
Izumi Okido
Illustration by
Jyun Hayase
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I'll Become a Villainess Who Goes Down in History
It Seems Turning Into a High-Born Baddie Makes the Prince All the More Lovestruck!

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YEN ON
New York

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Izumi Okido

Illustration by Jyun Hayase **Translation by Sarah Moon**

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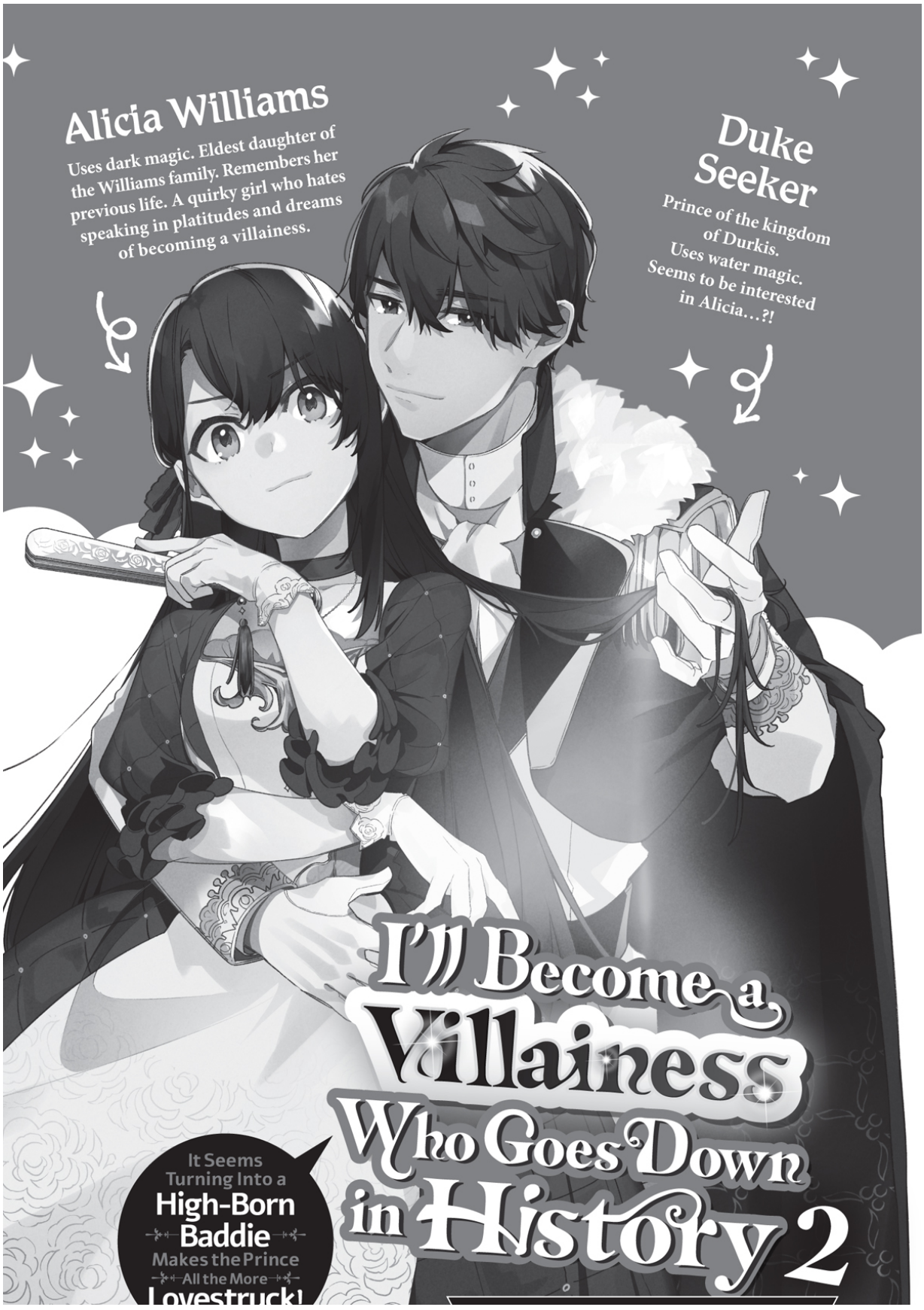
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Afterword




Alicia Williams
Uses dark magic. Eldest daughter of the Williams family. Remembers her previous life. A quirky girl who hates speaking in platitudes and dreams of becoming a villainess.
Duke Seeker
Prince of the kingdom of Durkis.
Uses water magic.
Seems to be interested in Alicia…?!
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Meet the Characters



Liz Cather

The girl meant to be the main character of this otome-game-based world. She is the saint and seems to have feelings for Duke…?!

Gill

A boy from Roana Village. After Alicia saves him, he devotes the rest of his life to serving her.





Will

Resident of Roana Village. An unassuming old man with sharp insight and a wealth of knowledge.

Williams Family Members



Arnold

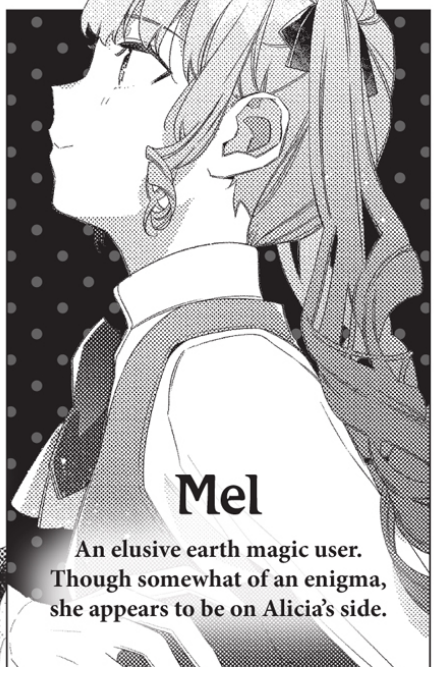
Alicia's doting father.

Albert

Eldest son of the Williams family and a Liz devotee.

Alan and Henri

Alicia's older twin brothers. Henri worries a lot about Alicia.



Mel

An elusive earth magic user. Though somewhat of an enigma, she appears to be on Alicia's side.





Arnold, Father of the Williams Family—Age Forty

Alicia has been confined to her cottage for a year and a half now.

In the beginning, I never imagined that she would agree to the arrangement—because it was an unreasonable demand. I was unreasonable on purpose, in the hopes that Alicia would yield, but it only had the reverse effect: It lit a fire in her belly.

I thought I knew my daughter well. I thought that even stubborn Alicia would have to bend if I demanded she reach level 90 to continue her role as Liz Cather's monitor.

Liz Cather's unique abilities have grown beyond competition. With Alicia absent, the herd of Liz devotees has expanded, and she is sure to wield the scepter of the legendary saint upon graduation.

……I haven't seen Alicia once since she made her decision.

Alicia's only human interaction has been with her personal maid, Rozetta, who brings her meals, clothes, and books. And naturally, the two never have any direct contact. Rozetta merely leaves the items outside the cottage. The cottage is furnished and has an archaic bath—it is at least habitable. But I expected that it would prove difficult for Alicia to experience a sudden downgrade in the luxurious lifestyle to which she was accustomed. I assumed she would complain in no time.

And yet Alicia has withstood those conditions for over a year.

I have caught myself uttering the most deplorable prayer ever: Please, God, make her give up soon.

When Alicia was kidnapped, I regretted with all my heart not forcing her to give up on being Liz Cather's monitor. After the fact,

when I heard what state she had been rescued in, my heart felt like it was being torn apart. My daughter almost died.

I wanted to stop her from putting herself in such danger as soon as possible, but she insisted she would continue monitoring Liz Cather. Then she accepted my conditions and marched straight for the cottage.

Once I found myself trapped in a promise with Alicia, I had to take accountability for the things I said.

Right after her confinement in the cottage began, an emergency summit of the five great noble families was held, and I explained the precariousness of the situation.

Joan said, "Well, you sure acted out of line." But I firmly pleaded with them that Alicia was in no shape to watch over and mentor a saint until she reached level 90 in magic. And at the same time, I wished that she could fulfill her duties as monitor without reaching level 90.

It isn't fair—why does *my* daughter have to carry such a heavy burden?

I acknowledge that Alicia is an unprecedented Divergent, just like the saint. She had mastered spells at age ten that only a thirteen-year-old should be capable of. But that is still no excuse to force a man to sacrifice his daughter for the good of the kingdom.

In one year's time, Liz Cather will turn twenty and enter her final year at the academy of magic. And once she graduates, she will surely go out into the world as a saint. So there was no time to lose. I was painfully aware of that. But still—

"For as long as she doesn't reach level ninety, I will not accept Alicia as the saint's monitor. She's my *daughter*, for heaven's sake."

I suppressed my rage as well as I could. The other four house leaders shut their mouths.

And after a long silence, the king—Luke—replied quietly, "A Divergent needs another Divergent."

After the emergency summit, I visited Gill, the boy Alicia had taken in as her attendant. When the nine-year-old boy emerged from his room with a sulky frown on his face, he looked quite petite for his age.

As I explained everything to him, the look in his eyes grew darker and darker. I also told him that while Alicia was in confinement, she would not be able to go to Roana Village.

I handed him a vial of a thin pink liquid called Avel so that he could go in her stead. When I told him it would allow him to cross the magic barrier to return home to Roana Village anytime he wanted, he gave me the most intimidating death glare I had ever seen.

It held an intense maliciousness for a boy of only nine years.

With a ridiculing sneer, Gill said, "When grown-ups are foolish, the children suffer," and he left the room.

Unable to come up with a response, I just watched as the tiny figure disappeared from view.

Gill spent the next year holed up in the Williams home library. Servants brought him his meals, and he bathed only once every two days. Sometimes I'd spot him running outside at night… His destination was likely Roana Village.

My eldest son, Albert, and one of my twin sons, Alan, showed little interest in Alicia's absence. But the other twin brother, Henri, raised complaints, asking why I gave her such crazy terms, and why I didn't realize that Alicia would accept those terms, no matter how impossible they seemed.

Henri hasn't spoken to me since.

And Duke, Luke's son and the prince of this kingdom, gives me the evil eye whenever we cross paths. He doesn't say anything to me, but his eyes are filled with anger and contempt whenever he looks at me.

My wife raised her eyebrows and slapped me across the face once…but nothing more.

A father’s job is incredibly difficult. I thought I knew my daughter very well, but maybe I underestimated Alicia.

Once she set her sights on a goal, she never gives up before achieving it. And I lost my temper and stubbornly placed that impossible demand on her.

And now, a whole year and a half since Alicia started living in that cottage, a lone letter sat in front of its door.

From Alicia, addressed to me.

Dear Father, I happened to overhear the gardeners gossiping, so I thought I’d drop you a line. They spoke of your regret for what you said to me. I assure you, it’s far too soon for you to have regrets. Save your regrets for when I fulfill your terms and end my confinement. —Alicia.



Gill—Age Eleven

Alicia has been confined to the cottage for two years now.

They felt like eons, yet they passed in the blink of an eye. I realize I'm contradicting myself, but that's truly what they've felt like.

I simply lost myself in books every single day. If Alicia is bettering herself, then as somebody who will stand by her side, I need to become smarter.

Finally…finally, I get to see Alicia. Nobody knows how much I've longed for this day.

I woke up early after a night of restless sleep, and now I'm standing in front of the cottage. It's three thirty in the morning. There are no signs of anyone stirring yet. A dark fog fills the air, chilling me to my very bones.

I've grown a little taller, though I'm still quite small for an eleven-year-old boy.

I'm sure Alicia has changed.

I suppose she spent the past two years holed up in that wooden cottage, speaking to nobody and spending every waking minute leveling up her magic. I could never endure that. It's made me understand just how resolute Alicia's determination to become a villainess is.

I pace back and forth, peeking at the cottage. When will she come out?

I've waited two full years to see her again.

The day right after she began her confinement passed like an eternity. I couldn't concentrate on anything, not even my favorite books. That showed just how attached to her I had become.

Alicia's father was the one who told me that she would be leaving her cottage today. Her father—Arnold Williams—has been very kind to me. He lets me use the library whenever I want, and if I fall asleep among the books, he carries me to bed.

At the start, I truly detested him. I hated him with all my heart for forcing those impossible conditions on Alicia. But it turned out that he regretted his actions more than anyone.

When I asked Arnold if it wouldn't be better for him to escort Alicia home, he said I should do it. It was my intention to fetch her all along, but I wasn't expecting Arnold to insist upon it.

I see Duke and Henri only a handful of times each year. This is because, as a rule, I spend my time in the library. And just as I'm dwelling on that thought, the door of the cottage lets out a long creaking sound…as if it were screaming.

My heartbeat quickens. At last…I get to see Alicia again.

I hear nothing save my own heartbeat. My palms are dripping with sweat. I can't breathe.

"You're sure up early, Gill. Long time no see."

The sight of Alicia nails me to the ground.

My heart was already pounding painfully hard as it was, and now I feel the jolt of it stopping for a second. My breath catches in my throat as I get lost in her beauty.

Her face has not changed a bit, but two years can really change the air about a person.

She is a beauty, standing still in the fog…a goddess who lost her way and fell to earth from heaven.

Her raven-black hair has grown down to her hips, and her slightly slanted, steadfast golden eyes sparkle brighter than before in their divinity. And her skin, perhaps from staying indoors for two full years, is as white as the purest snow, colored with a faint blush of pink on her cheeks and red on her lips. This is what the word *beautiful* was made for.

Her eyes hold an alluring luster as they look at me, while I stand in a daze and take it all in.

Alicia slowly approaches me. My heart is pounding so intensely, I feel as though it will explode. Upon closer inspection, I notice that Alicia has grown taller. Her gaze exudes wisdom and intelligence.

"Gill? You do remember me, don't you?" Her tone sounds a bit more casual than before.

Tongue-tied by her metamorphosis, all I can do is nod firmly in reply.

"Oh? Well, good. There's someplace I gotta go first before I see everyone else. C'mon."

I'm sure of it… The way she speaks has changed a little. Is it because she hasn't talked with other people for so long?

Without another word, Alicia grabs my arm and runs into the forest. She is probably headed for Roana Village. Gramps warned her only to go at night, since it's dangerous at any other time, but a thought pops into my mind then—is it really okay for us to go there right now?

The forest feels a little eerie. Mornings feel eerier than nights here.

"Wait, Alicia! You're not wearing shoes!"

I don't notice until we are in the forest for a couple minutes that the soles of Alicia's feet are pitch black with dirt.

"I'm fine. So any major changes during the past couple years?"

Alicia doesn't seem to care a bit about her dirty feet.

"Alicia…the way you speak has changed, hasn't it?" I peer searchingly into her face.

Alicia frowns thoughtfully for a moment, then replies, "Maybe it's 'cause I had nobody to talk to. Is it weird?"

"You sound a lot more casual."

Alicia smirks and asks, "You think?"

……Beautiful. It seems the baddie aura she exuded so willfully before is gone. Her smile is a manifestation of intelligence and good character.

"Yeah…I guess I did change."

"Did you really not speak to a soul for two years?"

Alicia looks a little perplexed. I never once saw that expression from her when she boasted constantly about becoming a villainess.

"D'ya think I'm not so villainess-ish anymore?"

I tense when she guesses correctly. Never thought the day would come when she could read my mind… Did she use magic?

"I didn't use magic," Alicia says with a smirk.

Aha! I know that face. That slightly devilish smile… That's the Alicia I know.

"Then how did you know?" I ask.

"Oh, probably 'cause you're easy to read."

No way. I think I've gotten pretty good at concealing my emotions the past couple years… Besides, I can produce all kinds of facial expressions at will.

"Sorry, that was a lie." Alicia smirks again with wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. And my heart skips a beat.

I was right the first time… This isn't the Alicia I know.

"Um, no, I haven't changed a bit," she says.

……She read my mind again.

As my eyes widen in shock, Alicia suddenly laughs. "Sorry, Gill, your reactions are just so funny, I couldn't help but mess with you."

"What's going on?"

"Aw, don't sneer at me like that."

"Explain yourself."

"Well, I wondered to myself, how can Will be so perceptive of other people when he can't see? Asked myself that question the whole two years."

"And did you find an answer?"

"Nuh-uh—nope. But I did make one discovery," Alicia announces proudly.

She seems more animated than before.

"I was all alone in that cottage, but there were lots of people outside, right? I mean, of course there were."

"Yeah," I agree and nod. "So are you saying you became sensitive to the subtle changes outside?"

"That's why you're my attendant," Alicia says, tousling my hair. Receiving Alicia's approval is probably the greatest pleasure imaginable for me. "Their tones conveyed their emotions, their demeanor, the air around them… It really made me appreciate just how hard it is to read a person's mind just from their atmosphere or the sound of their voice alone. It's still nothing compared to what Old Man Will can do, though."

"No, Alicia, you're amazing."

"Nah, nothing amazing about it," she says. And I can tell she isn't feigning modesty—she genuinely feels that way.

"Well, I could never work as hard as you," I say.

"Hard work? Oh, it wasn't that. I guess it did take some patience, but I wanna be a villainess. So I'm just doing what it takes to get there."

"But I get the sense…that you lost your villainess edge from two years ago. Like the way you looked so perplexed a little while ago…"

"Oh, that… Well, to be honest, that was because I didn't know how to answer you." Another perplexed expression fills Alicia's face as she says this. She isn't sure whether she should confide in me. I would never tell a soul, but that is for Alicia to decide. Alicia closes her eyes and takes in a quiet breath. Then she slowly opens her eyes and looks at me. "Just once…my mother came to visit me."

"She did?"

"That's right." Alicia rips off a branch protruding at an odd angle from a tree. "My mother."

I just realized I have never once seen Alicia's mother.

"What did she say?" I ask.

"That Albert, Gale, and Curtis were at level eighty…and that Duke had passed level one hundred. Oh right, she also said Liz was training at level one hundred."

"Huh?! What?!" I yelp without thinking.

I'm not particularly interested in keeping up with the specifics of Duke and his circle's progress, so I had no idea. Though I do remember that Duke got another piercing. A jade-green magic stone

now hung beside the blue magic stone. I guess that was for getting past level 100.

……It was beyond incredible. Nobody in this kingdom had ever made it to level 100 before. How could he not only break the record but smash it?

"That's just…unreal."

"Well, he's the main protag of an otome game—of course he's OP."

Alicia murmurs something quietly under her breath, but I can't catch it. And she probably won't repeat herself. Why would she… when she murmured it so I *couldn't* hear?

"So it's just a rumor, but apparently, Liz Cather is really popular in town as well as school," I say.

"Oooh, just as I predicted. So I take it she never made it to Roana?"

"Of course not. She's all talk and no action."

"Well, the more popular she becomes, the higher regard I'll have as a villainess," Alicia says with a cheery smile.

Alicia really is an oddball. She acts only in her own best interests, but for some reason, she's charming and hard to hate.

"Didn't your mother say anything else to you?" I ask.

"Umm—only that if I'm trying something bold, I should see it through."

"That's all? That isn't what I imagined she'd say."

"Oh, my mother is a bit peculiar. She's usually carefree and tranquil, but she's got this inexplicable *grit*… Anyway, she's weird."

I was going to tell Alicia she takes after her mother in that way… but I decide not to.

"I can see the fog…," she says. "Wait, Gill, how have you been going to Roana Village the past two years?"

"With this."

I show Alicia the vial with the light pink liquid. She probably wasn't expecting me to have it. Alicia's eyes bug out.

"Where'd you get that?" she asks.

"Your dad gave it to me."

"My father…," Alicia murmurs quietly. Her face fills with a mixture of surprise and joy.

"It's called Avel, apparently," I say, gently shaking the bottle.



This is my fifth time coming here in the past two years. And the four other times I came were in the first year. I explained to Rebecca and Gramps what had happened to Alicia. They were both stunned by the news, but they quickly understood.

After a whole year, I'm back. The thick walls of magic fog greet me just as they always have. To me, Roana Village is hell. Alicia gives my head two gentle pats when she sees the look on my face.

I take a deep breath and slip through the fog alongside her. I'm not sure what it is, but the fog feels different today…… Is it just my imagination? Maybe because it is early in the morning, the citizens are just starting to stir. Their sharp gazes focus on us, piercing like knives. This is bad… They're going to attack Alicia… But showing no sign of fear, she stoically stares straight back at them. Right… That's the kind of person Alicia is.

"What's wrong?" I hear a familiar voice in the distance. The villagers open a path, and a familiar face appears. The girl with a braid of long silver hair seems much taller than she was the first time I met her. Her light brown eyes widen in surprise at the sight of us. "Ali…cia?"

Gramps is standing behind Rebecca. The moment he appears, the air among the villagers changes. It seems like Gramps has become the leader of this village. What in the world happened in the past year?

"Long time no see, Rebecca," Alicia says with a gentle smile.

All eyes gather on Alicia, and most of them gasp in awe of her beauty. An outside observer might think she's a saint who saved this village, though Alicia wouldn't be caught dead calling herself a saint. And that is because she never had the slightest inclination to be this village's savior.

"You've gotten very pretty," Rebecca says, her gaze not leaving Alicia.

"Really? Thank you." Alicia humbly accepts the compliment.

"Alicia," Gramps says from Rebecca's side.

He always has great posture and exudes dignity. His hair is white, but he has few wrinkles, and even without his eyes, he is clearly very handsome. I dream of becoming an intelligent and kind man like him someday.

"Old Man Will!" Alicia cries out happily. It feels like she acts more her age whenever she is around him.

"You're lookin' well," he says with a soft smile.

Alicia approaches Gramps and squeezes him tightly. He stiffens for a moment but quickly gives Alicia's head some gentle pats. They have such a close relationship, it could make a guy jealous. Even though I have spent more time with Gramps, you can just feel the deep bond between the two.

"Old Man Will, could you please crouch down a little?" Alicia asks.

With a look of confusion, he crouches as instructed. And the rest of us look on as Alicia kisses one of his eyes. What is she doing? She chants an incantation, using words I have never heard before. It sounds like a song. Then suddenly a bunch of tiny, bright lights are floating around them.

……Is that the ancient Durkis tongue? Hardly anybody alive can use that language anymore. It takes at least fifteen years to master, besides.

……Is that why she let herself be confined in that cottage? To learn this spell? Her clear voice echoes through the silent village. And a glowing white light slowly wraps around the pair. It is so bright, I can't keep my eyes open.

Even assuming she has practiced magic beyond level 100, nobody in the kingdom can use a spell that employs the ancient tongue. The light gets brighter and bigger—I squeeze my eyes shut. The powerful light assaults my eyes for a fleeting moment. But the sensation immediately disappears. And with it, Alicia's voice. I slowly blink my eyes open.

……What was that spell? Then I realize my skin is covered in goose bumps. All the villagers are frozen in place, stunned. Some are even stock-still with their mouths dropped open.

Rebecca trembles as a strained smile forms on her lips. "Incredible…," she murmurs quietly, her eyes wide.

It *was* incredible. Everyone at the scene can't believe what they're seeing.

Black smoke is swirling from Alicia's left eye.

And now, in Will's left eye socket, a golden eye is shining.

Alicia is smiling in relief. Apparently, her spell was a success. Will looks at Alicia, unable to speak. He still hasn't realized what just happened to him.

……So I was right. I was right about Gramps.

"Old Man Will?" Alicia leans in closer to him. And Will gently places a hand on her cheek. His hand is trembling slightly.

"Alicia…I never knew how beautiful you were."

Will's voice shakes with emotion as he swallows his tears, tears that still threaten to spill from his eye. I feel something fiery surging up inside me.

"Holy shit…"

"Will just got an eye."

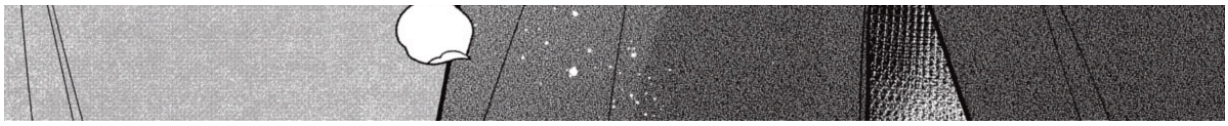
"Who the hell *is* that girl…?"

"Hey, think she can get us out of here?"

Once one person speaks, everyone starts talking. The area becomes chaotic in a matter of seconds. But I get the sense that the villagers have much better manners now. Even though they saw Alicia use magic and know they have no chance of defeating her,

there is bound to be at least one asshole who’ll trash-talk her shamelessly.





"Explain what happened here in town…," I demand of nobody in particular.

"Since Alicia was doing her best to get to level ninety, we decided to do our best here as well," Rebecca answers. "Then again, this village becoming more stable was mostly Master's doing."

She called Gramps "Master"…

"All the complaining creeps retreated deep into the village with their tails between their legs. Well, sometimes they scuttle out into the open and throw a tantrum. But Roana's split into good places and bad places now, basically," Rebecca finishes with a light chuckle.

It was surely Gramps and Rebecca who had influenced everyone's behavior, but the catalyst was undoubtedly Alicia. Though she is unaware of it, she has the power to enchant people. And she is good at capturing their hearts, too.

"Alicia, I can't thank you enough. I can see faces… I can see the faces of everyone in this village."

The area falls silent at Gramps's words. A lone tear rolls down his cheek. His tears sink into the hearts of everyone in the village. This is the first time in my life that I have seen him cry.

"If she used magic to give Master an eye, will it return to her when he dies?"

It is Rebecca who tactlessly breaks the solemn silence, looking at me with a grave expression.

"That's right. Once he dies, the eye will return to its original owner."

But still, most people wouldn't even think of giving away an eye to someone else. What's more, Alicia is seeking nothing in return from him. What she did—it can only be described as saintly. She has veered far off the path toward villainess glory. A smile spreads across my face. I've learned something about Gramps from Alicia's gift of an eye. He is much younger than I ever imagined.

"He's pretty handsome."

"I know. He's a charmer."

"Wait, you into old guys now?"

"Oh, he's probably no older than fifty."

"But his hair is white."

"He talks like an old guy, too."

A score of young, excited voices reaches my ears. Whether they are praising him or degrading him, I can't tell.

"Old Man Will," Alicia calls him, calmly and quietly.

From her expression, it is apparent that she already put two and two together. She is looking him in the eye as she calls out to him. So surely he knows what she wants to say, too.

That day…I thought the man looked familiar. So I asked Duke. I asked him the names of the men in the painting on the palace wall.

A deep, dignified voice echoes clearly enough to suck the air out of the village square.

"My name…is Will Seeker."



Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family —Age Fifteen

Saying nothing more than insisting I come visit again, Will bids Gill and me farewell. The moment I heard Will's full name, I got goose bumps all over (even though I already had a hunch who he was). So when he said he used to work in the palace…that was what he meant.

There are so many questions I want to ask him, but I decide to bow out respectfully instead. Nobody at home is awake yet, so I stop by the cottage, and Gill jogs back to his own room at the house, saying there is something he needs to take care of.

I lie on my back in bed, my mind racing over all sorts of things as I toss and turn.

Gill has grown quite a lot. Those ash-gray eyes are filled with even more wisdom than before.

I have spent the past two years studying like my life depended on it. I read books, trained my body, practiced magic, and repeated that day in and day out. Speaking to no one and doing everything all by myself was…to be honest, quite a strain. Many times I seriously considered throwing in the towel, and I almost lost my nerve. But I have a goal, so I knew I had to set my standards high or I'd be a disgrace as a villainess. A combination of self-inspiration and deprecation made me somehow pull through. Thanks to sheer mental fortitude, I am certain I've at least fostered a sense of perseverance in myself.

It was quite a hellish ordeal to memorize the ancient Durkis tongue. Never in my wildest dreams did I think a person would need to chant in ancient tongues to cast the level-87 spell: Personal Transference.

But in the end, in just two years, I somehow managed to practice all the way to level 91!

I energetically jump out of bed. Everything looks different now. The range of my peripheral vision has shrunk. I can't see very well on my left, but I'll adjust after a while. What I need to be most careful of is my sense of depth perception. At times, the world looks two-dimensional. That's why I almost tripped many times when I was walking through the forest.

I look down at my feet. The soles are bleeding a little. Yeah…I guess walking barefoot wasn't exactly the safest thing to do. I snap my fingers.

……Huh?

Nothing changed.

A chill rushes through my body, an ominous sweat beading on my skin. I snap once more.

Nothing…is happening?! I can feel the blood drain from my face. Why can't I use magic?

A knock at the door echoes through the cottage.

"It's me." I hear Gill's crisp voice from outside. I am so gutted from my loss of magic that I can't answer him. Feeling suspicious, Gill slowly opens the door and creeps inside. "Alicia? Is everything okay?"

I awkwardly look at Gill. He is holding a long, thin black cloth in his hand.

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's an eye patch. I just made it."

With that, he hands me the black fabric.

……An eye patch?

"You made this for me?"

"Yeah, I mean it was easy."

Gill sounds a little embarrassed.

He sewed this eye patch that quickly? He's beyond crafty.

"Thank you."

Without another word, I put on the eye patch. Then I look at my reflection in the mirror. Oooh, I think I'm pulling this off. It's really bringing out my villainess side. You know, Gill looks smaller than usual. I guess everything looks a lot different when you lose an eye.

"So what's up?" Gill seems to stare right through me.

I thought I was putting up a brave front, but he wasn't buying it. Well, I guess I should tell him. It's not like I can hide it anyway.

I take a deep breath in, then I tell him quietly but firmly, "I think I lost my magic."

Gill's eyes widen for a second, then he immediately presses a hand to his chin and frowns deeply. He is muttering something under his breath. Then he suddenly looks up at me.

"I think you'll get it back in about a week."

"How do you know?"

"I read it in a book. Your eyes possess magic energy… Since you suddenly lost one, maybe that's why you can't use magic?"

"Am I still at the same level?"

"Well…I'm not sure."

A troubled look fills Gill's eyes.

If I dropped in level, I can't be Liz Cather's monitor anymore.

"Hey, do you think Gramps can use magic?" Gill asks me curiously.

You know, that's a good question… Old Man Will is royalty. It is a fact of life that the nobility can use magic. But I have never seen him use magic before. Besides, since his name is Will Seeker, that means he is the elder brother of the current king, yet he is in Roana Village and… Wait, how does that make sense? The more I think about this, the more it makes my mind spin.

"Duke might know," Gill murmurs emotionlessly.

