory dress emphasized her femininity, so much so that she almost looked like a holy woman.

Yet the chill in the air definitely wasn’t normal, and droplets of the tea audibly dripped down to the ground from her skirt.

Breath hitching, Mary hurriedly grasped Carina by the arm. “Veltina, run! I’ll hold her off, so just run!”

“I... I’m not going to run! I’m not scared!” Veltina insisted.

“This isn’t some kind of challenge! This woman’s going to make you tread down the wrong path of life! If you wish to live respectably, then hurry up and run away!”

Despite Mary’s desperate attempts, Veltina stubbornly stood her ground.

However, in the next moment, Carina swayed her soiled skirt with an elegant smile and uttered, “Such delicious tea, isn’t it? Thank you for the refreshments.”

Those words made Veltina’s shoulders jolt. The ribbon in her hair trembled with the movement. Even so, perhaps on account of her pride, she refused to retreat and glared sharply at the other two girls. She continued to repeat that she hadn’t done it on purpose, and that blaming her for it would be childish.

Clack!

Veltina’s appeals were silenced at once by the sound. Mary and Adi both gasped, while the argumentative Veltina cried out in a high-pitched voice.

The sound had come from Carina’s fine-quality heels as she harshly struck the ground with them. *Clack!* The sound came again, as though she were trying to urge something to happen. *Clack! Clack!*

“Carina, are you trying to tell her to become your footstool?!” Mary

exclaimed.

“My! Not at all, Lady Mary,” she replied. “I’m simply entertaining myself because my feet have some free time.”

“Free time?! And how do you plan to fill up that free time?!”

“Why, through trampling, of course.” Carina laughed gracefully, once more snapping her heels.

The terrifying sound was enough to exert pressure on anyone’s heart. It was almost as if Carina were counting down to something, and just listening to the noise would cause beads of sweat to form by one’s temple.

Veltina must’ve been aghast too. Feeling disoriented under the pressure of Carina’s eccentric behavior, she cried out, “What on earth...?!”

Staring her down elegantly, Carina clacked her heels a few more times, and finally took a deep breath. “I see that being at Karelia Academy hurts my feet terribly.”

“O-Oh my, Carina,” Mary responded. “Your feet are hurting? Are you okay?”

“Yes. I suppose I just haven’t gotten used to treading upon the grounds of Karelia Academy. Or should I say, I’d prefer to step on something softer and full of bones. Perhaps my feet truly are longing for that sort of sensation. I do believe I’d like to get a new footstool *immediately*.”

“Veltina, run for it!” Mary shrieked, urging for the younger girl to make a getaway.

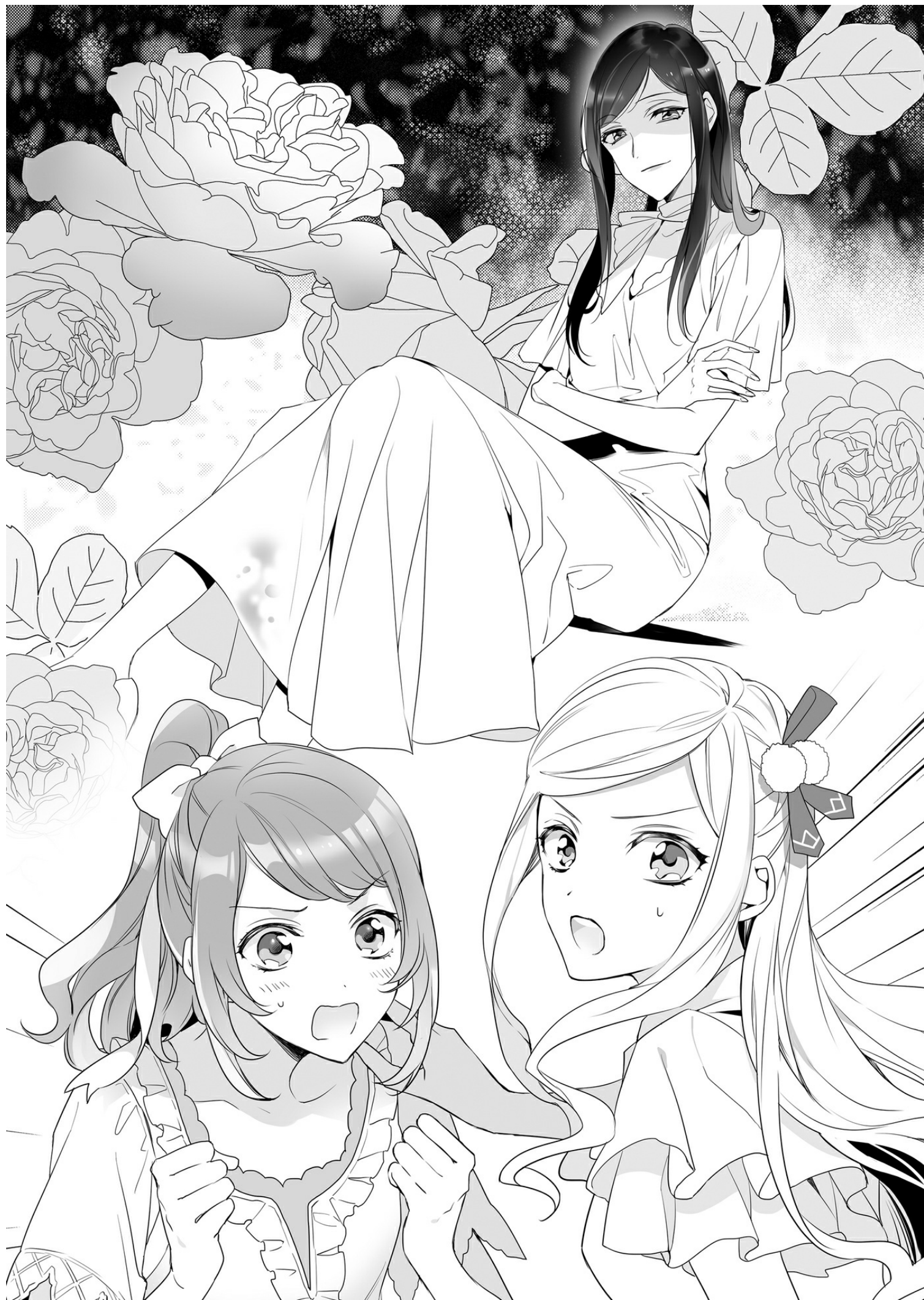
Veltina pouted, hesitating for a moment. “This is a strategic withdrawal!” she declared high-handedly, and then turned to retreat so vigorously that one could practically hear the *whoosh* in the air. Her cronies were quick to follow, and Mary let out a breath of relief upon seeing them disappear in the distance.

“Thank goodness! I managed to save a girl’s life...”

“Lady Mary, please don’t say such scandalous things,” said Carina. “All I wanted to do was thank her for the delicious tea.”

“It’s utterly frightening how you can say that without any hesitation—and with that smile!”

While Carina smiled away, Mary tried to pacify her to make the chill in the air go away.



Mary then cast her eyes down at Carina's soiled skirt. It wasn't just a few drops—there was a large stain in the material, its pale ivory color only making the blemish stand out even more.

There was no way Carina could leave in this state. Perhaps thinking the same thing, the girl's smile shifted to a troubled look.

"It's my fault that you got involved, so I owe you an apology," said Mary. "Adi, please bring us some towels and a change of clothes."

"Understood." Adi lowered his head respectfully, holding out his jacket towards Carina. "Please take a seat somewhere while you wait for me. Until then, you can use this to cover your lap."

"Lord Adi, this might sully your jacket..." Carina pointed out.

"It's no problem. Besides, the stain will stand out if you leave it like this," he insisted, handing his coat over before departing.

Mary wasn't sure whether he'd speak with the school staff and try to arrange something, or rush back to Albert Manor for a change of clothes for Carina. In either case, it'd take some time for him to get back, so she thought it best they find some bench to sit upon while waiting for him. When she said as much to Carina, the other girl nodded and started walking alongside Mary while covering the stain with Adi's jacket.

"Lord Adi's very kind, isn't he?"

Surprised to hear such words from Carina, Mary glanced at her with wide eyes. "You think so?"

She then looked down at Carina's knees, where Adi's jacket was resting. The man's item looked big upon her slender frame, concealing the stain on her dress. From afar, it would simply look like a lap blanket.

As Mary stared at it and pondered upon Carina's words, she was overcome with a strange feeling. Before long, her mind turned to thoughts of Adi.

Why in the world did she find it so difficult to calm down? Was she feeling bashful from having her spouse praised? No, that wasn't it. A strange mist rose

up within her chest.

“Adi’s been serving House Albert since he was very young, so he can be quite considerate when he puts his mind to it,” she explained. “Even in that, he is exceptional.”

“I’m jealous of the fact you’ve always had such a kind and reliable person by your side, Lady Mary.”

“Jealous...?”

Carina’s murmur caused the mist in Mary’s heart to whirl. Right now, she ought to have responded with something like, “*I know, right?*” in a lovey-dovey manner, or grumble a complaint along the lines of “*But there’s a gap—he’s terribly insolent.*” Yet despite knowing that, she couldn’t say a word.

Mary was caught up in Carina’s statement. Upon Carina’s lap was Adi’s jacket, and perhaps because *her* hands were touching it, Mary couldn’t make herself look away. The way Carina’s slender fingers stroked the coat almost had an air of affection to it.

“By ‘jealous,’ you mean...” Mary mumbled. Perhaps Carina meant that she’d like a man like Adi. Or...maybe not a man *like* him, but rather...

Yet when Mary tried to ask as much, her voice wouldn’t come out.

The image of Veltina sprung to mind—the way she’d embraced Adi, gazed at him fixedly, and acted all friendly towards him. The visuals turned the mist within her into a maelstrom, and a deep discomfort rattled her.

Overwhelmed by that feeling, Mary opened her mouth, intending to ask Carina for the truth.

But before she could do that, Carina let out a sigh. As she rubbed the jacket, she seemed to be deeply considering something, and the look in her eyes suggested she was thinking of someone.

Seeing her like this made Mary feel an even stronger sense of unease. The expression was unlike Carina, and she must’ve had a specific person on her mind. Could it be that this person was...?

Mary’s anxiety was overpowering. However...

“All I have is someone who’s only good for stomping on.”

...at Carina’s proclamation, the mist inside of Mary instantly evaporated. Its swift disappearance was quite splendid, indeed. In fact, perhaps it would’ve been more appropriate to say that the mist froze over due to the coldness emanating from Carina, and then scattered away in all directions.

Mary’s discomfort may have faded, but what a harsh remedy it was.

“Stomping, you say...?”

“Though, I suppose he *does* excel as a footstool.”

“Are you going to keep talking about this?”

“Lately, he’s become very good at guessing what I want. If I stomp my heels three times, he comes over to my feet all by himself. If I walk through the gardens on a rainy day, he becomes my foothold whenever there’s a puddle.”

“Adi, please come back soon... And bring an ultrawarm insulated coat with you, if you can...” muttered Mary impatiently, trembling at the chill in the air while Carina merrily continued chatting away.



Mary couldn’t really claim that Veltina’s attempts at harassment were in any way cunning. Not to mention, none of them worked.

Veltina hesitated each time Alicia spiritedly cried out, “I’ll mobilize the country...!”

And she also grew timid whenever Patrick smiled coolly and remarked, “House Barthez has a nice plot of land, hmm?”

With Carina and Margaret occasionally in the mix, it was no surprise that Veltina would be forced to make an escape. After all, no average young lady would be able to compete with two such figures.

That about summarized the present situation. Mary didn’t even have it in her to get angry at Veltina, and in fact often encouraged Veltina to run away before she could make matters worse for herself.

“Whenever I see that girl, I just can’t leave her alone,” Mary murmured with a sigh.

It was right after dinner, and she was in Adi's room. She was sitting upon her personal cushion, thoughtfully patting her second personal cushion as she reflected on the day's events. Inevitably, the topic of Veltina came up.

As usual, the younger girl had charged over to Mary, faced a crushing defeat, and then run away. Mary had endured four such surprise attacks today.

Alicia and Parfette had each been holding on to one of Mary's arms when Veltina interfered... Mary let out a sigh at the recollection. Ever since this whole exchange program had started, she'd been feeling exhausted.

"But you know, Lady Veltina fruitlessly running around in circles like that does bring back memories," Adi remarked. "Chiefly, those of you during high school, milady."

"When did I ever do that?!"

"The question should be, when *didn't* you do that?"

"How rude!" Mary shouted, smacking the cushion with irritation.

But after thinking things through for a moment, she looked away with a huff. She'd been about to demand that they discuss the times when she hadn't fruitlessly run around, but no matter how hard she searched her mind, no such memories appeared.

The way she'd aimed for her own ruin during high school, the way she'd insisted on being a spectator during her studies at Elysiana College, and the incident with the migratory bird restaurant... When she looked back, it was just as Adi said—Mary had always been fruitlessly running around.

Deciding it was in her best interest to change subjects, Mary put up a front of serenity as she spoke. "Still... I admit, Veltina's cheap methods of harassment do remind me of a certain someone."

Adi furrowed his brows at her words. His expression was full of genuine loathing. It was even more severe than the face he pulled back when he'd tried eating her seafood rice bowl. His reaction told Mary that he had an idea of who she was talking about.

A moment later, Adi reluctantly named that person. "You're talking about the

villainess Mary, aren't you?"

Mary giggled. Indeed, Veltina's methods of harassment were cheap, exasperating, and immature. The girl made nasty comments to Mary, tried to tear up her textbooks, and attempted to dirty her uniform. That was just like the actions of the villainess Mary—no, in fact, they were the *exact* same actions.

Thinking back to the *Heart High* anime, she realized villainess Mary was still going strong, finding all kinds of ways to pester the heroine. Villainess Mary laughed snidely at Alicia's peasant origins, purposefully sullied her uniform only to then make fun of her for not being able to get it fixed, and tore up Alicia's textbooks with her cronies while ridiculing the girl for her tears.

Of course, later on the male cast comforted Alicia, and eventually everyone's frustrations with Mary transformed into the ultimate catharsis when she got her comeuppance. Even in the anime, that hadn't changed.

"In other words, you're suggesting that Lady Veltina has past life memories and is using them to harass you?" Adi asked.

"I can't be certain, but it seems like a possibility. After all, in the anime, Alicia felt hurt by that kind of harassment. Maybe Veltina thinks it'll be effective if she mimics it... Even though that isn't the case at all."

Adi paused. "It's almost like everyone who tries to act based on their past life memories always fails. With a *certain someone* at the top of that list."

"I wonder what you're trying to say?" Mary inquired.

"Oh, nothing. It's just that the concept of 'a young lady who fails as a result of acting based on her past life memories' brings up the image of someone in my mind," he told her.

"I wonder who that could possibly be?" Mary huffed, glancing aside.

"Where's that mirror?" Adi mused as he started looking around, but Mary smacked him with a cushion to put a stop to his antics. They were supposed to be discussing Veltina here, not wasting time on silly subjects like this.

"Anyway, if she really *does* have past life memories, then..." Mary trailed off,

and then looked back at Adi.

If her line of thinking was correct, it would explain Veltina's harassment methods, as well as her saying that Patrick "*really was cold-blooded after all.*" And...it would also explain her blatant attitude towards Adi.

As Mary considered this, once more that mist swirled within her heart. It was an unexplainable feeling, similar to anxiety. But she had no idea what it was aimed towards, and she placed a hand upon her chest to try and calm herself down. Her fingers tightened around her shirt, and she glanced at Adi again.

He looked exasperated, his shoulders drooping as he sighed. "It would seem that Lady Veltina liked the Adi from the *Heart High* anime."

Based on his expression and his tone of voice, it was almost as if he were speaking of somebody else's matter. He didn't sound like a man discussing the illicit love a noble lady had towards him in the slightest. But the storm within Mary continued to rage on.

"I'm just going to say it directly: Veltina likes *you*, you know?"

"Not me. She likes the anime Adi."

"Right. But that's still you."

"That's not true," Adi asserted firmly. At this point, it wasn't even like he was speaking of somebody else, but rather, he sounded *completely* disinterested, as if this whole thing had nothing to do with him. "Lady Mary from the *Heart High* anime was a selfish, malicious girl who ridiculed the commoners, no? She was completely different from you, milady."

"Yes. I don't want to become like her," she replied, frowning as she recalled the kind of character *Heart High's* Mary Albert had been. Set up in the role of a villainess, she was a nasty, spiteful girl.

The *Heart High* Mary used her family name as a shield to act however she pleased, bossed her cronies around, exerted the Alberts' status to silence anyone who tried opposing her—even if they were her superiors—and sometimes even caused other families' servants or the school officials to be unfairly fired.

The real Mary may have used her memories in her plan to aim for ruin (the results being what they were), but she herself also found the villainess Mary detestable.

When she explained as much, Adi nodded his agreement. “She was a different person than you,” he emphasized again for her sake. “And *Heart High’s* Adi hated that Lady Mary, but he obeyed her as he was afraid of her power. Doesn’t he sound different from me too?”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I already told you before, milady: my place is by your side. But *Heart High’s* Adi would never say those words to Lady Mary, right?” he reasoned, gazing at Mary fixedly. Whether his rust-ringed pupils looked exactly like they did in the game, she couldn’t recall anymore, but to her, no other color could calm her down in the same way.

Those eyes of his, considerate at times, passionate at others, looked at her intently.

And the person he was looking at right now wasn’t *Heart High’s* Mary, or Alicia from the bonus content. It was the present Mary, and her alone. Under the warmth of his gaze, Mary felt the mist within her dissipate.

Just as he had said, the Adi from the game and anime was a completely different person from the Adi in front of her right now.

Looking back on it, Mary had a feeling that *Heart High’s* Adi had been portrayed as a sensitive man as a result of the distress he’d been under. In the bonus, he’d been shown to feel frustrated with himself for not being able to stop the villainess Mary, worrying over his own guilt, and seeking a path of atonement for himself.

That version of Adi would’ve never said he’d go with Mary even to the northern provinces.

“It’s true... You’ve always been by my side, Adi,” Mary acknowledged. “You’re different from *Heart High’s* Adi.”

“Exactly. I mean, he was basically a yes-man because he was afraid of Lady Mary’s authority, right? Being a devoted yes-man to his mistress... That’s not

me at all!" he proclaimed proudly.

Mary shut her eyes. "I agree that there's a big difference between the two of you. I would say that difference comes down to loyalty. *Heart High's* Mary would've had you deported on the spot."

"What are you talking about, Your Ladyship? My attitude would cause any other nobleman or woman to fire me immediately."

"If you're aware of it, then reform yourself! In fact, *I'll* fire you myself!" she declared enthusiastically, grabbing a pen and paper. It was a small sheet about the size of a notepad, but if Mary got her father to sign it as the head of the house, it would surely become an official discharge notice.

If necessary, Mary would even seal it with blood.

"Behold! I'm going to write it up and hand it to my father... Why do you look so unconcerned?" She had been in the middle of screeching as she wrote out the dismissal letter, but the suspicious look on Adi's face made her pause.

Usually by this point, he'd be panicking and desperately trying to think of a way to make her stop. Then, Mary would say something noncommittal like, "*This is your last chance!*" And that would be the end of that.

But today, Adi didn't seem flustered in the slightest. He didn't even make any effort to stop her, instead regarding her as if urging her to continue.

Seeing his unusual behavior, Mary prompted, "Have you got something to say to me?" while continuing to write the letter.

"Very well, write it and hand it over to His Grace. But before you do, you must prepare yourself for one thing."

"And what's that?"

"If that letter gets approved, your husband will be left jobless!"

Mary was at a loss for words. "*What...?!*"

Although, it *was* true that Adi was her servant and her husband at the same time. If he lost his job as a servant, then her husband would be unemployed. Faced with that fact, Mary glanced back down at the discharge notice, and...

“Well, we *are* the renowned House Albert. Feeding one unemployed man shouldn’t be all that difficult.”

...made her declaration as she stood up with the completed letter in hand.

“Wait! I’m sorry! I don’t want to lose this job!”

“Father! Adi’s finally ready to be dismissed!”

“No, I’m not! I’ve dedicated myself to serving House Albert for all my life!”

“Don’t worry, Adi! You can still have a job as the vice-chairman of the restaurant—!”

But Mary’s words cut off the moment Adi embraced her from behind. He wrapped his arms around her waist, and using his tall stature to his advantage, lifted her off her feet. Her hand had just managed to touch the doorknob, but now it slipped from her grasp, causing her to frown. They’d had this kind of rapport for a long time, but ever since their marriage, Adi had started using noticeably more force than before.

That said, Adi was taller than the average man his age, whereas Mary was of a small stature. She had no means of fighting back against the way her beloved husband held her up in his arms. Alas, she *could* have struck his side while demanding he show some restraint, but Mary just gave in as her shoulders drooped.

Adi tossed her back onto the cushion, at which point she crumpled up the letter and threw it at him as a last means of attack.

“I have to endure so many hardships—the *Heart High* anime, Veltina, a constantly insolent servant, and the fact my husband detained me and won’t let me see my own father... It’s no wonder I feel sick from all the strain.”

“Are you feeling unwell, my lady?”

“Yes. Lately I’ve felt like some kind of mist has been swirling inside my chest. It’s uncomfortable, and I can’t calm down.”

Indeed, the feeling would come upon her suddenly, the mist whirling inside of her and leaving her struck down with a deep feeling of discomfort. Thinking back on it, she realized it seemed to have started on the first day of the

exchange program.

At her words, Adi clasped her hand in his. His large hand enveloped hers soothingly, and his fingers caressed the back of her hand. The warm sensation tickled her skin.

“I’m sorry for not noticing sooner, milady. But it’s okay now,” he told her.

“Huh?” Mary looked up at Adi in confusion. He was smiling calmly as he looked back at her, and his grip on her hand tightened as if to try and make her understand. “You know what this discomfort I’m talking about is?”

“Of course I do. After all, I know you better than anyone, my lady.”

“Adi...”

Mary gasped quietly at his words; they sounded so sweet and dependable to her. But then again, Adi had been by her side since she was a baby, and had devoted himself to her. He served her, protected her, and gazed at her with eyes full of affection. Ever since their marriage, he’d been with her as her lover too. She was certain that he understood her even better than she understood herself.

Realizing the depth of his love, Mary smiled warmly. “Indeed. You know everything about me, Adi.”

“Yes. That’s why it’s okay now. From tomorrow...”

“Tomorrow?”

What would Adi do tomorrow to ease her discomfort? She was curious, but when she asked, he just smiled at her. “From tomorrow, let’s start preparing lighter meals for you,” he suggested.

Mary gazed at him for a moment, then glanced down at her own chest. She’d oftentimes feel a strange mist inside of it, swirling around and discomforting her. This feeling must’ve been...

“Ah, I see. It’s indigestion,” Mary said with a nod, convinced.

Chapter 3

It wasn't unusual at all for the young Lady Albert to receive invitations to parties. There were plenty of families, not just within her own nation but also abroad, who wished to form connections with House Albert. (Everyone formally sent her such letters...except for a select few, who'd say things like, *"Lady Mary, here's your invitation! Go on, read it! And you can reply to me right here, right now!"*)

(Or one would tearily explain, *"I was worried it might not reach you, and before I knew it I was already in a carriage myself...!"*)

Following this, Mary would send her reply, and on the day of the event, she'd arrive adorned in a beautiful gown. She would exchange greetings with the guest of honor, strengthen the family connections, and once the party ended, she'd send the host a thank-you letter and a gift. This was the thing called diplomacy—a responsibility which all those born into reputable families had to bear.

Having received another such letter, Mary casually opened it up. The invitation had a polite greeting and inoffensive content, but her eyes paused in one particular place, and her lips tugged up into a smirk.

"Adi, look. The way my name's written here is a bit strange," she said, pointing with her finger to a certain part of the page. Adi leaned over to glance at it.

The text read "Mery Albert"—her name was slightly misspelled. However, the envelope was neatly addressed to her, so there was no possibility of anyone else having received it.

Among high society, this was poor etiquette. Not to mention, the letter was intended for one of the Alberts, so great care should've been taken in writing the name of the addressee. It may have been simply an invitation letter, but even so, if Mary decided to be cranky and complain to her father, the relationship between the two families might suffer.

“You’re right. How rude of them—who sent this?” Adi asked.

“House Barthez. It’s from a relative of Veltina.”

“Ahh, I see.” He nodded in understanding, picking up the letter.

So this was to be a party held by House Barthez. More specifically, it’d be hosted by a relative of Veltina’s who lived by the border, but there was no way that girl didn’t have something to do with this. Most likely, she had convinced her relative that Mary Albert was her acquaintance, and written the letter herself.

“Well, you can’t really call her tactics cunning,” Adi commented. “Her methods are very plain.”

“I bet she was trying to stop me from attending,” Mary said, tapping the poorly written script of her name. “You’ll need to be more daring than that!” she added, as if she were addressing Veltina. Sure, misspelling her name was a faux pas, but even so, pretending she hadn’t noticed would be the mature thing for Mary to do. Making a fuss about it could cause embarrassment for both families.

Veltina must’ve thought as much too—that even if Mary had noticed the mistake, she’d just overlook it. If Mary complained about the discourtesy, the other nobles might criticize her for causing a stir over a young girl’s error.

“Her line of thinking isn’t too bad, but it’s still quite weak. If she was going to do something like this, I wish she’d have committed and made an even more drastic misspelling.”

“I agree. Personally, I would’ve written ‘Lady Drills Albert.’”

Mary laughed elegantly at his nonchalant remark...and then pulled a dismissal letter out of her pocket.



Having ignored the misspelling of her name in the invitation letter, Mary attended House Barthez’s party.

Compared to “Drills Albert,” Veltina’s purposeful blunder was downright adorable. Just recalling how cruel the term was made Mary stomp on Adi’s foot.

(As a side note, back when Mary had pulled out the layoff notice, Adi confiscated it while saying, *“I shall be responsible for delivering this to His Grace.”*)

The party itself was extravagant, and most of the guests were foreign nobles with whom Mary hadn't interacted yet. Alas, acting like a graceful young lady wasn't so bad on occasion. If she played her cards right, she might be able to put into action the opening of another branch of her restaurant.

With that on her mind, she decided to go offer her greetings to the guest of honor. But just as she started making her way in their direction, suddenly her stance was broken.

The reason: someone came flying at her at full speed and embraced her.

The culprit: it was none other than Alicia, of course.

“Greetings, Lady Mary!”

“Stop hugging me out of absolutely nowhere! In fact, don't hug me at all!”

“I'm sorry! I didn't realize you'd be here, so when I saw you, I just got so happy that I reached an even higher speed than normal,” Alicia explained, squeezing Mary one last time before stepping away. The girl then grasped her skirt and gave a proper greeting. It would've been beautiful, if not for the crashing embrace that had just occurred.

On the receiving end of a greeting from Princess Alicia, Mary had no choice but to respond. “You peasant girl!” she insulted, while at the same time returning the formal gesture.

“Mary, Adi. So you two are here today,” Patrick said as he jogged up to them, having chased Alicia down. To match with Alicia's yellow dress, his black suit had some yellow embroidery pinned to his chest. As the color contrasted with his indigo hair, it created a beautiful and refined look. “Alicia, it's dangerous for you to run off like that. What if you had bumped into someone?”

“When you say it like that, Patrick, it sounds like her bumping into *me* is no big deal at all,” Mary said.

“By the way, why are you two here?” he asked. “I thought House Albert had

no connections with House Barthez.”

“Veltina invited me,” Mary told him with a serene smile, which caused him to furrow his brows.

Patrick had witnessed Veltina’s attempts at harassing Mary countless times, and occasionally he’d pretended to threaten that he had his eye on her family’s territory. However, all of these things only occurred within the grounds of the academy. Though it was akin to a mini version of high society, it was still just a back-and-forth between young students.

But right now, they were at a full-fledged party, and the people around them were not students, but high-ranked individuals. The idea of continuing such exchanges under these circumstances...

