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YOUNG LADY ALBERT IS COURTING DISASTER
Story by Saki
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Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Prologue

Once every few years, Mary had a perm done to straighten her hair.

But uncoiling her stubborn drill-like curls was no easy feat, and no matter how skilled the hair stylists she'd have summoned were, and no matter how long they battled her hair, the post-treatment results were always nonexistent. Such was the terrifying power of her ringlets that many hairdressers yearned to quit while they were ahead, and the beauty salon she frequented had even given her locks the unfortunate nickname of the "Stylist-Killing Steel Drills."

And yet Mary kept trying, for she may have been an eccentric, but even she yearned to have the gently wavy hairstyles that her peers sported. Especially now that she was about to enter her second year of college, her desire for light silver waves that fluttered in the breeze just like her mother's only intensified.

Her tightly coiled drills waggled around, (this particular phrase was a favorite of Adi's to use. In addition, whenever her ringlets were being particularly stubborn, he'd say things like, "Wobbly, aren't they?" or, "Oh, they're lurching about more than usual today." Even at college, he still spoke as he pleased.) and along with her dress, they made her look all too childish. That may have been passable during high school, as the style made her look like a noble daughter, but in college, it was simply unacceptable.

So though she knew it was useless, Mary still tried to get a permanent straightening treatment. She dreamed of the day she'd finally be rid of the curls once and for all. However, it was difficult to pinpoint whether this was a case of her not knowing when to give up, or whether her ambition was in fact heroic and commendable.

"I'm sure it'll work this time, Lady Mary. Worry not!" the hairstylist assured her, combing her hair to help it dry.

How many times have I heard that one before? thought Mary, but out loud she said with a smile, "Yes, I have high hopes." Her losing streak was in the double digits by now, but she couldn't be disrespectful to the stylists who pulled out all the stops for her sake.

After all, they couldn't throw in the towel now, not when so many of their compatriots had been dealt an honorable death by those Stylist-Killing Steel Drills of hers. The remaining hairdressers inherited the will of the ones who had been lost. Mary's eyes involuntarily filled with tears as she pictured the retreating figures of the lost ones, entrusting their dreams to the survivors: *"Please, defeat those drills someday..."*

(To be clear, none of the hairdressers who'd been defeated by her curls had lost their jobs as a result, nor had they left their places of work. Her main attendant was either excluded due to her fear of Mary's ringlets, or had refused this challenge that cropped up once every few years and worked as normal. It was just that a little exaggeration could lead to great joy if they someday actually succeed, and this was no more than a charade to let their frustrations out at losing to Mary's hair.)

"It's all done, Lady Mary."

"Ah, already?"

"Yes, indeed..." The stylist gulped, and based on the volume of that sound alone, one could easily guess their anxiety.

None could blame the stylist for that. Typically, the moment hairdressers uttered the words, "It's done!" Mary's hair would promptly curl right back up. The movement was so vigorous that one could practically hear the *rrrumble* of the drills, as though they were laughing in mockery at all the stylists' efforts.

Somewhere in her heart, Mary was ready for the same thing as always to happen, and so she calmly awaited the inevitable...

...

...

Her gentle silver waves didn't budge an inch, and both Mary and her stylist—and in fact, the entire salon—were completely silent.

"Let's give up on the impossible and go find something to eat, milady!" It was Adi who broke the silence, with his usual insolent remarks that ill befit his rank as a servant, as he entered the salon. Yet soon he tilted his head at the strange atmosphere inside. He wondered what was going on—attempts at

straightening Mary's hair always ended in failure, so that alone shouldn't have led to such silence.

Sensing something was amiss, Adi looked around the salon in search of Mary. One girl, with gently swaying wavy hair, caught his eye.

His mouth fell open in shock. Seeing this, Mary smiled as she haughtily rose to her feet and slowly approached him, her silver locks lightly fluttering around her shoulders. She looked up at him with a proud smirk. Her hair had swayed. Not waggled—*swayed*!

"M-My lady..."

"What do you think, Adi?"

"What do I...?"

"My, there's no need for you to be *that* shocked. Though I admit, I'm a little surprised myself."

"Are you okay?!" he shouted suddenly.

"What?!"

"Did you chop them off?! Does it hurt?! Someone call the doctor!"

"Yes, we need a doctor! For *you!*" Mary responded angrily to his incredibly insolent exclamation. Their usual banter had a soothing effect on the rest of the beauty salon, and the stylist who'd been frozen in a stupor came to their senses and gazed at Mary's hair with satisfaction.

The beautiful hair Mary had inherited from her mother swayed gently. The locks that had up until now caused her so much torment with their mocking displays of dominance fluttered meekly in the breeze flowing in from the window.

Indeed, her ringlets usually didn't flinch at a slight breeze, and everyone knew the spring winds had come the day her curls would finally start to swing. ("Your hair is swishing, milady. So it's already that time of year," Adi would say with great emotion, at which Mary would scream and stomp on his foot. Such was their way of greeting the arrival of spring.)

"This hairstyle really suits you, Lady Mary," said the stylist.

“Thank you. Your skills have improved a great deal. Ah... What a long, long battle this has been.”

Out of consideration for the hopes of all the compatriots who had battled her hair countless times and lost, Mary patted the hairdresser’s shoulder in appreciation. The fight against her hair had been so long-lasting that even the rest of the salon’s staff gazed upon the scene with tears in their eyes.

No matter what they’d tried—going as far as to squander half a day away and call in hair stylists from abroad—not a single person had been able to eliminate her drills, by hook or by crook. That was why everyone felt so moved by the sight, and some even wiped at the corners of their eyes with their handkerchiefs.

The same was true for Mary herself. She was excited beyond belief, tugging on Adi’s arm. “I’m going to show this off to everyone!”

“To think that there’s actually a blackguard capable of unscrewing your drills...”

“*You’re* the only blackguard present in this salon! Anyway, time to get back to the mansion. People need to see my new hair!”

“What?! Is it even safe for you to go outside with your drills unequipped?!”

“I believe so. At any rate, I’m perfectly capable of lopping a certain very rude *someone’s* head clean off!”

“W-Well then, let’s depart! I’m sure this will be a shock for everyone!” Adi urged, tugging on Mary’s arm in turn.

Mary sighed in response. Unable to hide her silver waves, which swayed with each of her steps, she felt a little bashful.

Eventually, they made it back to Albert Manor, where she intended to reveal her new hairstyle, but...

As expected, she was greeted with words like, “Who are *you*?” and, “Lady Mary, perhaps you should lie down for a while?” Finally, everyone’s concern culminated in someone shouting, “Did you lose the drills somewhere on the way? We’ll begin a search at once!” The most cruel person of all had even said,

“Wow, so you can still move around, even without your main body part!”

Faced with such language, even Mary took some damage (and it was certainly not because she’d lost some of her defensive capabilities along with her drills). By the time she’d completed a single lap through the mansion, her shoulders had visibly drooped, and a sense of gloom followed her about. Her excitement had all but dwindled away, and her eyes were a little teary. Even Adi felt a pang of guilt at the sight. He’d thought at least one person would praise her or send her their compliments, but everyone had acted the exact same.

“Y-Your Ladyship, they’re simply playing off of each other in jest. They don’t actually mean any of what they say.”

“I know that! Even when the security guard saw me, he said, ‘Oh, I see you haven’t arrived in full yet!’ What’s that supposed to mean?! If he’d actually meant it, I’d slap him with a pink slip right this moment!”

As Mary screeched in open rage, Adi tried his best to pacify her. But just as if he’d been trying to soothe an angry animal, his actions had the opposite effect, and Mary only glared at him with even greater discontentment.

But then she exhaled a breath, somehow managed to calm herself, and suddenly reached out to grab Adi’s hand. Her anger vanished into thin air, and she smiled at him. Her soft silver waves fluttered with the movement, adding a mature and bewitching aura on top of Mary’s already beautiful and charming looks.

Adi’s shoulders jerked in surprise at seeing her act in such an unusual manner. “M-My lady?”

“It’s okay. I know how you feel, Adi.”

“Wha— You mean...?!”

“You were the very *first* person to say such rude things to me! *You* should get the pink slip much sooner than the security guard!”

“You’ve lost your mind along with your drills!”

“Are you seriously choosing *that* as your last words?!”

While Mary screamed threats about firing him (perhaps it was actually a point

of concern that even after what he'd said, she still wasn't serious about it), Adi smiled to distract her and reached out his hand to touch her hair. But he stopped right before his fingers could make contact. The pair's humorous exchange faded out as Adi's expression shifted to an affectionate look. Even so, he hesitated, peering at Mary's face with a slight frown.

"May I...touch your hair?"

"Y-Yes, I don't mind." Mary nodded, seemingly on the verge of questioning why he'd need to ask for permission in the first place.

With that, Adi softly caressed Mary's gently curled silver locks. He was as careful as though he were touching a porcelain doll, and Mary couldn't help letting out a quiet laugh, as if his touch tickled her.

"It really suits you... It looks truly beautiful."

"M-My, is that so? Thank you."

Adi looked pleased, as if he were complimenting something that belonged to him, to which Mary responded with another bashful smile. Hearing such direct praise embarrassed her, even more so when he was touching her like this. For some reason, his words seeped right into her heart.

He stroked her hair with the backs of his fingers, sometimes wrapping a lock around them. His cherishing touch was ticklish, yet pleasant. But a part of her was still embarrassed. It was a difficult emotion to put into words, and Mary's eyes narrowed. What was this sweet, numbing sensation that she'd never tasted before? Intoxicated by this unknown feeling, Mary turned her gaze towards her own hair.

There was no trace left of her once-firm drills. It was a change drastic enough to shock anyone. (Though in actuality, her hairstyle hadn't changed *that* much. The reactions of those around her towards her (deceased) drills had been so strong that even *she* had become convinced that it was a major change.) *With this...* thought Mary, letting out a careless laugh as she pronounced:

"With such a change, when I go to study abroad, perhaps no one will even realize that I am Mary Albert!"

Uh-oh, she thought immediately after, but it was already too late.

At her words, Adi's hand—and his whole body, in fact—stilled with an almost audible freezing sound.

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"Why?! Why are you going off by yourself to study abroad, milady?!"

"Because there's a seminar I'd like to take at that college. And the program has a limit of only one student."

"That's so cruel, Lady Mary!" cried Alicia. "Lord Patrick, you knew all along too! Why didn't you tell me?!"

"Why, you ask? Because I knew things would turn out like *this*," Patrick replied flatly, taking a sip of his tea. He cast a glance at Mary, and with his eyes alone, he seemed to reproachfully ask her, *"Couldn't you have broken the news any other way?"*

Feeling his criticism, Mary bemoaned her own carelessness as the other two raised an uproar. She'd ended up spilling it by accident, whereas she'd planned to calmly explain all the details in some quiet place. She had intended for Adi to be accompanied by her father at the time too, but in the end, she'd gotten more excited over her de-drilling than she'd realized.

Alicia and Adi both glared at Mary and Patrick. Alicia's pout was so intense that the thought she was this nation's princess was almost headache inducing. "Cease that disgraceful display!" Mary scolded angrily before she could stop herself, but Alicia didn't reply, and in fact, her cheeks puffed out even more.



Unable to withstand such a sight, Mary sighed and placed her teacup back

down onto its saucer with a clink. “Listen, I may be going abroad, but it’s just for one year. Besides, the country I’m going to borders ours, so traveling between them won’t take that much time. I’ll be sure to visit frequently, so stop making such a ruckus.”

“But to think you won’t be here for a full year, Lady Mary... If it’s only a day trip away, why not live at home and commute to the college instead?”

“Absolutely not! That’s more trouble than it’s worth,” protested Mary. “I refuse to cross the border every day just to commute to school.”

In response, Alicia’s cheeks puffed out yet again. In her desperation, she began downing her tea. She was a far cry from an elegant princess, and Mary frowned at the sight. Recently, Mary had begun to think Alicia was starting to resemble a princess a tiny bit (truly, the *tiniest* bit), and just as she had started to consider reevaluating her in a slightly more positive light, Alicia went and did this. That pout overturned every single bonus point she’d gained until now.

This time Adi, who’d received the baton pass from Alicia, looked at Mary with a serious expression as he spoke up. “In that case, please jump into the horse carriage the moment lectures end before the weekend and return home right away. As for the trip back to the college, please depart at the last minute so that you just barely make it in time for the first lecture. If you do so, I’ll consent to you going abroad.”

“That’s way too strict! And why should I need your permission in the first place?!”

“Then please let me...!”

Please let me go with you, Adi had intended to say, but swallowed his words back down.

Or rather, he wasn’t able to say as much because Mary suddenly got to her feet and smooshed his cheeks with both her hands. The gesture was too gentle to be called a proper slap, but both Alicia and Patrick, and of course Adi with his face being squeezed, all stared at her with wide eyes.

Only Mary’s expression remained serious as she stared down at Adi with eyes that seemed to say, *“I won’t let you say another word!”*

“Adi, why do you think I went out of my way to make sure everyone thought of me as a troublesome noble daughter who needed her servant to take care of her, even at school?”

“Because...I wanted to attend Karelia Academy.”

“Exactly. You have things you want to study here, and I have things I wish to study elsewhere. So you should know what the right thing to do is,” Mary told him as though she were admonishing a child.

“You’re right...” murmured Adi with a troubled expression as his eyebrows arched down.

Mary let out an exasperated sigh at his childish attitude. She released his cheeks and was about to draw her hands away, but this time, he clasped them himself. Now Mary looked at him with surprise, and his previously frail rust-colored eyes stared at her fixedly.

“Adi?”

“Then at the very least, please promise me you’ll look after yourself when you’re away. The thought of you someplace where I can’t reach you is enough to make me feel ill at ease.”

Instead of the boisterous protests, Adi gazed at Mary intently with an earnest expression as he pleaded with her. Mary’s breath caught in her throat at this sudden transformation, and she hurriedly cast her eyes aside. He often threw her off-kilter, but there was something different about it now, and she wasn’t sure how to respond.

She’d always known she was weak to his smile, but the way he’d look at her so intently on occasion had started to have much the same effect on her. She couldn’t stay composed when she looked into those rust-ringed pupils; it felt like her heart tightened and went all tingly.

Sensing the unrest within herself, Mary quietly cleared her throat and gently extracted her hands from his, brushing her own hair with her fingers instead. The silver waves fluttered calmly. Her mannerisms were perfectly befitting that of a noble daughter.

“R-Right, of course... I understand. We’ve always been together, so it’s not

surprising you'd be worried over the idea of us being apart for a year. I'll make regular trips back home, so rest assured."

"In that case, please get in the carriage first thing in the morning on weekends, and travel back at the last possible minute."

"You're not compromising at all!"

"What do you even intend to study while abroad?! What could they possibly have to offer that makes you want to cross the border?!"

"Management studies!"

"You *still* want to run that migratory bird restaurant?!"

His earlier intent gaze was completely gone, and the two had returned to one of their usual shouting matches as though a switch had been pressed. Patrick sighed. "And they were almost there," he murmured quietly.

Both Adi and Alicia, who had seized Mary by one arm each, heard his remark and whipped around to look at him. "You should help too, Lord Patrick!" they exclaimed in unison, requesting reinforcements. Obviously, Patrick had no intention of joining them. That said, he also wasn't interested in supporting Mary, and he elegantly observed the goings-on from beginning till end.

Eventually the boisterous duo had finally calmed down, and Mary once again brushed her fingers through her hair.

"By the way, don't you have anything to say to me?" she asked Patrick and Alicia, clearly referring to her new hairstyle. Her tight ringlets had been there mere days ago, but now her hair swayed lightly against her fingertips. It didn't waggle—it swayed.

Alicia and Patrick exchanged a look, and both of them smiled wryly. Though she was a member of House Albert, which reigned at the very top of high society, Mary was overjoyed at her new hair and wanted it praised.

Alicia was the first to respond to her appeal. She met Mary's gaze, then cast her eyes down at the silver locks of hair. "This hairstyle suits you very well, Lady Mary."

"R-Really? I just wanted to freshen up my look a little bit, that's all."

“Yes, really. Plus, the weather’s been getting warm recently...”

“This is *not* a weather-induced change! You spent most of last year with me, so you must’ve noticed my dri—I mean, my ringlets!”

As Mary shrieked, Patrick called out her name next.

Hearing this, she felt a slight sense of relief. This was Patrick Dyce himself, after all. He was the perfect Prince Charming desired by everyone. Someone as flawless as he naturally had a taste for language suited to properly complimenting women. His personality prevented him from carelessly sweet-talking others, but as Mary had been on the receiving end of his honeyed words countless times in the past, she’d started to appreciate the intelligence and good taste behind them. As a side note, these days, all of that was being directed at Alicia.

Nonetheless, Patrick turned to face Mary, gazing affectionately at her silver hair. As Mary felt not even an inkling of romantic interest in him, her heart did not throb at the sight, but she was ready to finally receive some praise and eagerly awaited his next words.

“Mary, you’ve really grown up.”

“This isn’t some proof of my age!”

“So, what’s it going to be next? Maybe it’ll completely straighten out in another two years.”

“What?! You’re already moving on to the second form?! Ugh, I’ve had enough! I was foolish to expect anything!”

“Please calm down, Your Ladyship. Your hair might roll back up if you keep getting angry like this.”

“That’s *not* how it works!”

Mary raised her voice, and Adi pacified her (despite the fact *he’d* been the one to hurl abusive language at her first). Patrick and Alicia could only shrug their shoulders at the duo’s usual exchange.

Chapter 1

After she'd somehow calmed down Adi and Alicia, Mary's first official day at Elysiana College had arrived. Calming them down had been a laborious task. Just as Mary thought Adi was helping her pack her bags, he'd started removing things at his leisure while nonchalantly making comments like, "Without this, you won't be able to go to Elysiana!" and, "If you leave this behind, you'll have to come back..."

Meanwhile, Alicia had insisted, "Let's spend time together every day until you leave!" and had raided Albert Manor once daily without fail.

Having endured such troubles, Mary finally arrived at Elysiana College. It was a sister school to Karelia Academy and served as an educational institution for the nobility and the children of wealthy merchants. It resembled Karelia in its interior ambience and the amount of money spent on it, and the things the students discussed also sounded vaguely recognizable: "When's the next tea party?" or, "What should I buy next?" Mary had no interest in boasting and found these topics tedious, but at the same time, she knew how to handle them and at least felt a sense of familiarity.

Seems like I'll get used to life here pretty quickly, Mary thought in relief.

Walking ahead of her, the board chairman looked over his shoulder and smiled pleasantly. His balding head reflected the light pouring in from the windows, causing Mary to have to squint her eyes a little. An excess of indescribable emotions swept through her mind. What was going on...? An indefinable feeling had entangled her thoughts.

"We actually have one more female transfer student," he told her.

"Oh, is that right?"

"Typically we have a selective system, but on occasion, there are seminars that can be taken on a class-by-class basis, so we thought it'd be a good idea to put you two in the same class."

"Thank you so much for your consideration." Mary smiled pleasantly as she

continued following after the chairman. It was quite unusual for there to be more than one transfer student at a time, but she was glad she wouldn't be the only one feeling out of place here.

Though she felt a slight sense of relief, the unease within her still remained. Why was that? Every time the light glinted off the chairman's head, Mary was on the verge of recalling something, but it felt like it was stuck somewhere and wouldn't surface. Yet she was so close to grasping the truth of the situation...

How frustrating, Mary thought, and right about that time, the chairman stopped in his tracks.

They must have arrived at the classroom. Mary could see the silhouettes of the people within through the window of the tidy door. They seemed to be excited about something, but due to the door's good craftsmanship, she couldn't overhear what they were saying.

The chairman peered into the classroom with a knock on the door, and soon it swung open to reveal a good-looking young man.

"Thank you for coming by personally, Chairman."

"Not at all. By the way, is the other girl already here?"

"Yes, though she did get a little lost on the way. We were just about to start self-introductions." The professor smiled wryly at Mary, as though to say she'd arrived just in time, and offered her an elegant bow of his head.

Despite his fairly youthful appearance, the man had the teacher's pointer of Elysiana College in his hand, so he must've been a person of considerable learning. Outwardly, he appeared to be handsome, if somewhat lighthearted, but Mary didn't believe in judging people by appearances. He might have *seemed* easygoing, but he very well may have been rigorous in his studies, and his true nature may have been quite firm. (And this had nothing to do with ideologies like, *"What truly matters is what's inside your heart!"* or any such thing. Simply put, Mary knew that she, herself, came across as the perfect noble daughter so long as she stayed still and didn't open her mouth. That's what made her so aware that people couldn't be so easily read based on appearances alone, in both good and bad ways.)

“Greetings. My name is Mary Albert. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Though it may only be for one year, I am very glad to be under your care going forward.” She curtsied gracefully and lowered her head.

The professor smiled pleasantly, as though to say her words were certainly on par with her house name, and then introduced himself as well.

It seemed to Mary that this man had risen to the rank of a scholar at a young age and chosen a teaching profession in order to guide the youth on their paths. He didn’t boast of himself even during his introduction, and she could see the clear determination reflected in his eyes. *You really couldn’t ascertain that based on his easygoing appearance alone*, she thought to herself. But when a group of female students walked by and squealed at him, he offered them a smile and a wave, so maybe he really *was* just that lighthearted.

In any case, the young, handsome professor seemed to be the object of the female students’ affections. Indeed, he was attractive, slender, stylish, and possessed of a soft countenance, and though he was young, he still had the presence of someone more mature. To top it all off, he had the rank of a professor, so it’d be impossible for the girls *not* to long after him. That said, all Mary saw him as was a good-looking teacher.

“The other transfer student is already in the classroom. Perhaps you’d like to introduce yourself to her?” he suggested.

“Of course.”

The man stepped aside and invited Mary into the classroom, like a gentleman offering the way for a lady. In response, Mary gave him a small bow of gratitude and leisurely walked inside.

“Hello, everyone! My name’s Lilianne! It’s great to meet you all!” exclaimed a girl with a voice so unbelievably adorable that stars and hearts seemed to flutter out with each word she said (so much so that the other female students wondered out loud just what was going on with her vocal cords).

Upon seeing this, Mary whispered, “There it is...”

It was as though her archenemy had just entered the stage. A threatening air seemed to drift off of the girl, and a number of handsome boys were already

gathering in the room. The scene instantly made Mary feel dizzy. The feeling that couldn't surface earlier now grew restless within her, and she was overcome with a sense of foreboding that she was on the cusp of remembering something.

"Lady Mary, if there's anything you ever need, please don't hesitate to ask us for help," said the chairman with a deep bow. Mary was about to call out to stop him, but seeing the peak of his lowered head aimed right at her made her eyes narrow as the light reflected off the sparsest part of his dome...

In that moment, Mary heard the thought she couldn't recall until now finally sink in with a thump. She had remembered once again.

As ever, this world was like that of an otome game.

After *Heartthrob High School* had acclaimed much popularity, the developers decided to launch a sequel to the game. The title was *Heartthrob Higher Education: The False Bride and True Love*, and it was commonly abbreviated as *Heart High 2*. Following in the tracks of the previous title, it was an otome game based around the nobility, and it garnered its own popularity as well.

The story went as follows: The commoner Lilianne started attending a college for the upper classes, where she met a cast of charming men fraught with troubles of their own. While helping them resolve their problems, she began a journey towards true love...

It was that typical kind of Cinderella-esque story. As for the "troubles" the male love interests faced, they usually related to their lineages and arranged engagements. In most cases, these engagements were broken off for the sake of "true love."

The main difference between this game and its predecessor was that very theme of engagement, and the fact that as the player progressed and came into contact with a member of the romanceable cast's fiancée, they had to reach a point of mutual understanding with her. In other words, the game featured multiple rival characters, and it wasn't all about bringing them down to a final defeat by the end.

The production team must have put a lot of thought into this, for in the previous game, with Mary as the sole villainess, she'd ended up appearing in

every single route without fail. Her rate of appearances throughout the game was second only to the heroine herself. At first, people had criticized the new game for this decision, claiming that if the number of female characters was raised, so should the number of obtainable male love interests be increased in turn. However, this plot device ultimately gave the game's story the freedom to expand further, and as certain female characters had their own friendship events, the game managed to secure a male fanbase as well, and all ended in success.

Having recalled all of that, Mary creased her brows. *How strange. Even if this is the world of* Heart High 2*, Mary Albert definitely shouldn't make an appearance here.*

Though the game had some relation to its predecessor for the sake of appeasing those who had played the first one, and its world did resemble that of *Heart High*, in the end, this story still unfolded in an entirely different place. One game element aside, the characters from the previous game were never portrayed in *Heart High 2*.

That was especially the case for Mary, who hadn't even made an appearance in the bonus content. As terrible as it sounded, she had been a throwaway character, and there was no need to bring back the wicked daughter after her defeat. Mary herself was well aware of this, which was why she couldn't understand why she was here right now. Still, she did her best to not let her confusion show as she dipped her head and offered an inoffensive self-introduction.

Mary went to her seat as prompted. On her right was the girl with soft, fluffy hair. She sported a smile that very well matched her adorable appearance as she told the other students in a sweet voice all about her slipup in getting lost on the way. On Mary's left was a graceful girl with glossy black hair, muttering under her breath, "Which route does she plan to take?"

On occasion, those two parallel girls' eyes met, upon which, both smiled at each other sweetly. But each time, for one brief moment—so brief that it'd be impossible to notice unless one was sitting between them as Mary was—they shot each other sharp glares. Their glares were so fiery that one could almost hear the crackle of flames, yet so icy as to almost give one the shivers. Overall,

they definitely didn't seem like the kind of looks two young girls who'd never met before would give each other.

Mary sighed at her unfortunate seating placement while feeling the meaningful bouts of eye contact between the two. *If only Adi were here*, she thought. After all that big talk of hers, she was already starting to regret her decision.

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It was very probable that the transfer student Lilianne, as well as the aristocratic girl who kept shooting her glares, Carina, both had memories from their past lives. This was on Mary's mind one day as she made her way towards a corner seat in the cafeteria to take her lunch.

