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YOUNG LADY ALBERT IS COURTING DISASTER
Story by Saki
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Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster: Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

One day, entirely out of the blue, Mary Albert remembered everything.

Right there in the middle of the school's opening ceremony, just as the principal capped off his long speech with a single bow, the light glinting off his bald head, awareness surged into her consciousness: this was the world of an otome game she'd played in her previous life.

The game was a classic, and as such its story was simple. Protagonist Alicia transferred to Karelia Academy, a school for young nobles, where she romanced a cast of charming male love interests throughout the course of her academic life.

Naturally, the love interests were all good-looking and highly capable, and as the game's theme was "interclass romance," every one of them came from the nobility. Compared to the boys, Alicia was a simple, ordinary girl, a fact which often caused her a great deal of worry and hurt. Yet despite this, armed with her positive outlook and a smile as brilliant as the sun, she ultimately ended up overcoming these hurdles and successfully courting the cast members.

On top of that, as the game progressed, the player learned that Alicia had in fact been a lost princess all along. It was the sort of tale young girls' dreams are made of. Such stories may be a dime a dozen, but that is by no means a shortcoming. On the contrary, following certain tropes is often a surefire way to win over a specific niche market!

But it wasn't just the story or the royal plot twist that had made the game so popular; both its graphics and mechanics were of superb quality. Eventually, it had even received a sequel as well as a fan disc for the series.

Incidentally, Mary Albert played the role of antagonist in the original game. As the daughter of House Albert, who were second in power only to the royal family, Mary was selfish, arrogant, and prone to harassing Alicia at every opportunity. She was a villainous daughter through and through.

During the climax of the game, Alicia and her chosen love interest denounced

Mary, who was subsequently judged for all her wrongdoings. Alicia went on to reign as the princess, while House Albert was left in total ruin. Playing the game from Alicia's perspective, one couldn't help but think, *"Take that!"* as they witnessed these events unfold.

However tragic, such was Mary's fate in the game: the villainous daughter's just deserts, as it were.

Having remembered all of this in a flash, Mary's mind was reeling in confusion. The balding vice principal droned on, and then the plainly wig-clad guidance officer droned on, but not a word from their long-winded speeches made it through to her head.

There could be no ifs, ands, or buts. She was definitely the same wicked Mary from the game—a beautiful and strong-willed yet selfish young woman with silver hair curled into tight ringlets.

Indeed, no matter how much time the hairdresser might've spent trying to straighten her hair, the moment she uttered the words, "I'm done!" Mary's locks would simply curl right back again. Such was the power of her ringlets that countless talented stylists had tossed their scissors aside in defeat. Just remembering it made her heart ache, yet it was unbearable to have the curls swaying around both sides of her face at all times.

Nevertheless, if this was a restriction of the game and therefore a necessary element in Mary's villainess identity, then she was prepared to accept it, even if it *was* rather annoying.

Above all, Mary's biggest issue right now was not her hair, but rather the ending that awaited her. If things progressed along the current path, her doom was inevitable. And if those stubborn ringlets that made all the hairdressers raise the white flag of surrender were anything to go by, she could not so easily avoid her fate.

Yet if all that lay ahead of Mary after her role as the villainous daughter was retaliation and ruin...then she had but one path forward.

"I shall face my doom head-on!"

"Why in the world would you come to that conclusion?!" Mary's servant, Adi,

couldn’t stop himself from quipping back at her decisive declaration.

Adi was a tall man with rust-colored eyes and short hair of the same shade, who sported a lean, toned physique that usually emanated masculinity. However at the present moment, he was emanating nothing but sheer exasperation, and his expression was sullen as he heaved a sigh.

Coming from a family lineage that had served House Albert for generations, and five years Mary’s senior, Adi typically wouldn’t have had the right to attend Karelia Academy. However, Mary had ordered him to attend as a senior student while serving her, and so the powers that be had made an exception for him. He’d been allowed in as her chaperone, and the fact that he was in attendance, clad in the school uniform, was another example of House Albert’s power and influence.

Presently, Mary and Adi sat facing one another at a table in the corner of the empty school cafeteria. Their topic of discussion was, of course, Mary’s memory of her past life that she’d remembered a few hours prior.

“I must say, my lady, the idea that we’re living in a game from your previous life is a little...”

“What do you mean, Adi? You’re supposed to be my loyal servant, but I feel like you don’t believe my words at all!”

“You are utterly correct. I don’t believe a single bit of this.”

“Admitting it without a moment’s hesitation? Very well, I suppose I can’t blame you. Even so, this is definitely the same world as from that otome game.”

Adi’s brows creased into a frown as he felt the growing pressure behind Mary’s earnest claim.

It was already hard to believe that such a thing as an “otome game” even existed, let alone Mary’s insistence that they were inside the world of one. If anyone else had said that to him, he would’ve laughed scornfully, or perhaps even taken them to the nearest hospital for a checkup.

With such thoughts on his mind, Adi suddenly turned his gaze to Mary.

He hadn’t noticed anything different about her today, and apart from the fact

that she was talking nonsense, her tone and demeanor were the same as always. If she'd truly been reincarnated and her past memories had returned, surely there'd be at least some notable discrepancy, however tiny.

He decided to speak up. "Milady, I'd like to ask you something. What is your name?"

After a brief pause, Mary responded. "My name is Mary Albert. I am a third-year senior student at Karelia Academy and the daughter of the illustrious House Albert."

"Bringing up things I didn't even ask about is *indeed* very in character for you, but... No, hold on. What comes to mind when you think of House Albert?"

"Diplomacy, for the most part. We even have influence in other nations, and thanks to that, we get to eat all kinds of delicious foreign foods! It's wonderful."

"Yes, that is the answer I'd expect from you, but I suppose anyone would be able to come up with that. Let's see... Can you tell me what you're aiming to do this year?"

"Getting rid of my impudent servant for having the audacity to question my every word!"

"And you've been saying that for how long?"

"For years."

While Mary added that this time she was serious, Adi cleared his throat as if to drown out her comment and said, "Now *there's* the lady I know."

Thus ended the interrogation, in part because Mary might have gone through with her threat if the questioning continued any longer. But more than anything, their exchange had convinced Adi that she was the real Mary Albert. Her answers added up, and most importantly, their back-and-forth was the same as always.

Adi sighed in relief, which earned him a hard glare from Mary. "I'm offended that you distrust me so much," she told him.

"My lady, with all your talk of past lives and whatnot, I was convinced your new memories had turned you into a different person. Or that those curls of

yours had finally drilled their way into your brain!”

“Hey, that last part was unnecessary!”

“That’s just how ridiculous your story sounds. But since it’s you, I suppose I’ll believe it. Still...”

Adi kept talking to pacify Mary’s glare. Although he’d decided to believe her outlandish claims, there was still one more thing he had to clarify. If they were truly part of an “otome game” as Mary said...

“Why do you want to play the villain if you know it’ll end in your ruin?”

“That’s just the way it has to be,” she answered. “I was born as Mary of House Albert, so my villainous course has been set from the start. Pits of endless despair, here I come!”

“Is that so? Well, I won’t stop you. So, what game are we supposedly inside of?”

Mary searched through her freshly awakened memories for the title. What was it? The abbreviation she did recall was *Heart High*, so the full title must have been...

“Oh, I remember! It was called *Heartthrob High School: Maiden in Love and the Prince of Memory*!”

“Ugh, what a tacky title that is... I congratulate you on being able to say it without an ounce of shame.”

“Well, it’s better than your *Big Titty Academy 2: After School Class with My Slutty Teacher*!”

“Wha—?! How do you know the title of that book?! Please don’t enter my room uninvited, my lady!”

“As if I’d ever want to do that! You gave it to me by mistake instead of returning the book I loaned you!”

“I’m so sorry!”

“I settled in for a nice and cozy read with tea in hand, but the moment I opened the book, my eyes were assaulted with the dirtiest sex scene ever! Just

try to imagine what I felt in that moment! Those four and a half hours of my life are gone, gone forever!”

“You read it all the way through?!”

For a moment, the two of them were left gasping for air after this lively shouting match. Then, they both murmured “anyway” under their breath and returned to the main topic at hand, which was not *Big Titty Academy*, but rather Karelia Academy.

“So, we’re in the world of that game, and you wish to become the villainess, correct?”

“Yes. I’ll torment the protagonist, she’ll retaliate, and then I’ll fall into total ruin!”

“I really don’t understand why you’re so determined to dig your own grave, but very well. I’ll assist you.” With another sigh, Adi rose to his feet.

Mary followed suit, tightening her fist with renewed vigor. “Hello, doom! You shall soon know my name!”

In response to this enthusiastic proclamation, Adi exasperatedly lifted his own hand in half-hearted support.

Chapter 1

“Step one is to find the protagonist, yes?” Adi whispered to Mary, who nodded.

They had moved from the cafeteria onto the path leading to the school dormitories. Peeking out from behind the corner where they crouched, with Adi above and Mary below, they bided their time.

The opening ceremony had wrapped up the school day, and most students had gone back home. Those who stayed in the dormitories also returned to their rooms to prepare for the first day of classes tomorrow, while others already went out to party. As a result, there was not a soul around.

That is, with the exception of the heroine and the wondrous duo of Mary and Adi hiding behind the corner.

“I think the protagonist passed through here in the opening animation. I can’t be sure, though, because I always skipped it.”

“Please don’t skip the openings. Think of the developers’ feelings!”

“But it’s the same every time. Anyway, that’s not the point! Look, here she comes!” Mary said as she and Adi huddled behind the wall to avoid being spotted.

They watched as a girl clad in Karelia Academy’s uniform slowly approached, pulling behind her a light-brown suitcase. There could be no doubt about her status as a transfer student, as she clutched a map in one hand and looked around left and right like a lost lamb. Everything about the aristocratic academy seemed a novelty to her, and overwhelmed by the sights around her, she let out a small sigh.

“Is that her?” asked Adi.

“Yes, that’s Alicia, the protagonist.”

“Really? Wow, she’s so... I mean, she’s just...” Adi murmured, staring at Alicia in a stupor. Mary nodded to signal she understood what he was trying to say.

Alicia was adorable, simple as that. Although she was intended to be a so-called “ordinary girl,” she was the heroine of an otome game, so of course she was a beauty. Given her prettiness, it wasn’t hard to imagine that the male students would all fall head over heels for her.

Her straight golden hair, which reached to her mid-back, shone brilliantly in the sunlight, and the way she delicately arranged it with her hand was endearingly rustic. Her purple eyes complemented her blonde locks, and her lips were slightly parted as though she was picturing in her mind all that awaited her in her new school life.



“She’s terribly cute. Her blonde hair and those purple eyes are so— Wait!

Purple eyes are a mark of royalty!” Adi blurted out.

“Shush! Don’t spoil the secret plot twist in the very opening scene! That’s not supposed to be revealed until the end of the game.”

“She’s the spitting image of the queen! You’d have to be blind not to notice that until the end!”

“Don’t blame *me* for that! Anyway, she’s coming this way. All right, time to make my grand entrance!”

Eager for her villainess debut, Mary leaped out from behind the corner, startling Alicia with her sudden appearance.

“Who are you?” Alicia asked nervously, eyes wide with shock. Her voice was sweet and girly, and she tilted her head to the side inquiringly.

It was Mary’s moment to show off her antagonistic skills. There was no time to hesitate! Alicia was about to begin her academic life with a whir of romantic affairs, and Mary had to make her aware of exactly who the enemy was.

“Um... Are you one of the students here?” Alicia questioned.

“Me? I am Mary. Mary of House Albert.”

“House Albert? Oh my! Please excuse my rudeness!” the girl cried. “I can’t believe I addressed you as my equal... I just never thought I’d meet someone from House Albert!”

“Well, you and I have lived worlds apart, so I’m not surprised you didn’t recognize me. Just the fact you asked for my name before even introducing yourself tells me plenty about the sort of place *you* come from.”

“I’m so sorry! My name is Alicia, and as of today, I’m officially a student at Karelia Academy. It’s an honor to meet you!”

“Oh? Did you really think I’d want to be friendly with a commoner like you? What a joke!” Mary laughed coldly, her gaze and mannerisms as villainous as one could get.

Alicia gasped at first, but soon her eyebrows arched down apologetically as she whispered, “Y-You’re right...” Then, slightly louder, she continued. “I’m really sorry for being so presumptuous... B-But I was hoping I could ask you just

one thing.”

“And what might that be?”

“Um, I can’t seem to find the reception area for the dormitories... Would you happen to know which way it is?” she asked in a frail, timid voice.

Mary and Adi exchanged a look.

“The reception area?” Adi spoke up. “You’re heading in the completely wrong direction.”

“R-Really?!”

“What, have you no sense of direction?” asked Mary. “I can’t believe you’re just walking around without knowing your left from your right! How impertinent.”

“I’m sorry... There are just so many buildings here, I ended up completely losing my way.”

“For student relations, you want building number two,” Adi advised. “My lady, do you recall the shortest route to get there from here?”

“Go through that building in front of you, and then by the opposite building, you’ll find a passageway that can take you there,” Mary said. “But the staff are leaving early today too, so you’ll have to hurry if you want to catch them.”

“Oh, I see! Then I’ll head off right away! Thank you so much for your help!” Alicia quickly bowed her head then turned on her heel and rushed back the way she had come. As she did, her golden hair fluttered behind her, and her suitcase clattered loudly with each step, painting the perfect image of the clumsy beauty trope.

Retracing her memories of *Heart High*, Mary realized that Alicia was indeed supposed to be a slightly clumsy girl. She’d been born among commoners, yet she was lively and courageous and had a smile as bright as the sun. Combining those traits with a dash of clumsiness was a tried and true recipe for the ideal heroine. Needless to say, Alicia’s clumsiness was rarely an actual flaw, but was instead portrayed as a merit within the game.

Mary watched Alicia’s retreating figure for a moment before snapping out of

her thoughts.

“Was I villainous enough?” she asked Adi, looking up at him.

“No. In fact, you were kind to her.”

Such was his unsympathetic reply.

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In the game *Heartthrob High School: Maiden in Love and the Prince of Memory*, commonly abbreviated as *Heart High*, Mary Albert was an aristocrat who held power and influence second only to the royalty. Born into an affluent noble family, Mary’s parents spoiled her, and her two older brothers always doted on her as well. Everyone would obey her, and nobody had ever defied her in any way. She was a selfish young lady, convinced that the world revolved around her.

Having always worn extravagant outfits, her uniform was naturally haute couture. With all the money to spend as she liked, she truly lived as she pleased. She would take every opportunity to mock the heroine for being poor and showed off their difference in wealth wherever she went. Mary was the definition of the despicable rich person archetype, and her boasting about her wealth was even considered a regular event within the game.

“Oh, so in the game you were surrounded by riches at all times, milady?”

“That’s right. I was very arrogant, and whenever I saw Alicia’s personal belongings, I’d say that they reeked of poverty and things like that.”

“So you were a walking stereotype...”

Mary nodded in agreement with Adi, who was so dumbfounded that he couldn’t think of anything to say.

Although Mary was an aristocrat much like her in-game version—and the both of them were indeed the same person—the real Mary disliked the sort of individual she was supposed to represent. Unfortunately, the nobility of this world were mostly prideful and vain, and especially as the daughter of the influential House Albert, Mary had spoken many times to peers who acted like their parents’ property was their own.

They'd boast about having just received their nth carriage as a gift, how for their birthday they'd had a personal villa built for them, how their favorite foods were foie gras and caviar, how they'd call a first-class chef over to their house to cater their parties, and so forth... The Mary from the game would probably sympathize with them. Or even more likely, she'd follow suit and start flaunting her own wealth in turn. After all, no matter what kind of pedigree the other nobles might have had, they would surely rank lower than a daughter of House Albert, so they'd have no choice but to take on the role of listening to Mary's bragging.

However, the present Mary had no such pride and would always turn her cold gaze on any boasting battles taking place in her vicinity. One carriage was more than enough for her, and she couldn't see the point in having a villa that you only visited for a few days per year, or not at all once you got bored of it. As for having a personal chef, she thought it an outrageous notion to confine a person who made delicious food to just one place.

"But no matter. From now on, I must act arrogant to fulfill my duties as the antagonist."

"Come to think of it, you were never the boastful type, my lady," Adi pointed out. "It's not like you hoard every expensive thing you can get your hands on, and you don't have a personal chef either. Why is that?"

"The answer is simple. I buy what I want and eat what I want."

"Speaking of, what would you like the most right now?"

"A certain someone's pink slip," Mary told him.

"I-I mean, what would you like to *eat*?" Adi clarified.

"You know, I just can't seem to get my hands on that letter of termination. Or rather, whenever I start writing one, it just up and disappears! Adi, do you happen to know why these letters keep going missing?"

"No, not at all! I haven't the slightest, faintest, foggiest idea. I think there might be little fairies living in your room who keep stealing it. Yes, that must be it."

"Your imagination knows no bounds, I see."

“Anyway, let’s put aside the topic of disappearing termination letters, which I have nothing to do with. Now, what would you like to eat, my lady?” Adi asked her, clearing his throat as he forcibly changed the subject.

“Something to eat?” murmured Mary. Then suddenly, her expression brightened. “Croquettes!”

“My lady, please don’t let the other nobles hear you say that,” he responded with a great sigh as he turned his gaze to the menu in his hand.

They were in the cafeteria during lunchtime, so there was quite a bit of bustle. Mary and Adi were standing in line for the food while inspecting the lunch menu. The Mary from *Heart High* would’ve probably cut in line, or perhaps stayed in her seat and yelled at Adi to hurry up and bring her meal.

However, the present Mary had no intention of acting in such a conspicuous manner. Rather, she looked around the increasingly crowded cafeteria and idly remarked that she should have saved herself a seat first. Unlike the Mary from the game, she had no cronies to save her a spot, nor was anyone willing to give up their seat for fear of losing power.

“You know, now that I take a proper look at the menu, these prices are extortionate.”

“I mean, that’s to be expected from a school for nobles,” Adi replied.

“Foie gras and caviar? How can they feed this to a bunch of students?” she asked with a sigh of dismay while gazing at the menu.

Indeed, as Mary had said, Karelia Academy’s cafeteria was supremely expensive, and the price of dessert alone far exceeded an average family’s daily grocery budget. The options were fittingly fancy, with an assortment of food that looked as if it had been transported straight from a first-rate restaurant. Moreover, the school had headhunted chefs from a wide variety of sectors to prepare the dishes live in front of the students, so the place truly surpassed the limits of what a cafeteria could be.

On the other hand, the customer service was so bad that they now had to stand in line for their meals. Each dish was served with great care and attention, so there could be no surprise about the wait. It was an inefficient system, which

added up for the aristocracy. Speedy, cheap and tasty—only commoners are happy with such a sentiment when it comes to their daily bread. Those whose schedules are just as open as their bountiful wallets choose meals that are time-consuming, expensive, delicious, and *worthy*.

"It's taking forever, as usual. They should just prepare the food in advance!"

"My lady, there you go again, saying things unbecoming of a noble. Such wonderful meals are worth the wait."

"Excuse me? Don't forget, I am Mary Albert. At home, I can have anything from this menu whenever I like. I would've never come to such a rowdy place if you hadn't insisted on it."

"But this is the only place where *I* get to eat such nice food," Adi said, holding his tray with great excitement.

Mary sighed. What noble lady would accompany her own servant to stand in a line at the cafeteria? Oh, right, that was her.

While she was busy with her thoughts, Adi seemed to have noticed something and tapped her shoulder.

"My lady, look over there. Isn't that Alicia?"

"What?! Where?"

She turned to look where he'd pointed and indeed spotted Alicia, who was sitting huddled in the corner of the cafeteria with an anxious look on her face. She held a small bag which was sure to have packed lunch inside, and beside her was a tray with a place setting laid out *à la carte* style, but it seemed she hadn't touched either.

"Adi, this is it!" Mary exclaimed, her lips twisting into a smirk.

"What?"

"In the game, Alicia was poor and had to bring her own packed lunch," she explained. "So, if I go over now..."

"Oh, I see. You can put on the villainess act and brag about your food."

"Exactly! I'll show off my lavish cuisine and ridicule her pathetic meal. Let's

go, Adi! Time to demonstrate the difference in our ranks! Take a look at this... My organic seafood rice bowl!”

“...”

“...”

“My lady, you can’t be serious.”

“No good, huh?”

I guess this won’t do, Mary thought as she lowered her gaze to stare at her meal ticket.

The thick writing that stated “Organic Seafood Rice Bowl” did whet her appetite, but it didn’t exactly evoke bragging rights for a young lady. It’d be delicious, no doubt, but there was no guarantee that Alicia would realize it was a dish from a foreign country, or that she’d be jealous of the meal even if she *did* know.

Even Adi, who often saw Mary take her meals, would ask how she could eat things like that. Once, they’d tried to reach an understanding by eating seafood spread over slices of bread. In the end, Adi had only ended up hating seafood even more.

Remembering this, yet apparently unable to bear the sight of Mary worrying over her lunch, Adi took the meal ticket out of her hand and offered his own.

“Huh? Adi?”

“I’m suddenly in the mood for seafood,” he announced. “My lady, won’t you trade with me?”

“Aren’t you always saying you can’t understand why anyone would eat raw fish? Besides, you think eating rice is a sin. You said that to my face as I was eating some! And you were glaring at me!”

“That’s because I have a principle of not talking behind another’s back.”

“Oh, but it’s fine to say it to a person’s face? Well, leaving that aside, are you really okay with trading? Can you even stomach this?” Mary tilted her head questioningly.

“I-I’ll be fine,” Adi replied with some apprehension while staring at the exchanged ticket in his hand. Without waiting for her reply, he dashed ahead.

Judging by his expression, there was no way he’d be fine, but Mary couldn’t hold back a smile at his overbearing concern. She was tempted to ask him why he was such an awkward servant, but she was certain he’d retaliate by saying he was just trying to match his mistress.

“All right, I guess I’ve no choice but to eat this.” She paused, glancing down at her new meal ticket.

In that same thick font as before, the label read: “Lamb Fillet Steak with Foie Gras Garnish.”

“Adi... You sure know how to indulge yourself when *we’re* footing the bill.”

“I am eternally grateful to His Grace.”

And so Mary received her new meal and triumphantly proceeded through the cafeteria.

Perhaps due to Alicia’s status as a transfer student of common origins, not a single person came within her vicinity. The corner she was sitting in was the only place in the entire cafeteria with unoccupied seats, as though she were being ostracized on purpose. No noble would want to take their meal next to a mere plebeian, after all. Yet her presence still aroused curiosity, and many students cast sneaky glances at her before lowering their voices to whisper amongst themselves.

This didn’t escape Alicia’s notice, and in response, she sunk into herself remorsefully, creating a rather pitiful sight. Adi couldn’t help but relate to her plight, having often felt a similar sense of inadequacy due to his own low rank.

In defiance of this atmosphere, Mary approached Alicia without hesitation, boldly sitting down next to her.

“I hope you don’t mind if I sit here?” Mary asked, which she’d intended as a threat.

Both Alicia and Adi stared at her in shock.

“G-Go ahead,” Alicia responded timidly, showing Mary into her seat while Adi

sat down opposite Mary in a daze.

"Oh, I see you brought a packed lunch with you. Is there a reason you're not eating?" Mary asked Alicia, glancing pointedly at the lunch and the *à la carte* cutlery tray.

Embarrassed, Alicia lowered her head and murmured, "I don't know how to. I've never been taught proper table manners, so I'm afraid I'll get it all wrong..." Without knowing the proper way to eat, Alicia had chosen to hide in the corner. There wasn't a speck of the in-game Alicia's vivaciousness in her words.

Indeed, in a school that only nobility could attend, every single person within the cafeteria had impeccable table manners. Even the female students who gossiped away cheerfully were able to take their meals with great elegance.

The academy didn't teach dining etiquette, as all students were expected to know already. Thus, Alicia had no way of learning, and the beautifully polished silver tableware in front of her only made her all the more aware of how much of an outcast she was.

"Hmm... I suppose a common girl like you wouldn't have had the opportunity to learn," Mary declared contemptuously as she lifted her own knife and fork. She slowly cut off a piece of steak and raised it to her mouth in a graceful gesture. As a daughter of House Albert, things like table manners came to her naturally.

Witnessing this elegant conduct, Alicia cast her flustered gaze back to her own silverware and cautiously picked it up. Peeking at Mary out of the corner of her eyes, she stiffly moved the cutlery towards her food. Imitating Mary, Alicia cut off a bite-size piece and placed it in her mouth. The look of utter delight that promptly colored her features was simply priceless.

My lady, this is no villainy! Instead, you've become her role model, thought Adi as he contested with swallowing the bite of seafood in his mouth. He kept his thoughts to himself, as it would be inexcusable for a servant to point out his mistress's blunder... And also because he'd concluded that raw fish and rice were indeed repugnant, and he was desperate for a sip of water to rid his mouth of that fishy smell and wicked texture.

“Remember, *Heart High* is an otome game. It’s all about falling in love.”

“Right, I see.”

“The player can choose a charming male love interest and he’ll shower her with affection to make her swoon.”

“Oh, more details from your previous life? How fascinating.” Adi spoke in monotone, nodding along to Mary’s explanations while keeping his gaze on the book in his hand. Although he was Mary’s servant, his replies were entirely void of interest in what she was saying.

They were in the school library. Nobody else was using it at present, and all the staff were out running errands, so it was the perfect time for a little intrigue.

“Mary Albert is the main rival in the game, and she’s constantly getting in the way of Alicia’s love life. I should follow in her footsteps. What do you think, Adi?”

“Mm-hm, great idea.”

“Shut that book this instant or I’m going to tell father!”

“I’m listening, my lady! Is there any way I might assist you?!”

“Just what kind of hierarchy do you have going on in your head?! The discrepancy between me and my father is absolutely ridiculous! Don’t forget, I am the daughter of House Albert!” Mary exclaimed, but Adi dodged her disapproval with a smile.

“You mentioned getting in the way of Alicia’s love life, yes? How will you go about it?” he prompted.

“Trying to change the topic, are you? Fine... In any case, Alicia’s already started to raise flags. That’s a sure sign love events will trigger soon!”

Alicia was on good terms with three boys.

She was closest with Patrick Dyce, the student council president who surpassed even Karelia’s best honor students from throughout the academy’s history. He was handsome, good at both academics and sports, and possessed a

historic noble family pedigree. With hair and eyes both in matching shades of indigo, even his appearance gave a princely impression. He was the game's top catch.

Getting on his route was difficult, for his initial affection with the protagonist was the lowest of all the love interests. During their first meeting, Patrick went as far as to tell the heroine to stop being so friendly with him upon discovering she was of common origins. But it was this arctic tundra level of coolness that lit a fire within the female players' hearts, making him the most popular character in *Heart High*. He also had the highest-selling merchandise out of the entire cast.

The Patrick of this world was likewise the most popular member of the student council, which was already chock full of unusually good-looking boys as it was. In fact, his popularity was unstoppable, and it would've been no exaggeration to claim that many young ladies of marriageable age yearned for his affections.

Patrick, along with the student council's secretary and the academy's physics teacher, was among the three closest characters to Alicia at present time.

That said, at the beginning of the game, all characters except for Patrick felt high amounts of likability towards the heroine and would treat her in a friendly manner no matter what. The same was true for their present counterparts, who treated everyone with equal respect regardless of their status. Most likely, the inquisitive secretary had taken an interest in Alicia and her peasant origins, while the kindhearted physics teacher couldn't bear to watch Alicia struggle by herself, so the two of them wound up helping her out in various ways.

Considering Alicia's character, she was progressing rather smoothly. Her relationships with the cast seemed to be more than friendly yet less than romantic, so she wasn't rushing into any particular route just yet. She still had time to grow closer with new characters and increase her stats to move onto a specific route. Right now, she was still at the crossroads.

"I wouldn't say she's *transcending*, but she's doing all right," said Mary. "If she keeps this up, she'll proceed with no problems."

"I wouldn't expect any less of you, my lady." Adi nodded, impressed with

Mary's ability to read Alicia's condition so thoroughly. "You've certainly done your research on her."

"She...keeps talking to me lately. She comes over with a huge smile on her face and chats about all kinds of things. What in the world would compel her to do such a thing?" Mary muttered, and Adi turned his head away, unable to answer her.

He couldn't just come out and say that Alicia probably thought of Mary as her friend. Subconsciously, Mary must have been aware of it too, but so long as she was aiming for her own downfall, admitting the truth would have only broken her heart.

"A-Anyway, I must do something about her three closest options!" Mary declared.

After all, the Mary in *Heart High* took every opportunity to get in Alicia's way. She'd purposely seek out the target of Alicia's affections and try to butter him up, claiming that her family background made her a perfect match for him. During a party hosted by House Albert, she'd choose the boy with the highest affection for Alicia as her own escort. In some routes, she would even get engaged with the target character. Of course, she did this with the full knowledge that said character liked Alicia and, more importantly, that Alicia liked *him*. She would get in their way without an ounce of pretense that she was trying to do anything else.

In the end, she'd be denounced for it all. Falling into ruin was Mary's goal, so she had no choice but to emulate this behavior.

"Alicia's in town today," Mary said. "She went to thank someone who helped her out when she first transferred to Karelia."

"Really? Did she tell you this herself?"

"Not only did she tell me, she wanted to invite me to come along with her!"

"Oh dear..."

"Stop it! Don't give me that look or I'll cry!" Mary yelled. "Anyway, I do recall there was some kind of game event in the town."

But just what was it? Mary searched through her memories. She was certain there were many CG images that depicted events in the town, and Mary had something to do with at least one of them. All she could recall was that one of them depicted herself and the student council president, Patrick. He was riding in a carriage along with Mary...

“I’ve got it! Patrick and I were riding together in a horse-drawn carriage, and Alicia happened to see us!”

And just like in the game, Alicia had gone out to town today. On the way there, she would have noticed Mary and Patrick pass her by in the carriage. Seeing the two of them talk so leisurely, Alicia would grow upset at the thought that the two of them might be dating.

However, if the player proceeded with Patrick’s route, they’d soon see that this was but a groundless fear. In reality, Mary only wanted to discourage Alicia, and she had lured Patrick into the carriage in a semi-threatening manner. The specifics of her scheme weren’t mentioned, but it was likely that she used her family lineage as a shield. She might’ve said something like, “You realize which has the higher standing between our two families, yes?” And in response, Patrick would have no choice but to nod and quietly go along with her.

“I see. That’s certainly one way of hindering her,” Adi agreed.

“Right? Okay, I’m going to do just that and invite Patrick to town with me!”

Thankfully, Mary and Patrick were already acquaintances. They both came from prestigious families, and they had spoken formally to each other during social events before attending the academy. In fact, Patrick had even acted as Mary’s escort on occasion, for due to their respective high standings, House Albert and House Dyce had been on amicable terms for generations. Not to mention, both Mary and Patrick possessed sublime good looks that would make anyone green with envy.

“I’ve known him for a long time, so I’m sure he’ll come along if I tell him I want to discuss something in my carriage,” Mary explained.

“A carriage, you say? Er, my lady...”

“What is it?”

“We cycle to school.”

“...”

The chilling silence that followed almost seemed to ring throughout the quiet rooms of the library.

“I forgot!” cried Mary, crumpling to her knees. Such a gesture was entirely unbefitting of a young lady, but it certainly conveyed her sense of utter hopelessness. “Who?! Who would be so cruel as to demand that the daughter of a noble family second only to the royals should *cycle* to school?!”

“As you’re well aware, it is by your own decree,” Adi replied.

“But when you’re riding a carriage, you have to go through the main roads, so the journey takes fifty minutes! On bicycles, you can cut through the smaller paths, so it only takes *fifteen*! That’s a huge difference, you know!”

“True, there are quite a few narrow roads around here that carriages can’t fit through.”

“It’s so inefficient! It’s complete nonsense!” Mary despaired while Adi sighed and nodded in agreement.

To reach the school from House Albert’s stately mansion via their grand carriage would necessitate a large detour through an area with an intricate network of pathways. Moreover, many students were dropped off at the academy gates, so getting off the carriage was a time-consuming hassle.

Meanwhile, if they cycled instead, they could leave through Albert Manor’s back gate where the bicycle parking space was located, race through the pathways, and park in the academy’s courtyard.

But cycling was purely a commoner’s mode of transport. While the poor fidgeted around on their scanty bicycles, the wealthy nobles would usually ride along in their carriages. The notion of a refined young lady having to pedal a bicycle with her own two legs was utterly absurd.

“Villainess Mary would never be caught dead riding a bicycle, no matter how efficient it may be,” Mary mused.

“Your Ladyship, I have been trying to tell you this for the past three years of

us cycling to school, but no normal noble lady would do this either," Adi commented.

"Ah, so that's why our school doesn't have any bicycle parking. It's all so clear to me now."

"So, what should we do regarding Patrick?" asked Adi. "Would you like me to return to the mansion and arrange for a carriage?"

"No... I'll just invite him to ride with me."

"Ride a *bicycle*?!"

"Yes, a bicycle! He may very well refuse me, but I shall not go down without a fight!" Mary proclaimed while Adi swallowed down an exasperated response.

This was the student council president Patrick that they were talking about. A horse-drawn carriage was one thing, but there was no chance he'd accept such a destitute mode of transport as a bicycle. This could only mean one thing... Mary was prepared to face an honorable death, and Adi could do nothing but remain silent and pick up her bones in the aftermath.

And thus, while Adi was putting up her tombstone in his mind, the click-clack of Mary's determined footsteps echoed down the corridor.

***

"We're actually doing this..." Adi murmured as he pedaled the bicycle.

Student Council President Patrick was seated behind him. His indigo hair swayed in the breeze, and there was an air of elegance about him as he sat on the luggage carrier of the bike.

A few minutes earlier...

Mary, prepared to face her honorable death, invited Patrick for a bicycle ride, and to everyone's surprise, he actually accepted. Thus, wide-eyed, they made their way to the school courtyard, where their bicycles were parked. Patrick gazed at the two bikes situated in the corner with great interest while Mary and Adi, who had come out of their stupor, agonized over what to do next while sneaking glances at him.

Per their original objective, Mary and Patrick should have ridden together.

Even if she couldn't demonstrate her wealth like she had in the game, she still had the chance of hurting Alicia's feelings by letting her see Mary leave the school while getting chummy with Patrick.

But there was no way that Patrick, a noble by birth, would have known how to ride a bike, and it would've been an impossible task for Mary to try and ride with him on board. So naturally, it was left to her servant Adi to give Patrick a lift. As for whether this had been the right call to make... Well, the blame surely rested in commuting to school by bike in the first place!

"I can't help but feel like I'm doing something preposterous right now," Adi mumbled. "What if the Dyce family files a complaint against me?"

"Worry not. I agreed to this myself," Patrick responded. "Besides, I've been wanting to give cycling a try at some point."

"Really? That's unexpected. Would that mean you have an interest in bicycles?"

"Yes, you could say that. Alici—ahem, that is, a certain *someone* told me that the breeze feels quite nice," Patrick said, clearing his throat to conceal his slipup.

"A certain someone?" asked Adi, pretending he hadn't heard.

Mary, who was riding alongside them, overheard their conversation. She acted as though nothing had happened, but she was surprised to see that Patrick had already started to change his mind about some things. She had to give Alicia her dues.

The fact that Patrick was showing an interest in the commoners' mode of transport implied that Alicia already meant a lot to him, which was more than Mary had expected—and surely more than the naive and thickheaded Alicia herself would have been aware of.

The idea of *Heart High* was for the player to become Alicia and live out her school life. The player only knew Alicia's own inner thoughts, and they could only find out how the rest of the cast felt about her by having conversations with them and checking the points in the affection system, but it seemed that Patrick had fallen harder for Alicia than the game implied. It was hard to believe

that calm and composed Patrick, the top catch in the game who remained cool even when he whispered words of love, was just putting on an act.

This may be more interesting than I expected, thought Mary as the corners of her mouth lifted just the tiniest bit.

Suddenly, she spotted a familiar figure up ahead on the road.

A young girl was walking, her slender limbs moving vigorously as her loose golden hair swayed in the breeze. The Karelia Academy uniform she was wearing should've been a mark of nobility, and yet she was walking around carelessly all by herself. It was definitely Alicia. No other student of Karelia would go home by foot, and certainly not without an escort...although there was *one* who commuted by cycling.

Seeing her inelegant silhouette ahead, Mary's hands tightened around the handles of her bicycle. They would be passing her by, just like in the game. Alicia would spot them, and seeing how friendly Mary and Patrick were, she'd misunderstand the situation and keep her distance from Patrick as a result.

All would go well.

Yes, all would definitely, surely go well...

Wouldn't it?

The situation had changed quite a bit from the original scenario, and Mary couldn't help feeling anxious. If all had gone as planned, she would have been sitting right next to Patrick in a show of intimacy. It was understandable that Alicia would've come to the wrong conclusion upon seeing that. But right now, Adi and Patrick were on the bike together while Mary rode solo.



If, as in the game, Alicia got the wrong idea by thinking “*Oh, they seem so*

close! Could it be that they're...?!" then Patrick and *Mary* wouldn't be on her mind, but rather...

"No! Stop overthinking things, Mary! You must believe in yourself!" She soothed herself, shaking her head at the chill-inducing image that had appeared in her mind.

There was no time for self-doubt. The plan was already in motion, and she had to see her decision through to the end as the daughter of House Albert. Yes, all would go well. Alicia would definitely get the wrong idea about what she was about to see.

Alicia's interpretation might be slightly different from Mary's original intentions, but Mary would still take it as a win. After all, the main goal was to get in the way of Alicia and Patrick's relationship, and Adi's eventual involvement was inevitable. His would be a noble sacrifice.

Just as Mary thought this, they passed by Alicia.

"Oh, Lord Patrick!" she called out.

"Alicia? Sorry, Adi, mind stopping for a moment?"

"Right away!"

Their bike screeched to a halt, and Mary instinctively hit the brakes too.

"Good day, everyone!" Alicia said with a curtsy and a bow of her head. She was somewhat awkward and inexperienced with such conduct, but knowing her background and character made it almost charming.

Patrick, who normally would've made a scathing remark the likes of, "*You're supposed to be a student at Karelia?*" in response to this graceless greeting, offered Alicia a nod instead. Further, he regarded her gently, and only now some warmth seeped into his usually cool and expressionless countenance.

Yet Alicia was oblivious to this and looked at the three of them in confusion as she tilted her head. "What brings you all here on bikes?" she asked.

It wasn't hard to see why she'd asked. Students from Karelia Academy would never ride a bicycle, let alone two nobles from prominent families like Mary and Patrick.

In response, Patrick coughed lightly and turned his gaze to Mary, as though he was trying to say that he'd leave answering that question to her. He apparently couldn't bring himself to admit that he'd become interested in bikes because of what Alicia had told him.

He was so easy to read, Mary couldn't hold back a small smile. In *Heart High*, he was a popular character who mesmerized female players by spouting sentimental, sugary remarks, but perhaps there was some charm in the way he now walked the line between sweetness and pride too.

But now was not the time for reflecting.

"I thought we could use some exercise!" Mary replied, making up an excuse on the spot as she laughed gracefully and then started backing up. "Oho ho, I must discuss something with Adi!" she added while pulling on Adi's arm and gaining some distance from Alicia and Patrick. It was as though she were a matchmaker, leaving the young prospective pair to a private moment.

Once she and Adi were far enough away that they couldn't be overheard, Mary stamped on Adi's foot while he stiffly looked the other way.

"Oh, those two seem great together! Your Ladyship, please stop stamping on my foot and take a look at them instead!"

"Let me ask you something," said Mary. "You *knew* what my plan was, so *why* did you brake?!"

"Look, my lady! Lord Patrick is being all shy! No surprise there. Alicia is sweet and adorable, and he's probably never met anyone like her before."

"We must all have a serious talk. You, me, and my *father*!"

"I'm so sorry! I was aware of your plans, but I couldn't simply disobey Lord Patrick's orders. Please, forgive me!" Adi cried. The way he repeatedly bowed his head made Mary feel dizzy as she pressed a hand to her forehead.

Indeed, as someone descended from a long line of servants, Adi couldn't ignore the order of a noble from a prominent family like Patrick's. Mary understood as much. But what about *her* orders?! What did Adi make of *them*?! She was certain something was off about the internal hierarchy in his mind. There was no questioning the fact that her father should take the top spot as

the head of the family, but Mary had a feeling that she, the daughter of House Albert, had an even lower placement on the scale than Patrick!

Sensing her suspicions from the way she glared at him, Adi tried to distract Mary with a smile. “Come on, my lady. Please cheer up, and let us return to those two, shall we?”

He was definitely just trying to appease her, judging by his strained smile, but she’d lost all will to be angry anymore. “Fine,” she said with a sigh, ending the conversation.

As his mistress, Mary was within her rights to question Adi, reprimand him, and depending on the situation, even come up with a punishment. She had a feeling that not exercising the privilege only encouraged Adi to push back against her, but right now wasn’t the time to worry about it. Though, perhaps things had reached this point because she kept putting it off...

Nonetheless, they walked back over to Patrick and Alicia.