That's right. Duke probably would. But he'll ask me why I want to know.

"Well, anyway, what's your next move?" Gill asks me grimly.

"Let me think… First, I'll go to school and see what it's like there."

"Huh? You'll go to school?" Gill gives me an exasperated look.

Oh my, I don't think I said anything that scandalous. I have to see what state Liz is in, first and foremost. Know thine enemy, and the sooner the better.

"Hey, do you really think they'll let you keep being Liz Cather's monitor if you can't use magic?"

"Never mind that—is it true that Henri and Father are acting incredibly standoffish?"

During my two years in the cottage, I received notes on my dinner plates to that effect. Also, I heard the gardeners gossiping.

Gill sighs softly, a look of resignation on his face. "Yeah, it's true. Henri hates everybody."

"Aw, poor thing. Poor Father, too."

Henri doesn't know that the king asked me to be Liz Cather's monitor. (Though I'm playing the part of the villainess of my own volition, not because the king asked me to.) Every otome game has its heroine. A villainess to oppose her is a necessity. But in my case, it's more like I have to get the heroine to gradually abandon her unsullied way of thinking to maintain order in our nation. For better or worse, our values are complete opposites of each other, so the only thing I can do to Liz is oppose her.

And Henri knows our father presented me with a batshit ultimatum. I imagine he still sees our father as the world's worst father, who haphazardly put his daughter between a rock and a hard place. Then again, if you didn't know the whole story, it *would* make you fuming mad.

In my case, I am pleased as punch to have all my brothers (who are also romanceable characters for the heroine) hate my guts, but Henri seems to be an exception to the rule. Guess he really loves his little sister.

……But at the end of the game, he winds up betraying his little sister, too. Actually, I prefer it that way! A villainess must live out her days as a lone wolf.

"Very well! I'm going to the academy right now."

"Right now? You aren't even going to say hi to Arnold?" Gill casually hits the nail on the head.

Ouch. That hurt. I mean, if I go see him now, he'll promptly give me a magic test to see what level I'm at. Which would be a bad thing, since I can't use magic right now. And while we're on the subject, when did Gill start calling my father by his first name? Could it be that the two have actually become friends?

"Yes. I'm going to avoid my father for the next week. Anyway, I'm getting dressed. Wait for me outside."

Gill sighs. "All right… Hey, I know it's a bit late to be asking, but… what made you want to become a villainess?"

I am at a bit of a loss on how to answer. I always dreamed of being a villainess, but when asked directly, I can't exactly tell the whole truth. But I always thought it was what I had to do…… To say it's because I think villainesses are cool would be a bit too childish. So I decide to give him the most basic answer I can think of, with the most buck-wild badass smile on my lips.

"Because it's my destiny."

When I emerge from the cottage ready for school, Gill's eyes go wide. Oooh, is he falling for me? Well, I am fifteen years old now. I thought it was time for a glow-up.

I am wearing the dress I asked Rozetta to prepare for this day: a black lace with gold embroidery to match my eye. It is exuding major villainess vibes……or so I hope. I tied my hair back so my sophisticated earrings are visible. This alone makes me look years older. And I feel like I have finally grown into the diamond around my neck—the one that Duke gave me.

Gill stares at me in a daze. "……You look pretty."

"I know," I say with a smirk.

"……I just think it's going to be hard to hide that you've lost your magic."

"I'm aware."

"So why are you smiling?"

"The road to villainess glory is always full of obstacles."

"And only when you overcome those obstacles are you truly living the villainess life?"

"Exactly."

"You really are a wonder, Alicia." There's frustration in Gill's chuckle. I can tell he is willing to ride the crazy train with me.

Nothing less from my attendant…or should I say "partner"? I smile proudly to hide my trepidation and the pounding of my heart.



The magic academy looks even more glamorous than before. Though if I'm being totally honest, after spending two years holed up in a cottage, anything looks glamorous to me.

"Alicia, let me warn you now—you should consider this campus a battlefield."

"Why's that?"

"Just a hunch…but you're going to have a horrible time," Gill answers evasively.

What's with the uncomfortable sneer, Gill? That's not like you.

"Just spit it out."

He sighs quietly in resignation and says, "I know slander doesn't bother you, and you're strong-willed, so I think you'll be okay, but… please don't let them fool you."

"Let who fool me?"

Gill only sighs deeply again in reply.

Was my question really that ignorant? Of course people slander me—I'm a villainess. If anything, I welcome slander. But what's all this about me being fooled?

"You're in a disadvantageous position at this academy, Alicia. And some students were really happy when you stopped coming."

After giving a half-baked explanation, Gill stops himself. Why is he sparing my feelings? I won't mind if he gives me the whole story. In fact, I am in an amazing mood. And why wouldn't I be? I just found out that I was already a stellar villainess two years ago! Why be a self-identified villainess when you can be an official villainess accredited by the masses?

"Basically, what I'm saying is I hope you won't let them make you quit school."

"Rest assured," I tell Gill with a smile. I get the sense that he still doesn't believe me.

Well, now I'm even more curious to see what state the school is in. A picture is worth a thousand words. And so we walk through the academy's front gate for the first time in two years.

After a while, some students start to come into view. The moment they see me, they gasp and whisper in shock. Why *do* people whisper when they have bad things to say? If only they slandered me loud and proud, then I could give them a clapback befitting a baddie.

"Look…isn't that Alicia Williams?" a shrill voice asks.

Even people who didn't know me know my name now.

"Look, she's wearing an eye patch."

"That's gross."

"A curse rotted her eye."

Then I suddenly hear giggling. Incredible. Just an eye patch has doubled the slander. Thank you, eye patch. I glance at Gill. As he walks, his eyes are icy enough to freeze a person in their tracks.

"Look at the leisurely way she's walking—what a disgrace."

"She has a pretty face, but her heart's that of a hideous witch."

"I think Miss Liz is prettier."

"Miss Liz is leagues above her."

"Why, I have yet to meet a person with a heart more beautiful than hers."

"Stop joking around. She doesn't even hold a candle to Miss Liz."

They probably think their gossip went unheard, but I caught every single word. And the more I hear, the wider my smile stretches and the deeper Gill's frown gets. Still, it is refreshing to hear them take the slander that far. Perhaps Liz was right when she said that "hard work will be rewarded."

"I wish she never came back to school."

"Yes, I hope she leaves soon."

"And Albert, Alan, and Henri are all such lovely people, too…"

"And she's the black sheep? Yes, I feel sorry for the Williams family."

"All that useless bitch has got going for her is a pretty face… She's a burden."

I glance at the gossipers. And in the span of one second, their smug smiles tense in fear. I haven't even put any malice into my glance, yet the air grows thick with tension in a flash.

Wow, look at how much fear I can instill in the masses with just one eye… I truly was born to be a baddie!

"Wh-what's your deal?"

"We aren't scared by the likes of you."

A true villainess doesn't have time to waste coddling a mob of NPCs.

I ignore them and keep walking. Our school is needlessly large, so it takes quite a while to reach the lecture halls.

"I can't believe she's back—she forced her way into Prince Duke's bedroom and got expelled!"

"That's right! And I'll bet she spent the past two years messing around with boys."

I stop the moment I hear the rough voices behind me. Just from their tones and the tension in the air, I can sense the tremendous animosity in their stares.

Oooh, since when was I expelled? Rumors are scary things, aren't they? And the reason behind my expulsion is quite impressive…… It's

peak villainess! I wonder how many Villainess Points I've earned so far just this morning.

My days in the cottage were quite strenuous, but some good has come of them. I never dreamed rumors about me could mutate so dramatically.

"You are unworthy of Prince Duke."

"We all know you only drag that boy around you to make yourself more likable."

"You flaunt how *generous* you are, taking that boy into your care."

"I really feel sorry for the boy. You see children as nothing more than tools to be used."

"Prince Duke will see through your flimsy facade in a heartbeat."

I sense a terrifying death glare shooting from Gill. He could blow his fuse at any second.

"Oh, how I wish he had gotten engaged to Miss Liz."

"Me too. Why was Prince Duke betrothed to a *harlot* instead?"

"He's surely regretting it by now."

Whoa……wait just a second. I give Gill a demanding look. He nods quietly, understanding what I meant to ask. When did Duke and I get engaged?!

"Excuse me, may I speak with you for a moment?"

Then suddenly a sweet little voice reaches my ears. I slowly turn my gaze in the direction of the voice. Umm……who is this person?

A pair of reddish-brown eyes are staring intently at me. She looks as if the phrase "neat as a pin" were coined just for her.

"So I think leaving this academy would be the most prudent choice for you."

For a second, I doubt my ears. Never did I expect to receive the same ridicule from a textbook teacher's pet.

"Huh?" Gill breaks the silence before me.

"Yeah!"

"Jane is right!"

"Get the hell out!"

In a flash, the hallway gets rowdy, with everyone jumping on the bandwagon. So this neat-as-a-pin teacher's pet type is Jane, eh? Her goody-goody grin is really getting on my nerves. I really wish she'd wipe that sickening smile off her face.

"The exit is this way," she says, yanking on my arm in an attempt to expel me.

"Hey, Ali—"

No sooner does Gill speak than I shove the girl's hand off my arm with all my might. Damn… It all happened so suddenly, I forgot to put my strength in check.

"Owww…!" Jane growls in a deep voice I would never imagine a girl who looks like her is capable of producing.

Oh dear, she flew really far, didn't she? When you work out as much as I do, I guess you don't know your own strength. Gill just stares dumbly at me. The hallway is so eerily quiet, it is hard to believe it was rowdy just a couple seconds earlier.

"Say, Gill…it will take a lot more than this to get me expelled, right?" I ask him quietly.

No answer. Did I really scare everyone that badly? Okay…then I suppose as a villainess, I shall use this moment to intimidate everyone a little further.

I slowly turn around. Everyone's fear and panic are palpable. Good, good… Those are the stares I've been longing to see.

I look down at the crowd and giggle. "Now, *who-o-o* shall I destroy first?"

I didn't notice until after it came out of my mouth, but that line might have been a tad too gauche. I should have given it more of a villainess-ish flair. Oh well, too late to take it back. In a flash, everyone's face drains of color.

"Fu-fu-fu-fu-fu."

Suddenly, a giggle cuts through the air. I look toward the laughter to see a short girl jump down from a tree and skip over to me. It's best to stay away from rascals like her… That's what my instincts are telling me.

With big, raspberry-colored eyes and pink hair in twin tails…she looks just like a porcelain doll. I don't remember a cute girl like her being in the game. A sweet smell drifts from her.

"Hello, Alicia! I'm Mel. Nice to meet you."

The girl with the sweet little voice leans in close, giving me a good look up and down.

"You're *soooooo* pretty! What dewy skin, what beautiful eyes…er, *eye*, I should say! But even your eye patch is dashingly elegant! But you're *sooo* pretty! I could just eat you up."

Mel leans in unfathomably close as she speaks.

Her aura is just screaming, "Don't touch her. She's dangerous."

And Gill seems to have the same impression as me. He is staring hard at me with a look that says, "Bitch is crazy."

"If you're looking for your brothers, Alicia, you won't find them in class. They're in the student council chamber." Mel giggles again, though it isn't clear what exactly she finds so amusing. "Oh, and from what I saw, the student council is sooo angry at each other right now! Oops! Silly me, the student council president is your fiancé, Ali-Ali, isn't heee?"

Huh? "Ali-Ali"? Is that supposed to be me?

"Things are sooo awkward right now with Vice President Lizzy, you see. Ali-Ali, you sure turned this school upside down, didn't you?!"

Where do you suppose this bolt from the blue came from? And wait a minute, if the student council is at odds because of Liz, could it be that she and Duke didn't—?

"I'm in the same class as Lord Henri and Lord Alan, by the way," the cute girl informs me.

"Huh? You are? So you're eighteen?"





"That's right! Call me Mel, will you?"

She sure doesn't look older than me…and the way she talks makes her seem even younger. Mel turns her attention to Gill. He keeps his guard up and stares at her with a look of intense suspicion.

"You're a cutie, too. What's your name? ……Oops, you can't talk?"

"It's Gill," I answer for him.

"Ooooh."

Mel looks coolly down at Gill. She really does exude an aura of danger with every cell of her body.

"So hey, Ali-Ali, you don't need to be so scared of me," Mel says with a smile.

Then she grabs our hands, and the next thing Gill and I know, the scenery distorts with a jolt. Aha. Teleportation magic. So she can do it, too… I close my eye and hold my breath. Gill catches on quickly and closes his eyes and holds his breath in turn. Being sick in front of her is the last thing I want to do.

When I can tell we are in a different location, I slowly blink my eye open. A sea of bluish-green fills my vision. The air is incredibly fresh. Is this…a forest? I don't sense any people around.

"Where are we?" Gill asks as he turns his head this way and that.

"Don't worry, we're still on school property. But nobody ever comes here, so we can chat to our hearts' content."

"Chat about what, exactly?"

"Come *ooon*, Ali-Ali. You don't have to be scared of me."

"Yes we do," Gill answers for me.

Mel glares at him and huffs. Even her scowl is cute. She doesn't look anywhere close to eighteen.

"Come *on*, it's okay. I really do like Ali-Ali."

"Even though you've never met her?"

"Oh, but I have seen her. She's super famous, after all."

"Is that all?"

"Guess sooo. But believe me, I would do *anything* for Ali-Ali."

"Yeah, I don't buy that."

"What would I have to do to make you trust me?"

The conversation continues just between Gill and Mel. Why does Mel like me so much anyway? We've never even spoken once.

"By the way…what happened to your eye?"

Mel's eyes are glittering with untamed curiosity. I ignore her question and throw another question back at her.

"What about me do you like?"

"You didn't answer *myyy* question! Well, if you don't want to, that's fine. First time I saw you was in the old library. At the time, I thought, *Well, lookee, what a smart girl*, and nothing more, but when I saw you at that tea party……ohhh, you truly gave me the *tingles*."

An amorous look fills Mel's eyes then.

"I detest Liz Cather soooooo much! She really makes my stomach churn!"

Mel's face is getting redder and redder. So even her psyche is that of a child.

"If you're just looking for a bitching partner, I'm leaving," I say, taking a step away.

But Mel's deep, calm voice stops me. "I'm not the only person who hates her."

Her cutesy expression has transformed, and she looks like a completely different person.

"I *love* your realistic way of thinking, Ali-Ali! I fell head over heels for you at that tea party two years ago, but the way you slapped away Jane's hand just now was also *perfection*! Now I've fallen even harder. *She* loves Liz Cather. Worships the ground she walks on." Mel's facial expressions change rapidly while she speaks. "Anyway, I just wanted to make it clear that I'm Team Ali-Ali."

"I didn't come here to make friends," I reject her with a smile.

"What are you doing?"

Suddenly, a familiar voice booms in the distance. It is a clear, lustrous man's voice…

…Duke?

I turn in the direction of his voice. And there stands Prince Duke, even taller and handsomer than before. His jade-colored earrings have multiplied. His aura has reached a new level of sophistication that says, "This is a *man*," and I find it hard to look at him straight on.

Wow. A person can change a lot in two years.

"A sharp jawline, eyes as beautiful as the ocean, handsome dark skin, a muscular physique…" Mel dreamily beholds Duke. Then she raises her voice even higher. "The fiancés' long-anticipated reunion! Come, give us a passionate embrace!"

"Wait a minute, why does everybody keep saying we're affianced? I don't remember becoming engaged to Prince Duke."

A bystander said something similar before, but Duke and Liz are fated to become lovers. So where did such a rumor even come from?

"Regarding our engagement…let me explain that to you, Alicia."

……Huh? Duke and I are really engaged? What, did we become engaged during my two years' confinement in the cottage?

"I missed you," he says.

"G-good to see you again, Your Highness."

I'm supposed to be a baddie—why am I being so awkward? Sure, I wasn't expecting him to say he missed me. What am I even supposed to say here?

"I take it nothing much has changed on your end, Prince Duke?"

"Sure. Alicia…you've gotten even prettier these past two years. But that eye patch… What happened?"

"S-so how do you and Mel know each other?"

Yeah, I'm really bad at dodging the subject, aren't I? Why can't I be smoother?

"We're master and servant," he answers apathetically.

Oh, okay… Wait, she's his servant? Isn't she a little too arrogant for that?

"Umm, *so*—what is this about an engagement?"

"It's just a rumor," he replied. "You stayed the night in my bed, remember? All sorts of rumors sprang up after that. Well…if it were up to me, we'd just make those rumors true."

Duke stares hard at me. I see my reflection in his blue eyes. If I let my guard slip, I just might get sucked into them.

No. A villainess would never falter over a moment like this. So why…why won't my face stop burning?

"Excuse me—is there something on my face?"

It was a stupid question, but the words just blurt out of me. The sweet, intoxicating aura coming from Duke is driving me crazy. Duke says nothing, slowly reaching out. The moment his fingers touch my cheek, my heart slams against my rib cage. Hey, I'm not used to being touched by the opposite sex! I'm a virginal villainess, okay?

"Why the eye patch?" he asks with worry, his hand moving toward it.

"Don't touch it."

I slap his hand away, afraid that he will notice I am missing an eye. My rejection of him causes the air around us to surge with tension.

Argh. Why does it have to be like this? I should just tell him the truth and get it over with. I smile and say with forced cheer, "I gave my eye to someone else."

Duke's eyes go wide.

"You did *what*?!" Mel speaks first, her shrill voice booming like an explosion.

"Again, I gave my—"

But before I can explain, Duke's hand once again cups my cheek. Um, your grip feels a little firm… I slowly look up at Duke.

……I suppose this is what the phrase "a face like thunder" was made for.

Duke glares at me sternly. "Why?"

His voice is terribly deep—it gives me goose bumps all over.

……He's enraged. His wrath consumes me, stealing my words away. What an overpowering wrath it is.

Gill and Mel look just as stunned by Duke as I am.

"You have no idea how I've felt all these years, watching over you from a distance. You played the villainess since you were a little girl—I knew you made a game out of it. But as long as it was what you wanted, I would—"

Duke cuts himself off midway. The wrath completely vanishes from his eyes. But replacing it is an even heavier sadness, which tugs on my heartstrings.

Wait a minute—he knew I was playing the villainess all along…? I have to admit, if anyone were to figure me out, it would be Duke. But how could he just admit it so bluntly like that?

"But, Prince Duke…I never asked you to watch over me."

Before I know it, those words are spilling out of my mouth. I admit, it is cruel of me, but if I were a real villainess…that's what I would say. That badass retort should make me happy…so why does my heart ache?

"Oh…well, sorry."

Duke smiles painfully. I…have never seen that look on him before.

I regret my words so badly, I could die. But I said what I said, and I can't take it back. He quietly releases my cheek and starts to walk away.

In a daze, I stare at his retreating back. I can't get his anguished eyes out of my mind. I never knew the day would come when I would so regret saying something. The villainess I want to become……is nothing like this.

"Ali-Ali, are you an idiot? You're the worst."

Mel glares at me. She speaks in the deepest voice I've heard from her that day. Her words cut my heart like a knife.

I know I'm the worst—and I want to say so, but the words are stuck in my throat. When your mind is in turmoil, it is even harder to speak.

"Though whether or not Duke is actually worried is up to his ego, so I guess there's nothing you can do about it," Mel murmurs in

resignation. “Sorry I called you the worst, Ali-Ali. I didn’t know about your eye.”

Then she suddenly bows to me. This stuns me, and Gill—whose eyes are wide as saucers. An apology was the last thing I was expecting from her. It takes courage to apologize for something you’ve done. It is something so common, yet so many people are incapable of doing it.

“But you know…Duke has been through the *wringer* these past two years, just between you and meee. Not like that is of any concern to *you*, Ali-Ali. But will you let me vent a little?”

I nod.

“So Liz Cather—the first thing she said when she met Duke and his friends was, *Our class system is silly. I want to be friends with you all.* And I guess Lord Albert and Lord Gale probably found that refreshing and novel. Since they’re in the Great Five, everyone’s too scared to speak frankly with them like that, you see.”

Mel’s expression looks like she accidentally ate an insect. Does she really hate Liz that much? Though if I heard that clichéd line, I would be sick, too.

Wait a minute—a bit after the fact, but it’s weird that Mel doesn’t use any honorifics with Duke, yet she addresses everyone else as “Lord”…

“Have you been observing them up close all this time?” Gill asks dubiously.

She smiles proudly. “I have. I’m good at masking my presence.”

She is flashy as a peacock, yet she can turn herself into a shadow when the need arises… People like her are the scariest of all.

“Liz Cather is dense and insensitive, and she worms her way into people’s hearts without restraint, right? Now, curiosity is a virtue, but she can’t read a room for crap. At first, people are weirded out by her worming her way into their hearts without permission, but over time, they like it.”

“So that’s how she keeps winning everybody over—involuntarily, no less.” Gill quickly agrees with Mel’s analysis.

Mel chews on her fingernails and stares bitterly at the ground. Way to ruin a pretty face. All that light, cutesy banter from earlier has mutated into something so deeply venomous.

"Have you never had any direct interactions with Liz?" I ask her.

"No, I've only observed."

"Come to think of it, why didn't Duke fall for Liz Cather?" Gill asks, with his hand on his chin.

"Hmm…well, wasn't it 'cause he saw a more exquisite lady first?" Mel asks, looking at me.

"Huh? You mean me?!"

I am not an orthodox daughter of the nobility—I am well aware of that—but surely I am miles apart from Duke's ideal girl. Perhaps it was a mistake that I made such a strong impression on Duke's brain before he had a chance to meet Liz. But at my core, I've been striving to be a bad girl. So surely, I've established myself as wicked.

"You *know*, Ali-Ali, your philosophy is the opposite of Liz Cather's, right? And yes, the things she says are incredibly virtuous, and her philosophy itself isn't mistaken. But at the end of the day, it's mere idealism."

When I see the smile on Mel's face as she says this, fear fills me.

"She's all talk and no action," Mel continues. "But *you*, Ali-Ali, are a realist who looks toward the future. Some people may see that as cruelty, but you walk the walk… Imagine, just *casually* visiting Roana Village regularly."

"Huh?"

Mel gasps softly and shuts her mouth. Then she looks at me with a mixture of embarrassment and remorse.

"Mel…how did you know that?" Gill asks.

"Well…"

"Did Duke tell you? An attendant is easily influenced by their master, so you have a rebellious spirit toward Liz Cather. And that's also why you like Alicia, even though you've never spoken to her before."

Gill speaks as if this were all self-evident. Is this guy really only eleven?

"Ding, ding, ding! Correct! Wow, Gill, you are *smart*! After all, it was *my* master who was the first to find out *youuu* were from Roana Village! And well…the look on his face when he found out was *quite* astounding. He was *tormented* with worry, I'm sure, but he never shows a glimpse of that when Ali-Ali is around, *amirite*?"

Mel chuckles gleefully. Both her emotions and her manner of speech really do change on a dime. Of all the characters I've met so far, this one's got the most depth for sure.

Why she wasn't a character in the otome game remains an utter mystery.

She is quite quirky, but she would totally have had a whole fandom devoted to her.

"He was worried *all the time* that you might be in danger, Ali-Ali. Oop! Don't worry, we weren't spying on you or anything. Considering his disposition, I was impressed by how hands-off Duke was when he watched over you. Though, well…I agree it was strange for him to call it *watching over* you when you never asked for his protection."

Those last few words…they really hurt. I totally deserved it, but still.

"About a year after you stopped coming to school, I think? That's when there was a sudden uptick in people slandering you, Ali-Ali. They probably all thought you weren't coming back."

Mel begins to tell all, without mercy.

……I think Mel and I are gonna get along just fine.

"And the more things got that way, the worse Duke's mood became. He got to where he never smiled anymore…and that's when *Liz Cather* made her move on him. She was all, 'Let's do tea together sometime!' Or, like, 'I just want to see you smile.'"

Those lines are very Liz-like. Ten out of ten. Top-tier heroine.

"It's *exactly* the way you're imagining it right now, Ali-Ali. Duke gave her the coldest shoulder in history."

"But Liz Cather convinced herself that Duke's ill temper was caused by some sort of sadness or loneliness, so she just pushed harder, trying to get him to open up his heart."

From the way Gill effortlessly adds on to Mel's story, it sounds like he was an eyewitness.

Mel looks at Gill with wide eyes. "You knew about that?"

"Nope, purely conjecture. I just figured that's what Liz Cather would do."

"Whoaaa."

"But Liz Cather's insensitivity angered Duke, and now the student council is split between Duke loyalists and Liz loyalists."

"*Very* astute!!"

Mel now seems extremely interested in Gill. And I don't find it particularly unpleasant watching her attitude toward him shift before my eye. In fact, it feels good, watching her valor come to the surface.

Just my imagination, but I'm sure that if Liz were to find out Gill is from Roana Village, she would look upon him with pity and handle him with kid gloves. Meanwhile, Mel looks at him with curiosity. And she seems to be the type of person who would ignore someone's circumstances and let herself like them if the feeling is there.

She said that she likes me, but she made that judgment after a lot of information gathering and observation.

"Hey, Mel, do you know where Prince Duke is right now?" I ask.

"This time of day? He's probably at the terrace of the dining hall only accessible to the student council, having his lunch. Ali-Ali, are you gonna go see him?"

"Yes, I suppose. There's some things I'd like to tell him and questions I'd like to ask."

And with that, I turn to leave the forest. Even though I haven't gone to the academy for long, I've been here long enough to know my way to that terrace.

As I walk, Mel's presence vanishes. Gill also notices. If she can mask her presence like this in an instant…then she really could just

pop up anywhere, couldn't she?

"That reminds me. I wonder what magic element Mel uses…," I murmur to myself.

"Earth magic," a voice answers me from the wind.

So…she's still close. And did she say earth magic? That's a first for me!

Earth's magic properties are quite amusing. Users can record people's voices, make themselves invisible… Those have nothing to do with earth, though. Well, this otome game has a lot of quirks. That's why earth magic just seems to do whatever the game needs it to do…



The stares of the student council are as sharp as blades. They aren't slandering me to my face—likely an aftereffect of sending that girl flying earlier.

"Are we really going in there?" Gill asks with a tense sneer as we stand at the entrance to the dining hall.

I didn't realize the population density was so high in the dining hall. This might even be the busiest spot on campus. Marching here on impulse sounded like a good idea at the time…but enduring the collective stares of so many people while I make my way to Duke will be quite an ordeal.

"Yes, we're going in," I say with vigor.

Resigned, Gill nods bravely. The moment we enter the dining hall, everyone stops talking and stares at us. Oh my, I didn't realize the effects would be so immediate. As we walk slowly through the dining hall, the students drift away from us, organically opening a path. This is incredible… I feel like a queen.

I keep a look of steel on my face while I nod proudly in my heart. The stares are split into two categories: shock and scorn. To be looked upon in such a way by people whom I've never even met—I truly am extraordinary. I don't mind if they talk, but everyone remains silent. They have stopped eating, too, only to stare at me.

I'll bet nobody realizes just how their stares are filling my villainess heart with a sense of accomplishment.

"It's like I'm a celebrity." I whisper to Gill so nobody else can hear.

Gill sighs and whispers back, "It's not *like* you're a celebrity—you're a *mega*-celebrity."

"But I was gone for two years. How did I become so renowned?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"If only I were renowned as a *villainess*…"

"Just a hunch…but I think that *is* what you're renowned for."

Well, I have a hunch that Gill is quite exasperated with me. Silly boy, you're years younger than I.

"Over there…isn't that Duke?" Gill gives my skirt a gentle tug.

I slowly turn my gaze in the direction Gill is pointing.

……The second floor? Mel said he was on the terrace…but he is just on the second floor.

A big, lush sofa, a gorgeous chandelier, elegant music…only the chosen nobles can enter there. But my, what a familiar assortment of faces. Look at how grown-up everyone's become in the past two years… And the way they look at me has changed quite a bit as well, it seems.

You know, most big brothers wouldn't look at their sister with such contempt. Well, I kid. They're looking at me more in shock than in contempt. I mean, they haven't seen me in two years, and now I'm wearing an eye patch. Of course they're shocked. Though Duke's shock seems to be for a different reason. I suppose he wasn't expecting me to come here after what I said to him earlier.

I stand up tall and walk slowly toward the staircase. And I carefully walk up each step, one by one. How will they all look when we exchange our first words? I take the final step up the staircase.

I curtsy. “Long time no see, everyone,” I say, a big smile on my face.

“Hey, Ali, what’s with the eye patch?” Curtis asks cheerfully, pretending not to read the room.

My brother Albert is the complete opposite of Curtis. “What are *you* doing here?” he demands with a deep frown.

“Oh my, is that any way to greet your little sister after two years? Surely this reunion calls for a hug!”

Albert’s face twists with scorn.

What sort of person have I become in their hearts? I suppose, going off the vibe at school today, they’ve heard all sorts of nasty rumors about me by now, which I welcome. So I have to be quite a horrendous villainess in their minds.

……But, man, these gentlemen’s sex appeal—their charm—it’s astounding. That’s romanceable characters in an otome game for you. They just keep getting more and more beautiful, don’t they? They’ll become the biggest Adonis sculptures in history, I suppose.

“We’re in no mood to play your games. Is it true you knocked Jane unconscious?” Albert demands.

“Jane is my dearest friend,” Liz adds.

Her voice is so strong and clear. She sounds quite angry on her friend’s behalf. Well, her friend was assaulted. Of course she’s angry.

“Your dearest *friend*, eh?” I sneer.

“Yes, she’s my friend!” Liz proclaims, even louder.

“But she isn’t *my* friend. This was between me and Jane—aren’t you barking up the wrong tree, speaking out to me?”

Her mood dashed by my diss, she blushes and glares at me. “But she’s still my friend. I can’t remain silent!”

“……Now, I could understand *her* getting back at me. But I don’t need another one of your lectures, Liz.” I take a quick breath, and with a broad smile on my face, I continue, “Be a *dear* and stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Liz’s eyes open wide as she stares at me in disbelief.

"What a horrible thing to say," Gale says, shooting the most bombastic death glare at me.

"You vulgar little bitch," Eric spits out.

"Oh my, that's no way to address a lady."

"*Lady*, my ass."

"My, how you've changed since our little outing to town all those years ago."

"No, *you've* changed."

"Have I?" I tilt my head coquettishly, not dropping my smile. A quintessentially baddie move. That earns me some Villainess Points for sure. "Anyway, I've come to see Prince Duke."