Initially, during the first few days of her arrival, everyone had swarmed around Mary in full awareness of her status as the daughter of House Albert. However, now that around three months had passed since then, they all treated her like a normal student. Of course, as the college had a custom of attaching importance to social status, there were plenty of occasions where her rank was respected, but at the end of the day, Mary could be labeled as a normal noble lady if only one actually tried speaking to her.

Even the group of people who'd tried following her about at first, intending to become her cronies, had eventually realized there would be no gain from becoming one of her hangers-on and gradually left her side. Such a change of attitude was par for the course for the nobility, and before Mary knew it, the girls who used to carry her bag around for her now carried the bags of some other noble ladies.

On the other hand, there were also those who, upon realizing that Mary was still a normal girl despite her family name, happily started friendly conversations with her. As such, her personal relationships with others evened out to an average amount. In fact, compared to her days at Karelia Academy, where the other girls had seethed with jealousy behind her back for hogging Patrick's attention, this social atmosphere was actually quite nice.

As for why she was sitting in a corner of the cafeteria by herself, that was because she'd begun to feel fed up with a certain conversation topic as of late

and had started putting a bit of a distance between herself and her school friends who only wanted to talk about it. Even now, she could hear bits and pieces of the same thing being discussed here and there, and she sighed on the inside. Right then, a sudden buzz stirred around the cafeteria.

"Here we go again," murmured Mary in disgust. She looked around, hoping to find at least one other soul who shared her sentiments. But finding no such thing, she rolled her eyes and hurriedly turned her gaze to the cafeteria's entrance as though to gloss over her initial reaction.

And so everyone, Mary included, turned to watch as a group of handsome young men entered the cafeteria gallantly—they were waiting upon none other than Lilianne.

Ever since her transfer, Lilianne had managed to captivate the male students who reigned at the top of Elysiana College. It was as though she'd already known their preferences and troubles ahead of time, and she had the ability to always give them the perfect reply in each and every situation.

Now that three months had passed since the start of the term, around half of the male students who'd been dubbed as the "princes" of the college had fallen under her spell, including the good-looking professor (indeed, their homeroom teacher), and all of them presently surrounded her. Needless to say, all those men were the romanceable characters from *Heart High 2*.

Mary calmly analyzed the situation as she observed this so-called reverse harem, bringing a bite-size piece of sautéed fish to her mouth.

As Karelia Academy's sister school, Elysiana College offered equally fine dining, and the fish was so exquisite that it had to have been prepared by a first-rate chef. The rich flavor spread through her mouth, and the soft morsel of fish that rested upon her tongue started to gradually fall apart. *I wish he could have a taste, but for that, he'd have to catch a ride on the carriage...* thought Mary as she ate another piece. The flavor was rich, but not overly so, and it was good enough to make one forget when to stop eating. She ate another piece, then another. Her silverware danced across the plate almost without her knowing. She wouldn't say who, but this dish was so delicious that a certain someone would definitely enjoy at least two helpings of it.

Before she knew it, Mary had finished the whole thing. *Now for the dessert*, she thought as she swapped her fork for a spoon, and right then, a tray of food was placed on the table across from her with a clatter.

Mary looked up to see a familiar girl standing there.

“Um... I, err...”

Speaking in such an incoherent manner was none other than Parfette Marquis, one of Mary’s classmates. She had soft chestnut-colored hair and large eyes, and her petite frame paired with her baby face radiated the same kind of cuteness a small animal would have.

Parfette was also one of the characters from *Heart High 2*, and she was betrothed to Gainas Eldland, one of the men currently taking up position in the reverse harem across the cafeteria. In the game, she played the role of the rival character in Gainas’s route.

Mary and Parfette had exchanged a few greetings every now and then, but they weren’t particularly close, so Mary’s eyes widened in surprise at being approached by her. She looked around; though it was lunchtime, the cafeteria wasn’t particularly crowded, and there were several free seats in her vicinity. It definitely wasn’t so packed as to necessitate compact seating. And yet Parfette had put down her tray right there in front of Mary as she looked at her.

Seeing Mary’s bewilderment, Parfette asked, “Do you mind if I sit here...?” in a quiet voice that almost petered out at the end.



“Certainly, I don’t mind,” answered Mary with a smile. She wasn’t sure why

Parfette felt the need to ask for permission, but Mary saw no reason to refuse her.

But Parfette seemed to have noticed something by Mary's hand, and her expression stiffened. "Um... A-Are you here with someone?"

"No, I'm by myself. Why do you ask?"

"Um, those cups..." she murmured, glancing where Mary's hand was.

Though she was by herself, there were two cups on the table next to her. Anyone would think someone must've been sitting with her upon seeing such a thing. Guessing as much, Mary clarified: "They're both mine."

Parfette seemed puzzled. Sensing this, Mary gestured towards the seat and encouraged her to sit down. "Don't mind it," she added before she could be questioned. Naturally, this was because she couldn't just come out and say *"I got two cups out of habit,"* or any such thing.

Having no idea what was on Mary's mind, Parfette, despite her visible misgivings, finally took a seat at Mary's insistence.

Mary wanted to resume her meal, but Parfette's silence had question marks floating in her mind.

What's the matter? she wondered, but felt too awkward to ask the question out loud and settled for eyeing Parfette's appearance. At the sight of the other girl's terrifyingly stifling expression, understanding finally dawned on Mary, and she eased out a sigh.

Parfette was the fiancée of Gainas Eldland, yet presently, he was caught up in the maelstrom of rumors that was Lilianne's reverse harem. In other words, the transfer student had stolen Parfette's fiancé. Even worse, he was but one of several men surrounding Lilianne.

It was a disgrace, plain and simple. Mary couldn't even imagine the discomfort Parfette must've been feeling. On top of all that, though House Marquis was part of the nobility, their rank wasn't all that high, and Parfette's engagement to a member of House Eldland would've served as a way of uplifting her own family status. Without that, Parfette had nothing to safeguard her, so the curious stares she received were likely not as lenient compared to the ones aimed at the other ladies who'd lost their fiancés.

Seeing the side glances and cold laughter the other students directed at Parfette, Mary sighed again. "*Ahem*," she very pointedly cleared her throat.

That was all it took from Mary Albert to chasten those who snickered behind a poor damsel's back—it was pathetic, the way they all hurriedly looked away.

However, the sound also startled Parfette, whose shoulders twitched in surprise as she took on a frightened look. In fact, she was more scared than anyone else. "Um... A-Am I bothering you...?" she asked as tears rose in her eyes.

"No! It's okay; please don't worry about it," Mary reassured, right as the girl was on the verge of getting up from her seat, trying to calm her down.

Parfette was trembling all over, but Mary repeatedly told her it was all right. Eventually, she let out a relieved breath and once more reached for her silver cutlery.

She truly resembled a small, timid animal. From Mary's perspective, the girl

was the complete opposite of herself, which would make dealing with her difficult, to say the least. But given Parfette's predicament, there wasn't much Mary could do at the moment to get rid of her. She may have had her roots as a villainous daughter, but she wasn't a total monster.

So Mary glanced up, and seeing the dejected way in which Parfette was eating, she said, "I won't ask any questions, so could you try to enjoy your meal a little bit more?"

The way Parfette looked had made it appear as though she was eating her last meal, all while taking sips of something that seemed to taste disgusting. It was a graceless display, to the point of being ascetic. Though Mary understood her situation, her behavior was an insult to the chefs.

When she commented as much, Parfette sighed. "You're...right," she muttered weakly. Yet the glances of the other students continued, and lively chatter echoed from one particular corner of the cafeteria, as though that place alone was the life of the party.

Parfette resumed her meal with a truly miserable expression. The gazes at her back continued, accompanied by whispers and murmurs. A certain carefree girl's chipper voice resounded throughout the cafeteria, alongside the masculine voices lionizing her...

Fed up, Mary sighed and stuffed the last bite of her dessert into her face.

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Mary had been doing her utmost to live her life without any relation to Lilianne or Carina, or in fact, any of the characters who appeared in the game. Not because she was sick and tired of the idea of otome games or determined to exclusively devote herself to the life of a background NPC, but rather because she knew she would return back to Karelia Academy after a year anyway. She had come to this place to study management so that she could run a migratory bird restaurant in the future, and she had no interest in sticking her nose into other people's quarrels. On top of that, she was completely out of place in a foreign country, which was why she wanted to pass her time here quietly.

To put it another way, Mary didn't behave in a particularly noteworthy

manner, nor did she go out of her way to be conspicuous. Until now, the student life she had led here suited her perfectly.

As a result, she was but one of the many ordinary students at Elysiana College. She did receive some favorable treatment on account of her being the daughter of House Albert, yes, but it was not in her nature to make a huge deal out of her rank. So when it came to the popular and handsome members of the student council, the presidents of various school committees, the ace of the sports club, the young playboy professor, the transfer student whom all of them waited upon, and the victimized schoolgirls...Mary had stayed out of that whole fiction-esque drama.

Moreover, two certain girls involved in all this nonsense sometimes glanced at her and murmured things like, “So she managed to dodge the northern boonies...” and, “Where’d the drills go?” But they wouldn’t speak to Mary directly, so there wasn’t much she could do about it.

And so, though Mary didn’t necessarily try to be completely unassuming, she’d still ended up leading a modest college life—until Parfette had come along and started clinging onto her like a shadow, and all of that crumbled.

A girl who’d had her fiancé stolen by the aforementioned transfer student, and a girl who had given up her fiancé to a princess... Two such figures together were sure to draw interest, though unlike Parfette, Mary was the daughter of House Albert. Any disrespect towards her could incur the wrath of not only House Albert itself but even the neighboring nation’s royalty, so any rumors about her were spread in the quietest of whispers. Of course, no matter how quiet the gossip, the person of concern would still end up overhearing it.

“I’m so sorry, Lady Mary...” Parfette muttered while they were on their way to the classroom.

Mary cast her a glance. Parfette was clinging onto her textbook with both hands, her head hanging low as though she wanted to escape the stares all around her. No matter how one looked at it, she was the very portrait of a loser. To top it off, she’d even apologized to Mary as though she were afraid of her too, at which Mary sighed.

“They’re all saying things about you...just because I’m with you...”

“Oh my. It was never my intention to be with you. You simply decided to start walking next to me all by yourself,” Mary responded flatly.

At those words, Parfette stopped in her tracks with a gasp. Her face paled even further than before, and her eyes were so damp that tears could have started falling down at any second. Her pursed lips and drooping eyebrows made her appear utterly frail.

Sh-She can’t handle it! Even Mary started to panic at the sight. “This isn’t anything to cry over!”

“But it’s really true... I’m causing you so much trouble... I’m nothing but a bother, I know...” Now, Parfette looked like she was on the verge of really bursting into tears.

“What do you know?! I never said anything like that!” Mary exclaimed, feeling in a state of chaos. She knew there were plenty of girls out there who were completely sheltered from the world, but she didn’t expect for someone to be *that* bad at handling criticism.

Mary’s usual social surroundings comprised of Adi and Patrick, who were always ready to quip back at her sarcastic remarks in turn, or else Alicia, who didn’t comprehend them at all. They were all quirky and far from being sensitive enough to feel hurt over a harsh word or two. In fact, that was a cast of people capable of breaking *her* heart if she ever made a poor attempt at sarcasm or snideness. It wasn’t just a matter of taking shots, but of hitting where it hurt—and they’d always pay it back in spades.

Meanwhile Parfette, crushed by a single blow, was uncharted territory for Mary. “I... I don’t really care if you’re with me or not,” she told Parfette.

“Of course... For Lady Mary to be with someone like me...”

“It’s not like that! I’m saying I don’t mind if you walk next to me. And anyway, I don’t care how much people gossip about me and my canceled engagement with Patrick.”

“Right... I was thrown away by Lord Gainas too... Ah, Lord Gainas...”

“Can you please stop taking damage from your *own* words?!” Mary asked sharply as Parfette sniffled. How difficult the girl was to handle! Not to mention,

her small frame the likes of a tiny animal was endearing enough to cause Mary feelings of guilt if she carelessly made Parfette cry.

So Mary tried to swallow down her instinctive urge to use sarcasm and conscientiously soothed the girl. “There, there. Don’t cry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Please listen to me.” She spoke to Parfette using a level of gentleness that Mary Albert had never once in her life treated another person with until now. “I don’t care if people gossip about me because you’re next to me. As long as they’re not trying to cause me any real harm, it’s best to let them talk about my canceled engagement all they want.”

“R-Really...?”

“Since they’re tasteless enough to stick their noses into other people’s relationships, you should be the bigger person and keep your head high,” Mary declared. “Now, let’s go,” she added and resumed walking.

Parfette’s eyes widened with surprise, and though she still looked tearful, she followed after Mary with a small smile on her lips.

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“...so Lord Gainas is actually quite cruel. During parties, he’s always so absent-minded too,” Parfette complained in dissatisfaction.

“My, that must’ve been so difficult for you,” Mary commented lightly in response, taking an elegant sip of her tea.

They were at the cafeteria as usual. Though the season had changed, Lilianne and the men waiting upon her still monopolized one spot in the cafeteria, and the rest of the students cast them envious glares, making for a restless scene. Half a year had already passed since Mary and Lilianne transferred to Elysiana College, yet things were still much the same.

The one small thing that did change was that Parfette now openly revealed her anger in front of Mary. That said, someone as endearing as she was didn’t have much ferocity to her, and the tearful scowl she cast towards a certain corner of the cafeteria was quite childlike. But it was still better than the way she used to whimper and cower.

“How very rude of him, to be inattentive when he’s escorting you,” Mary

commented.

“It wasn’t always like that. Lord Gainas used to pay me so much attention... It’s true that our parents set us up, but I always believed our feelings aligned. And yet...” Parfette whispered, hanging her head down.

Just as I thought she was getting angry, she gets all depressed. What a busy thing, thought Mary. “Indeed,” she said in a half-hearted reply.

Mary glanced to the side. There was Lilianne, utterly ignorant of Parfette’s feelings, with the boys surrounding her. All of them chattered away in lively voices like they were having the time of their lives. Even a hidden character from the game—the chairman’s son—was present, so the extent of Lilianne’s efficiency was nothing to scoff at.

Now, who’s still missing from that reverse harem? pondered Mary as she tried to sift through her memories for any characters that were left, but right then, Parfette called out her name. The girl was glaring at the group with her cheeks puffed out, which was as close to intimidating as someone like her could get.

“What is it?” Mary inquired.

“Are you curious about them, Lady Mary?”

“They’re being rather conspicuous, that’s all. Aren’t *you* the one who’s curious about them?”

“N-No! Not at all! I don’t care what happens to any of them! Not even one bit!” Parfette argued, pouting and turning the other way.

“I see,” Mary conceded with a dry smile.

Mary Albert was a character from the prequel, and one that didn’t even appear in its bonus content, to boot. In addition, at the moment she was merely an exchange student, so her presence was completely unrelated to whatever was going on at Elysiana. Who went around constructing a reverse harem or who plotted its downfall—it was all irrelevant to her.

And yet... Mary thought with a sigh. Lilianne and Carina kept casting her silent stares all the time—Lilianne, the queen of the controversial reverse harem envied by the other female students, and Carina, the all-around noble lady with

support from every corner of the university. Even Mary felt some discomfort when two such extreme opposites stared at her fixedly.

But Mary couldn't just expose herself by spitting out some remark the likes of, *"I have nothing to do with your game!"* All she could do was smile as though she was unaware of anything and ask them, "Is something the matter?"

Of course, the two of them wouldn't just start talking about a game from their previous lives, so they had smiled deliberately and answered, "No, it's nothing."

What a shallow rivalry they had with her! After countless such exchanges, Mary couldn't help getting sick of these girls.

However, it was that very same vigilance the two of them displayed towards Mary that assured her of the fact they both had recollections from their past incarnations. It was easy for someone with Mary's knowledge to see how efficiently Lilianne was able to seduce all the men, as though she was selecting the best replies from a multiple choice dialogue option—and how Carina put in daily effort to try and increase the number of her allies as though she was aware of her fate in advance yet determined to avoid it. It was so obvious that Mary doubted if they were even trying to hide it.

Mary Albert must've been an unexpected existence to those two. She was the villainess from the previous game, who should've exited the stage and fallen into ruin long ago, yet here she was, progressing on a path that would've been impossible for her in the game. They couldn't predict her movements, nor the kind of effect she might have on events. (Even Mary herself was confused as to why she'd ended up at Elysiana College... In fact, she wanted someone to explain to her how this all happened after she'd gone out of her way to pursue her own downfall before.)

In any case, Mary had gotten fed up with the mistrustful stares from the other two as they wondered why she was here and whether she had past life recollections too. She'd even started to wish they'd just come and ask her directly.

"Oh, Lady Carina and Lilianne are looking at you again," Parfette pointed out, turning to glance at the girls.

"Mm-hmm," agreed Mary, doing her best to keep her eyes on the book in her

hands. Even if she did look up to see for herself, the girls would either quickly turn their faces away from her or just smile sweetly at her.

“Are you friends with them, Lady Mary? I feel like the two of them often look your way.”

“They’re just curious about me since I’m from House Albert. From what I’ve heard, Carina’s putting a lot of effort into building foreign relations, and Lilianne is probably worried a lady with my level of influence could snatch one of her men away from her.”

“Lady Mary! Don’t tell me you’re after Lord Gainas...?!”

“Oh yes, it’d be quite easy to steal him by using my house name,” snickered Mary in jest, at which Parfette pursed her lips sulkily.

Lilianne had already stolen her fiancé, and now for the daughter of House Albert to join in... This was no laughing matter for her. But when Mary pointed out as much, Parfette stubbornly exclaimed, “I don’t care about him anyway!” and turned away. She was so easy to read that a wry smile made its way onto Mary’s face.

Seeing this, Parfette tilted her head a little. “Lady Mary... Do you have anyone like that?” she ventured.

“What do you mean?”

“Someone you adore from the bottom of your heart, and they’re all you can think about whenever you’re away from them... That kind of person.”

Parfette spoke dreamily, while a troubled frown creased Mary’s brow.

No, she couldn’t think of a single person who matched that description. As the daughter of House Albert, she’d always thought she would end up married to Patrick. This wasn’t something she’d been hoping for, just a logical prediction she’d made based on their family ranks. But when their engagement had ended in annulment, she didn’t immediately start thinking, *All right, I’m free at last! On to the next man!* or any such thing. Besides, her escort partner had always been Patrick—the flawless prince desired by all. The idea of her falling for just any man after something like that was difficult to imagine.

Having thought that far, Mary suddenly asked, “Can you think of anyone?” as she glanced to the side...and blinked, seeing no one there.

“Um... Lady Mary?” Parfette’s eyes widened at Mary’s behavior.

Needless to say, the seat next to Mary was empty. This wasn’t the first time Parfette had seen Mary act in this way either. In fact, she’d seen it happen many times, and it made her tilt her head in question on each occasion. Mary would look up as if she was about to talk to someone, or wait around even though no one was coming. And even today, there were two cups on the table next to her...

“Lady Mary... How should I say this? You’re a little strange, I think.”

“Oh dear. If it bothers you, you’re welcome to leave,” Mary said to hide her embarrassment.

“N-No, I...” Tears welled up in Parfette’s eyes as she took Mary’s remark seriously.

Flustered by Parfette’s usual poor handling of such words, Mary hurriedly said, “It was just a joke! As a lady, you should laugh it off and let it go!” which counted as words of comfort, coming from her.

“R-Right. I need to get a thicker skin... I shouldn’t care so much what someone says about me.”

“Indeed... Although, it is equally infuriating when no matter what you say to someone, it just doesn’t get through in the slightest.”

“Did you go through something like that, Lady Mary?”

“Yes, there was a certain peasant girl with a supreme mental fortitude... She deflected all of my bullets splendidly.”

Mary sighed grandly, recalling the princess of someplace else. Parfette looked at her curiously and was about to ask what had happened, but then she gasped suddenly.

Noticing this, Mary followed Parfette’s line of sight. The reverse harem was on the move in droves, surrounding Lilianne as they headed for the exit, but one person from among the crowd was looking their way.

It was none other than Gainas Eldland, Parfette's fiancé (for now, at any rate). He was gazing their way intently, and when he noticed that Mary was looking back, he quickly averted his eyes, though he did offer her a brief dip of his head. At least, that's what it seemed like to Mary.

She glanced at Parfette, seeing that the girl's eyes were downcast. Looking around, there were plenty of people who seethed in jealousy over the reverse harem, but none that Gainas was likely to bow to. *So the one he lowered his head at was...* Mary thought, then murmured quietly, "Ugh, how annoying."

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As expected, this world was similar to that of an otome game, yet it didn't strictly follow the events of the game. What a bizarre situation, indeed. Mary, the biggest outlier of all, took a sip of her tea as she pondered the happenings from a few days ago and sighed at the aforementioned bizarre situation.

It'd been so...*brief* of a time since she'd last been back home, given that she was forced to travel back frequently. Alas, no place like home or however that saying went—though, she *did* feel calmer back here, and her favorite teacup fit perfectly into her hand.

"So is Lady Parfette the wicked daughter this time around?" inquired Adi, seated across from her, as he reached out to help himself to a scone.

"She's definitely no villainess," replied Mary ambiguously.

The previous installment of the game, *Heart High*, had a clear-cut villainess—Mary Albert. She'd done her utmost to harass and get in the way of the heroine as much as possible before ultimately being defeated.

However, in the second installment, *Heart High 2*, not all of the rival characters were portrayed as wicked daughters the way Mary had been. A few of the female characters *did* bully the protagonist as though they were the second coming of Mary and eventually fell into ruin, but in contrast to that, some of them developed friendly relations with her, stepping aside for her and her love interest, even having friendship events of their own.

In this instance, Carina was an example of the former, whereas Parfette was the latter. But although Lilianne had captured Gainas, she and Parfette weren't

on friendly terms in the slightest, and in fact, Parfette despised Lilianne, making it a point to isolate herself from the girl. Whereas in the game, right around the time when Gainas was first enthralled by Lilianne, a budding friendship would've sprouted between her and Parfette, and later Parfette would decide to step aside out of her own volition.

In addition, in the game, Gainas and Parfette's engagement had been set up for the benefit of their parents, and the two didn't harbor any romantic feelings for each other. That was exactly why Parfette stepped aside for Lilianne, and went out of her way to support her and Gainas, even at the cost of her own social standing. The scene where the frail crybaby Parfette decided to stand up for Lilianne and Gainas and dissuade everyone else from trying to separate them because of their difference in status was very moving, indeed.

But judging by the way Parfette had acted a few days ago, she seemed to have genuine feelings for Gainas—despite seeing the way he waited upon Lilianne.

"Poor Lady Parfette... She can't even say anything because of her position. That must be so tough on her," Adi said sorrowfully, as though the matter were related to his own personal affairs. Mary cast him a curious glance while he sighed deeply, apparently in full support of Parfette's case.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "You sure talk about Parfette quite fondly. Do you know her from somewhere?"

"Huh? N-No, I just... I mean, I did happen to see her once during a party in the past. But we don't actually know each other... It's more that I can relate to her based on our circumstances," Adi mumbled.

Mary peered at him quizzically, finding his jumbled response out of character. He was red in the face, and very pointedly looking away from her. And he'd just said he could "relate to Parfette" based on their circumstances.

What that implies is... Mary's mind spun, and she suddenly looked up with a gasp as though she'd realized something. "Th-That's right! Adi, you..."

"My lady, I...!"

"That's how you must feel towards my father!"

“I... What?”

In response to Adi’s confused expression, Mary shook her head as though to imply he needn’t say any more, she’d already understood perfectly. “But I didn’t realize you yearned for him *that* much... I’m quite surprised.”

“Right. I’m also shocked, myself.”

“Granted, the difference in rank between a servant like you and the head of House Albert is massive. That’s why when you heard of Parfette being unable to say anything and simply looking on, you saw yourself in her...!”

“Milady... Please return to reality... Actually, it doesn’t matter which world you go to, just please vacate *that* one! That world is dangerous!”

“I admit, I feel awkward at the idea of getting in your way, but I can’t allow you to separate my parents... I’m sorry!” Mary exclaimed, turning away regretfully.

Adi’s shoulders sank low, but very soon, he lifted his head again. “Anyway, back to the main topic,” he prompted, forcibly changing the subject.

As expected of Mary’s servant—he was not so fragile as to be wounded by such an utter rejection. After all, when it came to a history of having one’s heart broken, Adi’s was much lengthier when compared to Mary’s...though it wasn’t something he was proud to admit.

And so Adi cleared his throat as the two of them returned to the previous discussion. (He was a little pale on account of having imagined a few things following Mary’s proclamations.)

“So, assuming that this is another otome game, what do you intend to do, Your Ladyship?”

“Nothing!”

“Nothing?! Even though you put in so much effort last time?”

“School is a place of learning first and foremost! Ergo, I should be putting effort into my management studies!”

“Well, I suppose that’s true, but...”

“And I’m aiming to expand the migratory bird restaurant business abroad someday. I’d better find and pin down a good spot of land while I can!” Mary said, puffing out her chest proudly as though to say, *“How about that?!”*

“If only you directed that enthusiasm towards other things...” muttered Adi, for which Mary stomped on his foot with great force.

It was no surprise that this was a letdown for Adi. After all, last time, Mary had been so determined to act (though the results were a sad sight), but now, she’d announced that she wouldn’t do anything.

“And here I thought you’d be trying to get revenge for that whole downfall and northern boonies thing,” he mumbled quietly.

Mary shrugged in understanding. “I did put my past life recollections to use at times, but Mary Albert didn’t appear in *Heart High 2*. I can’t predict what could happen as a result of my actions, so I can’t make any careless moves.”

“You have a point,” Adi concurred with a nod.

The current Mary was an irregularity that didn’t exist in the second game. Plus, she belonged to House Albert, a family now backed by the royalty and equal to them in power. If she acted recklessly towards the characters based on her memories of the game and stirred up trouble, it could result in a diplomatic problem between the nations. Doing that posed a serious international risk, so it was out of bounds for Mary. Even the ruin she’d wished for before was something that could’ve been resolved by Mary being sent to the provinces and her family restoring some of its power back to the royals—though now this was no longer necessary for House Albert.