“I do apologize for making you wait for us,” Mary said, smiling sweetly at both of them. The pair’s conversation had been so animated that they’d barely even noticed Mary was gone until the moment she appeared before them again and spoke up. Coming to their senses, they both turned to her, Alicia looking happy and Patrick seeming almost embarrassed.

“Let us continue our journey back, shall we?” Mary asked. “Good day to you, Alicia. See you tomorrow at school.”

“Oh, actually, about that...” said Patrick, putting a stop to her attempt at saying goodbye to Alicia. Surprised, Mary’s eyes widened as she questioned him with a look, to which Patrick responded by clearing his throat.

And so, the following was the result:

“It really does feel different pedaling yourself. I can see how this could be good for exercise.”

“This is amazing, Lord Patrick! I can’t believe you’ve never ridden a bike before. And you’re even carrying me!”

“Oh, this is hardly worth a compliment. It’s a cinch compared to horseback

riding!”

Mary heaved a massive sigh as she cast sidelong glances at Patrick and Alicia, riding around together as though they were having the time of their lives. For her part, Mary was seated behind Adi on the other bicycle. As a way of taking her anger out, she poked Adi’s waist with her elbows.

“Ow...” he murmured as the bike twitched and wobbled.

“I feel like I lost the match, I lost the bout, and to top it off, I lost the whole game too!” Mary huffed.

“I know you’re upset, but please calm down and hold on tight, my lady.”

Letting out another sigh, Mary did as Adi requested and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Patrick and Alicia were riding on the other bike alongside them. From an outsider’s perspective it may have seemed entirely ignoble, but it was nonetheless the very picture of youth. Patrick and Alicia looked like they were enjoying themselves, though on occasion their bike lurched and Alicia would cling to Patrick, making the both of them blush. It was a bittersweet sight.

In contrast, Mary continued mumbling about her defeat with a thousand-yard stare, and Adi smiled tensely as he felt the aura of loss emanating from behind him.

At first sight, they looked like two happy pairs, but on closer inspection it was obvious they were as different as night and day. Every time the bicycles bumped into something on the road, Alicia cried out in a cute voice and hugged Patrick tight, whereas Mary took advantage of the tremors to lightly elbow Adi and make him groan in pain.

“My lady, please,” said Adi. “What if we fall off the bike? I couldn’t look His Grace in the eyes if that were to happen!”

“Oh, so you’re concerned about what *father* would think, but you’ve no consideration for *me*?”

“That’s because you’re just venting your anger... Ow! Please calm down, or we’re really going to crash!”

“Then I’ll take you down with me! We shall die together! And then we can meet father in the hospital!”

“That makes no sense! Please, just kill me in one go!”

Riding alongside the happy couple, they sprinkled the tranquil streets with their gloom. In the pleasant breeze and with the view of passing townscape, Mary continued to poke at Adi’s waist, occasionally using her father’s position as a shield, and whenever they truly came close to crashing, she’d hold him tightly in a panic, the bike shaking even more. On and on they rode, arguing incessantly about something or other. To any onlooker, Mary’s defeated smile would’ve even seemed graceful...though, if one had looked closely, her eyes were still dead.

And Alicia, who had no way of knowing Mary’s true intentions, smiled at them joyously, which in turn contented Patrick as well. It was as if he were a prince protecting the pure and innocent maiden. At the sight, Mary let out a quiet, dejected sigh.

But soon enough, they reached the town, and both bicycles came to a stop.

“Thank you for accompanying me here, Lord Patrick! You, too, Lady Mary and Adi! Thank you all so much!” Alicia said with a low bow of her head.

“It’s no trouble at all,” responded Mary with a smile.

The war had ended in utter defeat. No, she’d been defeated even before she could throw down the gauntlet.

Moreover, Patrick (perhaps wanting to escort Alicia to her destination) decided to remain in town. In the end, Mary had not only failed to hinder them, she’d even allowed them to enjoy riding a bicycle together and led them to a date out on the town. It was worse than defeat—at this point, she’d basically become Patrick’s enthusiastic wingman.

Mary watched with empty eyes as Patrick and Alicia walked away, chatting happily all the while. “Did I even accomplish anything?” she muttered.

Adi, feeling that part of the blame lay with him, awkwardly averted his eyes.

Chapter 2

“This time, I’ll totally chew her out! And then she can give it back to me twice as bad in the future!” Mary proclaimed with enthusiasm.

Adi, who was standing next to her, heaved a sigh. “Your Ladyship, perhaps we can dial back the villainy for tonight?” he proposed.

“No, it *has* to be tonight!” she insisted.

Of course, Mary was speaking quietly enough that only Adi could hear her. Tonight, Albert Manor was overflowing with visitors, so holding her voice back was a necessity.

For at present, the mansion was busy and bustling in a manner usually unsuitable for nighttime. This was hardly surprising, as tonight House Albert was hosting a party to celebrate the birthday of Mary’s father, the head of the family. People with various intentions and ulterior motives had gathered under this pretext for a grand-scale celebration.

Such extravagance was to be expected from the family second in influence only to the royals. The residence was beautifully decorated, a band of musicians had been hired for the occasion to play throughout the night, and first-rate chefs were preparing top-class dishes. It was, in a word, splendid.

Mary did not typically enjoy such parties. To her, the sheer glitz and glamor invested in them seemed shallow, and the incessant flattery from the guests was frankly tedious. However, as the daughter of House Albert, her attendance was mandatory. She’d have to put on a smile and cordially engage with everyone, subduing her innate desire to flee so that she might instead act like a proper young lady.

But this year was different.

Even last year, Mary had dreaded the coming of this day, but this year her fighting spirit was fired up. And just to be clear, it wasn’t that she didn’t want to celebrate her father’s birthday.

“I invited Alicia to come tonight. That’ll give me the chance to show off our

difference in rank!”

“Is that so?” asked Adi.

“Yes. From what I recall, she only had shoddy-looking dresses in her possession,” Mary said with a smirk, explaining the information she’d drawn from her memories.

Tonight had also been an event in the game.

The protagonist had no connections and thus no way of attending such an event, but Mary had invited her, insisting, “You simply *must* come!” Alicia borrowed a dress from her friend and then showed up at the venue. The moment she stepped in, Mary, who had been waiting in ambush by the entrance, jumped out and ridiculed her dress. Mary then introduced her escort for the night, who turned out to be the character with the highest affection for Alicia.

Hurt and brought to tears by it all, Alicia would then flee from the venue. She’d been dragged out to a place where she didn’t belong, had her outfit mocked, and to top it off, she was robbed of the person she loved. The humiliation was so deep that, indeed, running away had been her only option.

However, there was a very otome-like conclusion to it all. The male character would chase after Alicia, explain how Mary had threatened him into escorting her and that he hadn’t known that Alicia would be attending, and finally compliment her dress.

Based on one’s level of progress in the game, it was possible to obtain CGs typical of the otome genre, such as one of Alicia and the boy dancing together in the moonlit garden, or one where the boy carried Alicia bridal style. Some characters would even embrace Alicia and kiss her under the starry sky.

“How cloyingly sweet...” Adi gagged. “But what happened to you when you were left behind by your escort?”

“Of course they never really showed it in the game. If it were me, I’d probably be so upset I’d just go to my room and sleep. But as for the villainess Mary, I reckon she probably just took her anger out on her servant.”

“Oh, game-Adi, how I pity you...” said Adi sympathetically, wiping an invisible

tear from his eye. But almost immediately, his usual aloof expression returned. “Anyway, that aside,” he said, changing the topic, “I see you put a lot of thought into your own dress as a result.”

“Yes, that’s right. Just one glance at me should prove that I’m a sensible beauty! Hee hee!” Mary exclaimed, proudly jutting out her chest. In response, Adi hurriedly turned away from her.

Seeing this, a question mark appeared above Mary’s head. Why did Adi keep stealing glances at her? And whenever their eyes met, he’d quickly look the other way.

“What’s the matter, Adi? Is there something wrong with my dress?”

“No, not at all... I-It suits you.”

“Does it? Good! I went all out for once and had it custom made. It’d be game over if it looked strange on me,” she said with a proud grin, and Adi purposefully cleared his throat.

Typically, Mary wasn’t the type to put a lot of effort into her appearance for special occasions like this. Many young ladies her age enjoyed dressing up, and there were plenty of designers who sought patronage among the nobility. Being fashionable was thrilling, and many delighted in having their outfits praised. If only Mary didn’t have those ultra powerful shape memory drills, she could’ve even played around with different hairstyles as well! But being burdened with her status as the daughter of House Albert had led to her growing bored of having to constantly wear party outfits.

She owned an endless supply of dresses and had new ones made for her regularly, but there was one little catch. They couldn’t be too extravagant, lest she outshine the guest of honor, yet they still had to retain a certain level of splendor. Due to her young age, she couldn’t get away with showing too much skin. Her status demanded her outfits be refined and elegant, and anyone should be able to tell with a single glance that they were upscale. As such, though she had many dresses in her possession, the vast majority of them looked much alike.

But not tonight. Tonight, Mary donned a mature deep-blue gown with a boldly low-cut neckline, adorned all over with frills and lace. She even had a

special hair ornament made to match it.

This design was the complete opposite of her previous dresses, which had ostensibly been made for a proper young lady. No, this dress *screamed* villainy—in fact, it was the exact outfit Mary wore in *Heart High*. Although in the game it only appeared briefly on her sprite, Mary had somehow managed to remember the design and requested it to be made for tonight.

Of course, usually her parents or older brothers would've put a stop to Mary wearing such a daring dress, but she had fiercely held her ground. The in-game Mary, used to getting her way, would've probably thrown a tantrum and forced things to go as she pleased, but that was quite the hurdle for the real Mary, who hadn't indulged in selfishness to that degree. (That isn't to say Mary was some good, obedient daughter. She was extremely lazy and preferred to let sleeping dogs lie, but as she was somewhat removed from the aristocracy, she wasn't a total egomaniac.)

Anyhow, in light of the rarity of such an indulgent request, she tried to make her family relent, despite their embarrassment. But the deciding factor had been seeing her wearing that gown. It really did suit her—even her family had to admit it. There was a certain appeal to seeing her in something she wouldn't normally wear.

The bold chest opening made a liberal show of her smooth and beautiful skin, and the simplicity of the deep blue hue helped to highlight her figure. Initially, everyone had insisted that the dress was improper and vulgar, but once she'd put it on, they'd clearly seen that this wasn't the case. In fact, the garment made even those who looked at her feel a sense of elegance. It was its very boldness that gave the dress its majesty; wearing it was an ostentatious display of absolute confidence.

In that mature gown, Mary was dressed to the nines. She was well aware of this, of course, as she'd seen it plenty of times in the game.

The reactions of those around her were even better than she had expected. Adi's had been particularly hilarious, as when he first saw her, he spluttered the tea he'd been drinking all over one of their tablecloths, completely ruining it in the process.

“Now, that girl should be wearing a light-pink dress tonight,” Mary said. “It was some démodé design she got off of her friend.”

“Démodé? Well, outdated or not, I’m certain she’ll look lovely in pink,” Adi replied.

“Maybe, but that dress of hers truly was just...barbaric.”

“I’m sure you’d think that about any commoner’s dress, milady.”

“No, you don’t understand. It was categorically *hideous*. I don’t even have the words to describe it.”

It’s often said that video game characters have outrageous fashion sense. This was especially the case for *Heart High*, with its Cinderella story of a poor girl thrust into a world of glamor.

This party may have been a special occasion, but dressing Alicia in something overly extravagant could’ve alienated the players. The very essence of otome games is that an ordinary girl can win the hearts of handsome boys, even if her true identity is that of a princess or a godchild. Therefore, putting the heroine in slightly unfashionable clothes is ideal for making her more relatable.

That was precisely why Mary, as Alicia’s antithesis, had to wear her daring dress. In the game, she was the type of girl who vainly flaunted her wealth and beauty and took advantage of men. The audacity of her dress was likely supposed to portray her as a frivolous bitch.

With this on her mind, Mary looked ahead and finally spotted Alicia.

The lines of her light-pink, airy dress were decorated with ribbons and lace, and she seemed unused to her shoes as her gait was slow and gingerly. She had a large pink ribbon in her golden hair, matching the color of the dress, and there was a corsage pinned to her chest among all the frills. There was another ribbon tied tightly around her waist, and on top of that, she clutched a parasol in both hands.

It was the very same dress that had stirred a heated controversy among players when the game first released. And that was putting it lightly—the whole fandom came together to vilify that atrocity of a dress. Everyone had lamented that Alicia wore it during a part of the game with such significant love events.

Mary couldn’t help thinking about that all over again. Alicia...really came dressed like that.

“Oh, so this is what you meant,” said Adi. “I can’t even look at her!”

“She’s wearing a dress that’s been out of fashion for as long as it’s existed, her accessories are all over the place, and she brought a parasol to an evening party!”

Both Mary and Adi face-palmed in unison.

That the dress was unfashionable was one thing, but surely Alicia could have at least worn it a little differently... To top things off, she couldn’t seem to calm down and kept turning her head left and right anxiously. This only added to the boorishness, not that Alicia herself would know.

She seemed a little relieved when she spotted Mary and Adi, and her face brightened.

“G-Good evening, Lady Mary. Thank you for, um, for inviting me here,” Alicia said with a bow, clutching onto the hem of her dress nervously. Even that gesture, which would normally have been elegant, was brimming with awkwardness.

Mary couldn’t hold back a sigh.

Hearing this, Alicia looked at her in a panic. “Um, d-do I look strange? This old dress was the only one I could get my hands on...”

“That’s the least of your problems!” Mary exclaimed, thrusting her finger at Alicia with great force.

Thankfully, nobody else was around, so Mary was free to deliver a harsh critique like a true villainess. Alicia looked so awful that Mary absolutely *had* to air her grievances. If any of the designers present at the event caught sight of Alicia right now, they’d probably pulverize her.

“What’s with all these accessories?! Just looking at you is exhausting! And why did you bring a parasol to an evening party?! Did you think you’d get a sunburn?!”

“No, I just... I’ve never worn anything like this, and I wasn’t sure what to do...”

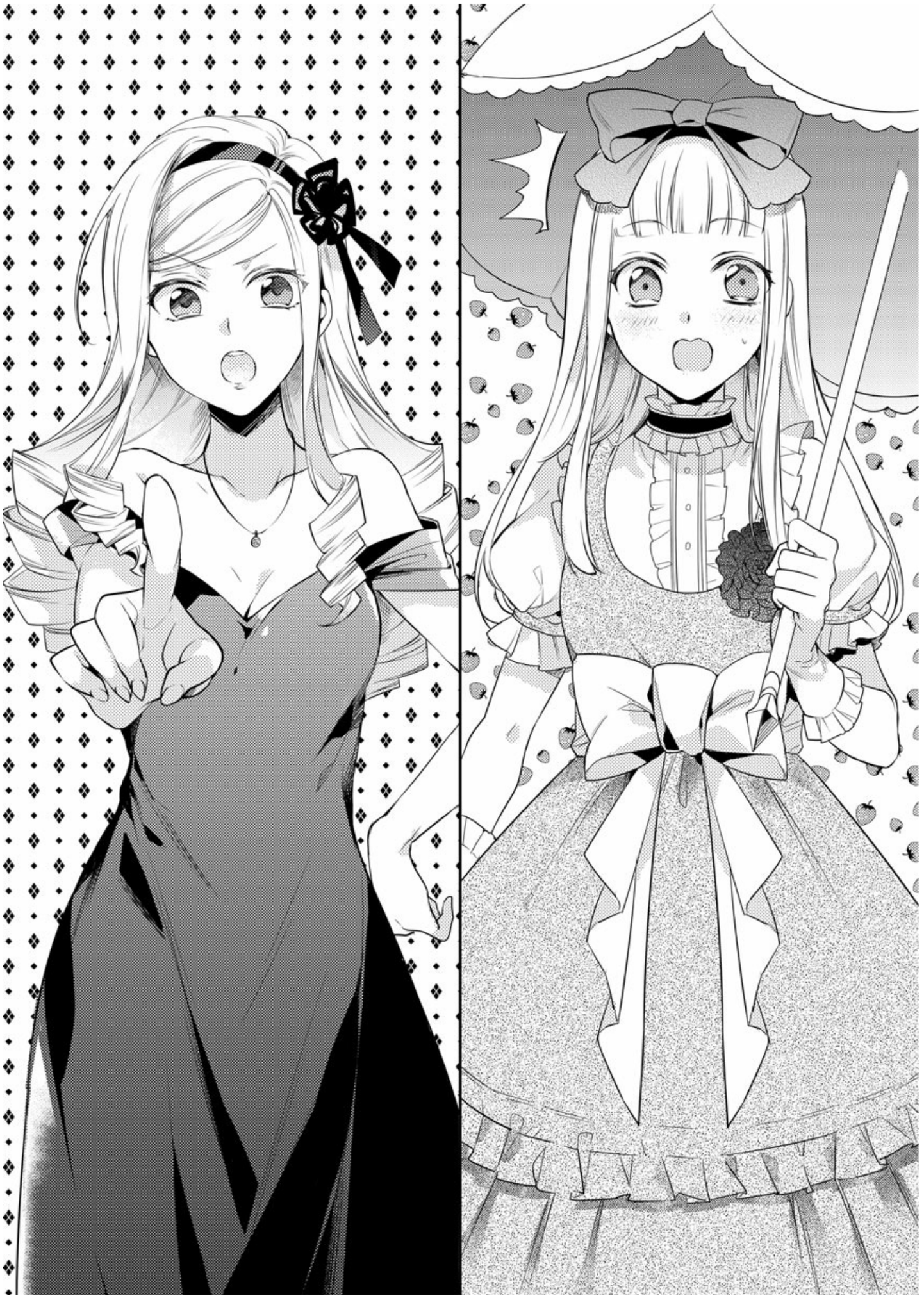
“You’ve a ribbon on your head, a corsage on your chest, and *another* ribbon on your waist! Is that supposed to mark your vitals?! Are you trying to become a target for practice?!”

“I didn’t know how to put any of this on!” Alicia cried pathetically in response to Mary’s barrage of questions.

Obviously a poor girl from the countryside who’d grown up in an orphanage wouldn’t know how to dress herself, but it was precisely Mary’s noble origins that made her despise such uncouthness. Therefore, Mary glanced at Adi and snapped her fingers.

He understood this wordless instruction and nodded. “Pardon me, Alicia,” he said as he approached her.

“H-Huh? What’s going on?” asked Alicia, looking between him and Mary in confusion.



Adi reached out his hand towards Alicia and, taking great care not to damage

her golden hair, gently removed the ribbon. He did the same with the ribbon at her waist, nimbly untying and retying it.

“This ribbon should be a little more loose. Otherwise, you’ll be uncomfortable,” he told her.

“Oh, really?”

“Indeed! Think how hard it’d be to enjoy all the delicious food with this tied too tightly.”

“Hee hee... I suppose that’s true.”

“And it’ll look much better if it’s slightly to the side, rather than right in the middle.” With the ribbon now expertly fastened, Adi nodded in satisfaction. “Now, go on ahead and remove that corsage yourself,” he instructed, understandably finding it awkward to touch Alicia’s chest. Realizing this, Alicia’s cheeks reddened as she quickly did as she was told. “My lady, what should we do about her hair?”

“Braid it for her, will you?” Mary ordered without hesitation.

“Very well,” said Adi, obeying her command.

Such was their relationship as mistress and servant, but Alicia had no idea what to make of this situation. It was embarrassing how pleasant Adi’s fingers felt as he lightly combed and braided her hair, and it was just as embarrassing how happy she was that Mary carefully observed them as though she anticipated seeing the end result.

Once all was said and done, Alicia found herself dressed in a fashionable, classical style that belied the backcountry look of just a few minutes ago.

Alicia had impeccably good looks.

Her fluttering golden hair glistened as it reflected the light, and her deep purple eyes that signified her royal origins (and somehow escaped the notice of everyone else) shone like gemstones. With her long, slender, and supple limbs and that eye-catchingly flawless figure, she truly captured the alluring boundary between a girl and a woman. Her endearingly childish smile made her seem like she was trying to act grown up, and yet her impulsive mannerisms were surprisingly charming.

Above all, Alicia looked exactly as the queen had when she was younger.

The queen was beautiful, wise, and emanated a refined sense of majesty, yet she had the compassion and benevolence of a saint. She embodied the very ideal of what a woman should be, and even Mary bowed her head to her with sincere respect.

Alicia resembled that same woman in her younger days—though, knowing the circumstances of her birth, the reason for it was obvious.

That was also why no matter how out of fashion her dress may have been, on Alicia it gave the impression of being a first-class outfit. After all, when it comes to a dress, it is not the brand or the designer who truly sell it, but the *person* wearing it...and *how* they wear it.

“Um, is this better?” Alicia asked, looking down anxiously at the length of her body.

Mary and Adi nodded in satisfaction, pleased with the perfectly polished result. Adi even had the afterglow of a job well-done about him.

“Yes! You look lovely,” he said as though he were praising a child playing a game of dress-up.

“Thank you,” Alicia replied with a smile, her cheeks reddening a little. “You’re so skilled, Adi. You even know how to style hair!”

“As Mary’s servant, ensuring that she always looks put-together is an essential skill so that I can assist her should anything happen. That said...” Adi paused, turning his gaze sideways. Alicia followed suit as they both looked at

Mary.

She was leaning against the banister as she listened to their conversation, and in the night breeze, her silver hair...was completely stock-still. Her robust ringlets wouldn't even twitch against the light wind, indomitably posturing on each side of her face.

"Those drills are as stubborn as steel, so they've never budged an inch..."

"Hey!" Mary protested. "I don't have these drills because I *like* them!"

"Huh? You mean you're *not* curling them on purpose?!" exclaimed Alicia.

"You know what... Let's wrap this topic up, or I'll cry," Mary said with a sigh.

Alicia forced a smile. She suddenly seemed to remember something and dug through her paper shopping bag, then pulled out a small bouquet of flowers.

"This is for your father, Lady Mary..."

"Oh my, you brought him a gift?"

"Yes. But I don't have much money, and I wasn't sure what an appropriate gift would be for the head of House Albert..." she explained, pursing her lips and dipping her head in embarrassment.

From every angle, dazzling decorations and fresh flower arrangements surrounded them. Alicia's little bouquet didn't even begin to compare to their splendor.

In fact, the House Albert residence even included a garden cared for by a specialist gardener who always ensured various sorts of flowers blossomed year-round, regardless of the season. There was simply no place for some city-bought bouquet in this mansion, much to Alicia's shame.

"Obviously, a common girl like you could never buy father a gift he'd actually enjoy," Mary said with a huff. She puffed up with pride and then, adding some villainous snide to her voice, continued: "But since you went through the trouble, why not give it to him?"

Mary smiled snootily like a true wicked daughter, and there was no trace of the charity she'd shown Alicia just a few minutes ago. Just like that, she had made a total switchover.

Alicia, completely oblivious to Mary's shift in attitude, quickly shook her head. "N-No, I couldn't possibly! The idea of approaching him myself is terrifying! And I wouldn't even know what to talk about..."

"My father is a very lenient and generous man," said Mary. "He's not the type of person to get angry at a country girl for getting something wrong. If anything, he'd just laugh it off."

"But all I have to offer him is this small bouquet..." Alicia whispered, staring at the flowers in her hands.

Mary stole a quick glance at the bouquet—it was very pretty. With pink and white blossoms in the middle and smaller flowers on the sides, the bouquet gave a modest but nevertheless lovely impression. It was held together by a red ribbon with a card attached, perhaps containing birthday wishes for her father.

The care and attention put into the bouquet almost mirrored Alicia herself. She'd definitely gone to the store and picked out those flowers in person. The idea of a girl looking at the storefront of a florist and fussing over which flowers to choose was very picturesque indeed.

Even so, the piece left a lot to be desired compared to the rest of the residence. Alicia knew this to be true more than anyone, and her spirits were so low that she seemed on the verge of tossing the flowers aside and beating a hasty retreat.

Adi couldn't bear to watch her and gave Alicia's shoulder a gentle pat. "It's all right. His Grace is a very kind man, so he's sure to be pleased with your gift."

"But..."

"You'll be fine. And besides, there's something he once told me..."

"What is it?" Alicia asked.

"Young girls are a gift simply by existing!"

...

Total silence ensued.

After a moment, it was broken by the sound of Alicia's footsteps as she receded deeper into the mansion after bowing her head, and then by Mary's

sigh as she pressed her hand to her forehead and let out a pained whisper.

“That is the *last* thing I want to hear my own father say...”

Leaving that particular remark aside, Mary’s father was held in high esteem as the head of House Albert. A great number of people adored him (though certainly many had their own agendas), and as such, tonight was a large-scale party with guests from as far away as the provinces in attendance.

“Excuse me! M-My name is Alicia. I’m attending the same school as Lady Mary, and we’re very close. I... I wish you many happy returns, sir!”

Alicia’s words were disjointed, perhaps because of her nerves (which was understandable, as to her the head of House Albert was completely above her station). Even so, the man she’d been speaking to accepted her wishes and the bouquet with a soft smile.

“Thank you. So you’re friends with Mary?”

“Y-Yes!”

“I can’t believe she actually managed to make friends with an honest girl like you... I know she’s quite an odd duck, but I hope you can stay on good terms with her.”

“Yes, of course!” Alicia nodded happily, while the man smiled at her as though he were looking at his own child.

Mary and Adi, who were secretly observing them, leaned in together.

“Did you see that just now, Adi?”

“Of course, my lady.”

Exchanging a serious look, they nodded at each other.

“Father hasn’t realized her true identity, even though he meets with royalty on the regular. He definitely should’ve noticed her purple eyes...”

“His Grace’s kindness truly knows no bounds!”

“Nobody else has noticed either. Perhaps there’s some strange power at work here to make everything play out as it did in the game.”

“My lady, look! He’s gazing at Alicia with such gentle eyes! I’d expect nothing

less from His Grace!”

“But *you did* notice, Adi. That could mean knowing we’re inside of a game may very well be the key here... What do you think?”

“I think His Grace is magnificent, as always!”

“Adi... Could you spare me even a *fragment* of that loyalty you have for my father?! I do believe we’d get along so much better if you did!”

He’d gotten so excited that he had entirely butchered their conversation, and Mary shot him an icy glare.

There was something quite disturbing about seeing Adi, a man in his twenties, shriek over her father, a man well into his forties—especially given that Adi’s typical voice was *far* from high-pitched. Alas, now was not the time to reproach him.

There was a very real possibility that some kind of power constrained them to ensure the game’s events unfolded as planned. If so, then perhaps it was safe to assume Mary’s downfall was predetermined too...

Also, why was father so surprised to see that I’d made an honest friend? And why did he call me, his own daughter, an odd duck? And you*, Adi... Something’s seriously off about your internal hierarchy!* Mary’s muddled thoughts went round and round in her mind, until she shook her head to clear them and compose herself.

Adi had always been partial to her father, and she had a few ideas regarding her father’s assessment of her. The former was a lost cause, and the latter had no intentions of changing his mind. If she thought about it like that, then worrying about this situation was completely pointless.

Just as Mary decided to throw in the towel on the overthinking and resume monitoring events, a voice called out to her.

“Hey.”

She whipped around and came face-to-face with Patrick. He was clad in a formal outfit appropriate for the son of a patrician family, and pinned to his chest was the House Dyce family crest, shaped like a red rose and glittering in

the light. He looked like a prince straight out of a fairy tale...or he would have, if not for the distrustful look on his face.

“Oh! Good evening, Patrick.” Mary quickly amended her expression and smiled. With a small lift of her skirt, she gave him a curtsy befitting that of House Albert’s daughter. Yet it would’ve been impossible for her to gloss over the fact that she’d been sneakily observing her father just a few seconds ago, especially when it came to Patrick.

“Could you rein it in with your bizarre antics, at least during your own father’s party?”

“Bizarre antics?! How rude!” she protested, puffing out her cheeks and turning her face away with a scoff.

To anyone else, Mary’s obvious sulking would’ve seemed adorable. Some might even have mistakenly thought she was interested in Patrick and trying to curry favor with him, such was the cuteness of her glower.

But those kinds of tricks had no effect on Patrick. He and Mary had known each other for a long time, so he was well aware of her character. Any ostensible flirtation from her towards him couldn’t have been anything other than a bad joke. Yet without being able to grasp her true intentions fully, Patrick let out an exhausted sigh.

“Oh my!” exclaimed Mary. “Perhaps *you* could rein it in with the sighs? This is a party! You’re bringing the mood down.”

“If you’d just act your age, I wouldn’t have to sigh.”

“Fine! In that case, go ahead and sigh as much as you like,” she declared nonchalantly, and Patrick sighed once again.

Glancing to the side, he noticed Adi straining not to laugh, perhaps finding their exchange humorous. Typically, given his and Mary’s social standing as members of the most prestigious noble families in the country, Patrick would’ve felt insulted by Adi’s attitude and probably scolded him, but he decided not to meddle with Mary’s affairs and kept his mouth shut.

Patrick could’ve only come to such a decision on account of knowing Mary so well. Had it been anyone else, they would’ve reprimanded Adi for his terrible

attitude as a servant...and certainly incurred Mary's wrath as a result. Patrick had already witnessed a similar spectacle in the past, which prompted him to swallow his own words down. Seeing Mary heedlessly resume observing her father, he heaved a sigh for the umpteenth time that day.

Then he lightly patted Adi on the shoulder.

"I must admit, I find Lady Mary completely incorrigible. If only there was someone out there who'd be a good match for her! I'd pay to see it. Right, Adi?"

"Er, yes..."

"Only a man of considerable talent could be on equal footing with her. I'm sure you'll agree with me on that."

"R-Right... It's just as you say..." Adi replied, flabbergasted, while Patrick chuckled at him.

With that, Patrick turned back around to Mary and reached out a hand towards her with a polite bow. "Your father requested that I escort you tonight. Won't you bear with me for a while?"

"You'd make any woman swoon with a line like that. But, ah... So you're my escort for the night..." said Mary, gazing at Patrick's outstretched hand while deep in thought.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, raising his head to glance at Mary and spotting the odd look on her face.

House Dyce was second in power to House Albert, and the two families had a long-standing relationship. A man from house Dyce would be completely expected to escort a woman of similar age from House Albert, and vice versa—but above all was the matter of Mary's personality.

She could play the part of a noble lady without a hitch when necessary, but she was much more comfortable around those who knew the real her. Although she didn't have a speck of romantic interest towards Patrick, if someone had asked her who'd be a good choice for her, she'd say his name.

In the same way, Patrick had an easier time escorting Mary as opposed to the

other noble ladies, who were only desperate to better their family's standing or pursue him romantically. Aristocratic society involved a lot of tedious hassle when it came to deciding who to escort or who to ask for a dance first, among other things. Mary's company was socially acceptable, and the other girls knew better than to get in her way or talk to her excessively.

Plus, both their parents would be pleased. Not only would their children be in the company of someone with a worthy social standing, there was also very little risk of anyone making any kind of faux pas. Even if by some remote chance such a thing *did* occur, there wouldn't be a problem, given the rank of both parties involved.

Patrick and Mary's escorting arrangement benefitted everyone involved. They themselves were well aware of this and usually went along with it without any complaints.

Yet today, Mary hesitated to take Patrick's hand for the first time. The way her forehead creased in a deep, thoughtful frown was very unlike a noble lady, yet very much like her.

"Did something happen?" Patrick inquired.

"Ah, no... Don't worry, it's nothing. Anyway, escort me for the night, won't you?"

"Of course."

Mary lightly placed her hand in his, and they slowly walked deeper into the venue.

They matched each other beautifully, and soon enough the room was filled with voices, some exclaiming their admiration for the pair, others expressing jealousy that Mary had snatched Patrick on yet another occasion. Mary and Patrick only smiled in response to it all, and their allure was indescribable. They were like a handsome couple straight out of a painting.

But though they walked together and smiled, their minds were elsewhere. Even as their thoughts strayed, they could both be confident that the other wouldn't take offense or act jealous, much less make some foolhardy attempt at probing into what the other was thinking. Indeed, they truly were the perfect

match for escorting each other.

In reality, Mary hadn't wanted any escort for tonight's party. In line with the events from the game, she should've forced the character with the highest affection for Alicia to escort her, but Mary had no intentions of acting in such an unsightly manner, no matter how fervent her desire to aim for her own downfall. Patrick was acceptable, as she'd known him for a long time, but trying to call upon the student council secretary or the teacher would've been exhausting.

In any case, Mary had some doubts about whether showing off her escort to Alicia would even count as harassment. Even now, the girl was watching the two of them get along. Despite the fact she likely had feelings for Patrick, there was not a spark of jealousy in her eyes as she gazed at them with rapt attention. It was a total, anticlimactic letdown for Mary.

But I'm pretty sure he only came here because he has the highest affection for Alicia...

Just as Mary had thought that, Patrick grabbed her hand again.

"Shall we dance?" he asked her, and with that one phrase, the rest of the venue erupted with flames of jealousy. To Mary, that was of no concern.

She glanced to the side, noticing the heated and resentful glares of the other noble ladies. They did nothing but stand there and seethe in their envy, making excuses and refusing to reveal their feelings, and that was precisely why a country girl would snatch Patrick up instead.

I have no sympathy for the likes of you, thought Mary as she turned her back on them and clasped Patrick's hand with a smile.

Patrick Dyce was an exceptional young man.

He had an athletic build, supple physique, and long limbs. And with those almond-shaped eyes and that indigo hair, he was truly the man of any girl's dreams. He excelled at both academics and sports, and had a prestigious family lineage. Though he seemed cold and aloof, he had a compassionate side and always treated those he held dear with sincerity. As he possessed not a single flaw, many secretly referred to him as Prince Charming. His popularity within

the academy was endless, and surely every single girl had pictured herself as the object of his affections at least once in her life.

Mary also found Patrick attractive. If she ever read a story about a prince, his face always came first to mind.

Even so, she never ended up together with Patrick in those stories. No matter how enthralling her book, and no matter how much she truly yearned for him, she'd always imagine someone else by his side at the end of the story. So it remained even as Mary grew up. As she watched all the other girls her age become smitten with Patrick, she remained perfectly composed around him.

Even now as she danced with him, her heart was calm. She felt no particular excitement or displeasure—she simply went along with his movements.

As they danced, Patrick's body moved enticingly despite his lack of enthusiasm. A handsome, blue-eyed prince smiled at Mary as though she was in some kind of a fairy tale. It was no wonder that the jealous glares almost burned a hole in her back with their ferocity.

And yet, Mary's thoughts kept straying elsewhere.

"There must be something wrong with me..."

"What's the matter?" Patrick asked. "You've been acting strange all evening."

"It's nothing. And you're one to talk! I've honored you with a dance, but you keep stealing glances at the crowd. Just who are you wanting to look at so badly, I wonder?"

"W-Well, I... That's none of your concern."

"Indeed. Let us both refrain from asking, then," she said with a grin as she looked up at him.

The so-called prince before her had looks lovely enough to captivate just about anyone, yet Mary's heart did not stir. Though his eyes searched for someone else, and she knew there was one certain girl in the crowd he was after, Mary felt no jealousy.

I'm here with this princely man, yet I feel nothing for him. I wonder why that is? she thought with a tiny sigh just as the music started to quiet down.

One song, and their dance was over. Patrick dipped his head, and Mary lifted the hem of her skirt in a small bow, and thus they thanked each other for their absent-minded dance.

Immediately after, Mary hurriedly left Patrick's side, as she knew there was a line of ardent ladies eager to take his next dance. She paid no heed to their envy, but she still found it a wise choice to make an escape for the sake of her personal safety. She could come to Patrick's rescue and invite him to a second dance to spare him from having to select his next partner, but by that point the flames of jealousy might've become so intense she'd actually catch on fire.

Thus, Mary's brisk pace took her back to the safety of the crowd, where Adi, well aware of it all, was waiting for her with a wry smile.

"Flawless as always, my lady."

"You mean my dancing? Or my exit strategy?"

"Both, of course," Adi replied in jest.

Mary smiled along in response and then straightened up. "All right, time to play hostess with the guests."

"Good luck."

"You'd better go find Alicia. She's a country girl; who knows what sort of mess she could get herself into if we leave her to her own devices."

"As you wish, Your Ladyship." Adi, perhaps conscious of their surroundings, replied with a bow of his head as though he were actually a well-behaved servant.

Mary chuckled, then turned her attention to the crowd. She stole a glance at Patrick, noting that one of their mutual acquaintances was trying to impose his daughter on him. *I pity us both*, she thought with appreciation, and when another acquaintance called her name, she turned to them with an innocent smile.

Thus, Mary busied herself with entertaining the guests. As the daughter of House Albert, she had to greet countless people, and was obliged to comply when they invited her to dance. After all, tonight's celebration was for the head

of their family. It wouldn't do for his own daughter to disrespect the people who had come here to visit him.

So Mary smiled at everyone courteously, but she was beginning to feel exhausted, as if she'd spent the evening trying to herd a bunch of cats. Just as she was considering enacting another escape plan, someone caught her by the arm.

"Milady—I mean, Lady Mary," said Adi, emerging from the crowd next to her.

"Adi? What's wrong?"

"Please follow me." With that, he pulled Mary along by the arm until they arrived at the garden.

Few people were out in the dimly lit garden, and the breeze carried on it the sound of music from within the mansion. Right in the center, Patrick and Alicia were dancing together, bathed in the glow of the moonlight as though lost in a world of their own.

Mary stared at them in amazement. It was just like the scene from the game.

"After watching you and Lord Patrick, Alicia decided she wanted to give dancing a try too," Adi said. "I told her I'm not skilled enough to teach her, and right then Lord Patrick arrived."

"And why did you bring *me* here?"

"I thought it was the perfect occasion for you to tutor her a little."

As he explained his reasoning, Patrick and Alicia stopped in their tracks, spotting Mary and Adi in the distance.

Alicia lifted both her hands as though she wanted to call out to them. She looked beautiful, a wide smile on her face as her golden hair twinkled in the moonlight. Her true identity aside, she honestly looked like a dazzling princess from a storybook.

But Mary felt no inclination to be gentle. "Straighten your back!" she screamed, hurling the harsh reprimand right at Alicia.

"Yes, ma'am!" Alicia cried, frantically fixing her posture.

“Every noble lady knows body posture is everything! Straighten your back, puff out your chest, and be bold! Do all that, and *everyone* will be wearing démodé dresses like yours at the next party!” Mary asserted.

“Yes, ma’am!” cried Alicia for the second time.

Listening to an exchange utterly unthinkable for an evening party of the aristocracy, Adi and Patrick both smiled sardonically.

Afterwards, Alicia (with slight improvements) joined Patrick in dance once more, slowly moving her feet to match the music flowing out from the mansion. Mary let out a satisfied breath of air.

Before her, a couple danced in the moonlight—formally dressed Patrick and finely adorned Alicia. One of them was an obvious beginner with awkward movements, but at least she’d gotten somewhat better following Mary’s scolding.

Mary watched this fairy tale-like scene with narrowed eyes as she mused. Yes, she’d definitely seen it before. Or rather, it was a CG that captured a single moment from this scene.

Indeed, the two dancing in front of her were also a part of an event from *Heart High*. Of course, in the game’s CG, neither Mary nor Adi were present. It wouldn’t have made sense in the story for them to be there, yet there was no mistaking that this was the very same event.

And that means... thought Mary, her mind whirring.

In *Heart High*, tonight’s party itself was an unskippable event that always occurred as part of the story. However, its various *CGs* needed certain requirements in order to be unlocked. If the player didn’t meet them, the party would conclude on a simple conversation with the highest-affection character and their usual sprite on the screen.

To witness this particular CG, the player had to have entered a specific character’s route before tonight’s event occurred. In Patrick’s case, if the player hadn’t entered his route, then the event would simply end with him praising the heroine’s dress, regardless of how many affection points he had for her. On the other hand, seeing the scene of them dancing together confirmed that the

player had successfully entered Patrick's route.

When Mary explained this to Adi, his face brightened. "Really?! That's great!" he said with delight, and Mary couldn't hide her surprise.

"What have *you* got to be so happy about?" she asked him.

"It's just that Lord Patrick is such a wonderful young man, and I've always thought a sweet, considerate girl like Alicia would be perfect for him!"

"Y-You did? Huh... I suppose they are a good match."

"Yes, indeed! In fact, I can't think of anyone more suited for Lord Patrick than Alicia!" Adi declared.

Mary, a little overwhelmed, nodded in agreement, but in fact she didn't have the faintest idea why her own servant would be so invested in someone else's love affairs. Yet she had to agree with him, as the two made a good pair.

Although Patrick had aristocratic views, he was open to accepting other people's opinions. Surrounded by nobility at all times, he had naturally developed a stiff and formal way of thinking, but this should change thanks to Alicia's unsophisticated nature. Now, whether House Dyce would find this change desirable was hard to say, but Alicia being a princess was certain to secure them peace of mind.

Mary couldn't help but agree once more. "If things continue this way, they will definitely end up together. However..." she paused with a sigh.

Adi noticed her discomfort. "What is it, my lady?" he asked candidly.

Alicia and Patrick were taken with each other. Seeing their content expressions as they danced under the moon was clear proof of that. But it was also the very reason behind Mary's conflicted feelings.