With that, I march straight to Duke. He is sitting on the sofa, an overwhelmingly threatening aura wafting from him. He has more than enough aura for one man.

"What do you want?"

"I just thought you might be sulking over the hurtful words I said to you." Duke grimaces. "Do the words *misplaced kindness* ring a bell?" I ask curtly, staring Duke right in the eye.

Gill probably assumed I came here to apologize to Duke. He is looking up at me in shock. This is what the phrase "lost for words" was made for.

"I was, however, honestly happy to hear you were worried about me. So I thank you for that."

I spit this out before Duke can get a word in, and I slowly lower my head. Even I feel sorry about what I said. You shouldn't be rude to somebody who is just worried about your well-being.

I don't know what sort of expression Duke is making. But I do sense nerves and surprise in the air. Then I see the shadow of Duke's hand reaching out to me.

"I have one more thing to say…," I murmur quietly, staring at the floor. And before his hand can rest atop my head, I forcefully grab his lapel with one hand.

……Wow, men's bodies are much firmer than I imagined. Duke looks at me with wide eyes. He does not yet comprehend what is

happening.

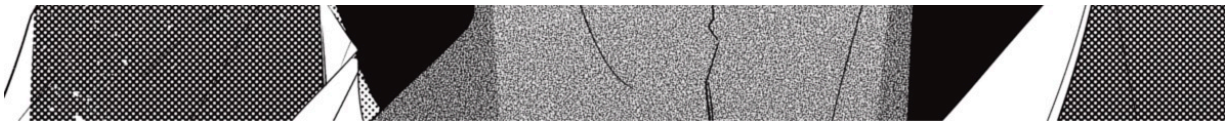
"If you want to watch over me…why not tell me so? The strong, silent type is not *my* type. A man has to tell me what he wants; otherwise, I won't have any idea."

Duke remains stiff as a statue, staring at me.

I smirk. "If it were me, I wouldn't watch over you from afar… I'd watch over you by your side."

And with that, I release Duke's lapel. Leaving him in a dazed state, and sensing the painful stares of everyone else penetrating my entire body, I begin to descend the staircase. Once I reach the bottom step, I hear laughter from above. It is like a burst of laughter. I have never heard Duke laugh like that before. I slowly lift my gaze. There he stands, his elbow resting on the banister as he looks down at me. His eyes are overflowing with joy and pride.





"Alicia—from now on, I'm telling you every thought that comes to my mind. Brace yourself."

Duke smirks devilishly…like a beast who'd spotted his prey.

"This is a side of Duke I've never seen," Finn murmurs, staring at Duke.

"Wowww, Ali's the best," Curtis says, his shoulders shaking and his eyes brimming with tears.

……Do you really have to laugh that hard?

"Well, the strongest woman in the world is watching over me, by my side. That's reassuring."

"Gee, I wish Ali would watch over me, too."

"They're teasing you, Alicia." Gill chuckles beside me.

I am about to retort that he is teasing me, too, but I shut those words in my heart, turn my back on Duke and his friends, and march quickly toward the dining hall exit.

Duke says nothing more to me.

For a moment, I feel a turbulent wave go through my entire body, but I have no idea what sort of expression is on his face. If I turn around to look, I'll be ceding ground. Be strong, Alicia.

A while after I left the dining hall, I bite my lip as a thought hits me.

……Wait a minute, I forgot to ask Duke about Will.

I stop in my tracks, press a hand to my forehead, and exhale deeply.

Duke's adoring gaze on Alicia captivated every student in the dining hall. Everyone was charmed by it, boy and girl alike, and even Gill was stuck to the spot. Only Alicia was unaware of Duke's eyes, so full of tenderness and love for her.



"Alicia."

I hear Duke's voice behind me as I am about to step into a classroom. I slowly turn around to see Duke and Curtis standing side by side. What an eye-catching pair. Their auras are just leagues apart from normies. They are used to the reactions of those around them, but I want to get away from the squeeing as soon as possible.

"What is it?" I ask, forcing a smile to my face.

"You're going to take classes with us from now on," Duke says.

"Excuse me?"

Curtis adds, "You came here as a special admission to begin with, Ali, and you're smart. Don't worry, you'll fit right in."

Absolutely no way in hell. I can't use magic right now. Besides, if I'm in their class, won't Liz be there, too? I can't afford to cause a scene in front of her.

"No thank you." And with a big smile, I turn to leave.

"So were you lying when you said you'd watch over me by my side?" Duke smirks.

……Right, I did say that on the spur of the moment.

"You aren't a liar, are you, Ali?"

Lord Curtis… You said that with the full intention of taking advantage of my personality quirks, didn't you?

"But isn't it improper for somebody to skip ahead to the final year?" Gill asks, offering me a lifeline.

Gill! I thank thee! That's right, I've been out for two whole years. It would just be ridiculous for me to jump ahead five grades out of nowhere. Besides, if I'm in the final year, that means Albert and Gale will be there. That's a sure ticket to Turbulence City.

"Okay then, will you stay if it's because I want you by my side?" Duke asks.

Excuse me?! My jaw drops.

Epic fail. A villainess should never let her emotions show. And is it just me, or has Duke's entire persona just collapsed?

"Aren't we being a little impudent?" I ask incredulously.

"I'm just speaking my mind."

"……I preferred you silent."

"Did you say something?"

"No, not at all."

Ahhh…I brought this on myself, didn't I? That's what I get for opening my big mouth. Then again, I don't want him to think I'm a woman who doesn't take ownership of her actions…but isn't this whole situation just a little too unorthodox? What the hell am I supposed to do?!

"Never mind. Just come."

And with that, Duke swoops me over his shoulder.

"Huh?"

This position again? Are you really going to carry me over your shoulder in front of all our peers? My poor villainess pride…

"Put me down!"

"But we've done this before."

"The place and circumstances are different, you moron!"

"Good. Keep talking like that. Never speak politely to me again."

"Why do you keep ordering me around?!"

For all my desperate struggling, Duke is showing no signs of relaxing his hold on me.

"Curtis—we're going."

"Copy that… You wanna be carried, too, little one?" Curtis asks Gill.

Gill vigorously shakes his head no.

Hey, Gill, don't betray me like that. A little help?

"You're kidnapping me, Your Highness!"

"Not so polite."

"But I never said I would obey you, Prince Duke."

"But your *dearest* Liz is in that class, too," Duke says, a devilish smile on his lips.

……He’s annoying me deliberately. I never knew he was so demonic. I mean, I got hints of it before, but still… Could it be—he knows I can’t use magic right now? Duke is level 100. I wouldn’t put it past him to notice. I must avoid being near Liz at any cost. If shit goes down, I’ll bring shame to the title of villainess!

“Um…if things get serious, will you have my back, Your Highness?” I ask him vaguely.

“But I thought you liked fighting your own battles.”

It seems Duke is onto my little scheme.

……I never thought I’d regret a proclamation as hard as I do now. It ain’t easy bein’ a baddie.

“Don’t worry, Duke will come to your rescue,” Curtis whispers in my ear.

“Enough of this. Put me down.”

“You really are headstrong, aren’t you?” Saying this, Duke finally lets me down. And of course, this is only after we are in his classroom.

Oh dear…we’re garnering a frightful lot of attention. But when the most popular boy in school is carrying the most hated girl in school over his shoulder, it’s inevitable…

“What’s Alicia doing here?” Albert is the first to speak, staring at me from his seat in the back of the classroom.

This looks like a lecture hall on college campuses in my past life. Such a big, open room… And from a quick cursory glance, it looks like the farther back you go, the more elite you are.

“Alicia is going to take classes with us from now on,” Duke answers apathetically.

Was Duke always this emotionless with his friends?

“And the boy, too?” Gale asks, with a dubious glance at Gill.

Gill returns his gaze, undaunted.

……Real talk, I’d love to disappear from this place pronto. I don’t think I’ll retain any of the material if I have to learn in this

environment.

"Come, come, sit down, class," comes a soft voice from behind us.

I know that voice… I slowly turn around. This man was the teacher who gave me Liz's essays to review two years ago. He is a little, plump elderly man with a kind face and round spectacles.

"Professor John?" I ask.

He looks at me in surprise. "Oh, you remember me?" he asks, smiling warmly at me.

Oooh…this is a new experience. Nobody's ever smiled at me like that in this school before.

"Professor John, Alicia is going to take classes with us from now on," Duke says, looking Professor John in the eye.

He's not asking—he's proclaiming. I don't suppose he could have turned the intimidation down a notch? This professor isn't exactly a stubborn old fart—old man, that is. Professor John is somebody most people would consider an old man. Thinking about it, I call Will an "old man." But that is only because when I first met him, I was so young that he seemed quite old to me.

"Understood," Professor John says cordially, approving the class addition.

……I wish he'd said no. My fleeting hopes were dashed in an instant.

Duke grips me by the wrist and begins to walk me up the stairs to the very back of the classroom, where the sons of the Great Five sit. (Though as a special exception, Liz is sitting there, too.) Ugh. I don't wanna go. But I'm not running away. (If I did, Duke would just catch me anyway.) I can feel the collective stare of every single person in the classroom. I sure have been the center of attention today, haven't I?

Duke escorts me straight to my seat…and what an uncomfortable seat it is. Stares from the students in front stab into me every few seconds, Gale and Albert give me the evil eye, Liz gives me a dubious stare, and Curtis and Duke look on in amusement—

meanwhile, Gill's eyes sparkle as he earnestly listens to Professor John's lecture…

"All right, who knows the answer to this problem?" Professor John asks the class.

A smattering of hands rise here and there. Liz is one of the hand raisers. The teacher's pet.

"I do," Gill says, raising his hand beside me.

No way. I shoot Gill a look of disbelief. Hey, do you realize this lecture is meant for people nine years your senior?

"Oh, and who might you be?"

"I'm Gill, sir."

Professor John gives Gill a look of surprise. A sea of eyes swarm onto him.

"He only raised his hand to show off."

"A kid would never know the answer."

"I guess that bitch's smugness rubbed off on him."

"He's disrupting class."

Voices trickle in here and there, but Gill pays them no mind.

"All right then, Gill, what herbs cure Spot Sickness?"

Spot Sickness is a condition where green spots appear inside the body, eventually killing the infected. But its cause is unknown. What's more, the herbs Professor John is asking about are highly valued.

"Madi, sir," Gill answers calmly. "Madi is a flower believed to grow on top of cliffs, and only a few can be picked once per year. Incidentally, Laval is the nation with the most cases of Spot Sickness. In other words, Spot Sickness is likely to have originated in Laval."

Gill's gray eyes sparkle as he talks steadily. He has the attention of everyone in the room. Professor John's eyes are wide as he stares at Gill—he probably hadn't expected the boy to touch on the source of Spot Sickness as well. Oh, Gill, you little rascal. When did you get so smart?

"Correct. Spot Sickness is believed to have originated in Laval. I'm impressed, son." Professor John smiles softly. Then he speaks to the

class. “Laval has the Dagon River running through it. It’s the world’s longest and also the world’s dirtiest river. It’s my personal theory that bacteria unique to the Dagon River caused the first case of Spot Sickness.”

Gill is not a noble. He can’t use magic, and he is incredibly self-aware of his own shortcomings. That is why he makes every effort to be at least the smartest person in the room.

“Gill sure is a wonder,” Curtis says, looking at the boy.

Wonder doesn’t even begin to describe him. By the time he reaches twenty, he will probably be the smartest scholar in the entire world. The world’s biggest baddie and the world’s greatest scholar—a match made in heaven, if I do say so myself. I can’t stop smiling at the thought.

“And the student becomes the master,” I murmur quietly, looking at Gill.

“What’s that mean?” Gill asks, staring at me blankly.

“I’m not sure,” I say vaguely, a thin smile on my lips.



After class, Gill and I finally make it to a secluded bench to discuss our plans for the rest of the week.

“I guess going home would be a terrible idea,” I say.

“I have a feeling somebody’s already told your father you’re out,” Gill says.

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

“If you don’t want to go home, why don’t you stay at Duke’s place for a while?”

“Excuse me?”

We aren’t even really engaged. That’s just all kinds of wrong.

But there is a serious look in Gill's eye. "I think Duke would be understanding of your circumstances… Besides, shouldn't you give being engaged to Duke a serious thinking over?"

"All right—Prince Duke and I would never get engaged."

"……I wouldn't be too sure," Gill whispers.

"Alicia!"

Hmm? That voice sounds familiar… But before I can see who it is, someone flings his arms around me. I guess this is how touching reunions are supposed to go. Though we did technically see each other in the dining hall before this. But my goodness, that's a strong hug.

"Um…you're hurting me, Henri."

When I say this, Henri loosens his hold on me. Oh, we're still hugging? Okay.

"You scared me back there," Henri says, his arms still solid around me. It is clear just how terribly worried he has been about me. He slowly releases me and gives my face a good looking over.

……Did somebody grow a little taller? I got taller, too, but Henri grew quite a bit.

"You've grown," Henri says, patting my head.

"Were you really that worried about me?" I ask.

"Well, duh. Though I guess I wasn't anywhere near as worried as Duke."

"Prince Duke, you say? So it is true…"

Duke has never shown any indication of that before. We didn't even have an emotional hugging scene…

"He worried about you more than anyone else—you can quote me on that."

You know, when we met in the forest, even though he acted calm, his breathing was erratic, and his hair was a little messed up… I suppose he ran over to me. At the time, I was surprised to see him, and I was distracted by Mel, so I guess I didn't really notice.

"Never mind that—there are some crazy rumors about you going around, Alicia."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"So Duke is going to nip the rumors in the bud and—"

"Nip the rumors in the bud, you say?!"

"Easy, let me finish. What do you think Duke did to stop everyone from slandering you?"

……The unexpected news-in-the-form-of-a-question. How would I know that? Then again…since Duke is rather kind at heart, I don't suppose he would do anything too terrifying.

"Did he have the main offenders suspended, perhaps?" I ask.

Henri snorts. "If only it had been that tame."

"His kindness stops at you, Alicia," Gill cuts in stoically. "He may not look it, but Duke is coldhearted—to everyone except those he trusts."

"Gill, you're exaggerating. I don't think Prince Duke is *that* heartless."

"Ohhh, so that's how you see him, Alicia? The first time I saw Duke, a chill ran down my spine," Henri admits.

"Was it because…he was impossibly beautiful?" I ask, genuinely baffled.

Henri snorts again. "Well, yeah, that was part of it…but it was the shockingly mature expression on his face for a kid. And his gaze was so cold, he could freeze anyone with one look."

Well, he didn't give off that impression when I first saw him.

"But aren't you in his circle of friends, Henri?"

"I guess. Though it did take some time before he would even speak to us."

"Isn't his friendship with Albert and the older ones still superficial?" Gill asks.

"I assume so. Duke's a gentleman, so he doesn't let his anger show, but whenever they slandered you, Alicia, his gaze was simply *murderous*."

"By the way, what *did* happen to the people slandering me?" I ask, realizing my previous question still hasn't been answered.

Henri pauses a moment, then his face twists as he answers, "They both stopped coming to school. Ever since, not many people would say anything bad about you in front of Duke."

"Huh?"

"Even Al and his friends stopped saying anything bad about you around him."

They stopped coming to school… What in the world did Duke do to them?

For that matter, it's impressive that he's still as popular as he is. I guess pretty faces really do rule the world. Since I played the game, I do have faint memories of Duke's traumatic past. I've forgotten the specific details, though…

Didn't he gradually open up his heart more as he fell for the heroine? Wait a minute… Isn't my involvement taking the story off course? What if he winds up with me, the villainess? If that happens…will Duke keep holding on to his inner demons?

"But today, I got to see Duke laugh for the first time in who knows how long," Henri says with a merry smirk.

"I have many questions…but I suppose I'll get answers faster if I just ask the man himself."

With a smile at Henri, I turn to walk away.

"By the way, Ali, what happened to your eye?"

"You ask that *now*?!" Gill butts in before I can answer.

"I kind of missed my chance to ask," Henri says.

Maybe I should tell Henri the truth…or maybe I should keep it a secret. Mel and Duke know the truth…but I doubt they'll tell anybody.

"If you don't want to tell me what happened, you don't have to," Henri says. "Your eye patch looks really cool," he adds with a chuckle.

"I made it."

"You did, Gill? Crafty."

"Aren't I? And that Alicia, even with one eye, she's got presence," Gill says, tactfully trying to steer the conversation in another

direction.

……Nobody's here right now. If I'm going to tell him, it's now or never. And I'm sure Henri would understand my circumstances.

I look Henri in the eye and say, "I gave my eye to somebody else."

His eyes go wide for a moment, but soon, he is lightly patting my head. "You're always full of surprises, Ali. If it's something you decided, I won't argue."

"That's what I like about you, Henri."

"Why, thank you. But mark my words…Duke will be furious."

"He was furious… Rather, he was exasperated."

"You told him?!" Henri yells.

"That's why I went to see him in the dining hall earlier."

Henri stares at me for a while in thought. I suppose from the way I'm behaving, it is difficult for him to imagine me telling Duke about my eye then… Looking back, that was actually quite a daring way for me to act with a boy in public. Who grabs a prince's lapel? A villainess, of course! That alone would be enough to carve my name in hist— No, no, it's not that easy.

"So that's why Duke was so moody." Henri smirks in understanding.

"Well, I'll just be on my way," I say.

"Wait, one more thing." He grabs my arm before I can walk away. "Did you make it to level ninety?" he asks, looking me in the eye.

Argh… That was the one question I didn't want you to ask me!

"What did you ask me, Dear Brother?"

"Did you make it to level ninety?"

"Somebody leveled nine trees? Wow, that's impressive."

Gill shoots me a look, letting me know how painfully cringey I am being. Hey, I know it's a lost cause. But how am I supposed to answer him? I'm not ready!

"Hey, Ali, stop stalling."

"I made it to level…ninety-one, Brother."

"Oh, so you did make it. Thank goodness… Wait, ninety-one?"

There's not much difference between 90 and 91. I don't see what's so shocking about it.

"Except I…… Never mind, forget it."

"Except you—what?"

"Oh, look! It's Duke."

"Gill, I'm not stupid enough to fall for that."

"No, he's really here!"

Gill's voice sounds tense as he points behind me. Henri glances over to where Gill is pointing (naturally, he holds my arm tightly so I can't escape). I slowly turn around with him…… It's true. Duke really is walking toward us. I have questions to ask him, but escape is my priority now!

Okay…desperate times call for desperate measures.

I stomp on Henri's foot with all my might. He lets out a silent shriek and falls to his knees. I am wearing heels, so that must've hurt…

"Gill! We're going!"

The moment Henri's hand leaves my arm, I yell at Gill and begin to run. He hurriedly follows behind.

"Gill! Faster!"

Since Gill is holding a bunch of books, he is running slowly. He also isn't nearly as strong as I am, since he doesn't work out regularly.

"Ali! Hold up!"

I hear Henri yelling behind me. I also could swear I hear Duke laughing softly, too. I run over to Gill and grab him, then hoist him over my shoulder. It is much faster this way. I don't have time to care about everyone staring at us.

"Whoa, Ali? Let me down!"

"Just hold still! If they catch us, we're done!"

"……I don't believe this."

I hear Gill's deep sigh behind me as I run out of the magic academy with him in my arms. Out of context, I probably look like a kidnapper. That will give me bonus Villainess Points for sure! Once I make sure Henri is no longer following us, I set Gill down.

"What's the plan now? Walk all the way home?"

"I suppose so."

"Alicia……are you stupid?" Gill looks at me with a gaze that surpasses frustration and enters the realm of defeat.

"Why am I stupid? I found us a way out of there—if anything, you should commend me on my ingenuity."

"But if we go home, once Arnold finds us, we're really done."

"Do I have to spell it out?! We'll just spend the next week back in the cottage."

"But I told Arnold you were leaving the cottage today. Wouldn't that be pointless?"

"The cottage has a lock—we'll be fine! Yes, that's right… Commence Operation Stealthy Living!"

"How…distasteful! I think you knocked a couple screws loose during those two years alone in that cottage."

A rather sick burn if I may say so. Okay, the name of my strategy is cringey, I'll give you that, but it's a pretty solid plan. My cottage even has a proper bath… Really, this is the simplest and safest plan we've got. It's our last resort, in fact.

"I'm just…so exhausted," Gill mutters.

"Me too."

Little by little, we talk it through as we walk on our own feet to our home for the week.



"I forgot to visit Old Man Will yesterday," I remark.

"Right. Well, it was dark by the time we got home, and we were exhausted."

We somehow manage to make it back to school the next day without my father seeing us…but the idea of us avoiding him for the

whole week is laughable. If Albert or Alan told him about what happened yesterday at school…

Besides, our driver wouldn't keep his mouth shut, either. He would definitely tell Father. But it would take an ungodly amount of time to get to school without riding in a carriage. I work out, so I could make it, but I'd feel bad for Gill. Still, I'm gonna keep up this Avoid Father Challenge as long as I can!

"Lady Alicia."

Just as I'm pumping myself up for a silent challenge against my father, a soft, high-pitched voice breaks into my thoughts. I turn around to see an unfamiliar girl standing behind me. She is like the quintessential NPC. There is nothing noteworthy about her. Brown hair braided in two plaits, dark brown eyes, and her face is…… average.

"What is it?"

"Um…I want you to come with me for a minute."

"Excuse me?"

"Like I said! Um—er…"

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why do I have to come with you?"

My question makes the girl fidget quietly in place.

Okay, this is just way too sketchy. I don't care how curious I am; I'm not following some rando like an accident-prone disaster heroine.

"Tell me why," I prompt.

"Umm…well…"

"You can't answer me? When you ask a favor of someone, you need to be clear and forthright."

"……I'm sorry."

"Your apology isn't helping, either. I'm asking for your reason."

"No! Um…… Excuse me!" And with that, the girl runs away.

What the hell was that about? Did somebody force her to do that?

"……Her extreme ambiguity made her even more suspicious," Gill says.

"I don't think we need to read too much into this. She looked feebleminded anyway."

Without paying the girl another thought, we both head toward the school building.



I am able to escape pursuit and spend the entire morning in classes without Duke and his posse. The collective stares from my peers are definitely overwhelming…but it is better that than taking classes with the big kids. Evasive action will be my life until my magic returns.

"Gill, you can still take classes with the older students if you want," I offer.

"No, I'm staying with you, Alicia," he answers with a smile.

When we arrive at the dining hall, once again, everyone's eyes lock onto us. While their gazes were shocked yesterday, today they are scornful.

……What's this? Animosity…rage…contempt…a variety of emotions are being hurled my way. Now, had I done something worthy of their eye daggers, that would have been all well and good, but I don't recall doing anything that extreme. So I want to know the reason for it.

However, as a villainess, I welcome their hatred! If there were a Villainess Certification Exam in this world, I would absolutely earn top marks.

"She's here."

The whispering voices of the girls are clearly filled with hostility.

"You can't answer me?"

Suddenly, I hear my voice coming from somewhere. It was the line I delivered earlier to that NPC.

"You can't answer me?"

My condescending venomous voice echoes through the dining hall on repeat.

……Listening to one's voice over and over sure is embarrassing, isn't it? This must be magic, right? Voice recording…what magic was that again? Agh, it's not coming to me. How could I forget? I need to study harder.

"I don't know who you are, but will you please stop that?" I ask, forcing my lips into a slight smile. I glance at the second floor, but nobody is up there today.

Whoever the trickster is, it would have been pragmatic of them to pull their little stunt when Liz and her posse are present.

"Why should it be stopped? You said those words, didn't you? You should be loud and proud about them!"

It is one of the girls who took note of my arrival. She's giving major A-student vibes—definitely Liz's friend. But more to the point, why does this person I haven't spoken to before feel the need to complain?

With her bangs in an extreme side part, her hair is in a ponytail below her ears…and it is a savage mop of split ends.

"What're *you* staring at?"

"Oh dear, do forgive me. I was just thinking to myself, what a *charmless* girl you are."

"*What* did you just call me?!" she yells, her eyebrows shooting upward.

……My eardrums are gonna burst. What an earsplitting voice she has. Is that her endgame? Making me go deaf?

The mood in the air shifts from scorn and animosity to a burning desire to make me disappear from the school altogether. The greatest villainesses in history all had to pass trials like this, I'm sure. I can't let them outdo me.

"What are you doing?"

Then I hear Liz's voice behind me.

What timing! How fantastic! Yes, that's right, this is the sort of moment when a heroine makes her entrance. I'm sure the game devs are ecstatic about this.

"Wipe that grin off your face, Alicia," Gill whispers to me. He has discarded his exasperated look for a sober one.

The usual suspects are standing in a line behind Liz. And all the girls are squeeing their hearts out at their grand entrance, just like they always do.

"What's the problem?" Liz asks.

The girl who yelled earlier pushes me aside and runs over to Liz. And with flirtatious glances at the hotties accompanying her, she pleads her case to Liz.

"Oh, Miss Liz! She said the most *horrible* things to me! She was so mean to Marika, too!"

I really wish you wouldn't gawk at the boys. Didn't anyone ever teach you to look people in the eye when you talk to them? I hope you realize just how disrespectful you're being to the wonderful Liz you worship. Besides…pointing the finger of judgment at others is just cringe.

"Hey—*you*—before you go condemning others, I suggest you fix your own rotten attitude first."

I glare at her as I speak. She flinches in fear, but she immediately finds her voice again.

"Marika! Play it for us one more time!" the A-student barks at the girl who approached me earlier.

"What?! Oh! Um, okay!"

So the sketchy girl's name is Marika. That's an unusual name in this world.

"You can't answer me?"

My voice rings out from who knows where.

"……I'm sorry."

"Your apology isn't helping, either."

It is the conversation from earlier. But it is being broadcast with cuts in convenient places.

"Just fancy! Not accepting an apology."

"Listen to her harsh tone! She backed her into a corner."

I understand why everyone is staring. The recording was edited to make it sound like I was bullying her. Not a bad scheme. This girl's pretty good!

"Mel." Duke's clear voice cuts through the air.

……Huh? Mel?

"Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee."

Then I hear that slightly creepy laugh again. And with it comes a gust of sugary sweetness.

"At your *serviiice*!"

Then Mel is suddenly beside me, laughing. Gill grunts in disgust.

"And you are…?" Liz tilts her head in confusion.

The look in Mel's eyes changes sharply as she sidles over to Liz. "Awww, do you remember me? But we only met that one *tiiime*! Mel is *shook*!"

Even though the actual words she's saying are cordial……why do they send chills shooting down my spine?

Her voice is cheerful yet hostile. And most hostile of all is her gaze, which is uncannily sharp.

If death glaring were a sport, she would win it, hands down. She has such a doll-like face with big round eyes, but when angered, she looks like a demon.

"Awww, don't give me that perplexed look, *darrrling*. Once I've fulfilled my duty, I'll make myself scarce *immediately*." With a big smile on her face, Mel continues, "You *seeeee*, I happened to hear that *whole* conversation in person." She wiggles her hips tauntingly at everyone.

"Just spit it out," Duke pesters her coldly.

Mel pouts at his harsh tone. "Meh! Okay, okay."

"What is it?"

"Um…I want you to come with me for a minute."

"Excuse me?"

"Like I said! Um—er…"

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why do I have to come with you? Tell me why."

"Umm…well…"

"You can't answer me? When you ask a favor of someone, you need to be clear and forthright."

The conversation between myself and that girl plays in full through the dining hall.

Wow, she replayed each and every word… I'm impressed.

"That's unique to earth magic," Gill murmurs beside me.

I see. Earth magic sure is incredible. But…it doesn't feel at all like earth magic. Hey, devs, shouldn't you have put more care into your game's lore?

"What even *is* this?!" the girl beside Liz screams, her voice shaking.

A murmur buzzes through the dining hall. The air of animosity shifts from me to the girl.

"Awww, why're you so upset? Hee-hee-hee."

For a split second, Mel looks like the devil. The eyes of an angel, the heart of a devil…

"If you're *gonna* use this spell, you've *gotta* make sure there's nobody else nearby who can! Oop, then again, I was invisible, so you *couldn't* have. Tee-hee!"

With a cute little giggle, Mel sticks out her tongue. Nobody can keep up with her anymore.

"That's enough, Mel," Duke says calmly. He is probably the only person in this situation who could speak to her then.

"*Ugh!* Duke, you *really* need to work on your people skills."

And with her cheeks puffed out in anger, Mel vanishes on the spot.

……She's like a ghost.

"She's just like a ghost," Gill says, his eyes a bit wide.

Oooh, great minds think alike.

"What is the meaning of all this? Explain," Liz demands of the girl. She sounds a little angry.

Marika suddenly scowls, shaking in panic. You could never ensnare me, honey.

"But, um…Miss Liz…she…"

"She what?"

"She abused me, too—said I was ugly!" the other girl snaps, pointing at me.

"I'm not exactly following you," Liz says, a look of confusion filling her face.

With a sigh, I open my mouth. "That's right. I did say she was *charmless*."

What the girl is saying may be illogical and painfully lacking in reason, but I feel I ought to tell them the truth.

"Alicia dear…why did you say such a thing?" Liz asks.

"Because it's what I thought."

"But she is plenty charming!" Liz insists loudly. The angrier she gets, the more her emerald-green eyes sparkle.

"Says the person who claims to judge all people equally?" I snort softly, casting a subtle glare upon her.

"Well, I… All right, it isn't good to judge a person's worth based on their looks. But I do think she is a very charming girl."

"Yes, I suppose the dastardly and vulgar manner in which she conducts herself is charming in its own way."

"Wha…wha…?!" Liz seems to be at a loss for words.

"Tell me, Liz, what exactly about her do you find charming?"

"Well…Emma is kind, attentive, trusting—she's a wonderful girl."

Aha. So her name is Emma.

"And her looks?"

"Huh?"

"I'll repeat," I say, sizing up Emma as I speak. "I am not asking about who she is on the inside—I'm asking about her outward charms."

"Her outward charms?" A deep crease forms between Liz's brows. A quiet tension has settled over the dining hall.

"That's right—her outward charms. Tell me what they are."

Liz frowns seriously at me and says, "But that's meaningless… A person's physical appearance is not everything."

Don't judge a book by its cover—I knew Liz would say something to that effect! Just the line I've been hoping for!

"I like that she doesn't adorn herself with anything and lets her true self show."

It is clear from the strain in Liz's voice that she is trying to convince everyone that she is right. And all her devotees, moved by those words, nod proudly in support.