And more than anything... Mary thought with a grave expression, hesitating to speak up.

Adi noticed. “Is there something else?” he inquired, leaning in closer to her with curiosity.

“I am Mary, and I will be Alicia’s rival to the bitter end!”

“Yikes... You still haven’t given up on that?”

“House Albert may be smooth sailing right now, but I don’t care! From here

on out, this is all about my pride! I have to make Alicia cry at least *one* time!”

“Your goalpost only shrinks closer and closer to the ground. Oh, but—”

“Quiet! For now, all I can do is devote myself to standing by and watching without making any drastic movements! I’ll diligently work on my studies at Elysiana College and come back here to make Alicia weep!”

“Lady Mary! Welcome baaack!”

With a cry, something vigorously charged at Mary from behind (needless to say, it was Alicia).

The hug was more like a tackle. “Ugh,” Mary groaned lowly at its ferocity, but naturally she managed to withstand it without collapsing. No daughter of House Albert would allow herself to be shaken up, even against a surprise tackle attack, nor would she be as graceless as to crash into the table.

So Mary held her ground, before turning around so slowly that one could almost hear the creaking of her movement.

Before her eyes was, of course, Alicia. Her gorgeous golden hair fluttered as she embraced Mary with a dazzling smile. It was hard to tell whether the flush in her face was because she was just that happy, or because she’d run all the way here at full speed. Mary’s expression stiffened at the sight of her grin.

Meanwhile Adi, who’d been elegantly sipping his tea as this happened, spoke up. “My apologies, Your Ladyship. I told Alicia you’d be coming back today.”

“You always do this! Traitor!”

“Me?! I am your ally before anything else—”

“Yes, yes. You’re my ally and the commander of her Support Squad, is that it?”

“I am the chief commander of the Alicia Support Squad based in Karelia HQ!”

“There you go, promoting yourself aga— HQ?! There’s even *more* of you?!”

Alicia giggled away at the usual banter between the two while still clinging onto Mary’s waist. “Lady Mary, it’s been so long since I’ve last seen you!”

“Indeed, how long has it been already? Oh, right... I was here last weekend

too! You don't need to hug me every single time! It reeks of the boonies!"

Mary demanded to be freed from Alicia's grasp, attempting to peel the girl off her. Arriving late to this scene, Patrick chuckled. "There you go again," he commented, and Mary shot a glare at his leisurely approach and pleasant smile.

"This girl is supposed to be a princess, yet she's exposing her provincial boorishness!" exclaimed Mary. "If this peasant actually ends up leading this country, I might have to plan for my emigration."

"Ha ha! But that's also part of Alicia's charm," said Patrick, smiling wryly at Mary's snide remarks. There was no hint of annoyance in his expression, and in fact, the way he gazed at Alicia was full of gentleness and affection. "Simmer down a little, okay?" he asked her. There was no anger to his words, nor could they have passed for a scolding. His tone of voice had nothing but fondness in it.

At those sickly sweet words and that expression, Mary pressed a hand to her forehead as though to say they made her dizzy. Patrick sat down next to Alicia, and his mellow smile made him look so soft... It was almost as if the icy and ruthless attitude of Patrick from *Heart High* had been nothing short of a lie.

"Lovestruck idiot," Mary muttered under her breath involuntarily before abruptly getting to her feet. "Sorry, I know you two just got here, but I need to leave for a bit."

"Do you have somewhere you need to be, Lady Mary?" asked Alicia.

"No, I'm just in agony at being forced to witness two stupid lovebirds flirting with each other."

"Hee hee... You're embarrassing me!" Alicia giggled bashfully.

"Wh-What kind of reaction is that?!" Mary was aghast, but quickly cleared her throat to change the subject. There was no need to prolong this particular defeat of hers. "Anyway, I do actually have someone I need to meet with. I don't think it'll take too long, though."

"How taxing that must be, given that you're supposed to be resting," Patrick commented, acknowledging the extent of her work.

Mary shrugged. Gender differences aside, both she and Patrick had been born to two influential noble families, and they had mutual understanding of the heavy burden that came with that. Even if they happened to be in the middle of enjoying tea with their friends, if their duty as the noble son or daughter called, they had to answer it.

That was why Mary smiled bitterly. “It is what it is. No use in complaining,” she said, and then added, “I’m meeting with a prospective spouse,” as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Alicia’s eyes grew wide at her words, and even Patrick, despite his awareness of her busyness, cast a flustered glance at Adi.

***

Presently, Mary was on the receiving end of countless marriage proposals. After all, House Albert had been officially recognized as a family with influence equal to the royals, so naturally there were plenty of people who wanted to join it. What drew people to Mary was her affiliation with House Albert, the royal family, and House Dyce. However low a family’s status might be, thanks to the kind of connections Mary herself had, they could shoot right to the top of high society.

With such value added, Mary was the center of attention in the aristocratic world, with those wishing to bring prosperity to their own families longing after her immensely. On the other hand, with so many influential families after her, many had gotten stuck at the stage of sending an engagement request, as none of the candidates could be carelessly ignored.

Moreover, Mary herself was appropriately beautiful considering her pedigree, and intelligent to boot, so this flood of marriage proposals was entirely unsurprising. (That said, there were plenty of people who thought her beauty and intelligence were, regrettably, on par with her eccentricity and bizarre behavior, but her added value outweighed that.)

Until recently, everyone was convinced she’d end up married to Patrick Dyce and so had given her a wide berth, but now many were likely spurred on by the rush of proposals other people were sending her.

Of course, Mary’s father thoroughly screened every single candidate one after

another, having his daughter's best interests in mind. (As a side note, his screening method revolved around using the cliché phrase of, "The candidate must be someone of equal standing to a man the likes of Patrick Dyce to be good enough for my daughter!" which was surprisingly effective... Not that Patrick himself was aware of any of that.)

Even under such circumstances, at times, there were people with whom Mary *had* to meet due to her family obligations. On this particular occasion, the candidate was the son of a reputable family from the neighboring country with diplomatic relations, and his father had earnestly appealed for the two of them to meet.

"Anyway, it seems like the candidate already has feelings for a different woman, so even though this is supposed to be a marriage interview, it'll be more like a tea party. He himself isn't all that interested; it's just his father who's pushing for this to happen," explained Mary as she worked on fixing up her appearance.

Behind the swaying silver locks of hers, Adi's expression shifted to that of relief, though unfortunately Mary herself didn't notice this. Right now, figuring out the quickest way to put the candidate off this idea without being rude took precedence over the servant behind her back.

"That said, if it starts running long, I'll just have to use my last resort."

"Last resort?" questioned Adi.

"Yes. I'll cast my eyes down, looking all frail and weak, and whisper, 'I've been hoping that a prince of my own would show up for me, just like what happened to Princess Alicia...' and take him down in one shot!"

"Why are you so casually using Lord Patrick as an example without any consideration?!" Adi protested.

"I'll use whatever means I have! Besides, this is an exceedingly effective method. It's sent basically all the other men away!"

"Obviously any man would back out when it comes to Lord Patrick! And it's because you keep saying things like this that people think you still have feelings for him."

“Let them say what they want! Honestly, I think it’s a good thing his name can rein people in like that. I’ll give him a cookie as a reward later,” Mary said with a good-humored laugh.

In response, Adi bitterly mumbled, “You’re so oblivious to other people’s feelings,” under his breath before he could stop himself.

Even Mary picked up on that, and turned to look up at him with wide eyes and a puzzled expression. “You mean *your* feelings? What are you talking about?”

“Er, well... I...”

Mary’s expression brightened as though in sudden understanding. “Oh, I see! It must be tiring to have to stand on your feet all throughout the marriage interview!”

She couldn’t have been more off the mark, but since Adi couldn’t tell her the truth, his shoulders sank deeply. “This woman...” The words escaped him in a quiet voice, sad enough to induce sorrow—but unfortunately, only Mary was present in the room with him right now. If Patrick were here, perhaps he’d have at least given Adi a sympathetic pat on the back.

“Indeed...” Adi responded. “Having to stand in the corner and being unable to do anything but watch you converse with other men is simply excruciating.”

“Yes, I wish you could sit down, but that might be uncomfortable too.”

“Y-You’re still not getting it?! This whole time, I’ve been telling myself that the reason everything went past you was because those steel drills of yours kept you soundproof...!”

“I don’t exactly get what you’re saying, but I *can* tell you’re making fun of me! Have you already forgotten I’m on my way to a tea party and my father will be present?!”

“I’m so sorry, my lady! I’ll braid it! I’ll braid your hair, so please forgive me!”

“I can’t really understand your criteria for what counts as an apology. Anyway, what were we talking about?” Mary asked with an inquisitive tilt of her head, at which Adi hurriedly looked away and cleared his throat to evade her

question.

While Mary went off on the wrong track with suggestions like, “How about we put a chair in the corner?” and, “Maybe we could all be standing?” he cast a quick glance at her. Her interpretation was incorrect as usual, but at least right now she was still thinking of Adi, even though she was about to go into a marriage interview.

Though that made him a little happy, the idea of soon having to witness her speak to another man (and a marriage candidate, no less) clouded his heart.

“I...”

“Hmm?” Mary glanced at him.

“I can’t stand having to watch you talk to another man. So...”

“So?” she prompted, tilting her head again.

Gazing fixedly into her eyes, Adi seemed to have made up his mind. “So please end it quickly, for my sake,” he asserted, and within a few seconds, his face started to redden.

This was a remark that wouldn’t have normally been allowed to go unchallenged. It was unbelievably disrespectful for someone with the rank of a servant to selfishly make such demands of his mistress when she was about to join an important meeting related to her possible engagement. It was something that could easily get him fiercely scolded and then fired for getting carried away.

That was why Adi shut his eyes tight after delivering his words, bracing himself for the reprimand and refusal that was likely to come.

Perhaps Mary would be surprised, exclaiming, *“What are you saying?”*

Or maybe she’d calmly admonish him: *“Stop making such unreasonable demands.”*

Maybe she’d even be angry: *“Don’t interfere with your mistress’s tea party!”*

But in contrast to Adi’s expectations, Mary simply said, “All right.”

Adi’s eyes flew open in shock to the sight of Mary’s self-satisfied smile.

“Huh?”

“What are you making that foolish face for? I don’t really mind. I’ll put an end to it quickly.”

“For...my sake?”

“Yes, for your sake. Get ready to measure the time! It’ll be the shortest one yet!” she declared enthusiastically.

Adi stood there in a daze for a moment...then chuckled. He hadn’t gotten his feelings across in the slightest, but the fact that he took precedence over the tea party replaced the cloudy feeling in his heart with relief.

“Very well, in that case, I’ll count the time.”

“I’ll show them my secret technique! I’ll play the part of a brokenhearted girl, hinting at Patrick’s presence, and urge the other party to withdraw!” said Mary with elation.

“Indeed, please give them the full course treatment.” Adi nodded happily, and right then, a maid called out from the other side of the door Mary had knocked on.

So the two of them entered the parlor, but upon seeing the candidate who sat there in waiting...

“Making this short might be impossible after all,” said Mary quietly, retracting her previous assertion.

For the one waiting for her was none other than Gainas Eldland.

Chapter 2

Gainas Eldland was a fierce-looking and untalkative man, but he was popular with girls on account of his tall stature, good physique, and sharp posture. His attentive personality made him equally idolized among the male students, and the teachers all trusted him because of his earnestness.

In the game *Heart High 2*, which featured almost solely glamorous prince-type characters as its romanceable cast, he was portrayed more in the image of a knight, bringing a slightly different appeal to the table.

However, this was not the time to be pondering the game version of Gainas or evaluating his reputation as a character. Facing off against Mary was not the fictional Gainas, but the real man himself, and both of their fathers were sitting opposite him, smiling sweetly as they urged their children on.

Fed up, Mary glanced behind her back to see Adi, now having switched to his servant mode, bow respectfully before retreating to his usual place in the corner of the room. Though, for but a split second, he cast her a look only she could understand as his eyes narrowed—this was his way of encouraging her.

With that on her mind, Mary approached the awaiting trio and dipped her head. The one sitting next to Gainas must’ve been his father, who smiled happily at her. “What a beautiful young lady!” he commented. In contrast to his taciturn son, the man seemed quite talkative.

As for Gainas himself, he adopted a slightly more defensive posture at Mary’s entrance, and following the example of his father, he awkwardly bowed his head.

“I am Mary Albert. Thank you so much for taking the time to come here yourselves.”

“Not at all! If anything, I apologize for having been so pushy,” responded Gainas’s father. “But please don’t worry. For today, I think it’d be nice if we simply chatted a bit.”

His words implied that this wasn’t meant to be a blind date. Yet at the same

time, by saying “for today,” he was suggesting he hoped for things to progress in a more favorable direction. Mary clicked her tongue in her mind.

So it’s not *a marriage interview after all?* she thought, but on the other hand, she was starting to understand where this was going.

After all, Gainas was still engaged to Parfette at the moment, and he’d fallen for Lilianne, to boot. For him to have a pseudo marriage interview with Mary under these circumstances...

I see. So that’s what’s going on, she thought. She started conversing with Gainas under the incitement of their fathers, smiling softly from time to time. However bothersome this charade, Mary couldn’t afford to respond coolly in front of their parents. She had no choice but to go the full feigning-friendliness route.

While she was toiling away, Adi was standing in the corner and watching. His spine was perfectly straight, and he kept as silent as though he was trying to be imperceptible, donning the guise of a proper servant. Casting him a quick glance, Mary sighed so quietly that nobody picked up on the sound.

Why was it that today Adi felt so strangely distant from her? Was it because although she’d proclaimed earlier that she accepted his request and would aim to get this done in the quickest time yet, she’d decided that was impossible almost right off the bat?

It was likely, but Mary couldn’t leave her conversation a mess. In her heart, she sent Adi an apology as she continued gazing at Gainas.

And so the absurd discussion (akin to a sales pitch) continued, until Gainas’s father spoke up as though he’d been waiting for this opportunity. “Well then, the two of us should head out...” he suggested, exchanging a look with Mary’s father.

What a typical, worn out tactic this was! He might as well have said, *“Now it’s up to you two youths,”* as though he were some kind of matchmaker. Mary sighed again, careful to not be caught on it. As the two fathers departed, she pretended to look their way while in reality casting another glance at Adi.

As usual, he was acting the common servant, opening the door for her father

and Gainas's as they exited. He looked truly servant-like as he lowered his head and kept the door open at exactly the right angle—his conduct was perfect, just as one would expect from a domestic employed by House Albert. But to Mary, this behavior was out of character for him.

Just that morning, he'd been holding a kettle of tea in one hand and a tray of scones in the other as he asked her, "Milady, both my hands are full, so please open the door." His words and attitude had been utterly unbefitting of a servant, yet so very like him. For some reason, the memory left Mary's chest aching.

(As a side note, Mary had been gearing up her reply following his exceedingly insolent request that morning, but when she saw those freshly baked scones in his hand, she'd swallowed her words. They looked so soft, and a sweet, fragrant aroma had drifted from them—who could resist such a thing?)

Thinking of their trifling exchange, Mary pressed her hand to her chest. It felt like a small needle was piercing her heart.

"I wonder why?"

But the pain subsided the moment she touched her chest. She glanced down, trying to guess the cause, but her heart rate had already returned to normal. *What on earth happened?* Mary wondered, staring at her own chest in confusion. Seeing this, Gainas called out to her with equal amounts of confusion.

"Lady Mary, is something the matter?"

"No... Not at all. You must be imagining things."

Mary snapped back to herself upon his words, and smiled amiably to gloss over her behavior. She turned to look at Gainas again, and with a gentle countenance, she clasped both her hands in front of her chest. The pose was very feminine, and surely anyone looking at her would find her so very charming... Or so she herself thought, self-conceited though it was.

"This came up so suddenly—I was really surprised," Mary spoke up. "You must have such strong feelings for me, considering how pushy you've been about this."

“Um, well... I...”

“Goodness, I’m joking, of course. Don’t take it so seriously,” she asserted coolly.

She’d shifted instantly out of that sweet attitude from earlier. Gainas’s eyes widened as though he’d been struck dumb. Someone as serious as him probably couldn’t keep up with Mary’s sudden cynicism.

“That’s also one of his charm points,” Parfette’s wistful voice echoed in her mind. Parfette, a girl who couldn’t understand Mary’s sarcasm and felt foolishly hurt by her words with tearful eyes, and the overserious and deeply earnest man in front of her, who looked like he was from straight out of a painting—the two made quite the match. If Lilianne hadn’t butted in, they would’ve surely had a tranquil, warm, and harmonious relationship.

As Mary’s thoughts strayed, she heard a pointed cough. She looked up to see Gainas purposely clearing his throat, as though to make a silent appeal, while glancing at one corner of the room.

Just what is he trying to say? Mary wondered, yet the answer was obvious. Besides herself and Gainas, there was one more person here, in the corner of this room...

“Don’t mind him. He’s aware of everything,” Mary explained, inferring Gainas’s unspoken words while casting a look towards Adi. As though to assent, Adi bowed his head in silent reply.

“Make him leave,” is what Gainas’s coughs had been trying to say. On one hand, leaving a man and a woman of similar age alone in a room together could be problematic in its own way, yet at the same time, it was almost tactless to have a servant staring at them and posturing in the corner after their parents had taken the trouble to leave them alone.

This comes up every time... Mary thought with a sigh. “You can speak freely. He won’t divulge anything,” she assured Gainas.

It always happened, regardless of who she was meeting with, but Mary couldn’t just invite Adi to sit alongside them. Under these circumstances, the only acceptable actions for Adi were to either vacate the room, or to stand

there at attention with his mouth shut until he was sent off on an errand. Mary was aware of this, yet still she tried to hold her ground.

But Adi picked up on Gainas's insistent cough. "My apologies," he offered, and Mary stopped herself from saying anything else. "I'm so sorry for not being more tactful. I'll wait outside, so if you need anything, please call for me."

With that, Adi bowed and exited the room. Mary silently watched him leave like the typical mistress, and then covered the sound of the door slamming shut with a sigh.

This always happened. Everyone obviously wanted Adi gone when Mary was to have a discussion with a man. Or else they'd say something like, "We're alone at last," as though he didn't even exist.

Naturally, that much was par for the course among the aristocracy. Mary was the odd one out for wanting her servant to stay in the same room, much less join them in conversation at the table. She knew that, and that was why she couldn't reproach Gainas nor call out to stop Adi. All she could do was watch silently as he left. An unexplainable emotion gripped her heart, but she had no idea what it was.

Fine, let's get this over with at once, Mary decided as she turned to face Gainas again.

He was staring at her fixedly. When their eyes met, his brows creased regretfully, and he bowed his head deeply. "I apologize for how heavy-handed my father was in arranging this talk." His posture was earnest, and to top it off, he even added, "I am also at fault for not being able to refuse him." He acknowledged his own blame like a truly agreeable young man.

Mary shrugged. "Perchance this is a case of your father thinking you have poor judgment for falling head over heels for a peasant girl, and trying to set you up with a different woman to open your eyes... Am I correct?"

"Embarrassing as it is, that's true." Perhaps Gainas had been able to see through his family's scheme, and so he could frankly admit the truth as he lowered his head again.

His father's feelings were easy to ascertain. Previously, his son and heir had

an amicable relationship with his fiancée, Parfette, but now he'd suddenly fallen for some country girl who came out of nowhere. Add to it the fact he was but one of her numerous male admirers... There was no way his father would accept something like that. This was no pretty story where true love conquered social status, and at this rate, it was clear their whole family would become a laughing stock.

That was why Gainas's father had kept his son's engagement in place even as he reached out to Mary. If Parfette was no good, maybe another woman could change his mind. Such a line of thinking was typical of the nobles, yet there truly was some logic to it. And to reiterate, Mary was currently receiving a flood of marriage proposals—being one of so many applicants lowered the chances of anyone else getting wind of this, and if luck was on their side, House Eldland might even get a daughter of House Albert to join their family. Mary's current added value was not just limited to the domestic market.

So Gainas's father had contacted Mary's father under the guise of diplomatic relations rather than marriage, which gave him insurance against the public eye. He was praying that his foolishly lovesick son could be swayed by a woman of favorable circumstances.

"And that would be my conjecture. Did I get it right?" Mary inquired sarcastically, following her lengthy evaluation, as she reached out for a sip of tea to dampen her throat.

Gainas looked flabbergasted, but finally nodded uncomfortably as though to say, *"You hit the nail on the head."*

(As a side note, when Mary had called him a "foolishly lovesick son," she'd been sugarcoating it. In reality, she'd wanted to call him a "son *so* foolishly lovesick that he'd been degraded into becoming but one of the numerous men who surrounded that peasant girl.")

"I should've expected as much from a lady of House Albert... I underestimated you."

"It's not really all that difficult to guess. So, what do you intend to do?" she prompted, throwing him a glare.

Gainas hesitated for a moment, but then took a deep breath as though he'd

made up his mind and spoke up. “I... I still have feelings for Lilianne, so...”

“Oh my. I’ve not even an inkling of interest in that.”

“Huh...?” Gainas looked up with surprise at her decisive remark.

In response, Mary patted the corners of her mouth with her napkin, as though to say she was bored, and waved her hand dismissively to show her lack of interest. “I don’t care how you feel about Lilianne, nor about how you’re one of the many men around her. I’d rather you didn’t gush all about it to me.”

“Then what on earth did you mean earlier...?”

“I only asked you one thing: What do you intend to do? You can’t possibly be thinking about immersing yourself in some lustful woman’s harem while keeping *that* girl tied up to you,” Mary declared, glaring at Gainas.

He grew timid at her words, evidently having guessed who she meant when she’d said “that girl,” as his breath caught in his throat. “Of course I’m aware that I can’t just leave things as they are. I should find a good moment to talk to her...”

“You should. And I’d like you to show some sincerity and shoulder the blame properly.” Mary elegantly placed her teacup back on its saucer as she cast a glance at Gainas. She couldn’t stop her gaze from being harsh as the Parfette in her mind trembled in tears.

Gainas bore her glare with a remorseful slant of his eyebrows. “Of course,” he responded, meeting her eyes. “I’m entirely at fault here. No matter what people might think, and no matter how ill they might speak of me, I won’t try to swindle my way out of this.”

Mary paused. “Don’t you forget those words.”

She shot him her harshest glare yet, at which Gainas straightened his posture and offered her a single nod in response. It was clear that although he’d fallen for Lilianne, he held no ill will towards Parfette, and he didn’t want to hurt her. *That almost makes it worse, since it’s usually easier to move on from being dumped by a terrible man...* Mary thought as she abruptly got to her feet.

Gainas was ready to settle the problem, and that was all that mattered. How

he intended to do it and what kind of things he'd say—it was not Mary's place to meddle with such details. Judging by his attitude, it was likely that he wouldn't do or say anything cruel, anyway.

Now that Mary was certain of this, she had nothing else to discuss with him. She wasn't about to let him start gushing all about his feelings for Lilianne, let alone do something absurd like converse with him as though they were on a real date, as Gainas's father had been hoping.

"Well then, excuse me," Mary bid him farewell, intending to end this tea party and leave, but Gainas called out to stop her.

"W-Wait, Lady Mary. Would you like to have a meal with me after this?"

"You mean...just us?" Mary asked, her eyes widening at the unexpected invitation.

She hadn't anticipated him asking something like that under these circumstances. She wasn't interested in Gainas, and it was clear he didn't have those kinds of feelings for her either, yet he'd implied he wanted them to have a meal together, just the two of them.

Mary turned to look at him, and in that moment, he seemed to have realized how his words had come across as he shook his head in a panic.

"N-No, I didn't mean it like that! I don't have a guilty conscience...!"

"Guilty conscience?" Mary tilted her head inquisitively.

Gainas looked flustered again. He turned red, then pale, then started making hurried excuses, explaining how his father had arranged a restaurant and that he hadn't meant to cause Mary trouble. It became clear to her that he wasn't used to socializing with women. He'd been engaged to Parfette at a young age, and until now (until Lilianne had ensnared him), he hadn't ever tried to entice a woman before.

Based on his flustered appearance, Mary guessed she was the only person he'd ever tried to invite someplace alone, and she let out a sigh. She shook her head, her silver locks swaying with the movement.

"Let's not. When this is over and done with, we can all enjoy some tea

together instead," she said.

"Yes... You're right."

Who exactly Mary had meant by "we all," she wasn't certain herself at this moment in time. She offered no clarification as she gave Gainas a single bow and reached for the door.

She'd gotten the door halfway open when Gainas called out to her again. "Lady Mary, I know I have no right to say this, but even so... Please look after Parfette."

"Oh dear. What's between me and Parfette has nothing to do with you. Do refrain from interfering with other people's relationships."

At her harsh remark, Gainas's breath hitched in his throat, and he lowered his head. "My apologies."

(*Foolishly serious man...* Mary muttered in her mind, because her remark had, in fact, been an agreement. Both Gainas and Parfette took her words so literally, she truly struggled with how to deal with either of them.)

Mary felt a prick of pain in her heart at Gainas's guilt-ridden look. But she didn't feel like offering him any support, for Parfette's heartbroken face flashed in her mind. She already felt as though she were betraying the girl for just having spoken to Gainas today.

So Mary decided the conversation had to end there, and swung the door closed behind her loudly, as though to tell Gainas not to try and stop her again.

Of course, once she exited the room, she came across Adi, who'd been waiting outside. He was standing straight with his hands behind his back like the perfect servant, but when he saw Mary come out, his shoulders relaxed, and his rigid posture was broken.

How can a servant feel this relaxed? Mary wondered, but seeing him back to his usual self caused her shoulders to reflexively relax as well. She'd become strung up during her standoff against Gainas, but at the sight of Adi, those feelings started gently melting away.

"I kept you waiting, Adi."

“Is it over?”

“Yes. There wasn’t much to discuss in the first place. Now, let’s inform my father and then get back to enjoying tea with Alicia and Patrick,” Mary said as she began walking. She didn’t look back even once, and she didn’t seem reluctant to leave in the slightest. In fact, she even regretfully commented, “I suppose I didn’t manage to end it in the shortest time after all.”