If the events of this world continued to pan out exactly as they did in the otome game...

"That won't happen before I become engaged to Patrick myself," Mary whispered, her words drowned out by the grand finale of the music piece carried on the wind.

Chapter 3

In *Heart High*, regardless of which route the player chose, villainess Mary would always try to hinder Alicia's love life right from the start. Sometimes she'd use her political influence against Alicia, or sic her cronies on her, or deceive her in some way. Mary would use any means possible to exasperate the player. Her antics served to fire up the player so they might try even harder at pursuing their love interest, and all the frustration caused by Mary built up to the final moment of exhilaration when they could finally bring her down.

Patrick's route was the most extreme of all.

The in-game Patrick Dyce was proud and full of himself. Aloof didn't even begin to describe him—if anything, he could be downright cruel. Starting with the lowest likability for Alicia out of the entire cast, his responses would always be brusque no matter which dialogue options the player picked. His route was so difficult that it had sparked discussions regarding how heartbreaking it could be to play it.

His relationship with the heroine would change on one particular day after school.

Alicia stayed back late after classes and by coincidence came across Patrick asleep at his desk. Perhaps his daily responsibilities had taken their toll on him and he'd fallen into a deep sleep in a manner quite unlike himself. The protagonist wrapped her own jacket around his shoulders, having no idea what else to do with him. After some time, Patrick slowly came to and opened his eyes. As he looked between the jacket and the heroine, he realized she'd seen him in a compromising position, and his cheeks tinged red.

Up until that point, the heroine had viewed Patrick as the intimidating student council president, but having seen him act out of character made her feel a sense of affinity with him. From then on, the two would slowly grow closer and become attracted to each other, and just as Alicia's sweet nature had begun to melt his icy heart...

The wicked daughter Mary would get engaged to Patrick.

Of course, Mary had used her family's influence to push the engagement. Ostensibly, House Albert and House Dyce had an equal hierarchical standing, but in truth, House Albert's authority held more weight. House Dyce had no choice but to go along with their demands. If Mary told them she wanted to marry Patrick, House Dyce had to oblige, and Patrick couldn't oppose it. Mary would go on to announce their engagement right in front of Alicia.

It was a decision handed down from the aristocratic world, and Alicia had no power to do anything about it. She could only watch as Patrick walked away with Mary clinging to his arm.

"Whoa, what a dirty play... You're a total brute when you're jealous."

"How dare you?! Humph... But I suppose that's true for the in-game Mary."

She'd just explained the events from the game, yet Mary herself took the blame for it! With a grumpy frown, she had a sip of her tea. Even if she and the in-game Mary were technically different people, just what kind of servant would say that about a girl with the same name as his own mistress?!

Though, Mary herself was also astonished over her in-game counterpart. It was precisely because she was currently in her shoes that she felt utter disgust for that foolish behavior. In fact, it was so bad that she actually pitied her.

"So if things go as they did in the game, you'll become engaged with Lord Patrick?" Adi asked.

"Yes. Timing-wise, it shouldn't be long now."

In-game Mary's triumphant announcement of the engagement happened not long after the evening party. She couldn't recall the exact date, but she was fairly certain there were no other events in between the party and the announcement. Given the number of days left before their graduation, it should've been coming up soon.

Adi, who was sitting opposite her and sipping his own tea, spoke up. "But you have no desire to marry Patrick, do you, my lady?"

"Not even the tiniest bit, no." Though all the other girls were besotted with Prince Charming, Mary's reply was a categorical rejection.

“Please don’t let anyone else hear you say that, unless you want a knife in your back.”

Adi couldn’t hold back another sigh. It was no exaggeration to say there was a myriad of noble ladies for whom marrying Patrick would be a dream come true. That Mary was always on the receiving end of envious scowls whenever she and Patrick danced so intimately together didn’t escape Adi’s notice. It was enough to give him goosebumps.

“He’s such a great man, so why isn’t Mary interested in him?” Adi’s exasperated sigh seemed to imply. Needless to say (not that he *could* say it), on the inside he was relieved beyond belief.

“To my understanding, your game-self imposed the engagement on Lord Patrick against his will,” Adi went on to say. “Wouldn’t that mean that as long as you don’t follow suit, there will be no engagement to speak of?”

“I’d like to believe that myself, but...I get the feeling we’ll be forced to follow the game’s story,” Mary murmured, reaching out to touch her own ringlets.

She brushed her delicate fingers against her hair, curled tightly as ever as it swayed around her face. Those stubborn ringlets were far from dainty—their sheer strength meant that “*drills”* was the optimal word to describe them. Even if Mary tried to straighten them just a little so they’d form more gentle curves, her hair would always twist back into drills from the moment she opened her eyes in the morning. Her three expert attendants would try their hardest, giving their all to pin them down, or smooth them out, or force them to somehow take a different shape, but...in the end, it was nothing but a waste of everyone’s time.

And so, because the willpower of the drills always won out over that of her caretakers, now here she was.

“Whatever force is at work here, these curls are a testament to its sheer prowess,” said Mary.

“Good point...” Adi conceded as he turned his gaze aside, well aware of the uphill battle Mary’s poor attendants had to face.

Setting aside Mary's progress as a villainess, up until now everything had more or less followed the same story beats as the game. Of course, she knew that this was all due to Alicia's efforts and Patrick's conduct, but it seemed likely that the engagement event was next on the list.

While this was the same world as from the game, there was no guarantee that absolutely everything would play out in the exact same way. Even so, there was no denying that so far many things *did* follow the game's script.

And in this world, the days passed the same way as they did in *Heart High*. Though some aspects were only ambiguously similar to the game (not unlike Mary herself), overall, they lined up too well to be a coincidence, reluctant as Mary was to admit she was living in the world of a game.

Taking everything into account, she had a hunch her engagement with Patrick would happen. Obviously Mary had no intention of bringing that topic up with Patrick herself, but according to the timeline of the game, it would be coming up soon. And considering their relationship, the idea of an engagement between them wasn't all that far-fetched.

In fact, any outsider not in the know would've probably wondered why they *weren't* engaged yet. Mary (despite her eccentric nature) had sublime beauty and a supreme family pedigree going for her, while Patrick was impeccable and desired by all—they were practically a match made in heaven.

"So you reckon His Grace will bring up the engagement with the head of House Dyce?" asked Adi.

"Think about it—up until now, our families have had a collaborative partnership, but nothing substantial to actually back up that connection, even though both have great social standings," Mary explained. "Do you know the reason for this?"

"Isn't that because they haven't had children born in the same generation?"

"That too. But among the aristocracy, marriages of convenience happen all the time. It's not all that uncommon to see young brides married off to men ten or even twenty years their senior."

"Well... I suppose that's true," Adi admitted. "But neither House Albert nor

House Dyce are in a place to be that desperate for a political marriage."

"That's the point." She nodded, taking a single bite of her scone.

The moment the freshly baked scone landed in her mouth, perfectly balanced savory-sweetness filled her palate. It was so delicious that she almost wanted to race to the kitchen right this instant and shower the patisserie with praise. Adi, apparently intrigued by this, also reached out to take a scone for himself, despite the grave expression on his face as he listened to Mary. This was his third scone so far.

"Both Houses have massive political influence. The other noble families are essentially insignificant in comparison," Mary went on. "That's why neither House could do a marriage of convenience."

"What do you mean?"

"Both of them were always in the position of choosing the most suitable candidate from a vast pool of applicants. Their prestige gave them the leeway to do that."

"That's true. House Albert and House Dyce would always be on the choosing side."

"With that in mind, if one of the families had agreed to a marriage with a large age difference, people might've suspected something was wrong."

In most cases, political marriages were for the benefit of the parents.

Making new political connections, deepening one's existing connections, or wanting betrothal money...parents could have all kinds of objectives, and they'd send out their daughters—or in a few cases, even their sons—to achieve them. Some families were desperate for a political marriage for the sake of ambition, whereas others simply needed the support of another party.

Hence, while House Albert and House Dyce kept developing friendly relations, they had no need to send out their heirs. After all, the choosing side had the upper hand, and both families wanted to show that they were free to have their proverbial pick of the litter.

"That's been the status quo until now. But things have changed," Mary said

matter-of-factly while taking another bite of the scone. “Patrick and I are close in age, and we get along. From an outsider’s perspective, we seem like a perfectly harmonious couple. In other words, we’re the matchup they’ve been waiting for all along, since it wouldn’t come across as a marriage of convenience.”

Even if Mary and Patrick were to announce their engagement right this moment, nobody would be all that surprised to hear it, and surely none would see it as a political move. How many times had the two of them danced together hand in hand so intimately? They must’ve merely been waiting for the appropriate time to make the engagement, so would everyone think.

“The connection between our families would deepen without anyone suspecting anything. For our fathers, all would go according to plan, and they could pat themselves on the back for it at the end.”

Mary sighed and sipped her tea while Adi fixed her with a hard stare.

She spoke as though she were discussing somebody else’s affairs. Unlike the other girls her age, there was no fervor about her as she spoke of love, nor did she show any inclination to lament the fact she was being betrothed without her knowledge. She was completely detached from it, almost as if she’d known something like this was coming all along.

Indeed, she could predict the engagement thanks to her knowledge of the game. But the past-life memories she’d been working off of couldn’t paint the picture of her present calm demeanor entirely by themselves. It was as if she’d known this would happen even *before* the whole game thing ever came up.

“My lady... Could it be that you’ve always thought you’d get married to Lord Patrick?” Adi inquired.

“I knew I’d be married off to *someone* eventually. Still, I’d rather it be Patrick than some strange man I don’t even know. We get along, and...”

“And?” he asked, stealing a sideways glance at her.

“No, never mind,” Mary said promptly, evading the question.

Nonchalantly, she took a sip of her tea. The fruity fragrance and delicate sweetness tinged the inside of her mouth. Adi, noticing her cup was emptied,

refilled it for her.

“Anyway, I can’t imagine this engagement working out with Alicia in the picture,” she proclaimed, reaching out for her second scone.

Just then, she spotted her father and Patrick’s father engaged in a friendly, convivial chat.

***

Sure enough, a few days later, Mary and Patrick were engaged.

The news spread quickly throughout high society, and after the weekend, their engagement became the hot topic within Karelia Academy. From that very morning, Mary was on the receiving end of congratulations and jealous flares alike, and by that afternoon, she’d started to resent her father for being the cause of all her misery. She had to commend the in-game Mary for not only putting up with this, but doing so in a proud and high-handed manner.

It was harrowing. Everyone had kept trying to talk to her constantly from the moment she woke up. The attention was expected, given both families’ statuses, but it was also clear that many only did it out of self-interest, supposing that if they managed to put themselves in the families’ good graces, an opportunity for a good marriage could present itself to them too.

Regardless, putting up with it was tedious. For Mary, who already stood out from the other nobles due to her eccentric, unladylike character, the situation was nigh unbearable. But she withstood it for the sake of appearances, and at last the school day ended.

At that point, she’d received congratulatory words from dozens...no, perhaps even hundreds of people, and among the commotion was a summons from Patrick, calling her out to meet with him.

“Lord Patrick wishes to see me?”

“Yes. It seems he’d like to discuss something with you.”

“I see. Thank you for letting me know.”

“It’s no trouble at all. And congratulations again on your engagement!” The female student bowed and walked away.

Mary watched her retreat with a sigh and prepared herself as the wave of people around her died down.

***

Mary walked down the corridor. Not many students were around after classes, but she'd still run into one every now and then and hear more words of congratulations.

Of course, Adi was by her side. A proper servant would probably walk behind his mistress, but Mary had once told him, "I hope *you* have to be dogged by a man twice your size and see how it feels! It's nerve-racking." And ever since then, he'd always walked next to her instead.

"I wonder how he's going to dump me," murmured Mary.

Adi glanced at her in puzzlement. "You think that's what this is about?"

"What else could it be? The in-game Mary really got raked over the coals. Let's see what's in store for me." She huffed out an ominous laugh, as though she were looking forward to finding out. Adi could only sigh in exasperation.

In *Heart High*, Patrick hated Mary from the bottom of his heart.

In the game, Mary was selfish, boastful, and prone to throwing a tantrum the moment things didn't go exactly as she wanted. She also used her family name to lure and trick anyone who opposed her. Patrick, who himself was prideful but not on the level of the utterly villainous Mary, naturally didn't like her.

Perhaps to maintain their families' reputations, Patrick had been willing to give Mary precedence, but when he was forced into an engagement with her against his will, he finally started to fight back. Up until then, he'd meekly gone along with everything for the sake of his parents and family, but once he met Alicia, he realized what was truly important to him, and what was worth fighting for.

Whether as a reaction to the engagement, or because of pent-up resentment, Patrick's annulment of their betrothal was particularly vicious. Mary, infuriated by the breakup, screeched at the heroine at the top of her lungs so impetuously that even the players found themselves gasping. (As her confrontation with Patrick wasn't portrayed in the game, it was a point of discussion for players to

imagine just what on earth Patrick could've possibly said to her to make her *that* infuriated.)

Mary would hurl verbal abuse at the frightened heroine, repeatedly saying things like, "It's all your fault!" and, "You're just some hick!" Patrick soon caught up to her and rebuked her, but the depiction of her in-game counterpart's hateful scowl was vivid and chilly in Mary's mind.

Such was the brutality of Patrick's rejection of Mary.

Now, the real Mary approached her destination with every intention of receiving that exact same treatment.

"Though it is strange," Mary spoke up, "to be dumped by a man I don't even like."

"You're taking this very well, Your Ladyship."

"Well, I already know what's coming. I don't plan on letting this get to me," she said with a wry smile.

Adi narrowed his eyes at her and suddenly stopped walking.

Mary instinctively did the same. "What's wrong?" she asked, glancing back at him.

"It's possible that Alicia will back out," he said in a low voice.

By "back out," Adi must've meant that Alicia would give up on Patrick. But Mary couldn't think of a reason for her to do such a thing, and she tilted her head as a way of implying her doubtfulness. Anyone could tell those two were in love. Mary, who was supposed to obstruct their relationship, was fully prepared for her breakup with Patrick.

"Even ignoring what happened in the game, they're obviously in love with each other," she argued. "Alicia has no reason to give up on him."

"What about their difference in rank?"

"Such a thing wouldn't matter to Patrick." Mary knew him well enough to ascertain that he wouldn't give up on anything—much less his beloved—no matter how great their difference in social standing.

Though Patrick seemed aloof at first glance, still waters run deep. He was a desirous man, the type who'd go to any lengths and push through any obstacles to get what he wanted in the end. His social rank had nothing to do with that aspect of him. His true strength lay in his willingness to rise against all odds in times of need.

Mary explained as much to Adi, yet he still seemed tormented by something. "I..." he muttered. "I still think Alicia will back out."

"I'm telling you, this is Patrick we're talking about. He won't have any issue with it."

"Even so!" Adi exclaimed, suddenly raising his voice as Mary's eyes widened in shock. "I think *she* will. No matter how much you love someone, however deep and true that love may be, the thought of dragging them down to your own level is unbearable! You'd much sooner step aside and let them be with someone who matches them in lifestyle, grace, and rank. You want them to enjoy the kind of life everyone would give their blessings to..."

His words suddenly grew quieter, as though he'd snapped back to his usual self. "You just want them to be happy," he added finally, the last of his words fading away as if it had been a soliloquy all along.

"Adi... What's wrong?"

"No, I just... Uh... My friend... Yes, my friend fell in love with someone of a much higher station than himself! That's all this is..."

Following his jumbled reply, Mary stared at him curiously. Adi always spoke to her in a clear and decisive manner (even when his opinion was uncalled for), so his comment seemed out of character. Plus, he wouldn't meet her eyes, for his own wandered all over the place.

"I'll go buy us some drinks!" he proclaimed and then went back the way they came.

Mary watched his retreating back in a stupor. When she finally came to, she pressed her hand to her chest, her heart still racing. "Don't scare me like that!" was all she could get out at the moment.

What was she supposed to say to Adi once he got back? Having no idea, she

decided instead to briskly make her way to the classroom where she was to meet with Patrick.

Inside, Patrick and Alicia were already waiting for her. Patrick smiled awkwardly and apologized to Mary for making her come all this way. Standing next to him, Alicia looked pitifully upset, and she seemed seconds away from bursting into tears. No, judging by how red her eyes were, she must've already been crying up until just a few minutes ago.

When she spotted Mary, her shoulders started trembling. Noticing this, Patrick gently rubbed her arm to soothe her.

"You probably know why I asked to speak with you, Mary," he began.

"Oh, yes, you called me all the way out here just to dump me," she said with a smirk.

Patrick smiled wryly at her boldness. Only Alicia, already looking quite faint, paled even further at their exchange.

"Please wait!" she cried as though wanting to intervene. "Lady Mary, I... Your engagement..."

"Alicia, we spoke about this," said Patrick.

"But, Lord Patrick! I... I really think you should have the kind of wedding everyone would give their blessings to!" Alicia said tearfully, reminding Mary of Adi's words from earlier.

Judging by their conversation, it seemed like Alicia truly was ready to back away from Patrick. She was trying to argue that Patrick and Mary were better suited to each other. Certainly, considering their ranks and the effect their marriage would have on their surroundings, that much was true. As for political marriages, there was no match more suitable than that of House Albert's daughter and House Dyce's heir. Though neither she nor Patrick had an ounce of desire to marry one another, such was often par for the course in marriages of convenience.

Alicia kept trying to tearfully make her arguments, while Patrick attempted to calm her down. After a minute or two, Mary decided their conversation was going nowhere and sighed.

“You’re a country girl, and yet you’re trying to foist your unwanted goods onto *me*?” she asked Alicia with disdain.

“Mary?”

“Lady Mary?”

Both Patrick and Alicia looked surprised at Mary’s sudden attitude. She took no notice of this and continued to smile daringly.

“Did you really think that I, Mary Albert, would care for *your* secondhand man?” she scoffed and laughed cruelly, looking every bit the villainess.

But knowing the intention behind her words, neither Patrick nor Alicia seemed hurt or upset by what Mary had said. After all, her message hadn’t been abusive. It was bitter and hard to understand, as was typical of her, but this was also her own way of affirming their relationship.

“Mary, this is all my fault,” Patrick spoke up. “We can end the engagement on whatever terms you like.”

“Oh my, how generous of you.”

“Lady Mary...” Alicia joined in. “I never intended to get in your way like this. I really did think you and Patrick would make a wonderful couple...”

“I’m not interested in a man beloved by a country girl,” Mary interrupted resolutely, turning to look at Patrick.

There was no hesitation in his eyes as he held Alicia close. He met Mary’s gaze with his own level stare, and his clear indigo irises were tinged with an almost palpable passion. “Up until now, I’ve always gone along with my parents’ wishes, bearing the burdens of being House Dyce’s heir. But I’ve changed. Now, I want to be the sort of man Alicia desires. I want to stay with her forever.”

Mary nodded in satisfaction at Patrick’s declaration. He was truly a nobleman’s son. His parents had raised him as such, and he answered their wishes. And now, he was fully prepared to cast it all away and be with Alicia.

I’m letting a really good catch slip away... Mary thought ironically as she smiled.

“And what of your parents?” she challenged further. “They went through all

that effort to raise their perfect heir, only for him to turn around and elope with a commoner! They might just faint when they hear the news."

"I'll think of something to persuade them. And if that doesn't work, I'll be more than happy to cast off my family name."

"Lord Patrick, you mustn't!" Alicia insisted, tugging on his arm.

At this, Adi's words surfaced in Mary's mind.

"The thought of dragging them down to your own level is unbearable!"

Even if it came to that, Patrick wouldn't lose out by it—not his grace, nor his talent, nor anything at all.

That much was obvious. His character didn't depend on his family name, but was the result of his own hard work and ability. If anything, one's family name can only boost the worth of what is already present from the start. Besides, even if Patrick became a commoner, he could always work his way back up. He was a talented man, and Mary wouldn't put it past him to rise to the rank of a noble again in his lifetime.

But looking at things from Alicia's perspective, she must've felt like she was not only robbing him of his birthright, but stealing him away from his whole family to boot. And in return, she'd be giving him the simple, perpetually frugal life of a commoner. The inconveniences of such an existence would be incomparable to the comforts Patrick had grown up with. It would be day after day without an ounce of glamor. Sure, he could work his way up, but he'd be wasting all that effort on something he wouldn't have needed to do without her in the picture. All love came at a cost, but he'd be losing too much.

Alicia was well aware of this, and she kept pulling desperately on his arm with teary, fearful eyes while continuing to insist, "You mustn't do this!"

Mary watched her with narrowed eyes. She wondered if she would've been able to understand Alicia's feelings if not for what Adi had told her earlier.

But even if I understand her feelings... thought Mary as the corners of her lips lifted once again.

She could see things from both Patrick's and Alicia's points of view. She

understood Patrick's determination to live for the sake of Alicia, as well as Alicia's fright at the thought of taking everything from him.

And because she understood both their perspectives...she wouldn't take them into consideration in the slightest. Indeed, she'd ignore them completely! *That* was her role as Mary Albert.

"You're so desperate to stop him... Could it be you've been after his family name all along?" Mary smiled sarcastically, as though trying to expose Alicia's true intentions.

The other girl gasped at her words, then turned to Mary and cast her a sharp glare. "How could you say that?! I love Lord Patrick for who he is as a person! Even if he were a commoner, my feelings for him wouldn't change!" Though her eyes were still watery, Alicia spoke with a strength she hadn't shown up until this moment.

A sigh escaped from Mary's lips. "Then I don't see the problem. Or are you just trying to show off your lovers' quarrel?"

"Oh... Lady Mary, I..." Alicia sniffled, her damp eyes looking at Mary.

In response, Mary waved her hand as if to say she was fed up with this whole situation and that the conversation was over.

Teary thank-yous were certainly not something a villainess wanted to hear. She wasn't in the habit of seeking out hatred, but being thanked was embarrassing, and as such Mary didn't like it any better.

"Don't expect me to congratulate you two," she told them. "But I suppose I'll leave you in charge of explaining everything to my father."

"That's very you. Thanks, Mary," Patrick said, sounding relieved.

Mary turned on her heel, as if to say she was glad to finally leave this place. She'd just been dumped, and in the aftermath, those two were acting lovey-dovey together and even thanking her. One wouldn't have to be a villain to be infuriated by this.

Mary swiftly made her departure, and when she opened the door to the classroom...she came face-to-face with a bewildered Adi, who'd been leaning

against the wall.

“I’ll have you know that eavesdropping is terribly rude,” she told him.

“Well, I couldn’t exactly interrupt *that*,” he argued.

“I suppose that’s true. So, did you buy those drinks?”

“Huh?” Adi asked inanely, apparently having no idea what she was talking about. After a few seconds, he must’ve remembered, because he looked visibly panicked. “Oh, er...the cafeteria! Yes, you see, rather than buying drinks, I thought it’d be much nicer if we could go and have some tea at the cafeteria after your talk was over!”

“What an obvious lie... But I’ll believe it.”

“If the staff is still there, we can have cake along with our tea! After all, we must commemorate this day!”

“Commemorate? If you mean Patrick and Alicia’s engagement, you’re jumping the gun a bit, don’t you think?”

“No, I mean today marks the day you got dumped, Your Ladyship!”

“How about we mark the occasion of your dismissal instead?”

She glared at him. As usual, he was acting in a way entirely inappropriate for a servant to act towards his mistress—much less a girl who just got dumped. His thoughtless joy was a complete letdown for Mary. Her servant was utterly delighted to see someone break up with his own mistress.

But she didn’t have it in her to complain and simply let out a sigh. Just then, she heard the voices of a happy couple calling out her name from behind her, and she sighed even harder.

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When her father heard of their breakup, the first words out of his mouth were, “Ah, I knew it.” And then, to add further insult to injury, he added: “I thought Patrick would finally get you off my hands...”

Hearing this, even Mary herself felt like crying.

Chapter 4

“Adi’s calling for me?”

“Yes, ma’am. He’s insisting that he has something to discuss with you and is requesting your presence in his room,” the maid explained, and Mary tilted her head quizzically.

The hour was late, and she’d just been considering going to sleep. Whatever Adi needed her for, it must’ve been urgent for him to send for her now. There was no point in asking the maid, however, as she probably didn’t know the details. Mary bid the maid goodnight and sent her off, then put on a coat and exited her room.

Albert Manor was a vast place, and as such, they had a number of live-in staff who occupied the servants’ quarters, Adi being one of them.

“It’s been a long time since I last came here,” Mary whispered to herself as she walked through the dormitories.

When she was little and didn’t yet know the differences between the buildings, she’d often sneak in here to play, knocking on the servants’ doors. She used to think that the employees with free time would be happy to play with her... (Back then, she still didn’t understand the concept of a day off, and even now she felt guilty over stealing so much of their precious free time.)

But as she grew up, Mary started to understand the difference between this place and the main estate, and she refrained from trespassing in the servants’ dormitories. Her not coming down here had nothing to do with the disparity between their ranks, or the oft-heard claim that masters should have no business being in their servants’ quarters. Merely, she felt it’d be awkward for a daughter of their employer to intrude on the staff’s private lives and areas. She herself knew very well how unpleasant it was for a presumptuous person to come barging into her own living quarters uninvited.

With that on her mind, Mary came to a stop in front of a single door—Adi’s room. A plate with his name engraved on it hung on the plain brown door. Mary

glanced at it, then reached out to knock.

"I'm in!"

Her eyes widened at these nonsensical words. *Obviously I know you're in!* she thought, and a few minutes later, the voice resounded again.

"Sorry for the wait..." Adi's face peered in from the other side, and he sounded a little out of breath. Mary heaved a sigh and, at his urging, entered his room.

Servants' quarters or no, this was still part of Albert Manor. The room was more than spacious enough for a single occupant and had its own kitchen, and even a private bath. The rest of the quarters also housed a canteen and were furnished with various shared amenities beyond just daily living necessities. Everything had been built with an air of luxury. It would've been hard to think of a place that could offer its servants a better living space.

"Sorry for the mess. Please feel free to sit anywhere you like."

"I wouldn't call this a *mess*..."

At Adi's prompting, Mary sat down on a cushion and glanced around the room. The place was relatively neat and orderly, except for...

"I must admit, I'm quite curious about that mountain in the corner. It screams, 'Oh no, quick! I have to hide all of my filthy stuff, so I'm just going to throw it in a pile, cover it up with a piece of cloth, and hope for the best!'"

"Wh-What are you talking about?! There are no mountains in my room!" Adi denied, trying to hide his obvious lie behind a smile.

Mary fixed him with an icy stare. While he hurried over to the kitchen to fetch them both something to drink, she took her chance and stealthily moved closer to the mountain.

"I'll get us some drinks, so please sit tight and wait!" Adi stressed, glancing into the room from the kitchen. Mary quickly grew still.

His stone-faced expression, combined with his rust-colored eyes boring into her, was intimidating enough to compel her into silence. So she was right in her suspicions! Since he'd gone out of his way to warn her, she decided to heed his

words and returned to the cushion. She sat down, took a breath...and suddenly glanced down.

How odd. The cushion felt decidedly uncomfortable. It was almost as if something was *underneath* it... Mary shifted to the side, and just as she reached her hand below to find out—

Thud!

A teacup slammed against the table in front of her. Mary's hand froze.

"Your tea. Is. Ready."

"Right... Thank you."

Adi's ghastly aura hovered over her, so Mary's hand changed trajectory and headed towards the cup instead. This only added further proof to her theory. Instead of pressing him on it, Mary took a sip of the tea.

"Just. Sit right there. And don't. Touch. *Anything*. Please." Following his incessant plea, Adi headed back to the kitchen.

He'd added an extra clause this time. Now, there was no doubt in her mind as to what he was hiding, and she had but one complaint to make about it.

You *called me out here. Hide your filth* before *I arrive!*

But as she was in enemy territory, she decided to keep the remark to herself. Even if this was a part of the Albert mansion, the room itself belonged to Adi, after all.

Soon enough, Adi brought in some light snacks and cakes alongside the tea, and at last they began discussing the main topic at hand.

"So, why did you call me out here?" Mary asked him. "Usually, *you're* supposed to come to *me* if you need something."

"I couldn't possibly go to your room at this hour! It'd be thoroughly impolite."

"Huh? *That's* why you made me come here?! You've seriously got your priorities all backwards!"

"I truly appreciate that you took the trouble to come and see me," Adi responded sincerely with a bow of his head.

She couldn’t comprehend his logic, but she decided to take another sip of her tea rather than drag this topic out any longer.

Indeed, servants weren’t typically allowed to enter their masters’ bedrooms at their leisure. Not to mention, Adi was a man and Mary a woman. Add to that the current late hour, and they’d be practically inviting everyone to misread the situation. It’d go beyond mere impoliteness—it’d be borderline indefensible. But that didn’t mean that servants were free to call their masters over to their own rooms! Such a folly could end in the servant’s immediate dismissal.

That was why Mary warned him: “Adi, whatever you do, do *not* try this with my father.”

He shook his head in a flurry. “I’d never! No matter how desperately I needed to convey something to him, I wouldn’t want to take up his precious time. Especially at this hour!”

“That reminds me... This is the perfect opportunity. After you’re done telling me why you brought me here, we can talk at length about the *other* matter you’ve been avoiding.”

“Huh?! Er, well, a-anyway, let’s focus on the main subject for now! We can discuss other things afterwards, if we still have time!”

“Look, if you called me out here for nothing, then you’d better be ready. Because by the time I’m through, whatever’s under the cushion is going to come out, that mountain will be exposed, and *you’ll* be left standing there with a pink slip!”

In response, Adi laughed stiffly. As always, he was trying to dodge the matter, and though Mary should’ve been used to it by now, all the aggression drained out of her anyway. (And most likely, the matter of his dismissal would be left unsettled yet again.)

Adi must’ve finally decided to broach the main topic, as he cleared his throat in an attempt to shift the atmosphere in the room and gazed at Mary with a serious expression. No longer did he resemble the insincere and frivolous servant from moments ago. Now, he took on the face of the gallant and chivalrous man that he’d occasionally show an aptitude for becoming.

“My lady, please be frank with me. Why are you so intent on becoming a villainess?”

“Because I am Mary Albert, and that means things are already set in stone for me. I’m fated to be the villainess and fall into ruin.”

“That doesn’t sound like you. You’re not the type of person to make decisions based on such simple reasons,” he argued. “Besides, you don’t have the character of a villainess.”

“Oh? So you see me as a saint, incapable of committing evil?”

“Ah, no, I don’t think of you in that way. Not even the slightest, teeniest, tiniest bit.”

“You’d go *that* far?! You’re supposed to back me up, here!” Mary whined.

In response, Adi coughed lightly again, as if to say that he wouldn’t be distracted by any jokes right now. Picking up on this, Mary sighed in resignation. Typically, even if shady business was at hand, she’d be able to lighten the mood with a few jokes and some banter, but tonight Adi wasn’t having it.

Deciding to take the matter seriously as well, Mary downed the rest of her tea. The blend of well-balanced sweetness and fruity aroma spread within her mouth, making her feel as though she’d just quenched her thirst after a long marathon.

“Very well, I’ll be up-front with you. I’ve never wanted to become any sort of villainess,” Mary murmured, and Adi nodded as though he’d expected as much.

Mary’s real personality was a far cry from that of a villainess. That said, she wasn’t saint material either.

She set herself apart from others in that, even if she hated someone, she had no particular zeal to go after them and cause them misery. When she did end up hating or disliking someone, she’d quietly put some distance between herself and the other person and gradually let them fade out of her life. She saw little point in trying to chase someone out of her territory, or in using her family’s influence to bring someone down. After all, why put in all that effort for someone you’re supposed to hate? That’s just who Mary was.

Alicia was just some girl Mary had nothing to do with. However low her rank may have been in comparison, Mary wouldn't go out of her way to harass her the moment she laid her eyes on Alicia, even if she'd managed to start attending Karelia. The memories of the game might've been conveying that she had to commit herself to the role of the wicked daughter, but Mary Albert would never comply with such arbitrary reasoning.

"My lady, you're prouder than anyone. Even if you have those past-life memories, and even if this is the world of a game, I know you'd never become a villainess."

"Oh my, you certainly sound very sure of yourself."

"I've watched you closer than anyone. That's why I can say with confidence that the Mary from the game is exactly the kind of person you despise the most."

In response to his assured statement, the corners of her mouth lifted a little.

Mary Albert was an eccentric young lady. Though she was the daughter of House Albert, second in power only to the royalty, she never made a big deal out of it or abused her privileges. She could act however she pleased and still graduate from Karelia Academy, but she had no such intentions, instead choosing to quietly follow the academy's rules without drawing attention to herself in any way.

It went further than that—she was happy to do things like a commoner if the need arose, going as far as to cycle to school to save time. Generally, she tolerated Adi's attitude, no matter how far it strayed from that of a typical servant, and she didn't seem troubled if other servants acted in a similar way to him. The other day, when there weren't enough staff in the house, she'd helped out with shelling beans in the kitchens. (Of course, she complained the entire time. "I'm the daughter of this house, you know? Hey, are you all listening to me?" she'd whine, but still she kept shelling those beans.)

Mary didn't behave like a typical aristocrat, and for that, many of the students at Karelia kept a distance from her. Some would even snicker at her. As she and Patrick were close, nearly all of the female students were jealous of her in that aspect. Needless to say, jealousy combined with teasing was hardly the recipe

for respect. As such, the other students often coldly remarked how unladylike or unsuited for House Albert she was. Though such surly words always followed in her wake, Mary paid them no heed.

“I can’t imagine someone like you deciding to become a villainess just based on some past life memories, Your Ladyship,” Adi reiterated with conviction.

Mary shrugged her shoulders. “You’re right. I may have my own goals, but I’ve no intention of degrading myself like that disgracious woman did.” Her tone of voice was cold and reprehensive. Anyone unfamiliar with her true nature would’ve hardly believed their ears if they’d heard her speak like that. She’d never talk in such a chilly way, not in front of those who saw her playing along with her role as a young noble lady, nor in front of those who saw her as an eccentric.

But Adi recognized that tone. A voice so cold it gave him goosebumps, combined with her piercing eyes, could only mean one thing—Mary was reaffirming her sense of pride.

Some, upon seeing her insolent servant and her disregard for the school rumors of her being an oddball, claimed that Mary had no pride. But they were wrong—her sense of pride was simply different from theirs.

To her, it didn’t matter how many people spread baseless gossip about her, or how hard they tried to ruin her reputation out of jealousy. None of them hurt her feelings, and to her, their words were little more than dust in the wind. That was why they didn’t know of her pride—or when they *did* realize she had it, it was already too late. The very reason Patrick didn’t make any comments about how Mary and Adi behaved was because he’d once glimpsed the extent of her pride.

All of that was the reason behind Adi’s confidence in the fact Mary wouldn’t pursue villainy. And now she’d confirmed as much. Yet despite this, she was still following along with the game’s script by getting in Alicia’s way (even if her attempts *did* usually end in failure). That could only mean...

“*Ruin* is your true objective. Am I right?”

“Oh, you’ve only realized that now? I’ve been saying this entire time that I’m after my own doom! I haven’t said anything about wanting to be a villainess,”

Mary said nonchalantly.

Adi lowered his head in his hands. *To think I've actually sided with her...* he thought, yet at the same time, he couldn't help feeling that degree of eccentricity was very much in character for Mary Albert.

"But *why* is that your goal?" he asked her.

"Listen, Adi... House Albert is very big, don't you think?" As she spoke, Mary held out her empty teacup. Noticing this, Adi refilled it, and she took it back with a look of satisfaction. However, suddenly her gaze shifted from her cup to the window.

Albert Manor stood against the darkness of the night. Most of the lights were already out at this hour, and she could only see the massive outline of the mansion in the dark. But in the daytime, the light of the sun only served to highlight the copious amounts of wealth that had been poured into its construction.

There was not a single blemish on the mansion's walls. The window frames were finished with fine craftsmanship, and through the beautifully polished windows, one could easily see hallways lined with splendid works of art. The front entrance was decorated with stained glass, though sadly it wasn't visible from the servants' quarters, which were located behind the mansion.

You could search the country far and wide and not find another mansion like this one. No, even foreign lands would be hard pressed to have one. Seeing Albert Manor's magnificence for the first time would leave anyone feeling overwhelmed, while at the same time make them realize the sheer extent of House Albert's might.

A noble's house was symbolic of their prestige. Their ability to obtain and upkeep these spectacular views demonstrated their financial prowess. The more exquisite the mansion, the stronger the family's power.

"Not even House Dyce can boast of such an estate," said Mary.

"Indeed. This is House Albert, after all."

"Yes. It belongs to House Albert. And...that's exactly why I'm doing this, Adi." She put down her teacup with a quiet clink. "House Albert has become too big."

It was often said that at present time, House Albert was second in power only to the royal family. But even among the royals, some of the lower-ranked members were trying to curry favor with House Albert, hoping to get in their good graces. Being at the top of the other noble families was nowhere near enough—House Albert was aiming to become *equal* with the royalty.

Mary had seen this unfold all her life, and that was why she'd started to think, *House Albert has grown too big. I must curb our influence before it's too late.*

"If things keep going as they are, House Albert will become equal... No, they could even *outrank* the royal family. And if that were to happen..."

Can you guess what that would mean? she seemed to ask with her eyes, and Adi's brows creased. He couldn't predict the finer details, but he had a feeling it wouldn't be anything desirable.

Adi was involved with the aristocratic society in the role of a servant. There were plenty of people who hid behind their status to get away with tyranny, and Adi had been on the receiving end of their outrageous words more than once. Thankfully, his own mistress was lenient (though, he wasn't sure that was the right word for her, really), and though he himself had never been mistreated, many of his friends who worked for other families often lamented that even work horses received better treatment.

Just by being born into nobility, these people wielded absolute superiority and power over the servants. Such was the case right now, despite the fact that the royals were reigning at the top. The idea of House Albert climbing their way up to the point of outranking the royals and turning the country into an aristocratic state was too terrible a thought to entertain.

"I don't think it's my father and his friends' intention, but the fact remains that they're being used by those who think nobility should rule supreme—the nobility fanatics. At this rate, House Albert could completely surpass the royalty."

"But... Why do you want to prevent that, my lady? If House Albert continues to prosper, you could enjoy an even more luxurious life!" Adi pointed out, and then much quieter added, "Though, as a croquette fanatic, perhaps you're already satisfied enough..."

This time, it was Mary who cleared her throat.

“Just think, you wouldn’t have to put up with gossip from the other students anymore, and you could have croquettes for every meal!” he continued.

“I could do that even now if I wanted. I just choose not to,” Mary replied. “That aside, I suppose if we were to reign supreme, just about everything would get better...at first.”

“What do you mean?”

As Adi tilted his head in confusion, Mary took a sip of her tea. It had a different taste to the tea she usually drank. She was used to tasting food and drink of the highest quality, so she could tell this tea was cheap after a single sip. It was the taste of common goods. She had a few more sips and took a deep breath. *I actually find it pretty tasty... There must be something wrong with my tongue*, Mary thought in the back of her mind, then sighed to clear her head.

“Since the royals are in control for now, the nobility fanatics are currying favor with House Albert purely in the hopes that we overtake the monarchs. They’d turn on us the moment we lost our usefulness.”

“Goodness...”

“My father is a talented man. He has the initiative to cross the ocean and expand our business abroad. There’s no one better suited to growing our house, so long as that’s *all* he does.”

“All he does?”

“Yes. After all, father takes everyone at face value. Though he always manages to recover in the end, he’s already been swindled several times.”

“Indeed, His Grace is perfectly magnanimous and benevolent to no end. He’s the kind of person who can trust in someone even if they give him no reason to.”

“There you go again, blind as ever. I’m going to sit at the far side of the room if you keep this up. Anyway, trusting people is one thing, but father takes it too far.”

“I agree. He does nothing to correct his eccentric daughter, and in fact lets her

get away with anything she wants."

"Exactly. And he even turns a blind eye to his daughter's impudent servant."

After that round of banter, they both took a breather. Then, one of them sipped tea, and the other reached out for a cake.

"Anyway," said Mary, returning to the main point of conversation. "Father can probably handle a few fellow nobles stirring up trouble. My true concern lies in invoking the wrath of the royals."

"You think House Albert could do that?"

"The royals would never overlook an insolent family trying to surpass them in rank. And if they decided to crush us, we'd have no way of stopping them."

House Albert might've had supporters who idolized them at present, but that didn't guarantee they'd stick their necks out when the time came. In Mary's opinion, about half of their current supporters would turn on them the moment things started looking bad, and the other half would pretend they'd had nothing to do with the situation, feigning neutrality. She could count on one hand the number of allies who'd be prepared to go down in the flames alongside House Albert.

"And that's why you're trying to cause House Albert's destruction *now*?"

"That's right. By the end of the game, our family falls into ruin, but it's not completely dismantled. As the main source of trouble, Mary gets sent to some remote land in the boonies, and House Albert restores some of its authority back to the monarchy, which spares them the brunt of the royals' wrath. Father and his friends should be able to recover from something like that."