Patrick must’ve been thinking something along those lines. If a confrontation were to be discovered and things went poorly, it could even escalate to a cross-national problem.

Surmising his thoughts, Mary lightly patted his shoulder. Then, she pushed Alicia into his arms. “There’s no way I’d take the bites of such a cute little puppy seriously. And she even pranked me again this time via the invitation. How adorable!”

“Pranked?”

At Patrick’s question, Mary asked Adi to produce the letter. The slight distortion of her name was just a cute prank to her. Adi took out the invitation and opened it up to let Patrick read it. It said:

“To Lady Drills Albert: An Invitation to The Steel Drills Memorial Service.”

“Ah, pardon me. That’s the wrong one,” Adi said, closing the letter back up then taking out another sheet of paper. “*This* is the letter from Lady Veltina. Look here! Milady’s name is spelled slightly off, see?”

“Wait, Adi! What was that just now? I have several bones to pick about that lettering and printing!” Mary protested.

“Goodness, how rude to misspell milady’s name, isn’t it?”

“That first letter was *the* rudest thing I’ve ever seen! Show it to me again!”

she demanded, tugging on Adi's jacket as she tried to grab the first letter from him. But she let go a moment later, when another voice called out to her.

Mary turned about and watched as a man made his way towards them. He seemed to be about a year older than Mary and her friends, and his wide shoulders combined with his sturdy build gave him a sense of masculinity.

More critically, the person next to him was Veltina, whose small frame made the man's size stand out even more. He wasn't just one or two heads taller than her, but rather, they looked like an adult and child walking together.

Who is that? Mary thought, trying to search her mind for a clue. Then, Patrick stepped closer to her and whispered into her ear:

"That is Luke—Miss Veltina's fiancé."

"It's an honor to meet you," Luke told Mary, to which she responded with a polite greeting as well.

Luke was a man of such large stature that his sheer presence seemed overwhelming. He had a fierce look about him, and his voice was low. Despite this, he seemed to have a gentlemanly disposition, his manner of talking was formal and polite, and Mary could tell he was actively trying not to frighten any ladies he happened to be interacting with.

Meanwhile Veltina, who was by Luke's side, did deliver a greeting to Mary, but her eyes were glued to Adi just as always. The ribbon in her hair fluttered, and Mary wondered whether the girl had picked its rusty color to purposefully match with Adi, or whether it was a sheer coincidence... In either case, it definitely didn't match the suit Luke was wearing.

Veltina declared that she wanted to dance with Adi, her ribbon still swaying as she spoke. Her words surprised everyone, but Luke was the most shocked of all, quickly turning to look at her with wide eyes.

"Veltina, don't be rude."

"My, I simply happened to hear that at House Albert, everyone changes their dance partners all the time. Lord Adi has danced with Lady Alicia, Lady Parfette, and even Lord Patrick, no? If that's the case, then why not with me too?" Veltina pestered Adi, staring at him intently.

He looked troubled, and seemed like he was on the verge of rejecting her. But he had the feeling that if he did, Veltina's animosity towards Mary would only grow. Worse yet, House Barthez was hosting tonight's party, and Adi knew he couldn't show disrespect towards the hosts or their relatives.

Mary was also trying to figure out how to handle this, but in the end, she shrugged her shoulders. "That's true, Adi. You can give her one dance."

After all, having Adi dance with Veltina once was likely the best way of getting through this situation amicably.

"Very well," Adi responded. "However, milady—or rather, Lady Mary. Afterwards..."

"I know. You'll dance with me."

"And after *that*, *you* can dance with *me*, Lady Mary!" said a third party.

"Off I go, then. Lady Veltina, if you please... Alicia, I know you're taking advantage of this situation, but I won't give in to you! Lord Patrick, if you don't wish to dance with me, make sure to catch Alicia in time!" Adi insisted, while holding his hand out to Veltina.

(Patrick responded by saying, "I'll take the proper measures. I mean, I always *try* to..." while giving off an uncharacteristic air of misery.)

Veltina seemed indescribably happy as she placed her hand in Adi's, giving Mary a prideful look as she did so.

Watching the girl walk away with Adi, Luke let out an exasperated sigh. From his perspective, his own fiancée had just invited another man to dance right before his very eyes. It was beyond rude—it was downright insulting, to the point that it wouldn't have been surprising if he decided to break up with her here and now.

Yet Luke wasn't gazing at Veltina with anger or blame. Rather, he bowed his head towards Mary remorsefully, and told her he wanted to speak with her for a bit, asking if she'd mind changing locations.

Mary followed after him to an empty corner of the venue. She almost protested when Patrick and Alicia went with them, but decided against it. If she

was alone with Luke while Adi danced with Veltina, needless rumors might start spreading. But with multiple people around, it'd still look like they were simply chatting.

Besides, Mary's indigestion was showing up again, this time mixed with irritation. If Luke were to tell her something unsolicited when it was just the two of them, Mary might've taken it out on him.

Once they reached the corner, Mary gazed at Luke as he sighed again deeply and started apologizing. "House Barthez has a long-standing relationship with my family. It's been decided a long time ago that whenever a man and a woman are born into our respective houses, they're to be wed to each other. For Veltina, it'd been decided that she'd be engaged to me even before she was born, despite our ten-year age difference..."

"My, is that so?"

"Perhaps because of that, her parents as well as my own have always spoiled her and let her get away with things..."

"And that's why she's such a selfish girl now, hmm?" Mary said, nodding in understanding.

In their world, where political marriages were commonplace, there were plenty of girls like Veltina, who'd had their fiancés decided before they were even born. And while the parents picked their children's partners at their convenience, sometimes they ended up spoiling said children out of guilt. Since they had decided such a large part of their children's lives, the parents felt they might as well turn a blind eye to a little selfishness and immaturity.

Given that Luke and Veltina had a ten-year age gap, it was possible their families felt guilty over that fact.

Mary, too, had once been engaged to Patrick without any consideration for her own feelings. Their families had allowed them to cancel the betrothal, but if things had worked out poorly, it was entirely possible that Mary would also have been wedded to a much older man for the sake of bringing House Albert prosperity.

Looking at it that way, she could understand why Veltina had grown up to be

so selfish, and also why she felt such hostility towards Mary, all the more so if in her past life, the girl had loved *Heart High's* Adi.

Luke was a large, tough-looking, and intimidating man—he was a completely different type from Adi. If Veltina had fallen for *Heart High's* version of Adi, she probably liked the sensitive, tortured type of boy. Unfortunately for her, Luke didn't seem like he'd fit the trope. (Though, the real Adi didn't match that description in the slightest either.)

In summary, Veltina harassed Mary due to her loathing for having her beloved Adi stolen from her, while also taking her anger out over the fact that she'd had her fiancé decided since she was born.

It's hard for me to hate her over that... Mary thought with a sigh.

"I see Veltina as my younger sister, so I've been letting her do as she pleases until the marriage," Luke went on. "But to think she'd act that way towards *you*, Lady Mary..."

"Don't worry about me. You have it pretty rough too," she replied.

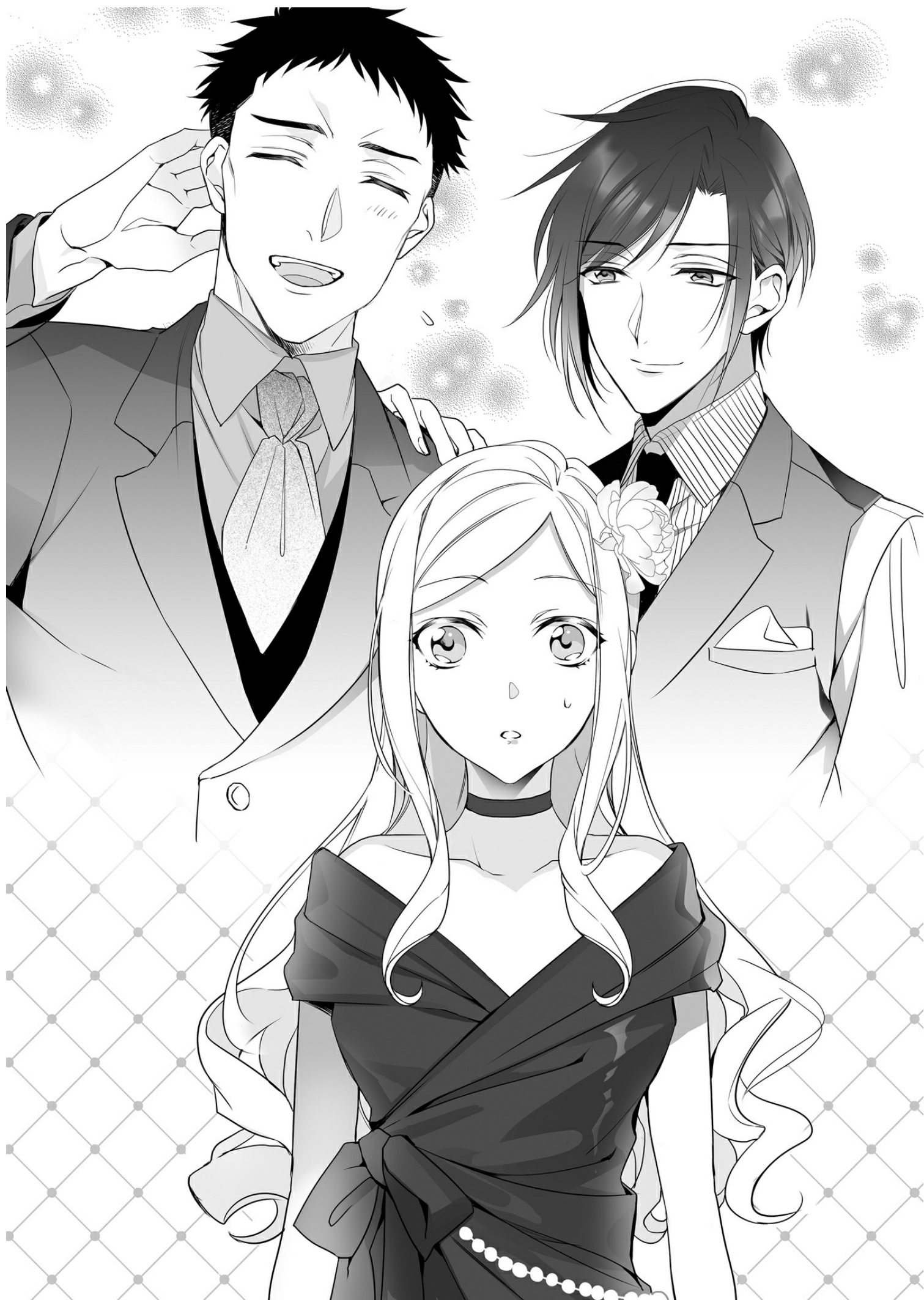
Luke had been engaged to a young, selfish girl, and now that girl was picking a quarrel with another noble family, and even inviting someone else's husband for a dance. Perhaps everyone around Veltina had spoiled her because they felt sorry for her, since she was engaged to an older man. But Mary thought Luke's fate of having a troublesome girl foisted off onto him was just as pitiful.

Her thoughts must've shown on her face, for Luke smiled wryly and shrugged. "I do think Veltina is cute, and I've no complaints regarding our engagement."

"Are you really fine with spending your days being pushed around by her selfishness?"

"In the past, her selfishness was quite cute. But...I guess she's turned out this way because I was so lenient with her, just like now."

As Luke laughed bitterly, Mary found herself smiling as well.



A moment later, however, Luke sighed and surveyed the venue. “I do love Veltina... And that’s why I’m jealous.”

“Jealous?” Mary echoed.

“Yes. As her fiancé, I should’ve stopped her earlier, but I was caught up in my jealousy of Lord Adi,” he explained, scratching his head in embarrassment.

Patrick patted Luke’s arm, perhaps wanting to console him in a show camaraderie. Mary watched them, blinking repeatedly.

So he was...*jealous*. Despite knowing Adi had no special feelings towards Veltina, Luke was jealous of the fact Veltina wanted Adi.

“But you’re engaged to her,” Mary pointed out. “So there’s no need to feel jealous, right?”

“I don’t think things work that way. Embarrassing as it is to admit, though I’m aware of the facts in my mind, my heart just won’t be convinced.”

“Your heart...?” Mary murmured, casting a glance down at her own chest. She had a red flower pinned to it—Adi had a matching one.

However, right now, that flower was in Veltina’s field of vision. It was possible that Veltina was taking advantage of the dance to hug Adi. If she pretended to slip, Adi was sure to catch her.

Thinking such things, Mary found the flower decoration oddly irritating.

“Could it be that...I’m somehow confusing the flower for food, and it’s causing me indigestion? Even though it doesn’t even resemble food. But...meals which use real flowers for decoration are quite lovely. Perhaps I should arrange something like that for the restaurant’s dessert menu.”

“Lady Mary...?” Luke called out to her.

“Oh my, I’m sorry. I was a little lost in thought. Right, we were speaking of jealousy.”

“You may think it laughable, coming from someone my age. But even now, I feel a sense of irritability, and there’s a stir within my chest.”

“That does sound difficult to deal with. I’ve also been unable to calm down

lately,” Mary sympathized, pressing her hand to her chest.

Both Patrick and Alicia turned to her at those words. Alicia placed her hand on Mary’s shoulder in visible concern. “Lady Mary, are you feeling unwell?”

“Yes. I’ve been having terrible indigestion,” said Mary. At seemingly random times, she’d feel a stir somewhere near her stomach, and an uncomfortable mist would coil around her. It’d feel as if she’d drunk lead. Mary mentioned she’d been avoiding croquettes lately to try and ease the problem.

Alicia rubbed her arm. “To think you’d even avoid croquettes over it! But Lady Mary, that sounds like...”

“What is it?”

“No, nothing!” Alicia said ambiguously, her expression brightening. In fact, she was smiling with satisfaction, and rubbed Mary’s arm faster. She even started elbowing Mary.

Mary had been convinced she was suffering from indigestion, but Alicia’s behavior was making her suspicious. She stared at the other girl, who couldn’t have looked happier if she’d tried. Her purple eyes were locked on Mary’s stomach... No, in fact, slightly lower, around her abdomen area.

“Why are you smirking like a creepy little girl? And stop touching me so much. Your peasant stench might rub off on me!”

“Tee hee! Oh, Lady Mary! It’s okay; don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone, and I’ll patiently wait until the day!”

“‘The day’? Are you saying you’ll throw a party to celebrate me curing my indigestion? You’re as childish as ever,” Mary said, looking away with a huff. She knocked Alicia’s hands off of herself, and was about to push the girl over to Patrick, when the man called out to her. His indigo gaze was locked onto Mary, as if he were trying to read her mind.

She looked back at him. “Patrick?”

“Mary, do you feel any stirring or tightness in your chest?”

“It’s just because I’ve eaten too many croquettes. I’ve also been taste testing all kinds of foods for the restaurant’s side menu.”

He paused. “And does that occur when, for example, Adi is with someone else?”

“I bet looking at Adi makes me remember about croquettes and the restaurant, so much so that it even brings about indigestion.” Mary sighed, as if to say she was annoyed by this. Alicia tried to reach for her again, but Mary knocked her hand away. Then, she put her own hand on her chest. Just as Patrick had said, she could feel stirring and tightness. It was a deep sense of discomfort, as if she’d drunk heavy lead.

When she mentioned as much, Patrick exhaled. “Mary, that’s...”

“I can’t believe *I*, of all people, suffer from indigestion. It’s very painful for my croquette-loving heart.”

“But you’re... Never mind. Yeah, I bet you ate too many croquettes,” Patrick conceded with a small shake of his head.

He was looking at Mary as though he were concerned about her well-being, which Mary found odd, as normally he’d just sigh upon hearing about her croquette troubles. (Or he’d say something ridiculously lovey-dovey, like, “I’ve also eaten too much of Alicia’s cooking lately.”)

Yet Patrick’s expression right now suggested he could understand what was happening to her. *I wonder if he’s ever suffered from indigestion too?* Mary pondered.

Still, he was Patrick Dyce. Even if he were suffering from such a thing, he’d certainly avoid showing weakness in front of others and put on a tough act.

“I see... So you know what I’m talking about. Poor us,” Mary remarked.

“Yeah, that’s right. Ah, the song’s ended,” he pointed out, looking around the venue.

Mary followed his line of sight, but then her breath hitched. She quickly turned around to find Alicia smiling away and inching closer to her. *Oh no*, thought Mary, lamenting her own carelessness. Given that the other girl was always plotting the commencement of a “dance”-esque activity called “Swinging Mary Albert Around,” there was no way she’d let this chance go.

“Alicia, you’re not in your own country right now. Play the part of a princess and behave yourself at least for toni—” Mary said, trying to persuade her, but she swallowed her own words.

Usually by now, Alicia would’ve said something like, “*Dance with me, Lady Mary!*” while clasping Mary’s hand and forcibly dragging her to the dance floor. Yet Alicia was standing still and simply smiling away at Mary. She *had* grasped Mary’s hand, but she just squeezed it cheerfully.

“Wh-What is it?” Mary demanded. “Where’s your usual fervor? You’re not going to swing me around?”

“I wouldn’t do such a thing right now.”

“Is that so? I don’t really understand, but it seems even a peasant like you knows when to restrain herself,” Mary said snidely, slapping away Alicia’s hand before turning towards the approaching Adi.

He was escorting Veltina, who looked extremely pleased. Right before parting from him, the girl coaxed him by saying, “If you have some time later, please dance with me again.”

Mary frowned at this, and even Adi didn’t hide his perturbed expression as he scratched his head. He then walked over to Mary and put his hand on her shoulder, as if to say, “*I have my own partner.*” His actions caused Mary to breathe a small sigh of relief.

“There you have it, Veltina. Apologies. Well then, we should go say our greetings,” Mary stated. Adi’s hand was still on her shoulder, and she stepped even closer to him, as if to make a further display of it, before the two of them walked away. Mary could hear a frustrated groan behind her, most likely Veltina’s.

She looked over her shoulder, noticing that Alicia and Patrick were discussing something. Luke spotted Mary’s gaze and gave her a slight bow, while Veltina glared at her spitefully.

The ribbon upon the girl’s head, which was slightly more extravagant than usual, was quivering slightly. Mary couldn’t tell if that was because of a breeze, or Veltina’s anger. Although, no matter how hard the girl was trying to show her

anger, there was no edge to it due to her naturally cute looks.

“I don’t hate you, but I just *had* to thank you for that adorable invitation,” Mary murmured under her breath, smirking.



Glaring after Mary and Adi for a moment longer, Veltina then turned away with a huff and walked off—in the opposite direction they had, of course. Luke bowed briefly to Alicia and Patrick before following his fiancée.

After they left, Patrick held out his hand towards Alicia. “Well then. Let’s have a dance too.”

“Okay!” Alicia replied, happily obliging. She put her slender, graceful, and warm hand into his.

Patrick gently pulled her along, causing her to smile ecstatically. But when she suddenly burst into giggles, he looked at her in puzzlement. “What is it?”

“No, it’s just... Lady Mary... Hee hee!” Alicia giggled again, unable to stop herself. She pressed her hand to her lips, but her smile peeked through the gaps in her fingers.

Patrick’s shoulders drooped as he remembered their earlier conversation with Mary. “Yeah, that Mary... But convincing herself it’s indigestion is so like her.”

“I know, right? Oh, Lady Mary! I can’t wait until the reveal.”

“Reveal? But it’s Mary. She obviously won’t say a thing, no?”

“I bet she’ll keep it a secret for as long as she can!” Alicia said, beaming. Her countenance suggested she was longing for the day to arrive as soon as possible.

Patrick’s eyes widened in surprise. *Is this something to be happy about?* he wondered dubiously. After all, to think Mary—*that* Mary—would feel *jealous*...

There was no way she’d admit such a thing to other people. She wouldn’t show weakness in front of others, wouldn’t acknowledge such feelings herself, and would continue hiding them.

Just like me...

Patrick froze in place at that thought. Right now, he was on the dance floor, and neither Mary nor Adi were around. Before his eyes was only Alicia, who behaved herself tonight and stayed by his side. Hence, he should focus on her.

Patrick told himself as much, gripping Alicia's hand tighter. But seeing her snickering away just made his shoulders droop again. It seemed like the girl's head was still full of thoughts of Mary insisting she was experiencing indigestion. No, her head wasn't "still" full of that; it'd be more accurate to say that she had thought of nothing else since.

At the same moment, Patrick and Alicia spoke out loud.

"It might be best if both Mary and I become more honest..."

"I wonder if it's a boy or a girl? Tee hee!"

Then, they both looked at each other and said in unison, "Huh?"

They were confused, each hearing their partner come to a completely different conclusion. But as the music began to play, they snapped back to their senses and moved along to the rhythm.



It was evening, and Mary and Adi had returned to Albert Manor from House Barthez's party.

"Lady Veltina most certainly has memories of the game," Adi asserted.

Initially, after they'd gotten back, Mary took a bath and wanted to go to bed, feeling exhausted. However, she noticed there was some kind of letter she'd never seen before on her desk. It read: "*To Lady Drills Albert: Steel Drills Memorial Evening Invitation.*" The event was occurring today, and its starting time was drawing near. As for the location, it was listed as Adi's room.

The lettering and composition of the note were beautiful, to the point where Mary wondered how nice it might've been if its contents were actually respectable as well. With narrowed eyes, she exclaimed, "Instead of meandering about, just invite me normally!"

But despite her words, she put on her coat and headed towards the venue of the Steel Drills Memorial event—in other words, Adi's room. She waltzed in,

popped herself on his bed, and received some tea. That was when Adi had made his proclamation.

It seemed like he'd drawn the conclusion based on his conversation with Veltina during their dance.

"Lady Veltina said that you're nasty, milady. She didn't call you an eccentric or 'Steel Drills' like some others do, nor even 'The Bird Meat Rice Bowl Lady' or 'Talented Dog Trainer.' No, she said that you're *nasty*."

"Wait. I've already given up on the first two nicknames, but I want to hear about the last two additions!"

"It *is* true that you're an eccentric bird-meat-rice-bowl-loving dog trainer with steel drills, but calling you 'mean' seems strange. I'm sure she got that impression from the villainous Lady Mary."

"Right... No, I can't hear a word you're saying because I'm too distracted thinking about the 'Talented Dog Trainer' thing! The giant Alicia is the same as ever, and I still haven't corrected the toy Parfette's crying habit, so don't embarrass me by calling me 'talented'... No, wait. This is no time for me to be humble!" Mary said, snapping out of it and turning to Adi.

Indeed, this wasn't the time to be ruminating over rice bowls or dog training. The important topic right now was the problem of Veltina.

"As I thought, she really is doing the same kind of harassment as the villainess Mary," Mary said, breathing out a sigh as she recalled the girl's actions up until this point.

Veltina complained that Mary was being noisy, attempted to rip up her textbook, and tried to soil her uniform by spilling tea on it... And at the end of things, she'd even tried to steal Mary's partner from her before her very eyes.

Though the situation and results were different, Veltina's harassment matched perfectly with the methods of Mary from the game and anime. The way the younger girl arrogantly pranced around with her cronies in tow was like a mirror image of the villainous Mary.

In *Heart High*, this kind of harassment hurt Alicia's feelings. The anime portrayed her mental state very vividly, and there were many scenes in which

she cried. In essence, Alicia would get bullied, cry because of it, and then be gently comforted by the male cast. Everything followed a predictable pattern, but it was a heart-stirring development nonetheless.

As Mary explained all this, Adi frowned. “I can’t imagine Alicia getting hurt by such things,” he said.

“In the series, Alicia was as vulnerable to beatings as anyone else.”

“Beatings...? Are you referring to actually being hit?”

“A shocking revelation, isn’t it? You can tell Alicia’s a different person just based on her durability. That aside, I suppose we now know for sure Veltina has past life memories, huh? So...”

Mary had been about to say, “*What should we do about that?*” but then she paused and smirked.

How interesting, she found herself thinking. Though she’d once been the villainess harassing Alicia, now she was in the reverse position. And the person harassing Mary was Veltina, who should’ve been Alicia’s friend. Moreover, Alicia was trying to protect Mary from Veltina. Everything had gotten switched around, from their positions to their actions.

Fascinating, indeed!

The irony of this world, which still contained traces of *Heart High*, was starting to suit Mary’s liking.

“Very well. If she wants to take it out on me or something along those lines, I’ll meet it all head-on. This has nothing to do with past life memories or the like—it is simply my duty as an older noble lady to show her what happens when you defy Mary Albert!”

“Milady, not this again...”

“Sometimes even I wish to act mean and be properly hated for it. And in the one-in-a-million chance that Veltina actually renders me speechless, I might as well give up the seat of villainess to her,” Mary said, laughing in good humor.

In contrast, Adi looked discontent. “You’re being oblivious to the feelings of others,” he grumbled, slowly standing up. He climbed into the bed on which

Mary was sitting, and embraced her from behind.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“I’m not happy about the fact that Lady Veltina likes me. But this is almost like you’re trying to agitate her...”

“Oh, it’s fine. A little bit of jealousy isn’t so bad sometimes.”

“Jealousy?” Adi asked foolishly.

He hadn’t been present during Mary’s conversation with Luke, as he was with Veltina at the time. Recalling that fact, Mary began explaining what he’d said: that despite the fact that he knew Adi had no special feelings towards Veltina, nor did he want to steal her, Luke’s affection towards Veltina led him to feel jealous. Luke had seemed frustrated when he’d explained his feelings...

As she spoke, Mary heard Adi groan quietly behind her. Apparently, he had complex feelings regarding this topic.

“I have no interest in feeling jealous, or being the target of others’ jealousy,” he said.

“Wait, *feeling* jealous? Adi, have you ever felt jealous before?” Mary asked with surprise, as this was the first she was hearing of such a thing. Adi groaned again, and Mary could tell he sounded deeply resentful.

She had known him for a long time, and they’d been together ever since she was born. However, this was the first time she’d heard that he’d experienced jealousy.

Mary looked over her shoulder at him, still wrapped in his embrace. “Who were you jealous over, Adi? And why? Tell me,” she insisted, but Adi’s countenance was grim.

It seemed like he didn’t want to say it. But his mulish attitude only made Mary all the more curious, and she rocked lightly into him, urging him for an answer. “Come on, I won’t tell anyone.”

Mary kept pestering Adi for a few seconds, until he let out a sigh, as if losing patience. Then, he opened his mouth...and his teeth sunk into the nape of her neck.

The bite was painless, like a nip from a kitten, but even so Mary cried out in surprise. However, Adi wasn't finished yet, and left bites all over her throat and shoulder. His arms were still tightly wrapped around her, and Mary put her all into trying to twist away from him.

"What are you doing?! That gave me a shock!" she exclaimed.

"People like you are just...!"

"Stop it...! What are you so angry over?!"

"There's no way I'd ever be jealous over anyone else but *you*!"

"That doesn't mean you have to bite—!"

"*Bite me*," she'd intended to say, but stopped herself suddenly. Adi's words were ringing in her ears as the meaning in them dawned on her.

"You were jealous...over *me*?" she asked, wanting confirmation. Adi hugged her even more tightly in response. Glancing over her shoulder, Mary could tell his cheeks and even his ears had flushed red.

Realizing she was looking at him, Adi turned his gaze the other way, as if unable to bear it. His behavior was so easy to understand, making Mary feel a sense of fondness for him. But she couldn't let herself smile, or else he might get worked up and bite her again.

"Who made you feel that way?" she inquired.

"I'll tell you if you promise not to laugh."

"I'll promise not to laugh if you promise not to bite me anymore. What if you leave marks?"

He paused. "You should wear a scarf tomorrow."

"Oh, so there already *are* marks," Mary conjectured, her shoulders drooping. *I was too late...* she lamented inwardly. Although she had felt no pain, it seemed like his bites had left marks behind anyway. Adi belatedly placed a remorseful kiss on the nape of her neck, but even that was just going in circles because it could leave another mark.