There was no lingering attachment about her, so she really must’ve just been trying to end the discussion as quickly as possible. Having conjectured this, Adi breathed a sigh of relief and then followed after her.

When they got back to the courtyard, Alicia greeted Mary in a carefree manner. “Lady Mary! Welcome back!”

“I should’ve just gone back to my room,” Mary muttered under her breath.

Of course, that didn’t get through to Alicia at all, as she eagerly began preparing some tea for the two arrivals. She poured it out with a serious expression, then pulled out two chairs and beckoned. “Here you go!”

Mary sighed in exasperation, but refusing would’ve been too much trouble, so she had a seat as prompted. Then, she took a single sip of the tea Alicia had presented to her.

“Forty points.”

Thusly she declared.

“Aww, you’re always so strict...” Alicia replied. “My parents both said the tea I serve is delicious.”

“That’s because they can’t just say it’s disgusting out loud in front of the person who served the tea. I can, though,” responded Mary. “And anyway, you’re a princess, so stop playing maid and pouring people tea. It’s tepid, strangely bitter, and obviously made by an amateur. It’s undrinkable.”

“Understood, Lady Mary! I’ll work hard to serve tea that you’ll find satisfactory!”

“It’s not sinking in at all! Patrick, just what do you need to say for something to get through to this girl?!” Mary demanded. As usual, she was on the brink of

despair since her cutting remarks had no effect on Alicia.

But Patrick only continued to elegantly drink his tea and smile leisurely. To make matters worse, he was even regarding Alicia with that same fond look on his face as always.

As a side note, the favorite drink of Patrick, the handsome heir to House Dyce, accomplished in both academics and sports, who still handled student representation even during college, was “tea that Alicia made for me.” So Mary could’ve complained to him all she liked, but needless to say, it was a pointless endeavor.

“Ah, don’t get so worked up, Mary. Alicia’s doing her best every day to prepare tea in a way you’d like.”

“I... I don’t care! I never told her to do that, so it’s just a bother for me. Anyway, I’d rather drink Adi’s tea!”

“Oh, I’m currently Alicia’s tea instructor, so I won’t make you any tea when she’s around,” Adi piped up.

“Why, you! You traitor!”

“Me?! Milady, I am your ally—”

“Right, right, here we go again. You’re my ally first, and the Chief Commander of the Alicia Support Squad at Karelia HQ. Is that it?”

“Yes!”

“Honestly, why are there more— Aha! It’s impossible for you to get promoted or gain any more members in such a short amount of time! I see you’re keeping the bit realistic!” exclaimed Mary, impressed for an altogether ambiguous reason.

Adi chuckled at her, while at the same time preparing some tea. Perhaps he wanted to offer it as an apology for their banter, or perhaps this habit was deeply ingrained in his mind as a servant. Alicia attentively observed his experienced ministrations, occasionally nodding at something or other.

And so his tea was presented to Mary, as though they all wanted to see how many points he’d score in opposition to Alicia. Mary received it with an

exasperated expression, but nevertheless took a sincere sip.

“Thirty-four points.”

Thusly she declared.

Patrick, who’d been spectating this scene, concluded that no progress was being made and (as though he wanted to say they’d had enough fun) changed the topic. “By the way, Mary. Since you took the trouble to come back home, how about the three of us go for dinner together?”

“I don’t mind, but... The three of us?” Mary asked, looking at him quizzically. For whatever reason, today lines like “just us two” or “us three” kept coming up.

Seeing her confused expression, Patrick smiled sardonically. “Ah, right, didn’t we tell you? Alicia’s going to stay with her aunt tonight.”

“My, is that so?”

“Yes. They should be picking me up soon,” Alicia added.

“Why’re you getting picked up from *my* place? Have them pick you up at the palace!”

“Ah, there they are! Well then, everyone, pardon me!”

“Listen when people are talking to you!” screamed Mary as Alicia happily got to her feet at the sight of the newly arrived horse-drawn carriage.

As usual, the words had little effect on her. “Okay!” Alicia chirped in reply, and then clasped both of Mary’s hands.

The bracelet around Alicia’s wrist, sporting gold and indigo beads, clinked with the movement. In contrast, there was nothing around Mary’s wrist, but it was already common knowledge what she had hidden in her skirt pocket.

“Good luck with your studies at Elysiana College, Lady Mary!”

“Wh-What? I don’t need to hear that from you!”

“Please come back soon. I’ll be sure to prepare a more delicious tea for you next time,” Alicia said affably, lightly rocking their clasped hands.

Mary was stunned, having no idea what to say in response to this infantile

proclamation, as her mouth simply opened and closed mutely.

“Please excuse me, Lady Mary. Lord Patrick, Adi, see you two at school!”

Alicia curtsied and then sped away towards the carriage. Halfway through, as though she’d remembered something, she stopped in her tracks. Then, she resumed walking with a slow, elegant step. Of course, what she’d recalled was a certain someone’s furious voice shouting, *“Stop running around all over the place!”*

Patrick and Adi chuckled after Alicia’s departure. Meanwhile, Mary was still flabbergasted.

“Wh-What is it, you two? If you’ve something to say to me, then spit it out,” she said.

“No, it’s nothing... Right, Adi?”

“Indeed, I have absolutely nothing that I’d like to say at the moment.”

While the two of them glanced at each other and smiled, Mary shot them a glare. “Fine, I’ll give you a fight!” she raised her voice to say. But right then, Patrick stood up as though to interrupt her. His timing was so perfect that it was almost as if he’d expected for Mary to get impatient and start shouting. Moreover, the way it played out implied that he’d thoroughly enjoyed Mary’s reaction.

How annoying, thought Mary as the sharpness of her glare strengthened. However, it was entirely ineffective.

“I actually already made the reservation,” said Patrick. “Let’s ride the carriage there. Hm... I think three stops should be enough.”

Adi dipped his head. “I apologize for the trouble.”

Mary’s eyes grew a little wider at this natural flow of conversation between the two. Adi got to his feet as though this were all par for the course and casually asked Patrick, “What sort of restaurant is it?” And the midway stops Patrick had mentioned were obviously the countermeasure against Adi’s motion sickness. At any rate, there were three of them, and Adi, too, would ride in the carriage...

“Yes. That’s why I...” Mary whispered as she beheld the scene. But before she could finish her sentence, Adi looked back at her, and thinking it strange that she still hadn’t gotten up, he called out to her.

“Milady, is something the matter? We should get going.”

“Y-Yes, indeed. Let’s go... The *three* of us.”

Adi reached out his hand, and in response, Mary placed her hand in his and got to her feet.

***

The following day, once Mary had returned to Elysiana College, she spoke frankly with Parfette and disclosed the truth regarding the pseudo marriage interview she’d had with Gainas. In high society, this kind of matchmaking wasn’t so unusual, even if it amounted to the parents treating their same-aged children as their pawns. Plus, Mary’s conscience was clear, and she had nothing to hide.

She had simply joined a tea party for the convenience of their parents, and after a brief conversation with Gainas, Mary had quickly put an end to the meeting. Honestly, she felt she had the right to complain, given that her day off had been interrupted as such.

Though at first Parfette paled and looked tearful, upon hearing Mary’s explanations, she began to calm down. By the end, a wry smile spread across her face as she calmly listened to Mary’s story.

“I see. So that’s what happened.”

“Gainas’s father is quite heartless, isn’t he?” Mary pointed out.

“Not at all, he’s actually a very kind man. He always doted on me like I was his real daughter. So I’m sure that what happened was...” Parfette trailed off, hanging her head down.

For a third party like Mary, it was a painful sight. From what she knew, House Marquis and House Eldland had enjoyed a longtime fellowship with each other, so Parfette must’ve adored Lord Eldland like he was her own father. Now, this harmonious relationship could be broken off because of his own son’s foolish

lovesickness. *I see. It's possible that he wants Parfette to give up on Gainas*, Mary found herself thinking.

Among the girls who'd had their fiancés stolen away by Lilianne, there were a few who promptly moved on, saying things like, "I don't care about that man anymore! I'll find someone better!" No matter how much the girls may have adored their previous partners, seeing them grow infatuated with some other woman and willingly become but one of her many male admirers was enough to dampen even a century-old love.

But Parfette was not one of those girls, and today as always, she sighed and cast a glance towards a corner of the cafeteria where a certain group was seated. The look in her eyes was nothing short of wistful.

Then, she cast a quick glance at Mary. "Lady Mary," she said timidly, as though she was about to ask something she shouldn't. "Are you still pining after Lord Patrick?"

"Huh? Why would I ever be interested in that— Oops." Having unintentionally revealed her true feelings, Mary quickly placed a hand over her mouth.

Even abroad, Patrick had a number of fans. In fact, his popularity increased on the daily because of the way his love for Alicia had conquered their difference in rank. Especially at Elysiana College, where all the popular men had been taken into Lilianne's reverse harem, people would call Patrick "the prince from the neighboring nation who took only one person's hand in interclass love."

If Mary made a careless comment about Patrick in this situation, it was possible that the flames of jealousy directed at Lilianne would leap to her instead. So she swallowed her words and cleared her throat.

"Listen, I've already said multiple times that that's not the case," she said calmly, trying to make Parfette understand. "I don't have any special feelings towards Patrick. And that whole idea of me being some commendable person who threw herself aside for the sake of two lovers, all while secretly hiding my own feelings, just *isn't* true."

"But ever since your engagement with Lord Patrick was canceled, you've been rejecting all other marriage proposals. That's why I was sure you were yearning for him, even after you stepped aside..." Parfette said hesitantly, at which Mary

sighed.

The moving tale of the commendable Lady Albert, who'd chosen to step aside, had even spread to other countries. To top it off, lately it had become so embellished, so utterly blown out of proportion, that people even started saying Mary had decided to study abroad because she still harbored feelings for Patrick and the sight of him and Alicia together was simply too much for her to bear. Talk about making mountains out of molehills!

The tale had become altered to the point that Mary felt as though she was reading a book adapted to the tastes of the masses and found herself shedding a tear while saying, *"What a touching story!"* That was just how removed from reality it was, and how her experiences had transformed into a tale to be enjoyed by young girls.

But in the actual Mary's view, the story was so off the mark that it astounded her. Whether in the past or present, she'd never felt even the tiniest inkling of romantic love towards Patrick, nor did she have any recollection of stepping aside for his and Alicia's sakes. Mary did used to think she and Patrick would become engaged eventually due to their ranks, but when he found a different partner, her reaction had been a mere, "Oh, is that so?" In sum, she had no interest in clinging onto her betrothal to Patrick, but nor did she wish to treat him with disdain.

The sight of Patrick and Alicia in an intimate relationship together didn't cause Mary any level of hurt, so the idea that she'd run off abroad because it was too difficult for her... It was absurd. Well, the sight of them flirting like mad was painful in its own way, but the reason she'd come to Elysiana was because they had a course that Karelia Academy didn't—management studies, which she wanted to take for the sake of her migratory bird restaurant. (Incidentally, Adi, who'd been left behind at Karelia, was taking much more damage than Mary on account of having to witness the lovebirds on a daily basis.)

In any case, Mary explained that she didn't have any such feelings towards Patrick, at which Parfette tilted her head curiously.

"Then why do you reject all the other proposals, Lady Mary? Have you been unable to find a nice person?"

“Why...?” Mary trailed off, falling silent. She could give no clear answer to Parfette’s question.

It was true that Patrick’s looks and social standing were excellent. He was like the embodiment of the most ideal man that any woman could ask for—a true prince, inside and out.

However, Mary was receiving a flood of marriage proposals, and among them were candidates who matched up to Patrick. In fact, it would be no surprise to anyone if she received a proposal from a member of another country’s royalty. She had choices aplenty. Anyone would gladly agree to become engaged to her if she so much as wished for it.

Yet Mary had rejected every single proposition that came her way, and she hadn’t made a move to approach anyone herself either. She acted no different from usual, and during parties when she would’ve normally been escorted by Patrick, she asked one of her brothers or a relative to accompany her instead.

Thinking of her behavior up until now, even Mary herself admitted that it wasn’t all that strange for others to believe she still had feelings for Patrick. But even as she mused about it, she ascertained that she definitely didn’t feel any sort of romantic inclination towards him.

But if I was fine with being engaged to Patrick, why am I rejecting every other man?

Parfette had questioned Mary precisely because she’d found her behavior strange if she felt no romantic love towards Patrick. But Mary had no idea how to respond, which troubled her. Truthfully, this was the first time Mary had ever been asked such a thing.

Her parents and brothers were screening every single applicant from A to Z, and they told her she could reject the candidates as she pleased. She’d report back to Patrick and Alicia with her rejections, to which they’d just say, “Ah, I see.” There wasn’t anyone else Mary discussed this topic with, which was why she hadn’t thought about it that deeply before.

Why was I only okay with Patrick?

He had good family standing, he was handsome and had perfect conduct, he

understood Mary's personality...and more than anything, he...

"Patrick's not like the rest," Mary said, but then trailed off again when she spotted the person standing behind Parfette.

Noticing as much, Parfette turned around, and her face stiffened with a gasp. "Lord Gainas..." she uttered, and at that moment, a buzz rushed through the cafeteria.

Why is he approaching her here, of all places? Mary wondered with an internal tut, watching as Lilianne snuggled up to Gainas with a smirk.

In *Heart High 2*, Parfette's relationship with Gainas wasn't outstanding by any means—they were simply engaged at the behest of their parents. It was easy to tell that they both harbored resentment over being forced to go along with such an arrangement.

However, when Lilianne transferred to Elysiana, Gainas tasted true love for the first time. Parfette also grew closer with the heroine and, because of that, realized she wanted to live a more honest life. Though the two betrothed had been on bad terms until then, they were able to forge a bond of friendship following the annulment of their engagement. Lilianne had gained a lover on one side and a best friend on the other, and they all lived happily ever after...

Or at least, that had been the general story in Gainas's route. It was all very conveniently wrapped up, as usual. Though pointing out as much now was redundant.

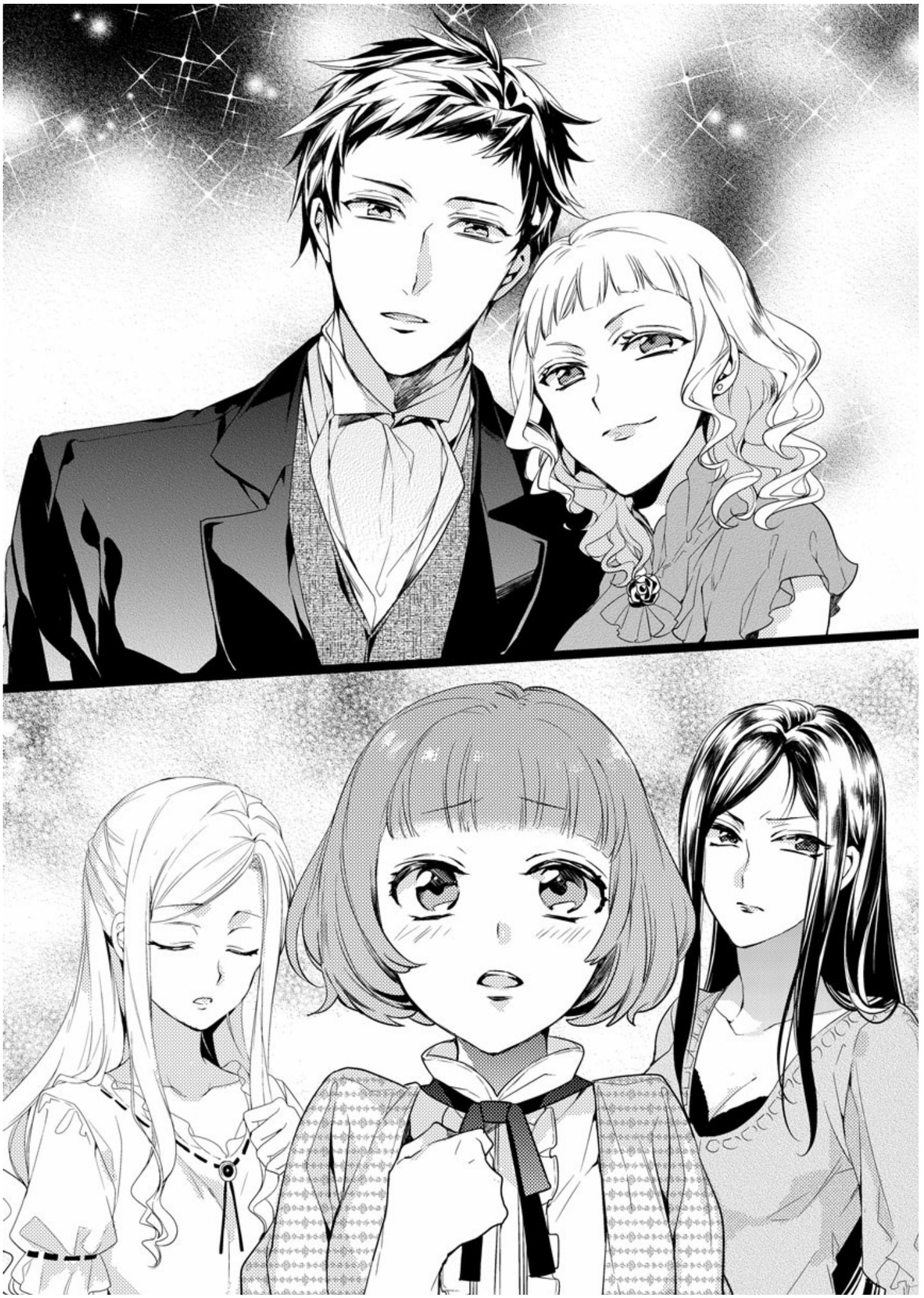
Of the several story lines within the game, Gainas's route was one that ended happily and amicably for everyone. Although at first Lilianne and Parfette clashed with each other, as the story developed, the two reached a mutual understanding, and the ending even included an image of Parfette happily watching over the heroine and Gainas together. Parfette was well-liked as one of the new cast of female characters that could be befriended, and she even had a few of her own official merchandise items. As far as female side characters in an otome game were concerned, she'd received quite the hearty welcome from the players.

That was how things had gone according to Mary's memories, but in reality, it was obvious that the current situation was a far cry from such harmony.

Gainas looked regretful, but Lilianne, whose arm was wrapped around his, was grinning triumphantly. Parfette was looking up at Gainas with misty eyes. Meanwhile, Carina must've sensed the change in the atmosphere, for she observed the happenings with a frightful expression.

The stiflingly oppressive air had not an ounce of amiability to it, and Mary sighed. "Excuse me, everyone," she spoke up. "If you've something to discuss, how about we move elsewhere? There's quite a lot of people here, so it'll be difficult to have a calm conversation."

Gainas nodded at her suggestion, as did Parfette, who looked on the verge of tears. But Lilianne, still coiled around Gainas's arm, purposely raised her voice. "My, do you have something to say to us, Lady Mary?"



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

“I simply mean that nothing presently happening *here* has anything to do with you. So you’re more than welcome to stay where you are,” Lilianne said, her voice dripping with intentional cuteness. Both Gainas and Parfette looked between her and Mary in confusion. Apparently neither of them had picked up on the hidden meaning behind Lilianne’s words.

But Mary did, and she cast a sidelong glance at Carina. Just like her, the girl seemed to have found some conclusive evidence from Lilianne’s statements. But she continued watching from where she was, making no move to directly involve herself.

She’s lacking initiative, as always, thought Mary with a small chuckle. A shame—it would’ve been suitable for the girl who was supposed to play the part of villainess to spring out here and quip a few nasty remarks.

But in the end, Carina was just the villainess of one route. In the other routes, including Gainas’s, her name didn’t even come up once. Her role was different from that of Mary Albert, who entered the stage in every single route to constantly get in the heroine’s way, and who always fell to ruin by the end of the game with such frequency that the players commented that her rate of appearances rivaled that of the protagonist.

With that on her mind, Mary smiled daringly as she fixed her eyes on Lilianne. Regardless of her own role as the villainess, a woman who hid behind a man was an unworthy opponent in the first place.

“‘Nothing to do with me’? I wonder what you mean by that? I was in the middle of a conversation with Parfette. You interrupted us, and now you’re saying you want me to keep my mouth shut because I’ve supposedly no relation to this?”

Mary didn’t even bother to add an offended exclamation like, *“Goodness!”* as she glared at Lilianne.

Parfette, caught in between them with fearful, teary eyes, looked disoriented as she took a few steps back to seemingly give up her spot. *Are you kidding me?* Mary thought to herself, seeing this easily readable act. Parfette was acting as though she could sense a conflict between Mary and Lilianne, but from Mary’s perspective, Lilianne was an opponent undeserving of even a minor argument,

let alone an entire conflict. Just facing the girl was a total waste of time on Mary's part.

So Mary gazed icily at Lilianne, and after purposely glancing down at the way she held onto Gainas's arm, Mary snickered openly.

"Did you really think that I, Mary Albert, would allow some lecherous peasant girl like *you* to get in my way? You should know your place before you go around seducing men."

The coolness in Mary's glare only heightened, her eyes full of scorn, as though she was looking at something utterly filthy. She had even dabbed at the corners of her lips with her handkerchief following her words. Mary's countenance couldn't possibly show a higher level of disgust, and in response, Lilianne's face instantly reddened. The reverse harem that had been watching over her from the side all started to rise to their feet at this unpardonable turn of events.

The reason not one person tried to break up the girls' standoff was because Mary Albert herself was involved. She was the daughter of the neighboring nation's noble family who stood equal to the royalty. If someone made a careless remark towards her, they'd not only put their own social standing in jeopardy, but they'd risk putting their entire family in mortal danger. Even abroad, House Albert held tremendous power—not a single other person at Elysiana College was in Mary's league.

And so nobody said a word as silence overtook the strained atmosphere around them. For her part, Mary felt quite moved at the fact that she'd managed to properly convey her sarcasm and snide, but of course, she kept that hidden away in her heart.

For a long moment, the heavy air brought about by Mary's proclamation remained unbroken, until one brave person from Lilianne's reverse harem began to slowly walk towards Mary, perhaps intending to lash out at her. No, he definitely wasn't brave enough for *that*. Nonetheless, he called out, "Lady Mary..."

He was a handsome youth, with vibrant eyes and matching hair color, the archetypal princely character. He had a gentlemanly attitude and a soft look in his eyes, and he was popular due to the fact that his manners were perfect regardless of who he was interacting with, noble or not. Both in the game and in reality, he was pompous enough to refer to Lilianne as "princess."

Though he looked timid, he still stepped in to break the conflict up, holding Lilianne close as he snatched her away from Gainas. Lilianne squealed in a cutesy voice, her expression screaming, *"Don't fight over me!"* The sight of it made Mary sigh in her mind.

"Lady Mary, don't you think that was uncalled for?" the young man reproached her in a gentle voice.

Lilianne quickly changed her tune and looked up at him with a distraught expression. Her eyes seemed to beg, *"Save me!"* which would surely stir any man's protective instincts. The rest of the men's eyes sparked to life, and they all rose to their feet as well, perhaps unable to take the idea of having the chance to savor this protective vigor stolen away from them.

This time, Mary sighed out loud as she watched it happen.

She thought men who wanted to protect women were splendid, and so was their courage in stepping up when someone wanted to depend on them. However, it was crucial to pick one's battles carefully, or else the whole thing would be nothing more than a fool's errand.

And right now, they'd chosen the wrong opponent. The young men were so enthralled by their little "princess" that they'd forgotten just who they were up against.

"Why, I've no idea what you mean," Mary responded to the one who'd spoken to her.

"I'm referring to your earlier words. I think you went a little overboard when you said those things to her."

"My, is that so?" she asked nonchalantly, not even bothering to meet his eyes. She started combing through her hair to show how little interest she had in this.

In response to her flagrant attitude, the idiot prince frowned. To him, her behavior was beyond inexcusable. (Secretly, Mary was thrilled that she was getting to act the villainess, but no one had any way of knowing that. If a certain someone were here, he'd probably say something like, *"You're really getting into this, milady!"* But unfortunately, he wasn't present.)

Looking between Mary and the prince, Lilianne snuggled up even closer to him, perhaps believing that he could rival Mary. In contrast, Gainas tried to rein in the prince, saying, "Just calm down a bit." Indeed, from Lilianne's perspective, there was no need to weigh her options here.

But if one were to pause and think this through logically, Gainas had the right approach in this situation.

After all, the opponent in question was none other than Mary Albert. True enough, she had been leading a normal student life with no ostentatious displays of her family influence in sight, many people had witnessed the way in which she often soothed a crybaby girl, she attended her management lectures with near reckless enthusiasm, *and* her notes from the course were excessively

bulky—but at the end of the day, she was still the daughter of House Albert. Scale, history, power—her family outclassed the others in all regards, and there was no house in this country or her own that could outmatch them. Even *if* Lilianne and her prince were in the right, the Albert name could overrule anything that happened here in Elysiana College.

Perfectly aware of this, Mary didn't even take pride in it as she coldly fixed her eyes on the couple before her.

"This peasant, who can't think of anything outside of serving the men around her, came up to me and didn't even offer me a word of greeting. Don't you think it'd be more appropriate for someone of her status to say a few words to me?"

"But she's—"

"You may see her as some sort of princess, but to me, she's nothing more than a country hick. Besides, this is Elysiana College. The school's dignity could very well collapse if someone goes around overreaching and forgetting who she is, don't you think?" Mary asserted coolly, shooting Lilianne a glare. A few people gasped at her words, but Mary didn't care.

This *was* Elysiana College, after all. In a way, it was like a condensed version of high society. It was an elite school where the children of nobility and wealthy merchants alike were in attendance, and social standing was of critical importance. A commoner like Lilianne was on the bottom of the hierarchy, while Mary Albert was at the top. Taking their ranks into account, Lilianne was in no place to casually strike up a conversation with Mary, however many men happened to be waiting upon her.

The prince's breath hitched in his throat. Maybe he'd conjectured what Mary had left unsaid, or maybe he was finally reminded of the true essence of Elysiana College. He looked away, avoiding Mary's eyes, which was certainly because he'd compared in his mind the influence of his own family versus hers—not that there was any comparison, as he was sure to have realized.