Rather than being used and tossed aside by the other noble families, and rather than being crushed down by the royals' wrath, the ruin caused by Mary still left House Albert with a future to cling to. In a certain route in *Heart High*'s bonus content, Mary's parents were shown to have apologized to Alicia and sworn their allegiance to the royal family.

House Albert's connections and dealings with foreign nations meant that when push came to shove, they'd be able to find a way out, or play a secret trump card. Causing their downfall now meant they'd be left standing at the

edge of a precipice, but they wouldn't have jumped down yet. The way back would still be open.

To stand at the edge of a cliff wasn't so terrifying a thing—the *jump* from that edge was the true terror. If House Albert was hunted down by the royals, there'd be no coming back from that.

"So that's why...?" Adi trailed off.

"Yes. Villainess Mary's acts may have been lèse-majesté, but all they added up to was a catfight over a man, and Alicia came out on top, anyway. That's why Mary is made to take most of the blame."

"But to think you'd be sent to the boonies all by yourself... Wait, the *boonies*?!" Adi bellowed as though it had only hit him now, and Mary's eyes widened. "They're actually going to send you off to the provinces?!"

"Well, it's in the game's epilogue."

Upon receiving Alicia's judgment, Mary was disowned by her family and sent off to live with their distant relatives somewhere far to the north. The time had come to pay for her misdeeds, and not a single person stood in her defense, nor did a single one of her cronies show up to see her off. Such was the epilogue as portrayed in the game.

Mary explained as much, and Adi's eyes darted about in bewilderment as he kept mumbling things like, "That's horrible!" and, "Why do you have to go through that, milady?!"

After some time, he seemed to have come to terms with the news, and though he still looked like a corpse, he reached for his tea and drained the cup to regain his composure.

"If they send you up north, it must be to your mother's side of the family, right?"

"The details weren't explained in the game, but I'd guess as much," Mary replied. "It's not a bad place. Life there won't be as convenient as in the city, but it's a tourist hotspot during the birds' migratory season."

"But still, to be cast off to such a place... That's just too cruel."

“I don’t know about that. There’s beautiful scenery, you can see seasonal bird migrations, and I’m sure their boarding school can’t be all that bad. And...”

“Yes?”

Mary stared off into the distance, perhaps thinking of the northern lands, while Adi waited for her to continue with bated breath. He wondered if she was already devising a scheme to return from the countryside and regain her previous life in the city...

Whether she was aware of Adi’s thoughts or not, Mary suddenly pumped her fist in the air as her eyes glinted. “I’m going to open my own wild game restaurant in the north and make a fortune! It’ll be a total hit!”

Hearing these enthused proclamations, Adi’s shoulders drooped, and he heaved a massive sigh. All his energy had drained right out of him. Here he was, so confident that Mary was cooking up her return plan, but she was already thinking of putting down roots and cooking up *birds* instead.

“Why are you like this?” he murmured quietly, and in response, Mary puffed out her cheeks in displeasure.

“What? Do you have a problem with it?”

“That doesn’t even begin to cover it...”

“I don’t see the issue. Wherever they send me, I’ll still act as I please. Besides, I think I’ve inherited my father’s foresight and business savvy!”

“Right, right, of course. But to think that while Alicia will be here living out all this bonus content stuff, we’ll be up north selling wild game rice bowls... Just deserts or no, I can’t help but pity us.”

“Huh...?”

Mary stared at him with wide eyes. She looked like she’d just heard something shocking, and Adi didn’t understand the reason for her surprise, glancing at her questioningly.

“What’s the matter, my lady? Have I said something odd?”

“Oh, um... No, it’s nothing. Right, the bonus... The bonus...” Mary said in a slightly shrill voice, pressing a hand to her forehead. Her face paled, and Adi

peered at her in concern.

In all honesty, he didn't have much of an interest in how things had played out in *Heart High*. Even if the in-game Adi had died, all Adi would've said in response was, "Dying and leaving Her Ladyship's side would be simply pathetic, even for me."

After all, it was just a game, and only Mary had memories of it. Its credibility was close to zero. He went along with it for Mary's sake, but had anyone else tried to make claims about having a past life in an otome game, he'd laugh them off, even if things had turned out the way they'd said. But right now, the change in Mary's countenance was so severe that he was actually concerned about what had happened in the bonus content.

"My lady, surely we don't appear in the bonus... Do we?"

"No... That's not quite right. *I* don't appear in it," Mary replied, and to soothe her nerves, she took a long, deep breath.

She looked up at Adi, his expression clouded with confusion. Mary was almost tempted to call him out for the stupid look on his face, but she was sure she'd made a similar expression a few seconds ago, so she restrained herself. With one last deep breath, she put on a smile to appear calm.

"Adi, you get your own route in the bonus content. Isn't that great?" she asked with a sweet smile.

Mary looked like the perfect image of a refined young lady. Any third party would think she was commending her servant on a job well done with great composure, but her heart was still unsettled, and a storm brewed within her.

In the original game, Adi wasn't a romance option for Alicia—he was an unobtainable character. Like a true underling, he always hovered behind the in-game Mary, turning a blind eye to her evil deeds.

But as *Heart High* was an otome game, Adi's looks were nothing to scoff at, and he showed up in every single route as the servant of the game's final boss, Mary. And though *Heart High* had a fairly diverse cast of romanceable characters, all of them fell into the category of charming, princely noblemen. The whole theme of the game was "interclass romance," but eventually the concept grew a bit stale. Adi's role as a servant made him stand out, and though he wasn't romanceable, he still gained a large amount of popularity.

Not to mention, as the game's setting was an academy (and set three years prior to graduation to boot), all of the obtainable characters were either the same age as the heroine, or significantly older teachers. Meanwhile, Adi, who was forced to attend the school by Mary's selfish demands, was five years Alicia's senior, creating a subtle age gap between them.

He was manly, looked attractive, had a completely different appeal from the rest of the romanceable cast, and to top it off, he was only on the evil side due to his rank as a servant. It was easy to see why everyone had expected his route to be added at some point. The players' expectations soon reached the ears of the production company, and Adi's route became one of the main selling points of the bonus content.

The story went as such: While Alicia was preparing to enroll in a university, the reality of her royal heritage had started to sink in. Unable to confide in anyone, she quietly carried the heavy burden on her shoulders all by herself. One day, she decided to sneak out of the royal palace and visit the town, where she came upon Adi, who was working at the orphanage...

"What? Why would I work at an *orphanage*?" Adi questioned with a confused tilt of his head.

"Congratulations on your new job," Mary replied nonchalantly.

“New job? But my family has worked for House Albert for generations.”

“Yes, but by that point, House Albert was ruined. They wouldn’t have been able to afford you.”

“But...”

“In the game, you certainly looked happy enough with your new employ.”

The in-game Adi despised his mistress. (In fact, in-game Mary had been portrayed as such a nasty woman that it was a wonder whether a single person had followed her out of genuine admiration and not purely for their own gain.) However, given his background, Adi feared that if he tried to oppose Mary, his whole family would pay the price. So he put up with her selfishness and endured her angry outbursts, all while going along with her foolish behavior.

And then Alicia brought an end to it all in one fell swoop.

Though Adi lost his job as a result, he’d been freed from the wicked daughter’s tyranny, and he no longer had to endure the heart-wrenching sight of all those crushed under Mary’s foot.

“I know it won’t make up for my sins, but from now on, I want to bring some good into this world.” These words, combined with the sight of Adi surrounded by children, pierced many of the players’ hearts, and the same was the case with Alicia.

From that point on, moved by that hidden side of him, Alicia made up all kinds of excuses to come and visit Adi again. Having forgiven him, she helped to heal his emotional trauma, and gradually the two of them grew closer and closer...

“And that about sums it up.”

“H-Hold on a minute!” Adi protested. “Wasn’t Alicia engaged to a *certain someone* in the game? What happened to him?!”

“In the bonus story, that never happened,” Mary explained. “Alicia’s relationship with Adi is perfectly unmarred, since she wasn’t involved with any other men!”

“What?! But even then, she’s a princess! For her to get together with a fallen family’s ex-servant... The social gap’s even more extreme than it was in the

original game!”

“Sure, but it’s still a *bonus*, so there’s no problem!”

“And wouldn’t a princess sneaking out to meet with a commoner be found in short order?!”

“’Tis no matter! The whole purpose of bonus content is to give the players an indulgent treat, so it’s all good!”

Adi put his head in his hands, not understanding why Mary was singing praises to the bonus content. “This bonus stuff terrifies me...” His words were strangely grave, but indeed, such were his feelings.

The bonus content was called *More! Heartthrob High School* and was commonly abbreviated as *More Heart High*. It functioned as a reward aimed at players who had completed the original game, and included an extra gallery of early drafts of the game and CGs that hadn’t made the final cut. The bonus stories were short but significantly more sugary than the ones in the original.

In sum, however indulgent it may have been, its purpose was to portray happy, romantic love stories. That was exactly why Mary didn’t appear in its contents.

“So Alicia and I...?”

“Your route was very popular.”

“So while you were sent up north, I was here doing all these bonus content things?” Adi asked in a daze.

“Yes... That’s right,” Mary replied curtly. Then, she suddenly got to her feet. “Well then, excuse me,” she said as she headed for the door.

“Wait, my lady... I’ll escort you back to your room.”

“There’s no need. I’ve some things to think over, so I’d like to take my time and enjoy the night breeze.”

“But...”

“We’re on the grounds of Albert Manor. It’s a short walk back to the main building.”

“Still, you look very pale, milady... I’m concerned about you.”

“I could say the same back to you.” Mary laughed sarcastically, reaching out for the doorknob. When Adi seemed like he was about to follow her, she added, “Thank you for the tea. It was lovely,” to signal that she didn’t want him coming after her. He was able to sense the unspoken meaning in her formal words, and that was precisely why he couldn’t get himself to move.

Casting him one last sidelong glance, Mary closed the door behind her.

Leaving his room and the servants’ quarters, she stepped out into the night. As she walked, she was overcome with emotions stormier than ever before.

“I really am despicable...” she said to the empty air, pressing her hand to her forehead.

Not many people were out at this time, not even the security guards, who regularly patrolled the premises. Not a soul was around to witness how different she was now from her usual self. Though she was pale and her vision was swimming, everyone else remained devoted to their assigned duties as they surveilled the dark.

I’m the height of arrogance... Mary berated herself in her mind.

She had been aware of the bonus content. She’d known that Mary didn’t appear in it, that there was a route where Alicia and Adi got together, all of it. And most importantly, she knew that House Albert was doomed in every single route. There was no way they would’ve been able to keep *him* in their employ.

While Mary would be chased out to some faraway lands, Adi would remain here with his newly gained freedom.

It was obvious once she thought about it. It should’ve been obvious since that very first day of the opening ceremony, when she’d regained her past life memories.

So why?

Even if she was sent away to the boonies up north, even if she was forced to live in such inconvenient lands, and even if she was imprisoned in some strict boarding school...

Why had she thought that she'd be all right as long as Adi was with her?

"I can't believe I've been thinking of him like he belongs to me... I'm no better than the villainous Mary from the game." She laughed at her own arrogance, slapping both of her cheeks with her palms.

This arrogance had to stop. She'd be sent up north by herself, while he'd remain here as a free man. It was the natural conclusion—and most likely for the best.

Adi would be relieved of his post as a servant, able to pursue his own desires. It'd be up to him whether he'd become involved with Alicia or not, which was much better than living a life decided purely by the circumstances of one's birth.

Yes, I know. I'm well aware of it. But I'm still in so much pain that I feel like I'm about to burst into tears... Why is that?

As an uncontrollable maelstrom of emotions swirled within her, Mary staggered back to the mansion on unsteady feet. Just as she reached her room and was about to open the door...suddenly she heard the sound of footsteps behind her and looked over her shoulder. On the other end of the corridor, she spotted Adi running towards her.

"What's wrong, Adi?"

"I've been thinking it all over..." he began, slightly out of breath after having run all the way.

Mary tilted her head. "I'd prefer we postpone this until tomorrow," she said over her shoulder as she turned away to enter her room. Perhaps it was cold of her to do so, but right now she really didn't want to speak with Adi. She had never done anything like that before, so she expected she'd be able to get away with it this once.

"My Lady...!" he exclaimed to stop her.

"Good night, Adi. We can talk in the morning." She purposefully bid him farewell and started to close her door...

"Please listen to me!" Adi grasped hold of the small gap in the door, keeping it

from closing as Mary twitched in surprise.

He held onto the door with a surprising amount of strength, and it didn't even budge when Mary tried to close it. She had no idea how to react, having hardly ever seen him act in such a heavy-handed manner.

"Adi..." she called out quietly as she looked up at him.

His earnest gaze bored into her. They'd made eye contact countless times over the years, but tonight, Adi's rust-colored eyes seemed to pierce into Mary, making her heart pound in her chest.



“A-Adi...?”

“I don’t care who I am or what I do in the game. Even if House Albert were to fall into ruin, I’d still stay with you. Be it in the boonies up north or some remote island, it doesn’t matter to me. I belong at your side!”

His voice echoed down the silent hallway, and the two of them gazed at each other until the reverberations died down. Mary, snapping back to herself, quickly looked away in a fluster.

“Oh, I... I see. Thank you, Adi. I’m really happy to hear you say that,” she answered, feeling a little overwhelmed by the vigor in his words. Adi’s hand was still wrapped around the door, and Mary placed hers on top of his.

Adi’s hands were svelte yet masculine. In comparison, Mary’s were delicate and pale—the difference was clear at a glance. *Since when do Adi’s hands look so manly?* she thought as she gazed at them. He’d been by her side ever since she was little—ever since she was *born*, even, and yet, funnily enough, she hadn’t noticed until this very moment.

Or perhaps it was *because* they were always together that she hadn’t noticed it.

“Let’s give it our all tomorrow as well. After all, we’ve got our own graves to dig!”

“Yes... That’s right.” Adi removed his hand from the door and, with a bow of his head, uttered, “Good night, milady. Sleep well.”

Mary responded to his polite words in kind, and then slowly closed the door to her room.

The cold stillness of the room caressed her skin. She kept her back pressed to the door until Adi’s footsteps gradually faded away. Then, she staggered over to her bed by the window and collapsed onto the soft sheets.

Mary sank into the cool, comfortable mattress. Normally, she’d have her bed heated before going to sleep, but tonight she had no need for it, enjoying the cold press of the sheets against her cheek. She didn’t even get changed into her nightgown or slip under the covers, closing her eyes right there on top of the duvet.

All kinds of thoughts swirled through her mind. Things she should’ve been

thinking about and things that didn't have to be considered at all mixed together so that she couldn't tell which thought was more important than the next.

There was something she should say to Alicia tomorrow, but she couldn't recall what it was. The image of Patrick holding Alicia's shoulders and Alicia gazing up at him with such joy floated through Mary's mind. Her head was full of irrelevant thoughts like those—images of the two of them happily together. She couldn't even recall what kind of story the two of them had in the bonus content.

Adi had said he didn't care about what happened in the game, and Mary felt the same way. So long as she achieved her goal of ruin, she'd be satisfied. But was it really all right for her to get him mixed up in that? They were merely mistress and servant, and once House Albert collapsed, his employ would come to an end. Would it be right of her to bring him along to some faraway hinterlands afterwards?

If anything, she'd been taking his presence for granted every time she pictured her doom.

But why only now? From the start, I... But if I'd noticed sooner... But in the bonus, he's...

"Ahh... I just can't think straight," Mary said with a heated sigh, burying her face into the pillow.

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After that, Mary Albert came down with a fever and rested for a whole ten days—the biggest disgrace of her life to date.

When asked the cause behind her fever, she'd simply answered: "I had a lot on my mind."

If any other noble lady had said this, it would've been interpreted as her being a fragile damsel, or perhaps believed that, like many other ladies her age, she was navigating some troubled waters, which would be good for her image. Her body simply couldn't handle all those grave concerns at such an impressionable age... What a lovely fleeting fantasy that would have been.

Any normal servants would have responded to this by saying things like, “If only we’d taken better care of you!” or, “We are entirely to blame for not noticing that you were unwell sooner!” After all, they had devoted themselves to ensuring their mistress was comfortable at all times, without a single hardship in sight; if their precious mistress came down with a fever, it was surely on the shoulders of those who took daily care of her for not being cautious enough.

That said, when Adi first heard the reason behind Mary’s fever...

“Your brain overheated!”

Such was his outrageous claim, and by the time Mary finally got up from her rest, the rumor behind the cause of her fever had already spread throughout the mansion.

Nevertheless, she’d somehow managed to recover from her illness (according to her physician, it had just been a common cold... Not that Mary had thought it was overheating or any such ridiculous thing!), and she passed through the front gate of Karelia Academy for the first time in ten days.

Yet for some reason, all the students that caught sight of her gasped and quickly averted their eyes. She was used to people stealing glances at her due to the name of her house and her eccentric nature, but now she could sense a maliciousness in their eyes that made her tilt her head in confusion.

“What’s the matter? Everyone seems on edge...”

“Yes... It definitely feels like something’s brewing in the air,” Adi agreed.

“I don’t know what to make of any of this. Adi, you’ve been coming to school while I was away. Do you have any ideas?”

As she looked at him for an explanation, somebody else called out her name before Adi could even open his mouth. Mary turned around and spotted another student with golden hair rushing towards them. She was sprinting with all her strength, making an infuriatingly disgraceful sight for someone clad in the noble uniform of Karelia Academy.

“My! Good morning,” said Mary. “I see you’re still running around all over the place without an ounce of dignity. How vulgar!”

“Lady Mary! I’m so glad you’re feeling better!”

“Could you please stop making such a fuss? I’ve only just recovered from my fever. Any more of your peasant revelry, and I might just collapse!”

As usual, Mary’s spiteful words had zero effect on Alicia. She seemed to take them as advice, and once she regained her breath, she uttered, “Pardon me!” with an awfully bashful smile.

Alicia straightened her posture. “Greetings, Lady Mary,” she said, her appearance much more appropriate for a Karelia Academy student. The improvement was such that surely nobody would be able to think of her as a mere commoner if they looked at her now.

But Mary was still dissatisfied. She let out a huffy laugh and pressed a handkerchief to her lips, as though to imply she felt disgusted from gazing upon a revolting sight.

“This is exactly why I loathe commoners! I’d never embarrass myself by sprinting around here and there, no matter how much hurry I was in. A true noble lady always moves with elegance, and if she has urgent business, she sends out a servant to take care of it for her!”

“Yes, ma’am! Thank you!”

“You think I’m giving you advice? Humph... Anyway, why were you in such a rush?”

“I was just so excited to see you! Well, that and...”

“And?” Mary looked at her questioningly, and in response, Alicia dipped her head to avoid eye contact.

Alicia’s current expression was nothing like her usual self, which was so bright and cheerful that she almost reminded Mary of sunlight. With the odd glances from everyone around her still clinging to her back, Mary creased her brow.

As she looked around to see what was happening, she took note of the curious bystanders, who nonetheless ensured to keep their distance from her, as well as a group of handsome boys gallantly making their way towards her. Leading the charge was none other than Patrick. But why was it that today he,

too, was wearing a grim expression and scowling at her?

What on earth happened?

Yet Mary wouldn't let her confusion show on her face. The creases in her brow relaxed, and she adopted a ladylike smile as she offered the group a graceful bow to greet them.

"Greetings, members of the student council. The day's only just begun, but is something the matter already?" she asked.

Yet Patrick's reply was a chilly, "It's high time you told us about your misdeeds, Mary Albert."

In *Heart High*, Mary bullied and tormented the protagonist relentlessly. She went from hindering Alicia's love life to secretly sending out her cronies to do her evil bidding behind Alicia's back. It was bad enough that it would've completely overwhelmed any normal person. Of course, the heroine was consoled by the romanceable cast, and Mary was judged for her wrongdoings. The characters who had high affection for Alicia joined in on the process.

Mary sighed as she remembered the accusation event that players had dubbed "The Judgment." That had been the beginning of the wicked daughter's downfall in the game, and since Mary was aiming for her doom, perhaps this should've been good news for her... However, given that she'd only just recovered from an extended illness, it was enough to make her feel sick.

That was why she let out a huff of displeasure as she fixed her gaze on the president of the student council, Patrick.

Apparently, someone had torn up Alicia's textbooks and sullied her uniform when she wasn't looking. She was even splashed with water at one point. Committing such wretched deeds was wholly unbecoming of any aristocrat. The academy's dignity was in question, so it was no wonder the student council was eager to find the culprit. Naturally, as the student council president, Patrick must've been more zealous about this than anyone (even if he was trying to appear calm).

"Well? Does any of what I've just explained sound familiar to you?" he asked in an unusually icy tone of voice.

To make matters worse, Patrick was surrounded on either side by the vice president and secretary of the student council, with the treasurer and advisor not far behind as they all glared at Mary.

Indeed, the student council members present here were all romanceable characters from the game. Each came from a prestigious noble family, boasted excellent academic records, and had incredible good looks, all of which culminated in great levels of popularity at the academy. To be the object of their undivided attention would normally be any girl's dream come true, if not for the sheer coldness presently visible in their eyes.

Incidentally, in the game, Alicia stood by Patrick's side during this event, tearfully recounting what she'd been through while the members of the council surrounded her protectively.

However, the real Alicia...

"What are you talking about?! Lady Mary would never bully me! Student council members or no, I won't allow you to besmirch her good name like this!" she exclaimed as she stood by Mary's side, defending her more fervently than anyone.

"Looks like reinforcements have arrived...from the least likely place of all," Mary murmured.

"Usually, *I'd* be the one coming to your defense, my lady, but I couldn't find the right moment to cut in. But now, I feel like *Alicia's* the one in need of comfort here..."

Mary quietly conversed with Adi in an entirely composed manner. Perhaps she was able to do so because of Alicia's intensity, or maybe because she'd already remembered this event, or in fact because she had no recollection of committing any of her apparent misdeeds.

According to Patrick, Alicia had started being bullied right around when Mary took time off school, as though the timing of it had been calculated in advance. Therefore, the one they pointed their fingers at was none other than Mary Albert.

"You're resentful because the president broke off his engagement with you.

That's your motive, isn't it?" the vice president asked frankly.

Upon hearing this, Alicia's breath caught in her throat as though stricken by guilt, but Adi patted her back and reassured her by saying, "It's okay. It wasn't your fault."

"Oh, I suppose that *did* happen," Mary responded.

"And let's not fool ourselves—you almost *never* act like a proper young lady," said the treasurer. Though he was typically a mild-mannered young man, right now even he sported a severe expression.

"My, how rude," replied Mary quietly, purposefully expressing her discontent at his words. Though in reality, she could think of plenty of instances where that had been the case.

"The bullying started right when you took time off school," the treasurer continued. "It's easy to guess that while you were resting at home, you got that servant of yours to do your dirty work." As he said this, he steered his gaze towards Adi.

"*Me*?!" Adi exclaimed in surprise, pointing a finger at himself.

What is he talking about? thought Mary, but she cast a glance at Adi just in case. "Surprise" didn't even begin to cover it, as Adi's flabbergasted expression made him look like a fool. But given his feelings on the matter, that inane look on his face was forgivable.

"During mila—Lady Mary's absence, I was in attendance at the school, yes," he began. "But I always made my way straight back to Albert Manor as soon as classes were over. I didn't even have the time to do any kind of bullying."

"According to my sources, that's not true. Apparently, you stopped by someplace else first."

"Um, well..."

Despite having possessed no prior idea what misdeeds they were talking about, Adi was being treated like the bully's accomplice. Perhaps feeling the pressure, his expression grew uneasy as he reluctantly answered their questions. He must've been uncomfortable to be interrogated by the

prestigious members of the student council, for his words were slurred.

“Some students think you only pretended to go home, then made your way back to school and got up to all kinds of trouble.”

“What?! Why would I ever do such a thing?!”

“If that’s not what you were doing, then tell us the truth! Where did you go after school?!”

At the treasurer’s probing question, Adi cast Mary an awkward glance. “I... I went to town to buy croquettes at Lady Mary’s request.”

“They’re very nutritious.” Mary’s words alone rang throughout the total silence that ensued.

“So *that’s* why you were so quick to leave after classes?!”

“Er, yes.”

“Surely you don’t expect any of us to actually believe that!” the vice president asserted irritably.

Troubled, Adi turned his gaze to Mary. *“What now?”* his eyes seemed to ask, and in response, Mary simply shrugged. Whether they wanted to believe it or not, that was the truth.

Every day after classes, Adi would go to town to buy croquettes and then go back to Albert Manor. Naturally, this had been at Mary’s behest. Though Adi had doubts about consuming oily food when struck down with an illness, he’d complied with her wishes.

But to the nobles of the council, such a thing was impossible to believe. One of them even asked, “Croquette? What’s that?” while tilting his head in confusion. The aristocratic diet was in a completely different league, so it wasn’t that surprising some of them didn’t even recognize a staple commoner food like croquettes. (That a lady of House Albert would enjoy them was another problem entirely, but now was not the time to address it. Plus, changing one’s preferred food didn’t just happen at the drop of a hat.)

Adi opened his mouth, probably about to further assert the matter of his own innocence, but...

“Enough of this farce! How about you own up to the truth?”

Hearing the vice president’s outrage, Adi decided to keep his mouth shut.

From the start, they’d had no intention of believing in Mary’s innocence. If anything, their gazes hardened even further as they seemed convinced that Adi’s explanation was nothing short of an outright lie.

If things had gone as in the game, the student council should’ve had definitive proof that all the misdeeds were Mary’s doing. The in-game Mary spouted all kinds of excuses in a pathetic display of willful stubbornness. No matter what the real Mary would say now, it’d all be taken as a mere excuse too.

How bothersome... she thought with a deep sigh. To think that they’d ambush her like this on her first day back in school. They had never been particularly friendly to her, but this was close to the bottom of the barrel.

Mistaking Mary’s sigh for a sign of her having given up, the vice president was one of the first to break into a triumphant smile.

Now *that* truly *was* the bottom of the barrel.

“I see you’re finally admitting your guilt. As for your punishment, we will be the ones to—”

“Now, let me get this straight...” Mary interrupted.

“...?”

Everyone turned to her. She glanced down for a moment as though out of exhaustion and let out another deep sigh. Then, when she glanced back up...she was smiling.

Her smile was enough to give anyone horrified goosebumps, and yet it was nonetheless beautiful. All the student council members’ eyes widened, as did Alicia’s. Meanwhile, Adi, who knew what that smile entailed, quietly whispered, “Here we go...”

At the same time, Patrick turned his face away as his shoulders trembled.

“What you’re all saying, gentlemen, is that I started bullying Alicia as revenge for her stealing Patrick from me. Am I correct?”

“Well, y-yes...”

“And that I, Mary Albert, was so offended by some country girl stealing my man that I tossed aside my studies in favor of carrying out some petty harassment.”

In response to her icy voice, the student council members looked around with wide eyes, as though to ask each other what on earth was happening.

The sight of Mary was chill inducing, and certainly a far cry from the girl they all thought they knew. They regarded her as the eccentric noble lady who never scolded her servant for his flippant remarks and instead retorted with flippant remarks of her own, ignored all the gossip that spread behind her back, and to top it all off, commuted to school by bike. Else, they saw her as a mere imitation of a noble lady, who’d only feign sociability at parties and formal events.

But none of them had ever seen the young Lady Albert act in such a cold and blunt manner.

“How dreadful! So this is how you all see me.”

“L-Lady Mary...?”

“Sullying her uniform, damaging her desk... Do you really think that I’d target someone in such trivial ways?”

“Huh?”

“But since you won’t believe me now no matter what I say, how about I give you all a taste of what it’s like to be bullied by *me*?”

Mary smiled happily and clapped her hands as though she’d just had a wonderful idea, but there was no joy in her eyes. (Adi calmly glanced at her as though this was all par for the course while soothing Alicia, who looked anxious at Mary’s sudden transformation. Patrick, whose face was still averted, could hardly hold back his laughter and had to press his hand to his mouth to keep composed.)

“You’ll see *exactly* what happens when you steal from the daughter of House Albert. I encourage you all to experience it! Perhaps *then* you’ll finally understand.”

Mary's sly smile seemed to say, *"I could bring you all to heel in a snap!"* Her elegant laugh was wicked through and through as the air around them grew colder still.

Of course, Mary had no intention of alleviating the atmosphere. Seemingly feeling overpowered, the first-year secretary's breath caught in his throat, but Mary didn't even grace him with a glance. She leveled the boys before her with a fixed stare as her frosty speech continued.

There was no true enmity in her eyes, but nor was there any particular friendliness for her fellow students. She was simply indifferent to them, as though she were taking out the trash that she'd never miss anyway. In fact, that was exactly how she saw them, regardless of their rank in Karelia Academy.

"Well? Which one of you would like to go first? Or if you'd prefer, I can take you all on at once! I've no doubt you'll offer me better entertainment than some country girl."



With the corners of her mouth raised, Mary exchanged a glance with Adi, who

was standing by her side. Adi nodded to signal he understood as the members of the student council, who had seemed so stern up until now, all twitched in surprise. Their expressions were a mix of panic and confusion, and their zeal from before was nowhere to be seen. They all looked so pale it was almost pitiful.

That was to be expected, as understanding of just who their opponent was had finally dawned on them.

Even if they'd acted out of a sense of duty as the virtuous student council, they now realized exactly whose daughter they'd just tried to denounce. Moreover, even if there had been any truth to their claims, good and evil could be reversed in but an instant and lead to their own destruction.

Indeed, they had understood at last.

Concurrently, Patrick, who'd been aware of all of this from the start, seemed close to reaching the limit of his self-restraint, as his shoulders trembled for an entirely different reason than the rest of them. Alicia, too, finally understood for herself what was happening and glared at him with her cheeks puffed out, which completely ruined her cute face.

In an attempt to set things right, the student council's advisor, who typically let the students lead, spoke up. "Still, you often behave in an unladylike manner. As a teacher, I can't go on ignoring it."

"What a cruel thing to say! I may be eccentric, but it was never my intention to cause trouble for others. I don't believe I've ever offended any of my teachers."

"But your demeanor could put Karelia Academy's reputation in peril. You are one of our students, and a daughter of House Albert, at that. I—and indeed all of us—believe that you ought to carry yourself with proper dignity."

He was implying they'd suspected her of the misdeeds because they disapproved of her usual conduct. Mary smirked at his words. *How amusing.*

"So even the teachers think I'm unladylike. Many people believe I don't seem like a daughter of House Albert at all. I see you share their opinion."

"That's right. Your behavior is—"

“So what you’re saying is that my father got some other woman pregnant, is that right? Or perhaps you mean to imply that my mother spread her legs for another man?”

“Wha—?! I never—!”

“It’s also possible my parents unwittingly raised some complete strangers’ daughter. We’d better change our family crest to a cuckoo, don’t you think?” As she spoke, Mary was smiling broadly as though she were enjoying herself.

Nervous chatter buzzed around them in an instant. Mary knew it was because among the bystanders were a number of people who had themselves spread rumors about how she wasn’t the true daughter of House Albert.

Nobody had actually intended to accuse her parents of infidelity. The two were on excellent terms with each other, and everyone had seen the way they exchanged affectionate smiles with each other. Theirs was the very ideal of a happy marriage that many young maidens yearned for. Words of accusation against their faithfulness would never dare to cross anyone’s lips.

It was also a well-known fact that the Albert couple adored their children from the bottom of their hearts—yes, even their odd duck, Mary.

And now, everyone had finally realized that by questioning Mary in this manner, they were ultimately denouncing the duke and duchess of House Albert.

“I...” the vice president mumbled weakly.

The vice president of the student council had always done his utmost to support the president from the sidelines, and himself was greatly idolized by the rest of the student body. He was a kind and mild-mannered young man, but he was unable to overlook the mistreatment of those dear to him. Yet right now, his pathetic voice resembled neither his gentle nor his rougher side.

His fans might come after me, thought Mary reflexively.

She sighed, listening to the boys in front of her caught up in their misunderstanding, and the gasps from the crowd of onlookers around them.

Just like that, Mary went from the target of their malicious gossip to the

source of their worst fears. Had someone asked her which she preferred, she'd say both felt equally off-putting to her. The students were so pale from fright that she'd almost say she liked their vicious looks from before better. Every one of her actions terrified them to the point that some of them even jerked in surprise at the mere sound of her sigh. It was a given, considering they were on the verge of making enemies with House Albert itself.

Mary had only thrown down the gauntlet because *they* had tried crossing swords with her first, but now that the roles were reversed, it almost seemed as though *she* were the perpetrator!

This was why she'd lived a quiet life up until now.

She was aware that people had been talking about her behind her back and making fun of her for being unladylike, and though there might have been a grain of truth to their words...

I, Mary Albert, have let matters slide up until now because I knew things would turn out exactly like this otherwise! The more she thought about it, and the greater everyone's terror grew, the more irritation bubbled in her despite her best attempts to reel it in.

Fine, so maybe she was a little unusual and didn't always act like the typical noble lady. But unlike the other students, she'd never flaunted her power, nor did she ever cause trouble for the academy. Some people purposely bumped into her shoulder, or passed her by without a word of greeting, yet she didn't get hung up on their actions. Equally, she'd never tried to get someone sacked over a trivial matter.

Mary's self-indulgence only stretched as far as adding new dishes to the school cafeteria. Even that had been a part of her father's business expansion and had been approved by Karelia Academy's principal and the cafeteria's manager.

As a result, the school menu had been vastly enriched, although it had taken great pains to convince the administration to agree to include foreign foods. At the time, yes, Mary *had* tried to jump at the opportunity to add croquettes to the selection, but...surely that was less objectionable than the students who brought along personal chefs to prepare them unauthorized private meals in

the school's kitchens.

Even when it came to cycling to school, Mary always ensured to drive safely and mind all the traffic rules so that she wouldn't get in anyone's way.

She didn't do anything particularly praiseworthy, but nor did she do anything that deserved reproach. Such was her self-assessment. Mary hadn't done anything to warrant this attack, nor did she have any recollection of ever acting out in anger against someone. Their claims were nothing but false charges.

I'm so annoyed... Maybe it's about time I really crush them all!

If they wanted to see a villainess so badly, she'd give them a show. She'd use her father's influence, tyrannize and bully them, then wrap it up by kicking them down once and for all. It'd give them even more reason to denounce her like this, but being accused of things she'd never done was an insult to her pride as a member of House Albert.

That was why ire kept simmering within her.

The council members' families may have been of good repute, but they were nowhere near the level of House Albert or House Dyce. So now that they'd insulted her like this, she was within her rights to destroy them.

If she actually went ahead with it, the consequences would be dire. They'd be expelled from their houses—or in other words, disowned. To protect their family, many parents would cast their children out for slighting House Albert. Heartless though it seemed, as part of the nobility, there were times when they had to set their emotions aside. Conversely, she knew her destruction would only go as far as their sons for this reason.

Though, if there were any parents ready to shoulder the blame of their sons' actions, then Mary would crush them all too. She wouldn't go as far to say that the sins of the son were the sins of the parent, but she'd respect their will to take the fall together. In fact, she'd even make arrangements to ensure the servants working for those families had somewhere to go afterwards. She could make use of the preparations she'd already undertaken for when House Albert would fall.

"My, that was easier than expected!" Mary said with a smirk.

Of course, they all trembled at this and waited silently for her next words as though in prayer. But Mary was in no mood to accommodate them, nor was she about to withdraw her threats. Rather, she simply breathed in as if to say she was done with this charade and then gave them an elegant nod.

“I believe this marks the end of our conversation. Excuse me, gentlemen.”

“W-Wait... We’re...”

“Oh? Have you got something else to say to me?” Mary, who was about to walk away, paused.

All of them seemed to have lost their strength, and their usual charisma was nowhere in sight. Their voices were shaky, and when Mary stopped to glance at them, they fell into silence once more.

She didn’t feel like showing mercy or throwing them a bone, and she let out an exhausted sigh. “You’ve already entertained me plenty. I myself am quite happy to leave things here. What else could you possibly have to say to me?”

She’d only just recovered from her illness, yet they were claiming she’d been secretly bullying someone. They’d tried to make Adi, who went to town after school every day to buy her snacks, into the perpetrator. Their reasoning was so shallow that Mary had to laugh. Not to mention, her supposed target was Alicia, who’d made Adi take home flowers and tea for Mary every single day as get-well-soon gifts.

How ridiculous! They couldn’t be more off the mark if they tried.

It was a complete and utter disgrace. There was no other word for it.

Following her disinterested proclamation, Mary once again bowed her head and bid them farewell.

Don’t try and stop me a second time, her words implied. Seeing nothing left to cling to, the members of the student council only looked paler by the second. To them, this was like a death sentence. Or if nothing else, it certainly foretold an end to their careers as student council officials.

To top it all off, the words “false charges” were surely starting to float in their minds as they looked on at Mary’s imposing display. No, by now they were

surely convinced of their own guilt. That was why none of them could say a word.

The same was true for the onlookers, who were just as frightened, some among them looking the other way as though to feign ignorance.

Silence and an arctic level of coldness enveloped them all.

Mary laughed scornfully to say she had no further intention of remaining in this oppressive atmosphere, and just as she readied herself to leave...

Clap!

“That’s Lady Albert for you! Bravo!” Adi called out cheerfully, clapping his hands as Mary stopped dead in her tracks.

...

The cold air shifted dramatically into something rather indescribable.

“Adi, I set up such a nice, icy atmosphere that none of them could respond against, and you just totally ruined it. Whyever would you do that?”

“You’ve only just recovered, Your Ladyship. I couldn’t let the air remain too cool, or you’d wind up with another cold!”

“Indeed... It was chilling to the marrow.”

“Why don’t we go to the cafeteria and get something hot for you to drink? The old cashier lady has been worrying about you. ‘Is that lady doing all right? You know, the rice bowl enthusiast?’ she’d ask me. We should go see her.”

“No, rewind for a moment. *What* did you just call me?!”

And thus the icy atmosphere had been entirely thrown out the window.

Awed by Mary’s sudden transformation back into her usual, eccentric self, everyone else could do nothing but stand there and watch as she and Adi continued to banter.

Following the total atmospheric shift, Patrick couldn't hold back any longer and burst into laughter. Everyone knew him to be a composed young man who kept a stiff upper lip at all times, and whose combined beauty and coolness almost made him seem like a marble statue. Seeing him, of all people, chortling away like a carefree teenager shocked the onlookers even further.

"I really can't believe you sometimes, Mary."

"Enjoying yourself, are you?" she asked him. "Dragging a convalescing girl into a travesty like that! Where are your manners?"

"Exactly!" Alicia joined in. "Lord Patrick, that was so mean of you! How could you do that to Lady Mary?!"

"I appreciate the support, Alicia, but you look ever more the peasant with that pout on your face."

"But Lady Mary!" Alicia protested. "You've only just recovered from your brain overheating, and here you are, getting attacked like this on your first day back in school!"

"Adi!" Mary turned to him. "Was the mansion not enough? You had to go spinning that bizarre tale around the school too?! *You're* the one who should be judged here! You!"

"Come now, my lady! To the cafeteria! Else we'll be late for homeroom!"

"You can't be serious!"

Adi tried to make his escape by speed walking away, while Mary gave chase after him, complaining all the while. But once she caught up, she only said, "I can't have a moment of peace because of you," while glaring at him. The thought of punishing him hadn't even crossed her mind, a stark contrast to the villainous Mary she'd seemed like minutes ago.

It was as if a switch had been flipped, and while everyone looked on flabbergasted, Patrick chuckled once more in amusement and called out to her, "Sorry, Mary! I wanted everyone to see for themselves."

"See for themselves, you say? There's only so much a farce like that could achieve."

“Come on, don’t say that. So many people misunderstand you, and some even claim I broke off the engagement with you out of spite. That’s why I had to make them understand.”

Casting a sidelong glance at the still-frozen student council members, Patrick approached Mary. He stopped right in front of her, then reached out his hand to gently stroke her silver hair.

He’s got lovely hands, Mary thought. They were slender and elegant, and though certainly masculine, they were also beautiful. She could no longer recall the number of times he’d held out those hands to her and she had placed her own in them. Yet as they brushed against her hair, her pulse—as always—remained unchanged. The gesture didn’t make her heart flutter, and so she didn’t enjoy the sensation. (Honestly, her first thought was that he might ruin her hairstyle, but...those ironclad drills wouldn’t budge an inch anyway, so she quickly cast that concern aside.)

Alas, as Mary turned her gaze on him and looked into his dark, gentle eyes, Patrick tenderly made his next proclamation. “If I hadn’t met Alicia, you would’ve been the perfect bride for me.”

“My, how you flatter me! Thank you. I’m glad you realize what a great catch you’ve let slip away.” She grinned at his unexpected compliment.

Naturally, everyone around them was rendered speechless. However, Adi and Alicia, who knew that this was Mary and Patrick’s way of showing each other their mutual respect, simply exchanged a look and smiled wryly.

Afterwards, Mary was ready to truly leave at last. “I’ll see you all at lunch,” she said as her departing remark, which in her terms was a demand for an apology. “*If you apologize during lunch, I’ll let all of this slide,”* was the implication.

Adi and Alicia exchanged another glance at this inexplicable twist of generosity and shrugged their shoulders. Patrick simply nodded with a sardonic smile.