"It's not a matter of personal taste—it's a matter of appraisal. In the real world, outward appearance is everything," I say.

"Well, that's wrong," she retorts.

"Is it, though?" I ask.

"She's right! Liz is right!"

"Rotten-hearted people like you shouldn't deserve to be here!"

The dissenters suddenly get rowdier. Just like animals. I do wish the peanut gallery would stay out of this.

"Have you heard of the experiment where there was a person in tattered clothes and a beautifully dressed person lying on the side of the road?" I ask.

The dining room falls silent again.

"What do you think happened?"

I ask Liz, searching her with my gaze. She bites her lip.

Yeah, I thought so. I love that you're so quick on the uptake. That's a saint for you.

"The person in tatters was ignored by the passersby. But the nicely dressed person was immediately helped. Funny, since they were both human beings." I smirk. "The thing about humans is, we choose other people as we live our lives—and we choose them unconsciously."

"But this has nothing to do with Emma having or not having charm," Liz argues.

Emma nods beside Liz as she stares at me.

"If I were to evaluate Emma on outward appearances…I would give her a score of three," I declare, undauntingly returning Emma's stare.

Emma's face turns red as an apple as her jaw drops.

Liz looks at me with the same expression.

"Alicia, isn't three points too generous?" Gill asks.

"I gave her three points out of mercy," I answer promptly.

"The word *mercy* doesn't suit you, Alicia," Gill says.

"You cheeky little boy."

"Take it back! Emma is very sweet, and I can't find a single fault in her!" Liz yells, her eyebrows arched.

I wish I could commemorate this moment in a photograph. A villainess and a saint duking it out. How fantastic!

With a sigh, I say, "All right, I'll spell it out for you. Emma is a noble, isn't she? Yet she has a lot of split ends, and a severe side part in this decade? Though…I suppose that makes little sense to you—anyway, her hairstyle isn't it. Her skirt is awkwardly long, and it makes her legs look fat. Her appearance is a far cry from the refined, sophisticated look a noblewoman should have. If I were to encounter someone who presents as she does…I wouldn't want to have anything to do with her."

(Not that she would have even the slightest desire to have anything to do with me, either.) Emma's eyes flash at me, either with hatred, anger, or resentment—I can't tell which.

"I'm not saying she's ugly. I merely believe she isn't making the proper effort to put her best foot forward."

"That's an awfully irresponsible thing to say, considering you don't even know her."

"It's *because* I don't know her that I can make objective judgments about her. After all, some people in this room think I'm creepy because I'm wearing an eye patch. My heart could be the

purest and most virtuous of all, but from an outsider's perspective, I'm just a creepy bitch, aren't I?"

A look of understanding crosses Liz's face.

Aha! If I keep pushing, she just might start to change her philosophy. What a wonderful job I'm doing as her monitor.

"The principle goes beyond outward appearance and extends to actions. Take laughter. A person gives off quite a different impression whether she covers her mouth or whether she opens her jaw wide. A person's outward appearance and their actions express who they are. Not only did she neglect to apply this principle, but she acted in an uncouth manner… I wonder how many people will ghost her because of this for the rest of her life."

I smile elegantly. Emma shrinks back, a look of fear on her face.

"She's sabotaging her own worth."

"Even if that's true, she still has a chance to fix that," Liz says defiantly.

Very good, very good… I suppose she's come to accept what I'm saying on a base level?

"It's very difficult to change an impression once it's made," I say. "A part of you will always see the person you decided they were at the start."

"Well, that way of thinking is wrong," Liz says. "People should just not look at others that way."

"If only life were that simple. A good impression is something that's built brick by brick…just like you've done, Liz. However, a good impression can be shattered by one trivial word or action."

"But Emma…she can reconstruct herself. It's not too late." Liz glues her serious gaze to me.

Liz honestly believes Emma can really change. That must be why everyone loves Liz.

"I suppose so. I don't know her, but I assume she is capable of change. Still the notion that everyone is capable of that comes only from *your* hubris, Liz."

"…!!"

I am Liz's monitor, after all, so I can get away with a diss like that. And it looks like not even the great Liz has a comeback. Ahhh, that felt so good!

Still, I never even considered my voice would be recorded. If somebody was compelled to lure me into a trap, I must have become quite the big-time villainess.

Now then, my work here is done. It's time I made my exit.

……Oh! That's right!

I slowly walk over to Emma, my footsteps the only sounds filling the silent dining hall. Emma watches me with a little fear in her eyes.

"Your beloved Liz says she finds you perfectly charming as you are. So why don't you stop hiding those freckles?" I whisper in her ear.

Her eyes shoot open in panic. "How…did you know?" she asks me hoarsely.

I didn't actually know; it was just a lucky guess. Upon closer inspection, I caught a glimpse of them. And since she cares enough about her appearance to hide her freckles, she should definitely put more work into her appearance from now on.

And with that, I turn to leave the dining hall. My brothers and their posse clear a path as I boldly stroll by (of course, their stares cut me like knives, though). Curtis and Duke have the same look of amusement as usual. To get a kick out of this sort of scene, wouldn't they have to be mentally seventy years old or something?

Then, just as I am about to exit the dining hall, Liz's clear voice sails through the air. "Alicia, dear… If you continue down this path, you'll wind up all alone someday."

I'll wind up alone "someday"? I'm already pretty alone. Besides, as long as I've got Gill by my side, I'll be fine.

I turn around and smile. "I'm well aware of that."

Then Gill and I put the dining hall behind us.

“Do you suppose Liz can distinguish the difference between herself and others?” I ask once we’re in an empty hallway.

“Beats me.”

Gill seems more immersed in his book than in what I’m saying.

Gee, you could at least try to listen to me…little brat. For that matter, it’s dangerous to read while walking. You should give it a rest. Just as I am about to tell him so, I suddenly feel myself floating in the air.

“Huh?”

The next thing I know, a strong arm is wrapping around my waist. To lift me single-handedly, what kind of workout regimen does this guy have?

“You really are thin.” His clear voice rings in my ears.

In a flash, I am flipped around, then a sturdy back fills my view. Whenever Duke carries me, I am always slung over his shoulder.

“Put me down.”

“So you can run away?”

I don’t care how badass I am; I can’t keep up with an impossibly sexy guy like Duke! Could he maybe revert to the age when he still had a little of his innocent boyishness?

“Gill, I’m borrowing Alicia for a bit.”

“Be my guest.”

Gill! I never thought you’d betray me! Couldn’t he at least look up from his book? Is that book more important than me?

“Since I’ve got Gill’s permission, let’s go.”

“Where?!”

With that, Duke quickly ducks into a little room right next to us. He is so assertive that I can’t even say anything.



Duke, Eldest Son of the Seeker Family—Age Twenty

It is a tiny room with a table and four chairs—truly empty. At last, Alicia and I are alone. I decided I would no longer hold back around her. Alicia probably thinks my personality suddenly changed, but I was merely holding myself back all this time.

She is so adorable whenever I tease her, and I always crave more. I love the way she struggles so hard to hide her emotions.

I fold my arms and lean against the door so she can't escape.

"So what do you want?" Alicia demands. Her cheeks are a little pink, and there is a hint of contempt in her eyes.

"Didn't you have something you wanted to tell me?"

"Huh?"

"You were going to ask me something yesterday. What was it?"

"Uhhh…I actually have a lot of questions."

"I'm looking forward to it."

When I see her hesitation and confusion, I can't help but tease her a little. And Alicia just sighs softly in resignation. I have a general sense of what she wants to ask. It probably has something to do with how I silenced the people who were slandering her.

"So, um…"

I answer her question before she can ask. "I just put a little pressure on them. That's all."

Alicia's eye widens in surprise. She doesn't say "How did you know?!" but I can see the question on her face.

The past two years have turned her into quite a mature, beautiful young lady, but she is still the same on the inside.

"I suspect the ones on the receiving end of the pressure were more affected by it than you, Your Highness."

The way she speaks makes a sour look fill my face. Why does she keep using such formal language with me? I feel like there's a wall between us.

"Language."

"……Do you really detest it so?"

"Yeah. I hate it," I answer honestly. She looks at me in surprise, perhaps because prior to her cottage confinement, I had given her the impression I was a man of few words.

"Is that all you wanted to ask me?"

"No, I have other questions…," she says. "Why did you—a prince—lower yourself to put pressure on schoolchildren?"

My lips form a smile.

What a stupid question. Sometimes I can't tell whether Alicia is perceptive or dense. She shrinks back a little when she sees my smile. With the sunlight shining on her through the window, her eye glitters blindingly bright.

"Well…it was my way of protecting you, Alicia."

When I see the bewilderment on her face, the beast within threatens to fly out of its cage. I stare at her so earnestly that even I am shocked by it. Never have I yearned to protect someone as badly as I do now. Alicia is the one person who pulls the strings of my heart unconditionally. I sense Liz has feelings for me, but I could never love her the way I do Alicia.

Alicia is the light in my heart.

"I just assumed, Prince Duke, that you were a weirdo."

"A strange choice of words, coming from you." I didn't expect Alicia to call me a weirdo. I smirk without meaning to. "I only make people *think* I'm strange—in reality, I'm exceedingly normal. What you said back in the dining hall? It's the same principle. People judge others by the most trivial words and actions. By merely putting a little pressure on the students who slandered you, I am now

perceived as a quirky prince. If I keep it up, everyone will deem me a disappointment as a prince, and I'll be a free man."

"You'll be free?" Alicia looks at me dubiously.

"That's right, I'll be free—I've been wanting to travel to Roana Village, too, Alicia. Long before you."

When I say this, Alicia seems to understand everything. When you're born a prince in this kingdom, you have few freedoms throughout your life. You can never go on a solo survey of a place—from birth, you're closely followed. It is a terribly constrictive world to live in.

"Even at level one hundred, it doesn't matter how intelligent everyone used to think you were. If they think you're a foolish weirdo, nobody will expect anything from you, right?"

"I feel like it's not that simple…," Alicia says skeptically.

"Well, anyway, life's a lot easier as a weirdo than as a perfect prince."

"But that's…true, I suppose. Prince Duke, you are quite the schemer, aren't you?" she murmurs in awe.

A man in my position has to scheme to some extent; otherwise, he'd be dead. The world of the nobility is quite ruthless; she just doesn't know it yet. I want to keep Alicia sheltered from that world for as long as possible. But at the same time, I want her to learn as much as she wants and broaden her horizons. If she wishes for something, she will have my full support.

"The one error in my calculations was that I assumed that if I did something a little extreme, you would come out of your cottage…but I guess that didn't work."

Alicia's pupil dilates. With hesitation, she asks, "Prince Duke…are you in love with me?"

She's asking this *now*?

I freeze up in a daze. I'm being so obvious, yet she still hasn't realized how I feel. Maybe I *should* have been more direct all this time…

"Never mind. Don't answer that."

She frantically backtracks—but it is too late. I am already slowly approaching her.

"Do you want to hear me say it?"

"No thank you…"

She shoots me down, but I continue closing in on her. Alicia's back hits the window. Now there is nowhere for her to escape. As I watch her get more flustered by the second, I wish that she would let her emotions run wild around me. I want her heart to be mine—*only* mine.

With great effort, Alicia tries to look confident, but she fails miserably. And it is incredibly adorable.

I press Alicia against the window, trapping her with my arms.

"*Ka—kabedon*."

She looks at the floor and murmurs something quietly, but I don't understand it.

Alicia manages to regain her composure. She stands up tall and looks up at me with poise. My face has received its fair share of scrutiny over the years, but when the woman you love stares at you up close, it is confusingly different. Why do I feel so nervous…? I can feel a slight warmth on my face. Even though I rarely let my emotions show, I am having a difficult time controlling my feelings at the moment.

"Don't stare at me like that."

"If you don't like it, why don't you cover my eye with your hand?" she teases with a smirk. She is overjoyed that she has turned the tables on me. "Your hair really is pretty."

Her bell-like voice resonates in my ears as her hand gently slides through my locks. Perhaps because I am crouching, our faces are shockingly close. Her thin fingers gently caress my hair.

……My heart won't survive this. And it's terrifying that she's completely unaware of what she's doing to me. It irritates me to no end that she has this power over me. I squeeze her hand in mine.





"What're you doing?"

The sudden move makes her eye widen in surprise. As I revel in her adorableness, my gaze meets her golden eye. Alicia desperately tries to escape me, but she doesn't so much as flinch under my grip.

I am once again impressed by just how athletic she is despite her delicate frame. I could watch her squirm to escape my embrace all day.

Alicia will certainly grow up to be even more alluring until she becomes a lady with a beauty second to none in the world.

I sigh softly. "I want to shut you away."

Barely after I utter the words, I press my forehead to hers and gaze right into her eye. I get an up-close view of her cheeks flushing more. Ignoring all worries of her hating me, I surrender to my heart's desires.

"……tss!"

Suddenly, I feel a blow to my head. It doesn't hurt, but it does sting a little.

Then I understand that Alicia headbutted me with all her might. The headbutter herself is clutching her own forehead in pain.

I am so shocked, I can't speak, but she is a picture of dignity. Enchanted by her aura, I sink back onto the table behind me for support.

She approaches me, performing the exact same move on me that I'd used on her. She cups my cheeks in her tiny hands and smirks slightly.

"You want to shut me away? Don't patronize me. I shut *myself* away in that cottage because I had a goal to accomplish. My father did not shut me in there by force."

Her eye is sparkling. Her gaze is clearly turned toward the future.

I yank on Alicia's arm and draw her to my chest. I can feel her heartbeat quickening against mine.

"I'm sorry… I almost let the beast have its way."

"Huh?"

I sigh deeply to calm myself. "I'm crazy about you—I think it's about time you realize that."

Her muscles tense. A part of me hopes she will just fall for me here and now. A heartbeat is pounding loudly in my ears, but I don't know if it is Alicia's or mine.

"Alicia—you always stick to your convictions. You race toward your goals, never losing inertia. You approach the reality of the world with strength. You're so intelligent, so strong, so dignified, and so beautiful."

I pause to see how she is responding. I can feel the fires in both of us through my chest. As she falls silent and still, blushing an even deeper shade of red, I vow with all my heart to cherish her.

And I whisper the last part in her ear.

"You're a *goddess*."

"…!!"

I can feel her entire body jolt. I'd better leave it at that for now… If I stay alone with her like this any longer, I won't make it. I release Alicia's hand and walk toward the door. I open it, then turn to look at her again. Alicia's face is red as an apple, and she stands in a daze.

If only she let me drive her crazier.

Holding this thought in my heart, I give her a satisfied smile and put the room behind me.



Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family —Age Fifteen

What in the world just happened?

Why does he have the sexiest face in the universe?! It's bad enough that his hair is silky, his skin is smooth, and he smells amazing, too! And why did he have to give me such a line with that sexy voice of his…?

The moment Duke leaves the room, I slump right onto my butt. I just lose the strength to stand. Thank goodness I am the only person in the room.

"Alicia?"

After a little while, Gill enters the room with a look of surprise on his face. I am about to say, "Oh, finally finished your book?" with all the cutting sarcasm I can muster, but I don't have the energy even to do that.

"What happened? Duke left the room looking really happy, but when you didn't follow him out, I started to worry…" Gill stops there, peering into my face.

He left the room looking happy? I suppose Duke gave me such a killer line knowing it would knock me out of commission like this. At first, I thought he was tenderhearted, but maybe he's actually a sadist at his core…

At last, I am starting to see Duke's true colors.

"Your face is all red…but it's not a fever, I take it?"

"No…I'm going to stay here for a while until I compose myself," I say, leaning back against the wall.

“Understood.” With a little nod, Gill opens a window to let some fresh air into the room.

A cool breeze softly wraps around me like a blanket. I can feel my body temperature start to lower. My heart is calming down, too. Gill sits beside me and resumes reading his book. Apparently, he hasn’t finished reading it.

Gill and I sit in the warm sunlight, enjoying the cozy atmosphere for a while.



The next morning, we go to Roana Village to visit Will. The village has mostly settled down, so Will told me it would be safe to visit during the day.

As we walk through the dark, quiet forest, Gill’s voice rings out behind me. It sounds a little young for his years.

“Alicia…can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Duke’s mother…have you ever met her?”

I shake my head slightly. “I haven’t. His mother has been deceased for a while. I have seen a portrait of her, though, and she looked very strong.”

“Strong, you say?”

“Yes… Prince Duke’s mother wasn’t from Durkis.”

“What do you mean—?”

“We’re here.” I intentionally talk over Gill’s question. I have seen her portrait only once, before my past life memories returned, so I don’t know anything for certain. I shouldn’t speak carelessly about it.

“Think Gramps is doing okay?”

“I’m sure he is,” I answer, setting foot into the fog.

"Huh?!"

It is Gill who gasps. I am too shocked to make any noise. The thick, dark air that used to shroud Roana Village is no longer there. There are hardly any people keeled over on the ground, either. The sky is still cloudy, but the village atmosphere is much brighter than it was the last time we came.

"What's happened here?" I wonder aloud.

"I don't know."

We just stand there in a stunned daze.

"Alicia! Gill!"

Rebecca's perky voice calls out from the distance.

"Gramps?" Gill gasps, his eyes wide as he notices the man walking beside Rebecca.

……I don't believe it.

"Who *are* you?" I mutter, my feet glued to the spot.

Even in the way he walks, he exudes dignity and grace. I am overpowered by his magnificent presence.

What a perfect picture of nobility. The moment he appeared, the air around us transformed. I haven't felt this intimidated since my audience with the king… I feel my back straighten on its own. So this is what the phrase "on pins and needles" was truly made for.

"Alicia. Gill."

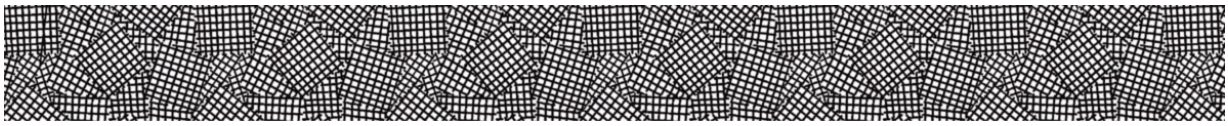
He smiles as he greets us. His voice is the one unchanged thing about him; it is so gentle and warm.

How could a person's entire vibe change so drastically? His coarse, graying hair is tied back, making his face clearly visible. A familiar golden eye shines on the left side of his face, and his right side is covered with a black eye patch just like mine.

He's in the same condition as me, so why is he giving off such a different impression…? Even his clothes are much nicer than before.

He stands in front of us, and before I know it, I drop to one knee.





Bowing down to someone in submission is the last thing you'd expect a villainess to do…but my limbs moved on their own. I received the education typical of every child of a noble family, and I have a more critical eye than the average person. As a result, I am able to tell at a glance if somebody is superior to me or even someone I could never match up to. And though people like Duke and Liz feel out of my league, Will is in a whole different dimension than them.

Every cell in my body knows I could never match his magnificence. How did he even hide it all those years?

"Ali?" Gill shouts behind me in surprise.

"Look at me, Alicia."

Will crouches to my eye level, speaking softly. I slowly look up.

"I don't want you bowing to me," Will says, his eye lined slightly with stern wrinkles. It feels a bit surreal, being stared at with my own eye.

He gently wraps his arm around my shoulders and helps me to my feet.

"Alicia? What's come over you? That's just Gramps." Gill stares curiously at my face.

"Well, Master certainly did change a *lot*." Rebecca's cheerful comment follows his.

"……What should I even call him?" I murmur.

Rebecca's eyes widen in surprise to match Gill's. "Huh? Like Gill said, it's *Gramps*."

"Alicia, are you okay?" Gill asks. "It's him."

"Yes, I know that. But…"

The one who stands before me is not Old Man Will… It is Will Seeker.

I'm not about to suddenly change the way I behave around him now that I know his true identity—I could never be that cringey. The next time I see him, I'll act no differently…or so I thought.

And yet the man standing before me now is not Old Man Will, the lovable grandfather figure. It is shocking just how well he hid his

dignity and wisdom all those years.

His left eye is my own, yet I don't recognize it. It is filled with knowledge, wisdom, and a subtle sadness. It is an eye that sees through everything in the world. This man has lived an epic life, the likes of which I could never imagine—I know this, just by looking in his eye.

Suddenly, something Will told me long ago returns to my mind.

"Since he'd taught himself all the way up to level eighty, he became overconfident and assumed he could skip ahead to level one hundred."

Will's slightly sorrowful eye reflects in my own.

I hope I'm wrong, but was the arrogant boy in question…?

——*"He lost the ability to use magic forever."*

"Alicia, I don't care what you call me," he says with a smile. The smile I know so well.

I tilt my head quizzically and meekly suggest, "Maybe…Lord Will?" I somehow manage to smile, but I know I look as though I am on the verge of tears.

"Yeah, he does strike me as more an uncle than a grandfather now," Gill says. "Maybe I should call you Uncle."

"Sounds fine to me," Rebecca chimes in, chuckling with him.

Old Man Will—Uncle Will—looks over at them with a warm gaze. "Please just address me the way you used to."

Seeing the peaceful smile on his face as he speaks to us makes me yearn even more to learn about his past.

Why were his eyes taken? Why was he banished from the palace to Roana Village? These are questions I've asked myself many times. But I always keep them to myself because I know it is a subject I have no right broaching.

But at this moment, I long for the answers with all my heart. I thirst for the truth more than anything I have ever thirsted for.

I take a shallow breath in and stand tall. "The boy who lost his ability to use magic… It wasn't your friend. It was you. Right, Uncle Will?"

I stare straight into my old eye as I say these words. Will does not seem particularly surprised as he looks solemnly back into my eye and nods.

"…And is that why you were banished?" I follow up.

"No, it wasn't that. It's just…my little brother and I didn't see eye to eye," Will answers, smiling sadly.

"You and the king didn't see eye to eye?" Gill frowns.

"Do ya really wanna hear my life's story? It's not that interesting," Will says as he stares into the distance.

"Is it okay for you to tell us here?" Rebecca asks with concern.

She has a point. There's people all around…but they all have a different look in their eyes from the first time I saw them. Their eyes seem to be full of hope. And it is clear they all love and respect Will.

"I don't mind anybody here knowing," Will replies. "My brother, Luke…he's my half brother."

Will's voice reverberates through the silence. It is certainly shocking news, but there is quite an age gap between Will and the king, so I suppose the revelation shouldn't be that shocking.

What is more shocking is that the king has had an older brother all this time—I never even heard rumors about him. The only evidence was that one portrait I saw…

"My mother died right after she gave birth to me. And when I could use magic before the age of thirteen, I was hailed and adored as a genius. My overconfidence led me one day to suddenly lose my magic. I was a child prodigy who carried the weight of my kingdom on my shoulders, and in a moment, I was completely useless."

"You said you and His Majesty are half brothers…so did the former king remarry?" Gill asks.

Will shakes his head quietly. "He had another son with a concubine."

"Wait just a minute—the former king had a concubine?" I butt in.

I thought kings were forbidden from taking concubines in Durkis…

"Well, he needed to produce an heir, so they made an exception." Will smiles faintly as he says that, traces of loneliness on his face.

Sure, the king needs to be able to use magic, but that's still no excuse…

"But a son with a concubine… Surely the court wouldn't—"

"They had to accept it," Will cuts Gill off. "I couldn't use magic anymore, and the kingdom lost its heir to the throne. So…they went ahead and made her his wife."

My heart begins to ache. I can't imagine how Will felt when that happened. He was worshipped as a child prodigy one minute, then he lost his magic and the throne to a half brother… Surely he must have felt like his heart was being ripped out of his chest.

"This concubine…the king's mother…what sort of person was she?" I ask.

"She was in a lower class of the nobility, and she was very pretty. Though on the inside, there wasn't much to her…"

From the slightly conflicted look on Will's face, I can imagine the sort of person she was. If Will is having difficulty describing her nicely…she must have been quite horrid.

"My father told me it was my job to support the king, so I studied hard every day to become the smartest man in the kingdom. After all, I wasn't hailed as a genius before just for my magic. I also had an outstanding intellect…" Will smiles at us, crinkles in the corner of his eye. "Or I guess maybe that's the story I like to tell myself."

Gill is frowning in anguish, and he isn't the only one. Everyone around me has the same look of anguish in their eyes. It is clear just how deeply everyone reveres Will.

"When Luke turned seventeen, he became king…and I was twenty-eight then. Back then, I was doing most of the government work. This village wasn't in as bad shape as it is now."

Will's face twists a little in pain. Now I know why whenever I read books about Roana, the picture they paint is completely unlike the town's actual conditions.

Roana Village must have fallen into such a dreadful state after Will was exiled. And seventeen is awfully young to become king. Far too young to carry a kingdom on your shoulders…

"One day, not long after Luke's coronation…our relationship fell apart."

In Will's eye, I can see he is bargaining with the past, begging to go back and change things.

"I proposed to Luke a divided rule—that he would split the rulership of Durkis with the other Great Five nobles."

I agree wholeheartedly with this idea. I always thought that was why Durkis had the Great Five to begin with. Otherwise, they were just a collection of rich and powerful people with no purpose.

"That's a great idea," Gill says, his eyes sparkling.

Well, I doubt anybody would object to this idea.

"But Luke's mother opposed it."

"Huh?" Gill frowns.

"Why did the king's mother even have a say?" I demand.

"Was she after the money?" Gill asks coldly, his eyes sharp as daggers.

"Did becoming queen give her a power trip?" I add. "But if she was after the money…then why didn't the court stop her?"

"Maybe she thought just because she was the king's mother, she had carte blanche to go hog wild…" Gill's voice is getting deeper and deeper. The more we uncover the truth, the more contempt he feels for the king.

And I know the feeling well, but this wasn't the king's fault—it was his mother's. Though, of course, as the king, he was obliged to step in and do something.

"Luke loved his mother," Will explains. "And his mother adored him. I was nothing more than a thorn in her side, though," he adds with a chuckle.

I know the whole evil stepmother thing is a classic, but was that really grounds for banishing him?

"Gramps, please don't tell me *that* was what got you exiled?" Gill said.

"It certainly was. I was banished from the palace for plotting to assassinate the king, and my eyes were removed so I couldn't pose a threat to Luke again. Naturally, I had no memory of plotting any such thing."

Gill's face twists in anger, and giant tears are spilling down Rebecca's cheeks. I can hear sniffles from the others around us as well.

He's such a lovable guy… Didn't he have any allies back then? That's right, like my father!

"But my father—"

"Only Luke's mother and her attendants knew the truth," Will says.

"What?! Wait…not even His Majesty knows?"

"That's right."

"But why hide something so important from him after all this time?"

"The Queen Mother. It was easy for her to destroy me without anybody else knowing. Besides, at the time, I had no title and no power."

"But it was a false accusation—couldn't you have pled your case?" I can hear my voice shaking more and more with anger.

"I did have potential allies, yes. But if any of them came to my defense, they would have most certainly been killed."

"But, Uncle Will…what happened to all the people who supported you back then…?" I ask.

"She raises a fair point," Gill says. "All the higher-ups in this kingdom today are buffoons."

"They were banished from Durkis."

Will's words freeze us in our tracks.

"Don't tell me…that *bitch* did it?" Gill asks what I'm thinking. Surely everyone else on the scene is thinking the same thing.

"Yes." Will nods. His eye is devoid of sorrow, anger, or any emotion. "All my friends and allies were exiled to Laval."

Laval… I guess that explains how they grew into such a superpower so quickly. If they were friends and allies of Will's, they surely rose to power in Laval. Imagine, sending Durkis's best minds to Laval… Just how stupid was the king's mother?

"About how many were exiled?" I ask.

"Only a dozen or so, but they were all great minds."

"So all the great minds were sent away, leaving behind only the talentless king… That explains why Durkis gradually fell into disarray." Gill's eyes narrow with anger and hatred as he speaks.

Durkis puts on a pretty face for other nations while, internally, life is getting harder and harder for her people. And as somebody who was born and raised in extreme poverty, Gill has every right to be angry. He has every right to want revenge.

…And I can just imagine Liz, blissfully unaware of these conditions, dismissively saying that revenge is pointless. Saints really are astounding creatures. If it were me, I'd probably hand Gill a nuke.

"Didn't the king say anything when you suddenly disappeared, Gramps?"

"No, I'm pretty sure Luke is holding a grudge against me."

"But how can you be sure unless you ask him?" I say.

"When Luke's mother and I were fighting over my proposal…Luke said something to me. He said, *Don't get cocky; you're not the king.*"

Dang, does this king have a major Oedipus complex or what?

"Aha…" Now I understand. "When you become the head of a kingdom at age seventeen, you're bound to turn out that way…"

"Huh? Alicia, don't tell me you're taking the king's side?" Gill looks at me with disbelief.

"More to the point, His Majesty might be regretting what he said all those years ago."

"Oh, I doubt that."

"Gill—shut up." I glare slightly at him. "Uncle Will—when you said your relationship with the king fell apart, I just assumed it was a very serious problem."

"But it *is* a very serious problem."

I ignore Gill's quip and continue, "Why don't you meet with him once and have a heart-to-heart?"

Will's eye opens wide at my suggestion. Gill's jaw drops as he stares at me.

Did I really say something so radical?

"Remember what you told me once, Uncle Will? That you didn't want to leave Roana Village? That was a lie, wasn't it?"

"No, I—"

"Don't you long to see the world again?" I approach him slowly. It feels like our roles have reversed. "If you really are okay with staying here forever, then why are you trying to start a revolution here? Uncle Will…you're so regal that I prostrated myself at the sight of you."

I fasten my gaze on him as I speak. Will stares intently at me for a while as my words hang in the air—then his face crinkles into a smile. My heart leaps at the sight. I don't care how old he is; he's still swoon-worthy.

"You're right… I do want to get out of here," he says, tousling my hair in a familiar way. "You should go home now. We'll talk more tomorrow," he says gently.

I nod obediently in reply. I have so many more questions, but I don't want to keep retraumatizing Will by asking them. We decide to stop for the day.

Gill and I head for the village wall, and when we get there, he turns to me suddenly as if he remembered something.

"What is it?"

"What do you think happened to the king's mother?"

"I…am not sure. But then again, we didn't even know she existed until this morning."

"True."

Gill doesn't say a word after that until we get home. He is deep in thought, with a perplexed expression on his face.



Aaaagh…I just wanna be able to use magic again.