"Th-That's...true, I suppose..."

"I'm glad to see you understand." Mary forced herself to sound pleased, smiling as she cast her gaze towards the rest of the men.

They had wanted to defend Lilianne and embrace her for themselves, but having recalled the weight of the Albert name, they'd stopped in their tracks. Now they simply stole glances at Mary as their shoulders trembled slightly.

"I don't mind if the rest of you have something to add, but before that, could I trouble you to introduce yourselves first? I'm a transfer student, so I don't know your names."

"I don't care about who you are," her words implied. *"To me, Mary Albert, knowing your names is worthless."*

At her indirect appeal, everyone awkwardly looked away.

What finally broke that stifling atmosphere was the sound of Lilianne's footsteps as she ran off, followed by the footsteps of the men who chased after her. The hectic scene was unbecoming of Elysiana College, and Mary laughed snidely through her nose. "Ew, how disgraceful!" she commented, and deliberately shrugged her shoulders.

Her gesture and remark alike were the definition of a haughty noble lady. It was a magnificent display of a truly nasty character.

Anyone would be convinced I am the villainess here! I wish Adi could've seen this... As Mary internally sent herself compliments, she brushed through the hair that lay over her shoulders. This, too, was an important component of her villainous performance; it was the result of the extensive research she'd done with Adi on exactly how her hair should move to produce the desired effect.

Mary took a deep breath, yet the cafeteria was still silent and emanated an air of awkwardness. A few people left in haste, unable to endure this atmosphere.

But Mary stayed in her seat. Calmly, she took out a book from her bag and began reading as though nothing had happened. She felt no obligation to go chasing after Lilianne, nor to start worrying and quickly vacate the place.

While she cast her gaze down at the open page of her book, Gainas, the only one who had remained, stiffly looked at Parfette.

"Parfette..."

"Lord Gainas..."

They both had things they wanted to say to each other, but the pressure in the air made them waver. They truly looked like kindred spirits with those identical perplexed expressions. *What a match they make*, thought Mary sarcastically.

“I’d like to discuss something with you, Parfette...”

“Y-Yes, I don’t mind... But...” the girl glanced at Mary. Considering her personality, though she wanted to talk to Gainas, she didn’t think she could just leave Mary alone here.

Parfette opened her mouth to speak up to Mary, but she suddenly stopped as though she’d remembered something. Then, her eyes began to gradually fill with tears...

“Listen!” exclaimed Mary. “You should already know that I obviously don’t have anything against our difference in ranks!”

“Lady Mary...”

“Just hurry up and go already!”

Parfette’s damp eyes widened momentarily at those words, and then her expression brightened suddenly. The thought that Mary hadn’t abandoned her must’ve brought her comfort.

Mary sighed at that easy to read shift in her expression, but even so, she smiled wryly before adjusting her line of sight towards Gainas.

“Um, pardon me, Lady Mary, b-but I’d like to talk with Parfette for a bit...”

“Huh?” she looked at him quizzically.

“Er... I am Gainas Eldland.”

“I know that already!!!”

This overserious pair! Mary screeched internally, sighing at the way these two made her lose her mind. “I’m going to be busy reading for the next while,” she told Gainas pointedly.

“Escort her properly!” her words implied, and apparently having picked up on at least that much, Gainas nodded in response.

So for a while, Mary engrossed herself in her book, and when Gainas and Parfette returned to the cafeteria, a stir began again among the remaining students. But at the sound of Mary clearing her throat, the noise subsided all at once, astoundingly enough.

That was because only the curious bystanders remained here now, and none of them had the courage to even speak to the involved parties directly. Those who wanted to confront the matter head-on, as well as those who'd rather ignore it entirely, had already long since vacated the cafeteria, Carina among them (Mary also wanted to join the leaving party, but alas).

"Um, sorry I made you wait, Lady Mary," Parfette said.

"My, I'm simply here reading my book. It's not like I was waiting for you or anything."

"R-Right, of course... I'm sorry. I'm such a—"

"*Welcome back*!" Mary corrected herself in a fluster as Parfette began to tear up and tremble. She couldn't handle the harsh words, as usual.

But Parfette hadn't looked tearful upon her initial return, and in fact, she even seemed a little uplifted, so at the very least, her talk with Gainas must've gone peacefully and without a fuss. Though Mary had made quite a scene, it seemed that getting rid of Lilianne and her cronies was a good thing in the end. Noting as much, Mary felt a twinge of relief.

With that, she abruptly got to her feet. "I know you just got back, but let's make our way to the next classroom," she urged, unwilling to give the onlookers any more bait.

As they walked, the students gazed at Parfette's back, and in her mind, Mary stuck out her tongue at them in vexation.

Alas, the conclusion was such that Gainas had essentially dumped Parfette. He would also send a formal notice asking for the annulment of their engagement. But their conversation had gone amicably, and the sight of Gainas speaking from his heart with his head lowered had given Parfette the determination to end their betrothal as well.

"Lord Gainas kept saying it was all his fault and bowing his head," Parfette

explained.

“Obviously, because it’s true,” said Mary.

“And he said I should let him know if there’s anything troubling me, and that he doesn’t mind if I want to hit him until I feel better.”

“So how many times did you deck him?”

“I didn’t hit him at all! Anyway, apparently Lilianne really understands the things that were troubling him, and she helped him to heal from them. He told me that’s why, this time, he wants to be the one to support her... Meanwhile, *I* never even noticed that anything was troubling him at all.”

Rather than being upset over the annulment of their engagement, Parfette hung her head low as she bemoaned her own uselessness. Just because she’d come to terms with the situation didn’t mean her wounds would heal instantly. She and Gainas had gotten along well, so she must’ve felt she was at fault for not noticing her partner’s troubles. Even worse, some woman who’d wedged herself between them had prodded at her wounds, and in the end, she’d even stolen her fiancé away.

Parfette let out a deep sigh, and Mary cast her a sidelong glance as her own brows creased.

It was no surprise that Lilianne understood what had troubled Gainas—she had her past life recollections of the game to rely on. She was basically attempting a one hundred percent completion run of making all the men fall for her. With the Gainas route being one of the game’s easier ones, it probably didn’t even pose a challenge for her.

In fact, Lilianne definitely didn’t plan to stop at Gainas—she was aiming for the reverse harem route, the most difficult one of all.

Such a route didn’t exist in the prequel, and its level of difficulty was so high that most players could only achieve it by referencing guides online. Even a single wrong choice in a dialogue option could result in the player failing the route. Yet this degree of difficulty was exactly what lit a flame of determination among the hardcore players. Some of the tougher fighters even boasted of the fact that the number of times they’d replayed the game in order to obtain the

reverse harem ending surpassed three digits—such a fervor was quite the unusual sight for an otome game, indeed.

As for the contents of this brutishly difficult to get ending...

“All the men surround Lilianne without discord, nor do they fight over her! This is no polygyny, but polyandry!”

It was that kind of convenient conclusion; everyone appraised it as another “bed of roses” type ending.

Nonetheless, the CG featuring all of the romanceable characters present together was a worthy sight. It naturally pleased otome game fans to see the heroine surrounded by all these men, and on top of that, it was the best kind of treat for the players who enjoyed the game based on certain other preferences in regards to the male cast.

In any case, there was no shortage of people who took the challenge upon themselves, and the little extras that were exclusively available in the reverse harem route only served to whet the players’ appetites.

A little something extra... That’s right, in the reverse harem ending that included...

Having recalled that much, Mary suddenly lifted her head.

It was clear that Lilianne was aiming for the reverse harem ending. She must’ve been relying on her past life memories to collect all the men with great speed while purposely omitting the reconciliation with Parfette. If, hypothetically, Lilianne was aiming for what lay *beyond* the reverse harem ending...and if she was rushing to obtain it...

What a meaningless endeavor that would be, Mary thought with a quiet sigh.

“Lady Mary, is something the matter?” Parfette asked upon seeing how lost in her thoughts Mary had become.

Mary returned to her senses, realizing that the lecture had progressed quite a lot while she’d been spacing out. She shook her head to rid herself of those idle thoughts. She wasn’t about to let herself ignore her studies by letting *Lilianne* of all people occupy her mind.

For now, just concentrate on your lecture, Mary berated herself as she cast her eyes towards the podium. Standing there was the good-looking professor (indeed, their homeroom teacher, and one of the game's romanceable cast), who was in the middle of explaining a slightly difficult technical term. He would mix it with sickly sweet words every now and then, to the shrill cheers of the female students encamping at the front of the classroom. Yet the way he'd cast Lilianne a quick glance and a wink after each pretentious exchange was proof that he was already a lost cause.

But Mary didn't care a whit about it, so long as he properly delivered his lecture.

Chapter 3

The turmoil of the last several days remained unbeknownst at Albert Manor, and a certain trio were holding the customary weekend tea party in its gardens.

Alicia and Patrick sat at the finely crafted white table. “What would milady think if she knew we were doing this without her?” worried Adi as he took his usual seat. The reason the Albert Manor gardens were open without a single Albert around was, naturally, because they were still waiting for Mary to arrive.

“Lady Mary’s running late,” said Alicia.

“They’re doing some construction work by the border, so maybe she got caught up in that,” mused Patrick.

“Oh! Or maybe she made tons of friends at Elysiana College, and they’re all out on a playdate together!”

“Definitely not,” responded Patrick and Adi in unison.

“Please don’t deny it together like that...”

“I don’t think milady would be so proactive if she’s only going to be there for one year.”

“We don’t have to think about all the particulars!” Alicia protested. “You two are honestly so mean! Humph!” she added as she puffed out her cheeks.

The two men exchanged a look and shrugged. They’d both known Mary for a long time, and their expressions seemed to say, *“That’s just how it is,”* and, *“Yes, indeed,”* on account of them being so familiar with her personality.

She was impishly stubborn, easy yet difficult to read at the same time, and she definitely wouldn’t let just anyone into her personal bubble; even so, she feigned being a sociable young lady. Such was her character, which was exactly why she was unlikely to make any friends during her one year abroad, even if she *did* make business connections. Hence, the two of them had trampled on Alicia’s words.

They hadn’t intended to be cruel—it was just the truth. Mary surely had no

intention of making any particularly close friendships while pretending to be a perfect noble lady. And though she had become recklessly attached to a certain girl, this too was a point of surprise and lamentation for Mary herself.

When the two explained their thoughts, Alicia, despite her scolding words, seemed to have something on her mind as she quietly spoke up. “That reminds me. That one time...”

A few months ago.

They were having a tea party, just like the one today, but as Patrick and Adi were both absent, only Alicia and Mary were present. Needless to say, Mary raised numerous complaints, saying things like, “If they’re going to be absent because they’re busy, then surely I don’t have to come back every single week!”

Alicia happily drowned out Mary’s words: “But that means we have the cake all to ourselves!”

It wasn’t long before a serene atmosphere took over. The girls enjoyed their usual conversation, interspersed with Mary’s sarcastic (and ultimately unsuccessful) remarks. But suddenly, Mary seemed to have something on her mind as she called out, “Hey...” with a serious countenance and evasive gaze.

Alicia peered at her in bewilderment. “What is it, Lady Mary?”

“There’s something I’d like to ask you...”

“Me? Okay, I’ll do my best to answer any question you might have.”

“Right, that’s good. Then let me ask you... I mean this hypothetically, but if there’s a one in a million chance...”

The incoherent words were very out of character for Mary. Even Alicia began to feel nervous at the thought of what Mary could possibly find *that* difficult to ask.

Was it something to do with Alicia’s family? Or maybe the circumstances of her birth? Or maybe it was related to Patrick, or the topic of the royal succession... Considering her unusual circumstances of going from an orphan to a princess, Alicia could admit that anyone might have a question or two for her. She’d already resigned herself to this, as there had been countless times when

people had asked her things out of ignorance or curiosity, and though they hadn't meant any harm by it, she still felt hurt. Whenever it happened, Alicia forced herself to smile and evaded their questions.

But when it came to Mary, Alicia had nothing to hide. "I'll answer whatever question you might have," she said with renewed resolve, staring at Mary as she awaited her next words.

At last, Mary turned to Alicia with a serious expression, then slowly opened her mouth and asked, "Would you say that the two of us are friends?" She seemed to have readied herself for whatever answer may come as she waited with bated breath, emanating a sense of tension.

Alicia was dumbstruck for a moment, staring at her without a word. Then, she exclaimed, "We're matching!" as she tapped the teacup that had at some point become Mary's favorite, and the tea inside swayed...

After concluding her retelling of the event, Alicia sighed. "That felt a bit... No, it felt *really* lonesome."

Both Patrick and Adi held their heads in their hands upon hearing of this.

"That is just..." Adi said, trailing off.

"Even if this *is* Mary we're talking about..." added Patrick. He suddenly recalled something, continuing, "Speaking of, there was that one time..."

Also a few months ago.

Back then, Patrick had been plenty busy dealing with problems concerning the matter of whether or not he'd go from being the heir of House Dyce to joining the royalty. His days were hectic, but the weight had finally started to lift from his shoulders after he asked for House Albert's assistance. Of course, Mary had been a part of the relief effort, and though usually the two of them based their friendship around exchanging sarcastic quips, that particular day, Patrick had gone to visit her in order to sincerely offer his thanks.

So when he expressed his genuine gratitude, the diabolical girl quickly turned away and said, "It's not like I did anything special."

Patrick smiled wryly at that easy to read attitude of hers. Normally, he

would've jumped at the opportunity to comment on her fiendishness, but just for today, he opted to face her again instead.

"Mary, I'm grateful to you from the bottom of my heart," he insisted.

"Huh? M-My, what brought this on?"

"Don't be afraid to let me know if you ever need anything. I'll be there for you, no matter what."

At his direct words, Mary grew obviously flustered. She must've been bewildered since she wasn't used to interacting with him in that way. Regardless, she responded with, "I wonder if you'd still be so eager to help me if I were to be cast out of House Albert?" as she smiled in jest.

It was so very much like her, but even then, Patrick's expression remained serious, and he replied to her while looking directly into her eyes. "Of course I would. No matter what happens, I'll be there for you. Even if you're expelled from your house."

At first, Mary paused. "Patrick..." she called out in a quiet voice after a moment, visibly hesitating.

To reaffirm his determination, Patrick nodded at her.

After a few seconds of them looking at each other, a frown crossed Mary's features while she tilted her head. "I understand that you're grateful to me, but why on earth would you offer me your help if I were no longer the daughter of House Albert?"

She stared at him in utter confusion, as if on the verge of making sure that he'd understood: *"I wouldn't be a member of House Albert anymore, you know?"*

Patrick had said nothing—he'd been lost for words...

"...and that's what happened," concluded Patrick. "That goes beyond her being aloof or thickheaded. At this point, it's just rude towards me."

He'd been telling the story indifferently while taking elegant sips of his tea, and Alicia had repeatedly nodded in full understanding of how he felt. Adi, unable to endure it, had buried his face behind both of his hands.

Patrick and Alicia both turned their eyes on him, expecting him to follow up and be the next to share a story of his own. Plus, he was the one who understood Mary best of all, so they believed he'd be able to offer an explanation for why she acted the way she did.

Adi conjectured that they were expecting as much, and slowly he pulled his hands away from his face while his shoulders drooped at the same time. "Milady is too caught up in being a daughter of House Albert," he said with a sigh, and thus his story began...

Mary had always been an eccentric noble lady.

Unlike her peers, she had no interest in extravagance or indulging herself in luxuries, nor did she make displays of her family's social standing. It wasn't that she lived a commoner's lifestyle either. She'd have her personal designers make custom dresses for her just like the other young ladies did, but after seeing them off for the day, she'd head for the servants' canteen and help to peel the vegetables. The attire she wore was appropriately luxurious for someone of noble status, and the hair clip she used to stop her hair from getting in the way while she peeled the vegetables was clearly of excellent make.

Mary didn't act like the other aristocrats, but nor did she live like the commoners did. She didn't go out of her way to emulate any particular lifestyle, yet she could play the textbook example of a young noble lady perfectly when circumstances required it—likely due to her sense of duty regarding how a member of House Albert should act, as well as her own intrinsic character.

She was more aristocratic than anyone, yet the complete opposite of aristocratic at the same time.

Mary could shift between these two extremes of her nature as though flipping a switch, and she'd become skilled at using them to her advantage depending on each individual situation.

As a result, though she'd been dubbed "the eccentric lady" behind her back, she was still surrounded by people who wanted to gain House Albert's favor. Whenever she made her appearance at parties, people went out of their way to bid her greetings and sing her praises, complimenting her beauty. Yet when she spoke pleasantly to Adi and the maids, others secretly laughed at her: "That girl

really talks to the *servants*!”

Having explained that much, Adi sighed. “The thing is... Normally, she’d still be able to make one or two friends from among her fellow noble ladies. Even if she’s eccentric, there should still be people who see her for who she really is, rather than just seeing her status. But...” he trailed off, stealing a glance at Patrick.

As always, his appearance was flawless, with handsome features befitting that of some prince. He returned Adi’s gaze with a curious tilt of his head, as though to ask whether this had something to do with him. His indigo hair swayed with the movement, framing his similarly colored eyes. He truly was the embodiment of any woman’s ideals—a Prince Charming who’d walked straight out of a fairy tale.

After a moment of looking at him, Adi hid his face behind his palms again. “All the other young ladies are yearning after you, Lord Patrick...”

His words caused a silence that was out of place for a tea party to drift through the air.

Patrick hadn’t expected his own name to come up in the slightest. “Sorry...” he offered as his cheek twitched.

“So the other girls were secretly seething in jealousy because they were convinced milady would end up engaged to Lord Patrick, and they started calling her an eccentric at school,” Adi continued. “But at the same time, there was no shortage of people after the Albert name, so it’s not like she was completely isolated. And it’s because of these really complicated circumstances that her feelings regarding her interpersonal relationships have become distorted.”

“Distorted? You don’t have to go that far...” Alicia dissented.

“No, it’s true! They’re *distorted*! Even now, she still only sees me as a servant!” Adi cried out.

Patrick and Alicia exchanged a look. It was obvious to anyone that Adi had feelings for Mary. His approach was so direct that even those unacquainted with him and Mary could tell at a glance what was going on. However,

occasionally he'd offhandedly report back to the two, "I've been completely rejected."

That was why, up till now, Patrick and Alicia had been convinced that Mary was withholding her reply.

"I see. So you haven't been able to get your feelings through to her," Patrick said.

"The point is, as the daughter of House Albert, milady's able to make connections, but when it comes to her as just Mary, nobody wants to be around her. To sum it up, that whole situation has come about because of her family's status...and that's why she's distorted."

"You've already said that," Patrick pointed out.

"It bears repeating!" Adi said with a massive sigh, at which Patrick patted his back.

Observing them, Alicia gulped down some of her tea before casting Adi an inquisitive look. "Why don't you try confessing to her?"

"I'd like to, but my family's served House Albert for generations. If my confession went poorly, I'd risk my entire family being cast out into the streets," he explained, sighing again as he was reminded of his own position.

Even the difference in status between a noble and a commoner was difficult enough to overcome, let alone a daughter of the nationally renowned House Albert and her servant. Besides, at present every member of high society was longing after Mary. She was House Albert's biggest diplomatic trump card.

Adi couldn't just come out and confess. Even the way he'd approached the situation so far could result in him being punished for stepping out of his bounds as a servant.

"I just wish I had *some* sort of court rank, no matter how low..." Adi sighed for the nth time, lamenting that if he at least had that much, he could send a formal marriage proposal.

Patrick and Alicia both frowned as they considered whether or not they had any bright ideas.

The first solution that came to mind was adoption. Though it was not uncommon in high society, that kind of thing was reserved for other members of the nobility. No matter how exceptional Adi might have been, it was hard to imagine a noble family going out of their way to bring him in.

"Actually, there might be more families than you think who'd be willing to adopt you if you come as a package deal with Mary," suggested Patrick.

"That's only if things work out well," Adi replied. "She might dump me at some point, and in the worst-case scenario, I might end up taking away my brothers' or my old man's jobs..."

Such was the reason he couldn't openly admit his feelings. He slumped, dejected, and Patrick patted his back again. Patrick exchanged a worried look with Alicia while she poured Adi some more tea.

Both of them could relate to his current predicament. A few years ago, they'd suffered as a result of the very same problem. But in this case, it wasn't something that could be resolved by Adi giving up on his own rank—it was a more grave issue wherein his entire family was at stake.

Realistically speaking, this was something that Adi ought to have given up on. The risk was just too great when it came to House Albert.

But the reason Patrick and Alicia were so determined to think of some way to help was precisely *because* it had been Mary and Adi who'd helped them overcome the problems of the rank difference between them.

"But you know, Lady Mary might give you a reply without getting hung up on something like court ranks," advised Alicia, concerned over the way Adi's head drooped.

Patrick joined in. "This is *Mary*, after all." The nuance in each of their statements was a little different, of course.

Perhaps feeling uplifted by their encouragement, Adi lifted his head. "You're right. This is *milady* we're talking about!"

"Exactly!" Alicia exclaimed. "Lady Mary's kind of strange, so she might not have so much to worry about!"

Patrick nodded. “Right. There’s no way she’d suddenly find a fiancé, since she has no friends. She’s been rejecting every single marriage proposal too, so she might fail to get married at all and just stay in House Albert.”

“Good point,” Adi agreed. “There’s no way someone as distorted as her would just graciously get engaged—”

“Oh, that’s *it*! I’m throwing down the gauntlet!”

...

...

At the sound of that vigorous voice, silence overcame the tea party. What finally broke the disquieting air was Adi stiffly turning to look over his shoulder with an almost audible creak. He was deathly pale, which—all things considered—wasn’t surprising in the slightest.

“M-My lady... Why are you here...?”

“What? Am I not allowed in my own family’s garden now? In fact, I should be asking *you* all why you’re holding a tea party at someone else’s estate.”

“H-H-How much...did you hear...?” Adi asked with a heavy gulp.

Patrick and Alicia also stared at Mary with grave faces, as everything depended on just how much of their conversation Mary had overheard. If she’d heard Adi disclosing his desire to court her, then if nothing else, his worries would be resolved. There was no predicting how Mary might respond, but at least he would’ve gotten his feelings across. On the other hand, there was the possibility that Adi’s worst fears could now become reality.

Sensing their nervousness as they gazed at her, Mary laughed boldly. “How much did I hear? You shouldn’t even need to ask.”

“Your Ladyship... You can’t mean...”

“I heard everything from the moment *you* said, ‘This is *milady* we’re talking about!’!”

“Why did you have to overhear the most misleading part?! You’re always like this!” Adi grieved, at which Mary’s eyes widened in bafflement.

They'd been making a fuss in demanding she visit home, yet the moment she arrived, she'd been greeted with verbal abuse outlining how she might fail to marry or get engaged. She'd been meaning to raise complaints about it, but now she wondered why on earth Adi was mourning while Patrick and Alicia sighed and soothed him. To top it off, the looks the two of them cast Mary's way were nothing short of icy.

She had no clue what was going on. "Hey! What's happening?!" she demanded.

Eventually, Mary joined the three of them at the table and asked again, "So? What were you talking about?"

The looks they exchanged were incredibly suspicious. They were basically announcing to her that they were hiding something. In an attempt to dodge the question, Alicia looked up at the sky and cried out, "Wow! What a cute birdie!" which felt completely dissonant with the current atmosphere. Even worse, the bird that flew past her head was in fact a crow, which only served to highlight the ridiculousness of her statement.

Patrick, losing his patience, broke the tense air with a single cough. "We were just talking about how Adi would like to have a court rank."

"Court rank?" Mary questioned.

"There's something he really, really wants to do, but he can't do it without a court rank," Patrick explained, shooting an urging glance at Adi while sipping his tea.

Mary did the same and turned to look at Adi, who flushed beet red. "Y-Yes, that's right..." he confirmed quietly with a nod.

"You can't do it without a rank?" Mary prompted.

"Yes... Or rather, it's not something that's permissible for someone of my status..."

"Stop holding such prejudiced ideology. It's no good," asserted Mary decisively, at which Adi sighed.

Alicia, who'd been listening to the exchange, and Patrick, who'd been

encouraging Adi, both turned to look at Mary coldly.

For Mary, this was an extremely uncomfortable situation which she couldn't comprehend. "Wh-What's the matter with you all?" she murmured before she could stop herself, her voice wavering pathetically. Anyone would've felt the same in her shoes, given that she'd taken the effort to come back home, only to be met with this sense of alienation.

Discerning her feelings, Adi spoke up to pacify her. "Please don't worry about it. It's just a selfish desire of mine... But no matter what, I don't want to give up on it..."

The way he gazed at her fixedly threw her off kilter, so she decided to hurl abuse at him. "You have outlandish tastes, don't you?"

(In his mind, Patrick murmured, *Indeed, he's a man with truly outlandish tastes and an appetite for the strangest things.* Of course, as expected of someone like Patrick Dyce, he kept his thoughts to himself.)

But despite Mary's words, she seemed willing to cooperate. Her mind whirred as she quietly said, "Court rank, huh...?" with a serious countenance. But this was a difficult matter even for her, and her brows creased. "Adoption is a possibility, but that's usually just between the aristocrats. And I'm not sure what my father would say at the idea of you going someplace else..."

"M-Milady, it's okay. It's very unlikely anyway, so there's no need for you to concern yourself over it." Seeing that Mary had begun to worry, Adi was overcome with remorse. Causing anxiety for the very person he wanted to confess to was nothing short of him getting his priorities backwards.

"Rest assured!" Mary responded as her expression brightened. "If it's a court rank you want, I'll find a way to make it happen at any cost!"

"Thank you, my lady... Your feelings alone are more than enough for me—"

"And if it comes down to it, you can just marry me and join House Albert!" Mary said with a sunny smile, insisting that she'd find a way to persuade her father.

Naturally, Adi, Patrick, and Alicia were all at a loss for words.

To say that, following this, their spirits were dampened would've been an understatement. Mary ended up complaining again: "Oh, come on! I even went the long way round to buy the apple pie you all said you wanted to try!" Next, she unleashed a line nigh unthinkable for a noble lady: "Fine, I'll eat the entire thing by myself!"