***

It was lunchtime. Mary and Adi were sitting together at the table. For some

reason, Alicia had recently decided to join them for lunch in the cafeteria like it was a matter of course, so she was there too. (For Mary, who was aiming to achieve her own ruin, having lunch together with Alicia as though they were the best of friends was nigh insufferable for her pride.)

“What are you doing with that bread? You’re dropping pieces of it all over the place. Are you trying to summon the pigeons from the courtyard? Have some class!”

As always, Mary was busy barraging Alicia. The girl hurriedly looked down at her plate and uttered, “I’ll be more careful!” as her cheeks reddened. She meticulously tore up her bread, mindful not to let even a single piece fall. Her movements were clumsy, but there was a hint of elegance in there somewhere.

Meanwhile, the actual noble lady by her side was having a rice bowl.

“I’d say tearing up bread is no easy task.” Adi, who was sitting opposite Mary, cut into the steak on his plate with practiced ease and took a bite.

His choice of food was, per usual, needlessly extravagant. Any other mistress would’ve scolded her servant for indulging himself like this, but Mary just said, “I don’t know how you can eat something heavy like that so early in the day. Your stomach must be made of steel.” She disapproved for an altogether different reason.

“Remember, table manners are most important of all.” Mary’s lecture continued. “If, say, you make a misstep during a dance and tread upon your partner’s foot by accident, as long as you blush a little and blame your nerves, he’ll let it slide. But it’s a completely different story when it comes to mealtime. Judgment begins the moment you sit down at the table.”

“Oh no, that’s terrifying...” said Alicia. “I’ve got to try harder!”

“Don’t worry; no one is judging you at present. I’m just warning you: There’s nothing more unsightly than someone who’s overly mindful of their table manners. As a lady, you must take your meals with a practiced grace and elegance. There’s no room for error.”

“Ngh... That’s more like a pipe dream for me...”

“Obviously! It’s not something a country girl like you could learn at a

moment's notice. For *me*, however, tearing up any kind of bread is child's play," Mary said with a boastful smile.

"Remarkable indeed," Adi offered with a nod. "I try to smile through it, but my shaky fingers give me away. So if I'm ever served bread that's difficult to tear, I secretly swap mine for milady's after she's done tearing hers."

"I knew it! I noticed a long time ago that sometimes my bread seems to magically restore itself whole again."

"As I said, I've been very sneaky about it."

In response to Adi's confident assertion, Mary murmured, "And here I thought self-regenerating bread was real..."

At that moment, someone called her name. She looked over and saw Patrick accompanied by the rest of the student council.

Typically, their sheer presence inspired a chorus of shrill voices, but after what had happened that morning, they were surrounded by silence as the other students merely hurled sidelong glimpses at them. Even those eating on the terrace stole glances their way, and those who'd been eating one floor up shamelessly descended to observe the exchange.

Lunchtime was a bad call, Mary mentally lamented the audacity of the onlookers, but as she'd been the one to decide the time, she kept that thought to herself. "Greetings, everyone," she said politely with a nod of her head.

Adi quickly got to his feet and offered the student council a deep bow. Mary was sure that, in his mind, what had happened this morning was already a done deal. Meanwhile, the moment she spotted Patrick, Alicia puffed out her cheeks and started to vigorously tear up her bread, apparently still very much irate. Mary smiled to herself at their contrasting reactions (though in fact, they had behaved exactly as she'd expected, which amused her further), and decided to throw the nervous student council a lifeline.

"I apologize for this morning. I'm still convalescing, so I've been a little on edge."

"N-Not at all. We fell for false information and publicly humiliated you. We're the ones who should be sorry."

It seemed the council members had finally ascertained that their reasons for blaming Mary had no authenticity. She was curious about the identity of the true culprit but decided it'd be best not to mention it now, as doing so would be akin to offering the onlookers a dessert. Rather, she'd discuss it with Patrick once the current matter had been settled, and send Adi out to investigate.

Besides, she was almost certain the bullying had something to do with all the female students who were madly in love with Patrick. Up until recently, Mary had been the one hogging his attention, and now that the role went to Alicia, there was no doubt she'd be the target of their jealousy.

That was exactly why this spectacle had to end quickly, so Mary turned her attention to the student council, who were still bowing their heads to her.

"I misunderstood you all as well, and let my temper get the best of me," she said gently. "We've both recognized our faults, so let's forgive and forget, shall we?"

"You're too kind, Lady Mary... It's shameful how immature we all were."

"Ah, but it's because of our immaturity that we all go to school. However..." Mary's voice suddenly lowered. Her brows drooped into an anxious expression as she worriedly cast her gaze to the side, and everyone leaned closer in anticipation.

"It's just so scary..." Her quiet whisper was ephemeral. The frailty she displayed in that moment would have been enough to stir up any man's desire to protect her, and even women would be moved to support her as a pillar of strength. (Adi, having guessed the game she was playing, joined the act by pulling her rice bowl over towards himself.) "To think that the culprit who did all these terrible things to Alicia is still at large... It frightens me."

"Please rest assured! We've already identified the culprit, and they're under our surveillance. We won't let them trouble you or Alicia again."

"Oh, how reassuring!" Mary responded. "You're all so reliable. I hope you continue to keep our academy safe for all students."

"Y-Yes, of course!"

Now that Mary had implied she had no intention of going through on her

threats, the council straightened their backs with visible relief. With one last deep nod, they all left the cafeteria. As they walked away, the members were already back to their usual selves, and dreamy sighs resounded throughout the place.

Patrick seemed reassured to see that Alicia (whose cheeks were now puffed out by mouthfuls of bread) was at least in a slightly better mood, and he chuckled when he saw her sulkily stuff more bread into her mouth. “See you later,” he said as he, too, turned away to depart.

With that, noise and chatter swiftly returned to the cafeteria, and Mary herself breathed a sigh of relief. What a first day back in school she’d had! Not to mention, the other students were peeking at her the same as always, which was discomforting.

“Quite a rough day,” Adi commented sympathetically, perhaps sensing her exhaustion.

In response, Mary smirked. “Oh, all that slander and insolence is nothing compared to a certain someone I know.”

“Oh! Rice bowl lady!” the lunch lady called out cheerfully when she spotted Mary. “I heard your brain overheated?”

Mary put on an elegant smile, but under the table, she stamped on Adi’s foot over and over again.

Chapter 5

“Adi, there’s something I’d like to ask you. Do you mind?”

Adi tilted his head at Mary’s uncharacteristically mild-mannered question.

They sat in the courtyard of Albert Manor. It was just after dinner, and they’d been chatting and enjoying their post-meal tea while gazing out at the beautifully darkening scenery, when suddenly Mary had turned to him with that inquiry.

She seemed apprehensive, like whatever question she was about to ask was unutterable yet she’d readied herself to do it anyway.

“What’s the matter?” Adi prompted.

“Listen... On the off chance that I— And I mean on the very, very slim possibility...”

“What is it?”

“We’re just talking probabilities here. So in the one-in-a-million chance that... Um...”

“*What* are you talking about, my lady?” asked Adi anxiously.

Mary sighed. “Remember, I’m just saying *if*,” she insisted again. “But...what if that girl Alicia is actually fond of me?”

Adi’s eyes widened at her quiet words. “So you’re finally facing the truth, Your Ladyship.”

“No, I wouldn’t go that far. I’d say I’m only glancing at it sideways, so please make sure your response is generously sugarcoated.”

Adi couldn’t bear to ignore Mary’s unusually frail disposition, and he let out a sigh. As her servant, he was obliged to respond to her. “Very well,” he began while she awaited his words with a serious frown.

“At first glance, it may seem like she holds some affection for you, but it’s most probable that she just happens to spend time with you on occasion

because you're the mutual acquaintance of both myself and Lord Patrick," he proclaimed, and his words were so exceedingly sugarcoated that they were actually difficult to swallow.

"Y-Yes, that sounds about right," Mary agreed. "And just for my reference, tell me your answer without the sugarcoating too."

"You're obviously her best friend."

"Ugh..."

Whereas his previous response had been all sugar, this one shook her so strongly in its frankness that Mary placed a hand over her chest. While she took a great deal of damage from his words, Adi reached over for a cookie and tossed it into his mouth with a palpable sense of accomplishment.

"You're her very best and most treasured friend," he added as a final coup de grâce. (He wasn't saying any of it out of spite—to him, it was simply evident that the two girls were close friends...even though Mary's tenacious tirades hadn't ceased a tad.)

Though she hadn't fully recovered from Adi's cruel honesty, Mary was still eager to argue her case. "But," she said, raising her head, "it's *her* fault for being a weirdo... That's right, I'm not to blame here! I'm doing my utmost to be a villainess, so I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Haven't done anything wrong, but you're still acting the villainess? That's quite the rabbit hole..."

"Well, I try to hurt her feelings on a daily basis to no avail! *She's* the one getting it all wrong." Mary puffed out her chest after declaring her far-fetched theory.

"Indeed," Adi replied tonelessly, refilling their emptied teacups.

Mary truly had been doing her best to hurt Alicia every day, and though her methods weren't as underhanded as those of the in-game Mary, she certainly had an edge over her counterpart when it came to verbal abuse. Her in-game version simply appeared in between the story beats to spit out lines like, "Ugh, what a peasant!" and, "Ew, she's clearly a pauper!"

After all, *Heart High* was an otome game at the end of the day, so naturally more screen time was given to the sweet proclamations of the romanceable boys than the verbal abuse of the villainess. Not to mention, certain restrictions had to be imposed on the dialogue as the game was aimed at players of all ages.

In contrast, the real Mary had not only spat out the same lines as her in-game self, but because she spent even more time with Alicia, she'd said even crueler things to the girl. Any normal person would've felt wounded by her words, or started to despise Mary and kept their distance from her, but...

"The other day, she sprinted right at me the moment she saw me, so I told her, 'Could you refrain from rushing at me like some untrained cur? Even our family's guard dog knows better than that!' And what do you think she said in return?"

As the memories came back to her, Mary began to emanate a mixture of frustration and despair. Adi responded with a silent frown.

Normally, the kind of things Mary said to Alicia would've probably started a fight. Adi was certain that if anyone other than the members of House Albert had said such things to him, he would've been infuriated. He couldn't imagine what it was that Alicia could've said in response to have left Mary looking this weakened, so he waited with bated breath for the continuation.

Seeing his pressing gaze, Mary sighed and turned her face the other way. She looked off into the far distance with the deep sorrow of an aged, weathered soul.

"Get this, Adi... She said, 'Wow! Lady Mary, you have a doggy at home?!'"

"Surely not...!"

"'Wow,' she says?! *I'm* the one in awe here!"

Mary slammed her fist against the table in resentment. Adi was lost for words and could do nothing but look at her sympathetically. He'd always thought Mary's villainous efforts flew over Alicia's head, but for it to go *that* far... At this point, he actually pitied his mistress. Tragically, he was also very impressed with Alicia's mental fortitude.

But he feared that if he said as much, Mary would reach her damage cap. “You can still turn things around,” he said to cheer her up. *It’s definitely too late now*, he thought simultaneously.

“Y-You’re right... I can’t give up yet. Yes, I’ve got this! I’ll hurt Alicia’s feelings at least once, or I’m not Mary Albert!”

“That’s right, Your Ladyship! I’m sure you’ll find a way!”

“Yes, I will! And if I don’t, then it’ll have to come to blows!”

“That’s excessive, milady!”

“I’ll stab her with my drills!” cried Mary in defiance, freshly energized to go down the completely wrong path, while Adi tried to allay her in a panic.

Eventually, he somehow managed to pacify her. “You’re right, I shouldn’t use my drills like that... And anyway, they’re *not* drills!” she insisted, having calmed down enough so that both she and Adi could turn back in good order.

Mary overtly cleared her throat to imply she still had more to say. Her cheeks were a little flushed, perhaps from embarrassment at having referred to her own hair as drills, but of course, Adi refrained from commenting on it as he awaited her next words.

“Listen, tomorrow that girl is going on a date out to town with Patrick.”

“Oh? You’re certainly well-informed, my lady.”

“I pieced it together from the game’s plot and confirmed that tomorrow’s the day. Alicia told me about it herself as well.”

“I take it she invited you along as usual.”

“Save it, would you?” Mary asked as she looked the other way.

Adi glanced at her worriedly. “Pardon me. I’d like to hear the rest of what you have to say, if you please,” he said in the respectful tone of a servant. He was certain Alicia had asked Mary to come along. Knowing his mistress, she’d rejected the invitation none too kindly, but given her presently melancholic gaze, it had obviously been an honorable death.

“So, do you plan to ruin their date?”

“Of course! So get ready, because we’re leaving at eight tomorrow!” Mary ordered.

“Understood,” Adi said at first, but then followed it up with, “Hold on, eight in the morning?!” He tilted his head, wondering why they had to depart so early.

Heart High contained so-called “date events” that came up many times throughout the game. Overall, the content was by the book for the otome genre—the protagonist went out to town with their chosen love interest, chatting to them while walking or shopping around, after which the event would come to an end. It was a simple gameplay mode that reused the characters’ usual sprites and game backgrounds.

Sometimes the heroine invited one of the romanceable cast herself, and other times, they invited her, as the occurrence of the events was randomized. These types of dates were also useful for checking and further raising a character’s affection levels, making them necessary to successfully complete the game. Tragedies could play out as well, for at times, an unexpected character that the player had no interest in could ask the heroine out on a date too, so they’d have to reject the would-be suitor and lose all their affection points in one shot.

Though short and simple, these events occurred frequently, and players had to skillfully navigate them in order to beat the game. This upcoming date event would be the very last one—timing-wise, everything added up to suggest as much.

Mary had thought things would follow the same course as they had been up until now, but once she realized this was the last date, she knew she’d have to trample on it.

“I see, so you intend to get in their way.”

“Yes,” Mary confirmed. “I let them do as they pleased up until now, but since this is the final date event, I absolutely *have* to interrupt them.”

“Very well... But why must we depart so early?” Adi asked. “Their date starts at noon, no?”

Mary turned to regard the scenery ahead of them with a serious look on her

face.

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It was a little past eight thirty in the morning. The town's streets were lined with tailors and general goods stores, making this the perfect date spot. Most shops had only just opened for the day, and the streets were fairly empty, as the real bustle would begin around the afternoon.

In this tranquil place, Mary postured as though she were a queen reigning over her subjects, while Adi obtusely let out a long yawn. They made for quite the mismatched pair.

"Their date does indeed begin at noon," Mary said as she looked around, recalling the many times she'd seen backgrounds from the game that resembled this place. "But there's something we must do first."

"Huh... And what is thaaat?" asked Adi with a yawn. "Milady, can I take a nap in the café?"

"Since we're here, I was thinking we could buy a gift for my father. Perhaps a pen for him to sign a certain someone's pink slip with?"

"All right, Your Ladyship! What's this thing we must do today?! I'm raring to go! No more yawning or dawdling!"

"Indeed." Mary sighed at Adi's typical attitude switch, then checked her surroundings.

The florists and cafés were already open and prepared for customers, but a few shops still hadn't finished their morning preparations, and some even had "Closed" signs still hanging from the doors. Espying the latter, Mary nodded her head with determination.

"Get ready, Adi! We're going shopping!"

At her declaration, Adi (perhaps still feeling the aftertaste of her previous threat) responded brightly with, "Yes, milady!" before giving her a quizzical look.

The date events involved the heroine and her love interest going to town and having a few conversations. However uncomplicated that concept may seem,

on occasion the target character would ask a question which, when answered correctly (they were multiple-choice), could raise their affection level. Yet generally, nothing noteworthy occurred, and the events had no influence on the game's story at-large.

The sole exception to that rule was the last date event. This was the only event which incorporated the player's circumstances and a certain mechanic needed for learning the game's ending.

And because it was such an important event, Mary Albert *had* to get in the way.

The Judgment event that had wounded her pride the other day was the beginning of her descent into ruin, but one instance of denunciation wasn't enough for her to learn her lesson. She'd barge right into the middle of the heroine's intimate date with her love interest, and...

"She'd make all sorts of snide comments, and try to seduce Alicia's date right in front of her eyes."

"Right, that must've been because the in-game you had to endure such a nasty breakup."

"Hmm, I wonder," Mary answered noncommittally with a giggle.

"Huh?" Adi cast her a suspicious glance.

But Mary refused to elaborate and changed the topic with a forceful, "Anyway!"

The middle of town seemed a strange location to continue this conversation, so instead, Mary grasped Adi by the arm and pulled him along. "Let's see, what shall we buy first?" she asked as she surveyed the shops around them. Clothes, footwear, food... Mary looked around every which way, while Adi grew increasingly confused and finally called out to her.

"My lady, why are you shopping?"

"Well, that's what we came here for."

"No, I mean why are *you* doing it personally?"

His bemusement wasn't surprising—after all, Mary was the daughter of

House Albert, the wealthiest aristocratic family of the entire nation. Money was no object when it came to getting what she wanted, and there was no reason for her to trouble herself with going shopping personally. Typically, servants like Adi would've taken care of such things for her.

Shopping trips were for the commoners. Nobility made others shop *for* them. When it came to clothes or shoes, they didn't have to bother searching for things that'd suit them, as they could have items custom designed instead.

Adi tilted his head, unable to understand why Mary would head to town for the purpose of shopping. Though, this was the eccentric Lady Mary, after all. It wouldn't be the first time that she'd stopped by the town to buy some snacks while on the way elsewhere.

"Is there something you're after, milady? I'd be happy to get it for you."

"No, I don't want anything. But I'm still going to shop."

"Huh?" Adi frowned at her; his head remained tilted.

"Let me explain!" Mary said, puffing out her chest. "When Mary appears in this scene, Adi is trailing behind her, enveloped by a whole bunch of boxes!" she declared proudly.

Adi stared at Mary open-mouthed for a moment. "I'm going to take a nap in that café. Please wake me up once Alicia arrives." He walked away, exasperated.

"I want a new pen to write father a petition for your dismissal with!" threatened Mary, but needless to say, her words had no effect on him. There was a certain air of grace to that.

To interrupt the date event, the in-game Mary showed up to flaunt her financial power.

She went after the lavish dresses that seemed somewhat out of place for the town, had her servant Adi lug around a mass of boxes for her, and bought out every new production line. Not only did she show off her wealth that way, but when she found Alicia, she snickered and said things like, "So commoners struggle to afford even one piece of clothing, hmm?"

One might've expected Mary to become a little more meek following The Judgment, but she turned up immediately after with that haughty attitude, so naturally the players' loathing of her only heightened as a result.

"So you're planning to give me an armful of boxes to carry, just like in the game."

"Yes. A pile of boxes stretching far above your head will exude a feeling of excess and prestige!"

"I suppose so..."

"But I'll be the one suffering, since I have to carry them!" Adi wanted to say, but instead, he simply sighed and followed Mary into a shop.

In the game's date event, Adi followed Mary with a mass of boxes in arms. Each one was filled with the things she'd bought, and the pile stacked so high that he found it difficult to walk, which portrayed her wastefulness. That said, looking at the event on the whole, though Mary's actions and their end result were important, Adi carrying her things was only depicted briefly as a background detail of a single CG.

Yet the overall portrayal of Mary as an excessively selfish young lady was done very well. While Adi's arms were piled with stacks of boxes, she didn't carry a single thing and didn't even look mildly concerned for her servant. Most importantly, the scene served to emphasize the difference in rank between Mary and the commoner Alicia.

That's why I must go on a shopping spree and end up with a whole bunch of boxes! thought Mary. "At least, that *was* my thought process, but..." she murmured, taking a sip of tea as Adi nodded in understanding.

They were at a café. As the weather was nice, they sat out on the terrace, enjoying a leisurely teatime while savoring the manager's recommendation of the current season's best tea... Wait, no! They were holding a serious strategy meeting. In just under two hours of shopping, they had run into a major problem, one so bad that Mary couldn't even find it in herself to enjoy the tea, instead wrapping her hands around her head.

As for the problem itself...

“I give up! There’s nothing else to buy...”

To her, it was a very grave matter indeed.

Meanwhile, Adi, who ordered refills while listening to Mary’s complaints, was sitting next to her, flanked by three small boxes. Needless to say, the boxes represented the end result of two hours’ worth of shopping. The haul wasn’t exactly worthy of being called their booty because, when stacked together, the boxes could easily be carried in one hand.

As a daughter of House Albert, Mary had been raised in an environment wherein the moment she expressed a desire to have something, a servant was sent out to fetch it for her without delay so that she’d have it in her hands in but a few hours’ time. Her dresses and shoes were made haute couture by her personal designers. She had no desire to own the mundane clothing sold in the town shops.

In other words, from the perspective of a noble lady who’d been surrounded by first-class, custom-made goods all her life, nothing she found for sale in the town had stirred her worldly desires, no matter how many determined rounds she’d made through the shops. She let out a defeated sigh because the fact she’d been born with a silver spoon had also led to the very issue she now faced.

Still... Mary thought as she glanced at the boxes. “We *did* manage to get three things, so...maybe I did a pretty good job.”

“You’re losing your will, my lady. We do have three boxes, but two of them contain items that could’ve easily fit into paper bags, and the third one’s my own purchase,” Adi commented flatly, taking a sip of the freshly refilled tea.

He nodded in satisfaction at the taste, then called over the nearest waiter to make an order for the tea leaves. Of course, he requested for them to be packed into a box. “That makes four,” he told Mary. Unfortunately, the box was tiny, smaller than any of the ones they already had. None were sufficient to flaunt Mary’s wealth.

“Hmm... Is there anything else I could buy?” she mused. “A new pen, I suppose. And plenty of ink, to fully list out a certain someone’s impudent behavior.”

“Th-That won’t do, Your Ladyship! A pen would need an even tinier box, and...”

Mary peered into his face questioningly. “Adi?”

He’d been trying to dodge the topic as always, but his words faded out as he seemed to have realized something. His severe, thoughtful expression was wholly uncharacteristic of him.

“Wait, don’t tell me you’re taking that serious—”

“Boxes, my lady!”

“Huh?”

Mary stared at him blankly after his nonsensical exclamation. She’d been certain that her insolent servant had finally realized how thin of a line he was walking on (though he *had* managed to get by on that thin line for a decade) and that he’d grown concerned over what might happen to him, but it seemed like that wasn’t the case at all.

Mary was a little relieved, and decided she’d ensure Adi had some self-awareness later. “What about the boxes?” she asked as she cast him a look.

“Boxes!” Adi said again, which didn’t make her understand any better. They *had* been talking about boxes, yes, but what was he trying to say? “Please listen, my lady,” he began when he noticed the look she was giving him. In that moment, he very much resembled Mary when she was giving him explanations about *Heart High*, though sadly, no one present was able to point that out to him.

“I think you’re getting too hung up on what’s *inside* of the boxes.”

“Well, the whole point is to flaunt prestige, so it won’t do to buy anything outlandish.”

“That’s exactly why you got stuck! But I was thinking it over, and it hit me—if we don’t know *what* to buy...”

“Yes?” she prompted.

Adi grinned with self-satisfaction. “If we don’t need to buy anything, then we should just buy the boxes!” he declared, puffing out his chest proudly as if to

say, *“How about that?!”*

A few hours later.

In the middle of town, Mary looked very much the part of a wealthy young lady as she impatiently waited for Alicia and Patrick to arrive. Behind her was Adi, with a tall, well-stacked armful of boxes.

Naturally they were drawing quite a lot of attention, and some of the passersby even cast envious glances at the boxes Adi was carrying. It was clear to everyone that Mary had wealth to spend. They saw the daughter of House Albert, buying out everything in sight with her servant in tow to bear the burdens. There was no way commoner girls her age wouldn’t be jealous at the sight of the rich noble lady on a shopping spree.

Admittedly, most of the boxes in Adi’s hands were empty, but it’s not like anyone else had to know that.

“We’re ready, Adi! We look every part the wastefully spending lady and her poor servant!”

“True enough, but while I’m aware it was my idea, I don’t think I’ll be able to forget the icy looks I got from the clerks when I requested to buy just the boxes.”

“It’s all right!” Mary assured him. “No matter what we buy, we’re still customers at the end of the day! And the good thing about boxes is that they’ll never go to waste.”

“I suppose they do have a lot of uses,” he agreed.

“I’ll let you have a couple, so please use them to tidy that Cover-Up Mountain in your room.”

“I’ve already done that! It’s all tidy now!!! And please don’t give my things strange names!” cried Adi. “If anyone finds out, I’ll be in some deep—!”

Mary laughed at him mischievously, and right at that moment, she spotted two familiar figures. Her smile widened. “All right, time to see the fruits of our labor,” she murmured.

Adi glanced at her in perplexity, but then seemed to connect the dots as he

fell back behind her.

In the distance was a happy couple—Alicia and Patrick. The looks on their faces when they spotted Mary were priceless. Alicia brightened, waved her hand, and immediately rushed over. (Of course, Mary had a number of scathing remarks about Alicia's conduct, but as usual, they were entirely ineffective.)

"I see you've been busy shopping, Lady Mary," said Alicia with a sigh as she looked up at the boxes in Adi's hands. The expression on her face went beyond jealousy; she looked completely overwhelmed by the sight.

Yes! There it is! Mary cheered as she struck a triumphant pose in her mind. She let out a huffy laugh as if the answer to the girl's question was obvious. Of course, she ensured to keep up the unpleasantries. "Oh, this? It's nothing, really! Though for commoners like you, buying even one piece of clothing would make you feel the pinch, so I guess you wouldn't understand." They'd gotten all these boxes just so she could say that. In fact, they'd woken up at dawn on their off day just so she could deliver this very line!

It paid off, as right now, the looks of envy from every young girl in the area who'd heard her snide remark shifted to bitter frustration, and some among them even cried, "On to the next shop!" as they ordered their servants around, apparently intent on competing with her.

Selfish, prideful, and ever viciously cruel—that was Mary's recipe for the perfect villainess. Pointing at her servant riddled with a mass of boxes and saying, "This is nothing!" with a laugh was very much part of the performance.

Upon hearing Mary's words, Alicia's expression shifted too.

She looked dissatisfied, even sulky. Seeing this, Mary was convinced of her victory at last. She'd been able to shove her difference in wealth in Alicia's face, make her jealous, and annoy her with that boastful display.

Mary was so elated that she wanted to shout, "We won!" and high-five Adi. Her smile turned even more daring. *I can't falter here! I've got to stick to the role until the very end!* she thought. Still...Alicia's pout caused Mary to slacken her expression, but she managed to change it to a sarcastic smile.

"Oh? Why are you making that face? Could it be that you, a country girl, are

dreaming of going on a shopping spree like mine? You should see what your purse has to say about that!" Mary said with a snide laugh, just to add salt to the wound.

In response, Alicia's lips grew even more pouty, and she glared bitterly at Mary like a child being picked on. When she opened her mouth at last, her next words were filled with contempt. "If you love shopping so much, Lady Mary, then why have you never agreed to go with me?!"

"...What?"

"It's just so mean! You've rejected my every invitation, so I always thought you must hate shopping! And yet..." Alicia looked away with puffed out cheeks.

Mary easily recognized that sulky expression (in fact, she'd used it herself plenty of times), but she couldn't comprehend why Alicia would know how to make it, and a question mark appeared above her head.

In Mary's case, puffing out her cheeks and looking aside was a tried and tested method of hers that seemed to say, *"I'm mad!"* when in fact, she was not mad at all and was just trying to curry favor with someone. It was equivalent to a child trying to get an adult's attention.

So why had Alicia just done that?

"Let's go together next time, okay?"

What? Why was Alicia saying that?!

Stop it! I'm not making any promises!

"How did this happen?" Mary asked Adi with her eyes, unable to hide her bewilderment. She was met with the sight of a stack of boxes, and so she couldn't see his expression. Of course, he didn't say a word, but the boxes were shaking a bit as though he were holding in a laugh. Mary, annoyed, was about to stamp on his foot, but she stopped herself. If those boxes came tumbling down, she'd definitely be swept up in the flood.

Overwhelmed by Alicia's vigor and unable to rely on her giggle-suppressing servant, Mary had no idea what to do and simply stood there dumbfounded. Neither Alicia nor Patrick paid her state any heed, snuggling up closer to each

other like the happy couple they were. “Well, then, see you later!” they even had the gall to say before departing.

She watched their retreating backs in a daze until she finally snapped back to herself. *No! I can’t let this opportunity slip through my fingers! I’ve a job to do here!*

“Wait, Patrick! Er... I mean, Lord Patrick, please wait a moment!” Mary corrected herself for the sake of appearances.

It would’ve been fine back when they were still engaged (though, Mary never particularly liked referring to the opposite sex without the appropriate titles anyway), but now that they’d broken off the engagement, if she didn’t use Patrick’s title while out in public, people might misunderstand.

After all, Mary and Patrick’s relationship had returned back to how it was before their engagement—in fact, they got along even better now, to the confusion of everyone around them. Some of the ladies seemed unsure whether to feel jealous or sympathetic of Mary now that she was friendlier than ever with Patrick. Others even had the ridiculous idea that she was just feigning having given up on him, so they kept up their guard around her. (Their jealousy or vigilance aside, none of the ladies made a move on Patrick regardless, and all they did was cast him passionate glances.)

“What is it, Ma— Lady Mary, is there something you need?” Just like her, Patrick realized the attention of everyone around them and was quick to correct himself.

And like her, he’d been fed up with all the hot and cold looks everyone cast his way ever since their breakup. If he referred to Mary without her title now, there was a chance someone would spread rumors about them still being engaged.

Whether Mary was aware of his thoughts or not, she cleared her throat once and gazed at the returning pair. Or rather, she gazed at Patrick alone. On her lips was a sweet smile, overflowing with charm and elegance.

“You see, there’s a certain tailor my father’s a patron of, and he mentioned earlier that he’d like to gift you a party suit of their make. Shall we head on over there? The *two* of us.” Mary invited, emphasizing the last part.

“You and *me*?” Patrick inquired.

“Yes, the two of us!” said Mary again with the same lovely smile. (She had meant to say that she wanted to ruin their date by stealing Patrick away, whereas Patrick was confused over the idea that she seemingly planned to go somewhere without Adi.)

Patrick frowned and looked over Mary as if to ask her what was going on. He then slowly shook his head. “Thank you for the invitation, but may we postpone this to another time?”

“Must we? Father will be so disappointed.”

“I’ll call on you on another day. Your father has great taste in fashion, so I look forward to it myself.”

“Indeed! His Grace has impeccable taste! Whether for himself or others, he is always able to select the most perfect fit for—”

“Shut it, box boy!”

“Box boy?! Do you mean *me*?!” cried Adi. He was hidden behind a mountain of boxes, so only his voice carried through to the other side. A box boy he was, indeed!

After quieting down box boy Adi, Mary cleared her throat once more. She put on another bold smile and brushed the hair off her shoulders. Had the hair moved with the gentle *whoosh* of scattering flower petals, it would’ve created the perfect impression of both a villainess and an extravagant lady, but her ringlets would be more suitably likened to the harsh *whiz* of an iron crowbar flung through the air.

“What a shame. I’ll let my father know, then.”

“Great, thank you. See you later, Ma—Lady Mary.”

“Please excuse us, Lady Mary!” Alicia said with a bow.

Patrick offered her a slight nod, and then he and his darling turned on their heels and walked away. This time, Mary sent them off and took in a deep breath of satisfaction. It was as if she’d just done a good job and was seeing her efforts pay dividends.

Adi witnessed this through a small crack in between the boxes that surrounded him. “Your Ladyship, what was that about?” he asked curiously.

“What do you mean? As you can see, Patrick brushed me off.”

“Yes, but all you did was talk about His Grace. It’s almost as if...rather than getting in their way, you were hoping to achieve something else.”

Mary responded to his words with a smirk. Unlike her previous lovely, ladylike smile, this one was nothing but impish. But that look was very much in character for her, and Adi knew it meant that she was scheming something. He sent her an inquisitive glance.

“Very well, allow me to inform you—this date event was the turning point that decides the ending!”

Following her proclamation, Mary began to swiftly walk off. Adi didn’t understand a single bit of what she’d said, but he had an inkling he’d get a further explanation inside the café she was heading towards, so he followed her with his head tilted the entire way.

The first half of *Heart High*'s story centered around peaceful daily life at Karelia Academy. However, all of that was spun on its head in the second half of the game, where the pace picked up rapidly.

For one, the heroine's true identity as a princess was established. From then on followed a rapid succession of story beats, as a few issues came up here and there, Mary was dealt a final blow during the graduation ceremony, and the ending arrived. The turning point for all of that was the very date event Alicia and Patrick were presently on.

The contents of the last date were mostly the same as the usual mundane love events, but it functioned as a game mechanic for the players. "A mechanic?" Adi inquired as he sipped his tea.

"Indeed," Mary prefaced, then took a bite of her cake. "Oh my! This is delicious!" she said in surprise, looking down at her plate.

Adi cleared his throat to urge her to continue the explanation.

"Pardon me," she said, picking up on his meaning as she gently wiped her mouth with a handkerchief.

"So what is this mechanic?"

"Players called it that because this date event is the turning point that determines which ending you get, and with whom."

"And what *are* these turning points and endings, exactly?" Adi prompted as he shrewdly called over one of the staff to order some cake for himself. Mary said she wanted another as well, and then returned his questioning gaze with a nod of her head.

The unaware player would've thought that today's event was no different from the game's other ordinary love events. They would've expected to meet up with their romanceable character of choice, have him compliment the heroine's casual outfit, have a few conversations against the townscape background, and by the end, have the character say, "That was fun; let's go again sometime," with a smile. It was the same simple event every time.

But this was the only date event in which Mary showed up midway through

and tried to steal the protagonist's man right before her eyes. Such a turn of events would've surely been surprising for a player who had no prior knowledge of what to expect. Even so, there was a certain pattern to Mary's appearances, and after the heroine's love interest rejected her, she usually turned contemptuous and insulted the girl before finally withdrawing...

...*If* the player managed to proceed through the game without any problems.

But if, for example, the player had, after confirming they'd entered Patrick's route via the night party event, let down their guard and neglected to keep raising his affection levels, turning greedy and only spending time with the other cast members, or wandering around aimlessly while ignoring the game's focus on romance...then today's event would've been a painful experience for them, as their chosen love interest would have left with Mary.

"What?! Why would they do that?!" Adi protested. "I mean, she's a villainess! She's immature and selfish—obnoxious ladies like her are a dime a dozen!"

"I know that you're surprised, and I agree that she's terrible, but I still don't want to hear you say that about someone who shares the same name as me! As punishment, I want you to hand over half of your cake right now!"

"You're a totally different person from her, milady! And anyway, you can't eat that much!"

"Cake and croquettes go to different stomachs!"

In response to her ridiculous claim, Adi chided her. "If you eat too much now, you won't have any room for dinner!"

From others' perspective, they seemed like a pair of close siblings, or perhaps even intimate lovers. In any case, they didn't give off the impression of a mistress and her servant.

Following their usual back-and-forth, Adi lifted his plate out of Mary's reach to protect his cake. "So?" he asked to reignite the previous conversation. "Why did the love interest decide to go with Mary?"

"Because his affection levels were too low. Even if you'd gotten onto a specific character's route, he obviously wouldn't like you spending all your time with other men. It's easy to make someone fall in love with you, but to *keep*

them in love with you is another story. That much is true for both games and reality."

"Still... Why would they choose to go with the villainess, of all people?"

"Rather than choosing to go with *Mary*, think of it more as them choosing to go with the daughter of House Albert. If not for her name, no one would've ever chosen her for anything," Mary declared frankly and ate another mouthful of cake.

In the date event, Mary appeared and recycled the same few lines to try and steal the heroine's man, regardless of who he was. She did it all while using her father—and by extension, the Albert name—as a shield in a manner the real Mary found pathetic. Although, thinking of it from the in-game Mary's point of view following the accusation event, it was understandable.

She must've felt her position was in danger, and that was why she tried to do everything in her power to steal the protagonist's date. Though...if someone insisted it had simply been because that was her personality all along, Mary would've had no choice but to nod along and agree.

And even in the case of the romanceable characters, there was no guarantee that they'd always favor the heroine over Mary. That was why the so-called turning point existed.

There were three endings per character, one of them being the breakup.

"So you're saying that the love interest choosing Mary in this date event was one of the possible endings?" Adi questioned. "But...what about Alicia?"

"Remember, just because the character chose to go with Mary, that doesn't mean the two of them are happily together forever. He reluctantly chooses Mary over the heroine because his affection levels are low and cuts the date short... That's how it goes."

Of course, following this turn of events, there was a method to patch things up. The protagonist and her love interest would send each other apology gifts, go out to meet in the middle of the night—such proper love elements were peppered throughout. After all, by that point in the story, almost every character in the game hated Mary. No matter how low his affection level may

have been, the chosen love interest still had some warm feelings for the protagonist, and he wouldn't have suddenly changed his mind about Mary at that late stage.

In the moment, he simply chose the daughter of House Albert over the heroine because she'd failed to raise his affection levels.

"So for example, in Patrick's route, if Alicia kept getting distracted by the other love interests, he'd end up reluctantly choosing Mary over her," she explained.

"Right. So Mary conveyed an invitation from the head of House Albert, which Lord Patrick prioritized. That much is understandable."

"He still had no affection for Mary, mind you. It had only turned out that way because he weighed his love for Alicia against his own status in society, and the latter won out."

If the scales shifted as such, and the characters chose Mary (or rather, House Albert), the game then culminated in a "Bad Ending."

That said, *Heart High* was an otome game aimed at all ages. Moreover, the full title *Heartthrob High School* itself didn't create a particularly highbrow impression. There might've been bad endings, but they weren't designed to be overly dark or depressing. Rather, it was better to think of them as "bosom buddy" endings, as opposed to romantic ones.

In Patrick's case, after the graduation ceremony and Mary's fall into ruin, the game ended with him telling the now-reigning Princess Alicia, "Let's both work hard for the sake of our nation," with a smile.

He had no romantic feelings for her at that point, and if anything, he only felt loyalty to her as the princess. Calling it a "bad" ending might've been a little dramatic, but for a romance game, it made for quite a bitter conclusion. (Some endings of this type even included the characters smiling pleasantly and saying, "I've been accepted into a study abroad program! I hope you'll cheer me on!" with an undeniably platonic connotation, which could send the player spiraling into the deepest pits of despair.)

"So because earlier, Lord Patrick chose Alicia, does that mean she's avoided

the bad ending?”

“That’s right. She must’ve been very devoted to him.”

“Okay, so what about the other two endings? Are those also decided based on the characters’ affection levels?”

“I’ll tell you all about that when the time comes. Now, since we’re here already, let’s do a little more shopping,” said Mary as she rose to her feet.

Adi looked up at her with dissatisfaction and quickly polished off the rest of his cake.

Mary smirked and didn’t even try to conceal her enjoyment at being the only one who knew the game’s mechanics, as though she were watching from behind the stage. She was also probably putting on airs for Adi, since there was no way she’d say she wanted to go shopping when there was nothing for her to shop around for in the first place.

Knowing her, if nothing else was supposed to happen after this, she would’ve wanted to go straight back home. *Such terrible character*, thought Adi. Yet having no choice but to obey, he stuffed the rest of the cake into his mouth, grudgingly washed it down with the tea, and then followed her out.

After that, they walked at leisure around the various shops, taking the occasional break, and the time pleasantly flew by. Time always flies on the days off, as it were. Before they knew it, the sun had started to go down, and the streetlights began to light up in places.

“Perhaps we should be heading back soon, Your Ladyship,” suggested Adi from behind the stack of boxes (of which most were empty).

“Yes,” Mary agreed, but as she looked around her surroundings, her lips lifted into a devilish smirk.

Wondering if she was not ready to go back home yet, Adi followed the line of her gaze with his own. There must’ve been a reason they hadn’t left the town yet. Mary’s expression seemed to suggest she had found it, and looking in the same direction, Adi murmured, “Is that...?”

It was Alicia and Patrick...as well as the student council members and their

advisor. In short, all the romanceable characters from *Heart High* had assembled together. They surrounded Alicia and Patrick, and they all seemed to be in the midst of a discussion.

Unfortunately, Adi and Mary were too far away to hear what they were saying, but as Alicia started to slowly back out of the circle, the topic at hand must've related to student council business. For Alicia, who was just one of the students—and a commoner, at that—their conversations seemed like something from another world, and she couldn't keep up at times. Or so she had said herself at one point.

That much Adi was aware of, but he still had no idea why all of them were here in town.

Eventually, a number of young women started to gather around the student council group as well, and the atmosphere turned lively in a way that seemed incompatible with the town at twilight; though, it was a common sight when Patrick and the other members of the student council assembled together. Whether they were there by coincidence or had been informed of the situation, a number of the apparent noble ladies began talking to them.

"What's going on, my lady?"

"It's as you see. Now, shall we enjoy the show?" Mary said with a giggle as she sat down upon a bench. Adi tilted his head in confusion, but when Mary added, "Join me, why don't you?" he listened and sat next to her.

The view before them was lively as usual—the handsome members of the student council and the young ladies surrounding them from every side. Some of the bolder ladies tried their hand at starting conversations with the student council, while others were too intimidated, straying to the side and simply looking on. Alicia, however, took a few steps away from the mass and loitered by herself.