I don't use magic much in my daily life, but losing it still makes me feel anxious…… And a villainess should never feel anxious. She needs to be extra confident, bold, and proud.

As I commute to school the next day, my mind is swimming with those thoughts.

"Miss Alicia? Um, we…we all love you so much."

As I am walking toward my class, I suddenly hear a voice directed at me. Ugh…sounds like I'm gonna get caught up in some more pesky drama. Gill seems to share my sentiment. He ignores the voice and stays on course toward the classroom.

"We all just *hate* Liz."

"She's so annoying. Thinks she's all that just because she's pretty."

"Who does she think she is? Joining the student council when she's a *peasant*."

"She's always with the boys of the student council… Do you suppose she's a slut?"

Sensing something amiss in the way they are speaking, I slowly turn to look at the girls. And eight eyes are staring intensely at me.

"Don't you agree, Miss Alicia?" an enthusiastic girl with light orange hair pipes up.

Bold of you to assume I'd agree with you… I return their stares with a frown.

"They let her into the student council because she's intelligent, no?" I retort.

The quartet stare at me in disbelief.

What? Liz and I don't see eye to eye, and I may not like her, but I recognize her talents. Conversely, without Liz, I wouldn't stand out even slightly as a villainess. In a way, I need her.

"B-but she used her womanly wiles to earn a seat on the student council!"

"That's right! And I hate how she's always so goody-goody. It's revolting!"

"I can't accept the idea of a peasant attending this academy."

"Everybody fawns over her just because she's kinda pretty—she truly disgusts me."

One after another, the girls trash-talk Liz. Well…I don't know if they really mean it or if it's just an act to trap me, but either way, it's truly ridiculous. I don't want to waste another second with these people.

"If you have a complaint, why not say it to her face? Or better still, why not spend your time improving yourselves instead of slandering her? Sure, perhaps she was let into the student council because she's a rarity, but nobody else has special talents like her, so it's a waste of time hating her for it."

I spit out the words like acid. And perhaps intimidated by my death glare, one of the girls breaks out in shivers.

When somebody's popular, haters always come out of the woodwork. Now, if Liz really did pull some major shenanigans to get where she is, that'd be another matter entirely.

I ignore the group of dazed girls and resume my walk to class. That's right…there's one thing I forgot to say.

I slowly turn around and look at the girls. "This boy next to me isn't of noble blood, either. But he's smarter than all of you combined. I value a person's merit, not their pedigree. I much prefer a smart peasant over stupid daughters of the nobility."

I punctuate my speech with a smirk.

The girls' faces twist with emotion. They scoot backward, then turn and run. Oh my…I just scored some more Villainess Points. I made them run away just by smiling at them.

"Alicia, your lips are twitching." Gill sighs tiredly.

I immediately assume a blank expression. That is a flaw of mine, relaxing and letting my true emotions show. I need to be extra vigilant whenever I am at school. There is no telling when somebody's watching.

"One more thing—I like you, too, Alicia. Not romantically, but…I would gladly sacrifice my life for you."

He turns a serious gaze on me. My tongue is tied… His surprise profession of love and loyalty has stupefied me.

But I am a villainess. I can't tell him he should cherish his own life more. It is his life, so I have no right to impose my will on it. A life's worth varies from person to person. How to use it isn't up to my discretion.

"Thank you. I shall try to live in a way that will never put me in danger of dying," I say, gently patting Gill's head.

"You know, Alicia, the things you say and do really are chivalrous… But if I have to die, I hope I can become as smart as you first."

"But, Gill…aren't you already smarter than me?"

"Oh, I doubt that." Gill chuckles cynically.

But I really do think so… Gill's broad range of knowledge and his deep insight are undeniably far greater than mine.



"I really do think this is how it should go."

I rewrite the letters on the blackboard. Since the old library isn't used much, Gill and I do a lot of our talking in here. That day many years ago when I wrote on the blackboard that Durkis should take Laval under its wing—nobody was there then, either.

"But with our greater numbers, a surprise attack could sack our enemy in one fell swoop," Gill argues.

"Oh, but it's much more fun to make them suffer."

We often play war strategy games together. There aren't ever any official rules or form to them, but once we get engrossed in a game, we always lose track of time. That's just how much fun they are.

"I think this is the approach *I'd* take…"

A large, artistic hand suddenly reaches out, resting its weight lightly on the top of my head. That voice, this hand… It's Prince Duke. How did he know I was here?

I ignore what Duke is writing on the blackboard, and I glare up at him. "Could you please go away? You're bothering us."

"You're pretty when you're angry," Duke says, smirking like a cat.

Yeah…he's definitely messing with me.

I know this, and yet my heart begins to pound louder. I am starting to hate myself.

"You no longer make any sense to me, Your Highness."

"It's like I told you, Alicia. I'm just speaking my mind."

"Ah yes…so you did. But you're pushing an agenda, are you not?"

"What agenda is that?"

"You say things that will make my heart nearly explode, and *then* __"

I only get that far, then immediately regret it.

Alicia, you're basically just admitting he works you up.

Duke's eyes widen for a moment, but his devilish grin quickly returns. "Ohhh. So I make your heart explode, do I?"

"What's with the smug grin?"

I glare at him, feeling my own face grow hotter by the second. That soul-penetrating gaze of Duke's…it's one of my biggest weaknesses.

"It's better than turning my thoughts into action, isn't it?" he murmurs earnestly.

Um…I think you're totally putting them into action, my guy.

"Duke, what you just wrote on the blackboard…," Gill suddenly interjects. "You can't lop the enemy's head off that way."

Gill is considering Duke's war strategy without so much as a distracted glance away. I join his examination of the blackboard.

"He's right. With your strategy, the enemy platoon leader will escape."

"No platoon leader worth his salt would abandon his men," Duke answers in earnest…a smirk quickly following. This guy is really good at smiling in a way that gives you chills. Duke elaborates, "Instead of crushing them in one fell swoop, wouldn't it be better to crush them in a way that earns us a prize?"

"Ah, I see your point. We spare their leader and make him serve us."

"That's a strategy Liz would hate," I remark.

"And what's *mooore*, if his entire army was wiped out before his very eyes, the poor platoon leader would lose his *marrrbles*."

A sweet scent and a high-pitched giggle suddenly reveal that someone else is in the room.

Wow…she really does pop out everywhere, doesn't she?

"What are *you* doing here, Mel?" Gill frowns.

"Hey, *youuu*! Wipe that frown off your face," Mel sings, holding up a pink candy to his mouth. "Driving the platoon leader insane? Why, that's the perfect match for Ali-Ali's plan to make the enemy suffer!"

Mel's eyes sparkle with glee. Meanwhile, Gill's face is somewhat tense. I smirk at Mel and the consistently nasty words that always come out of her cute mouth.

"But Alicia meant to hurt them *physically*," Gill argues, as if he is my advocate.

"Okay, okay, why not wreck the platoon leader's psyche, *then* beat him up?" Mel licks her pink candy as she utters the morbid suggestion.

It truly astounds me that a fun character like this never made it into the game.

"Well, that is actually a good idea." Gill puts a hand on his chin. He sounds serious now.

You know…I've got a lot of malicious, scheming people in my sphere, don't I?

"Okay, Gill, let's think about a contingency plan for if the platoon leader runs away," I say.

"But, Alicia, Duke said that'd never happen," Gill argues.

"In war, one must always consider every possibility and plan accordingly."

"She's right, Gill. You can never have too many contingency plans." Duke smiles in agreement.

"Oooh, what funnnn! I *love* this game!" Mel croons with glee.

And the four of us lose track of time, chatting in the old library.



"Hey, Ali, we've got another annoying problem to deal with," Henri says, running over to us and appearing flustered.

"Did something happen?" I ask.

Henri looks gravely into my eyes. "Ali…were you bad-mouthing Liz somewhere on campus?"

Bad-mouthing her? I have no such memory.

"Wasn't it *them*?"

The sparkle in Gill's eyes is quickly replaced with darkness. I immediately realize what happened.

Aha. Another setup.

With a little sigh, I look at Henri and say, "I didn't bad-mouth her, but I did come across a group of girls who were."

When I say this, everyone immediately understands what I mean.

"Okay, why don't we go see Liz first?" Duke suggests.

We all nod in agreement.

"Where is Liz right now?" I ask.

"In the classroom."

"Mellie's coming, tooooo!"

Mel's tone is bright and cheerful, but the look in her eyes is killer.

We roughly erase everything on the blackboard and head to the classroom to find Liz.

It truly is astounding how it's just one problem after another without a moment's peace in between. It sometimes makes me think I'm the heroine of this story.

As these thoughts run through my head, we enter the classroom where Liz is.

"Aha! *There* she is," a girl shouts, as if she has been expecting me.

"You're welcome," I reply with a smile.

"What's with the attitude?!"

The girl screeches at the sight of my smile, but I ignore her and make my way to Liz. And surprise, surprise, the girls who spoke to me earlier that morning are around her.

Naturally, the usual suspects—my brother and his friends—are also there (though Curtis and Finn are MIA).

When you're stared at with such contempt day in and day out, you certainly get used to it. Personally, I'd prefer they throw a little rage into their gazes. I mean, a villainess must trigger rage in people just by her very existence.

"What in the world happened this time?" I ask Liz, a big smile on my face.

"These girls claim you said horrible things about me, Alicia dear," Liz answers me without a hint of animosity.

There's a saint for you. Most girls would look at me with scorn right now, but she's remaining calm.

"So what's your take on the situation, Liz?" I ask.

"Well, I only had their testimony with no proof, so I asked Henri to tell you so I could speak with you directly. Alicia dear…did you bad-mouth me?"

I can see myself reflecting clearly in her emerald-green eyes.

"……I did not."

"I see. Well, I believe you." Liz smiles at me.

Oh my… Haven't seen her angelic smile in quite some time.

"Miss Liz?! Why do you believe what that witch says?"

"She cursed you, Miss Liz—she *reviled* you!"

"That's right! She called you a slut, said you were full of yourself—it was horrible!"

The girls around Liz raise their voices one after another.

"That witch"…there's a cutting insult. You don't suppose they could tweak it and call me "that villainess" instead?

Little by little, a shadow falls over Liz's face. If you got caught up in drama like this every day, you certainly would lose your faith in humanity.

The gazes of the other students cut deeper and deeper into me. And they have my sympathy—it is only natural for them to believe I'm lying after all my villainess antics they've witnessed.

"So pardon my asking…but weren't *you* girls the ones who bad-mouthed her?"

A boy's cute voice suddenly chimes in from somewhere. All eyes shoot toward the door.

And there is Finn, standing with a serious look on his face. Curtis is behind him.

"Where have you been?" Henri asks.

Without flinching, Finn quietly glares at the girls surrounding Liz.

"See, when Finn and I were playing catch, we broke a window…," Curtis explains cheerfully. Either he can't read the room, or he *can* and is being cheerful as an act of defiance—we'll never know which.

Finn ignores Curtis's cheery demeanor and walks over to us. God, no matter how many years pass, Finn looks the same. To look exactly the same as the day I first met him—that's an incredible feat. Now I see why all the baby-face lovers of the world go so gaga over him. The boy you admire never changing is the best thing ever.

"Lord Finn? Whatever are you talking about?"

The girl with pale orange hair beside Liz looks a bit uncomfortable.

"I'd like to ask the same to you."

His voice is sweet and a bit high-pitched. Finn really has an effortlessly beautiful voice.

"You know, you and Finn are kind of the same character," I whisper to Gill.

"Huh? Come on, I'm not that pretty, and my hair's not that shiny, either," Gill denies quickly, a look of scorn on his face. "Besides, he's seven years older than me."

I suppose he didn't enjoy being compared to Finn? Well, I agree, characters resembling each other too much is quite a serious problem.

"Finn, could you please speak in a way that I can understand?" Liz asks Finn gently, a look of bewilderment on her face.

"Well, let me *see*… Put in extremely simple terms, these girls bad-mouthed you in front of Alicia, and Alicia ignored them. Those are the facts as far I know them. Now, the rest is just my conjecture, but Alicia said something back to them that hit a little too close to home. So they got angry and got closer to you, Liz, so they could put the blame on Alicia. Now, I don't want to upset you…but I'm pretty sure they meant the bad things they said about you. And I think they were just using you to get Alicia in trouble."

Finn doesn't even flinch as he reads them to filth.

Now, this may sound strange coming from a baddie such as myself, but I am starting to feel sorry for Liz. For somebody with such a cute little face, Finn sure has a ruthless tongue—he and Mel are similar in that way.

Then a shrill laugh pierces my eardrums.

"These stupid bitches are rotten to the *core*!" Mel cackles with glee, pointing to the girls around Liz.

"Don't point fingers," I chide her.

It sure feels strange mothering Mel when she is older than me.

"Yes, ma'aaam," Mel sings, obediently tucking her finger away.

She even moves like a child. If you ignored the words that came out of her mouth, she'd be such a sweet, cute girl… Could this discrepancy in character fall into "gap moe" territory?

Mel smiles sweetly at the girls. "Wow, *self-sabotage*, much? Ali-Ali already has you all *clearly* beat both in looks and abilities—I don't have the heart to tell y'all that you've got the *worst* personalities, too!"

The girls shudder at the sight of her smile. What's more, giant tears are spilling out of their eyes. Mel takes a breath to taunt them some more, but that was too far even for Duke, who lightly slaps her head.

"They've had enough," he mutters tiredly.

"It's like he's her father," Gill whispers.

I nod quietly back. Indeed, nothing about their rapport implies they are master and servant.

Liz still hasn't completely processed the situation. It is as if her brain can't keep up with what her eyes are seeing. Denseness is a requirement for heroines, but it is annoying how that leads to plot-advancement gridlock. I suppose this moment calls for a villainess to let her hair down a little.

I approach the shivering gaggle of girls and look down at them. "Hey, you. Stupid bitches."

"Hey! Ali-Ali, *you* called them stupid bitches, *too*!"

"Shut it," Duke snaps, giving Mel's head another light slap.

……I can tell he's had a lot of practice keeping Mel in check.

"*Girls*—why are you such a blubbering mess? Do you think if you cry hard enough, somebody's going to come to your rescue? Sorry, but your tears aren't worth a damn thing. You had the audacity to be so despicable when you didn't have the guts to suffer the potential consequences? You're worse than *trash*."

I taunt the girls with the sort of language the daughter of a noble would never use. And the girls must be quite gutted. Their eyes are vacant, as if they've lost all emotion.

"Trash…," Liz murmurs quietly, staring hard at me.

Looks like she's angry at me now. Good. Now Liz the saint has finally made her grand return. This is the Liz I've been longing to

see. I want to be reviled by eyes overflowing with life, not the vacuous gaze she had earlier.

I know that she will come to the defense of anybody, even those who bad-mouth her. Could it be that I know Liz better than she knows herself? Don't falter, Alicia. Now is the time to let the culmination of fifteen years' hard work show in the most epically villainess moment of your life.

"Got something to say?" I ask Liz, with a slight tilt of my head and a big smile.

Her brows furrow. "Did you just call them trash?"

"Yes, I did," I answer.

Liz's eyes widen.

"Liz, I hope you aren't going to defend the girls who lied to you," I coo, baiting her. "Precisely put, those girls are *lower* than trash."

"They may have done a bad thing, but calling them trash is a line that shouldn't be crossed!" An impressive scowl fills Liz's face as she snaps at me.

"Oh my, what an emotionally moving statement that was."

"Are you patronizing me?"

"Quite the contrary—I'm praising you. I could never defend anyone who bad-mouthed me."

"Make no mistake, I haven't forgiven them…" Liz suppresses the shaking in her voice. "I'm just very angry that you would use a word like *trash* to describe them."

I inhale and exhale to compose myself. "But the world would be better without them."

"Without who?" Liz dares me.

I glance at the girls. "Without them."

Baffled embarrassment fills Liz's face.

"If everybody treated them like they didn't exist…they certainly would deserve it."

The girls are no longer angered or saddened by my words. They are terrified. And they keep glancing at Liz for rescue.

Wow…what an exhilarating turn of events. Nothing would make me happier than Liz gaining more worshippers. Ah, but then again, it would be a little annoying if Liz's platitudes brainwashed them.

"I'll admit, what they did might have been terrible."

"Not might have been—it *was* terrible."

"Why must you always speak like that?" Liz suddenly looks at me with pity. "They regret what they have done. What good is it to keep blaming them?"

It is apparent that Liz's calm, clear tone of voice has convinced most of the people in the classroom to endorse her view.

"Liz, you only see the good in people at the cost of ignoring the bad," I tell her.

"And what's wrong with that? A charming eye is made by seeking out the good in others."

"*Whaaat* the heck?! Are you *stupid* or something?" Mel's laughter echoes around the classroom. "On the flip side of the coin, you can never win a war unless you look for the bad in people. Why don't you just become a *nun* already?"

"You just insulted nuns everywhere," Gill quietly quips back.

"*Awww*, okay, what about—an angel?"

"Yes, that does have a nicer ring to it," Gill replies. "So does that make Alicia a devil?"

"But you *knowww*, it really does make you wonder who's *actually* the devil and who's *actually* the angel."

"I can't argue with you there."

"You two really are a great pair," Henri interrupts Gill's and Mel's banter.

If he is going to butt in, I wish he would say something to stop their conversation. But Gill does seem to be rather accepting of Mel. I get the sense that their wavelengths are similar.

But more to the point—their banter is totally erasing all the dramatic tension in this scene! Then again, I don't have to go along with their little comedy act. I told Liz once before that not all people are good. And it seems she's forgotten that lesson.

Those girls are rotten to the core. They need to own up to what they did wrong; otherwise, the cycle will simply repeat itself…

"This isn't fun anymore. I'll take my leave."

But no sooner do I say this than Eric's antagonistic growl booms through the classroom. "Running away, then?"

"Running away? From what?" I ask.

"Liz always tries to see the good in people and love anyone, no matter who they are. And you refuse to acknowledge it. You're just jealous that her soul is purer than yours."

Eric glares at me as he speaks. He's been glaring at me a lot, hasn't he?

I slowly walk over to him. Oooh, I wonder if we're about to start something…

Feeling a giddiness in my heart, I look straight at Eric and say, "At the risk of sounding contrarian"—I pause, beaming broadly—"I have never been jealous of anyone."

Eric snorts. "What's so fun about looking down on others? I used to think you were such an earnest, hardworking girl. I couldn't have been more wrong."

"Why, thank you."

"You think that was a compliment?"

"Yes."

After all, he is basically saying that I've made great strides as a villainess.

Eric's gaze grows sharper and sharper. The classroom is once again filled with thick tension. I feel sorry for everyone. Every time I show up, the air is hardly breathable.

But the bigger the audience, the better for me. After all, I want my villainess glory to be observed by as many people as possible.

"Here's the thing about Liz," Eric says. "She never runs away from what lies before her."

"Excuse me?" I blurt out dumbly in reply.

"Liz faces every challenge head-on. Every *person*, no matter who they may be. This is the girl who reached out in kindness to the

nobles who detested her. She sacrifices herself to save others. Even when that wild wolf appeared on this very campus, though she was terrified, she protected us all. That's because she cares; she cares so much that not even fear can stop her."

"Hold up—a wild wolf appeared on campus?"

I have a long list of questions I want to ask, but the wolf is at the top. Isn't a wolf appearing on campus just too nonsensical?

Eric ignores my question and quickly continues, "Whenever she has a spare moment, she goes into town to play with the children—she's always trying to make this kingdom a better place. And what are *you* doing? You're always mocking people…… *You* are the trash."

As he tells me this, Eric's eyes are brutally cold.

Oooh, my goodness. My trash talk has been thrown right back at me… And barely after Eric spat that out, I feel the most incredible murderous gaze from behind?!

Slowly, and with great trepidation, I look behind me. Henri, Gill, Mel, and Duke—their collective murderous gaze is powerful enough to flatten everything, myself included. So this is where the phrase "If looks could kill" came from.

Every single body in this classroom is covered in goose bumps—I am sure of it.

"Umm…I'm all right," I say, to pacify them. "Please stay out of this."

I gather my wits about me and turn back to face Eric. His eyes are wide and focused on what is behind me.

Oh dear…I've completely lost Eric's attention. Then again, anybody would shift their focus to a hate tsunami like that.

"Tell me, Lord Eric, if Liz would sacrifice herself to save anybody, wouldn't it be more correct to say that *she* is the fool?" I say something intentionally aggravating to get Eric's eyes back on me. "A person who can't get their priorities straight is a *major* fool. Even though she knows she's an important figure in this kingdom, she lowers herself to protect noblewomen who hate her guts? A true

wise woman would never martyr herself. Nobody the whole world over could possibly replace her."

"And there isn't anybody who could possibly replace you, Alicia dear," Liz says earnestly, a deep crease between her brows.

"Oh, but there is," I retort. Liz's eyes widen a little. "There's an endless supply of replacements. There's no such thing as the chosen one. Everyone wants to believe they're special, and I'm one of them, but in fact, I'm not at all special. If you search for intelligent people, you'll find plenty of them, and you'll find plenty of people good at magic. But none of them possess your gift, Liz."

My words quietly echo through the classroom.

"My gift…if that's all you see in me, then you may be right. But… each and every one of us is special and irreplaceable."

"No, Liz, that's only true of you. That's why you can't just wax poetic on your ideal world—you need to be the change you want to see."

"You cocky little brat…," Eric jumps in, his voice shaking. "You could never begin to understand Liz. She's fine the way she is. She doesn't need to change. If anything is lacking, then we will be her support."

His eyes filled with rage, he continues, "Liz faced her own fears to fight for us. She's a strong and beautiful woman."

Shouldn't you direct this speech at her and not me?

Liz's eyes go even wider, and her face flushes until it is nearly the color of an apple. I can see the dewiness forming in her eyes.

Okay, kids, get a room. Well, then…I said what I wanted to say, so let's end it here. This really isn't fun anymore. It's starting to drag.

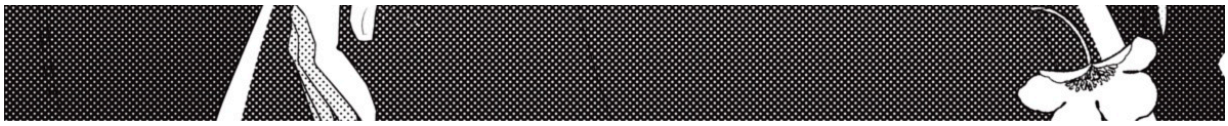
I look behind me and assume my most badass tone. "Let's leave this dreadful place."

The onlookers still don't seem entirely convinced, but I just want to get out of this classroom and relax.

"You don't understand Alicia, either." Duke's quiet, deep voice echoes through the classroom.

Since I turned my back already, I don’t know what kind of look is on his face, but it is easy to picture. That is probably the last thing Liz expected Duke to tell her. And who could blame her? Liz is blissfully ignorant of my way of thinking.





Eric, Gale, Albert, and Alan all endorse Liz's philosophy, while Gill, Mel, Henri, and Duke all endorse mine. And though they came to my aid today, I'm not entirely sure where Curtis's and Finn's loyalties lie.

Gill walks beside me in silence, with Henri, Mel, and Duke following behind.

Was it really the best move for Henri to follow me, since up until now, he had put up a good show of siding with the others?

This thought slips into my mind as we leave the classroom. And it isn't until we get home later that I notice that the palms of Gill's hands are bloody with imprints of his own fingernails.



Gill’s Reminiscence (Alicia—Age Thirteen; Gill—Age Nine)

Before her confinement in the cottage, Alicia trained religiously every day.

“Hey, Alicia, can’t you at least take today off?” I asked, peering into her face.

She was holing herself up in the library from dawn until dusk, practicing magic. She had been in a slump lately—though I suppose it would be more correct to say she’d been progressing abnormally well prior to this time. Ordinarily, children of noble families weren’t supposed to be able to use magic until they turned thirteen, but Alicia had been using it since she was ten. She was beyond special. From an outsider’s perspective, she was worthy of the title of super-prodigy.

But Alicia’s disposition was that, once sparked, her determination would burn on forever.

“No, I can’t. Today is very important.”

“Because it’s important to train every single day?”

“No, there’s no point in training every day.”

“What do you mean?”

“I might only be at this every day because I just want to raise my magic level as quickly as possible.”

“To catch up to Liz Cather?”

There was a pause before Alicia said, “No matter how hard I try, I’ll never catch up to her. But I want to get as close to her as I can. Otherwise, I can’t be all high-and-mighty around her, can I?”

Alicia looked earnest as she said that to me, then the corners of her eyes crinkled into a smile. She surely knew better than anyone that she could never compete with Liz Cather's gift.

But she was able to maintain an aggressive demeanor with Liz because she constantly worked hard in the hopes of coming within her reach. To be Liz Cather's monitor, she never became lax in her efforts to stand on an equal playing field with her.

That was why Alicia had told Liz Cather that hard work didn't always pay off. Because she knew that truth better than anyone… Because she knew that the results were everything.

She also knew better than anyone that what *hard work* did was give a person *self-confidence*. So she probably didn't want to let anyone else see that. Not because she thought it was embarrassing for people to see her desperately trying for something, but because she didn't want people to see her trying to boost her own self-confidence.

I didn't know what was truly in Alicia's heart…but that was my theory, at least.

And with all my heart, I prayed that someday Alicia's powers would surpass Liz's innate gift.

"Just don't hurt yourself, okay?" I said.

Alicia smiled slightly and said, "I won't cause any harm to these books, but you'd better believe I *will* hurt myself."

If everyone else knew the true Alicia, they would become her slaves in a heartbeat. They would all fall in love with her and wish to serve by her side.

While a part of her wished for such a day to come…another part of her didn't want anybody to know the real her.

And it was this dissonance in her heart that filled me with a soft tenderness.



Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family —Age Fifteen

I stay quietly in my cottage until my magic returns. That increases my risk of seeing my father, but there is something I want to focus on.

When I tell Henri I won't be going to school for a while, he immediately understands.

"You know, Alicia, Henri really is soft on you," Gill says.

"And he's the only one," I reply.

"Fair point." Gill smirks slightly at my answer.

He is holed up in the cottage with me. I requested that he keep me company.

"So when do you suppose this wild wolf appeared on campus?" I ask.

"According to Henri, it was about a year ago."

One year ago… Why wasn't it a bigger deal? A wild wolf suddenly appearing at the magic academy is inconceivable. Did His Majesty hear nothing about it?

"I guess the biggest mystery is, why did this wolf appear at the magic academy—right?" Gill asks.

I ponder this for a moment. "It certainly is possible that somebody summoned it there intentionally."

"But a *wild* wolf?"

"What I meant was, somebody only made it *appear* to be wild."

Gill puts a hand to his chin, frowns deeply, and stares off into the distance.

If somebody sicced a wild wolf on the magic academy, then we have a big problem on our hands.

Oh—but wait just a minute. Where would they have even gotten a wolf from?

"Durkis doesn't have any wolves, right? Which would have to mean…they brought the wolf in from another nation," I theorize.

Gill opens the desk drawer and pulls out a map.

Another nation… Wolves… Yes, I think I've heard this word somewhere… What was it again…?

I am so close to connecting the pieces.

Liz shivered in fear and protected the magic academy students…?!

""Laval,"" Gill and I say at the same time. The game revealed nothing about wolves in Laval when I played it. But it was knowledge that I gained from reading books in this world.

"Laval has wolves. I read it in a book somewhere," Gill says, pointing at Laval on the map.

That's my Gill. While I was combing through otome game events for clues, he did the actual work.

The otome game event in question existed to raise the likability score of the heroine—that would be Liz.

If I recall correctly, I selected "Don't help" when I played the event… A part of me wanted to help, but I wouldn't go out of my way to risk my life to save people who hated me. And because of that, I became the least-liked heroine in the history of the game. Peak villainess behavior!

"Alicia? Are you listening to me?"

Gill leaning in and looking into my eyes zaps me out of my thoughts.

"Listen to what?"

Gill scowls a little in annoyance and says, "I repeat, if that wolf is still at large, we should be able to tell immediately if it's from Laval."

I pause for a moment in thought, then say, "That's right, Laval's wolves have big tails, and many of them have red fur."

"Also, they've got thin iron collars around their necks," Gill adds, in a voice deeper than usual.

Come to think of it, in the game, this event existed only to increase the heroine's likability score. It left out the details of where the wolf even came from. Funny, seeing as how a wolf suddenly appearing at a school is really far-fetched.

"Those collars have the name of the wolf's master etched into them," Gill says, his eyes sparkling a little as he looks right at me.

We don't know if our wolf still has its collar on. But we do know that wolves do not live in Durkis. We can't conclude with certainty that the wolf who attacked the school came from Laval, but we decide to hedge our bets on the high possibility that it did.



"Gill! Wake up!" I shake Gill awake on the sofa.

Gill's eyes squint open. "What…?" he asks hoarsely. He has an incredibly grumpy crease between his eyes…perhaps he has low blood pressure.

"Just look."

I correct my posture and snap my fingers. The next moment, the map flies from the table toward me. I gently catch it and smile at Gill. He stares blankly at the map.

No reaction? Come on, give me something.

"……What am I missing?"

"I'm using magic!"

Gill's eyes open wide. He's finally awake.

"Oh, good…" He sighs in relief, finally grasping the situation.

"Alicia Williams has made a full recovery today."

I smile at Gill, and he smiles proudly back at me.

"So why are you still sneaking out of the house and avoiding Arnold?" Gill asks quietly as I am about to step through the gate to the magic academy.

The sunlight bounces off the stained glass and blinds me. Why is that stained glass even there? There are so many other places where money could have been better spent.

"Alicia, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, yes, I'm listening. But the sunlight is just so bright…"

"Don't dodge the subject." Gill stares at me, a hint of anger in his eyes.

"It's just…when I listed my priorities, I discovered that seeing my father was toward the bottom. Earlier, seeing my father was the most important thing, but a lot has changed during the past couple weeks."

Losing my position as Liz's monitor is out of the question, but there are things I have to take care of first. I have to take care of Uncle Will, the Wolf Event, and… Anyway, my father comes after that.

"Well, I can't say I don't see your point," Gill concedes.

"Right?"

I beam radiantly, happy that I gained Gill's approval, as we head toward the school building.

"Hey, Gill, wanna make a bet with me?" I suggest.

"What?!" Gill looks at me like I'm a cryptid. And I understand. It is unsettling to have somebody suddenly propose a bet. But I can't help it; the idea just struck me out of nowhere.