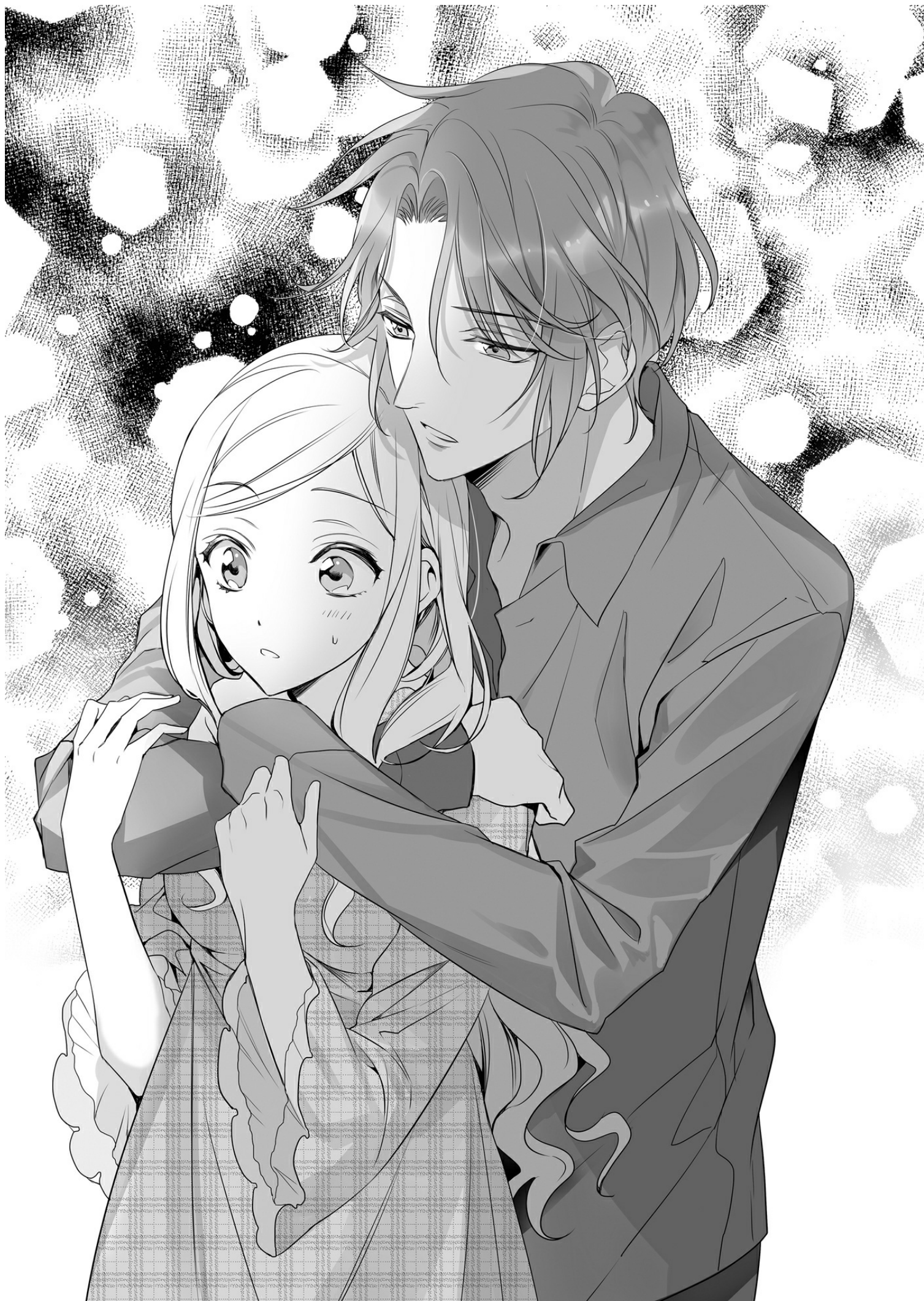
But for the ones already there, Mary supposed there was nothing she could

do. Besides, wearing a scarf to conceal marks on her neck felt somehow both sweet and tantalizing.

She cleared her throat to distract herself from these thoughts. “Well?” she prompted again. “Who made you feel jealous over me?”

“I know it went beyond my station to have such feelings, but...it was Lord Patrick.”

“Patrick?” Mary echoed.



They'd spent time with Patrick only a few hours ago. He was handsome, talented in both sports and academics, and beloved by everyone. Some even said there was not a girl in this world who hadn't yearned for him at one point or another. Adi had known Patrick for a long time, so naturally he was aware of Patrick's flawlessness.

Moreover, the two men were also friends.

"You felt like that because of *him*...?" Mary murmured quietly.

Adi sighed, sharing her sentiments. "Even I think that feeling jealous because of Lord Patrick was reckless of me. And for a long time, I believed that he was the perfect candidate to marry you, milady." His tone of voice sounded a little pained as he reminisced on the past.

Noticing as much, Mary softly pressed her back against his chest to console him.

Back then, Mary had also believed she'd end up wedded to Patrick. Both their social standings and their looks made for a perfect match, and it would've benefited their families. Though there was no romantic love between them, they were friends, and Mary had thought that would be enough, for to have friendship in the aristocratic world of political marriages was quite fortunate.

And if she had married Patrick, Adi would've been allowed to stay by her side. At that time, Mary hadn't even realized those were her true feelings on the matter.

"I knew that if you married Lord Patrick, you'd be able to live a life free of discomfort. There was no better match from the perspective of House Albert too. Despite understanding all of that, and knowing that I'd be no match for him, I still felt jealous."

"I see..." Mary murmured, her voice hoarse.

Adi's sincere, heartfelt words made her heart beat faster, and she couldn't calm herself down. Her face felt hot. Or maybe it was her body that felt hot, still caught in his embrace? Or her heart? She couldn't tell anymore. Trying to ease off some of the heat, she exhaled, but even her breath felt hot.

“So you were jealous of Patrick because of me...”

“I’m jealous of everyone. Not just him, but also Alicia and Lady Parfette for taking you away from me.”

“My, how deep your jealousy goes.”

“That’s right. I’m jealous and possessive. You’ve been caught by a very troublesome man,” Adi said in jest, perhaps to hide his embarrassment.

“Looks like I really won’t be able to get away from you, then,” Mary responded humorously in kind. Of course, she had no actual desire to run from him. Still, pretending like she’d had enough was her way of showing affection.

How sweet it all was! Caught up in the atmosphere, Mary pressed the back of her head against Adi’s chest. Wanting another serving of such sweetness, she coaxed him to keep talking. The sweeter the love, the better, after all.

“The levels of jealousy I feel aren’t normal,” Adi went on. “In my case, I...”

“Yes?”

“I got really drunk and complained to my coworkers, saying: ‘If milady’s going to marry Lord Patrick, then I will marry him too!’” For some reason (truly, why?), Adi made his proclamation in a grandiose tone of voice.

“I see...” Mary said, and then slipped out of his embrace.

Finding his arms suddenly empty, Adi was stupefied. “Huh?”

Mary rearranged her loungewear, which had gotten wrinkled during the hug. The sweet time was over, and she clapped her hands to signal a fresh start. “All right, Adi, it’s time for bed. We’re getting up early tomorrow!”

“Are we?”

“Yes. Because...” Mary paused, smiling smugly. “Tomorrow, we’re going shopping!” she declared.

Catching her in his arms again, Adi tilted his head in confusion.

Chapter 4

Though it was still morning, the town center was bustling with people. The weather was very good today, so the number of people out and the level of noise were both double the usual amount. The pleasant breeze swished through the boughs of the trees lining the road. Mary's silver-thread hair and the scarf around her neck also fluttered in the wind.

But she paid this no heed, walking through the crowded street with a daring smile. Sensing that she was getting ready for a counterattack, Adi looked exasperated as he walked alongside her.

"What are you plotting, Your Ladyship?" he asked with a yawn.

"Don't say such scandalous things. I'm not plotting anything—I'm simply doing some shopping."

"Shopping, huh? Are you planning on having Lady Veltina hinder you somehow?"

"You've gotten good at this. Yes, that's correct," Mary replied, her smile growing wider. Adi only sighed again in response.

Just as he'd guessed, Mary was here to have Veltina hinder her. If the girl was purposely imitating *Heart High's* methods of harassment, then there was no way she'd miss out on an opportunity to interrupt Mary's "date in the town center." Veltina was sure to appear from somewhere, and ostentatiously invite Adi to go with her.

I'll catch her during that and have a proper talk with her, Mary thought. She'd tell Veltina that she didn't mind if the girl wanted to charge at her during school, but it was best to refrain from such behavior during actual high society events. Even villainesses needed to have some manners.

"It's important to note that she has a fiancé, so if there are any problems, she won't be the only one suffering the consequences. I have to properly explain that to her. It's my duty as the original villainess," Mary asserted.

“This is exactly why you’re called the Talented Dog Trainer, my lady.”

“Then perhaps I should focus on disciplining the dog with a biting problem next,” she murmured, touching her scarf.

Adi instantly turned red and cleared his throat to evade this topic. “By the way...” he said, meaningfully casting his eyes sideways.

Mary followed his gaze. Before her was the lively scene of the town center. Some of the townsfolk rushed about in a hurry, while others wandered at their leisure, window shopping. Every person walked at an individual pace, crossing paths with each other while the shopkeepers called out to them. The street was bustling, indeed.

And also...

“Parfette! There’s a lovely cake shop over here! And this shop’s cookies are simply exquisite!”

“Waaah! This is so lively and fun, I can’t stop my tears...!”

On one side, a girl raised her voice cheerfully, and on the other, a girl quivered with joy. These two were also playing their part in heightening the town’s vibrance. Needless to say, they were Alicia and Parfette.

Mary wondered how on earth the information had leaked. When she and Adi had first gotten into their horse-drawn carriage, the two girls had already been seated inside of it. They’d been acting as if it were all par for the course, and had even arranged some lap blankets for themselves, remarking that the mornings were getting cold again.

Mary had let out a scream at the sight of them, and the noise acted as a signal for the carriage to start running. And now here they were.

“This is really beyond my expectations. I wish to shop with just Adi today, you two. Go home,” Mary told them.

“I want to have a migratory bird meal for lunch, Parfette!”

“Yes! I had a light breakfast today in preparation...”

“Well... I suppose you can accompany me until lunchtime,” Mary announced. If they were going to have a meal at the restaurant, then she couldn’t be

neglectful of them. It's important to treat one's customers well.

"My lady, are you sure?" Adi asked.

"It is what it is. Let's just think of this as killing time until Veltina gets here."

Today, Mary's main objective was to speak to Veltina. When she emphasized as much, Adi shrugged his shoulders and conceded. He seemed dissatisfied, and Mary reckoned it was because the two girls had interrupted their joint shopping trip. Smiling wryly, she gently touched the scarf around her neck.

"Oh my! What a coincidence!" Veltina's high-pitched voice called out to Mary and her companions.

After having walked around the town center for a while, the group had stopped by Alicia's favorite café for a break, and then once again headed out for some more shopping. That was when Veltina had arrived.

"She really did come..." Adi murmured under his breath, sounding exasperated.

In contrast, Mary smiled boldly. "She's finally made her appearance," she said, turning to face Veltina and readying to make some remark about the unexpected meeting. But instead, she found herself gasping.

The younger girl was standing proud with her chest puffed out. Behind her were her cronies, all carrying tall stacks of boxes, making it abundantly clear that Veltina had been on a shopping spree.

This is exactly what I once wanted to do! Mary cried inwardly, feeling moved. (Considering Veltina's character, the boxes her cronies were carrying most likely had actual items inside of them. They weren't empty boxes lined up for the sake of appearances...even though empty boxes *could* be useful items in and of themselves.)

Alicia immediately frowned. It was an unusual expression for her, as she was always lively and sociable, and this also pleased Mary. In her past role as the villainess, she had wanted to make Alicia put her guard up like this by bullying her.

That said, she was less pleased about Alicia trying to get in between her and Veltina protectively. *Why did it turn out like this?* Mary pondered, question marks floating around her head.

“Greetings, Veltina,” she addressed the girl. “Are you out shopping too?”

“Yes. Since I’m studying abroad, I wanted to take this chance to see what kind of trends are popular in this country for future reference.”

“That would be migratory bird rice bowls! There’s been an unprecedented boom in their popularity among men and women of all ages!”

“Milady, please stop spinning tales,” Adi admonished, causing Mary to return to her senses.

He’s right... she thought, calming herself down. She then looked at Veltina once more. “Croquettes are very trendy at the moment.”

“My lady.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. Ahem... Veltina, I’d like to speak with you for a bit. Do you have a moment?”

“Unfortunately, I’m very busy. Unlike you, Lady Mary, I don’t have all the time in the world to spare. More importantly...” Veltina paused, glancing to Mary’s side. Of course, she was looking at Adi. She was being as blatant as ever, which made Adi furrow his brows. But Veltina, either uncaring of this or not noticing it altogether, took a step closer to him and grabbed his arm. “Thank you for attending yesterday’s party, Lord Adi.”

“Thank you for inviting me.”

“You even indulged me in a dance... I apologize for being so pushy when I asked you about it,” Veltina said in a low voice, casting her eyes down. She almost looked sincerely ashamed of her actions... Except she was still tightly gripping Adi’s arm, so her true motives were questionable.

Now that Veltina had made her apologies, her face brightened instantly as she looked up at Adi again. “Please allow me to make it up to you, Lord Adi! Perhaps I could get you a suit? Or would you prefer something else?”

“I appreciate the thought, but I’ll respectfully decline.”

“Then please guide me around the town! It’s my first time here. Maybe you could take me to your favorite shops?”

“You should get a girl your age to show you around, rather than a man like me. Besides, you’re here with your schoolmates.” Although Adi’s speech was polite, he consistently rejected Veltina. He grasped her hand to get it off his arm and then stepped closer to Mary. “Thank you for your consideration, Lady Veltina. However, mila—Lady Mary and I... No, my *wife* and I are out shopping together as a couple.”

Calling Mary his wife and referring to them as a couple was Adi’s way of discouraging Veltina from interrupting them. Even Mary reddened at his words. (Behind them, she could hear exclamations like “Adi’s so passionate!” and “How moving! My tears...!” from the two girls accompanying them, but that ought to be left aside. Obviously, any kind of discouragement aimed at *them* would’ve been entirely ineffective.)

But Adi’s words *were* effective against Veltina, who hesitated for a moment in obvious chagrin. Then she suddenly turned to Mary, as if she had just thought of something. She glared at Mary, her brown eyes shining with unmasked hostility. Or at least, that *should’ve* been the case, but the gentle breeze fluttering the ribbon upon her head lessened the impact. Alas, she did not possess the kind of intensity that *Heart High’s* Mary did.

“Lady Mary, which shop do you intend to visit next?!” Veltina demanded.

“Well, it’s about to be lunchtime...” Mary pointed out.

“Lunch? And where will you have yours?! Not that I care! I have zero interest in the commoners’ restaurants!”

As Veltina continued interrogating Mary and insisting she had no interest in the answers, Mary and Adi exchanged a look with each other. Despite her appeals, the fact that she kept asking about the commoners’ stores implied she was planning something. As the original villainess, Mary could only wonder what Veltina’s sudden inquiries meant.

But Mary and Adi reasoned that since Veltina had asked, they might as well respond. As such, both of them pointed down the road towards...the migratory bird restaurant. It was located in a particularly good area of the town.

“Oh my!” Veltina exclaimed upon seeing it. “I’ve been thinking of buying up that restaurant!”

“Buying it up?”

“Yes, because I hate buying things in small batches. I mean, having to buy every little product one by one, compare them, and occasionally change providers... Don’t you think that’s so provincial and graceless? Especially when it comes to food, you have to make bold choices. That’s why I’m going to buy up that restaurant! And there won’t be enough for you to eat there, Lady Mary! What a shame,” Veltina proclaimed arrogantly.

For a brief while, Mary pondered over what the younger girl had said. Then, she raised her face with a grave countenance. “Veltina, do you even know how to run a business?”

“Your Ladyship, she means buying up the *goods*, not the rights to the management of the restaurant,” Adi said calmly.

Mary gasped, snapping back to reality. The conversation had made her enter business mode, and she’d interpreted Veltina’s words as an interest in transferring over the rights of management.

No, she’s merely trying to harass me. Mary thought. Still, seizing the initiative to buy up a shop for the sake of harassing someone is indeed a very villainous move. But even though Veltina has villainy, she doesn’t have any love for migratory bird rice bowls. I won’t yield the management rights to her!

Reassuring herself, Mary once more faced Veltina.

The girl was still continuing with her high-handedness. “But if *you* want to eat there, Lord Adi...” she said, trying to entice him.

It seemed the girl was planning to buy up all the restaurant’s goods to hinder Mary’s lunch plans, and then use what she’d bought to have a meal with Adi. That way, she’d be able to harass Mary while at the same time getting closer to Adi. Indeed, even Mary felt impressed by this thought-out scheme.

Of course, she had no intention of allowing Veltina to succeed. And even now, Adi looked very reticent about the younger girl’s obvious attempts at getting close to him. He was probably brainstorming how to reject her.

Gazing at them, Mary took out a leather-bound notebook from her bag, which looked like something that would suit the tastes of an old man. It certainly wasn't fashionable, and seemed odd in the hands of a noble lady. But this was the notebook of the migratory bird restaurant's manager, so it didn't need to be fashionable.

Mary read through the detailed schedule outlined in the notebook, murmuring to herself, "A large supply..."

The meat in the restaurant came directly from her relatives' land up in the northern region. It would take a few days to inform them that a larger supply than normal would be needed. Considering that, Mary calculated the shortest possible amount of time in which this could be done: ten days from now. Fortunately, the restaurant was closed on a specific day, so if the stock arrived then...

"Veltina, if you could buy up the restaurant ten days from now, that'd make me happy—I mean, that'd make me *very* sad."

"Why in ten days and not today?!" Veltina shouted in shock.

"There's no deeper reason, scheme, nor management strategy involved behind this suggestion. But if you could buy it up in ten days, the proceeds would be— No! I mean, that'd break my heart, and frustrate me, and upset me so very much that I'd cry...!"

"Ten days it is!" Veltina's expression lit up at the idea of being able to defeat Mary as the girl turned to one of her cronies. "Make the arrangements for ten days from today!" she demanded. "Well then, goodbye!" she added over her shoulder as she walked away, already basking in her victory.

It was settled, then—in ten days, Veltina would buy up the restaurant's stock.

"Adi, this is a huge deal!" Mary said with excitement, thinking of the boost in sales they were about to experience.

But while she was celebrating, Adi watched Veltina and her followers walk away with a cold expression on his face. "My lady... Do you still remember your original intent?"

"My intent? Oh... I... I completely forgot!" Mary despaired, almost collapsing

to her knees.

Originally, she'd been planning to lure Veltina into interrupting her time with Adi in order to have a conversation with the girl. She was going to ask Veltina to keep her harassment to the confines of the academy, yet that had entirely vacated her mind.

"My love of rice bowls and my managerial talent made me act recklessly...!" she lamented.

"All we accomplished in the end is some shopping," said Adi.

"But we did raise the restaurant's proceeds, so let's see this in a positive light."

"You're fruitlessly running around."

"No, I'm not!" Mary shrieked, refusing to acknowledge it. If she did, she had no idea what else he'd say in the future. Considering her time in high school, college, and during the opening of the restaurant, it would've been unwise to add another failing to the pile.

Hence, Mary exhaled and brushed her fingers through her silver-thread hair as though nothing had happened. "Now, let's get going."

"I see, so pretending it didn't happen is your newest strategy."

"Shut up!" she rebuked, then started walking away.

Witnessing this, Alicia surmised their conversation was finally over. "It's lunchtime, isn't it?!" she cried happily.

Meanwhile, the trembling Parfette clutched onto Mary's right arm. The rate of her vibrations was higher than usual, perhaps on account of her hunger.

"Well, no use fretting now. Let's have a fresh start and enjoy some more food and shopping. Adi..." Mary called out over her shoulder, wanting to invite him along. But a lively voice overlapped with hers, making her stop halfway through her sentence.

"Adi, you come too!" It was Alicia. She had grasped Adi by the arm and was urging him to hurry after Mary and Parfette.

Alicia was...*holding Adi's arm.*

She looked just like a child nudging their parent to join in on the fun. Though she was clinging to him, her eyes weren't looking at him, but were instead glued to the migratory bird restaurant up ahead. Her sole objective was to have some lunch, and that was why she'd grasped Adi's arm—unlike with Veltina, there were no ulterior motives behind her actions. Anyone would've been able to guess all of that at a glance.

But...for some reason, I just can't calm down.

Feeling a sense of irritation wash over her, Mary pressed her hand tightly against her chest. She couldn't tear her eyes away from Alicia's hand, which was holding on to Adi.

Parfette must've realized something odd was occurring, for she tugged lightly on Mary's arm. When Mary looked over at her, she was met with the sight of teary eyes and brows drawn up in concern. Parfette looked like she was about to cry...although that was quite normal for her.

"Lady Mary, what's the matter...?"

"N-No, it's nothing... I'm just having some indigestion. I've had it pretty bad recently."

"I won't forgive your stomach for making you suffer, Lady Mary...!"

"Don't hold a grudge against my stomach for my sake, thanks. But such is the destiny of the lover of rice bowls and croquettes."

"Destiny...!" Parfette quivered all over again, moved by Mary's grandiose explanation. The girl then rubbed Mary's arm, and the laudable gesture caused Mary to smile. By the time she looked up again, Alicia had already let go of Adi and was beelining towards the restaurant.

"Let's hurry!" Alicia urged, and her purple irises were directed right at Mary.

Even when the other girl had grasped Adi's arm, she hadn't been looking at him at all. As Mary thought this, her indigestion disappeared without a trace.

"Goodness, could you stop frolicking around? It's disgraceful! I can't stand the thought of people associating us together! I'm sure your boorish stench is half

the reason I'm having indigestion in the first place. You were standing upwind, so the breeze carried your stink over towards me and flared up my indigestion!"

"Indigestion... Tee hee!" Alicia snickered at the word.

"What's with that creepy laugh?!" Mary protested irritably, looking away with a huff. She then glanced over her shoulder and once more called out, "Adi! Come along, now!"



Veltina's harassment continued even after the incident in the town center. *That girl really just keeps going without stopping... I have to commend her for her tenacity.*

However, Mary couldn't understand the idea of harassment. She had never inserted herself in conflicts between other noblewomen, only ever spectating from the sidelines. (Not to mention, as so many called her an eccentric behind her back, she'd always been ostracized from the rest of high society.) If Mary disliked someone, she simply didn't get involved with them, and she'd rather put effort into things other than bullying someone.

But would adding illicit love to such harassment turn it into something she couldn't back out of?

Mary was pondering such things while having tea in a corner of the campus along with Adi, Margaret, and Carina. To be more specific, it had happened when Carina began talking about her footstool, and Mary had put her all into not hearing a word of it and directing her attention elsewhere.

In the middle of all this, a voice called out to them: "My, hello there!"

It was—sure enough, as expected, same as usual—Veltina's voice. She had a red ribbon tying her hair, and she was putting on a cocky act. But when Carina remarked, "Veltina, that tea the other day was lovely," the girl let out a small shriek. Apparently, traces of fear still remained within her.

But a moment later, Veltina smiled affectionately. "Greetings, Lord Adi!" she said in a sweet voice. The change in her countenance was so swift that Mary almost wanted to compliment her on it. Mary even found herself thinking, *If she ever decides to pursue acting, I'll support her.*

“Hello, Lady Veltina,” Adi replied with a stiff expression. He moved his chair slightly closer to Mary’s, likely in an attempt to get away from Veltina. Or perhaps instead he was escaping the icy air Carina was radiating.

“I see you’re all carelessly... Um, I mean, gracefully enjoying some tea,” Veltina went on. “College students sure have time to spare... Er, I mean, I envy the fact that you have so much freedom.”

“Indeed, college students tend to have more free time. What of it?” Mary prompted.

“Well, high school’s *very* busy, so I’ve been exhausted. But I suppose that’s no surprise, since me being so busy is proof that the teachers have high expectations of me. As a young person, I simply have to accept it. But I envy the fact you can be so carele—I mean, so free.”

“Yes, college comes with a lot of freedom... Wait, I don’t really understand your aims this time. Can you be more concrete?”

“I’m in high school, and there’s so much I have to learn, which is a great hardship! But I’m still so young, which means I have lots of expectations on me, and a bright future! Unlike you, Lady Mary, I’m *young*!”

“Ah, so you’re referring to our age difference,” Mary said, grasping the situation at last as she sipped her tea. It seemed that today Veltina was trying to harass Mary because of their age gap. Indeed, the girl was Mary’s junior and could use her youth as a pretext—especially since beauty was one of a noblewoman’s weapons in high society. Age played an important role, so youth itself was very valuable all on its own.

“For the sake of your honor, I won’t claim that you’re already past your prime. But you’re a bit older than me, no? And all the gentlemen say they prefer younger women.”

“Then what say you, the gentlemen’s representative?” Mary asked Adi.

“Please don’t get me involved in this,” he answered with a frown, appealing for his right to remain silent.

Mary turned her gaze to Carina next. Thankfully, the girl had stopped radiating iciness, meaning Mary could hope for a respectable conversation. “Did

you hear, Carina? Apparently, gentlemen like younger women. What do you make of that?”

“That may be true, but you can’t claim that youth wins unconditionally,” Carina responded. “What’s more important is that a woman has elegance, intelligence, tolerance, maternal instincts, good leg strength for trampling on—”

“Carina, I’ll give you my share of the cake, so please stop talking for a while.” Mary interrupted, handing her plate over to Carina while reproaching her for almost ruining a young girl’s education.

Veltina and her cronies were mightily confused as well, echoing “Leg strength?” and “Trampling?” to each other. Thankfully, things wouldn’t go further than bafflement.

As a student of Karelia, Mary would’ve felt guilty if the girls’ stories had turned into something like, *“By going on an exchange program, I opened up a new door...!”*

So she stopped Carina before any such doors could be opened, and then turned her attention to Margaret. The latter had been giggling away at Veltina’s words from the very start. Even now, she gracefully censured her friend’s reckless behavior by saying, “Gracious, Lady Carina! You mustn’t!”

Mary opened her mouth to inquire for Margaret’s opinion...and promptly closed it again.

Margaret was smiling, her shapely lips curved up in an arc. The refined sound of her voice as she chuckled again was overflowing with a mature charm.

However, her eyes weren’t smiling at all—they were blazing with a ferocious glint.

Seeing that, Mary inwardly scolded herself for thoughtlessly trying to address Margaret. After all, Margaret was presently involved with the third son of House Dyce, Bernard. Obviously, he was younger than Margaret, and even younger than Veltina, in fact.

Relationships with age gaps weren’t uncommon in high society, but if the *woman* was the older party, it wasn’t usually viewed well. Not to mention, having one’s age pointed out like that would surely lead to hurt feelings.

Perhaps a normal noblewoman would've simply felt hurt and moved on from it, but someone like Margaret...

Indeed, it would awaken her hunter's nature.

Yet Veltina didn't seem to notice the bloodlust radiating from Margaret, nor the glint in her eyes. Even now, the younger girl was kicking up a fuss. Worse yet, she seemed to have taken Margaret's silence as affirmation, which made her puff up with pride. "Youth is what enhances a girl's beauty and charm. I think youth alone is very valuable," she proclaimed.

"S-Stop that, Veltina..." murmured Mary.

"The younger, the better! There's a difference in skin elasticity and the gloss of your hair. Plus, young girls are remarkably adorable. Between us, women like you are—"

"Veltina!" Mary shouted, trying to silence the girl. Right about the same time, Margaret's eyes opened wide. "She's in countdown mode! Veltina, run!"

"Wh-What...?!"

"If you don't want House Brownie to take you over, you must retreat now!"