Seeing this, Adi was about to spring to his feet, but Mary's voice commanded him right in time. "Don't get involved!" she said with a grin, and her expression implied that she didn't want him ruining the spectacle.

"Please, my lady. What is going on here?"

“It’s exactly what it looks like—Patrick is as popular as ever,” Mary replied with a snarky giggle while Adi sighed.

It seemed she was more interested in enjoying the show than explaining anything to him, but Adi found it hard to simply nod along and watch. He looked at his mistress, deducing the situation in his mind.

“Is this another junction that decides the game’s ending?”

“Yes. It’s another part of the date event.”

“So the last event involves...getting surrounded by the student council and the other students?” asked Adi. “Does that influence the ending somehow?”

“The important part is what comes *after* this. What will Alicia do, seeing Patrick swarmed by this massive crowd?” Mary mused, still clearly enjoying herself.

“Alicia?” Adi tilted his head in confusion. He’d been certain this had something to do with the affection levels again, which would’ve meant there was nothing Alicia could do at present, as the result depended on what she’d already done up until this point. Yet despite this, it seemed that the key point of the situation was the question of, *“What will Alicia the heroine do now?”*

Adi looked between the scene and Mary in utter bewilderment, having no grasp of what was going on. Seeing his confusion, Mary finally cracked and decided to enlighten him.

In Alicia’s previous encounter with Mary, the important branching-off point depended on the love interest’s affection levels. If the player hadn’t reached a certain number of affection points by the time this event occurred, they would’ve gotten a bad ending. That sort of condition was par for the course in a game all about romantic love.

However, in the current event, the love interest wasn’t the main focus, but rather Alicia herself. She could make two choices based on the scene before her now, and her decision would determine the ending. But the player wouldn’t get to make that decision—Alicia would do so independent of the player’s input.

“Simply put, what she does now depends on her stats.”

“Her stats?”

“Yes. In other words, her personal growth.”

Although the theme of *Heart High* was romance, one of the other main elements of the game included raising Alicia’s stats throughout her daily life. This naturally encompassed things like increasing her academic knowledge by studying, taking supplementary classes, and visiting the library, or increasing her charisma and fashion sense by getting ahold of information regarding the latest trends and fads.

There were other abilities too, such as athletics, and it was entirely up to the player to decide which of her skills the heroine prioritized. Those stats would then go on to influence the game’s love events. For Patrick, whose route was exceedingly difficult, it was vital to raise all stats in a balanced way.

In sum, though *Heart High* was an otome game, if the protagonist neglected to care for herself and only focused on romance, in the end, the romance events would turn out poorly too. Maintaining the balance between love and self-care was one of the aspects that made the game so interesting to play.

And the current event’s end result depended on the protagonist’s stats.

“So if the player didn’t bother to improve her stats, it’d be reflected in Alicia’s behavior now,” Mary explained.

“Her behavior?”

“She’ll become convinced she’s too much of a greenhorn to deserve to keep Patrick all to herself, and she’ll say something like...”

“Why don’t we all have dinner together?”

It was exactly the kind of goody-two-shoes line that a lovable, benevolent heroine like her would’ve spat out. Patrick and the student council members agreed with her, and after a fun dinner together, the date ended. Of course, on the way home, Alicia and Patrick were alone and exchanged sweet nothings in a romance-esque style, but that was the end of the line.

What awaited players after this was the “Good Ending.” Though their efforts were rewarded, it was not without sacrifice, and finding true satisfaction

proved difficult with such an unusual ending.

Perhaps “Bittersweet Ending” was the better name for it.

For example, once Alicia became princess and their social ranks reversed, she and her sweetheart might’ve found their class difference too great and eloped. Or in another ending, Alicia even cast away her title as princess.

In another version, after the two of them affirmed their feelings for each other but considered their respective ranks and influence, Alicia and Patrick decided they’d be better able to support the nation separately as the princess and the heir of House Dyce, thus committing to working as partners and remaining unmarried for the rest of their lives... As such, these so-called good endings still left the players with a hollow feeling in their hearts.

They couldn’t be described as tragic, but equally, they didn’t depict true lifelong happiness—that ambiguity won a tremendous amount of support from a certain bracket of players who found it to have more depth than conventional good endings.

“But those two...” muttered Adi. “Even though their feelings are reciprocated, they still...”

“It’s *because* of their feelings for each other that this happens, see. Rather than casting away their respective titles, those versions of them find happiness in a different way.”

“So in the end, their ranks stand in their way...despite the fact they’re both in love with each other?”

“Yes, that’s part of the game’s theme. It’s about overcoming societal status, yet at times, the reverse happens, and the lovers find their path blocked again. It’s supposed to be ironic,” Mary said dismissively.

Per the memories of her previous life, this fickle ending was considered supreme, but looking at it from the perspective of those involved, it was no laughing matter. However conventional and rose-colored it may have been, there was no arguing that the best ending was the “True Ending,” in which everyone achieved genuine happiness. (Though, regardless of the route, Mary always ended up in the northern boonies.)

Hearing her proclamations, Adi seemed to have made up his mind about something and sprung to his feet. “Then how do you get the—you know, the other ending?!”

“What’s this, all of a sudden?” Mary asked, eyes widening in surprise at his sudden movement. “And...‘the other ending’? Are you talking about the true ending?”

“That’s the one!”

But Adi’s expression was grave, and the look in his eyes said that he wouldn’t be fooled by the usual ways she tried to dodge his questions. Mary, feeling a little shaken, cleared her throat. *I’m not sure why, but it looks like Adi wants them to get the true ending. I suppose I should explain it to him...*

“This is the deciding point. Everything depends on what Alicia does next. I already told you earlier—if she suggests they all have dinner together, then they’re headed towards the good ending.”

“But that means if Alicia does something else...!”

“Indeed. If she has enough stats to boost her confidence, then she won’t hesitate to monopolize Patrick,” Mary said, turning her gaze back over to Alicia in anticipation and...

“Lady Mary! I’m all alone with nothing to do, so please let me join you! Lady Maaary!” Alicia, on the verge of tears, was rushing right at her.

“She’s coming this way... What does that mean?” Adi inquired.

“That’s what *I’d* like to know,” Mary said in exasperation. Adi looked between her and Alicia and shrugged.

“Forget Lord Patrick! Shall the three of us have dinner together, Lady Mary?” Alicia suggested with a pout and her cheeks puffed out.

Mary pressed her hand to her forehead. (As a side note, she’d of course shouted, “Don’t you come this way!” when Alicia was running towards her, but as usual, the effectiveness of her remark was equivalent to zero.)

Alicia, upset at having been left by the wayside, turned towards the ever-growing circle of third parties and stuck her tongue out at them like a little

child.

“Stop that! It’s unsightly!” Mary scolded, unable to contain herself at such an immature sight unbecoming a student of Karelia Academy. “Since when am I supposed to have dinner with any of you? Without Patrick, no less? I’d rather dine at home.”

“Please, Lady Mary! I know of a really good croquette place, so how about we go there?”

“...Goodness! I almost gave in!”

“That was too easy, milady...” said Adi with a sigh as Mary nearly forgot herself and agreed to go at the mere mention of croquettes. He then turned to face Alicia and gently placed his hand on her shoulder. “Alicia, that won’t do. I think you’d better have a proper conversation with Lord Patrick.”

“Adi...” she whispered.

“I understand being put off by that swarm of people, but you should let him know how you feel.”

“I... You’re right.” With renewed resolve thanks to Adi’s advice, Alicia turned to look at the crowd. “But...how do I approach him?” she asked with a frown.

She’d been upset and said she wanted to leave Patrick behind, but in reality, she wanted to stay with him. However, he was surrounded by the student council, a bunch of noble ladies fluttering their eyelashes at them, and even a number of commoner girls who’d simply been out shopping. The crowd kept swelling, and to come between them would’ve taken a great feat of courage.

Given Alicia’s position and personality, the idea of her shoving aside the others who adored Patrick so much was unthinkable. Fully aware of this, Mary suggested, “How about you just give up and have dinner by yourself?”

“I’ll help you out,” Adi offered in contrast as he peered at Alicia’s face. “I want you to be happy, Alicia.”

“You... You do?” she asked him.

“Yes. I want you to free yourself from the shackles of rank and status. I want to see you succeed in that. That’s why I’ll take you to Lord Patrick...by using my

lady!”

Adi had maintained the serious atmosphere for but a moment before triumphantly blurting out his mistress’s name. Mary stopped in her tracks at his words, and that had been her deadly mistake.

“Stop joking around!” she yelled, but it was too late. Adi, his arms full of boxes, was already standing behind her.

To top it off, he took one step forward after another, causing the shocked Mary to walk forward as well. If he bumped into her now and those boxes went falling, she’d be buried underneath. Not to mention, on the off chance that any of the boxes opened upon hitting the ground and their contents were to be discovered... Well, there’d *be* no contents to discover! Everyone would realize she’d been buying empty boxes all along!

“Hey! What are you doing?!” she protested.

“Yes, yes, milady. Let’s get a move on, shall we?”

“Stop playing around! Wait— Whoa! Don’t push me... The boxes might fall if you bump into me!”

“Indeed... *If* I bump into you, yes? So I guess you’d better keep on walking!”

“Stop trying to herd me like a sheep! Just whose side are you on?!”

“Yours to start with, my lady! But I’m also the captain of the Alicia Support Squad!”

“That’s what I call a traitor!” Mary shouted, yet she kept drawing near the crowd as Adi (or more accurately, the boxes) pushed her along.

Just a few more steps...and then those on the outskirts of the circle spotted Mary, each muttering, “Oh...” under their breaths as they stepped aside to let her pass. The effect spread through the crowd like an infection, and before long, a path had opened before her.

Everyone’s eyes widened in shock at her unexpected appearance in such a place. Indeed, there she was—Patrick’s ex-fiancé, Mary Albert herself, and the onlookers all wondered what she was doing there. It was inconceivable that someone like her would be out shopping in such a quaint little town, much less

show herself among the crowd of people surrounding her ex-fiancé.

That was why they all gave way to her.

But none of them actually left the scene. They simply took a few steps back and cast her sidelong glances, at which Mary let out an exhausted sigh. “Don’t think I’ll forget this!” she threatened out of the corner of her mouth, with a glare aimed at Adi, then turned to face Patrick, who was in the center of the crowd.

“Greetings, everyone. Lord Patrick, are you out shopping *all by yourself*? You could’ve invited me, you know. I would’ve gladly joined you,” Mary said with purposeful emphasis, her implication obvious.

A troubled look settled on Patrick’s face as he picked up on her intent. Though he remained facing Mary so as not to be rude, his eyes darted around the throng of people in search of someone; he must’ve been looking for Alicia, whom he had lost track of. The moment he spotted his beloved behind Mary and Adi, his expression eased into that of relief.

“I’m sorry, Alicia...” he said remorsefully, taking a few steps towards her.

“How impolite. I was talking,” Mary complained in jest as she stepped aside to open the way for Alicia. Adi followed along, and soon enough, the crowd was gazing upon the couple instead.

Alicia seemed embarrassed and uncomfortable with all those eyes on her. She wasn’t like Patrick, who was used to standing in the public eye as both a representative of the academic body and the next head of House Dyce. For her, who was but a commoner, their gazes must’ve felt as though they were piercing right through her.

That was why it was so important for her to gain confidence and grow to stand by Patrick’s side as his equal. If she’d failed to do as much, she would end up suppressing her own feelings right here and now.

During this scene in the game, a dialogue selection menu appeared on the screen, but ironically there was only one choice for the player to pick. It was a very confusing moment for first-time players who lacked understanding of the game’s inner workings.

They could only choose one option. It was a choice without any choices to make.

So, what will it be? Mary thought with a smirk as she looked over at Alicia.

The girl's gaze dropped as if to escape the attention of everyone around her, and all she did was weakly call out Patrick's name a few times. She was a far cry from someone greedy enough to hog her lover all to herself.

"Lord Patrick... I..."

"Alicia?"

"So many people have gathered here...so I think... I think it might be nice for us all to have a meal together..."

Though she stuttered, she nonetheless suggested they all go out for a meal, and Mary narrowed her eyes at her. *She's withdrawing, huh?* she thought as she glanced at Adi, who was watching the two of them in disbelief. His shock was so palpable that it was almost as if this matter were about him.

Feeling that she had to do something, Mary tugged on his sleeve. "And so the farce ends. Come, let's head home," she said as she started to walk away.

"Huh? M-My lady!" he called out, wanting to stop her.

Wondering what the point of Adi stopping her was, Mary turned back around to the sight of Alicia and Patrick still facing each other. The only difference from before was that Alicia was holding onto the hem of Patrick's outfit with her cheeks reddened.

"I... I think it'd be best if we all had a meal together... But... And I know saying as much will only cause you trouble, but even so..."

Her voice wavered as though she were about to burst into tears. Question marks floated above everyone's heads while they puzzled over her clumsy attempts, yet she was determined to say something. Finally, she seemed to make up her mind as she looked up at Patrick suddenly.

"Just for now, I want to have you all to myself!" Alicia declared, looking right at him.

For a moment, she was greeted with nothing but silence. Even Mary, who

should've known what was coming, watched them with bated breath.

By the time everyone came to their senses, Alicia had cast her eyes down again with a blush, but Patrick couldn't stop himself from smiling at the sweet yet unusually confident words of his lover. Seeing his expression, Mary grumbled, "What a stupid face he's making!" under her breath. It was entirely uncharacteristic of him. Right now, he wasn't the cool and composed Prince Charming, but simply a man who couldn't get enough of his lover's adorableness.

He managed to compose his expression and wrapped his arm around Alicia's shoulders as he pulled her closer. "Sorry, everyone, but I'm escorting her today. Let's all talk and go for a meal some other time."

How happy Patrick looked as he said this, despite his attempts at seeming cold. "What a birdbrain," Mary muttered though her words fell on deaf ears.

To make matters worse, Adi was as pleased as though this were his very own happy ending. "That's just what we men are like," he said with a smile.

Such buffoonery, thought Mary, sighing. Right around the same time, the circle of people wreathing Patrick and Alicia began to slowly subside.

"I'm so sorry, Lady Mary..."

"My bad, Mary. I'd like it to be just me and Alicia tonight."

Alicia and Patrick turned to Mary to apologize as they snuggled closer, while Adi happily nodded along.

"Like I said! I never agreed to us four having dinner together!" Mary complained, though she knew it was in vain.

Alicia giggled, then softly grabbed ahold of Mary's hand and put a bracelet made of ornamental beads around her wrist.

"What...is that?" Mary asked in bewilderment as she lightly shook her wrist. The beads moved about with a quiet jingle. They glittered in the light in shades of silver and rust, matching Mary's pale skin quite well.

"It's a present for you! Hee hee!"

"PPresent?! And why exactly should I accept a present from a peasant like

you?!”

“Because then we can match!” Alicia proclaimed proudly, which didn’t explain anything at all. She then lifted her own hand to show it off, where Mary indeed spotted the same bracelet that she had, jangling and swaying around Alicia’s wrist. Except, the beads on Alicia’s bracelet were gold and indigo instead.

“Oh...” Mary whispered as the sight sparked a memory within her.

“We’re matching, Lady Mary. It’s a little embarrassing, but I’m really happy about it!” Alicia said bashfully. “See you tomorrow!” she added as though they were friends, before departing with Patrick, his arm wrapped around her. Only Adi replied to her as Mary stared at the bracelet around her wrist in a daze.

The bracelets were cheap and shoddily made, as though they were supposed to be for children. Even so, they were pretty enough to appeal to women, with a variety of available colors to mix and match freely.

The colors of the beads had been designed to match each character from the romanceable cast in *Heart High*—indeed, these were undoubtedly part of the game’s official merchandise.

“But these were never featured directly in the game...” Mary murmured. *What’s going on?* she wondered, head swirling with question marks. She couldn’t even begin to consider who the beads on her bracelet, colored in silver and rust, were supposed to represent.

Due to its popularity, *Heart High* was able to move large quantities of official goods. There were plastic sleeves and card holders with images from the game, as well as posters and calendars featuring special new illustrations. The merchandise that didn’t include images, such as decorative phone straps, was designed with each romanceable character’s signature colors and motifs in mind.

There existed a wide range of products, from wares that were evidently official merchandise to items that one couldn’t tell from a single glance were related to a game.

Mary recalled that the bracelets in particular were very popular due to their subtle design. Fans enjoyed the freedom of choosing different color

combinations to signify each of the characters, and as such, sales had gone through the roof.

Certain fans focused on mass-buying bracelets with one color to represent a single character, whereas others liked to mix and match the color of their favorite love interest with gold, which signified the heroine. Some people even surrounded the golden bead with all the other available colors to represent their preference for the so-called “reverse harem.”

Though *Heart High* was an otome game, some fans with different interests enjoyed matching the boys’ colors together too. Then there were those who wanted to financially support the franchise and bought one bracelet of every color, proudly and solemnly displaying them on their wrists.

The bracelets’ suitability for daily wear and—most importantly—the fun aspect of combining different colors together proved to be a recipe for success. Mary remembered buying them herself. Though she couldn’t recall which colors she had chosen, she wasn’t overly concerned or interested in trying to remember, since it would’ve made no difference to her now.

“Still, Mary’s color wasn’t available for these bracelets...” She tilted her head in confusion, taking off the bracelet and placing it in her palm to inspect it.

As these goods had been so well-received, they later went on to include colors of the characters from the game’s bonus and sequel. There were even designs from limited-time events and collaborations. So many versions existed that Mary wasn’t sure if anyone had actually been able to collect every single one.

But silver—Mary’s color—was the only one that had never been released.

That was no surprise, given that Mary was a despicable character (and intentionally portrayed as such), and there wouldn’t have been anyone willing to buy merchandise of her. In fact, one of the producers later confessed in a fanbook that they regretted having appointed silver as Mary’s color. Indeed, the silver in her palm glittered beautifully and harmonized well with other colors. Perhaps it truly could’ve been said that assigning this color to the character designed to inspire loathing had been the developers’ biggest mistake.

Mary once again fixed her gaze on the silver beads and the other color which

matched so well with it. The rust beads were neither overpowering nor underwhelming compared to the silver, but rather they complemented each other nicely...

“Hmm?” Mary murmured, turning her gaze over to Adi.

She looked over his hair color, then glanced back down at the bracelet. Then she did it one more time, and then again with furrowed brows... Finally, after three separate rounds of looking them both over, she lifted the bracelet up and nodded in understanding.

“Ah, I see! These are your and my colors.”

“...Did it honestly take you this long to realize?”

“It’s hard to notice these things when you’re always with me! But why yours and mine?” Mary asked, genuinely at a loss.

In response, Adi purposefully cleared his throat. Earlier, Alicia had handed the bracelet over to Mary while saying they’d match. But the colors of gold and indigo on Alicia’s bracelet signified herself and Patrick.

On the tiny, slim, measly possibility (as heartbreaking as it may have been for Mary, who was aiming for her own doom) that Alicia had intended the bracelet to be proof of the friendship between herself and Mary, then the colors should’ve represented the girls themselves.

But rather than Alicia’s gold, the other beads on Mary’s bracelet were in the rusty shade of Adi instead.

“So, this means...” Mary started, looking up at Adi with a frown. Unfortunately, at present her mind was preoccupied with the bracelet, and she didn’t notice the way his shoulders trembled slightly, or the expectant expression he was sporting.

“This has to mean...that Alicia really is an impoverished peasant after all!”

“...*What*?!”

“I mean, she matched your color with mine, right? It’s because she can’t afford to get another bracelet for you! That’s why her gift is a two-for-one combo! That has to be it!” Mary declared, puffing out her chest proudly at her

deduction.

Adi let out a massive sigh. His shoulders sagged, and he was on the verge of dropping all the boxes he was holding. “I’m not going to expect anything from you ever again...”

“Why do you look disappointed? What exactly did I say that let you down so?!”

“Everything! All of it!”

“What?! What are you talking about?! Explain yourself!”

“Not a chance!” Adi exclaimed heatedly. “This conversation is over!” he added, forcibly ending their discussion while he spun on his heel and began to walk away as though in escape.

A mass of question marks swarmed above Mary’s head, but she hurried after her servant, not wanting to be left behind.

As for the bracelet, she didn’t put it back on her wrist, but rather stuffed it into her pocket.

“You’re not going to wear it?” Adi questioned.

“Mary Albert wouldn’t be caught dead wearing a cheap trinket like this. It’d be a slight against my family name.”

“So you don’t want it? In that case, will you throw it away?”

“Mary Albert couldn’t outright reject an offering from a measly peasant either. That could harm House Albert’s reputation.”

“Hmm...” The corners of Adi’s mouth lifted as Mary used a similar logic for entirely opposite conclusions. She glared at him reproachfully. Her expression was admonishing, sulky, and very much unbefitting the daughter of House Albert. “Same as ever, I see,” Adi couldn’t stop himself from remarking with a snicker.

“What is it? If you’ve something to say, then just spit it out!”

“No, it’s nothing. For now, it might be best to keep that bracelet in your pocket,” Adi said. “Just for the time being,” he added for emphasis, and Mary

frowned at his words, not knowing what he meant by that.

She touched the bracelet through the cloth of her pocket. The beads jingled quietly, and her mouth twisted with discomfort.

Mary was both embarrassed and agitated as a feeling she hadn't ever known before pierced through her heart and muddled her thoughts. A part of her was happy, yet terribly disgruntled at the same time. She couldn't find the right word to describe how she felt. Adi was the only one who'd understand her by gestures alone, and it was obvious he would've simply laughed it off right now, but she had no one else to talk to.

No, anyone should've been glad to be consulted by the daughter of House Albert! Even the girls who usually felt nothing but the flames of jealousy towards her would've listened to her for the sake of their own families.

After all, there were a myriad of people eager for the chance to talk and get close to a member of her house. If she were to confide in someone, they would've done a favor for House Albert, and anyone would've been able to give Mary exactly the kind of advice she would've liked to hear at this moment. If they were to only learn she was suffering due to some unknown feelings, then even the most distinguished students might've felt compelled to take action.

But what was happening today wasn't something she could tell just anyone about.

If I can't consult someone about this as a daughter of House Albert...then what on earth should I do?

As those confusing, hazy feelings continued to swell within her, Mary puffed out her cheeks in dismay and then shoved the empty boxes Adi was holding.

"Whoa! Please stop, Your Ladyship! The boxes might fall!"

"Good, that's why I'm pushing them! That composed look on your face is *so* annoying! Ugh!"

"You're just taking your anger out on me... I suppose I really *do* seem to be the composed one compared to you right now!"

"Wipe that look off your face! And let me vent my anger all I want!" Mary

demanded angrily. “Humph!”

She shoved at the boxes again, and the upper section shook and slid about. Her single push rippled through all the empty boxes abruptly, forcing Adi to come to a stop to try and keep them balanced.

“My lady, please! They’ll fall down on top of you!”

“I’m ready for it!”

“That’s very noble of you, but I must insist that you please stop!”

His panic was rather amusing, and for a moment, Mary was distracted from her worries as she took a deep breath. Yet still unable to fully clear her mind, she let out a great sigh.

“This is all because I didn’t get to hear the name of that delicious croquette place!” she concluded.

It was a rather poor excuse coming from a daughter of House Albert. In reality, she was bewildered by the very first friend she had ever made not as a daughter of House Albert, but as Mary Albert herself. Her flimsy excuses were understandable in this case.

Adi, the only one who understood her current situation and the confusion in her heart, chuckled to himself.

“You’ll feel better once you’ve had a croquette or two,” he told his still sulking mistress in jest.

Chapter 6

Karelia Academy was the nation's best educational institution, established to take students from kindergarten all the way to graduate school. Unlike the youth of the general public, who oft had to work for their family businesses while attending school at the same time, Karelia Academy was a place of learning first and foremost, where the focus was on proper advancement through each stage of education via rigorous curricula and examinations. And as it was a school for the aristocracy, a little monetary donation could miraculously turn even the lowest marks on an exam into a passing grade.

Given that its administration favored such financial quid pro quo, the academy's student body was a mixed bag comprised of featherbrained, daft dandies and keen, scholarly minds ready to inherit their prestigious birthrights. (In general, students regarded family influence over academic ability and fought over monetary donations rather than exam marks. For parents, this arrangement also constituted a way to make connections on the side through their children.)

But things weren't quite so simple when it came to college.

Those who weren't the family heirs or didn't have the mind for studying would finish their education at the senior high school level and return to their parents' homes. Others would marry off into reputable families if they'd managed to make some connections while attending the school. The number of female students at the graduate level decreased by about half, and the male students had to be screened before they were admitted to higher education. (Though, even that process could be skewed by money.)

Despite the seeming decrease in numbers, however, the total number of students remained relatively unchanged, as youth from the lesser aristocracy and merchant families could enroll as well.

Members of the minor noble houses didn't have access to every university department on account of financial restrictions, but many still wanted to attend so that at least the latter portion of their studies could be carried out

somewhere prestigious. Some also used this as an opportunity to have their daughters find suitable marriage candidates. In certain cases, parents who'd already married off their daughters were forced to take them back home after a few years and, finding them unmanageable, sent their daughters to the academy to have them off their backs for at least a little longer.

Still, many future heirs who had little academic talent pushed their way into college via financial means. The gaps in social rank grew ever wider, leading to total chaos—perhaps even greater than during the high school years.

At the college level, there was a class exclusive to students who excelled regardless of their financial means, dubbed the "special program class." Eligible students were the topmost elites, consisting of family heirs who possessed both talent and confidence in their abilities, those who were aiming to steal the title of heir from their siblings, and those who wanted to become professional scholars in their own right—all of them brimming with ambition and supreme intellect.

The content of the lessons included topics such as etiquette, royal policy, history of the neighboring nations, foreign languages, and the vernacular necessary for successful diplomacy abroad. Due to the substantial level of difficulty, up to thirty percent of students were said to drop out before graduation. However, those who managed to successfully complete the special program went on to attain a unique elevated status even among the nobility, for achieving something that couldn't simply be purchased with money.

"Oh no... I didn't get into the special program," Alicia murmured weakly as her head drooped. In her hands, she was clasping a sheet of paper that detailed her exam results.

Meanwhile, Mary and Patrick, who had confirmed their own passing grades with a single glance each and had already packed their papers away into their bags, were busy enjoying their tea.

"What's there to be surprised about?" asked Mary. "You're a country girl, and you've only been here for a year. There's no way you could've gotten into the special program for the elite. That place is for future academics, or siblings having their little inheritance squabbles."

“But all of *you* passed,” Alicia pointed out glumly. “You’re all incredible...”

“Well, I *am* the heir of House Dyce, so it’s hardly a wonder I passed,” Patrick quipped. “But I’m surprised you did too, Adi.”

“My lady requires me to serve her throughout her time in school, so I can’t afford to let myself fall behind in classes.”

“Fair enough...” Patrick answered vaguely as he glanced at Mary.

Of course, she’d gotten into the special program as well. On the entrance exams that decided her class placement, she had obtained the same grade as Patrick—not only was it the top score of their year, they’d actually beaten the previous record for the highest marks in the academy’s history. How shocking it was, considering Mary had been hovering between second and tenth place for most of high school.

Just then, Patrick spoke up. “Mary, you’re in the program too, right?”

“Yes. I thought it’d be preferable to be able to boast of my own innate academic ability, as opposed to my family’s wealth.”

“Is that really all there is to it? Don’t you want to become the heir of House Albert?”

Typically, the title of heir was reserved for the family’s eldest son, though in cases where he wasn’t a suitable candidate, families could opt to name their second or third son as the heir. Rarer yet, if a daughter had proven she possessed a true aptitude for becoming the head of the family, she could be selected as well.

After all, a few years’ worth of difference was inconsequential when it came to securing a family’s prospects, so it wasn’t particularly unusual for the younger sons to push the eldest aside in a race to the top. That wasn’t to say the eldest sons took this lying down—they fought back, often requesting aid from any and all allies they could get their hands on. As these were mostly internal and therefore private affairs, the full stories rarely made it to light, but undoubtedly, almost every family faced its own share of inheritance disputes.

In fact, House Dyce was extremely unique in the fact that it had a capable eldest son as its heir whose younger brothers fully respected and supported

him.

House Albert had two sons—they were twins, seven years Mary's seniors. Both were equally excellent candidates to become the next heir of the family, but Mary was even better suited still. Or at least, Patrick had always been of such an opinion. Mary was a woman, yes, but even so, her inborn talents surpassed those of her brothers. Her eccentricity was her one flaw, but the same could be said for the twins.

But upon hearing his question, Mary looked at Patrick in confusion. "Me? The heir? I don't know where you got that idea. I have two older brothers, remember? I won't be inheriting anything."

"The special program is for those trying to become successors, though," he argued. "I was certain you'd be fighting for the title together with Adi."

"Why, I'd never!" Adi exclaimed. "I'm just doing the best I can in my studies, for the sake of His Grace and his family. The thought of trying to influence House Albert in any way has never even crossed my mind!"

Patrick sighed at their insistent denials. He was well aware that the special program class was a battle of ambitions between those who were supposed to take over their families and those who wanted to bring their siblings down and take that rank for themselves. But these two were about to enter this battlefield with entirely different reasons in mind: one out of a desire to boast of her academic ability, and the other because he wanted to help House Albert. What a waste that would be!

"Mary, you know you have what it takes. If you put your mind to it, you could absolutely become the heir."

"If I put my mind to it? People who need to be told things like that are the ones who never get anything done."

"Yeah, you're a textbook example of that, Lady Mary Albert, who fell to second place in her exam results due to careless mistakes because she wanted to avoid the limelight."

"That's exactly right, Lord Patrick Dyce, who got full marks on his finals and will have to give a speech about it. I'm glad you're just as gifted as I always

believed," Mary said with an elegant laugh. Patrick smiled pleasantly in return.

So long as one didn't hear what they were talking about, the two of them seemed like a beautiful couple holding a friendly conversation together. The sight was like something straight out of a painting...but again, *only* if their words went unheard.

Adi and Alicia, who were the only ones close enough to hear the two nobles, were focused on reading the college guidance documents as though they were completely used to the other two's quibbles. The college had greeted Patrick and Mary with open arms, going as far as to prepare a special welcome reception to assist them with all the necessary procedures. Unlike the noble pair, the two commoners had no such warm welcome waiting for them, and instead had to deal with the hassle of going through all the different procedures one by one.

Alicia couldn't stop herself from giggling at the way they were all leisurely spending their lunch break. "I hope we can all spend time together like this during college too," she said happily.

"Alicia..." Adi began. It seemed like he wanted to say more, but right then, he heard the sound of Mary clearing her throat pointedly, and he swallowed his next words. He could feel Mary's reproachful gaze burning into him, so he hurriedly looked away from Alicia.

Mary then got to her feet. "I've something to take care of. Please excuse me," she said, then departed. Adi cast one more glance at the cheerful Alicia and had no choice but to follow his mistress.

A few hours after that peaceful lunch break, Adi asked, "Are you...truly still intent on pursuing your own ruin?" as he walked by Mary's side.

Classes had already ended, and as there was nothing pressing they had to pursue, they were on their way to the courtyard (or rather, the bicycle parking space).

At her servant's weakly voice, Mary slowed to a stop and cast him a glance. "That's the way it has to be."

Such was her only response.

Admitting that she was fine with it would've been hard, but her goal hadn't changed one bit. At the graduation ceremony, the newly revealed princess Alicia was to denounce House Albert, leading to its downfall.

It was crystal clear that, at present, Alicia was greatly fond of Mary—even Mary herself was forced to admit this. The other day, Alicia had raided...that is, come to visit Albert Manor, cradling in her hands a pretty basket crammed full of handmade croquettes. Her greeting had been chirpy as ever: "Lady Mary! Let's spend some time together!"

It would've been impossible for Mary not to realize after something like that. The idea of a normal friendship was a foreign concept to her because of her status, but even she could make a guess or two.

This development was unquestionably different from *Heart High*. At this stage in the game, Alicia was wholly terrified of Mary, and Mary in turn harbored a deep, humiliating hatred for Alicia. They were each other's antithesis, and the gap between them had already grown much too wide to ever restore. That the two of them would be drinking tea together and chatting away about their college plans? It was unthinkable.

Such divergences were not applicable to the rest of the game's story, however. While Mary and Alicia had unexpectedly developed a connection, everything else was proceeding the same as it had in *Heart High*.

Patrick had escorted Mary during the evening party, and soon after, the talk of their engagement began. This was then canceled, the student council publicly denounced Mary, and to top things off, the council members had even showed up in town the other day during Alicia's date event.

The details may have deviated a little, but overall, things were developing the same way as they had during Patrick's route. In fact, at times, Patrick and Alicia said the exact lines from the game word for word, giving Mary an unpleasant, spooky feeling of déjà vu.

In sum, though this world was not an exact replica of *Heart High*, the happenings mimicked the game's story closely.

"Then, House Albert..." Adi trailed off.

“Whether things follow the game’s story or not, we’ve already made it this far. All we can do is await the final judgment,” Mary declared. “But we still have some work to do first.”

“Work, milady?”

“Yes. A very important task that will set off the final mechanic.”

Ahead of them, Alicia was standing by the counter of the secretariat office with question marks floating above her head.

“Greetings. What an unsightly frown you’re making! It’s utterly inelegant to look so flustered. Such shameful manners are a disgrace to the entire academy.”

“Oh, Lady Mary!” Alicia turned around at the sound of the familiar voice. Her expression brightened with relief, as though she was glad a friend had come to her rescue.

“Ugh...” Mary groaned quietly before she could stop herself. She’d coated her voice in copious amounts of cynicism, but as usual, this had no effect on Alicia’s incredible mental fortitude, and she didn’t seem wounded by it in the slightest. Mary’s heart was close to breaking. *I really might have to get physical with her after all...*

“Just what are you trying to do, monopolizing that counter all for yourself? You’re not the only one here!” Mary continued unpleasantly.

Alicia was holding a single envelope in her hands. Her brows sagged as she looked between Mary and Adi in visible bewilderment. “I wanted to hand in my college enrollment forms, but then they gave me this and told me to seal it!” she explained, showing them a candle and a seal.

“And what about it?” prompted Mary with a tilt of her head, looking upon the familiar tools.

Alicia glanced left and right in a fluster, and then started shaking the seal. It was the sort of harebrained act only a child would pull. Mary was so shocked she couldn’t even ridicule her for it.

Why is she shaking it? Does she think something will come out if it? Is the

intensity of the shaking supposed to change anything?

Then, Alicia started to look into the seal as if it were a telescope, though she obviously wouldn't see anything through it.

I truly don't understand how she operates... Mary thought with a frown as she observed Alicia. At that moment, Adi brought a fist down onto his palm as though he'd just realized something.

"Oh, I see! You don't know how to use sealing wax!"

"Sealing wax...? Ah, so that's what this is!" Alicia said as understanding finally dawned on her.

As the name implied, using sealing wax involved dripping the wax down onto the envelope to create a seal. The seal had one's family crest engraved on it, and using it on an envelope protected the contents from being read by unwanted third parties. Though improved letter sealing methods and similar measures to prevent information leakage were presently being devised, many still used wax due to its aesthetic and ostentatious appeal. Such seals were especially common among nobles obsessed with social standing, who craved to display their rank for all to see.

On one side of the scale, there was Mary, raised in the aristocratic world where seals were par for the course, and on the other side, Alicia, who'd hardly ever sent any letters at all. The discrepancy in knowledge between them was plain as day.

"Right, so I have to use this seal on the envelope. But how?"

"Your ignorance continues to astound me. Using sealing wax is child's play. You just do it with a whoosh, a drip, and a squish! Done."

"Those instructions are rather ambiguous, Your Ladyship."

More question marks drifted above Alicia's head at Mary's elusive advice. Adi couldn't just stand there and watch, and with a shrug of his shoulders, he reached out his hand to take the candle and the seal from Alicia, when Mary asked, "Since you have the chance, how about you use a personal seal?"

He froze at her words. "Er... My lady?"

“Personal seal? You mean *mine*?” Alicia asked.

Adi and Alicia both stared at her in confusion, which only prompted Mary to smirk at them.

“Lady Mary... I don’t *have* a personal seal,” Alicia pointed out.

“Oh? I’m sure you do. A splendid seal with your very own family crest on it.”

“I was an orphan, so I don’t have any such thing...” the girl explained hesitantly, perhaps feeling awkward discussing her own past.

“No, you do,” Mary insisted. She showed no sign of wanting to insult Alicia’s origin, but rather spoke as though she had irrevocable proof of her own assertion.

Everyone else would’ve thought it obvious that Alicia shouldn’t have a personal family seal. The purpose of such things was to let the nobility boast of their own status, and besides, just seeing the tools had bewildered Alicia to the point she was even trembling a little.

All that would lead to the conclusion that the girl didn’t own a seal. But Mary had her own conviction. In fact, she *knew* it to be the case.

Alicia has a seal. One with her true *family crest engraved on it.*

They were here at last—the final event of *Heart High*’s story.

Alicia did own a seal that had been left with her at the orphanage, with a symbol of the royal crest engraved on it. In fact, it was the very thing that validated her status as princess. In the game, it hadn’t been Mary who prompted her to look at it, but this was a minor variation that surely wouldn’t matter at this point. The most important thing right now was to establish Alicia’s true identity. If this happened thanks to Mary, it’d be even more ironic than it had been in the game itself.

Mary smiled even wider at her thoughts, and Alicia tilted her head in confusion. She glanced between Mary and the seal in her own hand a few times, then...

“Oh!” she exclaimed like she suddenly remembered something, and hurriedly fished around in her bag. From there, she produced a small pouch. She wasn’t

embarrassed by the old, worn cloth, but rather was all too happy to share how she got it. “My carer at the orphanage gave this to me!” she said, pouring the contents out onto her palm.

It was, indeed, a seal.

“Alicia... That seal...” mumbled Adi.

“I had it with me when I was left in the orphanage. I’ve always carried it around with me like a sort of good luck charm, but I had no idea it was a seal!” she explained with a smile, gently stroking the item in her hand.

Adi was stunned, all the more so because he’d been aware of Alicia’s identity from the start. And if she indeed was royalty and had a seal with the royal crest engraved on it, then this could be the trigger for House Albert’s downfall.

Meanwhile, the clerk on the other side of the counter window had no idea about any of this and just wanted to go back to work. As such, their expression very clearly said, *“You can use the school seal, you can use your own, whatever —just hurry up and get it over with,”* as they stared at Alicia.

“Ah, I see... A drip, a squish...and a whoosh, yes?”

“No, it’s a whoosh, a drip, and *then* a squish!” Mary corrected.

“So now it’s drip, drip...drip?”

“You’re dribbling the wax everywhere! Just a *small* drip!”

“We won’t get anywhere if you get hung up on something like that, milady. Here, Alicia, let me show you how it’s done,” Adi offered, unable to take any more of their exchange as he stepped between them.

With his (careful, accurate, and sound effect-free) guidance, Alicia gingerly managed to get the wax on the envelope. It dribbled down gently, drop by red drop, and the little mound soon grew solid. Alicia aimed carefully so that it hardened over the right place. She lightly pressed the seal over it, and when she retracted her hand, the symbol was clearly engraved in the wax.

The sun and the moon—there was no mistaking it. Everyone who lived in the nation would recognize it at once as a symbol only the royalty were privy to use.

“Hmm? This symbol...” Alicia tilted her head.

But before she could fully grasp the situation, the clerk glanced out of the counter window. “You all done?”

“Oh, yes! Sorry for the wait!”

The ignorant clerk’s voice seemed to blow any of Alicia’s doubts to the wind as she looked up from the envelope—an envelope bearing the seal of the sun and the moon—then held it out like a child showing off a drawing.

The look on the clerk’s face shifted when they saw the seal, and the secretariat office soon blew up with noise as they waved the envelope around in a fluster.

Only Mary watched this scene unfold with complete calm. “And so another farce begins,” she murmured, huffing out a quiet laugh.

Chapter 7

The story of why the nation's princess had been raised in an orphanage began more than a decade ago, shortly after Mary and Alicia had been born.

At the time, fortune-telling was terribly fashionable among the aristocracy. The ladies in particular loved to invite famous fortune tellers to their tea parties, where they could all merrily chitter-chatter away. If the soothsayer told the ladies a certain color was sure to bring them luck in finding love, they'd have dresses made in that color, and if a certain animal was to guarantee them compatibility with their partner, they'd have those animals stuffed and displayed around the mansion.

Generally, they'd do whatever money could afford to chase their luck, and some fortune tellers even had secret dealings with designers to influence popular trends among the nobles (alas, to call such people "fortune tellers" was laughable).

To put it frankly, it was all a children's game. Those who bought into it were aware of that fact themselves, but the priority was to have a fun conversation topic at tea parties and a pretext for their self-indulgence.

A portion of the ladies did, however, start to hold the fortunes in great regard and had their own personal soothsayers live with them in their mansions. Though said ladies were of a high social standing themselves, they still referred to their fortune tellers as "Master" or "Mistress." In extreme cases, they didn't even bother hiding a single matter pertaining to their family's internal affairs, confessing it all and choosing their next heir based on the fortunes that followed.