They watched her storm off towards the kitchen, and then decided to dissolve the party with indescribable looks on their faces. Right before her departure, Alicia turned to Adi and said, "Adi... Um, I'm sure everything will be okay..."

"To think that even someone like you is concerned for me..."

"I'm not quite sure what that means."

What a melancholic exchange, indeed! Though they spoke calmly, their agony was palpable.

For his part, Patrick had nothing to contribute, instead ruminating upon something alone and quietly whispering, "Things are going to get quite busy." Yet neither of the other two noticed the glint in his eyes, nor the smile that spread across his face.

***

The next morning, Mary was asleep in her own bed, glad to have it back for a few days. However, some kind of ruckus outside her bedroom door tore her out of her dream. Her upset stomach also played a minor part in waking her up.

“What’s all this noise first thing in the morning? I’m trying to sleep...” she muttered, but when she checked the clock and realized it was already close to noon, she couldn’t stop a surprised, “Oh dear!” from slipping out.

Though nobody was around, Mary hurried out of her bed and attempted to fix her appearance so as to smooth over her late awakening. Normally, the maids would’ve done this for her, but based on the clamor outside, it seemed like that wasn’t going to happen today. (That said, however much of a big deal was occurring out there, it was still no reason to leave the daughter of House Albert to dress herself. She was fully in her rights to scold the maids for this...but instead, she quickly put herself in order and so didn’t exercise such a right.)

After deftly changing her clothes and arranging the gentle waves of her hair, Mary softly cracked open the door of her bedroom and peered outside from the crevice. Right at that moment, one of the maids happened to be passing by in a rush.

“Oh! Lady Mary, did you just wake up now?”

“Of course not!” she rebuffed. “There’s no way someone like I, Mary Albert, would be out sleeping like a log all morning!”

“Right, right, of course. Good morning.”

“You know... This has been on my mind for a long time, but don’t you think all of you should reevaluate how you behave towards me? I think that in order to maintain smooth employer-employee relations, we should aim to periodically review our relationships.”

“Anyway, would you like some tea to help you wake up?” the maid offered.

“I’m already awake enough. What’s all this ruckus about, though?”

“Lord Patrick of House Dyce is visiting. And...” the maid glanced at Mary

hesitantly, finding it difficult to finish her sentence. Mary tilted her head, wondering what on earth that could mean.

When she made it to the reception hall, where she'd been told Patrick would be, she once again tilted her head. In fact, the scene before her eyes had her completely dumbstruck.

Patrick was busily handing out instructions to her house staff, all of whom rushed about just as hastily as he. Not to mention, Adi was standing next to him, looking visibly bewildered. The sight was bizarre beyond description.

Why was Patrick ordering around another family's employees? Or had they been transferred to House Dyce at some point while Mary had been out cold in her room? Adi's nervousness was certainly far from his usual self too.

Pondering upon all of this, Mary took a seat in one of the nearby chairs. She decided to try and suss out the situation first before speaking directly to the two men. Plus, she wasn't sure if she should interrupt this bustling atmosphere.

"Have you reached out to the priest yet?" Patrick asked one of the staff.

"No, it looks like he'll be away for at least a month."

"A month? Hm... All right, arrange the missive. I'll sign it myself to get him to come back, and I want it delivered as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir!"

"We also need to prepare the notifications," Patrick continued, swiftly making some kind of arrangements.

"U-Um..." Adi timidly raised his voice, looking apprehensive and twitchy. Was it Mary's imagination, or did he look a bit pale?

Observing this, she leisurely sipped on some tea. *If a priest's involved, this must be quite a serious matter*, she thought, as though this had nothing to do with her.

"I... I don't know if we should be doing this without the person in question..." Adi murmured.

"What's the matter, Adi?" Patrick asked.

“I just feel like this is too important for us to simply...” Adi continued incoherently.

Patrick placed his hand on Adi’s shoulder. He looked like he was about to admonish a child, which made the five-year age gap between them seem almost reversed.

“Listen to me, Adi.”

“Yes...?”

“This is *Mary* we’re talking about. She basically said it herself, so now all that’s left is to set the stage!” Patrick announced with a grave expression.

“This is exactly why people who possess power and initiative are so frightening...” Adi said with a twitch of his cheek in response to Patrick’s terrifying assertion.

Mary stared at them in puzzlement as she listened to their conversation. Patrick had just said her name, so she could safely assume this turmoil had something to do with her.

“Excuse me. Just what are you two talking about?” she asked as she got to her feet and walked over to them, unable to stay out of it now that her own name had been dropped.

Startled, Adi quickly dipped his head while calling out, “Good morning!”

In contrast, Patrick offered her a pleasant greeting. “Hey, Mary. Sorry to impose on you first thing in the morning.” He was acting like he owned the place, considering he’d just given such a greeting to a lady he’d woken from her sleep—in her own estate, no less.

“For the sake of courtesy, let me say: ‘It’s no problem; please make yourself at home.’ Now, what is this?” demanded Mary.

“What’s what?”

“This uproar.” She pointedly looked around their surroundings.

Some people were hurrying along carrying documents, while others came in and out of the hall, one after another. The man to whom Patrick had entrusted the letter earlier had just about flown out of the chamber, probably intending

to race as fast as he could to find the priest. There were more people passing through than usual, as though this were some kind of emergency, but all of them looked somewhat happy.

Though they were busy, they seemed to be having fun. Many of them eagerly looked to Patrick for instructions on what to do next.

Mary swept her eyes over the scene as if to say, *"What else could I possibly be asking about?"*

And as if it were obvious, Patrick replied, "We're making the proceedings." What an aimless answer!

"That much I can tell just by looking. What kind of proceedings?" she inquired further.

"Yours."

"Mine?" Mary frowned at his words. He seemed to be intentionally avoiding telling her the proper answer. His banter kept her in suspense, which she disliked. Though, he was certainly enjoying himself, out here happily hurling instructions among the chaos.

Unable to bear any more of their exchange, Adi sighed deeply before turning to look at Mary remorsefully. "I'm really sorry this woke you up on your day off. I'll call everything off, so please don't worry," he said in a sorrowful manner.

His tone threw Mary off-kilter, but nonetheless she persevered. "I got plenty of rest, so it's fine. Now, will you tell me what these proceedings are for?"

But at her words, Adi's expression only grew more heartbroken as his brows creased, and he finally turned his face away from her, unable to meet her eyes. It was different from the way he'd glance aside whenever they were jesting around, and worrying enough to make even Mary's heart ache. She'd never seen him look so upset. Just how grave of a matter was this?

"Adi...?" she called out anxiously.

"...riage."

"Hmm?"

"It's your and my..."

“Mine and your...?” Mary prompted after his unclear words.

Adi could sense her concern through her question and the nervous way she peered up at him. At first, he looked as though he’d lost his bearings...but finally he made up his mind and opened his mouth to reply.

“*They’re proceedings for our marriage*!”

Mary’s eyes widened in shock at his desperate proclamation.

For a moment she was still, staring vacantly at Patrick and Adi. Then, she turned to look at each person in the hall, all of whom were stealing glances at the trio to observe events as they unfolded. Mary repeated this process one more time, then finally turned back to Adi.

So all of these were marriage proceedings. And Patrick had been busy commanding them from the early hours of the morning...

“My, in that case, you really should get back to it. Patrick, if you’re short on staff, I’ll have more people called over, so feel free to carry on what you were doing,” Mary declared, as though this were the most natural thing in the world. Better yet, she turned towards the others in the hall and added, “Do your best and work hard, everyone!” to encourage them.

At this, Adi crumpled to his knees.

Patrick leaned down to pat his back. “I told you so.”

But however swift Patrick may have been, there were some things that couldn’t be processed in a single day. Besides, this matter concerned Mary Albert, a personage of enough importance to turn the entirety of high society upside down. They not only needed to call over a priest, but also to arrange all kinds of notifications.

“That said, Alicia is off notifying the royal family right now, so all we need is to make contact with the priest,” Patrick said nonchalantly, leisurely sipping on some tea.

“Really making headway, aren’t you? I’d expect nothing less of you,” Mary commented, praising his capability with admiration.

“Whoa... The stage is being set much faster than I’d anticipated... Lord Patrick,

you're terrifying...” Adi muttered with a pallid face; only he looked like he couldn't keep up with what was happening.

After all, Patrick was talking about all these people so casually; whereas, the very idea of someone with the rank of a servant like Adi speaking about them was presumptuous. The whole reason Patrick and Mary could bring such individuals up without reserve was because they were the first son of House Dyce and the daughter of House Albert. This went beyond merely “setting the stage.”

As for why Patrick, who up until a few hours ago had been hustling busily, was now casually drinking tea, this was because they had reached the limit of what they could achieve in a single day, as mentioned previously. It was not a case of him quitting while he was ahead; he'd simply already finished everything that could be done today.

There was little wonder that someone like Patrick Dyce could make progress with such ability and thoroughness, though it was the very reason behind why Adi looked so pale.

“Mary, when's your next holiday?” Patrick queried.

“Well, starting tomorrow there's going to be a three-day examination period at Elysiana, but we do get some time off after that.”

“Good, so you'll be back in four days.”

“Hey now, did you hear what I just said? We're getting time to rest after working hard on our exams, you know?”

“Then don't work hard.”

“What a ruthless approach! You're shaping up to be quite the tyrant,” Mary said, hurling abuse as she downed the rest of her tea.

Despite her complaints, she hadn't given a refusal, so Patrick surmised she'd agreed to return home in four days. He noted it down in the schedule book.

While they were discussing these matters, a single maid came over with some documents and discreetly spoke to Patrick. Whatever she'd told him made him rise to his feet as he said, “Excuse me,” and made his way out of the chamber.

Mary watched him disappear behind the door before turning to face Adi.

"Now that we have this chance, I have something to tell you," she said to him.

"Huh? Y-You do...?"

"Yes. I don't want Patrick or Alicia to hear this, so now's the perfect moment," Mary said, emphasizing her statement with a serious expression.

Reflexively, Adi's breath hitched in his throat. They'd been working on the marriage proceedings this entire time, so whatever Mary had to say, it must've been something related to that.

Perhaps she'd object. Or maybe she'd warn him that while she'd go ahead with the marriage, he shouldn't forget about his status. Maybe she'd even say, *"I'll marry you, but I don't actually love you..."*

Adi was on the verge of trembling, having no idea what he should say in response to such sudden confessions, especially since this was Mary. Nonetheless, he steeled himself and resolutely prompted, "What is it, milady?"

"I'm going to say this now, while I can."

"R-Right..."

"There's some apple pie left in the kitchen, so help yourself to it before Patrick finds out."

"I... Huh...?"

Apple pie? Adi's eyes were wide as saucers. She was talking about *apple pie*.

With his gaze alone, Adi appealed to her, *"Is that the same pie you ate yesterday by yourself out of desperation? The popular apple pie from the neighboring country's bakery? The same pie that made you put a hand on your abdomen every now and then and groan about how you had an upset stomach?"*

In response to all that, Mary nodded sagely. "I wanted to eat it all myself yesterday, but four servings is too much even for me. I set one portion aside, so have it before Patrick or Alicia find out."

"You...ate three servings of it?" Adi asked in exasperation.

Mary proudly jutted out her chest. “It was delicious!”

I don’t even know what to say to that... Adi thought with a colossal sigh. He fixed his gaze on her again and said, “Are you sure? At this rate, I really *will* help myself.”

He didn’t dare clarify what he was referring to, but the meaning behind his words completely flew over Mary’s head as she smiled radiantly. “Go ahead!” she told him in reply.

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The three days of exams passed safely, with Mary aiming for the average fifth place.

During that time, Parfette continued to fret tearfully about Gainas, who in turn continued to remorsefully bow at her. This culminated in her running into Lilianne and Carina, each intent on keeping the other in check, and Parfette ended up hiding under her desk while holding her breath to get away from them. That incident aside, everything passed peacefully.

Unlike the typical lecture format, the exams all ended in the morning, which was probably a good thing, as it meant they didn’t have to use the cafeteria. That reverse harem was the last thing Mary wanted to see today.

I might eat my lunches outside from now on... thought Mary, presently seated on a bench near the dorms as she took her meal. It was the last day of the exams, so nobody was around—not the love-hate scene of a singular girl surrounded by multiple men, nor the curious stares directed at the tragic lady. Sitting under the tranquil sky and gazing at the well-maintained greenery while unwrapping her lunch box filled with all kinds of indulgences as a reward for clearing the tests... It was almost a whole other world from the turmoil of the reverse harem. Mary felt like all her postexam fatigue was fading away.

Occasionally, a comfortable breeze swept past her, causing her silver-thread hair to sway. How beautiful it was! It didn’t waggle—it *swayed*.

Parfette was sitting next to Mary with a jam sandwich in her hand. Her lunch box was decorated with adorable ornaments of matching colors. Inside were fruits, sweet jams, and even cakes. When Mary first saw this lineup, she raised

her voice to shout, “That’s a dessert! It’s unacceptable as a meal!”

As for Mary’s lunch, the whole thing was blanketed with croquettes, giving it an overall pigment of brown. When she saw it, Parfette inquired, “What are those?”

“Don’t even ask. My body makeup is different from yours,” Mary told her.

After a while, Parfette asked, “How did your exams go, Lady Mary?”

“Mine went fine, I suppose,” she replied. “What about you?”

“I... I’m not all that confident about the results this time.”

“I’m not surprised to hear that, since you’ve been so absent-minded lately. Not that I care about whatever it is you’re scheming.”

Parfette gasped at Mary’s words. The way she hung her head down made Mary think she’d hit bull’s-eye. Even if it hadn’t been for her reaction just now, Mary had noticed that for the past few days, Parfette had been more restless and nervous than usual. She was so easy to read that it’d be a near impossible task to *not* conjecture that she was up to something.

She was definitely plotting something, and whatever it was, she apparently couldn’t share it with Mary.

It likely had to do with Lilianne, and if Parfette had silence imposed upon her, then Mary assumed Carina was behind it. Mary’s shoulders dropped slightly at the thought. Perhaps it was a good thing that Carina had issued a gag order about this, but since Parfette was like an open book, she was basically announcing that she was up to something even without opening her mouth. It might’ve been better to just forbid her from drawing near to Mary at all.

That was how far Mary’s thoughts had gotten before Parfette spoke up. “Um, Lady Mary... Do you have any plans for your day off tomorrow?” she asked, changing the subject. Her wavering voice was beyond pitiful.

Mary smiled sardonically, deciding to play along.

“If you’re free, maybe you could visit my house to spend some time...”

“My, I appreciate the thought, but I absolutely must travel back home tomorrow.”

“O-Of course... You’ve no interest in coming to visit me when I’m hiding things from you... I’m such a—”

“If you’re so fragile as to feel hurt by your own words, then do me a favor and stop trying to read too much into things! I really *do* have to go back home!” exclaimed Mary in a fluster at the sight of Parfette’s weepy eyes.

She put a single croquette into Parfette’s lunch box. “There, it’s okay,” she said to reassure the girl. Mary didn’t know what Parfette was scheming, but she wasn’t about to rashly start probing her for information, and she felt no ill will towards her about the matter either.

Perhaps surmising as much, relief colored Parfette’s features despite her still-teary eyes. “Allow me to reciprocate,” she offered happily, handing over one of her sandwiches.

Mary sighed. Parfette seemed more at ease compared to when they had first started talking, and sometimes she even conducted herself quite firmly, so perhaps whatever she was planning to do against Lilianne had recovered some of her mental fortitude. Unfortunately however, Parfette still was and had always been unable to endure a verbal beating.

“I have something very important to do back home,” Mary assured Parfette, as though she was comforting an upset child who had gotten attached to her.

The other day, both Patrick and Alicia, who’d shown up later, had pressured Mary to come back home as soon as possible no matter what. She may have been a daughter of House Albert, but with two such figures imposing on her so strongly, Mary had no choice but to agree. Besides, the disarming smiles of the two implied that if she were to disobey, a horse-drawn carriage bearing the royal crest would show up outside her dorm in the early hours of the morning.

That would be the so-called “forced repatriation.” She could easily imagine it: the royal coachman telling her off the moment she opened her eyes, and then her enduring the bumps and tremors as the carriage raced along the road, all while she breakfasted on some prearranged croquettes.

At the very least, Alicia certainly had the authority to make that happen, and Patrick the initiative to back it up. It was impossible to predict the kinds of things those two might do when collaborating.

“That’s why I have to go back...” Mary said gravely. Parfette, who’d been listening to her explanations, nodded vigorously while covering her mouth at the gravity of the situation.

“But just what could be so important?”

“Well, that much should be obvious. I’m...” Mary started to explain, then suddenly her words cut off.

Parfette looked at her with surprise, but nonetheless she smiled gently and said, “It must be something wonderful.” She looked as pleased as though this were her own matter, and it was Mary’s turn to look at her in confusion.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you’ve got a happy smile on your face, Lady Mary,” she responded with a giggle.

Shocked, Mary reached out to touch her own cheeks. She really *was* smiling, involuntarily. Now that it had been pointed out to her, she felt her cheeks grow warm.

But she wasn’t about to openly admit her joy. “No, I don’t,” she said evasively while fanning her face. Yet...thinking about tomorrow, she smiled fondly.

Yes, it’s a very important matter.

The most important one of my entire life.

Even so, I feel no trace of fear or hesitation. No matter how many times I think it over, each time, I come to the conclusion that this is the correct decision.

Tomorrow, Adi and I are going to...

Mary realized her expression had grown soft in response to her thoughts, and she quickly cleared her throat. Keeping up an appearance of calm, she declared:

“Of course it’s an important matter. After all, I’m getting married.”

Hearing this, Parfette’s eyes widened, and the red jam from the sandwich she’d been eating spilled right onto her skirt.

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Four days from the day she’d last left, Mary arrived back at Albert Manor

without a hitch. (Parfette *had* asked over and over who her marriage partner was, to which Mary had responded elusively and noncommittally.)

There was nothing particularly moving about the completely unchanged view outside, and Mary didn't even feel like looking out of the carriage window.

Nonetheless, the daughter of House Albert had just returned from her study abroad. Typically, a lineup of maids and servants would've greeted her by the entrance, all of whom would bow their heads and call out in unison, *"Welcome back, Lady Mary!"* Someone would open the carriage door and present their hand for her to take as they helped her to step out, and her baggage would've been taken to her bedroom without Mary ever so much as touching it.

The idea of the carriage stopping outside an empty front door and a young lady opening the door herself as she stepped out and then carried her own luggage was nigh unthinkable. Indeed, usually it would've been beyond belief! And yet...

"Hey! Couldn't at least *one* person have come out to greet me?! This is so desolate, I'm about to start crying!" Mary roared while swinging open the door to the estate, and the rest of her reproachful words died in her throat at the sight before her.

The inside of Albert Manor was utterly hectic, and even now a maid ran past her in a frenzy. *I suppose it'd be difficult to come out and greet me with this going on...* Mary assented in her mind, deciding to carry her baggage to her bedroom by herself.

Right then, a familiar voice called out, "Milady!"

She looked up to the sight of Adi. Patrick was next to him too, dishing out prompt orders as usual.

"Milady, when did you get back?"

"Just now, Adi."

"I'm so sorry we didn't come out to greet you! Oh no, you've even had to carry your luggage..."

"It's fine, really. It's my own luggage, after all. Anyway, I see you've been busy

as beavers," Mary said, pausing to look around as a bunch of people kept coming in and out of the mansion restlessly. It was almost overwhelming.

Patrick nodded as though this were obvious while staring down at the documents in his hand. "We're proceeding at an exponentially fast pace, and we've had to impose a gag order on everyone involved. Obviously things are going to be hectic."

"Right, we're keeping Adi's identity a secret until the party, yes? My mother loves surprises—it's almost like *she* thought this up."

"Still, this isn't something that can only involve your relatives and no one else," Patrick replied. "I've already informed some of your relatives, as well as the heads of the major noble houses—including my own—plus Their Majesties, other royal family members, the royal families of the neighboring nations, and the people of highest authority within each relevant institution."

"My, that's quite a few more people than I expected," Mary commented nonchalantly. "It's kind of embarrassing, really."

In contrast, Adi paled upon hearing this list of people. "Frightening... Lord Patrick is truly frightening..."

They bantered for a while longer, until a maid came running over and whispered something in Patrick's ear. Someone must've arrived, as he responded with phrases like, "Send them through to the reception hall," and, "Hand them over the papers." Judging by the maid's nervous countenance, it was likely a person of considerable rank.

"I wonder who it could be?" pondered Mary, straining her ears with great curiosity.

"I don't want to know," declared Adi, covering his ears with trepidation.

"Sorry, you two." Patrick looked at them. "I'll let you know when the preparations are done, so just hang in there for now," he said, then turned to follow the maid out of the chamber.

Mary and Adi stared after his retreating figure blankly, and once he completely vanished from sight, they looked at each other. Though all this frenzy was for the sake of their marriage, the two of them were being left

behind. Both seemed at a loss for what to do, watching as another maid raced past.

“Well...” Mary spoke up. “Perhaps we can have some tea until they call us over.”

“Yes, indeed. And... Um, by the way, Your Ladyship...” Adi called out in jumbled words as Mary started to walk away.

She stopped and turned to face him, tilting her head at him.

“Are you really okay with this?” he asked her.

“With what?”

“If this is allowed to go on, you’ll end up marrying me. Are you fine with that?” Adi asked again.

Mary looked up at him with a shrug. His expression begged her for an answer, but she could see traces of unease within it. The timidness was so unlike him that she couldn’t help smiling slightly.

Why’s he asking now after all this time? Things have already proceeded so far.

No, it’s not just that. Honestly, why now*, after* all *this time...*

“You said it yourself, didn’t you?” Mary prompted. “That you’d follow me anywhere. That your place is by my side. Have you changed your mind?”

“No, of course not. I’ll always be with you.”

“Then be by my side on the marriage certificate too,” Mary told him with a carefree smile.

Seeing that smile of hers, Adi’s eyes narrowed happily. “Very well,” he agreed with a single nod. “Milady, I know we’re doing things out of order, but I... I’ve always—”

“Also, you have something you really want to achieve, right? You need to do whatever it takes to reach your goal!”

“...Right, of course.”

Mary’s oblivious, innocent smile crushed Adi’s spirits as usual, and he sank into a crouch, having lost all his strength. A few people who happened to

overhear this conversation as they passed by paused to pat his back while saying, “Hang in there,” but that only broke his heart more.

The meaning of those words of comfort flew over Mary’s head. In fact, she was convinced they were related to Adi’s “goal” and decided to cheer him on too. “That’s right! Do your best!” she encouraged him in misunderstanding—from Adi’s perspective, it was nothing short of a coup de grâce.

“This is something you want so badly that you’ll even get married to achieve it!” Mary continued. “You can’t give up now! Oh... Adi, what’s wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing...”

“Really? But your entire body is emanating an aura of total defeat.”

“I’m okay... Since you yourself resorted to all means possible and avoided ruin, I’m going to follow your advice... That’s right; I’m going to do whatever it takes!” Adi shouted as he abruptly rose to his feet with vigor.

Mary flinched at the movement. “Right, as long as you’re okay now,” she said, guessing as much. *I’m glad my advice was of use to him, but that explosive behavior is a little unusual...* she thought with some anxiety, peering at his face.

Just then, Patrick called out their names and she turned around. The preparations must’ve been ready, as he was beckoning them both to come over.

“Let’s go, my lady!”

“Indeed, but... Are you really okay? Your eyes look glazed over...”

“You’re imagining things!”

The bizarre air around him was certainly not just her imagination, but Mary said nothing, nodding repeatedly to appease him before following after his footsteps.

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There were heaps of work involved in arranging the marriage of the daughter of a family equal in power to that of royalty. That would’ve been the case even if they hadn’t decided to implement Lady Albert’s idea of keeping the identity of the groom a secret until the party, which only further complicated things.

Regardless, progress was quick once they made contact with a few powerful and influential figures, including Patrick, and now all that was left was for the two newlyweds-to-be to sign the marriage certificate in front of the priest.

So Adi signed it, Mary followed suit, and thus the pledge had been made—the pledge that would verify that the two of them were husband and wife.

That said, the document would only become official upon having the royal seal stamped on it, but given that they had both signed it, the deed was as good as done. House Albert took precedence over ordinary matters, so it should be delivered to Their Majesties promptly. *The priest held it up and read it out loud, and that was that. One little paper, and a relationship can change just like that. How odd...* Mary pondered, lost in thought.

At that moment, Patrick reached over to take the certificate. “I’ll be responsible for getting this delivered to Their Majesties,” he proclaimed, carefully rolling it up and putting it into his bag.

His words reminded Mary of something, and she looked around. Alicia was nowhere in sight, which was strange, for she’d been so excited about the occasion that she’d arrived a day in advance.

“Patrick, where’s Alicia? She was so beside herself about this that I thought I’d see her scampering all over the place even more than usual today.”

“Oh, she’s back at the palace. She said she wants Their Majesties to sign the certificate as soon as possible, so she’s making them wait until it arrives.”

“Making Their Majesties *wait*?!” Adi exclaimed. “What a frightening thought!”

“Even I must say, that’s just offensive!” added Mary.

“Right? I agree.” Patrick nodded, having paled just the tiniest bit.

Document safely in his possession, Patrick moved towards the door, but then paused upon hearing Mary ask Adi, “By the way, just what is this thing you want to do so badly?” Hurriedly, he whirled back around to the sight of Mary looking up at Adi with a curious expression, and Adi gazing back at her with determination, as though he’d made up his mind.

An indescribable atmosphere drifted around the two of them, emanating a

sense of deep tension. Even now, Mary was oblivious to that fact, only looking at Adi inquisitively.

“That you’d even marry to achieve it... Just what is it?”

“Milady... I...”

“Hmm?” She kept staring at him with her head tilted to the side as she awaited his answer.

“My lady... No, Lady Mary. Will you marry me?”

Such were Adi’s honest, straight-forward words as he gazed right into Mary’s eyes.