"No, I refuse!" Veltina insisted, remaining obstinate despite Mary's attempts to get her to escape.

Mary couldn't stop herself from tutting. It was unladylike conduct, but they were running out of time, which intensified her stress levels.

The hunter was murmuring under her breath. It was something about House Barthez's domain, their social standing, family structure, and a way to seize another noble family...

Desperate times...! Mary thought, quickly rising to her feet. "Oh my!" she exclaimed, looking to the side. "Right over there... Isn't that Bernard?" she said to no one in particular, acting as if she'd just spotted him by chance. Of course, events didn't actually line up so conveniently—it was a lie designed to distract Margaret.

Alas, lies can be very effective.

"Bernard!" Margaret exclaimed affectionately, instantaneously switching

from a hunter to a noble lady. Although, given that she was acting ladylike in order to capture a first-rate man for herself, one could argue she was still very much a hunter. “Where do you see him, Lady Mary?”

“O-Oh dear, I may have misperceived it,” Mary claimed, apologizing for her mistake.

Margaret, who had gotten up, sat back down with disappointment. Judging by her dispirited expression, which was quite unusual on her, she must’ve genuinely been looking forward to seeing Bernard.

I was trying to allow Veltina an opportunity to escape, but I may have done something bad... Mary thought with a feeling of guilt.

Margaret and Bernard were in a relationship that crossed national borders. On top of that, they also had an age difference, which meant they couldn’t always be together, unlike Mary and Adi. They probably treasured the times they actually got to see each other.

Mary decided that as a way of apologizing for having deceived Margaret, she’d invite her out for a meal. She was about to suggest as much, but before she could say a word, Margaret spoke up first.

“Well, I suppose it’s fine. I mean, he *did* invite me out for dinner tonight, just the two of us.”

The other girl had gone and boasted about having a date. And she was even being lovey-dovey, emphasizing how Bernard had been the one to invite her first. Though nobody asked, she also went on to gush about how adorable he’d been when he did so.

Mary’s guilt vanished with the wind. Instead, she rebuked Margaret, reminding her that Bernard was still young and that she should keep her hunter spirit in check around him.

Bernard was the third son of House Dyce, and he was still a young, sweet boy. If a hunter truly went all out, he wouldn’t stand a chance. Their feelings may have been mutual, but there were still some limits.

That aside, right now Mary should’ve been concerned over another person—Veltina.

The girl seemed annoyed that the conversation had moved past the topic of herself, and she was glaring at Mary with open loathing. Just as always, however, there was no intensity to her, and she looked like an abandoned puppy crying for attention.

“Are you done yet? I don’t have the time to care about your issues!” she said with a huff. A selfish girl like her couldn’t stand to be kept out of the loop for long.

(She had something to learn from the other two, who had also been left out of the loop but went on with their own conversation. One had inquired, “Speaking of preferences, do you prefer shoes with thin heels or thick heels, Lord Adi?”)

(“Are you asking which I like better in terms of looks, or for the sensation of being stepped on?”)

(“The latter.”)

(“I wouldn’t know.”)

(Alas, Mary would rather Veltina *not* learn from the *topic* of their conversation.)

“I’m young, and that’s why I have a future!” Veltina continued. “I can’t waste my time like you, Lady Mary.”

“That’s true; you’re very young. By the way, what did you think of the migratory bird rice bowl?”

“It was *delicio*— I mean, it was passable. I suppose the food was fine for a commoners’ restaurant. It wasn’t worth a proper assessment!” Veltina declared stubbornly.

It seemed the girl had also treated her cronies to rice bowls when she’d bought up the restaurant’s stock. As they were preparing to withdraw, the girls remarked to themselves about how tasty the meal had been and how they’d like to try it again.

“Well then, goodbye!” Veltina said, and vacated the area along with her followers.

Mary watched them retreat with a smirk. Veltina was always loud, and her cronies accompanied her everywhere. If Mary played her cards right, they might even become the restaurant's poster girls.

"My lady... You're thinking bad thoughts again, aren't you?"

"Oh, pardon me. I was just thinking about the restaurant."

"Is that so? But please be careful not to agitate your indigestion," Adi said in exasperation, to which Mary nodded.

Fortunately, despite the restaurant being brought up, Mary didn't get any indigestion. Still, it'd be best to end the conversation early just in case, she reasoned, and decided to talk about something else. But right then, she heard a deep sigh from nearby.

It was Margaret, who seemed to be in a low mood. Not that long ago, she'd been smiling like both a hunter and a noble lady, but right now she looked anguished. Her gaze was set in the direction where Mary had lied about seeing Bernard, as if she was still searching for him.

Mary wasn't the only one to pick up on this. Even Adi and Carina, who hadn't been part of the previous conversation, noticed Margaret's uncharacteristic expression as the three of them turned towards her.

"Margaret..."

"Ah, excuse me. I was lost in thought..."

"I see..." Mary said, pausing. "Are you worried because of what Veltina said earlier?"

Margaret once again looked aside and sighed. "I'd be lying if I said no. But it's not just because of her. She was confusing youth for immaturity, so make no mistake—this has absolutely *nothing* to do with her."

"You dislike her, I get that. But please continue."

"Very well. It's not because of what Veltina said, but I *am* worried about being older than Bernard. Even though there's nothing I can do about it," Margaret said with a troubled chuckle. It was a self-deprecating laugh she'd normally never show to others.

Alas, age difference was one of those things that a person couldn't change, no matter how much they struggled. Surely even Margaret's ambition knew there was nothing to be done about this specific matter. That was the very reason she sighed so deeply.

Truthfully, Mary wasn't sure what to say to her.

"Lady Margaret, you shouldn't worry about this too much," Adi spoke up, calmly reassuring the girl. His words of gentle admonishment made even Mary feel relieved.

"Lord Adi..." Margaret said, glancing up at him.

Naturally, the pair's eyes met. Neither of them said anything directly, likely because of their complicated feelings on the topic, and so for a few seconds, there was only silence between them. All the while, they kept gazing at each other.

Having never seen anything like it, Mary felt unrest stir in her heart. She wondered if she was having a late onset of indigestion as she placed her hand over her chest.

Margaret let out another pained sigh. "I know I shouldn't concern myself over it. But Bernard is surrounded by younger girls, isn't he? When I think about that, I..."

"I've known Lord Bernard for a long time," Adi said. "He's a splendid and intelligent person. He's not the type who'd get sidetracked by something as trivial as age."

"True..." Margaret's expression brightened slightly. But it seemed she couldn't let her worries go yet, and she looked conflicted.

While gazing at her, Mary recalled what Luke had said to her. *"Though I'm aware of the facts in my mind, my heart just won't be convinced."* He had explained that despite the fact that he was engaged to Veltina, and despite knowing Adi had no romantic interest in her at all, he still felt jealous. Margaret must've had similar feelings, worrying about her and Bernard's age difference despite not being able to do anything about it.

Mary was certain that her indigestion was incomparable to the complex

emotions Margaret was going through. She looked at the other girl with sympathy. Yet for some reason, her eyes strayed to Adi, who was staring at Margaret. Mary's indigestion worsened, to the point that it was almost painful.

"You're a very charming woman, Lady Margaret," Adi continued. "I'm sure that Lord Bernard knows this... No, in fact, I'm sure he is more aware of this than anyone else."

"Thank you, Lord Adi..."

"And please keep this between us, but in truth, Lord Bernard is always asking me and milady about you. Isn't that right, milady?" Adi turned to face Mary. His rust-colored hair swayed with the movement, and his eyes of the same shade met Mary's.

He's finally looking at me... Mary told herself, but soon snapped out of her thoughts and shook her head to disperse them. Why had such a thing just crossed her mind...?

However, there was no time to ponder upon that. When she didn't answer right away, Adi was quick to inquire, "Is something wrong, my lady?"

"No, nothing... Right, we were talking about Bernard. Actually, every time we see him, he only ever asks about you, Margaret."

"Really...?" Margaret's face was starting to light up little by little. She must've been overjoyed to hear that her beloved partner, who always extended great care towards her, was trying to find out more about her even when they were apart. Although she'd been feeling discouraged over Bernard, he was still the best medicine for her worries.

"By that logic, maybe the cure for my indigestion would actually be *more* migratory bird rice bowls and croquettes..." Mary mused.

"Lady Mary, what kind of things does Bernard ask about?" Margaret inquired.

"Perhaps rather than 'hair of the dog,' I could try 'feather of the bird'...?"

"Lady Mary?"

"Ah, apologies. I was just trying to stir my memories," Mary replied. "Every time he says he has something to ask about, I always know it's going to be

about you. He asked me about what kind of place Elysiana College is, where you like to spend your time, what kind of shops you like...”

“Goodness, Bernard...! Please keep going, Lady Mary!”

“He’s very adorable any time he asks such things. He said he wants to learn more about your preferences, and that he wants to show you around our country...”

“Oh...! I must hear even more!”

“He often gets all red, which is also very cute. He’s asked me and Alicia about the best opening lines when writing a letter to you. He wanted to know what kinds of things women like reading in letters in order to make you happy.”

Mary giggled as she recalled these events, and Adi soon joined in, sharing his own anecdotes of the boy. House Albert and House Dyce had a long-standing connection, so both Mary and Adi had known Bernard since he was born. As such, the more they spoke about him, the more Margaret’s eyes gleamed.

Eventually, Margaret cast her gaze down and exhaled deeply. Then, she tightened her fist slightly and murmured, “All right!” She was brimming with fighting spirit. “Thank you both. I’m okay now.”

“I’d like to commend you for that very restrained triumphant pose,” Mary remarked.

“Uncharacteristically, I felt weak and vulnerable. It’s quite embarrassing,” Margaret said with an elegant laugh.

Hearing her perfectly ladylike giggle, Mary and Adi looked at each other and shrugged. (As a side note, during this conversation, Carina had nonchalantly packed up her belongings, nonchalantly stood up, and then nonchalantly walked away.)

“There’s nothing for you to be worried about, Lady Margaret,” Adi assured.

“You’re right, Lord Adi. Thank you.”

“In the end, regardless of things like types and preferences, once a man falls for someone, that person is his everything. Even if she’s older, or a person of much higher status, a man in love won’t be able to look at anyone else. It’s the

same for Lord Bernard—though he’s surrounded by girls his age, he only has eyes for you, Lady Margaret. Just like how I used to only have eyes for milady, despite believing it’d be impossible for us to be together,” Adi admitted calmly, yet with a slightly embarrassed laugh.

Margaret smiled at his words and nodded. She seemed uplifted, and Mary found herself feeling relieved at the sight of her friend’s smile.

However, a moment later, she was blinking in shock as Margaret decided to change the topic by saying, “Let’s leave that aside.” Margaret’s smile was the same as usual, but when Mary looked carefully, she thought she could see a certain glint in her eyes... Indeed, those were the eyes of a hunter.

Why did she revert back to being a hunter in this situation? Mary wondered in puzzlement. Given that Carina knew Margaret very well, Mary cast her eyes towards the girl, intending to question her about it. But she found herself blinking again, because Carina was nowhere to be seen.

Looking at the vacant, abandoned chair, Mary suddenly had a very bad feeling.

“You know, Margaret... Carina seems to have left at some point, so I guess Adi and I should also be going...”

“I still have some time left until my meeting with Bernard. I would love it if you could tell me in complete, thorough, minute detail *all* about him,” Margaret said, radiating an intensity that implied she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Mary gulped. *This hunter is starving...!* she shrieked inwardly. She felt an unspeakable pressure from Margaret.

“You’ve both known Bernard since his infancy, no?” Margaret went on. “You’ve known him back when he didn’t even have a single memory of me yet.”

“N-Not really... We only speak to him on occasion. R-Right, Adi?” prompted Mary.

“Yes, indeed... We’re only slightly familiar with him.”

Mary and Adi were laughing stiffly, retracting their previous statements. Their attempts at smoke and mirrors were plain as day.

Despite their desperate endeavors, Margaret wasn't fooled. She smirked to herself, briefly casting her eyes down and muttering, "I've been overlooking the best source of information this whole time..."

Those words caused Mary to shudder all over. *I can't let her catch me, or there will be no end to this! I've got to get out of here!* she thought, alarm bells ringing in her mind.

Alas, such bells could do nothing for her. Under the glinting eyes of the hunter, even Mary Albert had no way of escaping. Rather than a rat in a trap, she was like a migratory bird in a rice bowl.

Adi must've also heard similar bells in his mind, urging him to retreat. He glanced aside momentarily as he deliberated over something, before smiling stiffly once more and speaking up. "Milady and I are sure to have the same memories regarding Bernard. It'd be redundant for you to hear about them from us both. So I'll excuse myself here..." he said, slowly getting up. Apparently, he was going to use Mary as a decoy to make his getaway.

Mary quickly grabbed his arm. "What are you saying, Adi?! Even if we have the same memories, men and women are sure to take the events differently! Hearing a man's opinion is very important!"

"Come on, milady! You two can have a nice long chat together! I... I have to go deep-fry the croquettes for tonight's dinner! I'm on duty right now!"

"I'm not letting you get away! And frying croquettes isn't your job as a servant!" Mary screeched, clinging to his arm.

However, both of them froze in place upon hearing a high-pitched sound nearby. It was the sound of Margaret placing her teacup onto the saucer. This was not the sort of sound a refined and well-mannered person would've allowed to happen, so needless to say, it was entirely intentional. It was Margaret's way of putting a stop to Mary and Adi's exchange.

Realizing that both of them were staring at her, Margaret slowly smiled. Her serene expression was utterly beautiful, but her eyes were glinting just as before. "I cannot return home from the exchange program empty-handed," she declared elegantly.

Mary let out a long sigh. “Just what are you trying to learn in this exchange program...?” she lamented in exasperation, but turned to face Margaret nonetheless.

Adi started pouring them new servings of tea in defeat, which indicated he was ready to be there for the long haul.



A few hours had passed since Mary and Adi had been interrogated by Margaret.

“She’s not coming, huh?” Mary whispered as she and Adi walked towards the corner of the academy they used as a bicycle parking space (indeed, they still commuted by bike even during college).

Mary had been certain that Veltina would show up at least once whilst she was preparing to depart from the school, but there was no trace of the younger girl. Mary hadn’t even heard that familiarly high-handed voice at all. This was odd, since up until now, Veltina always appeared when Mary was about to leave, and tried to find faults in her.

“I wonder if something happened? Maybe she got lost somehow...” Mary contemplated.

“Why are you so worried, Your Ladyship?”

“I mean, that girl always shows up and tries to kick up a fuss whenever I’m leaving. But I haven’t seen her so far... She could’ve collapsed somewhere. Maybe we should go help her out...” she said with concern. Veltina caused trouble each time she showed up, yes, but her not showing up at all only made Mary feel anxious.

“Goodness, my lady... Ah, wait, isn’t that Lady Veltina?”

“Where?! Is she okay?! She’s not been caught in some sort of trap, has she?!” Mary fretted, hurriedly surveying her surroundings.

In her mind’s eye, she was already picturing Veltina caught in a bear trap, shouting, *“It’s fine if you want to help out!”* Mary imagined Patrick and Carina looking on coldly from the background. She was on tenterhooks.

“Are you implying someone’s set up traps all over the academy?” asked Adi. “Anyway, I suppose she *is* safe, but...” He trailed off, and then pointed at something.

Mary looked over in that direction, only to see Veltina and Parfette caught in a glaring contest.

The large ribbon in Veltina’s hair was fluttering about, while the ribbon around Parfette’s waist also swayed. Both girls were pouting, making their hostility towards each other very clear. But they were each naturally cute, and their current expressions didn’t take away from that in the slightest. Though they were also frowning deeply, it still wasn’t enough to spoil their looks.

In other words, despite the fact that they were glaring at each other, there was not an ounce of intensity between them. It wasn’t exactly something one could describe as an explosive situation.

Veltina’s cronies also seemed completely at ease, lazily making supportive remarks like, “Go, Lady Veltina!” (In fact, some of them were actually eagerly discussing how once this was over, they could visit the migratory bird restaurant again. Their composure would’ve normally astonished Mary, but instead she found herself smirking.)

“This is a perfectly serene scene with no hint of danger whatsoever,” Mary commented. “It’s the picture of peace.”

“Indeed. The two in conflict seem to be sincerely going for it, but there’s no sense of danger at all,” Adi responded. “Lord Gainas standing in the back and holding both of their bags just adds to the surrealism of it.”

“This isn’t even a confrontation. It’s a cheeks puff-off.”

As they conversed, Mary and Adi decided to approach Gainas. Noticing them, he bowed in greeting, then awkwardly glanced towards Parfette and Veltina.

“Hello, Lord Gainas,” Mary addressed him. “When did this cheeks puff-off commence?”

“Puff-off...? Oh, you mean these two. It’s been like this for the past twenty minutes.”

“What?! That’s quite long, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But I’ve been taught not to get involved in fights between women, so I can’t do anything but stand here and watch,” Gainas explained.

“I see. You must be having a rough time of it too.”

“Well, there’s only so much I can do... Lady Carina and Lady Margaret somehow sensed the conflict brewing and gallantly made an appearance, but I managed to appease them and send them home. Lord Patrick also showed up with a strangely pleasant smile, claiming he wanted to participate, but I also sent him home.”

“Compared to this puff-off, it sounds like *you’re* the one who’s been really put through the toughest trials,” said Mary, expressing her appreciation for his efforts. Even though she usually gave him a hard time, this was a special occasion. She could sense the fact that he’d been toiling away, which made her a little worried for him.

Around then, Veltina must’ve gotten fed up with the stalemate, for she finally raised her voice. “What’s the matter with you?! Do you really think that you, a member of House Marquis, can tell *me* what to do?!”

“Y-You’re right, my family can’t rival yours... But I wish to protect Lady Mary, and that feeling goes beyond our differences in social standing! Besides...” Parfette paused, glancing aside. At first, Mary thought the girl was looking at her, but in actuality, it was Gainas.

Indeed, House Marquis had a lower standing than House Barthez. However, Gainas’s family, House Eldland, stood even higher than House Barthez. Parfette was likely trying to allude to that.

Veltina fell silent for a moment, but soon enough her high-handed attitude was back, as she continued glaring at Parfette. “How cowardly, to hide behind your fiancé’s family!”

“No, it’s not. The fact that he’s my fiancé means we’ll be married someday. And that means I’ll become Lady Eldland!” Parfette argued.

“You say that, but you two might not end up marrying at all!”

“We *will* get married!”

“Don’t you get it, Lady Parfette? If you just cling on to Lord Gainas’s family name, he might stop loving you! You could be friends, at best!” Veltina declared, as if trying to instigate Parfette.

“That can’t be!” the other girl cried. She grew pallid, perhaps having recalled the time when Gainas had once requested for their engagement to be canceled.

But a moment later, she once again faced Veltina with a stern and openly hostile countenance. Parfette was strong at her core, but she showed it very rarely—including right now. “Lord Gainas *does* love me! I mean, just the other day...” She trailed off, her cheeks turning pink.

(In contrast, Gainas paled at the sight of her blush, and hurriedly appealed, “Parfette, don’t mention that...!”)

Unfortunately, Gainas’s pleas were ignored. Parfette steeled her mind, tightening her fists and drawing in a deep breath. “Just the other day, Lord Gainas used this exchange program as bait to press me to kiss him! So he *does* love me!” she emphasized loudly.

What followed this proclamation was nothing but silence. Eventually, several very different reactions cycled through the crowd.

“F-For you to bring up a kiss right now... How shameless!” Veltina yelled, her cheeks flushed. Even her ears had reddened, matching her fluttering ribbon.

Parfette was also blushing, and as Adi observed them, he murmured, “Oh dear.” Compared to the two girls, he was very calm, and he could only shrug his shoulders at this uncontrollable development. He then glanced aside to see the others’ reactions.

“Oh my, a kiss...? I see...” said Mary, smiling in a serene and beautiful way.

“I, um, er, I didn’t force anything...” Gainas clarified incoherently, having gone white as a sheet.

Compared to the two flustered participants of the cheeks puff-off, the atmosphere over here was quite heavy, indeed. The difference in temperatures on each side of Adi was so great that he wondered if he’d catch a cold.

However, Mary had a good reason to be smiling elegantly and pressuring Gainas. While Parfette was dependent on Mary, Mary doted on Parfette. On top of that, Gainas was a former convict when it came to hurting Parfette's feelings and upsetting her. In fact, one could even say that was the very reason why Parfette had become so dependent on Mary in the first place. After all, Gainas had once upon a time been enticed by Lilianne.

Since Parfette had forgiven him, Mary was turning a blind eye to his past misdeeds, but there was no way she could ignore a statement like, "*He pressed me to kiss him using the exchange program as bait.*"

Gainas and Parfette may have been engaged, but moderation was still necessary—all the more so considering his previous offenses. And though Mary could rebuke Gainas all she wanted in regards to having restraint, she couldn't go as far as to punch him in the flank. So rather than striking him, she chose to threaten him.

"This is the first I'm hearing about this. How very assertive of you, Gainas."

"I... It didn't go *that* far...!"

"Oh my, despite the fact that these were your own actions, you're being quite vague. So did you press her for it or not?"

"I guess...you could say that I did..." Gainas admitted meekly, drenched in cold sweat.

At that, Mary's eyes opened in a flash. She had entered moderation mode. Although she wouldn't hit him, the feeling wouldn't pass until she hit *something*. Sensing as much, Gainas let out a quiet shriek and shuddered, which only made the atmosphere all the more tense.

But right then, Veltina, whose cheeks were still red, exclaimed, "I've had enough! I won't engage in this vulgar conversation any further!"

With that, she made her retreat, ribbon fluttering as she went. Her cronies bowed once and then followed after her, and soon enough the group turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

Parfette had been glaring at them, but once they vanished, she quickly turned around. "Lady Maaary!" she cried, her eyes full of tears as she rushed over,

looking like her usual self.

Mary's expression softened, and she spread her arms to hug Parfette. But without missing a beat or losing momentum, she passed Parfette over to Gainas.

"Huh?" Suddenly in his arms, Parfette was dumbfounded. But she didn't try to get away, and when Gainas hugged her, she snuggled up against him happily. "Lord Gainas, did you see my fight?" she prompted.

"I did. You're a strong woman, Parfette."

"I am. That's why I don't need your protection. But if you insist, I could protect *you*, Lord Gainas."

"Then I shall sincerely rely on you. In fact...I'd like to ask you to protect me *right now*. But I won't say from whom." Gainas held Parfette more tightly, perhaps because Mary had truly scared him earlier, or maybe because he was worried that if Parfette rejected him here, he'd actually become a viable target of Mary's assault.

A large man like Gainas enveloping a petite girl like Parfette in his arms made her all but disappear from view. She didn't seem to have noticed his desperation either, for she just giggled and replied with, "Then I suppose I will!"

Mary's lovely smile transformed into exasperation, and she could only shrug her shoulders at the pair. "Well, in consideration of Parfette's fierce fight, I'll forgive you this time."

"Th-Thank you," said Gainas, breathing a sigh of relief at having narrowly escaped death.

Mary brushed her silver hair from her shoulder, and it swayed with the movement. "All right, Adi. Let's go home. Parfette and Gainas, I'll see you tomorrow."

Adi lowered his head, retaining his servant-like disposition. "Pardon us."

Gainas also bowed his head in response...still holding on to Parfette. The fact that he stubbornly refused to let her go was a testament to how frightening Mary must've been earlier.

Parfette's body was concealed by Gainas's, but through the gap between his arms, Mary heard the girl's well-mannered words of farewell. "Goodbye!"



With the exception of a few students, the exchange program had been proceeding well, and now there were only a few days left. It was around then that Parfette became even more tearful than before, as the time to say goodbye was drawing near.

"Lady Mary! Lady Maaary...!" she cried. She was shaking so much that the vibrations carried through Mary's arm, which the girl was clinging to, and caused Mary's hair to shake too.

(Adi had at one point wistfully remarked, "Those drills wouldn't have budged from such a thing." Mary wondered where the pink slip she'd slapped him with on that day had disappeared to.)

"Don't cry so much," Mary admonished. "There's still a few days left. And even after it's over, you can come and visit."

"But... But it all went so quickly! And when I think of the distance that will be between us, I can't stop my tears... A wall will soon stand in our way in the form of national borders!"

"Very true. Perhaps you could build a holiday home here?"

"House Marquis doesn't have such wealth... Ah!" Parfette gasped and quickly whipped around as if she'd just realized something.

Standing nearby was a group of three men—Adi, Patrick, and Gainas. When Parfette suddenly turned to them, three pairs of eyes in different colors all widened in unison.

Acting as the representative, Gainas spoke up. "What is it, Parfette?"

"House Marquis doesn't have the funds to build a villa... But with House Eldland, it's a different story! Lord Gainas, let's get married! I shall have House Eldland's wealth in my hands! And then I'll build a holiday home close to House Albert!" Parfette urged vigorously, as though she were convinced this was her only means of survival.

Gainas grew flustered and shook his head. “Parfette, you want to marry me just for my fortune...?!?”

“I only wish to be close to Lady Mary! Don’t equate my feelings to something like that! I simply want to get my hands on House Eldland’s fortune so I can be with her!”

“If that’s not marrying for the sake of fortune, then what is it?!?”

“So you’re saying you *don’t* want to marry me, Lord Gainas?!?”

“N-No, I do! I *do* want to marry you, but...!”

While Gainas appealed that he didn’t want to get married for such reasons, Parfette’s wrath intensified as she argued that marriage was the purpose of their engagement. The girl clung to Mary’s idea of the villa, tossing her ladylike conduct aside to press Gainas despite her small stature. She was shaking like a leaf from her anger. Well, she was *always* shaking, but this was different from her usual kind of shaking. A professional like Mary could tell as much at a glance.

Seeing her like that, Mary sighed before placing her hand on Parfette’s arm soothingly. She’d said the holiday home thing as a joke, but now she was feeling responsible for the result.

“Calm down a little, Parfette. We still have some time, and even if you do decide to build a villa, it won’t be done right away.”

“Th-That’s true...” replied Parfette. “I have to return to Elysiana first... Lady Maryyy...”

Realizing that no matter what, they’d be apart for some time, Parfette once again clung to Mary while sniffing. Alicia, who’d been watching this exchange all along, reached her arm across Mary to comfort Parfette. (In other words, Alicia had indeed grabbed ahold of Mary’s other arm at some point, but scolding her for that would’ve been pointless by now.)

Surely for any outsiders, the sight of three young girls cuddling like this would’ve been enchanting. The purity of their friendship was palpable...so long as one hadn’t seen Parfette’s raging and tumultuous proposal earlier.

“Parfette... I want us to marry normally,” Gainas muttered with a sigh. He seemed relieved that Parfette had calmed down, but at the same time, he looked somewhat miserable.

“Isn’t it fine?” Adi spoke up, attempting to console Gainas. “Whatever the process, the fact that you can get married is a great thing. Lady Parfette’s the one who pressed you to marry her, so now that you’ve got her commitment, you’ve basically laid the foundation. Isn’t that right, Construction Worker Patrick?” he prompted, seeking agreement.

“Who’re you calling a construction worker?” Patrick rebutted coolly.

Mary regarded the three men, as well as the two girls on either side of her, chatting to each other. *Just a few days left of all this liveliness...* she thought with a small sigh.



A few hours after Parfette’s gold-digging marriage proposal, Mary suddenly stopped in her tracks. Ahead of her on the road, she could see Adi and Alicia conversing together. Mary had asked Adi to get them some drinks, so he must’ve run into Alicia on the way back.

This kind of thing happened often. Once Mary joined in, the conversation between those two would grind to a halt, and Alicia would come flying at her. It was such a common occurrence that Mary could picture it easily.

It should’ve been a scene she was very accustomed to. Yet even so...

“Why’s she having so much fun with *my* Adi?”

The moment Mary caught herself murmuring that, her eyes widened and she covered her mouth with her hand. What had she just said? Hadn’t her voice sounded completely spiteful just now?