In her younger days, the queen (who was, of course, Alicia's biological mother) had been into divination too; though, she kept a healthy distance from most fortune tellers. When she attended tea parties where such fortune tellers divined, she gave them rewards if their prophecies actually came true. She'd ask for fortunes regarding love and health, and even trivial matters such as what the weather would be like during the next tea party, but she never let out a

single word about the royal family's internal affairs.

Though the queen bore the crown at a young age, she had plenty of good sense to back her up. But it was a different story when it came to her own personal fortune teller.

Being the royal family's personal diviner and telling fortunes to ensure their safety bloated the diviner's pride, and they shamelessly went around telling everyone of their position. They sold their own name, and all the nobles begged them, "Please, divine for us too!" while handing over hefty amounts of money. What a sight it was, indeed, to see the aristocrats bow their heads to a mere soothsayer!

And one day, the soothsayer proclaimed to the queen: "For the next three days and three nights, indulge the king's affections. If you do, you will certainly bear a fine son."

Alas, if a young and healthy man and woman lay together for three days and nights, of course they'd be able to have a child. No divination was needed to ascertain as much.

But the queen was elated to hear the prophecy. In fact, she was in such high spirits that she gave the soothsayer a generous reward before the divination even had a chance to come true.

Everything else aside, she was still a young woman, and though her marriage may have been political, she adored her husband from the bottom of her heart. It was the perfect opportunity for her to have the king, who'd been so busy with diplomatic meetings that they'd scarcely had the time to see each other, all to herself for three whole days. And there could be no greater happiness than for them to be blessed with a child afterwards.

When the vassals realized the queen's joy, and how she and the king truly did seem besotted with each other—and most importantly—the way the king had devoted himself to diplomatic matters for the nation's sake without a single complaint this entire time, they decided the two more than deserved to enjoy a break with just each other for those three days. If an heir to the throne was to come of it, all the better.

So the royal couple took a trip to their holiday villa, and for the next three

days and nights, they “indulged the king’s affections.” And just as prophesied, the queen conceived a child.

Yet she went on to give birth to a baby girl—Alicia.

This was no disappointment to anyone. The king and queen were glad to have an adorable daughter to call their own, and though the vassals had been hoping the royal pair would produce a son, they were relieved to have proof that the queen’s body was able to bear children at all, and congratulated the parents on having a princess who so resembled her mother.

The entire country rejoiced at the news, and the royal family even received congratulatory gifts from foreign nations. It was a time of celebration for all—that was, all except for a certain fortune teller.

However, no one had blamed the soothsayer, and they received no reproach for making a false prophecy. They may have been wrong about the child’s sex, but their counsel had still been fruitful, for which the queen had rewarded them. The royal couple were both incredibly grateful, in fact.

The only one who found the results of the soothsayer’s prophecy unacceptable was the soothsayer in question.

How could they, the royal family’s personal fortune teller, possibly have been wrong? They were convinced there must’ve been some kind of reason, or something that had hindered their prophecy from realizing. Mind swayed by arrogance, they began to loathe Alicia, thinking her the cause for the divination missing its mark, until eventually, they took the sleeping baby princess and...

“Let me guess, kidnapped her?”

“Yes. This is the true story of how the princess went missing,” said Mary, and Adi nodded in understanding.

They were in Albert Manor’s kitchens, where the maids and servants were preparing meals and eating alike—the servants’ canteen, as it were.

It was odd for Mary to be there, but she enjoyed the lively hustle and bustle of the place, and so she made frequenting it a daily habit. More than anything, the hectic atmosphere bred a sort of indifference in the busy servants that was the perfect backdrop for a private conversation. The one downside to this

business was that, on occasion, the servants pushed a bunch of vegetables into her hands while saying, “Lady Mary! Please peel these!”

“But then, why does Alicia have the imperial seal?” Adi prompted.

“Someone was suspicious of the fortune teller’s behavior, and during the kidnapping, that person managed to stuff the royal seal into the baby’s clothes. Quite the feat, isn’t it? There was even a CG for it in the game. But...”

“What’s wrong, my lady?” Adi asked when she paused, peering at her face curiously.

When *Heart High* explained Alicia’s backstory, the scenes were sepia to suggest a feeling of the past. Mary recalled all the major characters—the queen, whom Alicia was a look-alike of (to the point where one wondered if they reused the same sprite); the king, whose looks were so exceptional that many lamented he wasn’t a romanceable character; and the fortune teller, who was but a blacked-out silhouette, perhaps to imbue them with a sense of mystery.

After showing a few conversations between the characters, the screen changed to the CG portraying the events of that fateful night.

The image depicted a baby (because of the sepia filter, the hair and eye color couldn’t be confirmed, but it must’ve been Alicia) and a woman holding her. In her hand, the woman was clasping the imperial seal, which she hid inside the baby’s clothes. Then, in that same CG, a new person appeared. Their back faced the screen, so their visage was hidden, but they had lovely, drill-like ringlets. They snatched the baby from the woman and promptly vanished.

The princess’s disappearance was illustrated by those few images (so-called “CG variations”).

When Adi heard this explanation, his cheeks twitched. “...Lovely ringlets, you say?”

“Indeed, very much like drills.”

“Were they silver?”

“No, sepia. Have you forgotten already?”

“B-But, that would mean...”

“Track down all of my distant relatives if you like, but I promise you that you won’t find any fortune tellers in my family,” Mary declared. “So rest assured.”

Adi breathed a sigh of relief at her words.

In *Heart High*, tight ringlets were a direct reference to Mary, but she herself had been a baby at the time of these events, so it was impossible for her to have kidnapped Alicia. Mary’s mother had silver hair, but it was only slightly wavy. All her distant relations could be thoroughly checked, but not a single person would have the kind of curls the fortune teller in the CG (and, indeed, Mary herself) did.

Additionally, due to the sepia tone of the CG, there was every chance that the fortune teller’s ringlets had been of an entirely different color than silver. The backstory recollection ended immediately after the baby’s kidnapping, and no relation between the kidnapper and Mary had ever been mentioned.

The most likely explanation was that the producers had purposefully chosen that hairstyle to further emphasize Mary’s villainy. Maybe one of them was just really into evil characters having ringlets. Or maybe the CG artist just liked drawing them.

Mary decided to settle on this conclusion. That was why she was able to leisurely have her tea, taking advantage of the fact that school had closed following the incident with Alicia. The thought that one of her own relatives could’ve been responsible for the girl’s kidnapping would’ve been nerve-racking.

What Mary was after was a fall into ruin that matched with the game’s story. In the original game, House Albert lost some of its influence, but in the bonus content, Mary’s parents still retained the title of nobility and had sworn their loyalty to the royal family as a way of apologizing to Alicia. By that point, her parents weren’t portrayed with quite the level of affluence they used to have, but they were still outfitted in fine, well-tailored clothing. Of course, Mary was nowhere to be seen.

In other words, what Mary wished for was the kind of downfall whose consequences well-nigh started and ended with only *her* being sent off to the

northern provinces as punishment, and not the downfall that would await House Albert for having committed a serious crime the likes of kidnapping the nation's princess. That would no longer have them at the edge of a precipice, but rather see them shoved right off the cliff. If Mary had been after *that* kind of ruin, she wouldn't have bothered aggravating Alicia little by little with such subdued methods—instead, she would've ended it all by graciously decking the royals herself.

And that's exactly why I must take care to walk a fine line... Mary thought with a sigh, and at the exact same moment, Adi sighed as well.

"It's total pandemonium at the royal palace right now... Poor Alicia. Don't you want to help her out, my lady?"

"Why should I? It's got nothing to do with me," huffed Mary as she sipped her tea.

Adi sighed again at her curt reply. He picked up his own cup and brought it near to his mouth, and right before taking a sip, he murmured, "You say that, but you're always carrying that bracelet you got from her everywhere you go."

"Mmph!" Mary, who'd been drinking her tea, almost spluttered at his words and just barely managed to swallow it down in time—a save befitting the daughter of House Albert. A disgraceful act such as spitting out her tea would've been a stain on her pride, even if she'd done it in a place as inconspicuous as the servants' canteen. That said, she did proceed to have a massive coughing fit.

"H-H-How did you know?!"

"I'd like to remind you that I've been serving you for a very long time, milady. I can tell at a glance when you've something in your pocket."

"R-Right... I suppose I shouldn't expect any less of my servant. Just make sure you don't tell anyone."

"Very well. From tomorrow on, I'll make sure not to tell a soul."

"What?! So you've already let it slip?! Who did you tell?!" Mary shouted demandingly.

“Alicia and Patrick,” Adi responded, as though that should’ve been obvious from the start.

It should come as no surprise that those two were at the top of the list of people Mary *didn’t* want to know about her carrying the bracelet, and her shriek resounded around the walls of the boisterous canteen.

She obviously didn’t want to throw the bracelet away, but leaving it abandoned somewhere in the mansion equally didn’t sit well with her. After a while of inner conflict, she finally settled on hiding it in her pocket and carrying it on her person. She couldn’t just come out and say as much to Alicia and Patrick, and instead did everything she could to avoid the topic so that they wouldn’t find out. But if they had known the truth all along... Humiliation stirred within Mary by degrees. As her rage amassed, she turned to glare at Adi, who was fanning his own cheeks while feigning ignorance.

As always, though her servant had been well aware of how she felt on the matter, he had betrayed her. “Traitor,” Mary cursed him maliciously.

His eyes widened in shock. “Traitor? *Me*? I acted purely as your ally!”

“Right, my ally who’s also the captain of the Alicia Support Squad, huh?”

“I am the *commander* of the Alicia Support Squad!”

“That’s exactly why I’m saying you’re a trai— Wait, did you just promote yourself?! And to the top rank too!” Mary shouted, and when she proceeded to hurl scathing insults his way, Adi just chuckled in contentment.

They were still in the middle of their trifling discussion (though, Mary thought it problematic to write off Adi’s betrayal as a merely trifling matter) when the canteen doors suddenly flew open with a bang.

In the doorway stood a beautiful woman with silver hair in gentle waves. Her sheer beauty seemed almost unbefitting her majestically commanding presence as she looked around the canteen in search of something.

When she spotted her quarry, she called out, “Mary! We’re going to the royal palace! Prepare yourself!”

That voice, which carried so powerfully within the noisy canteen, indeed

belonged to...

“Mother?!”

“Madam?!”

...the wife of the head of House Albert, Keryl Albert herself.

Both Mary and Adi sprung to their feet at her sudden appearance. “Royal palace? Why do *I* have to go?!” Mary complained, while Adi lowered his head in a fluster, and in the end, Keryl just about dragged both of them out of the canteen.

Hurried along by Mary’s mother, neither of them had the time to ask for an explanation. Before they even knew what was going on, they’d been forced to change clothes and were being taken to a horse-drawn carriage.

Such high-handedness was very much in character for Keryl Albert. Once upon a time, she’d been surrounded by countless love rivals, and while they were all busy keeping an eye on each other, she drew near to the next head of House Albert and in but a flash came out on top as the sole victor—or at least, such were the rumors, true or not. All who heard the story unanimously agreed that it must’ve been quite the sight to see. Having married into the Albert family, Keryl conducted herself as a good wife and mother should, but in light of her ability to force things to go the way she wanted, she evidently still retained some of her old self.

Glancing between her mother and the carriage, Mary spoke up. “Er, mother... I’ll travel in my own carriage.”

“Oh, I’m afraid not. We’re in a hurry, Mary. In you go,” Keryl said, pushing on her back until Mary resigned herself to her fate and went inside.

In the carriage, she reluctantly planted herself in the seat facing away from the direction they were traveling in—that is, the lower seat.

“Oh? Why are you sitting there, Mary?” asked Keryl.

“You said yourself that we’re in a hurry. Let’s just go already,” Mary replied, rushing her mother in turn.

Keryl entered the carriage as well, taking a seat in the place Mary should’ve

been sitting too with a curious expression. Perhaps finding it discomforting to be sat opposite her daughter, Keryl involuntarily tilted her head, and the movement gently swayed her hair.

The last to enter was, of course, Adi. “Pardon me,” he said with a bow of his head like a proper servant, and with an apologetic look on his face, he climbed inside and sat down next to Keryl. At this, her eyes widened in utter awe.

Both Mary and Adi were aware of which was the seat of honor and which was the lower seat, yet their seating arrangement was reversed. Mary gazed out the window and leisurely enjoyed the breeze as though this were par for the course. In contrast, Adi’s expression was remorseful as he also stared out the window. Seeing the way his pale face twitched was the strangest thing about it for Keryl.

What on earth is going on? she wondered, looking between him and Mary as the carriage jolted into movement.

Noticing as much, Mary told her, “Don’t worry about it, mother. Adi gets really motion sick in the carriage, to the point that if he sits facing backwards, he’ll faint.”

“My, is that so?”

“I’m so sorry, madam! I know this is inconceivably rude of me, but please do not make me sit facing backwards, I beg of you...!” Adi’s face grew even paler, as though just imagining sitting on the opposite side was too much for him. Though his head was lowered as he gave his apology, he wearily clung to the window throughout. His motion sickness must’ve been very serious, indeed.

Though it was Keryl’s duty to scold Adi and make him apologize for forcing her daughter into the lower seat, when Keryl looked over at Mary, the girl didn’t seem to have a care in the world as she enjoyed the passing scenery outside.

“Well, so long as Mary is all right with this,” she conceded. “But do you actually feel fine, Mary?”

“I’m perfectly well. I could even read a dictionary right now,” Mary responded.

“That’s because your inner ears are protected by those iron drills, my lady...”

“You know what? I changed my mind. The scenery’s so much nicer when you’re facing forward. Adi, swap with me.”

“I’m so sorry! I won’t say another word, so please forgive me! I’d sooner ride on the horse, or even on the roof of this carriage...”

“No. I refuse to ride in a carriage with someone clinging to the roof. Now stop talking, or you’ll feel even more sick. Just look out the window.”

“Yes, milady...”

Keryl glanced between the two of them in bewilderment. When understanding dawned on her, a soft smile graced her lips.

Whenever they traveled anywhere, her daughter always left several hours before the appointed time of departure, yet all of them arrived at their destination roughly around the same time, which had raised suspicion in Keryl’s mind. When she asked her daughter where she’d been, Mary always brushed her off with something entirely uncharacteristic of her, such as, “I was just enjoying the scenery on the way here.”

From the start, her daughter, whose worldly desires were very much oblique, had been uncomfortable at the idea of owning multiple horse-drawn carriages like the other young ladies her age. *“Another carriage? Please. One is more than enough,”* she said with a glance at her prideful peers. And whenever she needed to get anything done, she’d always insist on taking her own carriage.

Keryl had suspected *something* must’ve been to blame for her daughter’s unladylike behavior, and now she’d put two and two together. *I see, so that’s what’s been going on*, she thought with a quiet chuckle, though neither of the other two noticed.

When they arrived at the royal palace, although they were members of House Albert, the only thing waiting to greet them was chaos and confusion.

There was a crowd of people who wouldn’t normally visit such a place, and among them even a number of students. It was a remarkable lineup of individuals, further proof of the gravity of the situation.

“Wow, what a sight...” Adi remarked.

“What did you expect? The lost princess has been found,” replied Mary.

Having never seen disorder to this degree, both Mary and Adi stood frozen stock-still for a moment. A panicked maid ran past the two of them.

She only offered a slight bow to the Lady of House Albert, which would’ve been unthinkable under any other circumstances. Even among all this chaos, Keryl remained resolute as she glanced around the area. Catching hold of one of the other nearby maids, she briefly questioned her about something, then grabbed Mary by the hand and started walking.

“What’s going on, mother? Even if you needed to visit the palace, I don’t see why *I* have to be here.”

“Such a diabolical daughter you are! If your friend’s in trouble, you’re supposed to help her.”

“Friend?! I’ve no idea who you’re talking about!”

“She obviously means Alicia, Your Ladyship. You don’t have any other friends.”

“You’d better remember we’ll be taking the carriage back home too, Adi!” Mary roared, taking her anger out on him.

“Eek! Forgive me!” shrieked Adi, admitting his loss the moment the topic of horse-drawn carriages was brought up.

“Stop bullying him!” Keryl scolded, very much like a mother, though not at all like a noble lady, which was quite out of place.

And so the three boisterously rushed their way through the already-hectic palace with such vigor and speed that one would hardly guess any of them could be an Albert. But none paid this any heed in the chaos, and in fact, no one seemed to have noted their presence at all. People gossiped freely and clicked their tongues in agitation, and some even yelled at the maids, demanding to know when Their Majesties would return.

Yet such mayhem was understandable.

Out of grief from having lost their precious firstborn, the royal couple never had any other children. They still loved each other, but the shock of their

adorable daughter disappearing had left them unable to answer their vassals' pleas for an heir to the throne. Seeing that the two had no further intentions of having children, their blood relatives made secret plans in the shadows on the off chance they could inherit the throne themselves, and some even tried to offer the king concubines. A number of people even proclaimed this was an opportunity to abolish the monarchy.

Within the royal palace, many were trying to influence the surging chaos in their own favor while pretending that all was well. And right at that time, Alicia had appeared.

She was the legitimate daughter of the king and queen. What's more, she was close with the heir of House Dyce. Some saw this as a miraculously well-suited match. Naturally, there was also an uproar of dissent from the people who weren't willing to just accept this as truth. Especially for those who'd been aiming for the throne, the news of Alicia's appearance had been a bombshell.

To top it all off, Their Majesties were currently away on diplomatic business, so there was no one around to pass a judgment and pacify the chaos once and for all. The more time went on with no way to put an end to this in sight, the more everyone would lose their common ground. And with everyone closely guarding all kinds of secrets, people would inevitably take advantage of the disorder to start sowing the seeds of conflict.

Such was the intensity of the discord within the royal palace at present. Royals, the prime minister, anyone who held authority within the country—and in the very center of this maelstrom of people was Alicia, all gathered in a single room together.

Mary and the rest arrived outside of a room called the congress chamber, which stood behind a large, oppressive set of doors protected by two security guards on either side. The guards postured, clearly sending a message that entry was forbidden and emanating a sense of intimidation, despite the fact they likely had no idea what was going on.

Mary and Adi stood in front of those doors, their faces growing pale.

"M-Mother... Don't tell me..."

"Madam... Please be careful..."

They both looked at her as though begging her not to do this. Keryl stood in front of the doors with an imposing air of authority, while Mary and Adi had beads of sweat forming at their temples as they watched her. Surely, even as the Lady of House Albert— No, *because* she was the Lady of House Albert, Keryl must've taken notice of the grave atmosphere seeping out of that chamber.

Who was inside, and just how heavy was the air in there? Thinking about it gave Mary a stomachache, and she was hesitant to even reach out to touch the doors.

"Mother, we can stand here all we want, but there's no telling when the congress will end. Why don't we go somewhere for tea?"

"Th-That's right, madam. You might get tired standing on your feet like this, so may I suggest we borrow a room and take a rest?"

While they desperately tried to convince her, Keryl didn't budge from her authoritative stance. In fact, she didn't so much as twitch one eyebrow as she glared pointedly at the doors, and...

Bam! Bam!

She pounded on them. With her *own fist*.

"Mother!"

"Madam!"

"Have you *lost* your *mind?!*" both Mary and Adi cried in unison, their inane voices resounding through the red-carpeted hallway.

With Their Majesties absent, there was no doubt that the people gathered within the congress chamber were all the topmost leaders of the nation. They were even out of Mary's league, especially as she wasn't the heir of her family. Just the idea of facing such a lineup of bigwigs gave her the shivers, and she desperately searched through her panicked thoughts for some kind of way out of this.

"L-Lady Mary!"

Just then, Alicia ran over and embraced her, eyes wide and tearful.

"Lady Mary, so much is happening right now, and I've no idea what to do!" the girl despaired as she still clung to Mary, her words hiccupped with sobs. Mary stood still, at a loss.

The usual thing to do in these circumstances would be to pat Alicia on the back and console her, but Mary couldn't get herself to act in such a friendly manner at the best of times—let alone in this situation, when even she couldn't retain her full composure. If she could, she'd have loved nothing more than to peel the girl off her, bow her head, and leave the royal palace altogether with Adi in tow. "C-Calm down a bit..." she said.

"Please, Lady Mary, stay here with me! I'm so scared, and my carer from the orphanage won't be able to come, but everyone keeps talking and talking, and I have no idea what's going on!"

"You want me to stay *here*?"

Is that a bad joke? thought Mary as she surveyed the congress chamber.

She was met with stares from all those who held authority over the country as they carefully watched her and Alicia. Among them was her father, but though she should have been used to seeing him, presently, even he emanated such an air of intimidation that she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze, let alone call out to him. That man was not her father—right now, he was the head of House Albert, the family second in power only to the royals.

Others present included renowned scholars and representatives of the other major noble houses. Met with their fixed stares in such an oppressive atmosphere, even Mary Albert herself crumbled.

A couple of chairs had been placed opposite the group. The setup of the chamber resembled an interrogation room more than a congress meeting, and just imagining herself sitting there had Mary swaying on her feet. What a joke, indeed! It was inconceivable. It'd be like a frog faced with a pit of snakes—or even more accurately, a tadpole faced with a flight of dragons. She wouldn't even last a minute against them.

Sitting in one of those chairs was Patrick, and Mary could tell at a glance he was pale with unease. His typical imposing manner was nowhere to be seen, but given his current company, that wasn't surprising. If anything, Mary was impressed that he'd retained his sanity at all. The icy, confining air within that room was so overwhelming that any man faced with having to sit there would be tempted to give up and toss Alicia aside so that he could join the interrogating party instead.

When he spotted Mary, his expression relaxed slightly, relieved at the thought of having an ally to join them. But at the sight, Mary's mind reeled in refusal.

Are you kidding me?! Stop this at once!

I have no standing in that room, nor any relation to the royal family, and I'm not even the heir of House Albert.

So stop it! Don't try to drag me in there! I have zero *obligation to sit there with you!*

"L-Lady Mary... I'm so scared..."

"Alicia, I..."

"Everyone's saying I'm the princess... B-But then, the others are saying that it's all a lie and that I stole the imperial seal, but I... I'd never do such a thing..." Alicia whined incoherently, which further emphasized the chaos that went on in the chamber.

They may have been the nation's highest authorities, but there was little those assembled could do about the sudden appearance of the supposed missing princess, especially given her background as a common girl from the provinces.

Not to mention, all gathered participants harbored their own ambitions and

desires, and some among them could conspire to turn this chaos in their own favor, truth be damned.

All the more reason for Mary to *not* want to be confined in there with them! She searched for some means of retreat, but in that moment, she noticed the way Alicia's hand, which was still holding onto Mary's clothes, was trembling.

Alas, of course she was trembling. Just as she'd finally gotten used to her life as the peasant girl surrounded by nobility at the prestigious Karelia Academy, *this* mayhem reared its head. Suddenly, she was fenced in by the topmost leaders of the nation (and all of them bearing grim, severe expressions), branding her as some princess. Any girl her age would've cried in such a situation—even Mary might have shed tears if she were in Alicia's place.

That was why Mary couldn't bring herself to just shake the girl off.

Mary Albert was not so barbaric as to cast Alicia aside in this moment and make an escape. She may have been unpleasant in her quest for her own doom, yes, but she was still a young lady, and she had pride in her status as the daughter of House Albert, to boot. Though, her spirit was also not so pure as to return Alicia's hug right there and then.

Above all, the matching bracelet was wrapped around Alicia's wrist, and each time Mary thought to pry the girl off her, the bracelet's clinking gave her pause. It was just some cheap trinket, so why? *Why* did it feel like the bracelet hidden in her pocket resonated along with Alicia's?

"I don't know if I'm really some princess... I always thought the seal was just a lucky charm, and all the carers at the orphanage said so too. The idea that I stole it is just..."

The shivering Alicia looked up at Mary and appealed to her to believe her. Any words of doubt Mary might have uttered would've died in her throat at the sight of Alicia's wavering, teary pupils.

Mary couldn't even nod her head in response.

Alicia had the same facial features as the queen, and the purple eyes that were passed down through the royalty. She'd even had the imperial seal placed in her clothes at the time of her abduction. Everything had turned out just as it

had in the game. Based on Mary's recollection of it, Alicia was indubitably the princess. Yet none of the people gathered here were able to identify these points, as though the strange power that imposed certain limitations on them was at play again. This only served to further deepen Mary's unease.

Her so-called "conclusive evidence" was just a game, and there was no way she could say something like, *"It was from a game I played in my previous life,"* under these circumstances. Besides, she couldn't even claim things had gone exactly as in the game—she herself was the greatest outlier.

It was still possible things were different from *Heart High*. Just looking at the end result of the game's story wasn't enough to ascertain Alicia was the princess, after all.

She could've simply been a relative of the royal family, favored and adopted by the king and queen. Or there could've been some other reason for things to end as they did in the game—the girl's true identity could've been something completely different.

The fear simmered and bubbled within Mary, and in her bewilderment, she looked to Adi, who was standing by her side. His expression, too, was stiff, as if he was just as confused as her about what would be the right thing to do here. Considering his own status, his consternation was expected. Among those gathered in this room (excluding the nervous maids standing in the corner), his rank was the lowest of all.

What now? I'm not sure about any of this.

I'm having doubts about whether Alicia really is *the princess like in the game. Should I even trust in my memories of it to this degree? I mean, I myself am the exact opposite of who Mary was in the game...*

As her mind reeled, Mary touched her own skirt...and the bracelet hidden within her pocket.

It was a piece of official *Heart High* merchandise, but it had never appeared in the actual game. This was not something she'd acquired as a result of what happened to Mary Albert in the game, but rather a genuine gift from Alicia.

Mary touched it, feeling the cool sensation of the beads against her skin as

she rolled them between her fingertips. *This belongs to me. It has nothing to do with the game—it's simply mine and mine alone*, she reasoned with herself, and then took in a deep breath as though she'd made up her mind.

To begin with, the in-game Mary meant nothing to her.

Mary was not some villainous daughter, and she had no intentions of changing who she was. Equally, she wasn't one to go out of her way in order to *not* become a villainous daughter.

Her ambition lay in chasing after her ruin, not in some video game from her previous life. Nor was she interested in the version of herself she'd been during her past incarnation. She had used those memories to aid her, but she didn't care a whit for who her previous self adored most from the game, or even why she had played that game in the first place.

In the end, her previous self was just a dead woman, and the in-game Mary was just an uncouth lady inside the screen. Mary had no obligation to be concerned about either of the two.

I am simply my own self. And this bracelet is also my own. That's why the girl standing here before my eyes is...

With that, Mary gripped the still-crying Alicia by the shoulders and...

"Cease your incessant sniveling this instant, you peasant girl!"

...rebuked her like she'd always done.

At that moment, the atmosphere around them was indescribable. But if Mary tried to back out now, it would be an insult to the Albert name, and her mind was made up. She squeezed Alicia's shoulders even harder.

"I don't care if you're a princess or not, you still *reek* of the boonies! Your whimpering is an affront to the sanctity of this chamber! Quit this disgrace at once!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"And *you*, Patrick! What are you cowering for?! You didn't fall for some princess, you fell for this peasant right here! You were so head over heels for her boorishness and the insolent way she tramples into other people's personal

bubbles that you were ready to cast your family name aside for her!”

“Mary...”

“And though it may have been canceled, you were once engaged to *me*, so do me a favor and cut that pathetic act now!”

As she reproached the two of them, Mary gallantly strolled into the chamber. She took a seat in one of the empty chairs, gazed upon the lineup of leaders in front of her, and offered them an elegant bow of her head. “I apologize you had to witness that unsightly display just now. By all means, please continue the discussion.”

Of course, nobody moved to reopen the meeting as an odd, solemn mood drifted over the room.

Only Patrick—and Alicia, who had returned to her seat beside him—looked a little uplifted, and when their gazes met, they nodded at each other as though their determination had been renewed.

As for Mary herself...

“Farewell, northern provinces. I’m taking a direct flight to the execution site for lèse-majesté instead...”

Her previous courage was nowhere to be found, and she’d paled splendidly.

She’d hurled such caustic language right in front of all these important figures, and supposing that they’d be able to officially prove Alicia’s identity as the princess, Mary had just committed lèse-majesté—an affront to one of the nation’s royalty. Even if the latter scenario didn’t happen, she’d still interrupted congress. Most critically of all, she’d just spewed phrases the likes of “reek of the boonies” in quick succession, here in this sacred chamber. Daughter of House Albert or no, surely even she wouldn’t be pardoned for this.

“I lost my temper in the heat of the moment...”

As Mary spouted remarks about her exceedingly impulsive crime, Adi, who’d been standing pale and petrified at his mistress’s behavior, suddenly seemed to have conjectured something in his mind.

“Please excuse me!” His voice resounded throughout the chamber as he

bowed very deeply and then also seated himself upon one of the chairs—of course, the one next to Mary.

Adi had the lowest social standing of all the people gathered here. Even supposing that everyone else had been seated and a number of empty chairs still remained within the chamber, the idea of someone of his rank taking a seat was simply unacceptable. He was a mere servant—and yet he'd done it anyway.

His mistress, Mary, turned to look at him with wide eyes. "Adi?" she called out in bafflement. "What are you doing?"

"I told you I'd follow you anywhere, didn't I?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"I shall go with you, even to the gallows."

Adi smiled at her, albeit awkwardly. Mary stared at him for a moment, dumbfounded, but then smiled back at him in turn. "You foolish, foolish man."

And so the congress resumed, though at first it moved slowly while everyone still reeled from the incident. However, it wasn't long before the chaos was back in full swing. After all, just because there were more people seated in the chairs now, that didn't guarantee anything would be resolved. Alicia and Patrick may have regained some of their composure, but that wouldn't provide the proof they needed.

As such, not knowing why she'd been brought here in the first place, Mary cast suspicious glances at her own mother throughout the congress. The woman was sitting next to her husband, observing the discord with an air of majesty that gave nothing away. Yet there must have been a reason behind her actions thus far.

Plus, she was the Lady of House Albert—she must have been aware of how grave a sin it was to infringe upon congress within this sacred chamber.

Could it really be that she's the one who...?

Mary had started to feel such apprehension when the topic of discussion moved towards the authenticity of Alicia's imperial seal. Why did Alicia have it, and was it a genuine royal article? Following this, the next topic entertained the

idea of Alicia having stolen the seal to pose as the princess, much to Mary's surprise.

It was an absurd notion, but the entire meeting had thus far been filled with such nonsensical opinions. Though, Mary listened to it all without a word. She had no intention of proclaiming *"It was the real deal in the game!"* or any such thing.

Just as she thought this was all beyond her control, Keryl's lovely voice resounded within the chamber. "Pardon me. May I have a word?"

Naturally, all eyes turned to her, Mary's and Adi's included. Keryl was beautiful in her dignity, and despite the situation, she did not hesitate in the slightest. In fact, she looked sublime, and yet Mary had a bad feeling about this.

She remembered that one sepia CG which portrayed the events of Alicia's kidnapping. *If the diviner who stole Alicia away was truly our blood relative... And if mother reveals that right here and now...* The unease within Mary intensified the more she thought about it.

She had no idea what her mother was thinking, but if the culprit behind Alicia's abduction was someone from House Albert, and on top of that, it had been kept secret this entire time, then things wouldn't simply end in their ruin. Every single one of their relatives would be imprisoned on the crime of treason.

"I can prove why Alicia had the imperial seal on her, and that it is authentic. The reason for that is..."

"W-Wait, mother! Think this through—"

"On that day, *I* was the one who put that seal on her!"

...

...

"*What?!*"

The room exploded with noise at Keryl's proclamation. Even the head of House Albert turned to look at her in astonishment, seemingly having never heard of this before.

The reactions were understandable—this was sensational news. To think that

the one who held the answer behind the abducted princess and the missing imperial seal was the wife of the noble family second in power to the royalty... There was not a soul present who *wouldn't* be surprised to hear of this.

"I had always found that fortune teller highly suspicious," Keryl continued. "I had a baby daughter myself at the time, so I could tell the diviner gazed upon the young princess with nothing but hatred."

"Mother..."

"Ever since I became aware of that, I kept an eye on that fortune teller, as I was worried something might happen to the princess. And then, on that day..."

According to Keryl, the fortune teller she'd been keeping a watch on had finally made their move. Though Keryl tried to protect the princess, she fell for the diviner's tricks, and the baby was subsequently kidnapped. But Keryl wanted to at least try to let the princess have some proof of her identity, and hid away the imperial seal within her clothes, just like in the CG from Mary's recollections.

"I was well aware of the risk in leaving the seal on the baby, but I thought it could at least allow for the possibility of her reuniting with her parents again someday..." Keryl explained, casting her gaze down.

With her own daughter the same age as the princess, she understood to a painful degree how the queen would have felt if she lost her baby, which had motivated her to commit an act she would have otherwise hesitated to do. Her resolute decision had been a true act of motherhood.

But even as the Lady of House Albert, her testimony alone wouldn't be enough to settle the matter. Already, voices of dissent and suspicion were rising, and the congress was on the verge of relapsing back into chaos.

Right at that moment, the doors to the chamber flew open with great force.

"She speaks the truth."

Everyone was struck dumb when they saw who it was on the other side, and in a panic all got to their feet and bowed their heads.

A woman with soft blonde hair surveyed the interior of the room without an

ounce of hesitation in her eyes. Her demeanor was both gentle and high-handed at the same time, and she was beautiful yet adorable. It was the queen, and standing by her side was the dignified king himself.

“Pardon our tardiness,” he apologized in a quiet yet solemn tone.

They were the two most powerful rulers of the nation—their existence was nobler and more exalted than anyone else’s. Mary, too, glanced between the queen and Alicia with nothing short of amazement.

They looked similar, almost the same, in fact. They were essentially two peas in a pod. It wouldn’t have been too great of a reach to say that Alicia was like a smaller version of the queen, to the point that one couldn’t help but wonder where the king’s genes had gone. It would’ve been so nice to see some of his contribution to the equation too...

“My lady... Milady!”

“Huh? Adi?”

“You’re spacing out. What’s the matter?”

Adi had been waving his hand in front of her eyes, and Mary blinked several times as she came to. Apparently, this development had halted her thoughts, and before she knew it, Their Majesties had taken seats as well.

“I wanted to escape reality for a moment,” Mary explained.

“How unfair. Please don’t forget to bring me along too,” Adi responded.

“I’ll be sure to let you know next time so you can follow me,” she said, and felt her composure return at their jesting exchange.

Now was not the time to find faults in Alicia’s resemblance to the queen. If anything, their similarity only added to the credibility of Alicia being the princess. Whatever power from the game may have been at play here, looking at the two side by side made their resemblance clear as day, and those who had been doubting the girl were holding their breaths and turning blue in the face.

And upon careful inspection, Alicia somewhat resembled His Majesty as well. Yes, perhaps it was something about her eyes...or maybe her mannerisms? Surely at least if one looked at her from a distance... No, this was in no way

flattering nor polite to say.

“Are you escaping reality again, my lady?”

“Ah... I’m fine.” At the sound of his voice, Mary once again snapped back to reality.

She hurriedly looked up to the sight of Their Majesties and Alicia cautiously studying each other and nearing one another step by timid step. Each was holding their breath, their expressions matching. Once in front of each other, they looked every part the parents and their child, and Alicia’s and the queen’s hair swayed gently at almost the exact same time.

“Mother! Father!”

“Oh, our darling daughter!”

The three of them hugged each other heartily, and a complete transformation swept over the congress chamber.

Those who just minutes ago had accused Alicia of being a spy from a foreign nation now broke into heartfelt applause. The intimidating leadership figures and the nervous maids who’d been shakily pouring tea alike wiped their dampened eyes from the sheer joy of witnessing the royal family reunion.

Of course, among the crowd were those whose eyes darted around anxiously as they thought back on their behavior up until now, but those were the very same people who’d been the first to cry out, “Ah, what a relief!” and, “How touching!” and other such insincere, conventional lines.

While this moving scene played out before her eyes, Mary was spacing out again.

She was at a loss. Unlike some of the others present, she’d never had such elaborate suspicions of Alicia, so she couldn’t go along with their sudden mood shift, but as she *had* started to doubt her past life memories, she couldn’t immerse herself in the celebratory mood that filled the chamber. In the end, she mumbled in a frail, quiet voice, “Adi... I have a tummy ache.”

“Oh dear... It seems you’ve finally reached your limit, Your Ladyship. You should treat yourself to some deep-fried croquettes tonight.”

“I don’t know what to think anymore... I just want to go home. My stomach hurts...”

“Just a little bit longer, and this will all be over, milady. We’ll buy you plenty of delicious snacks on the way home,” Adi reassured her. “Ah, what a pitiful sight you are...”

Mary, still dazed, only nodded weakly at his lamentations, one hand pressed against her stomach.

That she felt so downcast was only expected. Her and Adi aside, this was the very picture of the happy grand finale. Even Patrick was moved as he uttered, “I’m so happy for you, Alicia.” Though, he had every right to be angry at the way he’d been pushed around during this meeting.

Mary, who’d already known Alicia was the princess due to her access to extra information from the game and its CGs, couldn’t sincerely embrace the present mood within the chamber. But perhaps everyone else had their own agendas and were just joining in with the mood to keep up appearances?

Even if that is *the case, this standing ovation is a bit much...* Mary thought, wondering once more if this had something to do with the suppressing power of the game. The same people who hadn’t noticed Alicia’s resemblance to the queen this whole time were now readily celebrating their reunion. A constraining power, pushing for things to conveniently match up with the game’s ending...

Right, that must’ve been it. Otherwise, this happily-ever-after atmosphere would’ve been entirely unconvincing. It almost made her feel stupid for having been so anxious at the oppressive air of a few minutes ago. In fact, at this point, she *wanted* this to be a result of the restraining power.

Yes, that’s what it was, and that’s all there is to it! Mary decided with a sigh. The more she thought about all of this, the more distant she felt from the mood within the room.

Moments ago, she’d wanted to go home because of her nerves, but now she had a whole different reason.

What a true, utter, absolute farce this was. Such were her emotions as she

observed the scene before her, until a sudden buzz kicked up on the other side of the chamber's doors. Apparently, the onlookers from outside had also taken notice of the family reunion and the total atmospheric shift within the room. Perhaps the applause had drawn their attention.

Inferring as much, Their Majesties embraced Alicia's shoulders and nodded with blissful smiles on their faces. *"Let's introduce her to everyone,"* they seemed to say. Alicia picked up on it, and though she still looked a little disoriented, she happily smiled in return. What a lovely family they were...for those uninvolved and looking at them from the safety zone, at least.

"We're making a break for it," Mary told Adi just as the royal family moved towards the doors.

She was certain there was a throng of people outside, wanting to ascertain all the story particulars for themselves. But to break the news that Alicia was truly the lost princess in front of all these figures was sure to lead to even greater chaos than before. Mary was already fed up with the atmosphere in the chamber; it had even made her feel poorly, so for her, the upcoming chaos was a sign it was time to retreat.

When Mary proclaimed as much to Adi, he nodded in assent. Given that this situation was enough to make the daughter of House Albert feel nervous and sickly, a mere commoner like himself (and a servant, no less) certainly couldn't hope to endure it. He'd only retained his composure this long because Mary was here (and all the more so because her spirit had been breaking).

"Listen, as soon as Their Majesties open that door and introduce Alicia to everyone, chaos will ensue. That's when we find an opening and make our getaway."

"Understood, my lady."

"As for my mother... I mean, just look at her. She's beaming with joy... There's no saving her now."

"Madam, I beg your pardon, but I'm hightailing it..."

Amid this grand finale, the two of them quietly worked out their strategy and nodded at each other.

Just as they had predicted, the moment Their Majesties opened the doors, noise erupted on the other side. After all, the royal pair had just appeared, embracing a girl before the eagerly awaiting crowd. Nobody knew what this meant yet, and that spurred the bustle all the more.

Seeing their chance, Mary and Adi swiftly got to their feet. If they were going to run, now was the time. The two of them moved stealthily onwards while covering their tracks. Just a few more steps, and they'd be out of this mayhem...

"Mary! Adi! We're going to have a meal with Their Majesties soon. How about you two join us?"

Right before they made their escape, Patrick appeared with a needlessly pleasant grin as he clasped them each by the shoulders. His smile was so dazzling that it would've surely pierced right through any other young lady's heart, possibly leaving her on the verge of collapse.

But in contrast to his elegant expression, he was grasping their shoulders with considerable strength. Mary could tell he was attempting to impede their withdrawal, and her cheek twitched. Adi couldn't even afford to do that much.

"You invited us because you knew we were trying to leave, didn't you?" asked Mary.

"Ah, come on now. Alicia will be glad if you two are with us."

"Just as I thought this farce had finally ended, you're suggesting a meal with Their Majesties?! Stop joking around!"

"I... I'd really rather head home!" Adi piped up. "I'll have dinner and head straight to bed! I can't take any more of this!"

"See!" said Mary. "I finally manage to get some composure back, and now *Adi's* falling apart!"

"Just what were you two plotting?" Patrick asked with a sigh of exasperation, though he showed no indication of lessening his grip on them any time soon.

Mary didn't have the strength to shake him off, and though Adi surpassed Patrick in both strength and stamina, he wouldn't do such a thing on account of their difference in rank. In other words, it was over for them. Their already

narrow getaway path was now completely blocked by Patrick.