"I bet somebody is going to say to me, 'I thought you were never coming back.'"

I give him my best baddie smirk, but Gill just laughs.

"I think somebody'll say, 'Shame you didn't die.'"

"Oooh, that's quite a brutal insult."

"They may look pretty on the outside, but their souls are hideous."

"I can't deny that."

"But society places more trust in people who look nice on the outside."

"Well, I say, aren't people who are both the best of all? Like Liz."

Gill falls silent. As a villainess, I value what is on the outside, but Liz values what is on the inside. Though I suppose at the moment, I am hideous to look at. I hope people cut me some slack, since aside from the eye patch, I try to maintain an immaculate appearance.

A young, rich villainess ought to have a mess where her heart would be. Only the heroine needs to have a beautiful heart. I mean, if everyone were pretty on the inside, we'd just have another hierarchy of prettiness on our hands…

"I think you beat Liz Cather, Alicia."

Gill whispers something then, but I am too absorbed in my own thoughts to catch what he says.

"Gill? Did you say something?"

"Forget it," Gill says, beaming broadly at me. I feel like I haven't seen him smile like that in a long time.

"Say, if I win the bet, will you give me your bracelet?" he asks.

My bracelet? Why does he want such a thing? Gill isn't interested in jewelry.

"Sure, I don't mind… So if *I* win, you have to teach me something I don't know."

Gill's eyes open wide. "Is that all?"

"Don't scoff. Knowledge is the greatest treasure of all."

"Aha."

Gill smiles. He's been smiling a lot today. And his smile is infectious.

The other students stare shamelessly at me, but they say nothing. They just glare with contempt.

"They don't need to say anything; their eyes tell all."

I silently agree with Gill's assessment. They are looking at me as if I were the plague incarnate. And while a barrage of insults would have been annoying enough, their annoying gazes speak volumes.

"Hey, Alicia, when you called those girls *trash*…that was the second time. Rather, you used the insult *trash* the first time, and the second time, it was *worse than trash*, so that means you were harder on those girls."

"Huh? Did I call somebody else trash before?" I look at Gill with round eyes.

I think I remember most of the things I've said, and since *trash* is a powerful word, I definitely would have remembered it…but no matter how hard I rack my brain, I just can't recall.

"When we were kidnapped and you lost your temper…that's when you said it."

"……I don't remember."

"Guess I'm not surprised… You were in quite a state then." Gill's gaze is grim.

Maybe I was so worked up, I forgot about it.

"Oh, Aliii!"

Suddenly, Curtis's cheerful voice calls out casually from behind me.

"Haven't seen you in a week. How've you been?" he asks.

"Good, thank you. And you're looking well, too… Are you unaccompanied?"

Curtis smirks at the question. "What, were you hoping to see Duke?"

"No, I just don't usually see you by yourself."

"Fair point! I'm usually surrounded by pretty girls."

"Yes, there truly is no shortage of pretty girls with empty heads around here," I tell Curtis, forcing a smile to my lips.

He clams up for a moment, but his smile quickly returns. "What's this? Are we jealous?"

"Inconceivable," I answer with a big smile.

I would never be jealous because of Curtis. What bothers me more is that he completely ignored my badass quip about pretty girls with empty heads…

"I don't suppose you're going to scold me for mocking your fan club's intelligence."

Oops. I baited him.

Curtis's eyes go wide. "You're right, Ali…" Curtis smiles. "They have less substance than you. Both in magic and in academics."

I'm surprised… Well, maybe I shouldn't be. So many things have changed in the past two years that it's hard to keep up. To be honest, I assumed that everyone was keeping their distance because they saw me as a villainess…but I'm still not sure whether Curtis is Team Liz or not.

"Everybody at this school seems to be under the impression that I'm a vapid bitch," I tell Curtis, smirking slightly.

Curtis chuckles cynically. "I'm not from one of the Great Five noble families, but I at least have the ability to tell whether somebody understands me."

"I'm not even of the nobility, and I can tell the difference," Gill adds.

This time, I chuckle.

"Hey, Ali?" Curtis's gaze on me suddenly becomes serious.

"What is it?" I ask, staring into his eyes.

"Liz is intelligent…but she's just—how do I put it?—shallow-minded."

"Yes, I know."

"Aha…" Curtis then lowers his voice so nobody else can hear. "Liz is supposed to be important to Durkis—the saint of legend, right?"

From the look in his eyes, I can tell he's already made up his mind that Liz is the saint.

"How did you know that?"

"It's easy enough to tell from the way the king acts around her. Then there's her ability to use all the magic elements—she's

Divergent beyond reason."

"Sounds like quite a lot of information went public over the past two years."

"She's pure and innocent…believes the world is all beauty."

"Yes…she sure does."

After I agree, Curtis brings his lips close to my ear, takes a breath in and out, then whispers softly, "The king is using you, Ali…using your dark side that contrasts against Liz. If my theory is correct, he'll eventually ask you to be the saint's shadow."

"…!!"

And with that, Curtis turns and leaves.

Her shadow? Liz would be in the spotlight, and I would be her shadow?

"Alicia? What did Curtis say?" Gill demands, peering into my face.

"He said I'd be the saint's shadow…"

A dark look fills Gill's eyes. Since his brain spins at a speed beyond the norm, he surely grasped what that means right away.

Her shadow…? I'd rather die.

I am destined to become a villainess in the spotlight. Why do I have to be the saint's *shadow*?

"So that's what Curtis told you?" Gill asks.

"Not exactly… He said it's what the king would say to me someday."

Gill's gaze darkens even further. We both know the king is using me. And I don't mind being used. But being a shadow is one thing that, as a villainess, I cannot abide.

"What were you talking about?"

Then a familiar crisp voice calls out behind me. I look in the direction of the voice to see Duke, standing outside the window.

"Long time no see." He reaches out and gently caresses my cheek.

I'd rather my heart not beat like an alarm first thing in the morning. I am almost out of my daily allotment of stamina.

If I slammed the window real hard…I wonder how he'd react.

"Erm…what about you, Your Highness? What's that supposed to be?"

You'd better let go of my cheek ASAP. Otherwise, you'll feel how hot my face is. Well, I'm sure that ship has sailed, but still…

"An expression of love." Duke answers my question with a teasing smirk.

"Well, I don't need that," I reply sharply.

Now my face is getting even warmer. If Duke finds out he's making me blush, he'll gain the upper hand…… How can I gain the upper hand with Duke? Having a sudden stroke of inspiration, I reach out with both hands and vigorously tousle Duke's hair.

……His hair is wonderfully silky as ever.

"What's that for?" Duke asks, his eyes wide.

I suppose this counts as a tie. Hey, you caught Duke by surprise, Alicia. Not too shabby.

"It's an expression of love," I say with a victorious smile.

Duke freezes for a moment, but then he breaks into a smile. "Ohhh, so you love me," he says, staring intently at me with his customary devilish grin.

"Huh? Wait, uh, no, I—"

I didn't expect him to take my witty retort in earnest. Now Duke has the upper hand again!

A satisfied expression crosses Duke's face as he watches me squirm. Then he looks straight at me and says soberly, "I would do anything to win your love, Alicia."

I feel my eye pop out of its socket. It is like time stopped for an instant.

That's the first time anyone delivered that line to me. I never even heard it in my past life. Why didn't he say it with that teasing tone he had earlier? Then I could stay cool…

My heart rampaging beyond control, I press my hands to my cheeks in a desperate attempt to cool them down.

"Don't hide," Duke says, reaching out—then something quickly slides in front of my eye and I hear a thudding noise. Gill slammed

the window shut.

"I'm not against flirting, but could you please not do it so early in the morning?" Gill demands of Duke.

Duke smiles smugly at him as if to say, "Jealous?" Gill looks a bit displeased by the sight of his grin.

At the end of the day, Gill is my biggest ally.

Ah…the fever left my face in a flash. But wow, Duke's attack sure was a doozy. I wonder—do I have a thing for him? Well, duh, of course I do… But is it true love? That, I'm not sure.



"Oh right, I forgot to ask Prince Duke about the wolf."

It isn't until a few minutes after we parted ways with Duke that I remember. I forgot to ask Curtis, too…

"How could I forget the most important thing on my list? Argh… this is already shaping up to be Not My Day."

"But you got to talk to the boy you like, so aren't you happy?" Gill asks, an air of maturity in his eye.

That's not the sort of line you'd hear from the average eleven-year-old boy… Isn't that more like something an old man would say to his granddaughter when she came of age? Eww…I don't think I like that.

"The boy I like?" I ask back.

Gill rolls his eyes at me as if to say, "Are you that dumb?"

His beautiful ash-gray eyes glitter, reflecting the sunlight streaming through the window.

"Wait—Alicia, you *do* like Duke, don't you?" Gill asks, his eyes wide.

"Of course I like him……but is this love?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask… But didn't Duke give you that pendant?" Gill asks, pointing at the pendant resting atop my chest.

He has a point… Every day, I wear this pendant Duke gave me. But if you asked me why, I'd struggle to find an answer.

"I like you, too, Gill. Do you suppose my feelings for you and Prince Duke are different?"

"Of course they're different," Gill answers without hesitation.

I look at Gill in surprise. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'm a genius." He smiles, crinkles appearing next to his eyes.

Aw, what a pretty smile… You know, Gill is going to be really handsome when he grows up.

"But lots of people like Prince Duke more than I do. Some of them would gladly give their lives for him, I'm sure."

"You know, Alicia, when it comes to romance, you're pretty dense." Gill sighs in frustration.

I never thought I'd hear that from someone younger than me. For that matter, why am I even going to Gill for love advice in the first place? I don't think I'm exactly dense—I just don't know the standards by which romantic love is defined, that's all! Do I like him as a friend, as a lover, or as family? Or do I like him as an idol? Like the way Liz's devotees worship her… Agh, the more I think about it, the more jumbled my brain gets.

"Even if some girls like Duke more than you, Duke's heart is yours, Alicia. When you love somebody…it means you decide *not* to love somebody else," Gill says, looking me soberly in the eye.

There is not a shred of youthful innocence in his eyes. He has the look of a grown man, overflowing with intelligence and wisdom.

"No matter what happens, Duke's feelings for you will never change—at least that's what I believe."

"You do realize I'm mean, right?"

"Despite your faults, Alicia…Duke only has eyes for you," Gill answers firmly, as if to confirm this conviction to himself.

Wait a minute… Does this mean Gill and Duke don't actually think I'm mean?

"Alicia?" Gill peers curiously into my eye.

"Oh, you say that now…but just wait until I become an even badder bitch than I am now. He'll run for dear life."

If he accepts all of me as I am, that means I'm still quite green as a villainess. And Gill can be pretty malicious, too, so my meanness just might have a long way to go.

I can't let my partner out-villain me… I've got to hone my villainess skills much sharper.

"This late in the game…I really doubt Duke's feelings will waver," Gill says. "Though at this point, I wonder how long it will take for her to actually notice…"

I am so introspective about my insufficient villainess training that I completely miss what Gill mutters under his breath.

As we sit in the old library, basking in the nostalgic sense of solitude lingering in the empty air, I voice an insecurity that has been nagging at my conscience.

"By the way, Gill, everybody at this school *does* hate me, right?"

"Yeah…I guess they do hate you," Gill answers promptly.

"And I—enemy of the student body—have you, Prince Duke, Mel, and Henri as my allies…"

"That's right. And lately, it seems like Duke's popularity has taken a dive because of that."

When did he manage to get his hands on that intel?

"They all think you bewitched Duke and Henri."

Well, that isn't so far from the truth. After all, Duke is destined to hook up with the heroine, and now he has a thing for me.

"Even though there's only five of us, our influence is immense," Gill remarks.

"We're, like, quintessential bad guys." My lips soften into a smile in spite of myself.

Ahhh, this is exhilarating. I used to think I didn't need any allies, but if they'll amplify my villainess glory, then I heartily welcome their allyship. I used to think a villainess should be a lone wolf, but with the best, baddest people by her side, her fame can grow even bigger. Then her name will be etched into history.

Besides, Duke is the prince of this kingdom. A villainess who bewitched a prince? That's got a lovely ring to it.

"Well, in secret, people are calling us a Shadow Organization and a Cluster of Evil," Gill says.

"What a beautiful plot development," I say in exaltation.

"Dark Devil."

"Huh?"

"That's what they're calling you, Alicia."

"What about Liz?"

"Light Angel." Gill spits out the words.

What…what stupid names. Could they have been any lazier?

"And everything was so cool, up to the Cluster of Evil…"

The corners of Gill's mouth shoot upward.

Urk—you're scaring me, Gill. Now, that's the smile of a Dark Devil. I can even see a pitch-black shadow looming over his face.

"Though a faction of the student body is apparently calling you Dark *Angel*, Alicia."

"Dark Angel?" I frown at Gill. "So are these same people calling Liz a Light Devil?"

"That, I don't know."

……Why would they call me something like "Angel"? I am not at all angelic. For a start, my facial features lean more toward devilish. *Angel* is a word reserved for someone exactly like Liz. In personality and in looks…especially that smile of hers.

"This is the worst day of my life."

I put a hand on my forehead and spit out my heart's deepest truth.

I was at the top of the world, and now I've hit rock bottom. Can I please get that ecstasy I felt one minute ago back?

"By what definition and in what *universe* am I an angel?" I demand.

"Don't worry, nobody's calling you that in the open."

"How do you know all this, Gill?"

"Anybody can get classified intel if they want it badly enough."

Only Gill—that's all I can say about that. Even his devilish grin is perfect.

"I wouldn't be surprised if war broke out between the Alicia and Liz factions soon," he says.

"……Why do you look so pleased about that?"

"Oh, the thought of you getting more worshippers just makes me happy."

A bunch of worshippers of dubious identity don't exactly do it for me…

"Though I doubt the people in your faction would call themselves worshippers," Gill added.

"Well, of course. Team Liz membership is overwhelmingly higher… So where are you actually getting this information?" I glare at Gill.

He looks back at me for a little while before sighing in defeat. "Henri."

"Henri?"

"I won't elaborate. Just know that I'm doing a lot of work behind the scenes for you, Alicia." Gill shoots me a meaningful smile.

Why does he look so smug? It's like he's scored some victory.

……We spend so much time together, yet there are still sides of Gill that I do not know.



I am standing at the door to my cottage and muttering at the sky: "So we never got any information about that wolf after all."

The sky sure is cloudy… That always means something bad is about to happen. That must be why I didn't get a shred of information about wolves today.

Look at me, blaming the sky for my own lack of progress. Talk about petty.

"Come on, don't look so glum. There's always tomorrow," Gill says. "Also, why are we back at the cottage? Your magic is back, isn't it?"

"After two years of living here, I've grown attached to the place."

"Why don't you give it a name?"

"Good idea… How about Josephine?"

"……So your house is a girl."

Apparently, Gill thought my cottage is male. But the cozy atmosphere gives major girl vibes to me.

"Are we visiting Gramps today?" he asks.

"Sure."

And with that, we set out into the forest.

Even though we have been away for only a few days, the air in Roana seems to have improved yet again. It's filled with life… What has Will done this time?

"Alicia!" Rebecca hops over to me with remarkable skill on her one foot.

She's got skills. Does that ever make her tired? Too bad this village has no materials to make prosthetic legs…

Rebecca's silvery hair flows smoothly as she moves. I long to see how it would sparkle under the light of the sun. I wonder…will the sun ever shine in Roana?

"Rebecca, doesn't it bother you to do all that hopping?" I ask.

Rebecca's eyes widen in surprise for a moment, but she quickly replies, "You know, I can even fight with a sword one-legged." A proud smile spreads across her face.

"You can use a sword?"

No matter how good her form is and how strong her arms are…I wonder how a one-legged person could manage to acquire enough combat prowess to fight.

"I knew you were training hard, Alicia, so I trained hard, too."

There is a fire in her eyes. She looks just like a knight pledging fealty to me. During the two years I was away…she surely put in efforts the likes of which I could never imagine.

"You told me to become this village's messiah, didn't you, Alicia? I keep my promises." Rebecca smiles broadly.

What would a villainess do in this situation? I suppose she would test Rebecca, to see how strong she's really become.

"Then show me your skill," I dare her, looking her squarely in the eye.

Rebecca stares at me in shock.

"Only a fool would ask Rebecca to prove her skill with a sword."

A young man's scornful voice surprises me.

"Who are you?"

The new arrival stares at me. He has dark hair the color of blueberries, slightly slanted eyes, and a giant scar in the middle of his face that suggests someone slashed it with a sword. He has quite a gruesome appearance.

"I'm Nate. Will's in a meeting right now, so I'm here." He is standing close, looking down at me.

He is tall and well muscled, and upon closer inspection, he has a great facial structure… Another hottie… Agh, come on, can't we have an ugly character now and then?!

"Girl. What's your name?" Nate glares at me.

I stand tall and stare fearlessly back up at him. "I'm Alicia. Alicia Williams."

Nate looks at me with disdain and says, "What is a rich girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Well…that's a natural reaction to have. I'm a noble; of course I'm not welcome here.

"I bet you've never touched a sword, *milady*—aren't you in over your head? Don't you all agree?" Nate mocks me, raising his voice and glancing around. And everyone in the vicinity raises their fists high in agreement.

"Nate! Enough," Rebecca yells.

"Whoa, Rebecca, don't tell me you're taking *her* side." Nate stares sharply at Rebecca. And when he does, all the assenting voices hush.

I guess Nate is sort of like their leader…

"Alicia saved my life," Rebecca snaps. "And she *can* use a sword."

Oh my, how does she know I can swordfight? I don't recall ever demonstrating my skills in Roana before.

"Yeah, she used a sword to cut off your foot. Anybody could do that. Though I guess for a spoiled rich girl, that was quite a feat."

Oooh, now that's a great mocking sneer if I've ever seen one. I just love evil expressions.

"You can use magic, right, *milady*? Ya don't need a sword. Did ya come here to lord over us, then?"

Nate's eyes are locked on me. What glorious hatred in that gaze.

"Ya may've won Will's favor, but you're an outsider."

His eyes are golden…a hue very similar to my own. As this cheerful thought crosses my mind, I suddenly sense an intense wave of bloodlust from beside me. It is Gill, who looks as though he might leap out and murder Nate at any second.

"Alicia is *not*—"

"Gill, stand down," I snap.

Then Nate's gaze shifts to Gill. "Hey—Gill—*you*…think you can come back after you abandoned this village? You traitor."

Nate spits out the words like bile. His eyes are teeming with hatred and rage.

I don't blame you… Everyone wants to escape this village. And I went and made a special exception for one person…and a young boy, at that. But I'm sure nobody here realizes his immense potential. Argh…what a fun little mess I've gotten myself into. Anyway, first things first—let's shut this guy up.

"I'll have you know—I'm stronger than Rebecca," I say.

"Huh?" Nate raises an eyebrow.

Rebecca pipes up, "Alicia, pardon my saying so, but you're—"

"Dead wrong," Nate interjects loudly.

"Alicia, I know that smirk," Gill says. It seems he is onto me.

"You wanna try me?" I smile. "Give me a sword."

"What?" Nate grimaces.

"Who's going to fight me? Rebecca, or you?"

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I'm serious."

I remove a thin ribbon from around my arm and tie back my hair with it. Even Rebecca is looking at me with doubt.

Tension fills the air. Everyone hangs on to the silence, waiting for the next word from Nate's mouth.

"I'll fight you." Nate glares and points the tip of his blade at me.

Oh my, I get to skip ahead to the final boss. This way, my muscles will still be fresh, so I can fight him with the full extent of my abilities!

"Here. Use this."

……He drew a sword from his left-hand side? But he just drew a sword from his right, right? Wait…is he a dual wielder? It takes quite a lot of muscle to fight with two blades. I size up his arms. What thick arms he has. This guy must work out a lot.

"Rebecca, lend me your sword," I say.

"Huh? But…I doubt it's any better than his."

While Rebecca falters, Nate raises his voice in agitation. "Eh? What, my sword isn't good enough for you?"

"No, I just want you to take this fight seriously. And you normally fight with two swords, do you not?" I ask him with a smile.

Nate looks at me in surprise. "Ha! Keen eye you've got there." His expression twists into a smirk.

Rebecca hobbles over to me and gives me her sword. It is just as heavy and damaged as Nate's. She has clearly used it a lot. Her sword tells of all the hours of hard work she puts into her craft.

I turn and face Nate. He has already readied his swords and is looking at me. His bloodlust is sharp enough to pierce my heart……

Fabulous. I smirk back at Nate. This wears away at his confidence for a split second. He realizes I mean business.

"Wow, they both look so fierce," somebody comments.

"Especially that girl," another chimes in. "The bloodlust in her eye…it's giving me goose bumps."

"I'm ready when you are." With my gaze, I dare him to make the first move.

"Don't underestimate me, *milady*. You'll get hurt." Nate gazes right back at me—then he charges.

……What strong legs he's got. I block both his sword attacks at once.

……And he's fast, too. To swing two swords with such speed and strength, he certainly has very sturdy muscles. This guy just might be the best swordsman I've ever fought.

"That girl can fight…"

"She's holding her own against Nate."

"She's swinging so fast, I can't keep up."

"The captain is taking this fight seriously…yet those skinny arms are blocking all his attacks. I can't believe it."

The spectators grow more and more restless.

"Alicia!"

As I hear Gill cry out, the tip of a sword shoots right before my eye. It has to be moving at a remarkable speed, but it looks like it was in slow motion. As I dodge the sword, a piece of my hair, cut, falls to the ground.

……If I let my guard down for an instant, I'm dead. Nate is fighting to kill.

"How could she have dodged that…?"

"Come on, she used magic!"

"Ohhh, right. Magic. Little cheater."

"That's the nobility for ya. They always fight dirty."

Suddenly, the crowd is jeering at me.

"Shut up," Nate growls, glancing sharply at the booing crowd. In a flash, they obediently quiet down.

"She ain't fighting dirty." With his intense gaze on me, Nate smirks.

Oh my, he's actually a nice guy. Perhaps he's the type who respects someone who puts up a fair fight.

"*I* was going to say that," Gill says, looking a little upset.

"Hey, *milady*, you're good."

"You too."

After we each take a breath, he drops back into a fighting stance. I can't believe the addition of one sword made him that much more powerful… I want his technique.

"They're moving so fast, I can't see what's happening."

"The rich girl has been on defense mostly—I think maybe the captain will win?"

"You idiot, of course the captain'll win. He's the best fighter we've got."

I am so focused on the swords' movements that I don't know what our audience is saying.

……I want to launch a counterattack already, but he's not giving me an opening.

"It ends now." Nate grins, his eyes sparkling as he assumes victory.

……What an evil grin he has. I love it. But I will never be defeated. I watch his swords closely, searching for my opening. Stay calm. Don't rush it. He'll give you an opening eventually. Nate kicks off the ground with all his weight, leaping up to strike my head from above.

……His stomach. I let go of my sword and lunge forward, and as I dodge his strike, I sink my fist into his gut with everything I have. The hit sends him flying.

As silence hangs heavily in the air around us, I look down at Nate. His shoulders shake as he struggles to his feet. Oh my goodness…is he crying? No, no…he would never.

"You got me with a *punch*?"

……He's laughing?

"You win. Sorry I mocked you." With a shrug, he looks at me and chuckles softly. "Will was right. You've got a crazy-good eye for fast-

moving objects."

……Huh? How does Uncle Will know that?

"His eye used to belong to you, right?" Nate asks, sensing the question on my mind. "He told me once how wonderful your eyes were. Didn't realize the world through your eyes looked so beautiful."

Aha, now it makes sense. The abilities in my eyes were transferred over to Will…… But I think the world looks pretty filthy in my eyes. I mean, they're the eyes of a villainess. I doubt the world could possibly look beautiful through them.

"Your magic is incredible; your sword technique is incredible… Almighty. That's the only word I can find to describe you." Rebecca stares at me, her eyes sparkling with adoration.

"I'm not almighty. There are plenty of people in this world who are more powerful than me. Here's your sword. Thanks for letting me borrow it."

I am about to hand it to her when I suddenly remember I can use magic again. I snap, and a black sparkly aura wraps around her sword. (Naturally, I cast the spell on every sword in the vicinity.) As the black auras disappear, the chips in the blades vanish, and all the rusty spots are now clean. I am secretly relieved to see that my magic has made a full recovery.

Everyone's eyes are sparkling. Nate's are open wide, staring at his own swords. His broken sword sliced my hair. If he'd fought with his sword now, the damage would have been much worse… Thank goodness he only cut the tips of my hair.

"Oh my god…"

"She made those crappy swords look just like new."

The onlookers scrutinize the swords over and over in awe. This gives me a new appreciation for the wonders of magic. It's undeniable that the ability to cast spells puts me at an advantage above others… If I hadn't come to Roana Village, I might have never had this realization.

So since these villagers can't use magic…what keeps them safe? Their king? No…if their king took care of them, they wouldn't be in

such a hellhole in the first place… And even among the nobility, there are people who accomplish nothing, even with their magic.

I want to become a wise and powerful baddie…but at the same time, I want to protect the weak. In the past, I focused only on making myself stronger. But after spending the past two years in obsessive practice with the sole purpose of getting up to level 90…I think my philosophy has changed a little.

Naturally, I still want to become a villainess. That hasn't changed. But the strong have an obligation to protect the weak. Maybe that's why this world gave the nobility the power to use magic in the first place.

"Alicia…are you okay?" Gill asks, peering into my face.

……I know this is obvious, but looking people in the eye when you talk to them is very important. I can hardly believe this is the same little boy who cowered in fear at the sight of me all those years ago.

"I was simply gaining a new awareness of how a villainess should be."

"And by that, you mean…?"

"The weak should follow the strong."

"And?" Gill prompts me for further explanation.

……Why are you interrupting my flow? Is this some new way of teasing me? I only gained this new awareness myself just now. Well, when Gill challenges you, your only choice is to surrender and give him what he wants.

"On the flip side, the strong have a duty to protect the weak," I murmur quietly but firmly, strengthening my resolve.

"That's a very Alicia sort of conclusion." Gill nods in understanding, as if he already knew what I was going to say before I said it.

I wake to the brightness of the morning sun. I sit up in bed in my cottage and yawn daintily.

I never wound up seeing Will the day before. The question of whether he could return to the nobility aside, we left Roana Village without even a lead toward any potential resolution of its core problems.

There were no events in the game where Liz saved Roana Village. She just offered her thoughts and prayers and never actually set foot in Roana. Will is the one to save Roana Village—that is an undeniable fact.

When will all these problems be resolved? I wonder. Maybe I'll practice my sword forms… That'll clear my head. I grab my sword, stretch my arms, and walk out of the cottage.

"Alicia?"

An unexpected voice calls out to me.

I know that Gill got up before me and is outside. I also know that Henri is out there with him. So here's the question…what is *he* doing here?

"Long time no see." Paul—the owner of the plant shop—looks at me and smiles. "You've grown into quite a pretty young lady, Alicia. Your eye…what happened?" Paul asks, pointing at his own left eye.

"It's quite all right, sir… Um, what brings you to these parts?"

Henri and Gill exchange glances, like a pair of boys whose prank has just gotten foiled.

"Henri invited him here," Gill says. "We figured you ought to hear what Paul has to say, too."

"Ali, Paul gave us some very useful information," Henri adds.

No way—Paul was an information broker all along? Is that a side job? Or is his plant shop the side job?

"Now I see how you've been so well informed, Gill. You'd get all the school news from Henri, you'd get all the town news from Paul, and you'd go to Roana Village yourself to cover all the bases."

As I praise Gill, he smiles proudly.

……What a wonder of a child.

"Roana Village?" Paul gives us a dubious look.

……Oh, right. Everyone in my circle knows about Roana, so I let it slip out. I suppose Paul didn't know Gill came from Roana Village.

"Paul, you know the josaiah you gave me many years ago? Well, I used it to cure Gill's sickness."

"Huh?" It is Gill, not Paul, who is surprised by my confession.

That's right, Gill didn't know the herb that saved his life came from Paul's shop. I feel like I just dropped a big bombshell after years building up to it.

"I guess we've been connected ever since," Paul says, a familiar soothing smile on his face. "I never would have dreamed that a daughter of the Great Five noble houses would go to Roana Village."

"I know, every time somebody finds out, they're always shocked," I say.

Paul smiles sheepishly. Then he eyes Gill carefully and says, "Gill… so you're from Roana Village."

"Should I have not revealed that?" I quietly whisper to Gill.

"No, people will find out eventually anyway… Besides, I'm used to it. It's okay."

I'd rather he not get "used to" any sort of bad treatment, but as long as prejudice exists, that isn't a very easy request to make.

That said, Paul doesn't seem to have a very good impression of Roana Village. I suppose no matter how kind a person looks, they're always capable of such feelings. No matter how much he recognizes Gill's intelligence, he is still a nobleman, so I wouldn't put it past him to be prejudiced.

"You come from Roana…and yet you attend the magic academy?" Paul asks, searching for answers in Gill's eyes.

Aha…now he's wary of Gill. I messed that up. I'd better be more careful with what I say from now on.

"He attends as my aide," I answer.

"Does His Majesty know about this?"

"Yes."

A conflicted look fills Paul's eyes.

Hmm, things aren't boding well for us… If Paul exposes Gill's secret to the wrong person, we could be in real trouble. I need to nip this in the bud… I suppose I'll be a good villainess and threaten him.

"Paul…can you keep this a secret? If you breathe a word to anyone…I'll kill you."

Paul freezes.

I continue, "Besides, Roana Village is not as bad a place as you think. Learning from books or word of mouth is indeed commendable, but you need to question the veracity of everything. I went to Roana Village on my own two feet, so I think I know it rather well. And there are people with fantastic potential there."

I turn my lips upward into a smug smile.

"Understood. I won't tell anyone," Paul says. "Though being murdered by a beautiful girl wouldn't be a bad way to go," he adds with a chuckle.

Huh…… Was Paul always like this?

"Do you promise me?" I press the issue.

Paul smiles sheepishly. "Do you know what I receive in exchange for the information I give Henri and Gill?"

"……No?"

"Money."

"Excuse me?" I blurt out.

"I love plants, and I love money."

Hearing that line from somebody who looks like him is bound to make anybody lose trust in people.

"To be honest, I still don't have a very good image of Roana in my mind, but I like Gill. Besides…if there are other people there like Gill, then maybe Roana isn't so bad after all."