But no matter how much she asked herself, no answers came to her, and a sense of discomfort swirled in her chest. Why was her indigestion flaring up in this situation?

Mary wanted to approach Adi and Alicia just as she always did, but for some reason, her legs wouldn’t move. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the sight of the two chitchatting happily. Adi was smiling serenely, while Alicia’s

countenance was as bright as the sun.

She wanted to call out to them and get their—no, get *Adi's* eyes on herself. This feeling of urgency was different from the kind she'd felt when joining their conversations in the past, and it seemed much heavier.

Just why did I think "my" Adi? And towards Alicia, of all people...

Mary was baffled by her own emotions, but right at that moment, someone's voice resounded in her ears. "Oh my!"

It was Veltina. The girl approached Mary with a high-handed attitude just as always, and the ribbon upon her head bounced along.

"Greetings, Lady Mary. Seems like you have plenty of free time again. What are you doing here?" the girl asked brusquely.

"I-Indeed, hello, Veltina..." Mary responded distractedly. Usually, she would've sighed in exasperation, but she was not in the headspace for that right now. Veltina's attempts at harassing her by pointing out that Mary had so much spare time while Veltina was so very busy all went in one ear and out the other.

The fact that Adi and Alicia were still happily conversing was what had Mary's full attention at this moment.

Noticing that Mary was looking elsewhere, Veltina followed her line of sight. "Ah, it's Lord Adi and Lady Alicia," she remarked.

"R-Right, yes..."

"They seem to be having a lot of fun. But what are *you* doing over here, Lady Mary?"

"Me? I'm..." Mary had intended to answer Veltina's question, but just trailed off while casting her gaze down.

Veltina tilted her head at Mary's unusual behavior, before glancing over to Adi and Alicia again. "Oh, it's her..." she murmured.

Mary looked up at that, and noticed Carina had approached Adi and Alicia. Carina was gently holding a bundle of cloth in her arms, which she handed over to Adi before lowering her head deeply. Adi hurriedly reassured the girl, while Alicia peered at the bundle curiously.

“What’s Lady Carina doing?” wondered Veltina. “What did she just give to Lord Adi?”

“It must be his jacket,” Mary clarified. “He lent it to her in the past...”

Perhaps Carina had washed it, or had it retailored. Mary could tell that the girl was grateful from the bottom of her heart as she gave her thanks to Adi. Meanwhile, Adi was awkwardly trying to pacify her, most likely because he was embarrassed to be thanked again like this.

Watching him, Veltina seemed moved as she let out a passionate breath. “Lord Adi is really kind, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is... He’s very tactful, having worked as a servant for so long.”

“And he indulged me in a dance as well. Just look at how grateful Lady Carina seems... Lord Adi is just so kind to everyone,” Veltina said happily.

Mary muttered a half-hearted reply. Indeed, she did agree that Adi was a kind man. But she’d never heard anyone claim that Adi was kind to *everyone*, and those words troubled her.

After all, Mary and Adi had been together for a long time, just the two of them. Most of their peers saw them as an eccentric lady and her impudent servant, and though Mary and Adi could feign friendliness during their occasional interactions with others, for the most part, they had kept to themselves.



Adi's carefree smile had once been only Mary's to see. At least, that had all been the case until they'd met Alicia and made some friends.

Something in Mary's chest rumbled. She felt like running away from here, or breaking up the conversation between Adi and Alicia. An unspeakably suffocating sensation rattled through her.

As if wanting to intensify what Mary was feeling, Veltina spoke up again. "Lord Adi..." she began, and today specifically, hearing that name on her lips rubbed Mary the wrong way. "If he's so kind to everyone, that means he's not kind just to *you*, Lady Mary."

Mary paused. "What do you mean by that...?"

"Nothing deep, really. But...he's having such a nice conversation with Lady Alicia, and he's kind to everyone else too, like with Lady Carina. Wouldn't that mean you're not as special as you think?"

"What...?!" Mary's breath hitched. But before she could reply, Alicia spotted her and called out to her.

Just as usual, Alicia darted over towards Mary and embraced her. Carina smiled wryly as she watched this, and as for Adi... Mary observed fixedly as his rust-ringed pupils moved from Alicia over to her.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Ladyship," he said.

"N-No, it's okay..." Mary said, her voice sounding shrill.

Adi glanced at her curiously, realizing that something was wrong. A moment later, however, he frowned as Veltina got in between the two of them and said that she and Mary had just been talking about him. Hearing that a girl he wasn't fond of had spoken about him with Mary caused his expression to sour even further. "You were talking about me?"

"Yes," Veltina affirmed. "We discussed how very kind and considerate you are!"

"Kind? Me?"

"That's right. I heard all about how you lent your jacket to Lady Carina. I knew you were just so nice and full of affection!"

“Affection? I don’t think that’s the case...”

Before Adi could say anything else, Alicia interjected. “Of course you are!” she exclaimed vigorously. The girl let go of Mary and puffed out her chest proudly. “You’re a very kind man, Adi!”

“You too, Alicia...? I’m really not such a virtuous person...”

“No, both you and Lady Mary are kind people,” Alicia insisted. “Ever since I first came to Karelia Academy, you’ve looked after me!” she pointed out, her eyes glittering as she recalled those times.

When she had been lost on her first day at the school, Mary and Adi had called out to her and helped her. When she had been ostracized and eaten her meals all by herself at the cafeteria, they’d sat with her.

In response to Alicia’s fervent speech, Veltina exclaimed, “I knew it! Lord Adi is so considerate!”

Even Carina seemed impressed as she listened. “Indeed, I’m not surprised to hear any of this.”

Looking the girls over awkwardly, Adi stepped closer to Mary and then leaned down to whisper into her ear. “What now, milady? It doesn’t seem like an appropriate moment to say, ‘Actually, we were trying to harass you in pursuit of ruin.’”

“Right... Let’s just leave this as a difference in perception of the events,” Mary decided. She had no means of stopping Alicia’s speech, and if she were to act recklessly now, the girl might hug her again.

With that, Mary covered both her ears with her hands. She wouldn’t hinder Alicia’s speech, but that didn’t mean she had to listen to it.

Alicia’s speech went on for a while, until finally a person arrived to collect her. Of course, it was Patrick. Apparently, he had something he needed from her, so upon his arrival, he clasped her arm, bid them all a polite farewell, and left with her in tow. It was a truly splendid pickup, and it was clear that he’d become used to it.

Carina and Veltina both left shortly after as well. (As a side note, at the time of her departure, Veltina had exclaimed, “We had a *very* nice chat just now, so I’ll leave it there for today!” But when Carina muttered something about delicious tea, the younger girl retreated at the speed of light.)

Once they had all gone, everything grew quiet. Finally calming down, Mary exhaled right about the same time as Adi. They both looked at each other.

“Well, milady. Should we head home?”

“Yes. But Adi...” Mary glanced up at him as she paused.

He turned to her inquisitively. His eyes had always been looking at her, even when she wasn’t aware of it. Yet nowadays, those same eyes often gazed at many other people too. When he’d been having that pleasant conversation with Alicia earlier, his eyes had the same soft look in them as they did now. Was there anything different in the way he looked at Mary?

The mist once again stirred within her. She gripped her chest, causing Adi to guess what was happening.

“My lady, are you...?”

“Adi... I’m special, aren’t I?” she whispered.

Adi blinked. He then looked her over appraisingly, and pressed his hand over hers, which was still resting on her chest. His large hand enveloped hers, and it almost felt like the mist inside of her was dissipating from the contact.

“Special... Yes, I think you’re very special,” he told her.

“Adi...”

“I’ve never heard of anyone having such strong indigestion before. There might be some special reason for it, indeed. Rather than House Albert’s personal doctor, perhaps we should summon a specialist to take a look at you,” he suggested, squeezing her hand.

Hearing him say the word “special” made her melt. It was enough to soothe her, and she felt relieved. Although...at the same time, it also didn’t quite ring true.

Even though this is about me, I still don’t understand what’s going on, Mary

thought with a frown.

Chapter 5

“Your Ladyship, you have another letter from House Barthez,” Adi said, presenting an envelope to Mary as he entered her room.

Mary, who’d been reading a book while holding a cup of tea in one hand, looked up. She thanked him, accepting the letter. Her name hadn’t been misspelled, but was instead neatly written across the envelope.

But what about the contents? Mary wondered. She couldn’t help but feel expectant. Since she was unable to discern why that may have been the case, her expression hardened as she opened it up.

Inside was a single piece of good-quality paper—it was an invitation to a party.

The letter was addressed to her, and this time the way her name had been written was slightly more audacious than before. Mary found herself smiling. She could easily picture Veltina arrogantly exclaiming, *“I bet you’re feeling hurt, aren’t you? Feel free to cry!”*

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, my lady.”

“Ah, pardon me. I’m not, but isn’t this cheap trick just adorable?”

“That’s an odd way to go about it,” Adi said as he looked at the letter. “If I had done this, I would’ve written ‘Drills’... No, never mind.”

“Don’t go acting like you’re in the clear, stopping yourself only *after* you say the word ‘drills’! That by itself is an out.”

“I would’ve addressed it to Drills Drillbert.”

“Don’t double down just because you have one out already! Wait... *I’m* the only one who had drills in this family! Don’t get the rest of the Alberts wrapped up in this!” Mary shrieked, then let out a breath and turned her attention back to the letter.

The invitation was for a party that would be occurring in a few days’ time at

House Barthez. There had already been one not all that long ago, but among high society, hosting several parties in succession was quite common. Parties were a symbol of prestige, and hosting them often was a means of showing off a family's standing and wealth. For the guests, receiving numerous invitations and keeping busy was also good for appearances.

Not to mention, many families were looking to make connections now that Karelia Academy and Elysiana Academy were holding a student exchange program. House Barthez was just one of many houses who held various social events, unwilling to let such an opportunity slip by. And those who were invited were often very happy to accept.

This particular invitation was likely much the same. Even if ulterior motives were at play, it was also possible that Luke wanted to apologize for Veltina's harassment of Mary.

"Since they invited us, it'd be rude of us not to attend. Don't you think so, Adi?"

"True... But I won't dance with Lady Veltina again," Adi said, looking fed up as he recalled what had happened last time.

Mary glanced down at her chest. When she'd seen him escorting Veltina, it had flared up her indigestion greatly. Looking back even further, her indigestion had begun on the first day of the exchange program, from the moment Veltina had embraced Adi.

Perhaps this had nothing to do with the condition of her stomach, but even so, Mary didn't feel very well. Remembering that scene caused the mist to swirl in her again.

But it seemed like Adi had no intentions of continuing this topic, and his sour expression went away as he looked at the datebook. Checking the appointed day of the party, he frowned thoughtfully.

"If you wish to have a new dress for the occasion, we might need to act quickly," he said.

"Indeed..."

"I'll arrange for a tailor." With that, Adi turned towards the door.

For some reason, the sight of his retreating back as he made to walk away from Mary caused her to feel uneasy. She reached out her hand, grasping the sleeve of his jacket to stop him.

Adi turned back towards her with surprise, his hair swaying from the movement. His eyes were wide as he looked at Mary. "What is it, milady?"

"N-No, nothing... Ah, I know. Let's get you a matching suit as well. There's that design we talked about earlier, right? If our outfits match, I bet it'll irritate Veltina."

"Right... But why are you still holding my jacket?" Adi inquired, after which Mary hurriedly let go of him.

Why was she so reluctant to part with him? She'd felt a sense of anxiety when her fingers had brushed against his clothes. But what was this anxiety aimed at?

Unable to even understand that much, Mary pressed her hand to her chest.

"Milady, could it be...?"

"Adi, I..." she trailed off, gazing at him helplessly.

Conjecturing what was going on, Adi placed his large, warm hand on her shoulder. He rubbed it gently, and Mary felt her unease and anxiety start melting away.

"It's all right, milady," he said. "We can have a light dinner tonight, and I'll ask the doctor to prescribe you some medicine. I'll also prepare you some tea that's effective against indigestion. You should drink it before going to sleep."

"I see you already have a complete counterplan against my indigestion. As expected," Mary replied, feeling relieved.



"I hope you didn't make another strange invitation this time, Adi," said Mary during House Barthez's party.

She was wearing a dark-blue gown with the neckline a little lower than usual. The thin shawl around her shoulders matched well with the evening atmosphere. Adi was also sporting a simple dark-blue suit, without too many accessories this time around. Together, the two of them looked like a newlywed

but very composed couple. The simplicity of their outfits made the red and blue plumes pinned to their chests stand out all the more.

Anyone would've been able to tell at a glance that they had a harmonious marriage.

That said, Mary was glaring at Adi spitefully, while he was pointedly turning his eyes away. Their outfits may have looked mature, but their conduct was the same as usual.

"You did make another, didn't you?" Mary urged.

"N-No... I haven't distributed them yet!"

"Why are you acting like that makes it any better?! You really *do* move fast, don't you?!" Mary exclaimed, though it was unclear whether her words were supposed to disparage him or praise him.

As she shouted, she rummaged through his jacket and snatched two envelopes from its pocket. One of them was the original invitation to the party. The other...

"To Drills Drillbert: Invitation to the Drills Resurrection Event"

Once again, the penmanship was stylish and gave the impression that the author had taken special care at the time of writing. It would've been a first-class invitation letter, if only one didn't notice its contents.

"You did it again... Wait, resurrection?!" Mary shrieked. "What are you even trying to do?!"

"D-Don't worry. It's only going to be a little get-together between me and the other servants. I just made this as a joke," Adi explained.

"Ah, good. If it's just going to be a peaceful drinking party, then there's no issue," Mary conceded, returning the letter to Adi. (But even if it *was* a joke, should she really have turned a blind eye to such boundlessly insolent behavior?)

Alas, Mary wasn't concerned about this for now. Adi sighed in relief and quickly put the invitation away. With that, the matter was dismissed.

"By the way, are Alicia and the others in attendance today?" he asked Mary

while surveying their surroundings. High on her guard, she did the same, keeping a lookout for Alicia.

“Yes!” said a voice from behind the pair, but they didn’t turn around, continuing to search through the crowd with their eyes.

“I’m sure she would’ve been invited as well,” Mary told Adi. “Her attention is a nuisance to me, so let’s just give our salutations to the hosts and call it a night.”

The voice behind them spoke up again. “Oh, are you going home early today, Lady Mary?”

“That’s right,” Adi responded. “Milady’s been having terrible indigestion, after all.”

“Hee hee, I see! Lady Mary should be taking it easy right now!”

“It’s because I’m so exhausted from being lionized by that girl,” Mary asserted. “And by the way, Adi...” she added, still not turning around. Adi also remained still, but surmising what she was trying to say, he nodded in agreement. They were both facing forward, and therefore only searching through the crowd ahead of them while stubbornly refusing to look behind.

However, realizing that this conduct was reaching its limit, they sighed in unison, as if to say, *“It’s about time we acknowledge her.”* And so Mary and Adi slowly turned around at the same time and came face-to-face with Alicia.

The girl’s pale-blue dress emphasized the beauty of her golden-thread hair. When their eyes met, she grinned sweetly and offered them a sophisticated greeting. “Lady Mary, Adi! Good evening!” she said, her smile as bright as the sun.

“Why are you here?! When did you even *get* here?! Don’t just nonchalantly join our conversation!” Mary screeched, which of course was entirely ineffective.

Adi sighed as he watched the girls. “Good evening, Alicia. How unusual for you not to embrace milady.”

“Tee hee! That’s because Lady Mary must be careful with her body right now!

Oh, you mustn't get cold!"

"What are you talking about? H-Hey...! Stop wrapping your stole around my stomach! Your peasant stench is going to rub off on me!"

Alicia was beaming while trying to envelop Mary's abdomen with her stole, while Mary shook it off irritably. But Alicia just started wrapping it around her again... It seemed like there'd be no resolution to this anytime soon.

Mary openly glared at Alicia, having no clue why the girl was so insistent about keeping her abdomen warm. Yet Alicia's hands didn't stop, and in fact the girl rubbed Mary's stomach while suppressing a giggle.

"If you're worried about my indigestion, it's a bit higher than that," Mary pointed out.

"Tee hee! True!"

"Creepy little girl." Mary let out a huff and distanced herself from Alicia, instead hugging Adi's arm. "Let's just disregard this country hick, Adi," she appealed, tugging on his arm lightly as she began walking away.

However, Adi didn't budge. Mary glanced at him in confusion, and realized that he was staring at something in the distance with a strained smile.

Looking in the same direction, Mary spotted Veltina making her way towards them. The younger girl was clad in an extravagant red dress and had a ribbon of the same shade upon her head. With a smile, she waved in their direction while walking over.

Indeed, she was wearing a red dress and a red ribbon. One didn't need to think too deeply to guess who she was being conscious of. Moreover, Luke, who was following after her, was wearing a gray suit which didn't match her outfit at all.

Despite the fact that they were engaged, they didn't have any sort of matching decorations, and Veltina had dressed herself in red from head to toe.

"She's being really blatant," Mary murmured to herself with a frown.

"Greetings, everyone!" Veltina called out. "Thank you for attending tonight, Lord Adi."

“Thank you for inviting me...”

“What a lovely dress that is, Veltina.” Mary was smiling stiffly as she complimented the girl, who continued to have eyes only for Adi.

Veltina smiled elegantly in response, and spun the hem of her dress to show it off. The rust-colored fabric swayed, and it was clear the garment had been arranged specifically for tonight. Even from a distance, one could tell that the cloth was of supreme quality, and the way it moved was gentle and beautiful.

It looked remarkably similar to Adi’s hair.

“I’m honored to receive your compliments. This is my favorite color, and I think it suits me best. Right?” Veltina prompted, seeking agreement...from Adi. Her attitude was borderline crude at this point.

Knowing what she was trying to do, Adi adopted a severe expression. “Right... It does suit you.” The hollow sound of his voice made it clear that he was just speaking for politeness’s sake.

But Veltina either didn’t notice that or was satisfied with it regardless, for she joyously replied with, “Exactly!” She then stepped closer and hugged his arm.

“Lady Veltina, please let go of me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just so happy to hear your praise...” she said, hurriedly releasing Adi’s arm. But she didn’t step away from him, remaining close enough that she could touch him again when there was an opening.

Adi must’ve noticed as much, since he frowned in concern. But given that the girl had apologized, he couldn’t keep scolding her. “Please be more careful,” he told her, which was the most he could say at that moment.

He likely wanted to raise the white flag of surrender. Mary could practically hear him silently appealing, *“Enough of this.”*

Finding this a hard sight to stomach, she let out a sigh and was about to reproach the girl herself. But before she could do that, Alicia stepped forward protectively. Golden locks of hair fluttered in front of Mary’s eyes.

“What are you doing?” Alicia demanded, her voice sounding uncharacteristically wrathful and stern. “Don’t you think it’s rude to hug people

without their permission?”

“Adi, did you bring a mirror with you?” Mary inquired. “I’d like to point it at this peasant.”

“Also, Lady Mary and Adi are married! I won’t allow you to get in their way.”

“What position do you think you hold with me, exactly?”

Alicia was rebuking Veltina in an almost hostile manner. (She was also ignoring Mary’s regular interruptions, but that was nothing new.)

But right now, Mary knew it wasn’t Alicia whom she should be concerned about, so she turned to face Veltina. Before she could say anything, however, the younger girl spoke up first.

“It’s not like I’m bothering him. The other day, he even danced with me.”

“That’s because he’s a kind man. He was just humoring you,” said Alicia.

“Indeed, Lord Adi’s very kind to everyone. He’s a wonderful person! That’s why you’ll dance with me again, right, Lord Adi?” Veltina asked him.

Adi was about to reject her, but Alicia was first to speak. “No, he won’t!” she exclaimed loudly. Veltina’s attitude must’ve really been getting to her, as she seemed oblivious to their surroundings now.

Not one to back down, Veltina cast Alicia a sharp glare. “I was asking Lord Adi. Why are you replying in his name, Lady Alicia?”

“I won’t let you take advantage of his kindness!”

“With all due respect, even if you *are* a princess, this still has nothing to do with you. In fact, I don’t think it’s a good look for a princess to be showing favor to one specific noble house.”

“That’s irrelevant! I may be a princess, but the fact that I love Lady Mary and Adi comes first!” Alicia declared.

Mary’s shoulders jolted. Alicia had just said that she loved Adi. Of course, she’d also said Mary’s name, but...even though Mary had heard it, she wasn’t processing those words. The only part that had entered her brain was Alicia saying, “*I love Adi!*” and it rang in her ears over and over.

Why had Mary's mind clipped Alicia's statement in such a malicious way? Especially when Alicia was quarreling for their sakes.

Mary understood what was happening, and she knew she should've felt thankful. But instead, she felt irritation wash over her, and the mist rose up in her heart again.

Why now? Mary asked herself, pressing a hand to her chest. The sensation felt worse than ever before, and she was even having palpitations.

"Lady Alicia, are you really admitting that you have a personal attachment to them despite being the princess?" Veltina scoffed. "If you go around saying such things so lightly, people might misunderstand."

"I'm not saying it lightly. Lady Mary and Adi are special!"

"Special...? In that case, Lord Adi is special to *me*!" Veltina exclaimed, grabbing Adi's arm. It was a childlike attempt to appeal that Adi was hers.

Alicia, spurred by the sight, grasped Adi's other arm to contend with her.

With two young ladies pulling on him from either side, Adi seemed like a stuffed toy that a pair of children were fighting over. It didn't look like the scene of a love affair in the slightest. In fact, Adi just looked fed up. "Calm down," he admonished them, sounding exhausted.

Mary wanted to throw him a lifeline, and reached out her hand. But she stopped halfway, for she didn't know where to put her hand with the other two girls holding on to both his arms. She'd been pushed aside by Veltina and Alicia alike, and the distance between her and Adi had grown, even though he should've been beside her.

Mary found herself having an absurd thought: *They're going to take him from me.*

The image of Adi and Alicia happily chatting surfaced in her mind: the way he'd been smiling serenely while talking to Alicia. He'd had a gentle look in his eyes back then and was smiling from the bottom of his heart.

That was an expression he'd only ever shown to Mary before. Only *she* had seen it on him. But on that day, Mary had seen it from a distance, aimed at

someone else, and the frustration she felt at that moment filled her heart.

“S-Special...?” Mary uttered.

“Lady Mary?”

“Special? Love? Kind? Stop just saying these things for your own convenience! Don’t act as if you know anything! And stop getting in our way! I’ve had enough of all of you!” Mary shouted out of nowhere.

The silence that came afterwards almost made it seem like there hadn’t even been a quarrel occurring just seconds ago. Mary could still hear the venue’s music and idle background chatter, but it felt like the sounds were reaching her from another world.

The only sound that finally got through to her was Adi’s quiet voice. “My lady...?”

Mary gasped and clasped her hand over her mouth. What had she just said?

Alicia’s eyes were wide, as Mary’s anger just now had sounded completely different from usual. Seeing the other girl like that, Mary opened her mouth to apologize...but swallowed her words when she noticed Alicia was still holding on to Adi. She had a feeling that any attempts at an apology would just turn into more abusive language.

“What’s wrong, milady...?”

“N-Nothing, I’m fine. I don’t even know why I raised my voice like that... I’d like to be alone for a bit so I can calm down...” With that, Mary turned on her heels and walked away.

Behind her, she could hear Adi and Alicia calling after her, but her feet wouldn’t stop. The frustration within urged her to make an escape, and she rushed towards House Barthez’s garden.

Escaping the brightness of the party’s venue, Mary walked into House Barthez’s garden by herself. The evening breeze was weaving through the gorgeous flowers, but right now, she wasn’t in the mind to appreciate it.



One chair had been left outside, and Mary stopped in front of it. Perhaps the gardener had forgotten to take it away—or had forgotten its existence altogether, judging by its old and worn-out appearance. It definitely wasn't something a noble lady ought to use, but Mary briefly brushed some of the dirt off and sat down upon it.

She heard a high-pitched sound and couldn't tell if it was the chair creaking or a shriek resounding inside her chest from the engulfing mist. But having such thoughts wasn't like her, and Mary sighed. A moment later, a droplet landed on the back of her hand, causing her eyes to widen. "Is that drool?!" she exclaimed in disbelief, wiping at the corner of her mouth in a fluster.

Even as she did so, however, more droplets slid down her face and over her hand. Noticing this, Mary moved her fingers to trace her cheeks, and finally the corners of her eyes.

I'm crying... But why?

The tears weren't her only source of confusion. Why had she screamed at Alicia like that? Why had her indigestion flared up so badly? And what was with this irritation and unease she was feeling? Her mind was spinning.

Unable to control her emotions, Mary let out another breath. Deciding she'd better be getting back, she was about to stand up, when the sound of footsteps nearby made her pause. She looked over her shoulder, her silver locks fluttering. Someone was heading towards her.

"Adi...?" Mary asked, uttering her spouse's name at the unidentifiable silhouette.

However, as the person drew closer, she did not see a man with rust-colored hair—instead, his was indigo. It was Patrick.

He looked around, and when he noticed Mary, his expression relaxed with relief as he walked over to her. He was slightly out of breath, suggesting he'd been running around the garden in search of her.

So it's not Adi... Mary murmured inwardly. In that case, where was he right now? Who was he with? These thoughts made her chest ache, and though she had wiped her tears, her vision was once again turning blurry.

“Patrick...”

“Are you all right, Mary?”

“If I look all right to you, you should probably go see a doctor.”

“Ah, you seem fine,” Patrick decided, arbitrarily drawing his own conclusions as he stood facing Mary. How cruel, indeed. But despite his assumption, Patrick took a handkerchief from inside his jacket and held it out to her. “I was chasing Alicia down, and I was shocked to discover her arguing with Miss Veltina. But right as I was about to step in, you ran off, so...”

“You followed me, huh?” Mary asked, wiping her eyes with the handkerchief.

Patrick nodded. He then explained to Mary that Adi had followed her immediately after her departure, which made her feel relieved. It meant that Adi was still prioritizing her.

“Thank goodness...” she murmured. But her relief was short-lived, for soon enough she found a new source of anxiety: If what Patrick had said was true, then why wasn’t Adi here right now?

Patrick must’ve guessed her thoughts from her expression, for he told her that he had stopped Adi. “I said that I’d go after you, and told him to settle the matter between those two.”

“I see... Thank you, Patrick.”

“It sure is a struggle, having a friend who cares about you,” he said with a sigh.

Mary smiled wryly. After a beat, she replied with, “That’s true. I also have a sprightly friend who kicks up a fuss when she tries to look after me, so I can relate.”

Knowing that she meant Alicia, Patrick turned away. “Let’s just say we’re in the same boat,” he said, attempting to propose a humble compromise. This implied he was aware of his spouse’s exuberance as well as her idea of caring for someone.

Normally, Mary would’ve protested, shrieking about how Alicia definitely didn’t treat them in the same way, but for tonight, she settled for letting it pass

with a small smile.

Her heart did feel a little calmer after speaking with Patrick and learning that Adi had wanted to follow her. But even so, the mist was still within her, causing her to sigh.

Patrick sensed the distraught emotions behind her actions and cast Mary a worried glance.

“I’m okay. I’m just in a bit of pain,” she told him.

“I see...”

“Indigestion sure is bothersome.” Mary rubbed her chest, feeling the mist whirling inside.

Patrick’s expression softened, and he smiled slightly. “Indigestion, you say...? How about tonight, at least, you speak about it honestly?”

“About what?”

“The truth behind this indigestion that’s been tormenting you so much.”

At his words, Mary cast her eyes down at her chest. The mist swirled within her, and it even felt suffocating. The unease made her want to get up and run off somewhere, but she had no idea where she was supposed to go. Her stomach felt heavy.

The truth behind her indigestion... As Mary considered this, Patrick spoke up in an admonishing tone of voice.

“I know that you find it difficult to talk things out with others, Mary. I’m the same.”

“That’s true. I can’t really talk to people much...” she whispered, clutching her chest tightly.