As if delivering a coup de grâce to a fleeing enemy, Alicia, who was sandwiched between Their Majesties, cheerfully called out both their names. For the finishing blow, she started waving at them.

At this, even Mary resigned herself to her fate with a great sigh and a droop of her shoulders. She didn't even have enough willpower left in her to glare at Patrick.

In due course, they somehow made it through the meal, and by the time Mary was back in the carriage, she had truly surpassed her limit and leaned limply against the window in a gesture unbefitting a noble lady.

"I may be the daughter of House Albert, but to join Their Majesties in a meal out of nowhere... I vaguely remember commenting that it was delicious, but I have zero recollection of what we actually ate."

"Just think how *I* felt, milady. I can count on one hand the number of times I've dined in such a manner in my life. And to have sat together with Their Majesties... Oof, just the memory alone is enough to give me the jitters..."

As they mumbled and grumbled, the Dyce family's carriage swayed about on its way to Albert Manor.

Keryl had already gone home earlier via the carriage they'd arrived with. It was hard to tell what she was thinking, having forcibly brought the two of them to the palace and then promptly returned back home, but given Adi's present condition, it was probably for the best that she'd departed first.

The congress had left him mentally exhausted, having to dine with and sit by Their Majesties had made him exceedingly anxious, and to top it off, he had motion sickness. If in addition to all of that he'd been burdened with the weight of having to sit next to the Lady of House Albert and make her daughter sit in the lower seat, he might have actually fainted.

The only other passenger inside the carriage was Patrick, which seemed to give Adi some peace of mind as he leaned against the window and interjected from time to time.

Patrick watched as Mary, who was sitting next to Adi, occasionally rubbed his

back and made quips at his remarks. “You’re a good woman, Mary.”

Her eyes widened as she glanced at him questioningly. He looked flawless as usual, wearing a refreshing smile on his face as the breeze from the outside fluttered his hair.

“Where’s this coming from? Kicking yourself for having dumped me, are you?” she scoffed.

“Yeah, I was just thinking of wooing you into becoming my concubine.”

“Oh, so you’ve finally gotten sick of that peasant girl.”

“Not at all. I just felt a craving for the taste of something a little different.”

“My, you don’t say! Your diet must be painfully plain for the first son of House Dyce if you prefer that commoner over me.”

So the two smirked and bantered with each other. *They’re not being honest*, Adi thought to himself as he leaned weakly against the window. But he said nothing, since if he did, he might’ve been thrown off this carriage, and more than anything, he knew that expecting honesty out of these two would be asking for too much.

Chapter 8

Outside the auditorium, a crowd of people smiled brightly at each other in the warm rays of the sun.

The inside of the finely adorned building resounded with lively voices. Some wept over the sorrow of parting, others made promises to each other that their friendship would never fade, and others yet stood side by side with their longtime teachers, flashing smiling faces.

Among them was Patrick and the rest of the student council members; a group of female students had lined up to hand them bouquets of flowers. Many of the popular members were graduating, and as such, the collection of guests was unlike any other in previous years. Underclassmen, those who'd already graduated, and even their neighbors had endeavored to gather here today.

"Lord Patrick is really incredible," Adi remarked. "He's gone up onstage twice already, once to give his greetings to the previous president of the student council, and then to reply to the congratulatory speech."

"He'll also receive an award on behalf of the graduating class, so it will add up to three. Being onstage is basically his specialty at this point. I could laugh!" Mary quipped.

"If that's the case, you might as well have agreed to give the speech in his place, milady... And by the way, what are you reading?" Adi, who'd been reading the graduation ceremony program, directed his gaze over to what Mary was holding.

Initially, he'd thought she was reading the same thing, but the paper in her hand was a different color from his. The thickness was different too, and so it became clear to him she'd been reading something else altogether.

Mary glanced down at it, looked back up at Adi, then, nonchalantly and as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, she said: "A tourist brochure for the northern provinces."

Looking carefully, the pamphlet in her hands bore the name of the northern

land she would be cast away to, as well as some pictures of birds. The “K” of Karelia Academy, which would usually signify the school’s affiliation with a document, was missing, and there was a world of difference between the cheap, simple design of her pamphlet and the academy’s needlessly extravagant graduation ceremony program.

Glimpsing as much, Adi heaved a great sigh. “But we’re at the graduation ceremony...”

“And that’s exactly why I’m reading this. We’re at the very last part now,” Mary said with a huffy laugh, at which Adi only sighed again.

For the in-game Mary, the graduation ceremony was her final stage where the grand climax would take place.

This was where Princess Alicia and her partner would denounce her for everything she’d done, and her sins would be dragged out into broad daylight for all to see. The downfall which had begun with the accusation event would finally conclude with Mary kicked down to the bottom of the proverbial gorge. Though, for the players of *Heart High* embodying the role of Alicia, this was their moment to yell, *“Take that!”* at the exhilaration of finally seeing Mary cornered and denounced.

Mary’s gaze fell back down to the pamphlet as she explained this, to which Adi responded with a discontented, “I see.”

He was still dubious of her words. Considering the present situation, he just couldn’t imagine Alicia and Patrick wanting to denounce Mary. But because even Alicia’s true identity had matched the events of the game, part of him did anxiously ponder the what ifs.

Not everything had turned out according to the plot Mary had explained, but many of the happenings still lined up. Even if it wasn’t Alicia who denounced her in the end, it was still possible Mary would be sent away to the north by some other means. In fact, looking at her now, he wouldn’t be surprised if she’d decided to travel north by herself if nothing else happened.

With renewed determination, Adi grasped her shoulder, and when she looked up at him quizzically, he gazed fixedly into her eyes. “I’ll follow you anywhere, Your Ladyship, be it to the northern boonies or a wild game restaurant.”

“Oh my, you still haven’t given that idea up?”

“Of course not. My place is at your side. Besides, I can do the bird hunting,” Adi claimed as his cheeks reddened slightly. To distract from that fact, he straightened his posture.

Mary’s eyes widened at first, then creased as she smiled. “You can be the assistant manager, then.”

And so the rest of the ceremony proceeded smoothly, with numerous female students lining up to see Patrick onstage for the third time. Their shrill voices rang out, and some even cried out his name with tears streaming down their faces. As for Mary, she’d barely held back her laughter seeing him onstage during his second appearance, and by the third, she couldn’t even lift her head up to look at him as her shoulders trembled.

Gradually her mood shifted, and as she listened to the last speech by the academy’s principal, she was back to her usual dignified self. She gazed ahead graciously, looking every part the woman ready for her honorable death, for she knew her denunciation was on the horizon. With no trepidation nor opposition, she majestically waited for the moment to come.

“My lady...”

“It’s about to begin, Adi.”

If all went as in the game, Alicia would appear on the stage, clad in a dress, once the principal’s speech had concluded. Her glittering dress was in the shade of light blue, with the royal insignia embroidered on the cloth, and the tiara placed upon her golden hair was simple yet refined. Seeing her new aristocratic sprite was such a change from her commoner self that even the game’s players held their breaths upon her appearance.

Everyone (players included) was captivated by the in-game Alicia as they listened to her explain everything she’d experienced due to her previously perceived rank difference, after which, she made a pledge to improve the terrible social customs regarding the lower classes. The ideals she’d gained were a direct result of her experiences as a commoner attending the noble Karelia Academy, and that was the stepping stone towards the denunciation of the very archetype of these social customs—Mary.

As for the in-game Mary, she had trembled when the country girl she'd been speaking ill of this entire time appeared before her very eyes as royalty. Yet still she insulted Alicia, tried calling on her cronies (who'd already long since abandoned her), spewed all kinds of lies, and exposed an unsightly side of herself to the public.

The real Mary, however, had no intention of acting in such an uncouth manner. Though she was heading for the very same ruinous course, not an ounce of her wanted to make up excuses or lies. After all, she was still Mary Albert, and though she wished for the same fate as the in-game Mary, she was not about to stoop to her level.

Besides, it was true that she'd shouted abuse at the peasant girl, and despite knowing Alicia's true identity, she still made snide remarks about her etiquette all the same.

For Mary, who was proud of her graceful table manners and general conduct, and who could perfectly play the part of a noble lady, the idea of having her etiquette criticized in a public space was utterly humiliating. She recalled all those things she'd pointed out about Alicia: her tendency towards ungainly sprinting, her inferior table manners, her overall dearth of elegance, and of course, how all those graceless acts solidified her peasant status. If someone had said any of those things about her, Mary would've been so humiliated that she'd flee the scene at once. If she'd been in Alicia's shoes, she would've certainly grown to hate herself, such was the extent of how harsh her criticisms had been.

That was precisely why she'd gracefully face her denunciation, and just as gracefully accept her fate.

Mary observed the stage resolutely as the principal's long-winded speech finally came to an end and he gave a deep bow to cap it off. (His hair was so painfully thin that his scalp peeked through, reflecting the stage lights. Looking back on it, one year ago, she'd regained her past life memories under these exact same circumstances. To think that moment had been the very beginning of it all... Actually, no, the sight of that balding head didn't stir her heart in the slightest.)

According to the scheduled program, this should've marked the end of the graduation ceremony. A few of the students stretched in their seats, and others smacked the shoulders of their dozing friends. Everyone was convinced it was over. Only Mary remained elegantly seated, awaiting the person who would be appearing onstage.

It wasn't long before the auditorium began to buzz with noise as a figure slowly approached.

The heroine had taken the stage.

Just like in *Heart High*, she wore a light-blue dress, and upon her head was a small but stylishly crafted tiara. Normally, Alicia would've devolved into nervous laughter, displaying a colorful range of emotions on her face, yet now there was an air of dignity and dauntlessness about her. In place of her usual childish adorableness was a refined, beautiful countenance.

At the sight of this almost intimidating royal high-handedness, the noise within the auditorium only grew louder. Though most students were aware of the truth by now, the image they had in their minds of Alicia was still that of a commoner. Their perception of her as the lively, bumbling, and cheerful girl running around the place wouldn't crumble so easily, yet the person standing before them and solemnly surveying them all was a far cry from the girl in their minds.

Even Adi, who'd known the truth well in advance, stared at the stage completely flabbergasted. "Sh-She's beautiful..."

"Yes, not bad for someone barely keeping her head above the water."

"Not bad? I'd say she's doing splendidly. Her walk, the way she curtsied... It was all perfectly sophisticated. She's almost like..." Adi trailed off, turning his gaze back to Mary.

Despite the noise all around, she appeared entirely composed as she remained in her seat and quietly listened to Alicia's speech. Her expression was somewhat self-deprecating, but at the same time, she seemed contented.

"She's almost like *you*, my lady."

"My, do cut these jokes out. I won't have you compare me to some country

girl," Mary replied with a snide laugh, and Adi sighed as he shrugged.

She intended on her own downfall, yet she was still so proud. To top it off, she even said, "If you want to bring *me* down, you'd best be prepared to earn that right."

Though Adi was exasperated and dismayed with her, that side of her was precisely what made her the Mary Albert he knew. He supposed that the fact he found her twisted, contrarian personality charming in its own way likewise spelled *his* ruin, and with a wry little smile at his own expense, he turned his gaze back to the stage.

Alicia's speech eventually came to an end. "And now, there's someone I'd like to speak to," she prefaced before calling out Mary's name.

The line was practically word-for-word from the game, according to what Mary had told Adi. *Could this really be it?* he wondered as his expression darkened.

He still couldn't picture Alicia trying to bring Mary down, yet so far, everything had turned out just as his mistress had said it would. Alicia's appearance in the middle of the ceremony, the color of her dress, the make of her tiara, and even the contents of her speech—everything matched perfectly with the final act of *Heart High* Mary had described.

Though, there *were* some notable discrepancies, such as the fact that while the student council members harbored loathing for the in-game Mary, in reality they had all greeted her with beaming smiles at the start of the ceremony.

Both deviations and correlations were at play—so which category would Mary's ruin fall into? Would it head down the path of irregularity, along with Alicia's affection for Mary? Or would it all match up with *Heart High*'s conclusion, leaving House Albert crushed and Mary sent off to the northern countryside?

Not knowing which would come, Adi cast a nervous glance at Mary. In contrast, Mary hadn't shifted her composed attitude as she rose to her feet in response to Alicia. In fact, when she noticed Adi's countenance, she smirked. "What's with that look on your face?"

“Milady...”

“The beginning of the end is already here, Adi. It cannot be stopped... Not that I’d want it to, anyway.”

With a sarcastic smile, Mary elegantly straightened out her skirt and then headed right for the stage. There was no fear nor hesitation in her eyes as she looked back at Alicia, ready to face off against Alicia’s newfound high-handedness with that of her own.

“What did you think of my speech, Lady Mary?”

The auditorium fell silent at Alicia’s question as the audience looked between her and Mary, awaiting the answer. Mary had anticipated as much, and the corners of her mouth lifted in response to the tense atmosphere around them.

Once again, things matched up almost painfully close to the game.

Alicia’s inquiry was the very last lifeline she had presented to Mary. Had the in-game Mary chosen to admit to her wrongdoings and apologized, Alicia would’ve been willing to forgive her. That never came to be in any of the routes, but the point was that Alicia, despite being the biggest victim of Mary’s terrible treatment of the lower classes, was still willing to give her another chance. What a compassionate story line, indeed.

That said, Alicia wasn’t willing to turn a blind eye to all that Mary had done—she simply wished for Mary to realize her mistakes and admit to them in front of the crowd, even if just this once, precisely *because* Mary had been so arrogant and audacious that her personality seemed to embody all the worst parts of the aristocracy condensed into one.

Yet the in-game Mary took no notice of Alicia’s clemency, and with a dissatisfied expression, she answered just as the real Mary did now: “Your ideas are as boorish as the rest of you. It’s laughable!”

In response, the in-game Alicia let out a sigh and abandoned her hopes of redeeming Mary, turning her back on her and denouncing her in one fell swoop.

She certainly had *not* said, “Yes! Thank you!” with a happy look on her face.

“...Huh?”

“I want to be a princess without throwing away the rest of my identity. I knew you’d understand, Lady Mary!”

“Er, wait a moment...”

“I owe my way of thinking to you too! Even when my status in society was about to change, you continued treating me the same way as you had always done. That’s what lifted my confidence! I realized that I can keep being me, just the way I am.”

“R-Right... That’s great; I’m happy for you. B-But, hold on just a second...”

“Thank you! I’ll do my best!”

“Yes, sure, do what you want. Now, about what I said...”

“I know that you’ll have my back... I always believed in that! I love you, Lady Mary!” Alicia proclaimed her affections, loud and clear for all to hear. A moment later, Patrick emerged onto the stage from the wings and wrapped his arm around Alicia’s shoulders.

The way they stood side by side was exactly the same as in the last scene of the game, but Mary barely took notice. She’d prepared herself to receive the denunciation of a lifetime, but instead Alicia had *thanked* her! On top of that, the happy couple on the stage gazed at her warmly and said, “Let’s work together to uphold our nation!” as though they were all like-minded comrades.

Mary had no idea how to react, and then was overwhelmed by a rouse of cheers from the audience. Dumbfounded, she made her way back to her seat and dropped down into it with a thump, as though all energy had drained out of her. Her mind couldn’t process what had just happened, and she didn’t even utter a single complaint to Adi, who was dying from laughter right next to her.

And so the stately graduation ceremony of Karelia Academy, along with all of the surprises academic life had in store, had come to an end. All of the students began leaving the auditorium.

Typically, many of them would’ve been crying or similarly moved by the thought of having graduated, but the majority of the students still felt lingering excitement from the joint onstage appearances of the princess, House Albert, and House Dyce (the daughter of House Albert hadn’t responded, or even nodded, during most of her appearance, but the students were so excited that they’d barely noticed). Some, though they knew Patrick was set to marry the princess, still cried out to him in shrill voices.

As for Mary herself, she was completely unaffected by this atmosphere as she stood stock-still beneath the shade of a tree.

“I... I was stunned!”

“Milady, you spoke! Well done!” Adi rejoiced. “Step one achieved!”

Mary glared at him reproachfully, but her eyes glistened with tears so that, no matter how hard she tried, there was no real sharpness in them. “What are you talking about?! Nothing turned out as I expected! What of the restaurant now?! Those migratory birds in the north are waiting for me!”

“I doubt they’d like to be hunted down and eaten, Your Ladyship,” he pointed out. “But what’s there to be so frustrated about? This is the best grand finale we could’ve hoped for!”

“What do you mean?” Mary asked, tilting her head at him.

“Just think: Now that Alicia and Patrick are together, the problem of the country’s succession is resolved. And House Albert has built a friendly relationship with the royal family, so there’s no need to fear inflicting their wrath! See? What a superb grand finale!”

“Well... I suppose you’re right. But I tried so hard all this time!” Mary lamented. “Why did things turn out this way?!”

In response, Adi only chuckled at her.

As for House Albert’s ruin...it was nowhere in sight. Instead, they’d even gained a reputation lately as the House most devoted to the royal family.

Keryl Albert, rather than bearing the guilt of a great sin, had been the one to leave the imperial seal on the baby princess, thanks to her motherly empathy towards the queen. Plus, her daughter, Mary, had withdrawn her engagement to Patrick after acknowledging how he and Alicia felt about each other, irrespective of how the cancellation would affect her own rank. The royal family, and everyone around them besides, recognized these commendable deeds. How could ruin possibly befall House Albert when it boasted two such distinguished figures?

In fact, the story gradually became embellished and dramatized, to the point that one could hardly listen to it without shedding a few tears.

All the young maidens who heard the tale claimed, “Lady Mary canceled her engagement to Lord Patrick, despite being desperately in love with him!” as their hearts fluttered at the thought. If Mary herself had heard of this, she would’ve probably fainted.

Alas, the family that had once been second in power to the royalty had been elevated to a status equaling theirs. This, too, had been formally acknowledged by the royals themselves.

“H-How did this happen...?” Mary mumbled absentmindedly while Adi explained the flow of events to her.



Everything had turned out the exact opposite of her goals. She’d been vaguely

aware of that fact, but hearing Adi talk about it made her realize just how much of a corny story it all was.

Compared to *Heart High*'s true ending, commonly nicknamed the "Bed of Roses Ending," this made for an even more convenient happily ever after. In fact, it was practically an entire *field* of not just roses, but pansies and daisies as well.

Tears prickled Mary's eyes at the thought of such an unexpected and exceedingly difficult-to-accept reality. Thinking back on the past year of hard labor (she truly *had* done her best), she was left feeling at rock bottom, and let out a pathetic grumble underneath the tranquil, serene sky.

"Ah... My life in the northern provinces..."

"That won't be happening, so let it go, milady!"

"All of my efforts to aim for doom..."

"Indeed, they were completely wasted!"

"I'm so...so... Hey, wait a second! You're supposed to console me! Why are you just rubbing salt in my wounds?!" Mary protested tearfully at his decisive blows.

But Adi seemed on the verge of commenting how satisfied he was with this ending, and though she shouted and stamped on his foot, he simply pacified her with a, "There, there," and a smile.

Though usually she'd lose the will to be angry at that smile, this time, it made her explode with even more rage and turbulence, which was very understandable.

"No! This isn't fair! I even tried beating Patrick at his own game and came out on top of the class for the final tests, despite the fact I've wandered between second and tenth place and usually maintained fifth this entire time!"

"Your subdued methods are exactly why things turned out the way they did, my lady."

"I don't want to hear it!!!"

As Mary, who apparently still hadn't fully processed reality, continued

screaming and whining, Adi kept pacifying her with a wry smile. (He spoke to her as though she was a child throwing a tantrum, though it was hard to blame her when all of her efforts had produced far more positive results than ever anticipated.)

"Come on, milady. You can have your revenge during college."

"But the migratory birds..."

"We can leave that for another time. For now, it's time for us to start higher education, *together*! Right?" he prompted, eager to hear her agreement. Mary's eyes widened at the way he'd emphasized the word "together."

Gradually, her expression started to relax. "I suppose," she quietly assented, and seemed to have regained her composure, perhaps having finally come to terms with her present situation. She even slowly started to smile—a happy, soft, and genuine smile, which was neither reminiscent of the eccentric noble lady nor the daughter of House Albert some knew her as, but in Adi's mind, this one suited her best of all.

"I did say I'd follow you anywhere, Your Ladyship. That includes college."

"Yes, I suppose if you're with me, college might not be so bad after all."

"And it won't just be me. See?"

Glancing where he'd pointed, Mary spotted a gathering of Karelia Academy's alumni, current students, and even teachers surrounding Alicia and Patrick. Yet the two of them weaved their way through the crowd, heading straight for Mary and Adi instead.

"Lady Mary!" Alicia exclaimed cheerfully, rushing towards her. Her royal-embroidered dress fluttered in the wind, and the tiara atop her golden locks wavered with her every step. Moreover, she was waving about a bouquet of flowers all alumni had received, so petals scattered all around her.

Witnessing this, Mary let out an exasperated sigh, gulped in a deep breath of air, and...

"How many times do I have to tell you, *stop* scampering around all over the place, you peasant!"

...criticized Alicia like a true villainess.

Epilogue

Mary's day had been disheartening, to say the least. Alicia and Patrick called out to her earlier and made a vow of friendship with her, the entire student council gave her their greetings, and even the teachers stopped by to say things like, "I look forward to what you'll achieve at college." So by now, Mary had turned into a machine, spewing out automated replies with a thousand-yard stare. Eventually, she managed to find an opening within the wave of people and made her escape. More than ready to head home, she and Adi were presently on their way to the bicycle parking space (yes, they'd commuted by bike even to the graduation ceremony).

It was right around this time that Adi remarked in surprise, "Oh? My lady, your hair is unraveling."

Mary creased her brows. "My hair is unraveling? I've no idea what that's supposed to mean."

"I suppose it *is* just about impossible to believe, but alas... Please look," said Adi, reaching out to touch her hair.

Indeed, among those drills like steel that had made hairdressers shed tears both today and in the past alike, there was a single lock of hair that drooped loosely, as though it had escaped the spiral vortex. It was slender and not at all like the rest of her ringlets, although a small trace of its previous shape was left in its gentle, loose wave.

Mary stared at it in shock. Her hair had never looked this loose before. For as long as she could remember, her silver locks were tightened into hard ringlets that rubbed and bumped against each other. Even when wet, the hair gradually curled itself back up—a sight that almost made her fall into despair.

"How woeful..." Adi lamented. "You received such a huge shock today that even your drills unscrewed themselves."

"My drills have no reflection upon my mental state! Still...I wonder what brought this on? It's so strange..." Mary said with a confused tilt of her head,

coiling the loosened lock of hair around her finger.

After the Graduation Ceremony

During Karelia Academy's graduation ceremony, each of the graduating students received a bouquet of flowers. Though on the smaller side, they were nevertheless elegantly arranged with bright, complementary colors that perfectly matched the academy's image. In fact, the school had the flowers specially brought over from a faraway land, and a number of first-class designers put in diligent efforts to arrange them.

Each one was tied together with a ribbon bearing the academy's emblem and included a message card elaborately decorated with gold leaf. The whole package was imbued with the capital and political power of the nobility from beginning to end.

However, the students attending Karelia Academy would be hard pressed to become emotional over a single bouquet, and though many smiled sweetly upon receiving theirs, trotting out platitudes such as, "Oh, how lovely!" they all just as quickly lost interest and turned their attentions elsewhere. In the end, no matter how much money was invested in them, the sons and daughters of aristocratic families weren't so easily moved by mere flowers.

Though, certain superstitions were an exception.

"Giving away the bouquet?" asked Adi, staring at the flowers in his own hands as though on the verge of asking, *"Why this, again?"* His bouquet was almost identical to Mary's, except that the ribbon around his was blue. The ribbons came in a few different colors, and he recalled that some of the girls had made a fuss about the colors matching.

"What's the point of giving them to someone else if all the students received one of their own anyway?" he inquired further.

"Why, the very significance lies in giving away the bouquet you yourself received!" Mary explained self-importantly.

Of course, she was holding a bouquet of her own, but why on earth should a daughter of House Albert be appreciative of such a modest bunch of flowers

when her family had an expansive and luxurious courtyard to call their own? She held it in one hand, as though it were some kind of luggage. (Yet she still wouldn't let Adi hold it for her, as she was aware it was something she'd received as a congratulatory gift. Mary had a surprisingly strong sense of obligation and couldn't bring herself to treat something she'd received unkindly.)

In any case, both Adi and Mary were presently holding bouquets of flowers, with the former tilting his head in confusion and the latter proudly puffing out her chest.

"There's a certain superstition that's been handed down for generations at Karelia Academy," Mary went on. "The idea is that if you give the bouquet you received at graduation to someone very dear to you..."

"You'll die a tragic, gruesome death?!"

"Ew, that's horrible! Stop turning a celebratory gift into some kind of cursed item! You'll jinx it!" shouted Mary.

Adi hardly paid her anger any heed, prompting swiftly, "So? What's supposed to happen?"

He'd been the one to derail this conversation in the first place, and Mary glared at him for his attitude. "If it *was* a cursed item, I'd stuff it into your hands without hesitation!"

Afterwards, she cleared her throat and looked back down at the bouquet in her hands. Bright red roses were the centerpiece, surrounded by smaller white and pink flowers that added volume to the bouquet. The light-pink ribbon around it had the school's emblem pictured in gold, so that anyone could tell at a glance the bouquet was of a high quality, but for Mary, whose family garden had always been maintained by a specialist gardener, it was simply mediocre.

In the end, it only amounted to a bunch of flowers.

"But you know, these flowers hold our memories from the time we were students," she pointed out.

"Our memories?"

“That’s why you give it to someone to show them that you’ve always longed for them. Some people give it even if it’s a one-sided love, and others exchange their bouquets as proof of their unchanging love for each other. Ah, how romantic!” Mary said absentmindedly.

As he listened to her words, Adi surveyed their surroundings. Right, so *that* was why some people were exchanging their bouquets, and others loitered around with flowers in their hands, looking left and right as though in search of someone. Among them were also newly minted alumni who passed their flowers over with tears in their eyes, whereas others triumphantly showed off the multiple bouquets in their possession.

In particular, the student council members were exceedingly popular recipients, with the latest graduates, current students, and even those who’d graduated in previous years giving them their own bouquets. Most popular of them was Patrick, and so many people surrounded him that it was difficult to tell if he was even there at all.

Both the spectacle and the news of that very student-like superstition had Adi nodding in admiration. Meanwhile Mary, still entranced by her thoughts, let out a small sigh.

“Still, if you’re going to confess anyway, at least do it during your school years. It’s such a waste to do it at the graduation ceremony, where it all comes to an end,” she remarked, dismantling the romantic atmosphere in one fell swoop.

“My lady... That’s not how it works.”

“Of course it is. If quietly staring at someone in longing isn’t bringing about any results, then you know it’s time to act.”

“That’s easier said than done...” Adi sighed deeply, but then suddenly looked aside as though he spotted something. Noticing this, Mary looked up at him quizzically.

His rust-ringed pupils stared fixedly at something, and slowly he opened his mouth to speak. “Your Ladyship... Alicia is heading this way at an exponential spe—”

“Lady Mary!!!”

“Exponential speed,” he’d been meaning to say, but before he could end the sentence, Alicia had already jumped to embrace Mary from behind.

Mary had no time to scream or reproach Alicia, much less avoid her pounce. The impact made her stoop forward, and in a panic, she clung to Adi’s arm, which he had reached out to her.

Someone like Mary Albert did not allow herself to be as unsightly as to fall over, even against a surprise attack... Though, that had been a close call.

“Nice save on my part!” claimed Adi.

“Nice save?! You should’ve warned me in time!”

“I was just thinking Alicia is getting faster and faster by the day...and before I knew it, she was already here.”

“You’re supposed to pay attention to escorting your mistress, not the development of some commoner! And *you*—let go of me already! This is disgraceful!” Mary shrieked, pulling away from Alicia. She brushed her hand against the places where Alicia had clung to as though to say, “*You dirtied me!*”

Then, she glanced coolly at Alicia and just as icily asked, “So? Is there something you need from me?” Of course, her attitude still screamed, *“Stop talking to me!”*

In response, Alicia beamed. “I changed my clothes!” she exclaimed, spinning on the spot. Her light-blue dress from before had been beautiful, but it was the Karelia school uniform that truly brought out her adorableness.

“R-Right, I see. Then why don’t you hurry off someplace else? Adi and I are busy enough as it is.”

“Oh, Lady Mary! Your bouquet has a pink ribbon too, like mine! Please look, they match!”

“Are you even *listening* to me?!”

“Alicia, have you heard? There’s a superstition regarding these bouquets,” Adi interjected.

“Wow, really?! I’d love to hear it, Adi!”

“Oh, I see. You two detest me, don’t you?!” Mary screeched, but Adi and Alicia continued their conversation completely undeterred.

Adi went on to explain the belief surrounding the flowers while ignoring Mary’s grumbled complaints. Alicia’s eyes glittered at this new knowledge as she gazed down at the bouquet in her hands.

A bouquet of flowers filled with school time memories, and giving yours to someone important meant...

For Alicia, who’d overcome her rank difference and experienced a grand love affair, it must have sounded like a method to boost that love. She’d already been treating the flowers with care, but now she held onto them even tighter.

The pale roses of her bouquet and the little flowers around them were so lovely that they only served to bring out Alicia’s own adorableness all the more. “Give them to someone important...” she uttered quietly as her cheeks reddened, a sight that would’ve certainly pierced the heart of any ordinary man.

“How cute,” Adi said calmly, sending Alicia compliments while Mary still huffed out complaints. “That right there is how an honest girl reacts,” he informed his mistress, upon which he received a vigorous stomp on his foot.

At any rate, Alicia happily gazed at her bouquet after hearing of the superstition and then suddenly lifted her gaze to Mary and Adi. She then looked over her shoulder, to where Patrick was all but drowning in bunches of flowers.

She looked between the three of them twice over...and the stems of the flowers in her bouquet squeaked. “Please wait... I’ll split it into three!”

“Go ahead and palm off your torn up floral debris onto me. I’ll stomp and bury it into the ground before your very eyes, and then slap you to boot!”

“Alicia, there’s no need to think of me! You should give this to Lord Patrick!”

In response to them, Alicia stopped trying to rip up her bouquet and hung her head down. “But...” She had only one bouquet, and three people she wanted to give it to. “You both are very dear to me, so I wanted to give this to you to show

my thanks...”

“Just the fact you feel that way is enough for me, Alicia.”

“And I don’t need your gratitude!” Mary said flatly.

But Alicia, as though she hadn’t heard her, looked over her shoulder again with an anxious expression. Of course, she was looking at Patrick. Or she would have been, but he was so obscured by the flock of people that only the peak of his indigo hair was visible.

“What a huge crowd. Being so popular must be exhausting,” murmured Mary as though it was none of her business, and Alicia sulkily pursed her lips.

For her, the popular student council president, so adored by men and women of all ages, was her precious lover. They probably wanted to celebrate their graduation together, but he’d been taken away by the others instead.

“Couldn’t you exert your royal power and just disperse the crowd?”

“I couldn’t do such a thing... And Lord Patrick is getting so many flowers already...” Alicia responded as she hung her head. Indeed, Patrick’s hands (and everything from his bag down to his feet) were full of countless bouquets of flowers.

The sheer number of them was proof of his popularity, but for Alicia, it meant her own bouquet would get buried. Even if she did manage to somehow push through the throng of people and give Patrick her flowers, after a few minutes, they’d get lost among countless others anyway.

Neither Mary nor Adi thought Patrick would actually commit such a blunder, but that was Alicia’s current anxiety-ridden state of mind. “Lord Patrick already has so many that a single bouquet from me would hardly make a difference...” she worried. “Besides, both his hands are already full, so I probably couldn’t give it to him even if I tried.”

“True. At this point, it’d be more like a game to see just how many bouquets we can stack on him,” Mary remarked.

“Please stop, milady. You’re making me want to test it out myself.”

“The trick is to put yours in an unbalanced spot and entice the person going

after you to make a mistake."

"Such dirty tactics... Oh! Oops," Adi murmured, quickly shutting his mouth at the sight of the plainly sulking Alicia.

Her cheeks were puffed out, and her reproachful eyes seemed to silently say, *"I'm genuinely troubled over here!"* Sensing as much, Adi tried to pacify her in a panic.

But Mary disregarded them both, casting her eyes towards Patrick. "Humph," she huffed. "Calm yourself. I just had a splendid idea."

"What do you mean, Lady Mary?"

"Listen. It's true Patrick's hands are full right now, but there's still a way of giving him the bouquet that doesn't involve his hands."

"You mean putting it into his bag? To be honest, I'd rather just give him my flowers directly, even if they end up getting buried..." Alicia shook her head with a frown. Though she and Patrick hadn't given an official announcement, they were still lovers, and the idea of sneakily hiding her bouquet in his bag just because she was worried it'd get covered up seemed utterly shameful.

Seeing her sorrowful expression, Mary patted Alicia's shoulder as though to reassure her.

"Lady Mary..."

"Worry not. There's a method for you to give him the bouquet without it getting buried. A very special method," Mary assured her.

"Really?" At the sight of Mary's persuasive countenance, the light returned to Alicia's saddened purple eyes. She looked fixedly at Mary and inquired, "What method is that?"

In response, Mary assumed importance as she inclined her head with a gentle smile and...

"His *mouth!* You can shove it into his mouth, Alicia!"

...smiled smugly, as though she'd just said an incredibly wise remark.

"Oh boy..." Adi murmured, looking as though he had truly given up.

Alicia, however, squeezed her bouquet with renewed determination, as though Mary's confidence in her own excellent advice had somehow resonated with her. "You're right!" she exclaimed, her expression brightening.

Whether it was because of the festive post-graduation atmosphere, or her level of affection for Mary, or perhaps the heartache of not being able to get through to Patrick—the cause was unclear, but in any case, Alicia had clearly lost any reasonable sense of judgment.

"Thank you, Lady Mary! I'll do just that!"

"W-Wait, Alicia... Slow down and think this through..." Adi pleaded.

"Oh, just one moment. I have something to tell you, Alicia," Mary called out to the girl, purposely drowning out Adi's words. She stood in front of Alicia, grasped her by the shoulders, and looked into her eyes as though to imply she was about to say something very serious. (Needless to say, this was all to cut Adi's attempts at snapping Alicia back to normalcy short.)

"Remember, cancellation or not, Patrick was once engaged to me. What would everyone think of the idea that *I'm* giving you love advice?"

"Oh... Th-That's true." Alicia's eyebrows arched down, and she averted her gaze. Mary and Patrick may have made the decision to break off their engagement themselves, but apparently Alicia thought she had been the cause of it and felt some responsibility over it.

Seeing as much, Mary smiled sardonically and gently called out Alicia's name. "Don't worry about it. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

"Lady Mary..."

"I was reminding you just in case, since we don't know how people might react to this. That's why, if Patrick questions you about anything, be sure to let him know that *Adi* was the one who told you to do all that."

Whoosh... The three bouquets of flowers between them swayed in the pleasant breeze.

"Milady!!! Why are you incriminating *me*?!"

"Yes, Lady Mary! Off I go!"

“Hold on, Alicia! Think this through— Ah! So fast!”

Perhaps because she’d always run around all day (turning a deaf ear to Mary’s scolding), or perhaps because the conversation just now sparked a flame within her lovestruck heart, Alicia eagerly sped away towards Patrick, fast as lightning.

Having failed to stop her, Adi turned to glare bitterly at Mary. “What if he gets angry at me?”

“Goodness, you should at least be prepared to bear your mistress’s sins,” she replied, staring at Alicia with a smirk.

Adi heaved a massive sigh at his irresponsible mistress, but then smiled fearlessly.

“My, you got over that quickly.”

“I believe in Lord Patrick. I’m sure he’ll be able to logically infer that I’d never ask Alicia to do such a thing.” Though he was about to be blamed as the mastermind behind some truly eccentric behavior, Adi looked perfectly relaxed thanks to his trust in Patrick.

I was hoping he’d get a bit more flustered than this... thought Mary in disappointment as she glanced at Adi, then looked back at the crowd.

Alicia was the princess, and on top of that, everyone was aware that she and Patrick were together, so they all stepped aside at her appearance. The two were the pride of Karelia Academy, and so the crowd soon adjusted to surround them both. In fact, the sight of the two of them together only attracted even more people to draw near.

In but a single moment, the lively gathering of people suddenly turned completely silent.

Then, a buzz of noise started up again, and from within...

“Mary!!!”

...echoed Patrick’s angry voice.

There was nothing left to confirm—Alicia had definitely done as Mary had said. She’d crammed a bouquet of flowers right into her precious beloved’s mouth.

“I can’t believe he didn’t even hesitate before blaming me. Isn’t that just too cruel?” bemoaned Mary.

“See, I was certain Lord Patrick would know. There’s no way I’d ever give Alicia such instructions.”

“And you, Adi!” Patrick continued. “You should’ve put a stop to Mary’s antics!”

“Oh, he’s angry at me too.”

“Yes, a sound point,” Mary agreed, as though they were discussing something completely unrelated to them, and then cast her eyes back down to her own bouquet.

Did Alicia shove it into Patrick’s mouth handle first, or starting with the blossoming flowers themselves? Either was a delightful mental image, and Mary couldn’t help grinning smugly at the thought.

Suddenly, she turned her eyes to Adi’s bouquet. The color of the ribbon was different, as were the shades of some of the flowers, but both volume-and size-wise, it was much the same as hers.

“What are you going to do with that bouquet, Adi?”

“Me? To be honest, I haven’t made up my mind yet. As a man, I don’t know about having flowers in my room.”

“Yes, I suppose both your Cover-Up Mountain and the space behind your bookshelves are beyond the redemption that a single bouquet of flowers can provide.”

“Please don’t imply my room is some kind of den of filth.”

“Isn’t it?”

“...It is. But that aside, I can make the bouquet into dried flowers.”

“Dried flowers?” Mary questioned, tilting her head at this uncharacteristic notion.

Perhaps agreeing with her sentiment, Adi smiled in a strained manner. Apparently, one of the maids at Albert Manor was very skilled with her hands,

and she was able to turn all kinds of materials into stylish decorations.

Adi explained how lately, the maid was particularly fond of dried flower decorations, and how he often saw her picking up fallen flowers while he was helping the gardener. In response, Mary hummed thoughtfully and glanced down at her bouquet.

She had thought about putting the flowers up in her room as decoration, but as they were in full bloom, their life span would be inevitably short. Even if she put them into a vase as soon as they got back home, the flowers might start wilting in but a few days, or even by tonight.

If that's the case... Mary thought, looking up at Adi and then holding out her bouquet towards him. "You can have mine too!"

"...Huh?!" Adi's eyes widened at her sudden declaration.

Mary tilted her head quizzically at his reaction, still holding out the flowers. "I considered displaying them in my room, but they're probably going to wither very soon, so I think it'd be better to craft something nice out of them instead."

"B-But, if you give me that..."

Mary seemed completely perplexed by Adi's loss of composure. Still, she half forced the bouquet into his hands, and nodded in satisfaction upon seeing it in his possession.

"Is this truly fine with you, my lady?"

"I don't see why it wouldn't be."

"In that case... Um, please take mine as well!"

Adi held his bouquet out, just as Mary had done moments ago. This time, it was Mary who turned her surprised gaze down at the flowers presented to her.

The bouquet tied with a red ribbon rested in Adi's hand, while he held out the one with the blue ribbon.

"Adi?"

"My bouquet still has a lot of buds. It'll last a while, so you can keep it in your room," he urged her as she continued to gaze at the flowers.

Indeed, unlike Mary's fully blossomed bouquet, Adi's had a few flower buds scattered here and there. In that way, the bouquet was a little less voluminous, but that meant it'd last that much longer if put up in a room to be admired.

Mary nodded in understanding, accepting the bouquet. "That makes this an exchange, then."

"Y-Yes... It does. And, um...p-please don't exchange it with anyone else," Adi appealed, averting his gaze as his face reddened.

Mary held her new bouquet in both hands and looked up at Adi questioningly. "Huh? I can't exchange it anymore?"

"N-No, you may not. If you do, er..."

"Oh, I know! I'll die a tragic, gruesome death! Right?"

"Yes, yes, exactly. And compared to the others, I think this one will last the longest of all." How easy it was to infer what he meant! Yet Mary herself didn't seem to notice.

Even so, she still smiled proudly and declared, "It's okay! I'm not going to give it to anyone else. It's all mine now!"

For a moment, Adi was overcome with surprise at her unflinching assertion, but soon, a wry smile made its way onto his face. "That's right. All yours, milady."

Afterword

Hello! My name is Saki.

What did you think of my novel, *Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster*?

I had intended to write a rom-com, but clearly this story lends itself more towards pure comedy. I'd be delighted if it made you laugh at any point, even if only a little!

I would like to thank Haduki Futaba, who was in charge of the novel's illustrations, for drawing the characters in such an attractive and adorable way. From the time I received the very first drafts, I've been looking at the drawings every day without fail.

I'd also like to thank my manager for guiding me all the way here despite how clueless I was about everything.

And more than anything, I'd like to give my sincere thanks to every single person who has picked up and read this book.

Thank you very much! I hope we can meet again soon.

Saki