She looked back at him in shock as she failed to understand what he’d meant. From her perspective, they’d *just* gotten married and signed the certificate. Having Adi propose to her before the ink of their signatures had even dried caused question marks to float all around her. She just stared at him, blinking repeatedly as if to say she couldn’t comprehend this at all.

“Yes... That’s why we signed the document earlier.” Looking a little dazed, Mary reached out to point towards the pedestal where they’d done the signing, and flinched when Adi caught her hand.

Surprised, she looked up at him. His pupils were fully focused on her. Mary felt like his intense, rust-colored eyes pierced right through her, and her breath hitched.

This wasn’t Adi’s usual self, but the side of him that only came out on occasion. Seeing him like this made Mary’s pulse quicken, her heart pounding like alarm bells. She even found it hard to breathe as her chest tightened.

Adi’s hand felt hot against hers. It was larger than hers, almost enough to envelop her hand completely. Mary’s chest ached, and she wasn’t even sure if she could breathe properly...

“A-Adi...?”

“I’ve always wanted to say this to you. I love you from the bottom of my heart, more than I’ve ever loved anyone else.”

Mary’s eyes widened, and her mouth fell open in mute shock at his sincere

confession. Her mind couldn’t catch up with this sudden revelation, and she had no idea what to say... But Adi didn’t even give her a moment to think as he lifted her hand to his lips and placed a kiss against her knuckles.



Though Adi’s grip on her was strong, and her chest felt tight, the soft

sensation upon her fingers had Mary's cheeks reddening... No, in fact, her whole body instantly felt like it was on fire. The skin where Adi's lips had touched felt like it was burning, as if all her nerves had zeroed in on that place.

Unaware of her loss of composure, Adi lovingly kissed her knuckles again as he turned his gaze on her. The sight of his fiery red eyes made Mary feel like her limit was fast approaching.

When she tried to draw her hand back, Adi didn't allow it, only holding her tighter. Then, as if to hit her with a finishing blow...

"I vow to spend the rest of my days with you. So please, let me be the only man at your side."

...he made his proclamation while looking right into her eyes.

Mary finally reached her limit as the heat in her body hit its highest temperature.

"Hyaaah!!!"

Thus, she ran off with the most ridiculous shriek she'd ever produced.

Her escape was incredibly fast and beyond pitiful. Adi collapsed to his knees while lamenting, "*Now* she runs away?!" Patrick, who'd inadvertently given her a way out by standing next to the open door, approached Adi to remorsefully pat his back. It was such a severe turn of events that even the priest, a third party who didn't quite understand what was happening, offered Adi a few consoling pats.

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Mary continued shrieking foolishly all the way to her bedroom. Once there, she leaped into her bed and dove under the sheets. She had entered a full-on siege defense mode. Feeling that this wasn't enough yet, she grabbed one of her pillows and squeezed it tight between her arms.

After a moment, she took in a deep breath, and her eyes moistened at the same time. They stung at the corners, and as she reached out to wipe her eyes, drop after drop of her tears grazed past her fingertips and slid down her cheeks, soaking into the white bedsheets.

He said all those things to me... Just what am I supposed to do?

Adi's words swirled in Mary's mind over and over, causing her chest to tighten so much that she felt it might get crushed. She'd never, *ever* expected to hear Adi tell her that he loved her.

Mary had believed that Adi would always be by her side in a manner completely different to that.

"I... I don't know if I love you or not... But we got married, didn't we...? Ugh, you idiot..." she sniffled, rubbing her hands together over the pillow in her grasp.

There were faint red marks over her fingers where Adi's hand had gripped hers, and the thought that he'd held her so strongly had fresh tears spilling over her cheeks. The more she recalled the events, the more her heart ached, and the heat circulating within her body, having nowhere else to go, changed into tears. Her throat trembled with each inhale, and more overflowing tears dripped down with each exhale.

Her behavior was out of character for both Mary and the daughter of House Albert. Right now, she was simply a lone, fragile girl—a sight that she could never bring herself to expose to anyone else...except for *him*.

Indeed, despite her current predicament, the one thought that surfaced in her mind was, *I want to talk to Adi.*

She knew that would be putting the cart before the horse, but that was just the extent of how much she'd always shared everything with him. Anytime an issue came up and she was unsure of what to do, she'd end up talking it out with him. Even on the day when she'd first regained her past life memories, though she knew other people would laugh at her or say she was crazy, she had still told Adi about it without thinking twice.

Mary still recalled the way he'd insisted she couldn't tell anyone else, and she'd replied with, *"Obviously, I know that."* Nobody would have believed her, and in fact, it was likely that nobody would've wanted to discuss the topic with her in the first place... Nobody other than Adi, that is.

To Mary, Adi was that person. It wasn't love, but nonetheless he was

someone who'd be by her side today, and tomorrow, and every day after that. Even if the physical distance between them would grow, like when she left for her studies abroad, not a single thing between them would change. Even if Mary had married someone else and been taken into another noble family as a bride, Adi would still be with her. At least, that was what she had always believed.

That was exactly why she couldn't simply nod and assent when Adi had brought up romantic feelings after all this time.

Not to mention, Mary knew little of romance, and had concluded long ago that she wanted to keep things that way. This wasn't because she had no interest in the opposite sex—rather, it was because she was Mary Albert. She'd been born into an affluent family, which meant she'd one day be married off to someone for the sake of her house. Mary would only be inflicting suffering onto herself if she dreamed of romance and pined after pretty boys the way her peers did. For Mary—no, for a daughter of House Albert, it was simply better to keep herself away from romantic affairs.

She'd held this belief ever since she was a little girl. Mary was born into a world where political marriages were the norm, and grew up watching women be married off into other families regardless of whether they loved or hated their groom. Hence, she had told herself to never let a seed of romance bloom within her heart.

More than anything else, Mary had Patrick. As the heir of House Dyce, society had dubbed him as a suitable fiancé candidate for someone like her.

People went around gushing about what a perfect match they made without giving two hoots about how Mary actually felt. The girls her age whined about how envious they were that her partner was Patrick, and treated them as though they were already married. There wasn't a single person who'd ever asked Mary if she had someone she loved, or whether she was in love with Patrick. Everyone just selfishly gushed, envied, and imagined Mary and Patrick's futures together as they pleased.

Faced with such treatment, Mary had come to the conclusion that her own feelings were irrelevant. She had an obligation to the family she'd been born

into, and she had no choice but to fulfill her duty in order to benefit House Albert.

Tragic love stories were only beautiful in fiction. Therefore, Mary was better off having never known what it was like to yearn for someone, instead marrying for the sake of her house and supporting the man who'd become her husband... That had been her belief until now. Though it wasn't something she'd wanted to happen in the slightest, she was certain she could make a convincing act as the bride. She would suppress her own feelings and play the part of the wife—for a shrewd individual like Mary, it would be an easy feat.

As long as Adi was with her, then even if she could only be her true self in front of him, Mary was sure she could endure being married off into any family under the sun. It may not have been the future she'd wished for, but having Adi by her side would be more than enough for her.

That's why, if he were not to be there with me... Mary thought as another tear escaped her eye. She tried to take a deep breath to calm herself, and her throat quivered with hiccups.

What should I do?

Adi would always be there to worry alongside me. Without him, I can't sort my thoughts out at all.

For a while (in fact, for several hours) she continued to fret, but no answers came forth. It was true that this was unlike Mary Albert, but at the end of the day, she too was but a normal girl, and the one person who could help her to compose herself was the very source of her troubles. She felt as if she was stuck in an endless swamp of thoughts, and all she could do was sob and pound her pillow with her fists.

"Adi, you idiot! What do I do?! I can't think straight without talking things out with you..." she muttered to herself.

As she moved to punch her pillow one more time, a quiet jingle resounded from inside her pocket.

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“I know you’re the daughter of House Albert, but I’m afraid I cannot simply grant you an audience without prior notice...” the security guard explained with a troubled look on his face.

“Right...” Mary replied quietly, staring ahead in a daze.

She’d managed to sneak out of Albert Manor and ordered a servant she happened upon to drive her to the palace via horse-drawn carriage. Everything had gone fine until that part, but when she arrived and the guard asked her to provide a reason for her visit, Mary realized she couldn’t give him a clear explanation.

She just wanted to see Alicia for some reason; that was all.

But thinking it over, Alicia was the princess, and there was no way Mary could just meet with her at the drop of a hat, especially now that it was getting dark outside.

Mary didn’t even understand her own feelings, and none of the things she’d say would make any sense. Plus, it was hard to imagine that the person in charge of the palace’s security would just let her in, regardless of her rank among the nobles or how close her friendship with Alicia may have been. Mary didn’t see this as disrespectful, given this was the very point of his job.

Still, he didn’t outright reject her and instead tried to calm her down and soothe her. Perhaps this was because she was Mary Albert, or maybe because he found the way she kept messily wiping at her tearful, reddened eyes quite a pitiful sight.

“My deepest apologies,” he went on. “Her Royal Highness is currently dining with Their Majesties. Unless this is an emergency, please return tomorrow instead.”

“R-Right... Of course... I’m sorry for imposing on you.” Mary hung her head weakly at the guard’s words. She should’ve seen this coming. In fact, if she were her usual self right now, she would’ve probably said something like, *“Visiting the royal family at such a time shows nothing but a lack of common sense.”*

Mary turned on her heel dejectedly. She decided to return home and started walking...but the quiet jingle that came from within her swaying skirt made her breath hitch. With renewed determination, she whipped back around. The glass beads of her bracelet rubbed against each other within her pocket, creating a faint sound as if they were calling out to her, *"Wait!"*

"Um, just this once! Please, just this one time, tell her that I... I want to speak with my friend Alicia! Not as the daughter of House Albert, but as myself...!" Mary appealed earnestly to the guard, grabbing hold of his arm out of desperation.

This was completely unlike her normal self, and she'd even referred to the princess as her "friend," to boot. Her words were extremely insolent, unbefitting of both Mary the eccentric and the highly commended daughter of House Albert.

The guard's eyes widened, but then he placed his hand on Mary's shoulder to pacify her and nodded. "Very well," he agreed. "Even a member of House Albert wouldn't be allowed through at this time, except in the event of an emergency. But you're not here to see Her Royal Highness the Princess—rather, you're a friend asking to visit Lady Alicia. In this case, we'd be reprimanded if we were to turn you away," he proclaimed with a wry smile.

The guard then turned to call out to another person behind him, who hurriedly rushed away, probably to inform Alicia. Mary observed this all vacantly as she waited, and soon enough an uproar began somewhere from within the royal grounds.

"Lady Mary!" The one who came running out from the palace was, of course, Alicia. She was wearing a pink dress, and her golden hair was braided, swaying behind her as she dashed right over to Mary.

"Lady Mary, what's wrong?!"

"Alicia, I..."

"Did you come all by yourself? Where's Adi?"

"He's...not here. I came over in secret. I'm..." Mary trailed off as tears filled her eyes.

Her chest began to tighten and ache again as she remembered the reason why she'd come here, why she left Adi behind, and why he wasn't by her side. Mary knew she was on royal grounds now, and Their Majesties were somewhere nearby, but even so, her tears overflowed. She opened her mouth to say some kind of a greeting, but all that came out were hoarse sobs.

Seeing this, Alicia must've inferred something as she nodded and firmly gripped Mary's hands. Her slender, elegant fingers entwined with Mary's, and a subtle warmth seeped into Mary's skin.

"Please send someone over to Lady Mary's estate," Alicia began, reciting orders to the nearest maid while still holding onto Mary's hands. "Let them know that she's here, and that we'll take responsibility for sending her back, so there's no need for them to send anyone over."

"Understood, Your Royal Highness."

"I'd like to speak with Lady Mary privately, so please clear out the gardens, and prepare some hot tea."

"Of course, I'll bring it over right away."

Alicia then turned back to face Mary again. "Lots of flowers are in bloom in our gardens. They're very beautiful under the natural light, and I'd love for you to see them," she said gently with her usual amiable smile.

Having witnessed this chain of events, Mary stared fixedly at Alicia with dampened eyes and murmured, "Strangely...you're almost like a true princess."

The garden Alicia led her to was gorgeously illuminated by both the moon and the outside lights. Occasionally, the wind breezed past, fluttering the greenery with a refreshing rustling sound. Mary felt herself calming down a little thanks to the tranquil atmosphere and the soft moonlight. Each sip of the hot tea unwound the pressure in her chest little by little, and by the time she'd drank about half of the cup of tea, Mary finally felt her composure return.

While she'd been tearfully sipping her tea, Alicia sat opposite her, sometimes gazing at Mary, other times turning her eyes towards the greenery with apprehension. However, at no point did Alicia start talking. Normally, if Mary asked her to be quiet, Alicia would blurt out something like, *"Okay! Oh, by the*

way, Lady Mary!" and rattle on incessantly, but today she remained completely silent.

Amid this gentle stillness, Mary felt the chaos and tension within her melt away, and slowly she opened up about what had happened earlier.

"Alicia, I... I got married to Adi..."

"Yes, I know."

"But I don't understand. He said there was something he wanted to do...so I married him. I thought I could give him the Albert name so he could get a court rank, like he said he wanted."

"Mm-hmm."

"It wasn't a hard decision for me. Adi said he wanted something, so...I didn't even have to think about it. That's why I married him. But then..."

Adi had suddenly told her he loved her. His deep rust-colored eyes gazed into hers, and he held her hand. He'd confessed his feelings so sincerely, it was like a scene from some storybook.

"I believed he'd be at my side forever, the same as he's always been. But to change our relationship to something romantic after all this time... It's almost like he's become a totally different person..."

At times, Mary wiped at the corners of her eyes as she stuttered out her tale. Alicia nodded diligently as she listened, and softly rubbed Mary's hand where it rested weakly upon the table between them. Mary was embarrassed to be treated as if she were a child, yet the warmth of Alicia's hand was pleasant enough to cause her eyes to crease with a slight smile.

The gold and indigo bracelet that matched Mary's was wrapped around Alicia's wrist, and a quiet, satisfying jingle resounded from it every so often. Mary remembered how Alicia had told her that she only took the bracelet off when bathing or at night when going to bed, but otherwise she always wore it. The thought made Mary reach out to touch the pocket of her own skirt. (She'd never admit to it, but Mary followed the very same habits and almost always had her own bracelet hidden on her person. Though, Adi *had* found out, and so had Alicia and Patrick after he'd spilled Mary's secret.)

“I... I’m really sorry... It’s so late...” Mary mumbled.

“Lady Mary?”

“It’s just that I’d always talk to Adi whenever something came up. B-But I can’t talk to him about this, so...I didn’t know what to do...”

Hence, Mary had ended up arriving at the palace with swollen eyes and a disheveled appearance. It was probably the most pathetic she’d looked in her entire life. The thought made a mix of turmoil and shame sweep through her.

To top it off, she’d come quite late into the evening. These were no visiting hours for anyone, royalty, nobility, or otherwise. She’d always shout at and criticize Alicia’s offbeat behavior, calling it boorish or senseless, yet this time Mary herself had acted much the same.

Ashamed, she tearfully appealed, “For some reason, I came here.”

Alicia smiled a little and stroked Mary’s hand again. “You know, Lady Mary, lately I feel very calm whenever I’m around Lord Patrick.”

“Calm...?”

“Yes. When we first started dating, my heart would pound in my chest every time we met. Each of his gestures made my chest tighten, and when he hugged me, I’d get so nervous that I’d start trembling and my heart would race even faster. But...”

“But?”

“These days, his presence calms me down. Even though I used to get so flustered around him that my head went totally blank, now I am at my calmest when I’m with him,” Alicia said with an embarrassed giggle.

After a moment, she seemed to have recalled something and continued on. “But even nowadays my heart will throb because of him sometimes. The other day, Lord Patrick came across me having a difficult conversation with my father, and when he noticed me, he smiled at me. Seeing his serious expression morph into that soft smile was so dazzling and lovely that my heart started pounding.”

“If you show off about your love life three more times, I’m leaving,” Mary declared coolly, despite the way she sniffled.

“I was just joking!” responded Alicia with puffed out cheeks. “Anyway, as I was saying,” she went on shortly after. “At first, I used to constantly want to be with Lord Patrick, and kept thinking about what I could do to make him be with me even longer. But lately, I find myself thinking about *how* we’re going to spend our lives together instead,” Alicia explained, still with an awkward, yet happy, smile.

She must’ve been thinking of Patrick. Her soft smile was a little different from the lovestruck grin Mary remembered. At some point, Alicia’s feelings had changed to that of someone who cherished her partner, but Mary couldn’t pinpoint the exact time when this had happened. Either way, Alicia’s expression now was somewhat distinct from that of her past self.

Perhaps the reason her smile had changed was because she realized she loved Patrick, but had also found pride in being loved *by* him.

“I know he’s going to be with me now, which is why I can start thinking about what comes after,” Alicia continued. “Maybe that’s what happens when you go from falling in love with someone to loving them on a deeper level. That’s what I’ve been thinking lately.”

“Deeper level...?”

“I’m sure that’s the kind of love you already had for Adi. That’s why you’re confused now, because you feel like you’re falling in love with him again instead. Don’t you think so too?” Alicia prompted, and Mary stared at her in bewilderment.

She did think that the story between Alicia and Patrick was beautiful. Love shifting into something deeper and more profound—it was exactly the kind of fairy tale between a prince and a princess that everyone dreamed of.

But when she thought of herself and Adi in that context, none of that applied to them. After all, up until this point, Mary had thought their relationship had nothing to do with romance. Such fairy tales were simply made-up stories that she’d read in books during the evenings, and they had nothing to do with her real life.

“But I was sure I couldn’t fall in love...” whispered Mary. “I mean, I didn’t have any such feelings for Patrick when he was my partner.”

Alicia giggled quietly in response. “Lady Mary, you were certain you’d get married to Lord Patrick, right?”

“Yes, I was...”

“Is that because you thought the two of you were a good match based on your social standing?”

“Yes, house relations were one reason. There’s also the fact that Patrick’s an exceptional individual, and there was nothing to criticize about him as a potential spouse. Plus, he already knows my personality.”

“Lord Patrick’s also very tall, manly, smart, kind, and has a wonderful character! And sometimes, he’s also very cute!”

“*Two* more times...”

“Like I said, it’s just a joke!” Alicia said sulkily in response to the steadily decreasing number. “But you know...” she began with a smile, gently squeezing Mary’s hand. “I don’t think those are the only reasons you thought you’d marry Patrick, Lady Mary. I mean, you have so many marriage proposals coming your way these days, but you’ve refused all of them.”

Mary responded with a nod of assent. True enough, it was difficult to find a man who was as much of an all-in-one package as Patrick, but among the candidates there were a number of applicants who would meet the criteria of “a prince whom everyone yearned after.” There were handsome youths accomplished in sports and academics alike, older gentlemen with a mature appeal, and even those with actual royal relations from the neighboring nations.

Yet Mary had rejected them all.

However handsome they may have been, however exceptional, however difficult it might’ve been to reject some based on their high status, and however some of them might’ve good-heartedly told her that her eccentricity was a part of her charm—in the end, Mary continued to refuse every single one.

She did feel guilty whenever her father smiled sardonically and told her, “All right, as you wish.” He encouraged the candidates to withdraw their applications by implying (though not outright stating) that they were still

waiting for someone like Patrick to appear.

But this was, in fact, the truth. Mary *did* think using Patrick's name was a good way of putting off the candidates, yes, but she truly *was* waiting for someone like him. She was waiting for a partner she could marry. And that had nothing to do with looks, status, or personality.

"I was fine with marrying Patrick. He's got good social standing and a good character, but more than anything, he's the only one who..." Mary murmured her explanation bit by bit. "I mean, he's..." she added even quieter.

There was one absolutely nonnegotiable reason that had always been vague in her mind. It was a condition that Patrick would agree to if she were to marry him. Thinking of it that way, there was only one possibility...

I see, so that's why I was always fine with marrying Patrick. Because he's different from the other men. He's the only one who...

"Only Patrick would earnestly accept Adi being the closest person to me..."

The moment Mary voiced out loud the reason that had been so hazy to her all this time, tears spilled from her eyes as though a dam had burst.

No matter how much the other men downplayed her eccentric qualities or claimed they'd accept them, they wouldn't do the same for Adi. They'd try to bring him down, keep him away, and some of the more jealous ones would even directly tell him things like, *"Stop acting so friendly with Mary,"* and, *"Know your place."*

This was because while Mary and Adi were mistress and servant, the fact that their relationship surpassed that was clear to everyone. But for Mary, his presence by her side was a given for all her life, and in her eyes, those who tried to break into her world and make Adi disappear were nothing but invaders.

"None of you understand anything!" Just how many times had she screamed those words in her heart? *"You know nothing about me or him! Stop trying to break my world just because you're one of the marriage candidates!"*

Patrick was the sole exception in the way he accepted Adi being by Mary's side. Even when Patrick was escorting her during parties, or when their parents purposely arranged tea parties for them to "spend time together," he'd never

once acted jealous towards Adi, nor tried to make him leave. He'd accepted it as though Adi's presence was par for the course, and went along with everything as though all was as it was supposed to be.

Only Patrick would glance up curiously at a servant like Adi standing stiffly in the corner and ask him, *"Why aren't you sitting down?"* And whenever they had meals or tea, he'd always order three portions.

That was why Mary felt fine with the idea of marrying Patrick. She had said it was because their ranks were equal and they made a good match, but in reality she wanted to secure a future where Adi could be by her side like he'd always been.

Ruin or marriage—whichever future Mary pictured in her mind, Adi was always there. She'd always believed that as long as he was with her, she could endure the northern lands, or college, or any other thing.

"Lady Mary," Alicia spoke up. "You've realized your own feelings now, so it's okay. After all, you'll be with Adi forever."

"Forever...?"

"Yes. You and him got married, remember?" Alicia asserted happily.

Mary's eyes widened, but then slowly she whispered, "That's right, we did get married." She wasn't even trying to respond to Alicia, but rather to remind herself of this fact. "Still... I feel like things went really out of order with it all."

By the time Mary had fully realized her own feelings, she'd already loved Adi deeply for a long time and expected them to always be together, then they'd gotten married, and *then* she had fallen in love with him.

It was as if everything had gone in reverse order. Mary anxiously complained that she'd never heard of such a love story, at which Alicia smiled. "Indeed," she agreed, caressing Mary's cheek. Her touch was gentle enough to tickle as she wiped away the remnants of Mary's tears, and a fond look crossed Mary's face. She wondered if the reason she felt a numbing tingle around her eyes was because she'd roughly and repeatedly wiped at them with her own fists.

"It may be a bit strange, but don't you think it's very you, Lady Mary?"

Mary paused. “Are you saying that *I’m* strange?”

“Yes, I am. You’re eccentric, you occasionally do bizarre things, you’re strict and ill-tempered. But you’re also kinder than anyone, both difficult and easy to read—for someone like you, this is the perfect story, don’t you think?”

“So even *you’re* starting to say these things about me.” Despite her teary eyes, Mary scowled at Alicia.

“But!” Alicia appended, tightly gripping Mary’s hand with both of hers. “I love you just the way you are, Lady Mary.”

Mary’s eyes widened slightly at that straightforward proclamation. Slowly, she nodded while squeezing Alicia’s hand in return. With tears still clinging to her eyelashes, she smiled and said, “I... I love you too, Alicia.”

Alicia looked surprised in turn to hear Mary openly declare her own feelings. She then started giggling and replied with, “I’m really glad to hear that, but you can’t say that to me right now, or someone’s going to get jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Isn’t that right? Adi.”

At Alicia’s cheerful words, Mary made a startled sound and quickly looked over her shoulder.

In that moment, the greenery around them rustled as a breeze blew past, swaying both Mary’s silver hair and the rust-colored hair of the person standing behind her.

“Adi...” Mary finally called out after several seconds of staring at him in a daze.

Adi slowly approached her and...

“Er, I know we have a lot of things to discuss, but... Before anything else, may I embrace you?”

...appealed to her for permission while spreading his arms.

Reflexively, Mary and Alicia exchanged a surprised look at his statement, which didn’t suit the present atmosphere at all. After a moment, Alicia couldn’t

endure it any longer and burst into laughter. In contrast, Mary sprung to her feet as her face turned red in but an instant. The chair rattled behind her, almost falling over, making her agitation very clear. Though, her blush had already made her lack of composure quite apparent.

"Wh-Wh-What are you saying?!" Mary shrieked. "Where do you think we are?! This is the royal palace! We're in public, so have some modesty!"

"It's all right, Lady Mary!" Alicia exclaimed. "I made sure the garden was cleared out, and my attention is glued to the beautiful scenery!" The girl got up and noisily adjusted her chair, then sat back down facing away from them. "It's so beautiful that I can't look at anything else!" she added, laying it on thick.

Her actions were obviously unnatural, and so Mary turned even redder. "This is *not* what I meant!" she shouted. But the rest of her words died in her throat when a pair of arms wrapped around her.

Mary's pulse skyrocketed. Two hands pushed into her back as though to prevent her from escaping, and a feverish heat swept through her body all the way to her core. She was suddenly conscious of the fact that Adi was a man when she felt his arms holding her, coupled with the way her chest pressed against his. The heat inside of her had nowhere to run, growing stronger as it roamed throughout her body. Her palpitations had grown to an almost painful degree, yet at the same time, a sweet numbness spread through all her limbs.

I feel like I'm going to melt... Mary thought with a gasp, feeling that even the air she breathed out was as hot as a furnace.

I'm so nervous and embarrassed.

The hands around my back feel so hot, and my whole body's hot too.

Her pulse showed no signs of calming down. She could hear Adi's heartbeat, which overlapped with that of her own as the sounds reverberated together.

Mary and Adi were so close that they could feel each other's every breath, which only made Mary hesitate to inhale at all. It was almost as if she'd forgotten how to breathe in the first place.

Yet despite her anxieties, the one feeling that outrivaled all others was euphoria. She couldn't get enough of the sweet numbness she felt from being

in Adi's embrace. It made her so happy that she felt like her body was melting all over.

When Mary sensed herself growing intoxicated by that feeling, she suddenly pushed herself away from Adi. Even the short distance that opened between them felt regrettable, and when she looked up at him, her breath hitched in her throat.