Patrick exhaled, as though he could sympathize with the stifling sensation she was feeling. “Jealousy isn’t something you can just rashly bring up with others, right?”

“Having indigestion from overeating is embarrassing, so I can’t just come out and say it, right?”

They'd both spoken at the same time, and then turned to look at each other while murmuring, "Huh?"

Mary was surprised, but Patrick looked astonished. "Indigestion?" he echoed.

"Yes. I've eaten too many croquettes at the restaurant. As a noble lady, that's very embarrassing for me. But what did you mean by jealousy, Patrick? Who's jealous of whom?"

"Wait... Are you being serious right now?"

"Of course. Basically, I have an upset stomach. But please, what did you mean earlier?" Mary inquired, question marks floating by her head.

Patrick let out a colossal sigh. It was so strong, in fact, that it almost blew away all of the question marks around Mary. He even pressed his hand to his forehead.

His behavior was making Mary feel a rising discomfort. *Is it related to me...?* she wondered, rubbing at the nape of her neck where Adi had bitten her in the past. "Patrick, could it be that you were talking about me?"

"Mary, you're so... No, but if I think about it, you didn't even have a first love experience or anything like that, and you didn't realize anything until after your marriage. So I *guess* it makes sense... Let's just leave that there."

"Yes, do that. Now, what's this about me and jealousy?" Mary prompted.

Patrick looked exasperated, yet he smiled at the same time. It wasn't the smile of the beloved Prince Charming, but Mary had long since grown used to seeing this expression on him.

"Mary, you're jealous of the other girls who are around Adi. That pain and discomfort you feel in your chest isn't because of indigestion; it's all because of jealousy. It is categorically, positively, indubitably *not* indigestion."

"I see you're completely dismissing that possibility... But jealousy? I mean, I'm married to Adi. And he's with me because he loves me," Mary proclaimed, showing not an ounce of embarrassment or awkwardness.

It was the truth—Adi was devoted to her and adored her just the same as he had before their marriage. Mary could proudly claim that she was special to him

and that he loved her. She was different from Luke, who felt jealous that his fiancée's heart belonged to someone else.

For these reasons, Mary explained, she had no reason to be jealous.

However, Patrick shook his head, countering that this wasn't the case. The way he spoke sounded almost wistful. "Even if you're married to someone and know they have feelings for you, you can still become jealous."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah... Actually, there's something I want to talk to you about," Patrick said, leaning back against a tree. The wind fluttered his hair lightly, making him look beautiful yet masculine at the same time. The darkness of the night deepened the color of his hair and eyes, and surely any girl's heart would've throbbed at the sight.

But as usual, Mary felt no such thing, and only waited for his next words.

"To be honest with you, I've also been feeling jealous lately," Patrick admitted. "No, actually... I've been jealous for a long time. From the very beginning."

"You? Really?" Mary asked with surprise.

Patrick had perfect conduct and was accomplished in both academics and sports, and everyone else yearned after him. All the women wished for a chance to be escorted by him, while all the men wished to become like him. He was like a symbol of admiration.

Even Mary, who'd canceled her engagement with him to marry Adi, could admit that—romantic feelings aside—there was no better marriage candidate around than Patrick. Before his marriage with Princess Alicia, he'd already been known as Prince Charming among high society.

To think that someone like him could be jealous... But he didn't seem like he was lying, so Mary asked him whom he felt jealous towards. Jealousy wasn't something one could do alone.

"You," Patrick responded openly.

Mary blinked several times. But there was nobody else in the garden except

for her and Patrick, so...

“Me...? Why would you be jealous of me, Patrick?”

“Because Alicia’s always looking for you and running at you.”

“‘Running’ is putting it lightly, considering that girl’s velocity, but I’ll ignore that for now. So?”

“So that’s why I’m jealous of you. Every time I see Alicia running to you, I find myself thinking that she should just stay by my side, or wondering if she prefers you over me...” Perhaps embarrassed to be voicing his feelings, Patrick looked the other way with cheeks flushed.

It must’ve been difficult for him to be perceived at that moment. But Mary continued staring at him, and murmured, “I see...” under her breath.

Each time Alicia found Mary and tackle-hugged her, Patrick always calmly followed after the girl. Sometimes he’d be smiling in amusement, other times he’d gently scold her. He did seem troubled, but nothing about his expression or gait had ever suggested that he was feeling *jealous*.

When Mary pointed that out, Patrick replied while continuing to look to the side. “I was hiding it.” In contrast to his usually cool tone of voice, he sounded uncharacteristically sulky. “I know that Alicia sees you and Adi as her friends and me as her romantic partner. But even so...I still feel jealous,” he revealed with embarrassment, scratching the back of his head.

His eyes wandered over to Mary once again. They were not rust-colored, but rather indigo. No matter how much he looked at her, Mary’s heart didn’t stir, but his gaze did ease the tightness in her chest.

“When I met Alicia, it was the first time I became fixated on a single person. I turned unreasonably jealous, and realized how possessive I am. I found myself thinking that, in the end, I am just a man after all.”

“Just a man? Patrick, that’s ridiculous...”

“That’s what everyone around me says. But I *am* just a man... And it’s the same for you, Mary.”

“Me?”

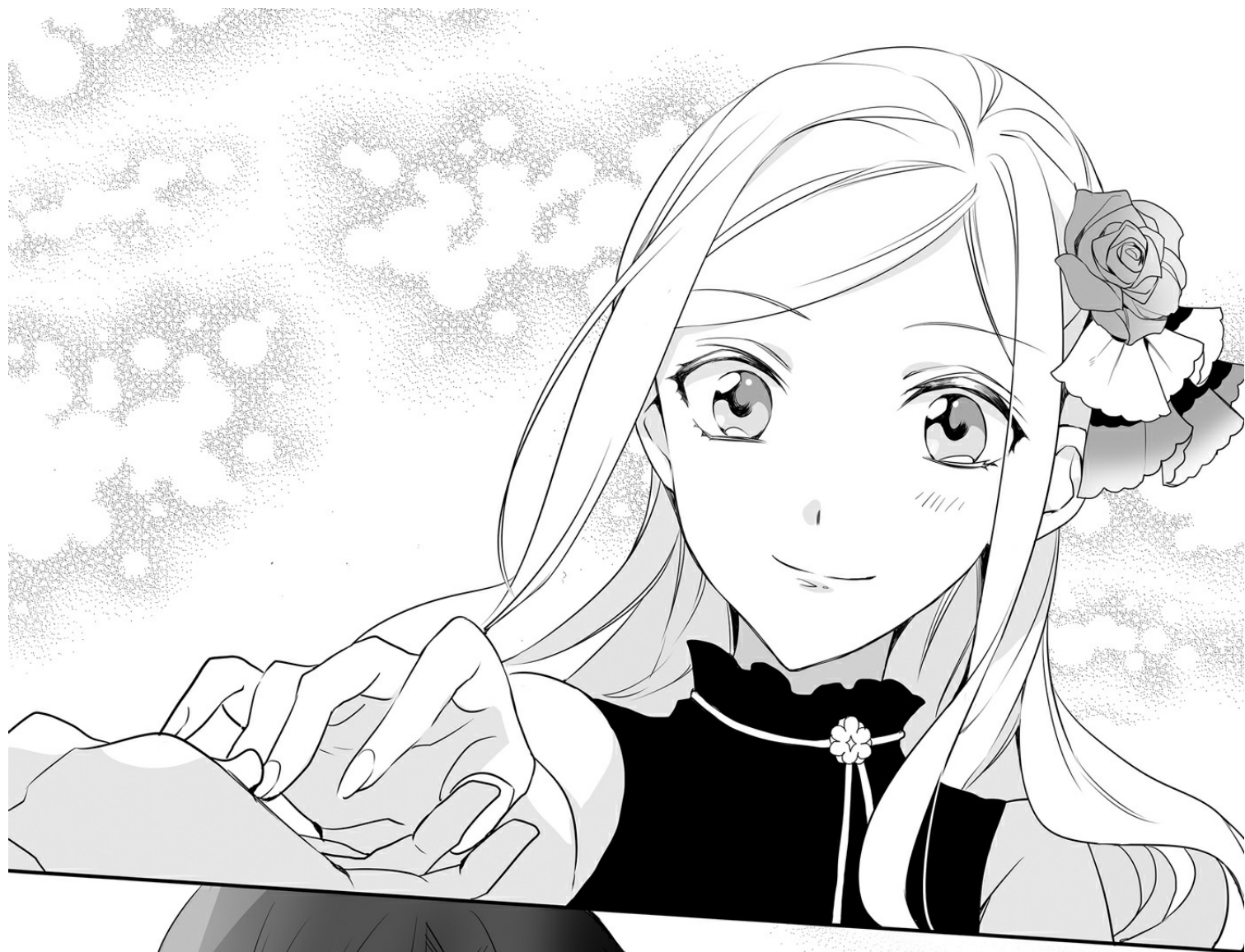
Mary looked down at her chest. *“Whatever others might say, I’m just a man.”* Such were Patrick’s words. So in her case, though the others might say she was the daughter of House Albert, or an eccentric, or whatever else, at the end of the day, she was just a girl in love with her partner. Like anyone else, she could be possessive and feel a deep sense of jealousy.

The moment she realized it for herself, the mist that had been swirling inside of her swept over to her heart. It was as if this feeling, which had previously wandered inside of her with nowhere to go, gently converged into shape once it had been identified as “jealousy.”

So this is what it means to come to terms with something, Mary thought with a deep inhale. “Yes... You’re right. I was feeling jealous too. Because there’ve been more people around me, there’ve also been more people around Adi. I didn’t like seeing others getting so close to him. I didn’t like seeing others speaking with him. I couldn’t accept that his eyes were looking at someone other than me.”

As Mary explained this mist within her called jealousy, Patrick smiled wryly and nodded. Then, he held his hand out towards her. “You should tell that directly to Adi instead of me.”

Knowing he meant to imply that it was time for them to go back, Mary also nodded and placed her hand in his.



Patrick pulled lightly, causing Mary to stand up. The high-pitched sound that followed was the creaking of the chair. This time, Mary was certain of it.

“Mary, I’ve escorted you countless times in the past. But this is the first time I’ve thought from the bottom of my heart that I want to escort *you*.” Patrick was smiling wryly as he spoke, and Mary looked up at him.

She couldn’t sense an ounce of romantic love in his eyes, which were fixed upon her. No matter whom she was with or who gazed at her, he never felt jealous over her. Moreover, the reason he was escorting her now was to bring her to Adi. His hand would guide her there.

Thinking as much, Mary squeezed his hand. It was a silent appeal for him not to let go...for now, at least.

“This is also the first time I’ve truly wanted to be escorted by you, Patrick,” Mary told him with a similar smile, to which he nodded and slowly began walking.

Gentle music was flowing through the venue, and many people engaged in idle chatter. Mary noticed one particular small crowd, and started heading towards it with Patrick escorting her.

Veltina’s cronies were standing in a circle, and when Mary approached, the girls’ expressions soured awkwardly as they stepped aside. Standing in the middle was Adi, but his back was turned to Mary and Patrick, so he still hadn’t noticed their arrival.

“Adi...” Mary murmured, trying to step closer to him. But the sight of Veltina standing in front of him made her freeze in her tracks.

The two of them were looking at each other. Adi’s rust-colored eyes were fixed on Veltina. The scene made Mary’s chest stir painfully. Knowing it was due to jealousy made her want to call out to him. If she were to say his name and he looked at her, the mist in her heart should vanish.

But before she could do that, Adi began speaking.

“The reason I am kind to everyone is that everyone is kind to *milady*. If it

weren't for that, I wouldn't bother. The reason I took your hand and danced with you, Lady Veltina, was also because milady permitted it, and told me to do so." Adi's voice sounded cool and detached. He was simply stating the facts without looking out for the other person's feelings. Mary had never heard him sound like this before.

What does his expression look like right now, when he's speaking in such a tone? she wondered. But she just couldn't imagine it, despite the fact that she had no trouble picturing his face. What she saw in her mind, however, were his usual expressions: a dry smile when he was troubled, an occasional seriousness when he was acting as the servant, and the tender, affectionate smile he'd direct at her.

No matter how much Mary searched through her memories, she couldn't recall a single time when she'd seen Adi reject someone this coldly.

Yet his refusal didn't seem to get through to Veltina. Or perhaps because she knew she was being rejected, she grew even more stubborn as she interjected with a shout of, "But still!" She hadn't noticed Mary's arrival, and she was looking at Adi with desperation. Her brows were slanted down remorsefully, and she seemed deeply upset. Normally, such an expression would've caused Adi to gently soothe someone. "Lord Adi, from the very beginning, I've always..."

"I don't care how you feel about me. Even if you've loved me since before you met me, the one and only person whom I love is my lady."

"But..."

"I love the person who's been with me all this time, and with whom I've vowed to be together forever: Lady Mary Albert."

Veltina hesitated at Adi's clear declaration. After a moment, unable to bear it any longer, she turned on her heel and ran off. Her behavior was different from her usual high-handed retreats. It was obvious that she was hurt, that staying here any longer would cause her added suffering, and that she knew there was nothing more she could do.

For once, her cronies seemed at a loss as to whether they should follow her or not, but eventually they dispersed one after another. Mary had no idea if they

intended to chase after Veltina, or perhaps fetch Luke or her relatives. Or, like *Heart High's* Mary's cronies, maybe they'd decided to give up on their leader after seeing things go south for her.

What would happen next was out of Mary's hands. Naturally, however, she had no intention of going after Veltina herself.

"Hey, Adi..." she murmured, and Adi turned to face her.

He looked surprised to see her, but there was a hint of relief in his face too. "Oh dear... How much of that did you hear?" he asked with embarrassment, and his expression was one Mary was familiar with.

As Adi approached, Patrick said, "My escorting ends here," while stepping away from Mary. She was about to thank him, but the words never left her mouth, because just as he let go of her, another hand grasped hers.

It was a large, warm hand, which enveloped hers almost possessively. Mary's gaze followed it as if it were beckoning her. Slowly, that masculine hand pulled her closer, and soon enough, Adi's lips pressed against her fingertips. Then, he kissed the back of her hand, causing Mary's cheeks to flush.

Thoughts of Veltina, and even Mary's gratitude to Patrick for escorting her here, both disappeared under the warmth spreading through her hand.

"I'm sorry that I didn't follow you," Adi told her.

"It's fine. Patrick went after me," Mary replied, wanting to reassure him.

However, Adi didn't take her words as reassurance at all, and he frowned discontentedly. "Please don't say that it's fine for some other man to be escorting you." He must've been jealous.

Finding his sulky expression endearing, Mary smiled lightly. "Then I shall rectify my statement: I had to put up with that Patrick."

"If the other ladies hear you say that, their resentment might pierce right through you."

"True. But what can I do? I'm just not satisfied unless it's you, Adi," Mary said, as if it were obvious.

Adi smiled happily. He wanted to apologize to her again, but unable to find

the words, he instead placed another kiss on the back of her hand. It seemed his jealousy had subsided. Patrick—who certainly deserved some thanks—had caused Adi to feel envious, and a few simple words from Mary were enough to make that envy vanish. What an egotistical thing jealousy was, indeed. But Mary also felt that selfish emotion in her heart, and therefore it was no wonder it could so easily manipulate them.

“Adi, my chest has been aching for a while now.”

“Is it your indigestion?” he asked. “Let’s call for a doctor.”

“No, it wasn’t indigestion.”

Having finally understood her situation, Mary grasped both of Adi’s hands. (As a side note, Patrick was witnessing these events from the side and murmured, “So even Adi brought up indigestion...?” with an exasperated sigh. But then Alicia, who had surmised something or other, clasped his arm. His expression softened, and both of them walked away hand in hand.)

Mary had no idea that anyone had been watching them, nor that the audience had left. She placed Adi’s hand on her cheek, pressing it closer to coax him. Realizing what she wanted, he cupped her face in his hand. His thumb brushed against the corner of her eye when he noticed the traces of tears that remained there.

“Adi... I was jealous,” Mary admitted.

“You? Why? Of whom?” he inquired in confusion.

Mary’s shoulders drooped at his questions. *He doesn’t even know...* she thought, resentment rising up in her throat. *I see, so this is how it feels to want to bite someone.*

“There’s no way I’d feel jealous over anyone else but you, hmm?”

“Me...?” Adi questioned.

“Yes. I’ve been feeling jealous because you’re so kind to everyone. I hated seeing other women touch you. I wanted you to look only at me. But that’s okay, since now I know the reason you’re kind to everyone is because they’re kind to me. It’s all been for my sake,” Mary said, rubbing his hand on her cheek

and closing her eyes at how pleasant it felt.

Adi treated other girls with kindness because those girls were kind to Mary. How simpleminded of her, to have felt jealous over seeing something like that. Now, she just found it laughable. Entranced by the feeling of the moment, she slowly opened her eyes to see...

“You were jealous...over *me*...?”

...that Adi’s cheeks were even redder than his hair or eyes.

“What kind of expression are you even pulling right now, Adi?”

“Well, I just... I mean, you felt like that over me...? I’ve always been the jealous one, so...I should be the only one feeling that way...” Adi mumbled incoherently.

He’d always had feelings for her, yet had almost given up because of their rank difference, but in the end, he hadn’t been able to do that and had single-mindedly pursued her. He’d felt jealous over men he thought he couldn’t compete against, so not even in his wildest dreams had he expected to hear that *Mary* felt jealous over *him*.



Adi had no idea whether to feel happy or not, or what he should even do with himself. In fact, it seemed like he still hadn't fully processed it, and Mary giggled at him.

"My, didn't you know? Anyone, including the daughter of House Albert, can feel jealous," Mary proclaimed proudly, as if she'd known this all along.

Adi blinked, and finally smiled serenely. His hand slid down Mary's cheek and rested against her shoulder. "I'm sorry to have made you feel that way."

"Honestly! And who was it that came up with this indigestion idea, huh? You quack!"

"I'm truly very sorry about that too. I shall close down my medical practice," Adi said by way of apology for the misdiagnosis.

Mary's smile widened; she rested her forehead against his chest. It was her way of saying that while she blamed him verbally, she wasn't actually angry.

Picking up on this, he hugged her. "I vow that I'll never make you feel jealous over me again. I will look only at you."

"And I'll only look at you, Adi. Anyway, feeling jealousy despite being mutually in love is just a waste of time. If we have so much free time to run around feeling jealous over each other, we might as well put it to better use and spend it together instead," Mary declared.

"Put it to better use..." Adi echoed quietly. But he didn't say any more, as Mary once again pressed her forehead to his chest.

"Yes, that's right," she said, feeling his arms close around her waist.

As Adi embraced her tightly, one of his hands carded through her silver-thread hair. Sometimes he entwined the locks around his fingers, and at others, his hand smoothly glided through them.

Comforted by the sensation, Mary closed her eyes. The jealousy that had been gripping her so tightly this whole time was now completely gone, and affection was the only thing that filled her heart.

Chapter 6

A few days after House Barthez's party, Mary made a sincere announcement: "I was jealous of you all."

The exchange program would end tomorrow at long last, so she had decided to host a tea party in House Albert's gardens. Only her friends were invited, and though the scope of this farewell party was much smaller than the event held at the academy, it was also much warmer.

Mary made her proclamation during said tea party, causing everyone gathered to turn to her with surprise.

"You were jealous of us?" asked Carina—whose conversation about her footstool had frozen everyone in place earlier—as she elegantly sipped her tea.

Margaret, who was sitting beside Carina, was also shocked as she looked at Mary. "Why is that, Lady Mary?"

"I was jealous when I saw Adi acting kindly towards all of you," Mary explained. "How embarrassing..."

"My, I see. To have Lady Mary become jealous of us... What a wonderful—ah, I mean, troublesome feeling."

"Margaret, I'd rather you just be honest."

"To have the very daughter of House Albert herself feel jealous because of me is such a wonderful sensation! For a noblewoman, it's like a blessing!"

"Go again, but this time I want the sugarcoated version," Mary demanded.

"My apologies for not noticing your sensitivities sooner, Lady Mary..."

"And now for your real feelings?"

"I wouldn't mind if you felt jealous of me some more. Jealousy makes a woman beautiful, after all! Oho ho ho!" Margaret laughed, and Mary's shoulders sagged at this predictable response. Judging by Margaret's words, she intended to use the first-class jealousy of the daughter of House Albert as

sustenance while bringing her quarry, Bernard, down. Even jealousy was no more than fuel for her ambition.

Carina also laughed, amused by Margaret's typical self. She didn't seem to mind that Mary had felt jealous because of her.

One of the girls teased her, while the other laughed about it. Such characteristic reactions to Mary's announcement, indeed! This was their way of telling her, "*There's nothing to worry about.*"

Meanwhile, Parfette tearfully cried out, "Lady Maaary...!" She'd been in tears and trembling since the tea party had begun. She quivered while discussing the memories they'd made during the program and their future plans, and she quivered some more while sneakily taking Gainas's serving of the cake for herself. (Of course, Gainas, who was sitting next to Parfette, noticed what she had done. He looked incredibly happy to have his cake stolen like that. His expression was sweeter than the cake itself.)

Mary's announcement made Parfette shudder even more, and unable to bear it, she called out sorrowfully. "Lady Mary, I also know how painful it is to endure feelings of jealousy, thanks to a certain someone. Passing your days feeling nothing but unease and pain in your heart... I know it too well, because of a certain someone... A certain *someone*...!"

"Oof... A direct attack disguised as a remote attack really hurts... I'm sorry, Parfette. I truly regret it," Gainas said, passing a slice of tart over to her as a way of asking for forgiveness.

Parfette smiled with satisfaction and accepted the dessert, but when she noticed Gainas's smile as he looked at her, she quickly puffed out her cheeks. Despite her expression, however, she showed no inclination of letting go of the tart.

Mary found herself smiling at yet another commonplace scene. Only her eyes were sharp as she directed her attention to Alicia, who was sitting next to her.

"Let's leave the topic of my jealousy aside for now. Alicia, why have you been poking me in the stomach this whole time? Depending on your reason, this tea party could change into a mudslinging contest."

“I was convinced you were pregnant, Lady Mary,” she responded.

“*Huh?!* ” Mary huffed, flicking Alicia’s forehead.

But the girl continued poking her stomach, looking quite disappointed to boot. Mary let out a sigh. She’d found Alicia’s blabbering difficult to make sense of ever since they’d first met, but she truly couldn’t grasp what the girl had thought up this time.

“I’m the daughter of House Albert, you know?” Mary pointed out. “We have a flawless system in place at home, to the point that the doctor would notice way before me if that were really the case.”

“Is that why you thought it was indigestion...?” Alicia asked.

“If you’ve got any complaints, direct them to the quack,” Mary responded huffily, while Adi cleared his throat upon realizing she was referring to him.

Those who hadn’t been present at the party murmured among themselves, surmising the events and whom Mary had meant. Adi’s face was turning redder the longer this went on, but Mary had no plans of throwing him a life jacket as she simply smiled.

However, it was true that House Albert’s servants would’ve been the first to notice had Mary begun to show such symptoms, and the doctor would’ve been the one to inform her even before she realized it herself. After all, Mary was the daughter of House Albert (even if the way everyone treated her left some room for doubt about that), so if she had actually gotten pregnant, it would’ve been news large enough to spread nationwide.

In reality, the people of House Albert had guessed right away that Mary’s symptoms were jealousy, and decided to let things play out as another part of a beautiful young lady’s growth.

As a side note, once Mary had understood what she was experiencing, she just couldn’t keep the news to herself and went around the mansion telling everyone, “I love Adi too much, so I was feeling jealous!” Everyone was more than happy to listen along...except for Adi, who’d rush in moments later, shrieking over the fact that his spouse was once again spreading lovey-dovey talk about them.

Hearing Mary's explanation, Patrick murmured, "I see..." He then turned to glance at Alicia next to him. "So that's why you stopped embracing Mary."

"Yes," Alicia confirmed. "If Lady Mary had a baby in her belly, I thought it best to be careful."

As the girl continued dejectedly poking Mary's abdomen, Patrick visibly brightened, glad to have finally gotten some answers. He even said, "I was worried that your legs were hurting or something along those lines," causing Mary to cast him a glare.

"Perhaps we could use this opportunity to put a stop to you hugging milady or kidnapping her?" Adi proposed. "In fact, I implore you. Don't take my lady away from me!"

"That's an impossible ask, Adi!"

"How imposingly assertive...!" Adi cried mournfully. He wrapped his arm around Mary's waist, which was his way of asserting himself as well.

Alicia's finger, which had been repeatedly prodding Mary's stomach, now began poking Adi's hand. Mary sighed over this modest battle, but then she thought of something and glanced at Patrick. "If Alicia's going to take me from Adi, maybe I should try taking Patrick for myself."

"What?! Lady Mary, you mustn't!" Alicia shouted, determined not to let such a thing happen.

But Mary paid this no heed, and in fact only smirked as if she were amused by Alicia's panic. "Come on, isn't it fine? Just for a little bit."

"No! I won't hand Lord Patrick over!" the other girl insisted, quickly rushing over to cling to Patrick, as if worried Mary might really try taking him away.

As she continued to insist she wouldn't allow it, Patrick gazed at her, looking happier than ever. "Calm down a bit," he scolded, but his eyes were full of affection.

"I won't hand him over, even if it's you, Lady Mary!"

"My, you're more possessive than I would've thought," said Mary. "Listen... You really won't let me? It'll be fine for a little while, hmm?"

“No!” Alicia declared. Since she was making a proclamation that she’d monopolize the beloved Prince Charming all to herself, if the other noblewomen were to have heard this, the entire country would’ve surely burned down in flames of jealousy.

That said, Patrick still looked very pleased as he stared at Alicia, so perhaps the girls would’ve raised the white flag before such a disaster could occur.

“Lady Mary, Lady Maaary...!” cried Parfette. “I’m okay with it! I’ll give you half of Lord Gainas!”

Someone else joined in on this conversation, saying, “Oh my, Parfette. Would you mind if I take some too?”

“Lady Carina?!” Parfette squeaked. “You also feel that way about him...?!”

“No, not in the slightest. I’m simply curious about the splitting process.”

“If that’s your only objective, I cannot let you have him...!” Parfette’s voice was shrill as she shook her head. Her trembling turned even more erratic, though it was unclear whether that was because she feared Carina, or if she was stirred up by the idea of handing Gainas over, or if she felt jealous and possessive at the thought that someone else was truly after him.

“Please don’t tease her too much, Lady Carina,” Margaret spoke up.

“Lady Margaret...!” Parfette exclaimed.

“If you truly want him, you must thoroughly corner him and get at least three quarters in your hands before you can declare he’s yours.”

“Please don’t divide him into even *more* parts...!”

Carina and Margaret laughed in amusement at Parfette’s protests. Even Gainas figured they were joking, and just pacified his fiancée with a wry smile.

For some reason, Alicia, who was still clinging to Patrick, loudly declared, “I wouldn’t hand over even one quarter!” Of course, Patrick looked indescribably joyous upon hearing her words.

Despite the fact that the exchange program would be ending tomorrow, and despite the fact that Mary had just disclosed the truth about her jealousy to everyone, the liveliness was the same as always.

While this went on, Mary glanced at Adi's hand. She caught it in hers and squeezed it tightly, causing Adi to look at her inquisitively. Just the fact that their eyes had met was enough to fill Mary's chest with euphoria.

It was obvious he'd always had eyes for her. When she had first tasted love, just having him look at her made her happy. But once she knew she was in love with him, she'd even felt jealous that his eyes weren't locked on her alone.

Mary had no idea her possessiveness went this far. Ever since she'd married Adi, she just kept discovering new things.

"I'm not handing him over either," Mary pronounced.

"Milady?"

"Don't you underestimate the possessiveness of the daughter of House Albert. Whether one quarter or one eighth, *all* of Adi belongs to me," she said, tightening her grip on his hand.

Adi smiled in embarrassment and squeezed her hand in return.



The last day of the exchange program had finally arrived.