I feel like I just caught a glimpse of Paul's dark side. He always gave me the impression he was one of those everybody-is-equal, peace-comes-first types…… I suppose that's just another flavor of prejudice.

"And *that's* why I can trust him," Gill says, smiling wide.

“So any news on the wolf front?” Henri asks Paul, his tone serious.

The wolf…? Does this mean Gill already told Henri about that? Boy, that kid doesn’t waste time.

When he heard Henri’s question, Paul’s eyes suddenly darkened. “Somebody sent that wolf to the magic academy on purpose.”

“”I knew it,”” Gill and I say in unison.

“Alicia, Gill, you knew about that, too?”

“I just had the sense it was true,” Gill says.

“I mean, a wild wolf waltzing into the magic academy—it’s ludicrous,” I add.

“So was it a wolf from Laval?” Gill asks.

Paul isn’t even slightly surprised by his question. Instead, he nods. “Yeah, it was… You’re a smart boy.”

“What I want to know is, who the hell smuggled a wolf across our border?” Henri asks, sounding a little irritated.

“A valid question, but also, what became of that wolf?” I ask.

Paul and Henri both seem uncomfortable.

Um…what sort of reaction is that? Wouldn’t most people confirm the survival or death of the wolf?

“After Liz subdued it with magic, she let the wolf escape,” Henri says with great difficulty.

Excuse me?!

“She…let it go?”

“A *wolf*?”

“Didn’t it attack someone?”

“Where did it escape to?”

Gill and I ask Henri rapid-fire, with accusatory tones. We know Henri won’t give us any answers, but we just have to ask.

“I don’t know. But even though Liz didn’t say anything, the wolf’s corpse was discovered the next day.”

“Did somebody kill it?” Gill asks quietly, a conflicted look in his eyes.

……This is getting pretty dark.

"Liz Cather wanted to play the part of an animal lover," Gill says, not a glimmer of light in his eyes. "So watch, I'll bet Liz sent the wolf in."

"Yeah, I really doubt that," Henri rebutts, smiling cynically.

"But most girls would never risk their life to protect people who were mean to them. Liz Cather knew that wolf wouldn't kill her, so she used it to make a show of protecting everyone."

"You know……that is definitely a way to gain popularity." Paul seems to understand what Gill is trying to say.

Wait a minute, you're all reading way too much into this. She's the heroine. She would never draw up some harebrained scheme to increase her popularity—she doesn't need to. Gill's hatred of Liz is sparking biased reasoning in him.

"She's like the plague," Gill spits out, a sneer beginning to form on his face.

……I don't like the path he's on.

"Gill."

I look right into his eyes. He seems to know immediately what I am going to say. He slowly closes his mouth.

"You're looking at things too subjectively. Take only the facts and analyze them with an objective eye." I hold his gaze and continue, "Let's organize our facts. First, if we put all our focus on the wolf, somebody brought it to Durkis from Laval, then the wolf trespassed at the magic academy. After Liz subdued the wolf, it ran off somewhere, and the next day, it was dead… What can we conclude from all of this?"

I glance at the trio. They say nothing, their expressions fixed into grim frowns.

I guess somebody bringing the wolf into Durkis is our main point of interest. But at present, we have no leads whatsoever.

"Was there no collar on the wolf's corpse?" Gill asks.

Henri shakes his head. "No, there wasn't."

So there wasn't a collar, but the wolf was still confirmed to be from Laval. I mean, I can't think of any other place it could have come

from. Like, say…I suppose it's possible that some intelligent people exiled from Durkis—somebody like Will—might have set the whole thing up. They could have easily destroyed the iron collar with magic, and they hold a grudge against Durkis, too.

……But even if that were true, why would they send a wolf to the magic academy, of all places? I can't think of a motive. It's not like they went through all that trouble just to see what the magic academy was like. Was it to assess Durkis's strengths? But the wolf just appeared near Liz… I look up at Gill with a start. His ash-gray eyes are shining as he murmurs softly.

"Their target was the saint—it was Liz Cather."



"This is where the wolf appeared."

Henri escorts us to the spot where the wolf showed up.

……There's nothing noteworthy here.

"It might have left some traces behind." Gill thoroughly eyes every inch of the area.

It is possible that somebody used a teleportation spell to summon the wolf onto campus. If it is somebody formerly from Durkis, they ought to be familiar with the magic academy.

"We should search the area, too," I say.

Henri gives me an uncomfortable look. "Ali, I know nothing I say will change anything, but…don't put yourself in danger."

"But I've put myself in danger countless times already."

"This time, another nation is involved. Let Duke handle this."

"Not His Majesty, but His Highness instead? Henri…did Prince Duke say something to you?"

I peer searchingly into Henri's eyes. A bit flustered by my question, he forces a smile onto his face.

"Did I do something wrong?"

……Why does he always show up with the most impeccable timing?

I slowly turn toward the person who spoke.

"You did absolutely nothing wrong, Your Highness."

My smiling rejection makes Duke's face cloud over a little. His clear blue eyes stare intently at me.

"The wolf incident piqued my interest…so I've come to investigate," I reluctantly tell him, unable to withstand the weight of his silence any longer.

Duke immediately shoots an accusing glare at Henri. "I told you not to tell her about that."

"Once Ali gets set on something, she won't listen to reason. Don't you know that?"

"But surely you told her it was dangerous?"

"I did. But if you want to complain, go to Eric," Henri tells him with a sheepish grin. "I didn't think she'd find out that way, either."

So does this mean they both kept it a secret from me to keep me from getting caught up in danger? How cruel. I may not look it, but I'm actually a pretty great fighter. I might have lost my touch slightly since I've got only one eye, but if shit goes down, I can fight.

"Share everything you know with me," I demand.

"……I can't."

"I can take it," I assure Duke.

"What kind of man gives dangerous information to the woman he loves?"

The seriousness in Duke's gaze nearly takes me out. Why do those eyes make me so weak?

I sigh quietly. I may be stubborn, but I'm no idiot. This must be why Henri said I should let Duke handle this.

"Fine, then let me ask just one question. Liz's true identity—her sainthood—has that intel traveled outside this kingdom?"

Duke frowns deeply. "We don't know that yet."

"I see… Well, I'll be on my way, then—"

"Alicia."

Before I can turn and leave, Duke softly calls out to me. I ought to be used to hearing him say my name by now, but for some reason, my heart jumps a little.

Duke's eyes are overflowing with tenderness as he looks at me. "Someday…I need you to tell me how you feel."

"How I feel…?"

How do I feel…about what? I glance at Gill for help.

"Alicia, you have the intellect of an adult but the heart of a baby."

"I'm begging you, too, Ali," Henri chimes in, an awkward smirk on his face. "Please just tell Duke how you feel about him."

"All you do is take, take, take, Alicia. You've never once told Duke how you feel…," Gill says.

"He keeps throwing his heart at you when he doesn't even know how you feel… Talk about cruel and unusual punishment."

Urk…um, I kind of wish you two wouldn't gang up on me like this. And Duke still isn't saying anything. What in the world is on his mind?

"To toy with the heart of a popular, handsome, gifted prince, you really are a villainess—" Gill stops and slaps a hand to his mouth.

A smile spreads on my lips. "Why, yes, I *am* a wonderful villainess who toys with princes' hearts."

Gill looks at me uncomfortably. He's made a horrible mistake.

I never dreamed the day would come when Gill called me a villainess… This is the best day of my life!

"Ali's the only girl who smiles in response to someone calling her a villainess," Henri murmurs to Gill, who nods firmly in reply.

As I stare at the still silent Duke, I make a secret vow to myself.

If I ever get confident in my feelings, then I'll give Duke an answer befitting a villainess.



"Professor John said the Spot Sickness in Laval can't be cured by magic."

"Madi can cure it, right?"

"Guess so. But madi is so heavily prized that you can't get it easily."

"Why don't they just make more madi with duplication magic?"

Yes! Exactly! If you duplicate the madi in stock, you can save more lives. Why didn't I think of such a simple solution earlier? Spot Sickness is so rare in Durkis that you could basically say it doesn't exist, but I really want to test that theory!

My heart quickly fills with curiosity.

"Perhaps I should visit Laval," I say.

"What?!" Gill barks.

Uh-oh. I said that out loud, didn't I?

But I really do think duplication magic could be quite useful. And since it is a level-82 spell, that means I can use it. The duplication spell is in the dark magic category… Setting aside the question of why that is, it is a useful spell. But more to the point, I really want to see what Laval is like with my own eye. Just like with Roana Village, there are many aspects that can only be understood if you see for yourself.

But travel overseas is highly restricted…and I don't have the privilege. Which is a missed opportunity, really. If Laval is trying to kidnap Liz because they want her saintly powers, I would have gladly let them kidnap me instead… Besides, if Liz disappears from Durkis, I would lose my raison d'être. Every villainess needs her saint.

"Hey, Alicia, you aren't by any chance fantasizing something weird again, are you?" Gill asks, staring dubiously at me.

If I tell him what I'm thinking, he'll definitely be against it.

"Not really. Why?"

Something in Gill's eyes tells me my facetious reply hasn't exactly satisfied him. Looks like he doesn't trust me… Well, Gill's intuition is spot-on in this case.

With that, we make our way to the dining hall. There is already quite a crowd there. Why is every place on this campus so bustling? It's like there's never a day when something doesn't happen.

"Wanna go in?" Gill asks.

"Let's not," I answer quickly.

I'd rather die than step into such a clamor. It is bound to get us caught up in some mess again. No sooner do we turn our backs to walk away than somebody cries out.

"Hey! Alicia Williams is here!"

……And you just ruined her stealthy retreat.

To recognize me at a glance—does this person have a crush on me?

"Think it's another mess involving you, Alicia?" Gill asks with a little smirk.

Why did all these Alicia-related messes have to happen without my knowledge? A villainess cannot afford to be half-hearted with her feelings.

I lower my voice and glare at Gill. "Gill, I know you're eating this up."

"Yeah, and? Every time you stir up some drama, you just get more popular."

"I don't want to be popular. I want to be hated."

"Setting that aside—are we going in or not?"

"We're going in."

If we don't go in, that would signal defeat. So with this strong proclamation, I boldly set foot into the dining hall.

Nobody says a word—stares pierce into me as I stride in. Being watched always makes me stand up straight and tall.

"Oh my."

This is the first thing I blurt out. Is this……a bunch of hair? Strewn across the floor is a beautiful mess of hair in the rare color of violet.

"The cutter herself finally makes an appearance!"

The tense, high-pitched voice sounds familiar. I turn to look at its owner. Why, it's Jane… Haven't seen her in a while. Looks like her wound healed—either that, or it was healed with magic.

"You're looking well, Jane," I say.

She grimaces. "Hearing my name from your mouth *disgusts* me."

Oh my, oh my, somebody sure hates me. And of course she hates me. I lost control of my own strength and sent her flying. To use the word *disgusting* to describe me—that takes guts. I did have the feeling our battle was not yet over. So this is a grudge match.

"Alicia, I don't think she's our girl," Gill whispers to me.

……Huh? She isn't?

"Don't you think *she's* the troublemaker?" Gill asks, pointing behind us.

I look where he is pointing to see a girl with her hair brutally shorn off, sitting on the floor.

Aha. She's the owner of the violet hair.

"What a tragic sight. What happened?" I ask.

Jane glares at me and begins to speak. "She says she idolizes you. She loves your long, lustrous, beautiful…disgustingly black hair, so she grew hers out to be like you."

Well, what a nicely thorough explanation. She even described my hair type to a T.

"And?" I prompt her to continue.

Jane lets out a coquettish shriek. "The thought of anyone idolizing *you* makes my skin crawl! So I did her a favor and cut her hair! That's what she gets for worshipping you!"

After shrieking with all her might, Jane sneers at the violet-haired girl slumped on the floor.

Oh dear…it seems during my absence, Jane has become quite unhinged. Not a trace of the esteemed teacher's pet remains. Did I knock it out of her? I wonder……

"So what exactly do you want me to do about this?" I ask.

"Just look at what a pathetic state she's in because of you. Don't you *feel* anything?"

"No, I don't."

With my blunt reply, the atmosphere in the dining hall changes in a flash.

Oh my…I recognize this atmosphere. Blame is in the air.

Jane's eyes shoot open. "You're *deplorable*!"

"How rude… I don't even know her. I have no interest in weaklings."

"But she's in that state because of *you*."

"Don't misunderstand—that's not my fault. It's your fault."

"It's your fault for making me do it!" she yells, sounding a little frazzled.

……She seems pretty gutted that I knocked her down a peg.

"Lady Alicia is right—it wasn't her. You're the one who cut my hair."

Oh my. What a lovely voice.

I look at the violet-haired girl behind Jane. She got to her feet and speared Jane with a scrutinizing glare.

What incredible valor. And her stance has a sophistication to it, despite her disheveled hair.

"Wow, she really does idolize you, Alicia," Gill remarks.

"Does she?"

"Her stance, the way she pierces people with her gaze—she looks just like you," Gill dispassionately remarks as he observes her.

I stare fixatedly at the pile of violet hair on the floor.

……It seems yet another incredible girl has entered the story.

Jane snorts daringly at the violet-haired girl. "Serves you right for spewing that nonsense about loving *this bitch*."

Jane points her scissors at the girl. She looks as though she might stab her then and there.

……So how will a girl who idolizes a villainess deal with this behavior?

I silently watch the girl. Her deep-purple eyes are wide.

Gill gives me a testing look. "What's our move?"

"It's *her* move. That's for the girl with the cut hair to decide."

My words boom through the dining hall louder than I expected. The girl's gaze shifts toward me. Our eyes meet for the first time.

……Yeah. There's no need for me to come to rescue her, so I'll stay out of this.

"What a ruthless witch you are!" Jane roars, even louder.

"Ruthless? Why? This problem isn't mine to resolve."

"How irresponsible. Your very existence is utterly unpleasant."

Oh my, that's high praise to a villainess. Perhaps I shall reward you with a suitably villainous reply. I smirk and snap my fingers. And the next instant, Jane is clutching her chest, breathing erratically in pain, and falling to the floor. Strained wheezing and drool emit from her gaping mouth.

I used a level-91 dark magic spell that stops an internal organ from functioning. Now *that* spell is very fitting for dark magic. I snap my fingers again to cancel the spell. (I had to stop it there; otherwise, she really would have died.) Jane foams at the mouth a little as she glares at me. It looks like the spell really hurt her.

"What…did you…do?" Jane mutters weakly as she lies on the ground. It is still a struggle for her to breathe.

"I stopped your heart for just a moment." I tilt my head and smile. "Did it hurt?"

The next moment, all the stares upon me change from scorn to terror. The tension in the air grows thick. I can tell from the way everyone around me is breathing. Nobody dares hurl an insult at me now. What a perfect moment that was to show off the level of spell that had taken me two years' practice to achieve. Don't anger a villainess, or there'll be hell to pay.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," I tell Jane, walking past her to the violet-haired student. Despite what she just witnessed, her eyes are still filled with respect and adoration as she looks at me.

"You—what is your name?"

"My name is Carol Miller…Lady Alicia," she answers clearly, a tremor in her voice.

I'm right. Girl has class.

"Do you idolize me?"

"I do! Your strong will, your forward-thinking pragmatism, your beautiful golden eye, your long, lustrous black hair—I love it all."

There is a ravenous adoration in Carol's voice as she speaks. I never dreamed anyone would worship me so devotedly as her.

"So I wanted to grow my hair longer, to be as much like you as possible, Lady Alicia…," she murmurs sorrowfully.

I glance at her hair. It has gotten frightfully short. Jane went too far.

"I'm sorry you got caught up in this," I apologize to Carol, then turn to Jane. All traces of her former spirit gone, Jane stares at me in terror.

"Don't worry. I'm done with you." With a little smile at her, I snatch the scissors from her hand. Then I turn back to Carol. She is staring blankly back at me.

—Now, time for a great history-making villainous act! Burn the image into your eyes, *mortals*!

I grip my hair in my fist and vigorously slice it off with the scissors. The black hair flutters to the floor, landing atop the pile of violet hair.

Carol's and Gill's eyes are both so wide in shock that it looks as though they might pop out of their sockets any second.

"There. My hair is just as short as yours. Now you're like me again."





Then I smile at her. The dining hall falls silent, not even an ambient sound in the air.

It is Gill's laughter that finally breaks it.

"Alicia, you always act beyond my wildest dreams."

"Oooh, should I take that as a compliment?"

"Of course," Gill replies happily.

Gill really does smile a lot more than he used to.

……I'll have to trim my ends straight with magic later.

I walk over to Carol and hold out a hand. "Good to meet you, Carol."

But she just continues to stand there, her eyes brimming with tears.

Huh? What? Did I say something wrong?

"You…said my name…," she murmurs shakily, her eyes fixed on mine.

"All you did was say her name to get that reaction… Somebody sure loves you, Alicia." Gill smirks.

He is right. She really does seem infatuated with me.

"But you love me, too, don't you, Gill?"

I meant it as a quip. Gill has been getting me really good lately, so I want to pay him back with an uncomfortable question.

Gill looks sucker punched for a moment. Then he smiles softly. "That question is torture."

From that line alone, I know Gill's answer. And how flattering it is, to have a boy in his rebellious phase give me such an earnest answer.

I shift my gaze from Gill back to Carol. "We're done here. Let's go."

"Yes, milady!" she answers energetically. The tremor is gone from her voice. She looks at me with animated joy.

And as expected, everyone clears a path for us as we exit the dining hall.

Oooh, I really do feel like a queen…an evil queen. I'm at the top of the world.

Right after we leave the dining hall, we bump into Mel. As soon as she spots me, she comes running with a ridiculous amount of excitement in her voice.

"Ali-Aliiii, are you—? Whoa! Did you just cut your hair?"

"Yes. There were…circumstances."

"It's so cute! Too cute! This is the first time I've seen a girl rock a bob cut so well!"

Mel nearly bowls me over in her excitement. As I watch her overreaction, I can't exactly enjoy the praise she is giving me.

"You're drooling," Gill says, tiredly eyeing Mel, but Mel doesn't seem to hear him.

"You've got such a doll-like face, Ali-Ali. Everything is in such perfect proportion, too! Oooh, beautiful girls with short hair rock my world!"

Mel calling me "doll-like" feels wrong… She looks much more doll-like than me.

"Mel, don't carry on like that in front of Lady Alicia—it's rude." Unable to stand the sight anymore, Carol chides and glares at Mel.

……Oh my, do they know each other?

Mel's gaze shifts to Carol, her tone dropping down an octave. "What—what—*what*? Hey, Carol. What's with the gruesome haircut? And how do you know Ali-Ali?"

"How do *you two* know each other?" I demand.

"She's a distant relative," Carol promptly replies.

Mel glares back at Carol. "Don't get all cocky just because you're a year older."

Carol's a year older…? If I recall correctly, Mel is eighteen. Which means Carol is nineteen? Four whole years older than me? I give Carol a surprised glance. She and Mel are still exchanging epic death glares. They are clearly Best Frenemies Forever.

Never mind that—I'm itching to fix that horrid hair of hers. While the girls continue their death-glaring match, I snap my fingers. And in a flash, both of our hairstyles are fixed. Magic sure is handy. We don't have to go to a salon.

"There, I gave it a quick fix."

"Lady Alicia…oh, thank you with all my heart! I'm elated beyond words."

"Just don't get cocky," Mel snaps, bursting Carol's bubble of joy.

"Aren't you jealous that Lady Alicia fixed my hair for me?"

"Huh? Um, *nooo*? Besides, I've spent waaay more time with Ali-Ali than you. I even *kidnapped* her once."

"Right, that did happen, didn't it?" I chime in.

Carol watches the exchange with a look of disbelief on her face.

"By the way, Mel, what brought you here in the first place?" Gill asks.

Mel looks at me, suddenly remembering. "Right, right, Duke said there was a ruckus in the dining hall, but he was busy, so he wanted me to check on you for him…but it looks like the ruckus resolved itself!" Mel explains in a bubbly tone.

I'm not exactly certain if we can say the ruckus has been resolved…but with all my heart, I am grateful Mel didn't witness the scene.

"Oh, look! It's Duke!" Mel cries, pointing in the distance.

……What a crazy aura around that student council. They're like idols. Duke stands in the middle with Liz directly beside him, and the usual faces surround them. Gleeful feminine sighs start to fill the air.

……Duke has been letting his dark side show a lot lately, yet he's still so popular. Handsome faces really do rule the world, don't they?

Mel shouts to Duke and his entourage. "Hey, Duke! Ali-Ali just got *super* cute!"

Duke meets my gaze. And as soon as he sees me, he comes barreling toward me.

……Should I bail? But I've never heard of a villainess making a hasty retreat.

Duke stands before me, scrutinizing my face. And I stare defiantly back at him. All I did was cut my hair. That's hardly grounds for a lecture. I'll be okay……right? Just when I recoil a little in fear, Duke's hands gently cover his eyes.

……Does it really look that bad?

"You're so pretty, I'm angry."

I hear a whisper.

……Huh?! That's your take?

"I wish I were the first to see it."

"Excuse me?" I yelp without thinking.

……That was an unexpected reaction. I thought Duke would be much more mature about it. Perhaps it was a big failure on my part to demand that he speak his mind.

"Huh? Ali, you cut your hair? Oooh, you look pretty!"

That means very little, coming from Curtis the F-boy…

"Of course Lady Alicia is pretty," Carol huffs.

"Ali's a beauty—she looks good in anything," Henri follows, patting my head.

Liz and her posse say nothing, keeping their distance from me.

"Your short hair is a big hit, huh?" Gill murmurs beside me.

And it isn't a bad feeling, getting all this praise just by cutting my hair.

"But since she had such a big audience in the dining hall…I'll bet you were one of the *last* people to see it, Duke!" Mel teases.

Seriously. Mel has the best personality ever.

……What sort of reaction should a villainess give in a moment like this? If I get in my head, I seem to understand less and less how a man-bewitching villainess should act. Well, I'm still in training to be a villainess after all. I'll figure that out later.

As these carefree thoughts fill my head, I don't notice the look of jealousy and envy in Liz's eyes as she stares at me.



"Alicia."

I return to my cottage to find my father standing in front of it. The surprise reunion freezes me in my tracks.

Oh my, he aged a bit. But he's still my handsome father, of course…

"Umm…long time no see, Father. What brings you here?"

"I hear you made it past level ninety. Congratulations." My father's nostalgic deep voice echoes in my ears.

"Thank you, Father."

I give him a formal curtsy. He gives me a perplexed look back. Slowly, and with great care, he touches the eye patch over my left eye.

Aha, the eye patch. Hey, it was my choice to give my eye up. Get that guilty gaze off me. It was my plan all along that once I learned the personal transference spell, I would give my eye to Will.

"Father, I am very happy right now. I was confined for two years so that I may continue my task as monitor…but I believe I gained so much more." I soften my tone and smile. "So please do not apologize to me."

"I see…so are you coming back home, then?"

"Back home?"

"I hope you weren't planning on staying in this cottage forever."

He's……right. It's so after the fact that I completely forgot.

……I suppose I should go back to the mansion.

"Get locked in a cottage, come back home—grown-ups sure are headstrong, aren't they?" Gill murmurs.

He sounds quite bitter. But I know my father made the suggestion only out of worry for me…

"Well, you know, the mansion has a library. It would be much more convenient to do our research there…," Gill concedes, softening his own rebuke. "Besides, a girl like you shouldn't hole herself up in a cottage forever, Alicia."

"Fair point…… Let's go home."

When I say this, my father's face lights up. Oh my, he wanted me to come home really badly, didn't he…? More to the point, it really

did seem to bother him that he put me in that cottage in the first place.

"I'm happy for you, Arnold," Gill murmurs quietly to my father.



Hello, old friend!

I look around my room. It was kept clean while I was away.

"Lady Alicia! Lady Alicia!" Somebody is excitedly calling my name and pounding on my door.

……Rozetta?

"Come on in," I answer calmly.

The door bursts open. "Lady Alicia! You've returned home, I see."

Rozetta, who hated Alicia in the game, has tears in her eyes as she welcomes me home. I haven't seen her face-to-face over the past two years, but she brought all sorts of things to the cottage for me.

"Lady Alicia…your eye…" Rozetta's voice cracks, her hands darting to her agape mouth. "What…happened?"

"I gave it away. To somebody else."

Right after I say the words, I realize that my father didn't ask what happened when he saw my missing eye. Had he already received the news? Well…I did figure that the news was out there.

Rozetta presses me no further. She bows gracefully and says, "Please forgive me, my lady, for bursting into your room. I am simply beside myself with joy."

"It's all right. Thank you for taking care of me."

Rozetta smiles at me, her voice shaking as she says, "Lady Alicia… I truly am so happy that you've come back home."

It feels good to be missed.

“Well, I’ll be on my way, then,” she says. “If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ring me. Oh! Also, Lady Alicia, you’ve grown into quite a beautiful young lady.”

Before Rozetta leaves my room, she turns and gives me the softest smile.

“Alicia, you in there?”

I hear Gill’s voice on the other side of the door.

“Come on in.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes, it’s only me.”

After a moment of silence, the door slowly opens. There is a distinct graveness in Gill’s eyes.

“Is something wrong?”

“……I found this at school,” he says, handing me a tiny card.

“Where did you find this?” I take the card from Gill and stare at it.

……This is a trump card. I believe they’re called “royal cards” in this world? They’re often used among the nobility in betting games.

“I found it where the wolf infiltrated the school.”

“Wha—?” I gasp dumbly in reply.

“Are you saying there’s a significance behind this card…?”

“I don’t know.”

It is the four of spades. Which could mean…

“If this card is our connection to the culprit—”

“”The nobility cater,”” Gill and I say in unison.

“Aha! So the answer came to you, too,” Gill says.

In the world of playing cards, social class is displayed by the markings. Clubs are farmers, diamonds are merchants, hearts are the clergy, and spades are the nobility. Ones are aces, twos are deuces, threes are treys, and fours are caters, so it can be inferred that the four of spades is the “nobility cater.” It’s either the name of some group or organization, or neither—that, we don’t know.

Besides, it wouldn't make sense for the culprit to leave behind incriminating evidence.

……Yeah, we're just making knee-jerk assumptions, aren't we?

"It might be a trap," I say.

"True. Somebody from Laval might be trying to frame somebody at the magic academy."

"We can't infer anything from this card alone. Seriously, the mysteries just keep growing."

……At this rate, I really think our fastest bet is infiltrating Laval. But my father would never allow that. He tried to get me to quit being Liz's monitor, after all.

So maybe I could get exiled…? Yes, I should just get exiled like the villainess I am. Then I would find the evidence I need and bring it back to Durkis. I'm not sure my plan will succeed, but if it does, I will surely go down in history for it.

"Alicia? What are you thinking about?"

"……Being Liz's monitor."

"I can't use magic, but I know a lie when I hear one." Gill lets out a deep, dubious sigh.

"I was thinking about what my best choice would be for me to become a villainess."

"……So did you get an answer?"

If I tell Gill my idea as is, he will definitely oppose it. But if I lie, he will see through that anyway… With hesitation, I look at him and say the words slowly.

"Simply going to school…and criticizing Liz…that isn't enough."

Gill frowns meaningfully. He understands what I am getting at. Up until now, every time I came within saintly Liz's reach, drama ensued. And I have built up my villainess cred rather well using that method, but only to a point.

"I was just thinking it's about time I make things happen, rather than waiting for things to happen to me."

"I think you're taking plenty of action already, Alicia."

"But my sights are aimed higher."

"How high exactly are you aiming?"

"As high as I can go."

Gill looks sucker punched for a moment, but soon after, the corners of his mouth lift into a beautiful smile.

"……And I'm coming with you."

"I appreciate your companionship, Gill…but I have to do this mission alone."

"Huh? You don't want me with you?" Gill stares at me wide-eyed. To a boy who revels in my needing him, my declaration must have crushed him.

"Gill, I want you to stay here and be Liz's monitor in my stead."

"……I don't want to."

This might be the first time Gill ever refused my order. But it is still best that I travel to Laval alone. It wouldn't be right to rope Gill into that much unknown danger.

"What in the world are you trying to do?" Gill asks me, his eyes dead serious.

I'm trying to get exiled! …Yeah, I can't exactly say that. But Gill is a very perceptive boy, so he's bound to figure out what I'm thinking eventually. I need to strike now, before that happens…

"What am I supposed to do?" His eyes beseech me, begging for guidance. But Gill's life is his to decide, not mine.

"Gill, your mission in life isn't to stand by my side—it's to stand at the top of the world, right?"

"But I want to stand at the top of the world with *you*, Alicia."

It feels like I am seeing echoes of Gill's younger self for the first time in years. Lately, he has gotten so obstinate that his innocent sweetness has faded. But Gill seems more like his age in this moment.

"I can give you a golden opportunity," I tell him. "But that opportunity isn't for me to seize; it's for you, Gill. Don't worry, we're both aiming for the same destination."

"And where is that?"

"The top."

I look up at the ceiling and point. He and I have spent our lives climbing to the top, so even if we part ways, we will always meet up there. Besides, this isn't an eternal farewell. I am just going on a little journey.

Then again…if I get exiled, there's no guarantee I'll be able to come back to Durkis in one piece…

"Don't worry, Gill, you will always have a place on my path." I gently pat his head.

"……Well, now you're making it impossible for me to say no. You'll always have me beat, Alicia."

With a soft sigh, Gill smiles…and there are signs of adulthood in his eyes.



The morning sun streams through the tiny carriage window. Gill's hair sways gently as he sleeps in front of me.

I have to start drawing up my Great Exile Plan today. My heart is dancing—it feels like I am about to do something utterly wicked.

……I suppose I should do something terribly disrespectful to the king? But before I do, I want to ask about Will.

"Alicia."

……You scared me. Gill, who I thought was asleep, is now staring at me intently.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I thought about it all night, and…if you want to go on some quest alone, I won't try to stop you. I won't oppose you." Gill's eyes remain steady on me. "But…I want you to promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Please don't die." Gill is so beautiful when he says the words that I am bewitched for a moment. What a manly gaze he has. "And this

wish isn't coming just from me. Duke, Henri, Mel, Carol—we all love you very much, Alicia. A future without you would be too lonely for words—Duke said that once."

The tone of his voice is so serious that my brain derails to the most insensitive thought—is it okay for a villainess to be so loved? I am so happy, yet anxiety is taking firm root in my heart.