Mary was at Karelia Academy to say her farewells to everyone, with Parfette having clung to her since early morning. The girl stuck to her like a magnet, occasionally sniffing or weakly murmuring, "Lady Mary..." The entire time, her trembling never ceased.

I'm getting motion sickness... Mary thought, her silver locks jittering up and down from the vibrations of Parfette's body. Regardless, she wiped away the girl's tears, for even if the vibrations bothered her, she was also happy to see that Parfette idolized her so much as to be this heartbroken over their separation.

"It's not like we'll never see each other again, Parfette. Don't cry so much."

"But... Lady Alicia, Lord Adi! Just for now, please yield the right to embrace Lady Mary to me!" Parfette appealed.

"Since this is goodbye, that works for me!" Alicia replied. "You can hug Lady Mary to your heart's content!"

“Of course I’ll yield it to you, Parfette. However, Alicia has no such right. But yes, fine, go on,” Adi said reluctantly.

Parfette hugged Mary even more tightly in response. At this point, Mary wondered if the girl might actually try taking her home with her. But she couldn’t just push Parfette away, so she only sighed in resignation.

Someone called out to her around that time. “Lady Mary.”

It was Carina. She wouldn’t go so far as to hug Mary, but she also seemed saddened that the time for goodbyes had come, and her expression looked somewhat lonesome.

“Please visit us again in the future, Carina,” Mary told her.

“I will. And I extend the same invitation to you, Lady Mary.”

“Thank you. But I don’t want to see your footstool, so please put him away when I come.”

“No problem. In that case... I’ll put him away in some cramped, dark space.”

“That’s terrifying,” said Mary, asking her friend to stop right there. What a shoddy joke Carina had told. She only giggled in amusement, causing Parfette’s shaking to grow even stronger.

Soon enough, Carina walked away, and in her place came Margaret. Mary wondered if the girl would also look upset, but...

“If you wish to see me, we can meet at House Dyce. I’ll be coming to visit in a few days, since Bernard invited me.”

“You do come here quite often, and we see each other all the time,” Mary pointed out. “So I can’t say I feel even an ounce of sorrow upon our parting.”

“Goodness, Lady Mary! Those are completely different things. We ought to show at least a little bit of sorrow... Ah! Bernard’s looking this way!” Margaret cut her own words of farewell off, and rushed away to her beloved’s side.

Still, Mary had meant what she said. After all, since Margaret and Bernard were in love, Margaret often visited House Dyce. And whenever the pair attended a party together, Bernard always escorted her.

Margaret was a frequent guest at parties hosted by House Albert, and House Dyce too, where she and Mary would run into each other. Moreover, sometimes when Mary visited House Dyce, Margaret would be sitting there as if her presence were the most natural thing in the world.

Some people might've been dubious as to why a noblewoman would cross borders so frequently to visit another family before she was even married...but then again, anyone would've been happy to accept an invitation from House Dyce.

In any case, Mary didn't feel at all wistful over parting with Margaret in this way. She watched as Margaret and Bernard chatted happily, until she felt Parfette squeeze her arm. It seemed that the girl was jealous because Margaret would get to see Mary so often.

"I also wish I could see you all the time, Lady Mary... Should I aim for someone from House Dyce as well? But for me, Lord Gainas is... But if I *do* go for it, will I be able to get closer to you, Lady Mary...?!"

"Oh my, you seem to have wandered slightly off course. Gainas, retrieve her," Mary demanded, passing Parfette over to Gainas, who'd been on standby next to them.

Parfette inhaled deeply once she was in his arms. It seemed like she'd changed her mind about her previous idea, and instead teasingly told Gainas, "We should get that holiday home built without delay."

It was almost time for the horse-drawn carriages to start departing. However, at that moment, another carriage noisily arrived.

Mary thought it looked familiar. Yes, she'd seen it on the first day of the exchange program. In fact, she'd also seen it many times after that day too. When she and Adi had been out shopping in the town center, when they had been on the way back home, or sometimes just when they'd taken a stroll outside—indeed, each time, this carriage would gallantly materialize as if for the specific purpose of separating them.

It was House Barthez's carriage, so there was no question about who was inside of it.

As soon as the carriage stopped, Veltina stepped outside. She had a white ribbon with silver embroidery upon her head, and it bounced as she made her way over towards Mary and Adi.

The girl stopped in front of Adi, and then deeply bowed her head with a pained expression. When she looked up again, her pupils shook for a moment as she gazed at him.

In response to her meek conduct, Adi awkwardly scratched the back of his head. This was the person he had bluntly rejected in the middle of a party. He didn't enjoy having her stare at him like this, but he couldn't disregard her either.

"Lord Adi, I'm sorry about before," Veltina said.

"No, I should've at least asked to change locations."

"Lord Luke admonished me afterwards, and I decided to face my own feelings. I have always adored you, Lord Adi, and saw you as an ideal."

"Lady Veltina..."

"But then I realized something!" the girl exclaimed vigorously, gazing up at Adi. There was no trace of doubt in her eyes, nor did she seem as vexed as she had during the aforementioned party. If anything, she looked to be in high spirits. "The version of you standing here before my eyes... There's just something off about you!"

"Something's *off* about me?!"

"Yes! That's right!" Veltina affirmed decisively.

Mary was barely holding back her laughter. Telling herself that laughing in this situation would go poorly, she quickly covered her mouth with her hand. But she still struggled to endure it, and her shoulders were trembling, so it was obvious what was going on.

At least she was doing better than Patrick, who was looking the other way and covering his mouth too while mumbling, "Off... There's just something *off* about him...!" Apparently, Veltina's words had really hit the mark with him. At this point, it would've been better if he'd just laughed openly.

“It’s rude to laugh right now, Lord Patrick!” Alicia scolded, but there was no way even a scolding would make his laughter stop.

For his part, Adi seemed in total shock over what Veltina had said, and just stood there dumbstruck.

“I thought you were someone who was secretly fragile and tortured,” Veltina went on. “That you were sensitive and harbored deep anguish in your heart, and because of that anguish, you treated others with kindness. But if I really think about it, you’re a bit... You’re just slightly different from what I imagined.”

“There’s no need for such a detailed explanation,” Adi asserted with dissatisfaction. It wasn’t as if he desired Veltina’s affection, but hearing her saying he was “off” just didn’t sit right with him.

Mary couldn’t stop herself from smiling, and rubbed his arm. “Veltina, you said there’s something off about Adi, right?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“But you see, for me, *this* Adi is just right. He may not be fragile or anguished, but he’s been by my side all along, and that’s enough for me,” Mary said with a smile.

Veltina looked away with a huff, perhaps interpreting Mary’s words as her showing off about her love life, or trying to rub her victory in her face. But after a moment, she glanced sideways at Mary, and with pursed lips, she murmured, “I’ve done some self-reflection.”

“Oh?”

“After Lord Luke scolded me during that party, I realized how selfishly I’ve been acting, and I regret that,” Veltina grumbled dejectedly, recalling the events. The ribbon on her head also drooped, making her entire self look completely depressed.

She feels that bad...? Mary thought with surprise.

Luke did indeed look like an imposing man on the outside, but he was gentle on the inside. Even he himself acknowledged that he’d been spoiling Veltina. Mary couldn’t picture a man like him getting angry enough to make Veltina

upset to *this* degree.

According to Veltina, Luke had followed her right after she ran away from Adi, and immediately scolded her, yelling, “*Haven’t you had enough already?!*” She hadn’t expected to be reprimanded by a man older and much larger herself, let alone be comforted by him, and she’d therefore been in a state of confusion.

“Lord Luke told me about how angry he’d been over everything I’ve done so far, and how much you’ve been looking out for me, big sis... And then at the very end of things, he patted my head.”

Veltina explained that she had endured a painful blow from her unrequited love, and then Luke had scolded her right after. By that time, she felt disordered, but Luke patting her head finally calmed her down, and then the both of them reflected on their own actions.

Veltina had been rude towards the daughter of a distinguished family from another country, and brazenly tried to get closer to her husband. She’d even caused problems for Mary’s friends, ultimately leading her to get into an argument with Princess Alicia.

Her actions were carelessly driven by her feelings for Adi and jealousy towards Mary, but things wound up spiraling so far that it wouldn’t have been strange if every member of House Barthez were to reprimand her for what she had done.

Yet it had been none other than *Mary* who hadn’t seen Veltina’s behavior as a problem, and had even tried to pacify everyone else for her sake. When Luke had admonished Veltina, she indeed remembered that Mary would often tell her to run. Had she ignored Mary’s advice and continued acting disrespectfully, who could say what might’ve happened...

After all, the involved parties included members of House Dyce and House Eldland, and even this nation’s princess. Veltina narrowly escaped making a number of powerful enemies that her family couldn’t have hoped to stand against.

“I realized that you were covering for me and looking out for me, sis,” said Veltina.

“Right, I’m glad you know now... Wait.” Question marks started floating around Mary’s head. She had a feeling that Veltina had been referring to her in an odd manner during this conversation. In the past, she’d called her “Lady Mary,” but now...

Before she could ask, however, Veltina straightened her back and assumed her usual arrogant stance. “I’ve reflected on my past errors, and I regret them. That’s why I came here to apologize!” she proclaimed. Considering her high-handed conduct and the way she huffed afterwards, nobody who looked at her right now would’ve thought she was feeling the least bit remorseful; she was acting the same as ever. In fact, some might’ve even taken offense to the idea that she was behaving like this during an apology.

But contrary to her demeanor, Veltina’s feelings seemed sincere. She gazed at Mary for a moment, and then looked aside, casting her gaze down awkwardly. The girl tugged lightly on Mary’s sleeve, her brown eyes slowly glancing up at Mary. Her ribbon had also lost some of its springiness, and drooped down like a pair of animal ears.

“...ry.”

“Hmm? What was that?” asked Mary.

“I... I’m sorry,” Veltina whispered, her voice uncharacteristically quiet and weak. Her words had been barely audible.

Veltina was a selfish young girl who had even her fiancé wrapped around her finger, so she wasn’t used to giving someone a genuine apology. This might’ve been the first time she’d ever done something like this.

Mary looked over to Adi, and the two of them exchanged wry smiles and shrugged their shoulders.

“It’s all right, Veltina,” Mary told her gently. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Really?!” the other girl shouted, quickly looking up. She was grinning in satisfaction, having done a complete one-eighty from her previous meekness. Mary wondered if she was just imagining the way Veltina’s ribbon also sprang to life with newfound vibrancy. “Well, since *I’m* the one giving an apology, it’s no wonder you’d accept it!”

“I see your comeback is as quick as ever.”

“Because of everything that’s happened, I’ve grown to like you a little bit, big sis. So feel free to like me in return!”

“Uh-huh, thank you very much... By the way, about the way you’ve been referring to me...” Mary said, entertaining the possibility that she’d been mishearing it somehow.

Veltina turned away with a huff, but there was no longer any hostility in her gaze when she again glanced at Mary. If anything, she seemed to be full of expectations, her body language practically screaming, “*You’re asking because you’re curious about me, isn’t that right?!*”

“My, it’s no wonder you’d say that!” she continued. “After all, since I’ve come to like you just a little bit, then it’s obvious *you’ve* come to like me too and want to know more about me, sis!”

“Oh, you really *are* saying it. I heard it perfectly this time.”

“Well then, feel free to ask me any questions you like, sis! I still have some time, so I’ll do you a favor and answer them for you!” Veltina said pompously. Yet she was most definitely referring to Mary as her sister, even though in the *Heart High* anime, she had referred to *Alicia* in that way—and she most definitely didn’t have such a huffy attitude when she did so there.

But Mary knew she couldn’t allude to such a thing right now, and just sighed deeply. She decided to evade the issue and ask Veltina some suitable questions instead.

“I suppose I’ve no other choice, so I’ll come by again sometime!” Veltina called out as she climbed aboard her carriage, which was about how Mary would’ve expected the girl to say her goodbye.

She watched as Margaret and Carina boarded their carriages too, as did a sniffing Parfette, guided by Gainas. The carriages soon departed, and only the home students of Karelia Academy were left. It wasn’t long before they, too, exchanged elegant goodbyes and started leaving one by one.

“We should be going too,” Mary spoke up. “Why don’t we have some tea in the town center, Adi?”

“Good idea, milady. Let’s take it easy somewhe—”

“Yay! Let’s go!” someone interjected, getting bodily in between them as well. Of course, it was Alicia.

This time, Mary didn’t raise a complaint. Instead, she flicked Alicia’s forehead. If words weren’t going to be effective, Mary was going to resort to silent violence instead.

Patrick quickly rushed over, trying to break things up. But when his eyes landed on Adi, he suddenly stopped and burst out laughing. He kept mumbling apologies, but he couldn’t stop himself from snickering. Without a doubt, this was the result of Veltina’s words of, *“There’s just something off about you!”* leaving a lasting impression on him. It really seemed to have ingrained itself in his brain.

“Your Ladyship, please hit Lord Patrick once in my name,” Adi implored.

“Leave it to me. An insult to my husband is an insult to me! I don’t need to hold back against a man, so take *this!*”

“Lord Patrick, watch out!” Alicia shouted. “Lady Mary, if you’re going to hit someone, let it be me!”

“That works just fine for me!”

“Waaah! Please forgive me!”

The ridiculous sounds continued as Mary kept striking Alicia’s forehead over and over. After several blows, Mary finally seemed satisfied, withdrawing her arm. She took a fine-quality handkerchief out of the pocket of her embroidered jacket to wipe her hand. Her conduct was so graceful that nobody would’ve guessed she’d just attacked her own nation’s princess.

“If I touch you any longer than that, your provincial stench will rub off on me. Now, let’s get going, Adi,” Mary declared haughtily and started walking.

Adi followed after her, and she wondered why on earth he was chuckling so much. Alas, the answer was obvious, so she pretended to stumble in order to

stomp on his foot.

When Mary had begun walking, Alicia and Patrick followed after her as if it were par for the course. They even started discussing which establishment they should go to, and how the weather was nice enough for terrace seating. Mary could only sigh. She knew telling them not to follow her wouldn't be effective. Even if she somehow shook them off, they were aware she was heading to town, so they'd be able to find her anyway.

I've no choice but to give up... Mary thought, suddenly turning on her heel. Alicia and Patrick gazed at her curiously.

"I'll allow you two to come along today, but *I'll* be choosing where we go. And Adi will be sitting next to me," Mary announced, making it clear there was no room for discussion on the matter.

Alicia and Patrick looked surprised for a moment. Then, the two of them smiled wryly and nodded in agreement. Satisfied, Mary nodded in return, and brushed her silver-thread locks off her shoulders as she resumed walking.



The day after the exchange program had ended, things were still just as lively at Karelia Academy. Some of the students were seriously considering studying abroad at Elysiana Academy, devoting themselves to their schoolwork in hopes of being chosen to participate in the future. As such, the exchange program could mostly be considered a success.

Despite what had happened with Veltina, Mary also felt that she'd been able to have a meaningful and enjoyable experience thanks to the program.

"If they do this again, we should consider going to Elysiana College," she remarked.

"I'm sure Lady Parfette would cry tears of joy," Adi responded. "Well... She's probably crying *right now*."

"I've been worried lately about whether that girl might suffer from dehydration," Mary said, picturing her shivering friend.

They were in a corner of the school, sitting at a table designed for students to relax at during breaks. The day's lessons had already ended, and the two of

them were having a moment of peace. There was a pleasant breeze in the air, swishing past the well-trimmed trees.

Indeed, the scenery was appropriately beautiful for a noble academy, and plenty of other students were also out and about among the blooming flowers.

Gazing into the distance, Adi murmured, “Those two...”

Mary turned to look and noticed a familiar couple walking down the path. It was a girl with golden hair and a boy with indigo hair. They were far enough away that Mary couldn’t make out their faces, but she was sure it was Alicia and Patrick. They didn’t seem to have noticed her and Adi, and chatted happily as they walked.

“What should we do, milady?” Adi asked. “Run away?”

“What are you talking about? I am the daughter of House Albert! In my dictionary, phrases like ‘honorable death’ and ‘being dumbstruck’ may be present, but there’s no room for ‘deserting under enemy fire’!”

“Just when did those two phrases enter this dictionary of yours?”

“By the way, it also includes a detailed twenty-page write-up about ‘dismissal’!”

“Ah, milady, they’re heading this way!” Adi called out, getting the topic back on track as he turned to watch Alicia and Patrick.

Mary had been about to give him a lengthy explanation about the term ‘dismissal,’ but decided to postpone it in light of the circumstances. (*I can talk about dismissal at any time*, she told herself inwardly, which was exactly why she had chosen to let it go at this moment.)

Right now, Mary had to prioritize the matter of Alicia and Patrick, as the two of them were headed in her direction. They would surely notice her at any second. If that were to happen, then Mary knew precisely how things would turn out: the same as always.

Alicia’s eyes would light up, and she’d cry out Mary’s name, then rush over with speed unthinkable for a princess. She’d tackle—or rather, hug—Mary tightly, while Patrick followed after her with a troubled smile...hiding the

jealousy in his heart.

Recalling how Patrick had confided in her, Mary suddenly got to her feet. Around the same time, Alicia froze in place. She must've noticed Mary and Adi. Just as the girl cried out her name...

"Patrick! Seize that girl at once!"

...Mary raised her voice in turn.

Alicia stopped, but it was unclear whether that was because Mary, who'd always scolded her, had for some reason shouted at *Patrick* today, or because Patrick had caught Alicia's arm.

Whatever the case, Alicia stood still with her eyes wide in shock. Mary exhaled in exasperation at the sight.

"What's wrong, my lady?" Adi inquired.

"Let's go, Adi."

"You mean towards them?"

"That's right," Mary said, turning to look at him. She then held out her arm expectantly. "Escort me!" she ordered.

Adi smiled wryly, sensing where this was going, and stood up. "Very well," he said with a bow, before softly taking her hand.

As they started walking, Mary could tell even at a distance that Alicia had grown fidgety. She probably had no idea what to do about this development, the likes of which had never happened before. She wanted to get closer to Mary, but also to wait for Mary to come to her. With a confused expression, she kept glancing between Mary and Patrick.

Mary continued making her way forward elegantly while keeping her eyes on Alicia. Obviously, she wouldn't *run*, but she did walk a little faster than usual.

Stopping right in front of Alicia, Mary brushed through the hair over her own shoulder, causing it to sway. Then, she cast her gaze down towards Alicia's hand.

The arm that would normally wrap around Mary in an almost painful embrace

was now being held by Patrick. Noticing the way he was caressing Alicia's skin and trying to entwine their fingers only soured Mary's expression, as if she wished to say she couldn't bear to watch any more of this.

Alicia still looked surprised, while Patrick was smiling in embarrassment. They both appeared utterly foolish, and Mary murmured as much under her breath while glancing aside grumpily. "It's not like I can't approach you first from time to time, so be good and just wait by Patrick's side, peasant," Mary declared.

Alicia blinked, while the two men chuckled. They didn't say anything, but Mary found their knowing looks very irritating. She was about to whine that she shouldn't have said anything, when...

"Yes, Lady Mary!"

...Alicia launched an attack at point-blank range, wrapping one arm around Mary.

Shaken by the impact, Mary shrieked, "Stop hugging me! H-How can you have that much strength in just *one* arm...?!"

I Wished for One Sweet, Peaceful Day

“I suppose she *did* say she would visit...” Mary murmured one sunny morning, standing by Albert Manor’s entrance. The meticulously maintained trees swayed in the breeze, and the flowers were in full bloom. In short, it was a beautiful day.

But neither Mary nor Adi could feel particularly stirred by the scenery, as both of them were already used to it. Not to mention, as the country’s most distinguished noble family, the Alberts had to make a good impression on others from the moment they laid eyes on the front door. This was also a place meant for greeting visitors, so of course it was always beautifully maintained.

Even if such visitors were to show up unannounced, it was still important to give them an extravagant greeting.

“I can’t help thinking that it didn’t take long before she decided to show her face around here again...” Mary commented. “But still... Hmm...”

“I’d rather she didn’t show her face here at all, but let’s leave that aside...” Adi murmured.

Even as they grumbled to each other, a gorgeous carriage stood before them. Mary could see its owner’s face pressed up against the window as if she were dozing, her large white ribbon fluttering about.

But then the ribbon flicked upwards and suddenly withdrew into the carriage. Now that the owner was finally awake, the driver opened the door. “My lady, we have arrived. Please wake up.”

A high-handed voice responded, “I wasn’t sleeping!”

After a moment, Veltina came bursting out of the carriage. “Big sis! It’s been a while!” she proclaimed, sounding as arrogant as ever. (Her ribbon was wrinkled in one place, but she didn’t seem to be aware of it. For her, this was something akin to bed hair.)

Mary sighed. “You say that, but not even three days have passed,” she said as

her shoulders sank.

Veltina's visit may have been unexpected, but that didn't mean Mary and Adi could just turn her away. As such, they brought her over to the parlor. The girl plopped herself onto the sofa and gazed out the window, looking as if she'd been invited to a friend's tea party. The way she took her tea was very graceful too.

"So what brings you here today, Veltina?" Mary asked her.

"I thought about how you must've wanted to see me, so I took the effort to come and visit."

"I see. Worry not—I didn't have any such thoughts."

"I've been very busy writing a report about the exchange program, you know," Veltina continued. "But since you looked after me so much, I decided to make some time for you, sis."

"Riiight... I see..." Mary replied in monotone. *I'm not getting through to her at all*, she thought with exasperation.

The girl continued to insist that Mary had surely missed her, and that she was doing Mary a favor. Nothing Mary might've said would change Veltina's mind at this point.

"I wonder if that big ribbon is supposed to be sending me some kind of message..." Mary mumbled.

"Sis, I can't stay for very long, you know!" Veltina admonished, which was her way of trying to get Mary to pay attention to her.

Mary couldn't decide if the girl was easy or difficult to read at this point, and she sighed. "Right, right," she muttered. "In that case, shall we play some chess?"

"I'll accept that challenge, as long as you play with a small handicap!" Veltina huffed, apparently lacking confidence in her chess skills. Mary thought that making such a request with her usual attitude was very consistent of her.

I'll play with a handicap, and still crush her completely...! Mary thought,

smiling to herself. (Her smile was gorgeous enough to captivate the heart of any man. But for Adi, whose heart had belonged to her for a very long time already, that smile only gave him a bad feeling about what was to come.)

“Adi, could you bring the chess board over?” Mary requested.

“Very well... But I’d like to speak with you for a moment,” he answered while standing up.

Mary did the same, and together they vacated the parlor. When she glanced over at Veltina, she saw the girl taking a sip of her tea. “I don’t have all the time in the world,” she complained, which to Mary’s ears sounded like, “*Come back quickly!*”

Once she and Adi reached the hallway, Mary closed the door behind them. Now that they were out of Veltina’s sight, Adi immediately scowled, glaring at the door with open disgruntlement. One might even say the fact that he was making this expression towards a person who’d once been in love with him was downright merciless.

From his perspective, however, Veltina had merely fallen for someone who shared his name, but wasn’t actually *him*. On top of that, the girl had caused Mary plenty of grief, so it was no surprise that Adi disliked her.

“What do you intend to do, milady? I would’ve asked her to go back home as soon as possible...”

“Oh, don’t say that,” Mary replied. “It’s true that she’s an uninvited guest, but she’s still a guest nevertheless. We have to be polite and entertain her,” she argued with a shrug.

Adi hung his head in frustration. “But...” he muttered, glaring at the door again. There was still a hint of resentment in his eyes. This was unlike his typical self, who’d always treat all of House Albert’s visitors courteously on account of his servant-like disposition.

Mary understood his point of view, yet she had no choice but to ask Adi to endure it for a while. She rubbed his arm to soothe him and said, “I know she’s a troublesome girl, but she’s still the daughter of a foreign noble family. If we’re tactless and make her leave, it’ll reflect poorly on the Albert name.”

“I suppose...” Adi conceded with a sigh. In contrast to his words, his tone sounded reluctant. Despite knowing that Mary had a point, he still couldn’t shake off his negative feelings, and even now he glowered at the door.

He’s very stubborn today. Is it because we’re dealing with Veltina? Mary wondered. *If that’s the case...* “I’ll take my revenge!” she proclaimed, patting Adi’s arm. “Not only will I give her first-class hospitality, I’ll also give her a crushing defeat at chess!”

As members of House Albert, they couldn’t turn away a guest at the gates. But offering her hospitality and beating her at chess was fair play. Having reached such a decision, Mary proudly puffed out her chest.

What kind of expression would Veltina make upon being completely beaten? Perhaps she’d prove surprisingly persistent. Mary didn’t have great expectations, given the girl had requested a handicap, but she wouldn’t have been opposed to ending the game in a draw either.

“I hope she has a backbone,” Mary murmured with a smirk. She didn’t even look like a villainess at this point, but someone utterly wicked. Her smile was chilly, yet she was enjoying herself.

Adi sighed as he watched her. He must’ve resigned himself to the fact that Mary had no intention of sending Veltina away. But a moment later, he made his mind up about something, and his countenance shifted into a serious look. “Since it’s come to this...!”

Sensing some kind of urgency in his words, Mary turned to look at him. He was gazing at her, his eyes overflowing with will and readiness. There was even a kind of fervor about him.

“What’s the matter, Adi?”

“No matter what, I just can’t stand Lady Veltina. If I have to watch you interact with her, I’ll do everything I can to hinder you and throw things into disorder!”

“Disorder...? Just what are you going to do?!”

“To counterbalance that boisterous girl, I’ll throw a noisy princess at her! Now excuse me. I’m going to climb the roof!” Adi declared on the spur of the

moment, turning on his heel and sprinting off. He probably wanted to use the system he'd once told Mary about to send a message to the royal palace.

But before the astonished Mary could try and stop him, a voice echoed around them, making both of them stop in their tracks. "Goodness!"

Mary and Adi turned towards the sound, only to find Alicia standing there.

With a surprised expression, the girl hurried over to Adi. "Are you going to inform the royal palace of an emergency?!"

"W-Well, yes... I wanted you to come over..."

"Oh no! What do we do now? I'm not in the palace to receive your message!" Alicia exclaimed with concern.

Unable to fathom what was happening, Adi just stared at her, stunned. "What, indeed...?" he echoed numbly.

"*Why are you here?!*" Mary exclaimed, interrupting their exchange. "I know you shamelessly visit all the time, you country hick, but when did you even get here?!"

"When? That's a silly question, Lady Mary!"

"What...?"

"By the way, the breakfast stew was really delicious today, right?" Alicia chirped casually.

"So you came first thing in the morning again?! I've had enough! I'm going to bill the royal palace for the meal fees!" Mary shrieked.

"The croquettes we had as a side dish were handmade by me, you know."

"Humph... I suppose I'm willing to overlook things this time," Mary decided with a nod. Just as Alicia had said, today's breakfast stew had been delicious, and the croquettes exquisite.

Mary went on to explain to Alicia about Veltina's sudden visit. Hearing the news, Alicia scrunched up her face and glared at the door to the parlor, full of uncharacteristic hostility. "How rude of her, causing you trouble again despite what happened the other day!"

“You cause me trouble all the time, on top of incurring food expenses,” Mary pointed out.

“In order to protect you, Lady Mary, I shall also participate!” Alicia announced. She puffed out her chest, becoming filled with a puzzling sense of duty, while Mary just sighed.

At some point, Adi had gone to fetch the chess board and returned. “If we can’t stand to be alone with her, we might as well make even more of a mess...” he said with a smile that was both suspicious and self-deprecating at the same time.

It’s still morning, and I’m already fed up with all the clamor, Mary thought as her shoulders drooped.

When she opened the door, Veltina haughtily lamented the fact that she’d been left alone by crying out, “I can’t believe you’d make your guest wait like this!”

Just before noon, Veltina climbed into her carriage while shouting over her shoulder, “I’m not frustrated or anything! But just so you know, I’ll definitely win next time!”

The girl was more heated about chess than Mary had expected. They’d ended up playing numerous games and swapping opponents between each other, and the time had passed in the blink of an eye.