……Is the villainess I'm aiming to be the right kind of villainess for me?

"I will always be your shield, whenever you need me," Gill promises.

"Then I will always be your sword."

"……Together, we're the strongest in the world."

Gill smiles proudly. The morning light makes his ash-gray eyes shine so bright that I can't look at them directly.



"Lady Alicia."

"Ali-Ali!"

Carol and Mel are barreling toward me. They both look as though they are about to burst.

"Good morning, my lady."

"Good! *Morn*iiiing!"

"H-hi."

"Yay! She was talking to *me*—I'm sure of it!" Mel cheers, a proud, victorious look on her face.

"You're wrong. She most definitely greeted *me*."

"Huhhh? No matter how you slice it, she was talking to *me*—Mellie."

I guess they're both morning people.

"Alicia, you should probably just assume there's at least a hundred people in this school who worship you like they do," Gill says.

"A hundred?!" I shriek. "Isn't that a bit of an overestimation?"

I am stunned. Isn't that just too many fans for a villainess?

"…I'd say one hundred is a conservative estimate. There's bound to be more."

How does he even know that? Just how much intel is Gill gathering in secret?

"Well, *I* love my Ali-Ali most of all."

"No, *I* worship Lady Alicia more than anyone else."

Mel's and Carol's shrill voices ring in my ears. Gill watches the exchange with a tired look on his face.

"They're at it again."

……I wonder if the one with the most mature psyche here is Gill.

"Good morning, Alicia."

A pair of big arms hug me from behind. A sweet aroma hits my nose.

Can't this guy greet me like a normal person? He used to do that until very recently…

"Barf!"

"Could you please not ruin our morning?"

Henri and Gill shoot frustrated glances at me—well, at Duke, rather.

"Good morning, Your Highness. Now, please let me go." I gently push Duke away with one hand. Look at me, shunning a prince—I'm a stellar baddie. But what a brawny frame he has. He's so slender, yet so muscular. The quintessential dream body.

"In very recent history, you would've blushed from a little hug. Are you used to it now?" Duke teases slyly.

……Could it be he only hugged me from behind because he gets a kick out of watching me squirm?

In that case—

"Yes, I'm bored by it now. I doubt you'll stir my heart from now on…though perhaps *somebody else* might."

That last little jab surely scores me some Villainess Points.

"Ohhh…look who's gotten sassy."

From the way Duke is looking at me, it seems he sees through my entire act…… Urk. He's angry. But I'm a baddie. I must be able to say cutting lines like that boldly.

"I deeply respect the amount of self-control you've had, Duke," Henri says supportively. But his words don't even enter the ears of the prince, who still refuses to let me go.

Agh…his gaze is painful. Duke told me he wanted an answer, but I still don't even know how I feel! What am I supposed to do?

"Hellooooo? Class is gonna start soooooon—wait, what's going on here?"

Curtis, who has jogged over to us, stops abruptly in surprise at the sight of Duke.

Yeah, I understand. It's not often that Duke stares at me with that kind of expression…

"It's nothing. Let's go," Duke says sharply, turning his back on me and walking quickly away.

"Wow, I'm a wonderfully wicked woman, aren't I…?"

Gill smirks cynically back at me. "More like an awkward ass, if you ask me."

"Awkward ass…that hurts. That means I'm not even close to being a baddie."

"If your roles were reversed, wouldn't you hate to hear the line you just said?"

If I were crazy about Duke and my heart was faithful to him for years, and I told him how I felt, yet he told me only other girls could stir his heart…

"Yeah, I would hate that a lot," I admit. "If Prince Duke said such a thing to me, I would be deeply hurt."

"Huh? You would? Alicia, I think it's pretty clear you're in lo—"

"I suppose Prince Duke will toss me aside now."

"What? Where did that come from? More to the point, Alicia, I'm pretty sure you're in lo—"

"That last horrible thing I said to him surely crushed him."

"*Listen* to me!" Gill finally yells.

I look at him with a start. Gill takes a deep breath. Then he looks at me sternly.

"Alicia…you've loved Duke for a while now. Right?"

"……"

It takes some time for Gill's words to sink in.

"Well, there's no use in me saying so; you'll just deny it," he says.

"Yes…I think I probably do love him."

"Huh?" Gill's eyes widen. "Alicia…did you know I meant romantic love?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Really?"

Why is he forcing me to say it was a lie? When he made me consider things from Duke's perspective, I did feel very upset. I realize that I don't want to see Duke falling for some other girl. All this time, I thought he would be best served hooking up with the heroine…but now my feelings are a little different.

Duke makes my heart race…and I don't mind it. That probably means I have special feelings for him.

……But when I'm chasing after my dreams, these feelings are nothing more than a burden. I've never heard of the prince and the villainess having a happily ever after. He always winds up with the heroine.

"The saint shall marry the prince and become a symbol of peace for the kingdom."

That is the prevailing view. But it feels more like a fate that is forced onto a person, not a path someone chooses for themself… That explains why Duke said that he wanted to be free.

After a long pause, I finally say, "I'm not sure if this is for the best."

"What do you mean, Alicia? You said you were sure of it earlier."

"I did…but now I'm not so sure anymore. I feel like I've wandered into a complicated labyrinth."

"I get it…but it sounds like you've grown up a lot, Alicia." Gill nods proudly.

……What's with that air of superiority, Gill?

"Anyway, I need to go see Prince Duke…and apologize."

"You're apologizing?"

"Yes, this time at least. Though, of course, it will be an apology befitting a villainess."

"You could always wait until you've got some time."

"But if the world ended right now, I would regret not apologizing until I could regret no more."

"I see… Well, you should go to him right away, then," Gill says gently.

"Prince Duke is already in class by now, I imagine, right?" I lower my voice so it won't echo down the hallway.

"*Everybody* is in class, not just Duke. You and I are ditching."

"Should we march inside while class is in session?" I ask.

"That would be pretty wicked…though also disruptive."

"Oh, the students are probably all asleep anyway. I'll be their living alarm clock."

"I know you're putting a positive spin on this, but just so you know, what you're doing is bad."

"*That's* what a baddie does—bad things."

"Yeah, yeah."

I don't know why, but Gill really has a grown-up air about him lately. But I'm rather mature for fifteen myself. Gill is a special breed.

We silently walk down the hall toward Duke's classroom. This hallway really is so big and pristine. The marble floor is always polished to a shine. But a chandelier is a little out of place in a hallway. It feels more like a palace, not a school.

"When Liz becomes queen, this school should be her first reform."

Gill grimaces in disgust. "Huh? Why do you assume Liz Cather will be queen?"

"Because she's the saint. She will wed the crown prince."

"Duke will never agree to that."

"But that's the law of the kingdom."

Gill's eyes widen. I suppose he is surprised that I brought up the law of the land. I also believe the coercive forces of the game are absolute, though I feel sorry for Duke.

"But you should just break the law. Aren't you a villainess, Alicia?"

"Not even a villainess can disrupt the fundamental laws of the world. If the nobility breaks the rules, then what reason do the commoners have for obeying them?"

"……I see the logic of what you're saying, but Duke wants to marry you, Alicia."

"If my love for Duke becomes serious, then I'll just have to cast it aside."

Gill falls silent in thought. Has my answer displeased him? Well, my personal feelings are immaterial. The nobility do not act on their own personal feelings.

"It's written in the Holy Book…that the Devil killed ten people." Gill's voice is low and quiet, and grimmer than ever before. "But God? He killed two hundred, thirty-eight thousand, three hundred, and forty-four people."

Gill gazes into the distance as he whispers this. A brief silence hangs between us.

God killed far more people than the Devil ever did. That is what Gill is trying to say. But my brain can't quite make sense of it all.

"So listen to me, Alicia… I don't care if everyone calls Liz Cather a saint. In my eyes, the only saint in this world is Alicia Williams."

His gaze is so solemn that I am at a loss for words. What wise eyes he has. If Duke were king and Gill were his prime minister, this world would probably become a much better place than it is now.

As I ponder over what to say to Gill, we arrive at Duke's classroom.

"Nobody's in here." I look around the empty room.

"You're right. I wondered why there weren't any sounds coming from the room."

Are they having an outdoor class? Well, this was a waste of time.

"Hey…do you hear somebody crying?" Gill frowns and looks at me.

……I don't believe in ghosts, but I do hear the faint but distinct sound of somebody crying.

"There."

"Huh?"

Gill points straight to the back of the classroom. Chestnut hair. It looks familiar… Who is it? She is looking down, so I can't tell.

"Who's there?" She looks up, sensing our presence. Ah, now I know. That's Emma, one of Liz's devotees. The girl who tried to bait me into a trap. If she's in this classroom, that means she must be older than me. "What…are *you*…doing here…?"

She looks at me with a bewildered gaze. She isn't hiding her freckles today. With a look of panic on her face, Emma roughly wipes her tears with her sleeve and hurries toward the door.

"Wait—you were here first. We'll leave," I say.

Emma freezes, a suspicious look on her face. "It's all your fault… I know you're just going to tell everyone I was crying in here, aren't you?"

Emma's voice gets rougher with each passing second. Either she is genuinely angry with me, or she is just taking it out on me.

"You ridiculed my appearance that day… You humiliated me in front of Miss Liz!"

She seems angry with me…but Liz would never cast aside someone for something so petty. She has the literal heart of a saint.

……Did somebody do something to her? Not like it's any of my business.

"Sorry we disturbed you. We're leaving now."

"What—is that pity? You feel sorry for me, so you'll give me some space to cry alone? Well, your little act of *kindness* doesn't make me feel even slightly better."

Wow, she really must detest me. Not like I didn't know this before, but for her to resent me so deeply, I truly am a villainess, aren't I? I slowly approach her. Emma looks a bit frightened, but she shows no

sign of backing down. She just stares at me with contempt, not moving a muscle.

"Wh-what?"

Her eyes are red and swollen. She must have been crying an awful long time…

"I saw nothing. So I'll say nothing."

"Huh?"

"If you want to cry, it's best to let it out."

Emma looks at me with wide eyes.

"I'll erect a barrier around this classroom for you. Nobody outside will be able to hear you, and nobody will come inside. Don't worry—when you're ready to leave this classroom, the barrier will dissolve on its own."

And without a word more, I turn to leave the classroom.

"It's a lie, and we both know it—you're tricking me the way I tricked you!" Emma yells, her eyes a flowing river of tears.

"But I have nothing to gain by exacting revenge on you," I argue.

"Oh, stop playing! You hate me, and we both know it!"

"Did somebody say something to you?"

Emma freezes, clearly feeling a wave of emotional turbulence.

"That's none of your business!"

That means yes.

"You're right; it is none of my business… But strong-willed people like you, who think that to cry means defeat, as a rule, they hold back their tears. That's why I'm telling you, it's a good idea to open the floodgates and have a big cry now and then. So why don't you stay here until you feel better?"

Before she can say anything, I leave the classroom. I don't know what sort of look is on Emma's face as she watches me go. With a snap of my fingers, I erect a barrier around the classroom. And just before the walls go up, I hear a wailing cry from inside the classroom.

……I'm not particularly interested in Emma, but she seems to be going through a lot.

"You know…sometimes I think…," Gill starts to say.

"What?"

"…that you're actually a people pleaser, Alicia."

"Don't be silly." I laugh in reply. "I'm not a people pleaser—that's what you'd call Liz."

Gill rolls his eyes at me.

"*What?*" I demand.

"Nothing. It's just, if you keep going down that path, the saint's position will…"

Gill's voice got weaker and weaker, so I can't tell what he said. I want to know, but he wouldn't tell me even if I asked him to repeat it.

"We're going to look for Prince Duke now," I say.

We quickly march down the hall. We wander around the building, but we can't find him anywhere.

"Are special classes really this difficult to find?" I sigh. "Maybe it's because I cast that spell earlier, but I'm hungry."

"Want to go to the dining hall? I doubt anyone will be there this time of day."

"Yes, let's go," I agree.

The hallway is silent, save for our footsteps. Because of that, the voices coming from the dining hall are all the louder as we arrive.

"Emma got what she deserved."

"I know she wants Liz to love her, but she got *way* too big for her britches."

"She's been *so* annoying. This is the only way we can deal with her."

Sigh… When will I ever enjoy a quiet, relaxing meal in the dining hall? I quietly peer into the dining hall so the gossiping girls won't notice me. Oh my, that's a familiar face… She was the girl Emma used, I believe? The one who used earth magic to record my voice… Marika, I think. The other two girls are new faces to me.

Marika is like the quintessential NPC. She doesn't look all that important…but in that moment, she has the face of a villainess. So

she's capable of some beautiful expressions after all.

"She was always so *bossy*—I just got sick of her self-centered attitude."

"She made us do all the work, and *she* took all the credit—she's really the worst."

"She's not even *human*. She hit me once."

"A girl like Emma could *never* support someone like Liz."

"That's for sure. Wouldn't Emma be better suited to support that Williams bitch?"

"Hey, she's technically in the Great Five! We'd better call her *Lady Aliciaaaa*."

"Eww, I don't wanna call her by name."

Emma truly is suffering the consequences of her own actions.

……But still, the way they're trash-talking me is penetrating me like a drug. This is exhilarating! I have to up my efforts, so that they spread those nasty rumors about me even further. Their trash-talking doesn't relent—it starts to heat up.

"Remember how terrified Emma looked when we pulled knives on her?! That was *epic*."

"For sure! The look on her face was sheer *poetry*!"

"Little Miss Smug and Confident cowering in fear…"

"Oh, she *shook* when we hid the dead rat in her bag, too."

"Oooh, I loved when we all threw our knives at the wall behind her!"

"I *know*! She fell to her knees and almost cried!"

Shrill cackles fill the air.

My ears are bleeding. Their actions were just too cruel… *They* are the worst, not Emma.

"Gill, hand me your knife," I whisper crisply.

Gill smoothly hands me his knife. "Here you go." Then he sighs and says, "Every time we come to the dining hall, we always get caught up in some drama."



Curtis, Eldest Son of the Kenwood Family—Age Twenty

"Ugh, I'm so tired…," Finn groans, stretching and reaching his hands to the sky.

We are in different school years, but he takes extracurriculars with us since he's gifted. Henri, too. Henri and Alan are twins, but Henri is smarter. Eric is also smart, but not the same level as Finn and Henri.

Finn stares hard at me, a huge smile filling his face. The sun is reflecting off his golden hair, shining blindingly bright as ever.

He always smiles at me like that when he wants something. Finn may look like the purest and most innocent of our group, but he has a dark side. I might just be overthinking things, but if Finn used his cuteness as a weapon, he could probably get anything he wanted.

"Let's get something to eat," he says.

"Just us two boys?"

Finn rolls his eyes and glares at me. "You'd better ease off on the lady-killing; otherwise, someday they'll kill *you*."

That does have a ring of truth to it. I do love women, but it is exhausting being around them constantly. Besides, I'm not wired for monogamy.

"All right, let's go to the dining hall," I agree.

We set out together. And for some reason, when we arrive at the dining hall, we find Alicia and Gill standing in front of it. They are peeking inside.

"I saw something glint just now—was that a knife?" Finn says.

Apparently, Gill just handed Alicia a weapon.

"The real question is, what are those buggers up to?"

Finn and I get closer to the dining hall for a better look at Gill and Alicia.

Come to think of it, how does Finn feel about Alicia? It doesn't seem like he's got a thing for Liz…but he also doesn't seem like he's on Alicia's side, either.

"What—is there something on my face?"

"Uh, no."

Great. Now Finn caught me staring at him.

"Whoa, check that out." Finn pays me no mind and points at Alicia and Gill.

Alicia has entered the dining hall, stands before a trio of girls, and is staring hard at them.

……What a terrifying death glare. I hope she's not going to actually use that knife.

"What are *you* doing here?!"

"Don't barge in on us, you creep…"

"Let me guess—you overheard everything we just said?"

Alicia just listens in silence.

"Wait, did Emma say something to you?!"

"Did she betray Miss Liz? Wow, she really is the worst."

"That *rat*, she should just leave this school and never come back."

Emma…she's one of Liz's devotees, isn't she…?

The girls' verbal abuse gets worse and worse. The words they use to slander Emma are very much not what you'd expect to hear from well-bred ladies. But Alicia quietly stands her ground and takes it all in.

"Don't just stand there—you've got something to say? Just spit it out."

"Awww, unless you're too scared of us to talk?"

They laugh condescendingly at Alicia. But Alicia remains undaunted. I steal a glance at Finn. His head is tilted slightly, and he shrugs. Apparently, he is also having a hard time understanding Alicia's motives.

"She's giving me the creeps."

"I guess the great Alicia Williams isn't so hot after all."

"She acts all bossy and struts around, but maybe we made her lose her nerve."

The situation has escalated quite far, yet Alicia remains silent…… Something is wrong. I take a step forward, to stop them.

"Forget about her—let's go."

But the next thing I know, the girls turn to leave. I quickly scoot backward. I have a feeling I'll get caught up in some pesky drama if they see me.

"Curtis? Don't you want to stop them?"

"I can't. They're already coming toward us."

Finn sighs softly at my excuse. It annoys me how condescending he can be despite his younger years, but I can see why my behavior annoys him.

And then it happens. Something shiny shoots right at us.

""Huh?"" Finn and I gasp in perfect unison.

Alicia threw the knife. It sailed right next to the group of girls and stuck itself into the wall. The girls haven't pieced together what happened yet. They're just standing there, frozen stiff. The knife sailed right past their faces. It's understandable that they're shaken.

……Wow, what incredible control. Is it even possible to shoot a near miss with such precision? There is no surprise in the girls' eyes…only fear. They stare at the knife in horror.

"Well, how does it feel to have a knife thrown at *you*?" Alicia murmurs without flinching. Then, ignoring the girls, who are paralyzed in fear, she turns to leave.

"Hold it right there!" the girl with the strongest will cries out, after much desperate struggling to move. "Did Emma get to you? You came here to avenge her, didn't you?!"

With an annoyed sigh, Alicia turns back to face the girl. And the once boldly shouting girl clamps her mouth shut, trembling in fear. From where I am standing, I can't tell what sort of expression is on Alicia's face, but her voice sounds tense.

"Next time, I won't miss."

Those five words carry a tremendous weight. As a threat, it succeeds beyond her wildest dreams. For Alicia to suggest vengeance, those girls must have done some truly horrible things to Emma. They scramble away from the scene, hurling obscenities as they run.

"Shouldn't we scram, too?" Finn asks me quietly.

He's right. We should leave before Alicia finds us.

"Lord Curtis, Lord Finn, a moment of your time?"

But the next thing I know, Alicia has met my gaze. I don't even have a chance to run away…

Without a word, Alicia makes her way to the central garden. Feeling guilty about getting caught, we follow silently behind.

"Ali, can I ask you a question?"

Alicia stops right at the entrance to the central garden. Then she slowly turns to face me. The light in her eye is so sharp that I swoon in spite of myself. Most people would probably be terrified at that moment, but her demure expression nails me to the spot.

"……What the hell are you thinking?" I blurt out my thoughts.

"Huh?" Alicia frowns, staring at me in amazement.

"Er, it's just, you know, I was just wondering why you threatened those girls on Emma's behalf."

She pauses for a moment, then answers, "I didn't do it for Emma. I just couldn't stand to hear another word from them."

"I bet Emma will defect to you, Alicia," Finn says beside me, sporting a poker face similar to Alicia's. Is he happy or angry at the prospect of Emma siding with Alicia? Who can tell?

"But Emma is a rabid Liz worshipper, you know," Alicia argues.

"I only believe what I can see with my own eyes," Finn replies.

"Lord Finn, what exactly are you trying to say?"

"Everyone calls you a devil, Alicia, but I've never seen you act like one—if anything, you're an angel to me."

"That is the worst possible compliment you could have given me," she scoffs. "An angel? How truly deplorable."

Wow. She really does hate being called an angel. Funny. Most girls love that… I observe Alicia as these thoughts run through my mind.

"By the way, Emma likes girls," Finn says.

"Excuse me?"

This finally surprises the formerly calm Alicia. It looks like Gill already knew, though. He doesn't show the slightest surprise in Finn's revelation.

"I said, she *likes* girls," he repeats.

"Um, so you mean…in a romantic way?"

"""Girls,""" we three boys reply in impeccable unison.

Alicia still doesn't seem to understand what Finn means. Well, it has to be a shocking revelation. Not very many people know.

"Gee, I wonder if Emma is already in love with Ali…," I tease.

"But I didn't do anything," Alicia insists, her voice slightly emotional.

"Yeah, I think Emma fell hard for you, Alicia," Gill says in earnest (clearly to add fuel to the fire of her worries). "Anybody you get close to always feels the lure of your charm whether they want to or not," he adds, a hint of cynicism in his smile.

I have to admit, the kid is right. It is odder *not* to feel drawn to Alicia's allure. Even if you think she is a wicked woman, she still draws you in. Completely the opposite of Liz, Alicia is the bewitching of the two, in my opinion.

"If Liz were in your position, she would have either brought the girls to Emma and forced them to make up, or she would have stood up to protect Emma, one or the other. Though that's pure conjecture on my part," Finn says.

"Well, Liz Cather is everyone's hero," Gill agrees. "She'd have to at least do that much."

"But if you ask me, the true hero is the one who punished Emma's abusers in secret," Finn says.

"Liz Cather wants to show everyone how pure her heart is, so she'd gather an audience and say a long, beautiful speech first."

……They sure treat Liz horribly. I'm not exactly siding with Liz, but for boys with such cute little faces, Finn and Gill sure let the slander slide off their tongues like butter. But more importantly, for the first time, I finally know what is on Finn's mind. I had only a vague sense of it earlier, but to my surprise, he has been Team Alicia all along. I get the sense that all of Alicia's followers are geniuses.

Though I suppose it is only natural that the gifted flock to the gifted. I wonder how many of Liz's followers will defect to Alicia. Things have gotten really interesting. I guess an outsider like me will have to keep a close watch to see how things unfold.



Alicia, Eldest Daughter of the Williams Family —Age Fifteen

"Prince Duke, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

I bow my head deeply, then I look right into his deep blue eyes.

He happens to be visiting my family mansion. Since I couldn't find a chance to talk to him at school, this works out perfectly for me. At my own home, I can take the time I need to open up and tell him everything.

"What I said to you that day was so careless. To be honest, I've never experienced being loved by anybody so deeply, so I just…"

As I squeeze the words out with difficulty, a soft smile forms on Duke's lips. It is a smile that shows he already knows everything. That confident smile of his always makes me feel so weak.

"So, um……are you not angry with me anymore?"

"I was never angry with you to begin with, Alicia."

"Huh?" I blurt out dumbly.

He smiles uncomfortably at that. He was never angry with me… What does he mean?

"So, um, who *were* you angry with?"

"Let's not talk about this anymore."

"I'm going to keep asking until you give me an answer."

I turn a full smile on him. Now our positions are reversed. What a rare treat it is, watching Duke flounder.

A soothing breeze flows in from the window, gently rustling the curtains. Duke moves with them, turning to look at me.

"The thought of some other man making your heart flutter… It made me envy him to no end."

……Well. That's one of the most romantic lines I've ever heard. Only a prince could say such an embarrassing line in earnest. The future is yet unknown, but I doubt I will ever meet a man better than Duke. After all, Duke was my fave when I used to play this game. What's more, I can be myself around him. It is never a strain to be with him; it is relaxing, in fact. (Though, of course, a part of me is still nervous at times.) Over the years, he has smoothly slipped into my heart. Perhaps that is a testament to the charms of Durkis's crown prince.

"Alicia?"

He mercilessly stares into my eyes. His face, a national treasure of beauty, is just inches away from mine.

"Um, thank you very much?" I thank him with a questioning lilt in my voice as I step away from him.

You know, why has Duke come to my house anyway? It doesn't seem like he has business with me or my brothers…… Is it my father? I have never seen the two speak with each other before. And perhaps it is vain of me to think so, but if they did talk, I can only imagine it would be about me.

"Your Highness, so sorry to have kept you waiting."

With impeccable timing, my father enters the room just as I am thinking about him. My father bows, and Duke nods slightly in return.

"It's all right, Lord Williams. No need to be so formal."

"Thank you, Your Highness." My father raises his head, his eyes meeting mine. He probably doesn't want me to be there.

"So what are you two gentlemen here to discuss?"

I'm sorry, Father. But I just can't bow out gracefully before I know what's going on. A girl just has to know. And I don't care if you say I have no place in your gentleman's conversation—I will never back down.

I stand up straight and look my father firmly in the eye. When he sees my posture, my father's eyes fill with resignation.

"……I suppose we should give in early," my father says.

"It appears so," Duke replies.

"No matter how sternly I lecture her, she will certainly want to hear what we have to say…and besides, Alicia is fifteen years old now."

Is fifteen really that mature an age?

"Alicia, you could use magic at age ten… That makes you a Divergent. I'm sure you suffered needlessly because of that."

I'm a Divergent? Isn't he mistaking me for Liz here?

"No, Father. I gained my abilities through hard work, nothing more. Liz the saint is the only special one."

"That's not true. I really should have kept your power hidden. Because I didn't, His Majesty set his sights on you and… No, let's not dwell on that."

"Why do I have to hide my power?"

"You really need to be more aware of your own genius. You could use magic at age ten, and now at age fifteen, you've passed level ninety. And it's more than your magic. It's your intellect. Everything about you is beyond the norm."

"Her sword skills and physical strength are superhuman, too," Duke adds.

Did he…mean that as a compliment?

"So are you trying to say that I should live my life in the shadows more?"

"No, that's no longer possible. You already stand out far too much," my father says with a little sigh.

I have to admit, he is right. My infamy at the academy is quite high. To my utter delight, I stick out like a sore thumb.

"So a meeting was held, and a decision was made…"

When I see the pained look on my father's face, I already know what it was. They decided to strip me of my role as Liz Cather's monitor, even though I reached level 90. That's what the uncomfortable look on his face must mean. And I understand. Even though I have finally reached level 90, I am still no match for her at level 100.

……If the decision was made at a special council by the Great Five, I'm in no position to protest.

"We want you to resume being Liz Cather's monitor."

……Huh? Did I mishear that?

"Um, excuse me, but what did you just say?" I ask.

"Now that you have reached level ninety, we have determined you are indeed suitable for the role of Liz Cather's monitor."

Why are you giving me such happy news with such a sad look on your face?! You made me assume I wouldn't be Liz's monitor anymore.

"You could at least be happy for me," I tell him.

"You might be happy with the news, Alicia, but I'm sick with worry. I wanted you to live a life of leisure…"

I suppose these are the struggles of a man with a daughter. No matter how hard I try, I could never talk him out of his worries. It isn't easy, getting a father's wishes to line up with his daughter's.

……Could it be that I'm a tad abnormal?

As if he read my mind, Duke looks at me and nods.

"If you find yourself about to be caught in any danger, you tell me right away," my father commands firmly. It is clear just how deeply he loves me.

"But, Father, isn't it in the greatest danger that flowers bloom the most beautifully?"

"……Are you sure you're only fifteen?"

I never thought the day would come when my own father would question my age. And while it is difficult to give my genuine age, I am indeed technically fifteen.

"Anyway, I get to be Liz's monitor again, so I'm satisfied."

"And when she's truly in danger, I'll be there for her."

I hear Duke murmur that clearly into my father's ear.

How rude! If I'm truly in danger, I'll overcome it myself. That's what a villainess does… No matter what obstacles face me, I will not falter. In fact, I welcome an ocean of obstacles. It will make me a better villainess!

"You look excited." Duke smirks.

"She's probably got something foolish on her mind again… I'm so exhausted." My father sighs, his shoulders slumping in frustration.

"Fear not, Father. I am more than strong enough to survive!"

"……Just promise you won't push yourself too far. Now, I have a matter to tend to, so I'll take my leave."

With a deflated bow to Duke, my father leaves the room. Now I'm starting to feel sorry for my father. I hope I haven't shortened his life expectancy. Live a long, long life, Father.

I look at Duke. Our eyes meet for a moment, and my heart skips a beat.

"Aren't you going home, Your Highness?"

"I want to be with you for a while longer, Alicia."

"It's all right. You don't need to be so blunt about it."

I look away without thinking. I am starting to feel hot all over. Come on, any girl would faint hearing a line like that from such a handsome guy. I do wish Duke would be more aware of his own hotness.

His gaze shifts to the diamond pendant around my neck. He gently tugs on it, pulling me closer to him.

"Someday, I *will* make you mine."

……I thought he was going to kiss me. I…I'd better say something back!

"How can you be so certain? The opposite might happen, you know."

I muster up what little strength I have left to smirk back at him.

"The opposite?"

"It's just as possible that I might make you *mine*, Your Highness."

Duke freezes for a moment…then his expression melts into a gentle smile. And my heart won't shut up.





"My heart has always belonged to you, Alicia."

Agh! Why must he always do this to me?! How many times will Duke's romantic lines knock me dead? I truly am concerned for my future.

As I look into Duke's eyes, which hold a glimmer of victorious smugness, I quietly sigh to myself.

—Fin

Afterword

Hello! Izumi Okido here.

Thank you for reading to the very end.

Volume 2 is out in the wild, and I couldn't be happier!

Personally, Mel is my favorite character. A doll-like appearance, a sassy tongue, and a love for Alicia—she's so quirky and in your face, and I love her so much.

Who is your favorite character, everyone?

But oh my goodness, Alicia certainly has become quite a *valiant man*. I hope she made readers swoon, "Yas! Queen!"

Gill also did some growing up…and I feel kind of sad that he's not such a cute little boy anymore. Then again, no matter how mature he becomes, he always retains a bit of his childish side, so it's all good!

Gill trusts Alicia with all his heart, and he loves her deeply. Alicia has become a necessary piece of his life.

……Gill, if ya ain't careful, you'll miss your chance to get married.

Though since he's devoted his entire being to Alicia, I somewhat doubt he'll ever get married.

Alicia's self-described villainess glory continues to draw talented people to her. Sadly, the harder Alicia strives to be a villainess, the less like one she becomes…

Intelligent and strong—her definition of a villainess will stay the same as she earnestly pushes herself forward. That's what I want for her.

Thank you to my editors, who are always there with wonderful advice, and thank you to Jyun Hayase for the very beautiful illustrations.

And also! *I'll Become a Villainess Who Goes Down in History* has become a manga series!

Akari Hoshi is doing a beautiful job drawing it!

Thank you so very much.

Until we meet again!

Izumi Okido

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