Now that Veltina was leaving, Mary found herself smiling fondly at the girl’s parting remark. She’d thoroughly beaten both her and Alicia in chess, which brightened her mood. Feeling invigorated, she inhaled deeply as she watched Veltina’s carriage depart.

Mary then glanced at Alicia, who still looked spirited despite the crushing defeat she’d endured. Mary had utterly and mercilessly crushed her over and over, yet it had no effect on the girl whatsoever.

Rather, when their eyes met, Alicia joyfully commented, “It’s almost lunchtime, isn’t it?”

“Why are you trying to have your lunch here?! Go home!”

“I arranged for a delivery from the migratory bird restaurant!”

“Humph! I see the delivery division is doing well too,” Mary said with a delighted smile. *This way, we can operate in a wide range of fields!*

At that moment, Mary heard a sound from nearby. She looked over to see a horse-drawn carriage slowly making its way towards Albert Manor. It wasn't Veltina's, for while the vehicle was well made, it wasn't anything fancy. The decorations and engravings were modest, giving the whole package a sense of elegance.

“Your Ladyship, isn't that House Marquis's carriage?” Adi inquired.

“Indeed...” Mary said as she continued observing it.

Once the carriage stopped, the driver got up and bowed towards them, then turned to open the door. The second he did so...

“Lady Mary!”

...Parfette came flying out. She rushed over, repeatedly crying out Mary's name (though her pace was as slow as usual).

“Lady Mary! I wanted to see you...!”

“Not even *three days* have passed yet, Parfette,” Mary told her.

“I know! I wanted to hold out for another two, but then I had a dream this morning...” the girl said with a snuffle. Apparently, she'd had some sort of dream about Mary, which had made her want to see her. Unable to contain herself, she'd hopped into a carriage.

A dream is just a dream, but that still counts for something. Some might even claim dreams are a form of divine message from the heavens.

Mary knew as much, which made her curiously inquire what exactly Parfette had dreamed of. (While this was happening, Adi glanced meaningfully at Albert Manor's roof and murmured under his breath, “I guess that'd be impossible...” Out of consideration for the great distance, he instead asked the carriage driver to send a message to House Eldland.)

“So did I show up in your dream?” Mary asked Parfette.

“Actually, no. In my dream, I was petting a very cute cat. But all of its fur suddenly coiled up tightly, which woke me up... I thought the dream must’ve been trying to portray your ringlets, Lady Mary.”

“Don’t tell me *that’s* the reason you came to see me?”

“It’s not just that!” Parfette assured her. “I fell asleep again, and in my second dream, a brown cat curled up on my lap. And that cat...”

“Yes?”

“It was just like a croquette! When I woke up again, I realized something: because I had two dreams related to you in a row, that meant I should probably go and see you. No, in fact, I *had* to do it!” the girl declared passionately.

Mary’s expression stiffened. Just like everyone else around them, she was well aware of the fact that Parfette depended on her terribly. However, this time went far beyond just dependence—the girl was even displaying withdrawal symptoms. Mary had joked before that Parfette should have a holiday home built near Albert Manor, but maybe such a thing truly *was* necessary, urgently so too, before Parfette started experiencing hallucinations.

“Well, since you’re here now anyway, how about you join us for lunch?” Mary proposed.

“I’d be honored...!” Parfette replied, her countenance glowing.

In response, Mary smiled softly.

Picking up on the mood, Alicia happily clasped Parfette’s hand. “Let’s wait in the courtyard until lunch is ready!”

“Why are you acting like you’ll be joining us, Alicia?” Mary inquired. “You can just go home.”

“Oh, I have an idea! Parfette, you should take a look at the roses I’ve been raising! A really beautiful one bloomed this morning!”

“Listen to me! And don’t just raise another family’s flowers without permission!” screeched Mary.

But her words didn't get through to Alicia. "This way!" the girl said good-humoredly, leading Parfette by the hand towards the courtyard.

Fed up, Mary sighed and glanced over to Adi. "Do you think we can get compensation from the royal palace for the princess's meal fees and land costs for a portion of the garden?"

"The meal fees would be difficult enough to requisition, but the land costs especially so," he answered. "The area managed by Alicia is popular for its beautifully blooming flowers. Most importantly, madam really loves them."

"Typical provincialism. Playing with dirt is that girl's specialty, huh? Wait... She has her own *area*?! Is she a gardener?!"

"By the way, your favorite rose arch is also Alicia's creation."

"A *talented* gardener!" Mary exclaimed. *I suppose we can't ask for land costs in that case*, she conceded inwardly.

The rose arch was in Mary's favorite part of the garden. It featured a splendid arrangement of white and red roses and was located at the perfect distance from the fountain. One could either gaze at the fountain for a while and then pass under the rose arch, or pass under the arch first on their way to the fountain, as if guided by the sound of the water. It was also enjoyable to stand under the arch and observe the glittering water from a short distance.

Both the rose arch itself and its location were perfect. The gardeners praised it too, and were even thinking of bestowing a special award upon it.

To think that it was Alicia's creation! Although Mary found it a little frustrating, she had no choice but to acknowledge the other girl's achievement. Even if Alicia was a country hick who kept showing up bright and early each morning, it was Mary's conviction that those who made beautiful things should be shown respect.

"As far as the garden is concerned, we can let her do as she pleases. Go on! Toil away for the sake of our beautiful garden!" Mary said with an elegant laugh.

Adi sighed. "So they'll hinder us until afternoon..." he murmured.

“Hmm? Did you say something, Adi?”

“No, it’s nothing. I’ll finish the lunch arrangements, so please wait in the garden.” He bowed, then headed towards the mansion. As he retreated, he looked somewhat wistful, and he took larger strides than usual, as if giving in to his despair.

What’s the matter with him? Mary wondered, tilting her head. But she had no time to ponder it further, as Alicia and Parfette called out her name.

The four of them enjoyed their lunch together, peacefully passing the time with light conversation. (Parfette cried periodically, but her crying was also a sign of peace.)

Around the time the sun started going down, a maid came over to inform them of Gainas’s arrival.

“Parfette, let’s get going soon,” he urged, as if he were her legal guardian.

Parfette began preparing for the trip back. Soon enough, she stood next to Gainas, luggage in one hand and holding his arm with the other. She smiled at him tenderly, but then turned back to face Mary and pitifully sobbed, “Lady Maaary...” This meant that while she would indeed go home, she felt sad because they had to part.

Mary smiled at Parfette’s lovable antics, shrugging her shoulders. “I suppose we’ve no choice but to execute the villa construction plan. Adi, prepare a list of notable plots of land, if you will.”

“Very well,” he responded. “Alicia, you can handle the garden construction side of things when the time comes.”

“Leave it to me!”

Seeing the three of them get so fired up, Parfette paused, her cheeks reddening. But Gainas took advantage of the situation to say, “Parfette, even if you’re gold digging...” He was hinting at their marriage. She blushed all the way up to her ears, and reluctantly allowed him to help her into the carriage.

Gainas gave the rest of them a bow before climbing aboard himself. As they

departed, Parfette leaned out of the window to wave everyone goodbye.

Mary sighed, and then turned around to glare at Alicia. “Now, how about *you* go home too?”

“Okay!”

“I *told* you to listen to— Oh...? How obedient of you. But that makes sense: after hanging around here for over half a day, even a country hick knows when to rein it in.”

“Lady Mary, you’ve been invited to a soiree, right?” Alicia prompted.

“Yes, indeed. That’s why I’ll have to start getting ready soo— Wait, don’t tell me...!”

“Then I’ll see you there!” Alicia shouted spiritedly, getting into a carriage from the royal palace that had shown up at some point. It all happened so quickly that Mary didn’t even have the time to raise a complaint.

The carriage soon disappeared, and everything grew quiet. It was as if all the liveliness up until now had never even happened.

“Ugh, that girl!” Mary screamed. “If she makes a racket at the party too, I’ll slap her!”

“There, there,” Adi pacified her. “That’s enough of being angry. Let’s get ready for the soiree.”

But Mary was still glaring in the direction Alicia had left, even though it was pointless. If anything, slapping Alicia would prove much more effective. Telling herself as much, Mary went back into the estate to change her outfit.

The host of the party Mary had been invited to was a family with a long-standing friendship with House Albert. They possessed a rich history as well as high authority, and were known far and wide. Given all that...

“Lady Mary, Adi! Good evening!”

...it was no wonder that Alicia had been invited too. Despite the fact that she was boisterous and prone to rushing over at nigh-imperceptible speeds

whenever she noticed Mary, the girl was still a princess. Having someone of her rank appear at a party was a surefire way of increasing one's prestige.

While Alicia launched her charge attack, Patrick chased after her with a little delay. He was smiling pleasantly, and looked so handsome that even the passing maids swooned at the sight of him.

"Hey, Mary," he greeted. "I heard you spent time with Alicia today."

"Gracious, Patrick!" Mary replied. "It's not just that I spent time with her today, but rather today *as well*. We even took our meals together. Truly, what an honor to have the princess shamelessly overstaying her welcome!" she deplored with an elegant smile.

Patrick warded off her words with another pleasant grin. "Sounds like you really did spend a lot of time together. You two are so very close."

The both of them were beautiful and dignified as they gazed at each other. Surely they looked like something out of a top-class painting to any outsiders. But to those who understood the true state of affairs, the beauty of the scene was purely superficial.

Throughout the exchange, Alicia was clinging to Mary with a cheerful expression on her face. Growing tired of the girl's persistence, Mary raised her hand, which caused Patrick to quickly change the topic.

"By the way!" he exclaimed, his voice sounding uncharacteristically loud and panicked. But naturally, anyone would've grown panicked if their spouse was about to be smacked in the middle of an evening party.

Mary stilled her hand, glaring at Alicia. "You've narrowly escaped death," she grumbled, lowering her arm.

"I recall you liked this mansion's courtyard, Mary," Patrick continued. "How about we go see it?"

"You're right. I do believe they have a splendid courtyard here," Mary answered reluctantly, seeing right through Patrick's forceful change of topic.

At the same time, Alicia's eyes lit up, and her cheeks flushed slightly with excitement. "A courtyard that's earned Lady Mary's praise?! We must go at

once!”

“Wh-Why are you getting all worked up out of nowhere?” asked Mary.

“I wish to use it as reference for improving the Alicia Area even more!”

Seeing a gardener’s zeal burning brightly in Alicia’s eyes, Mary couldn’t stop herself from raising her voice. “Those are the eyes of a gardener!”

But Alicia paid this no heed, only grabbing Mary by the arm and forcibly pulling her along. The girl was already strong enough to drag Mary around all day long, and now she was overcome with a gardener’s spirit of craftsmanship. There was simply no way Mary could hope to fight her off.

“Cease making such a racket! You’re one disgraceful gardener!”

“What kind of flowers do you like, Lady Mary? I’ll make plenty of them bloom in the Alicia Area!”

“Mint and shiso,” Mary answered grouchily as Alicia continued vigorously pulling her towards the courtyard. (She was aiming to destroy the Alicia Area by naming plants that had a high propagation capacity. However, a gardener wouldn’t fall for such tricks, and in the future, croquettes with shiso and after-dinner mint tea would be served at House Albert.)

Alicia’s eyes were blazing with a gardener’s fighting spirit as she pulled the unwilling Mary along. In such a turbulent clamor, the two girls headed to the courtyard. Patrick followed behind them leisurely, showing no intention of stopping Alicia, which only heightened Mary’s rage.

Bringing up the rear was Adi. “That we’d be alone during the soiree... Nope, I didn’t have any such expectations from the very beginning,” he muttered with a sigh. His tone of voice was full of disapproval, but nobody paid him any attention.

The party carried on peacefully for a while, and eventually concluded with a speech from the host. The guests took their time, exchanging a few extra words with each other before dispersing one by one.

Mary, Adi, and Alicia were walking towards the horse-drawn carriage

together. Indeed, Alicia was there too.

It wasn't as if they had a prior commitment together, nor had Mary and Adi invited the girl to join them. And yet there she was, accompanying them as if it were par for the course. She didn't force herself into their conversation, but nor did she try to completely erase her presence—she just chimed in occasionally.

The carriage shook gently for some time as it traveled with the three of them inside, until eventually Albert Manor was in sight. That was when Mary snapped back to reality.

“Why are you here?!” she shrieked.

“Huh? *Alicia*?! Really, *why* are you here?!” Adi shouted, belatedly shocked as well.

Alicia cast her eyes down dispiritedly. “Actually...” she began.

Originally, Alicia was supposed to go home together with Patrick. The pair would've serenely passed their time together in the carriage, taking the long way round so they could enjoy the lovely nighttime scenery. It would've been like a small postparty date. Alicia had been excitedly anticipating it.

However, right as they were getting ready to leave, Patrick's father as well as several scholars had approached him. They wanted to discuss something related to academics at House Dyce's estate, and invited him to join them.

Patrick had wanted to refuse, but it was Alicia who stopped him from doing so. She urged him to take the opportunity to go with them and not worry about her.

“It's okay, Lord Patrick!” she'd told him. “I'll go to Albert Manor with Lady Mary and Adi!”

“Sorry, Alicia. When we're done, I'll come to pick you up.”

Having finished her retelling, Alicia sighed as she gazed out of the carriage window. She'd put on a brave face in front of Patrick, but in reality, parting from him like that when he was in the middle of escorting her made her feel lonely. She looked wistful as the evening breeze fluttered her golden locks.

“Don't just fall into ennui in someone else's carriage,” scolded Mary.

“I hope Lord Patrick picks me up soon... From Albert Manor, I mean.”

“I’ve had this thought for a while, but rather than the peasant, maybe it’s *Patrick* who needs correcting. Adi, what do you think?” Mary prompted, seeking agreement from him. “Adi...?” she asked again, turning towards him.

Her eyes widened at the sight of Adi limply leaning out of the window. He looked fatigued, frowning deeply with his eyes closed, as though he was trying to withstand something.

“Ah, right, you’re motion sick. I thought you’d built up a tolerance lately, but I see you’re still not doing well.”

“My apologies. I’m usually fine if I focus on the conversation, but sometimes it just randomly— Ugh...”

“It’s all right; don’t worry. You don’t have to say anything, so just stay put,” Mary advised. Following that, she once more surveyed the interior of the carriage.

Adi was leaning against the window, while Alicia gazed outside wistfully and quietly called Patrick’s name. There was no trace of the elegance normally present when nobles such as themselves returned home from an evening party.

Mary sighed, rubbing Adi’s arm soothingly.

Once the three of them made it back to Albert Manor, Mary and Adi had no choice but to bring Alicia to the guest room.

Mary felt that she wouldn’t be able to relax in her party attire, so she left for a while to get changed into casual clothes. Once she’d returned to the guest room, she saw that for some reason Alicia had also changed into a casual dress. It wasn’t that she’d borrowed Mary’s clothes either—the dress was her own.

Mary was about to shriek at Alicia, but swallowed her words. By now, it was much too late to bring up the way that Alicia was treating Albert Manor like her home. *She might even get her own room at some point*, Mary found herself thinking absentmindedly.

They decided to take some tea in the guest room, at which point Alicia let out

a long sigh. She gazed out the window, and then glanced up at the wall clock.

It had already been dark by the time they'd left the party venue. Although Albert Manor's garden was full of beautiful flowers that swayed under the breeze during the day, at present the place was stained in darkness too. There was some charm to the evenly spaced lanterns outside, but such things wouldn't lift Alicia's mood right now.

"Lord Patrick..." the girl called, casting her eyes down.

Normally, she would pass her time with Mary in high spirits, and if Patrick tried to do something about it, she'd sulkily say, "*I don't care about you anymore, Lord Patrick!*" However, Alicia didn't seem to be in such a lively mood tonight.

Patrick had escorted her at an extravagant party, and they'd been planning to spend time together afterwards—it would've been a wonderful evening. That was precisely why his absence right now intensified Alicia's feelings of loneliness more than usual.

Even Mary, who'd spent the day screaming at, getting angry with, and smacking Alicia, felt sympathetic towards her. That went all the more so given the fact that Adi was *always* by Mary's side, party or not.

"I know Patrick's been busy, but this is a breach of etiquette. He'd better come pick you up soon," said Mary.

"Should I send a message to House Dyce?" Adi suggested.

"You want to go there?" Mary asked him.

"No. I'll climb to the roof and shine a light."

"So that system extends to House Dyce too, huh?"

"If we tell Lord Patrick that Alicia's feeling down and you're angry, he's sure to rush right over."

"I see that you're able to send very detailed messages," Mary remarked. The system was more exceptional than she'd anticipated. That said, getting Patrick to come to Albert Manor was the biggest priority right now.

After Adi left the room, Mary turned back towards the still-dispirited Alicia.

Not knowing what else to do, she poured the girl more tea. She'd always thought Alicia's boisterousness was problematic, but this silent despondency had its own way of making Mary feel restless.

Whether it was because he felt bad for making Alicia wait, or because Adi had instigated him by sending an exaggerated message, Patrick soon arrived at the mansion.

Almost immediately after a maid notified them of the carriage's arrival, there was a knock on the door. Without even waiting for a proper reply, Patrick opened the door and rushed inside. Both Mary and Alicia were dumbstruck at his unusual abruptness and lack of composure. Only Adi was smiling in self-satisfaction.

"Alicia! I'm sorry I got here so late!"

"No, I'm sorry for being selfish, Lord Patrick..."

"Don't be. This was completely my fault. So please don't live as a gardener with your pruning shears at Albert Manor from now on!"

"I know that must've been an important discussion... Huh? Gardener? Pruning shears?" Alicia echoed, tilting her head in confusion.

Mary, too, could only stare blankly after Patrick's nonsensical statement. Alicia *did* tamper with Albert Manor's gardens, true, but there was no way she'd actually decided to become their gardener. Mary had no idea where Patrick was going with that pruning shears talk either.

Seeing their reactions, Patrick seemed to have finally realized the peculiarity of his own words. For a moment, he just stood there petrified, until...

"What is the meaning of this, Adi...?"

...he spoke in an aggravated tone of voice.

Judging by the fact that Adi immediately burst into laughter, this must've all been a part of his scheme. "I didn't think you'd *actually* believe everything I said!"

"Of course I did! I was overcome with guilt for making Alicia wait for me. And Alicia's been getting lessons from the gardeners lately too...!" Patrick pointed

out, appealing that this was the reason he'd swallowed the story without even questioning it. He must've been mortified, for he was red in the face as he frantically tried to explain himself.

Alicia smiled upon seeing his desperation, and went up to rub his arm comfortingly.

Mary, however, was in no mood for offering comfort. "You reap what you sow," she told him, delivering a follow-up attack. "Leaving behind your own escort partner like that is such a low move, you'll need to swap your pruning shears for a shovel to reach it."

"That's pretty harsh... I'll reflect on my actions."

"But I'm at fault too," Mary murmured with a sigh.

Patrick inquired what she'd meant by that. Adi and Alicia also seemed surprised, turning to look at her in puzzlement.

Recalling past events, Mary responded. "Back when we were each other's escort partners, Patrick, you didn't mind it if I ignored you, right?"

"Not at all. It was enough just to have you as my partner for appearances."

"It was the same for me. I didn't care if you spoke to other people, or completely disappeared from sight. Actually, that felt like a blessing, because it meant I could escape to the kitchens with Adi. And if there was a dance, you'd invite me by saying, 'Let's just do one dance for the sake of it.'"

"Yeah. Our hearts weren't in it, but still, it was kind of offensive."

"Back then, I should've told you what you were in for if you neglected your escort partner like that," Mary said, repenting for having let Patrick off the hook so easily.

Patrick's eyes widened, and he fell silent. But after a moment, he started laughing. "You're right. You should've given me at least one lesson."

"Goodness! If I'd given you a tough time just once, then maybe tonight you could've handled things as well as a pair of pruning shears can!" Mary said scathingly.

Unable to bear any more, Alicia interjected. "Lady Mary! To me, Lord Patrick

is so wonderful that pruning shears can't even compare to him!"

"My, are you sure about that? He's neglected you and made you get all melancholic in someone else's house," Mary countered. "Is that really good enough? Maybe pruning shears could give you a better escort than him."

"I'm happy with Lord Patrick's escort. No, in fact, I *only* want Lord Patrick to escort me! So...please escort me to the end, okay?" Alicia looked at Patrick, tightening her grip on his arm.

Patrick looked delighted at her words, and if the pair had been alone, they would've embraced without a doubt.

"You're practically drooling over each other," Mary huffed, wanting to make fun of them, but her words didn't get through at all.

At the time of their departure, Patrick once more apologized for the late visit (though it felt like he was apologizing for more than just that), while Alicia was back to her usual self with him by her side. The two of them boarded their carriage, and Mary watched it slowly retreat as the surroundings grew quiet.

She waited for a bit, but no other carriage showed up. The silence continued, with only the sound of the plants flitting in the breeze to disturb it.

Things have finally calmed down... she thought, looking up at the night sky. The moon was almost directly overhead. She still needed to bathe and get ready for bed, so she had no idea what time she'd be able to go to sleep.

"If that peasant shows up first thing tomorrow morning again, I'll lure her to the rose arch and slap her. What do you think, Adi? Adi...?" Mary called out, turning back towards the estate.

Adi stood there with a somewhat dissatisfied expression. He was scowling, and the way his eyes bored into her made her feel like he was blaming her for something.

Mary asked him what was wrong, in response to which he silently approached and embraced her. She tilted her head at this sudden hug, looking up at him. "What is it, Adi?" she prompted again.

“Your Ladyship, do you remember our original plan for today?”

“Well, we had a party tonight, so...” Mary replied, but then stopped herself when she recalled their plans.

It had been simply for them to spend the day together at their own leisure. They would’ve enjoyed some tea at home, spoken about trivial matters, had their meals in their room, walked around the garden for a bit, maybe napped... Of course, it would’ve been just the two of them the entire time.

It would’ve been a lazy day, which they would’ve made up for by attending the party during the evening.

Yet in the morning, Veltina had shown up, and right as she’d left, a crying Parfette had arrived in her place. Once Gainas had retrieved her, Mary and Adi had no time to rest as they needed to get ready for the soiree. During said soiree, they had walked around the courtyard with Alicia and Patrick, and on the way back home, they’d had to take custody of Alicia for some reason. Then, they’d waited and urged Patrick to come pick her up, and now finally here they were.

They hadn’t had even a moment to themselves all day.

“Have you been sulking about that this entire time?” Mary asked Adi.

“Please don’t word it like I’m some sort of child. But I must admit, I’m not very happy about the fact that we’ve been getting hindered since first thing in the morning,” he answered sullenly. Despite what he’d just said, it was clear as day that he was, indeed, sulking. His tone of voice sounded slightly upset, and though they were hugging, he looked aside to escape Mary’s gaze.

He was so easy to read, but Mary had a grievance of her own.

“Don’t blame me for this. I also wanted to take it easy today.”

“No, this is all because of your popularity, my lady.”

“Popularity?” she repeated, blinking. “Adi, what are you saying? I’m not popular.”

“Milady, you’re so...! Your grasp on human relationships stopped developing during the drill season!”

“What did you just say?!” Mary shrieked, thrashing about in his arms. Feeling vexed, she put her hands on his chest and tried to pull herself free. “Let me go...!” she demanded, using all her power to escape.

But there was a huge difference between their physiques and levels of strength. Mary couldn’t break free by force, so she tried to slip out of his arms. But tonight specifically, Adi was holding her so tightly that she couldn’t do anything.

Mary briefly considered shouting for help, but decided against it. The hour was already late, and she didn’t want to bother people with their lovers’ quarrel. Not to mention, even if someone did come, would they really have helped her upon seeing this scene? They’d probably have just turned a cold shoulder, or at best unenthusiastically muttered, *“Oh my, how troublesome.”*

Worse yet, they could then use Mary’s own sarcastic remark she’d told Alicia and Patrick earlier and say, *“You’re practically drooling over each other.”*

In summary, this was something Mary had to handle by herself.

Thinking as much, she looked up at Adi. “Do you suppose that peasant will show up tomorrow as well?”

“I think she’ll come in the morning. By which I mean, first thing in the morning.”

“I want to lure her to the rose arch and smack her. Surrounded by beautiful flowers, listening to the invigorating sound of the fountain... I think I can give her a romantic strike.”

“What’s ‘romantic strike’ supposed to mean?”

“I want Patrick to be present too, so I can give him a lesson. If he witnesses his spouse being smacked romantically, he’s sure to change his way of thinking.”

“Right. But how will you do it?” Adi questioned.

“That’s what I’m considering right now. There’s no time, so I want to polish my strategy as soon as possible. But I wonder if I can really think of something by myself?” Mary mused, sighing in concern. Her body language was clearly lamenting, *“What do I do? I can’t think of anything, and I have no time left...”*

“Won’t anyone discuss it with me?” she went on, at which point Adi conjectured what she was doing and hugged her tighter.

“I will, my lady,” he said.

“Oh really?”

“Yes. After all—results aside—we’ve always done it together. Right?” he prompted.

Mary smiled softly. It was just as he’d said. Ever since the start, whenever anything happened, and even back when Mary had first remembered her past life, she’d always been able to talk things out with Adi. Her race to ruin in high school, the uproar during college, the grand opening of her migratory bird restaurant... No matter what it was, the two of them always did it together (though as he’d said, the results were best left aside, at least with regards to her ruin and such).

“Then I’d like to discuss this matter with you,” Mary declared. “As for the place... I’ll leave that up to you.” She held out one hand, silently imploring him to escort her, at which point his hold on her slowly relaxed.

Mary thought it a little regrettable when Adi finally let go of her, but he squeezed her hand to make up for it. His warm hand gently enveloped hers as he said, “Then allow me to lead the way.”

“Go ahead,” Mary encouraged, and the two of them began walking.



The night passed, and the next morning...

“Do not...show up...without invitation!”

“Waaah! The rose arch’s thorns make it impossible to escape!”

...Mary and Alicia’s voices resounded in Albert Manor’s garden.

Adi observed the scene proudly, glad that everything had gone to plan. Next to him, Patrick averted his gaze and made no attempts to stop it. In his hand, he was clutching a sheet of paper with House Albert’s family crest—it was an invoice for Alicia’s meal and land expenses.

The paper was of fine quality, and the lettering was stylish, yet the contents

themselves demanded payment in no uncertain terms. Since Alicia had stuck around Albert Manor for so long, the fees were proportionately high, and Patrick's expression had stiffened when he first laid eyes on the amount. (It wasn't anything he couldn't afford, but he had mixed feelings on the contents and so felt reluctant to pay up.)

"I'm sorry, Alicia..." he said. "Please endure it for now so I can make the claim moot...!"

"Whether she endures it or not, those *are* her expenses," Adi responded. "Ah, but please let milady blow off some steam from time to time."

"Ahhh! Lady Mary, please don't push me! The rose thorns are going to stab me!"

"That's exactly what I'm aiming for! Now be quiet and become our garden's objet d'art!"

As one girl lamented and the other screeched, their boisterous cries continued echoing around Albert Manor's tranquil gardens.

Afterword

Hello, this is Saki.

Thank you for purchasing the fourth volume of *Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster*! The characters were running around in slapstick as always. What did you think of the story?

I'm very grateful to announce that this series will be adapted into a manga!

The drill era... Or, as it were, the senior high school era. In the manga, Mary's relationship with Adi is still simply "the eccentric lady and her impudent servant." The tantalizing feeling has me smirking, because I'm already writing about them as a sugary couple.

I hope you enjoy reading the manga alongside the novel.

I'm so glad that Haduki Futaba has once again drawn the characters!

I'd also like to thank my manager for guiding me through various processes, including the manga serialization.

And thank you so much to everyone who's read this book!

I hope we can meet again soon.

Saki

Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba

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YOUNG
LADY ALBERT

IS

COURTING

DISASTER



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Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster: Volume 4

by Saki

Translated by Ray Krycki Edited by Casey Pritt

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