His face seemed closer than when they had embraced... Actually, it was getting even closer. Those rust-ringed pupils narrowed invitingly, and Mary found it oddly seductive, at which point her heart had reached its limit.

"A-Adi... Don't you think it's a bit too soon for that?"

"What are you saying? We're already a married couple."

"Yes... You have a point. But you know, there's an order to everything," Mary said, hastily trying to persuade him.

Adi held her even tighter. "How long do you think I've been waiting for this?"

"Huh...? Well, how long *have* you been waiting?" Mary asked, nonsensically repeating his own question back to him as she stared into his eyes. Her cheeks felt hot, her heart was pounding, and in her mind, she herself wondered what on earth she was even saying. Of course, given the situation, she was not in a state to actually consider the answer to that question.

Her body just felt so hot, and her heart was beating painfully fast.

What Adi wanted, and what lay in waiting after their embrace... Mary couldn't claim that she didn't know the answer to *that*. She may have been inexperienced with romance, but that didn't mean she had zero knowledge of it. Yet despite her awareness, she didn't feel ready for it. That was why she'd tried stalling for time and repeating his question back to him.

At her words, Adi smiled fondly as though remembering all that he'd been through up until this point. "I suppose I don't know either," he replied.

"What? That's not an answer."

"Well, I've only ever had my eyes on you for as long as I can remember. Laughable, isn't it? That in all this time, you're the only person I've fallen for. To

me, you are my first love," Adi told her with a wry smile.

Mary's blush deepened even further upon hearing his frank proclamation. She wanted to say something, but stopped herself.

He'd been waiting for this his entire life while always standing by her side. He'd waited and waited, and now finally he'd gotten to embrace her. *Even if it's a bit fast-paced, since he's waited for this long...* Right as Mary thought this, Adi's hand reached out to touch her cheek.

His fingers brushed against the corners of her eyes. She'd been crying so hard all day that just this soft gesture flared up a burning sting. Her eyes narrowed from the pain, and Adi frowned, realizing what had happened.

"I must've confused you so much by confessing *after* we'd already gotten married. I'm sorry."

"I... I was really shocked. That's why I'm in this sorry state now," Mary said. She looked at Adi as though to say this was all his fault, and was met with his bitter smile.

He looked troubled, on the verge of tears even, and yet somehow happy at the same time. Mary couldn't put into words how sensual, attractive—and above all—endearing she found his expression. Her chest seized at the sight, and she gazed admiringly at Adi's face, as if enchanted by it. Noticing the way she stared at him, Adi lightly cleared his throat in embarrassment and shifted back to a serious countenance as he returned her gaze.

His rust-colored eyes were piercing into her heart. The wind breezed past, swaying his red hair, and in that moment, Mary felt like her whole field of view was narrowed down to that one color.

"I vow to be by your side for all of my days. I will always think of you first and devote myself to you completely. So rather than my mistress... Please, be with me as my wife."

As he spoke, Adi looked at her pleadingly, yet with a stare so serious that it almost seemed he wouldn't let her refuse. His gaze was scorching enough to melt her. *Those eyes of his are my weakness*, Mary murmured in her mind as she closed her own.

She had no idea what kind of words to reply with. Having lived her whole life removed from the concept of romance, she didn't know what she was supposed to say at that moment. Hence, she closed her eyes and turned to Adi, hoping her actions would relay her answer. His hand, which was resting against her cheek, twitched at her actions.

Ah, so you're nervous as well, thought Mary, and right then she felt a soft sensation upon her lips.

They were kissing.

The instant Mary realized this, she was overwhelmed by an excited, pleasant feeling.

By this point, Adi had touched her countless times. They'd even held hands before. Yet the contact between them now was sweeter than Mary had ever imagined it could be. The sensation made her whole body grow numb, draining all her strength.

This must've been what fairy tales were made of.

Mary's body relaxed, entranced by sheer delight. Slowly, the two of them parted, and both breathed a long, warm sigh. When their eyes met, Adi spoke up again. "I've always been in love with you. And I'll keep loving you forever."

How sweet and delightful these words were to hear! Mary felt them sink deep into her heart and wrap all around her body. Her mind swayed, and as though delirious from the heat, she answered: "I... I must've always loved you too."

Adi's eyes creased into a happy smile. With their love for each other confirmed, he drew his face nearer to hers again.

Oh, are we going again? Mary wondered in her mind.

The soft sensation was upon her a second time. She felt as if she were floating, and everywhere she and Adi were touching was pleasantly warm. Mary was spellbound as they kissed gently to prove their feelings for each other, occasionally shifting angles, until slowly but surely the kiss started to deepen.

She lifted an eyebrow. Something about this was different from before...

It still felt pleasant enough to melt her, but it had gotten a lot deeper and

more enthusiastic compared to the previous kiss. It was going a little too far... Then, as if wanting to entice her to deepen it even *further*, Adi's tongue started to slip into Mary's mouth...

"Have some restraint!!!" Mary screeched, breaking the kiss without hesitation to bury her first into Adi's flank.

"Ugh...!" he groaned, holding his side and collapsing. "I'm sorry! I got carried away..."

"The next time you act out, I'll file a restraining order and have us limited to exchanging letters inspected by my father!"

"No...! I don't think I'd last even a month..."

Adi apologized pathetically while continuing to groan, and Mary murmured, "Goodness!" under her breath. She'd gone with the flow too, but they were at the royal palace, and Alicia was right beside them.

Though, the girl was conscientiously facing away from them, and she'd even plugged her ears. (That said, Alicia was currently sporting a chipper grin while thinking of the happy couple behind her, giggling away with a, "Tee hee!" It would've been quite the inexplicable sight to any onlookers to see her beaming while Adi slumped in the background).

"You can look this way now, Alicia," Mary said, coughing quietly to cover up her embarrassment.

When Alicia realized someone was speaking to her, she began to happily turn back around. "It's okay, Lady Mary! This is your chance, so the two of you can—Eek!" she shrieked. "Adi, what happened to you?!"

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"Well then, we'll be taking our leave. I'm sorry I imposed on you so late in the evening."

"No, no, it's okay!" Alicia shook her head happily, and Mary smiled awkwardly in response.

No matter what Alicia said, Mary had shown up at the royal palace at a late hour with no prior notice. She had to ensure she thanked Their Majesties at a

later date, as well as the security guards who had agreed to call out Alicia for her.

While she was busy pondering this, Adi, who was standing next to her, muttered, “I’d better thank Lord Patrick too.”

A few hours before these events, Adi had been dining together with the head of House Albert and some ministers when a message from the royal palace arrived.

All along, Adi had thought that Mary was in her room, and he even went up to her door to check on her periodically. Though sadly no answer came whenever he tried calling out to her, he’d never have thought it was because she was *gone*. (However, in the past Mary had asserted that the door wasn’t the only way to leave her bedroom. Adi had answered, “I know. There’s also the window and the storage space above the closet.” Nevertheless, who would’ve thought that a lovesick, heartbroken, and tearful young lady would actually sneak out through a window or storage space...?)

Upon receiving news of Mary’s whereabouts, Adi wanted to race to the palace right away to pick her up, but he hesitated. He was torn—up until now, he’d lived his whole life as House Albert’s servant, and he was determined not to relax his attitude just because he was taken into his bride’s family. Hence, he couldn’t get himself to leave his seat when he was in the middle of a meal with the head of House Albert and other similarly high-ranking figures.

At that moment, patting him on the back was none other than Patrick. “What are you dallying for? You’re the man chosen by Lady Albert, who was once *my* fiancée! Stop acting so feeble!”

Patrick’s words sounded so very much like something Mary would say that Adi’s temporary paralysis had faded at once. He’d given Patrick a single bow, hurried out of the room, jumped into a carriage, and come all the way to the palace...

Mary’s eyes widened as she listened to this retelling. “You came here by horse carriage?”

“Yes. I’d been drinking, and I was in a hurry, so I just jumped on.”

“What about your motion sickness?”

“Seems like alcohol makes it better. Besides... I’d been so busy thinking about you that I didn’t have the time to feel sick,” Adi explained with an embarrassed smile.

Mary’s cheeks flushed a little again. In the past, she would’ve taken no notice of what he’d said, but now that she’d become aware of their feelings for one another, each of his words melted sweetly into her heart. But she couldn’t let herself be openly entranced by him, so she turned away swiftly and covered up her feelings by commenting, “What mighty power alcohol possesses.”

“Adi, if Lord Patrick is still at Albert Manor, please send him my greetings!” Alicia interjected.

“Right, got it— Er, that is... Understood, Lady Alicia.”

“There’s no need for such formalities... You’re wounding me.”

“We’re at the royal palace, so I can’t exactly get away with treating you as usual. Please understand.”

Mary smiled at the banter between the two, then grabbed ahold of Alicia’s hand. “Thank you, Alicia,” she said, her words genuine and heartfelt. “I’m glad I came to see you. And I’ll be sure to give my thanks to Patrick too. I’ll let him know how kindly you treated me.”

“Lady Mary...” Alicia grinned at their tightly grasped hands. “I have something else I’d like you to tell Lord Patrick!” she added suddenly.

Uncharacteristically, Mary smiled happily and said, “Of course, I’ll tell him anything you like.”

“Please tell him, ‘Good night, Lord Patrick,’ from me!”

“Very well, I shall do so.”

“Oh, and tell him I said, ‘I love you!’”

“Right, right. I’ll tell him.”

“And also, tell him I said, ‘Lord Patrick, you really are wonderful!’ and ‘You’re so kind! I love you!’”

“...”

Alicia, cheeks flushed, continued cheerfully listing messages she wanted Mary to deliver to her lover. “Well, let’s hurry back home,” Mary said coldly without breaking her smile.

Love-bragging allowances left: zero. What an exceedingly Alicia-esque conclusion!

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Dawn broke after that eventful night, and by the morning, Mary was in an unbearably festive mood.

She may have been a late bloomer, but a bud of romance had finally sprouted within her heart (or more accurately, said bud had already been there for quite a long while but had been neglected.) Last night, Adi had even kissed her forehead! “Good night,” he’d said, and then Mary felt that soft sensation upon her brow. Seeing his joyful, smiling face... It made her giddy. She’d gone to sleep with flowers blooming in her mind, and woke up in a flower bed. They had spread as fast as mint.

Better yet, due to Mary’s actions last night, everyone had decided to give her some space to rest. No one thought to wake her up early or hurry her to change her attire. Though, if at least a maid or two had brought her some hot tea, perhaps the flowers in her head would’ve been plucked a little...

Alas, the festive Mary emerged from her room with petals scattering all around her. “I’ve got to tell everyone!” she proclaimed, for such was her uncalled-for sense of obligation.

The first room she arrived at was her father’s.

This man was the head of House Albert, who stood equal in power to the royals, and some even called him the loyal pillar of support of the royal family. With such an individual waiting behind the door, any commoner—any average aristocrat, even—would’ve paused to take a deep breath and calm their heart rate before entering. In fact, given the early hour, they might’ve grown timid and decided to delay the visit for another time.

But as his daughter, Mary didn’t hesitate nor concern herself with the hour.

Lightly she knocked on the door and, upon receiving a reply, slowly opened it and peered inside. There, her father and her two brothers were sitting around his desk, deep in conversation about something or other with serious expressions. *Must be tough, having to work from so early in the morning*, thought Mary as she entered the room, seating herself in a chair nearby.

Everyone exchanged morning greetings as usual, but their faces clearly asked, *"You came all the way over here, so did something happen?"*

Sensing as much, Mary cleared her throat. "Listen, all of you..."

"Hmm?" They all paused what they were doing to look at her.

Involuntarily, Mary felt her cheeks redden under their gazes. "You see, I... I married Adi," she announced, pressing her hands to her cheeks.

The head of House Albert and his two sons all exchanged glances. *"What is she saying, after everything that happened?"* Such were their expressions. The wedding proceedings had occurred within Albert Manor none too subtly, and no marriage could happen between nobles without a signature from the head of the families. In fact, Mary's father had to sign many more documents than she herself did, so why on earth was she bringing this up now?

With that on their minds, all three men turned to Mary and told her in unison, "We know."

"Oh my... Yes, I suppose you do know," she replied.

"What's the matter, Mary?"

"Right... But you know... Yesterday, I learned that Adi loves me, and he told me that he wanted to marry me out of love," she went on, fidgeting bashfully as another blush spread across her cheeks.

Wondering why the girl was chattering about such things at this stage, the three once again told her in unison, "We know." Their familial sixth sense informed them that Mary would continue this absurd conversation if nothing else was done, so they appended their reply with congratulatory words: "Good for you."

Mary nodded happily, her smile indescribably pure. "I've got to let mother

know too!” she proclaimed with that same smile, bowing and dashing out of the room. The three men couldn’t understand her in the slightest.

After all, anyone could tell that Adi had always had feelings for Mary. Just like Mary could play the perfect noble lady, so too could Adi act the perfect servant, but only in front of her did he become his true self. Moreover, he’d been by her side for all her life, so he knew her better than anyone.

Everyone could see that the way Adi looked at Mary couldn’t be passed off as a mere servant’s loyalty. But apparently, Mary had only realized this last night.

“Hmm,” murmured the head of House Albert solemnly with such things on his mind. Meanwhile, his two sons, who so resembled him from his younger years, smirked.

Then, out of nowhere, the three of them started saying things like, “I’m parched!” and “I’m peckish!” Naturally, this was so they could call over the household staff to arrange refreshments, and start asking about to discover if anything had happened last night.

Having no idea the kind of schemes her father and brothers were up to, Mary stepped lightly all the way to her mother's room with her head still full of flowers. She knocked on the door just as before, and went inside upon receiving a reply. Her mother was enjoying some handicrafts while a few maids busied themselves with tidying the room and arranging the flowers.

Keryl's silver hair swayed softly as usual when she greeted her daughter with a beautiful smile. "Good morning, Mary. Is something the matter?"

"Listen, mother..." Mary seated herself opposite the woman, her cheeks flushed. The maids offered her a cup of tea, from which she took a sip before continuing. "You see, I... I married Adi."

"Yes, I know."

"Right, I suppose you do. Hey, everyone, listen—"

"We know," responded the maids in unison.

Mary's eyes widened at their decisive blows. Yet indeed, as the wife of the head of the family, Keryl had also signed a number of documents regarding Mary's marriage, and the maids had assisted with the arrangements under Patrick's supervision. Of *course* they all knew! In fact, at present they were chiefly discussing what kind of musical program and outfits to arrange for the unveiling party, as well as the meal and drinks.

"Right," Mary said with a nod, realizing as much. Then her cheeks reddened again. "And also... I actually loved Adi all along," she announced, and as if further embarrassed by admitting it out loud, her blush deepened, and she turned away with a quiet squeal.

Keryl and the maids all exchanged a look, wondering what on earth this girl was talking about. "We know," they replied altogether.

"I'm sure there are plenty of other people I can tell!" decided Mary before vacating the room.

Those left behind all breathed a sigh.

"Goodness! She may be my own daughter, but I can hardly understand her. What is she even saying, after all this time?" Keryl wondered out loud.

“Indeed,” replied the maids, and everyone giggled at the gentle banter.

Anyone who came into close contact with Mary could tell that she felt affectionate towards Adi. This was especially so given the fact that Mary, who skillfully switched between the two ladylike and unladylike sides of her personality, would be simply herself only in front of him—and her countenance during those times was joyful beyond description. She didn’t try to keep up any appearances with him, but was just her genuine self.

If that wasn’t affection, then what else would one call it? Though, apparently Mary had finally discovered this only last night.

When that thought occurred to her, Keryl set the embroidery needle she’d been using down on the table in front of her. “Girls,” she addressed the maids with an exceedingly amused expression. “Perhaps all of you would like to take a break? Let’s have some tea together.”

“With us?”

“Indeed... I do need someone to prepare the tea, after all,” Keryl confirmed, her smile dazzling enough to make one think she was a holy woman.

Sensing what she intended, the maids smiled prettily too. “Yes, ma’am.”

Having no idea the kind of conversation her mother was holding with the maids, Mary walked around the estate with flower petals scattering around her, pronouncing to all those who’d made her marriage preparations that she had, in fact, gotten married. When she caught sight of a certain person’s back in one of the hallways, she quickly came to a halt.

He had straight posture, a slim figure, slender limbs, and indigo hair fluttering in the breeze... Without a doubt, it must’ve been Patrick. Mary trotted over to him hurriedly.

“Patrick.”

“Ah, Mary.”

“I was going to ask what you’re doing here so early, but...I suppose it’s not that early anymore. Anyway, is something going on? Do you still have outstanding documents or anything like that?”

“No, I’m actually visiting your father today to discuss something related to my family,” Patrick explained. “But I *have* been over almost every day lately, huh? Maybe I’ll arrange to have my own room in Albert Manor,” he jested with a shrug, and Mary smiled along in response.

Indeed, Patrick had been visiting the mansion to conduct Mary and Adi’s marriage arrangements, but he’d been frequenting the place even before that. Ever since House Dyce had needed to change its heir, Patrick had been coming over to ask the head of House Albert for his opinions regarding the various issues that came up as a result. If the head of the Dyce family officially pronounced a new heir and some kind of problem arose, then among the aristocracy, only House Albert had the ability to contain it.

It wasn’t just Patrick who paid visits—his younger brother who was preparing to take over as heir, and even their parents, the lord and lady of House Dyce, would often come to rely on the Alberts. Whenever something went wrong, the two families assisted each other, deepening the quality of their interactions.

“To think I’d come to rely on your house this much,” mused Patrick.

“Yes. We’d never have guessed it would turn out like this,” Mary agreed.

In the past, the two families’ relationship was ostensibly friendly, but there was a clear difference in their levels of authority. Conscious of the watchful eyes of the other nobles, House Albert and House Dyce had made a show of fellowship, yet the first interhouse relationship that could truly be called intimate had only begun with Mary and Patrick. That was why people had treated the two of them as though they were to be married out of love for each other. Yet neither of them had thought that they could earnestly ask the other to marry them.

Though, if they *had* gotten married, would their families have grown closer as they did now? In the end, it would’ve simply been a marriage of convenience, and what they’d have gotten out of it would’ve been limited to business connections. They likely wouldn’t have been able to achieve a mutually supportive relationship.

These days, Patrick would listen to her father talk with his indigo eyes glimmering and comment, “Excellent point. As expected of someone like

yourself.”

(Upon witnessing this, Mary would groan in exasperation: “Ugh! Father’s gained another crazy fanboy.”)

In response to Patrick and his younger brothers, the head of House Albert would reply rather seriously with, “If only we had two or three more daughters!” Meanwhile, the wives of the families enjoyed tea parties together. Nobody would’ve ever thought that the two houses could patch things up to this degree.

Thinking it over, Mary and Patrick felt that all the compliments they had received about how well suited they were for each other seemed almost ironic. The two of them chuckled, wondering what all those compliments and setups had even been for. That was when Mary suddenly paused and called out Patrick’s name, having remembered something.

His eyes were such a deep indigo that she could almost get lost in them, and his looks were outstanding enough to match any woman’s ideals. Yet as always, though she gazed into those eyes, Mary’s pulse remained steady, and there was no ache in her chest. Once, she had thought her lack of reaction odd, but now that she knew who her heart belonged to, it seemed obvious.

“Listen, Patrick.”

“Yes?”

“Adi and I are married!”

“I know. I made the arrangements.”

“Indeed, you have my thanks. But also...” Mary blushed yet again and squeezed her own cheeks, her expression so heartwarming it was as if she were some lovestruck maiden.

At the sight, Patrick looked startled. To think that *Mary* of all people could make such a face, or act in such a way...

“You see...” she went on.

“Y-Yeah...? What is it?”

“Adi and I... We’ve been in love with each other for a very long time!” she

announced blissfully.

Patrick was dumbfounded for a moment. “Yeah... I know,” he answered eventually with exasperation.

“Oh, I see... I suppose everyone’s more quick on the uptake than I thought.”

“Actually, I think *you’re* more thickheaded than you realized.”

“I suppose that is also a possibility.”

Patrick sighed at this pointless exchange, but then called out to her again. “Congratulations, Mary,” he told her. This was not a case of the eldest son of House Dyce congratulating the daughter of House Albert, but rather Patrick casually addressing Mary, who openly accepted his words with a nod.

“Thank you, Patrick. If not for Adi, I would’ve definitely married you.”

“Indeed. If it weren’t for Alicia and Adi, then I’m sure the two of us would already be husband and wife.”

As they exchanged these top-class compliments, suddenly the patter of racing footsteps resounded from behind them.

“Lady Mary! Good morning!” cried Alicia while vigorously tackling—that is, *embracing* Mary.

“Oof...!” Mary groaned, stumbling from the impact. That she held her ground was a feat becoming of a daughter of House Albert. “G-Good morning, Alicia... Thank you...for yesterda— *Ugh*! Let go of me already! Why are you holding on tighter and tighter?!”

Mary forcibly peeled Alicia off her, and the girl giggled away happily before pinching the hem of her skirt and bowing politely. “Good morning, Lady Mary,” she said, bidding her greetings calmly. If it hadn’t been for her earlier actions, her conduct and words would’ve been truly royal. It was almost refined...again, if it weren’t for that *tackle*!

But just as Mary thought this, Alicia’s usual sunny smile returned. “Lady Mary!” she called out, pulling on Mary’s arm. It seemed her princessly behavior had a strict time limit. “I know you went home yesterday, but next time please stay overnight! Let’s have a sleepover!”

“No thanks. I can’t sleep if I don’t have my personal pillow.”

“Really...?”

“Yes, really. No other pillow has the right thickness.”

As Mary insisted on her refusal, Alicia dejectedly let go of her arm. Mary then murmured, “Well, I suppose I *can* sleep even without the pillow.” Unfortunately, Alicia didn’t catch her words.

Patrick however did, and when Mary stuck out her tongue at him, he only sighed tiredly.

Once again, hasty footsteps resounded from nearby, and all three of them turned to look in that direction.

“Milady!” a voice called out, which was neither a form of address suited for use by a husband nor a servant. Naturally, it was Adi. He seemed in a great hurry, and when he ran up to them, he didn’t even have a second to spare to greet Patrick and Alicia, instead calling out to Mary. “Milady, what on earth have you been telling everyone?!”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“His Grace and Madam have been calling on me since early this morning, and persistently questioning me while giving me strange looks! And no matter where I turn, everyone’s smirking at me and congratulating me! It’s a disaster! What have you been *saying* to them?!” Adi demanded, flushed bright red in embarrassment.

“What? But I haven’t been saying anything strange.” Mary tilted her head, having truly no idea what the matter could be.

From her perspective, all she’d done was announce to everyone that she had gotten married. If anything, what she’d done was just a simple courtesy. Regrettably, her head was so full of blooming flowers that they impeded her thought process. She couldn’t have guessed that, to those who were aware of her and Adi’s relationship (apparently to a much higher degree than she’d realized), her words were like a proclamation that *something* had happened last night.

Patrick more or less inferred as much, and with a sigh he explained what Mary had told him earlier regarding her marriage. He looked at Adi with a great deal of appreciation and sympathy, but still he patted him on the back and declared, “Tell me all the details later too.” After all, he was on the side of those enjoying this entire affair. In fact, one could even say that he was their representative.

“M-My lady...” Adi stuttered out. “Don’t tell me... Have you been going around telling everyone that we’re married...?”

“They all knew already!”

“A-And you’ve also been mentioning that we’re in love...?”

“They knew that too!!!” Mary replied excitedly as if to say, *“What a surprise, right?!”*

Adi, who’d already been quite flushed, turned an even deeper shade of red and, unable to bear any more of this, hid his face behind his hands. His unrequited love had been obvious to everyone who’d worked for House Albert for generations, and the very moment it had finally borne fruit, his wife went and proudly tattled all about it. How humiliating! There was no doubt that this would become a hot topic within the mansion and a source of never-ending teasing.

Meanwhile, Mary observed him with confusion, but then raised her voice. “Oh, that’s right!” she said, recalling something. “I have to go back to Elysiana a little sooner than usual today.”

“Has this been your intention all along?! Dropping this bomb and then abandoning me?!” Adi questioned.

“How disgraceful! No, Parfette asked me to arrange a cake for her,” Mary said. Adi continued complaining, even calling her a brute, and the offended Mary began explaining what had happened...

It was the day before yesterday. As Mary was getting ready to depart for Albert Manor, a knock came on her bedroom door. Shocked, she asked who it was, and it turned out to be Parfette.

“Um, Lady Mary...” Parfette started weakly, and when Mary encouraged her to enter the room, she quietly seated herself on a chair.

“What’s the matter, Parfette?”

“Lady Mary, I... I have a favor to ask... But if not, that’s okay! I know it’s a bother... Right, I’m such a bother. You must be annoyed... I’m so sorry!”

“Wait! I haven’t even said anything yet!”

Parfette hadn’t made an ounce of sense, yet she was already heading for the door with tears brimming in her eyes. “I’ll see myself out...”

Mary quickly stopped the girl, guided her back to her seat, and poured her some tea, as leaving immediately after being served a drink went against aristocratic principles. Parfette did seem a little calmer with a teacup in hand, but she remained restless and fidgety as usual as she peered at Mary.

“Um, I’d like to ask you a favor, Lady Mary... But it’s such a bother... Waaah...”

“Just tell me! What would you like?!”

“I... I promise I’ll cover all the costs! But...”

“Costs? So you’d like me to buy you something, yes?!”

“But I’m afraid you’ll think I’m a glutton... I’d be so embarrassed if you did...”

“Okay, you’d like me to buy you some food?!”

“I did think about buying it myself, but...by the time I get there, it’s always sold out...”

“Right, something popular! You’d like me to buy you some kind of a popular food! Yes?!”

“U-Um, I’ll definitely exercise after I’ve eaten it! And I’ll be sure to add less sugar to my tea...!”

“So something highly caloric?! You’d like me to buy you a popular food that, if recklessly consumed, could cause one to gain weight! Right?! That must be it... I must be close to finding the true answer!”

It took some trial and error (“Which kind of croquettes would you like me to buy?!” Mary had asked; however, Parfette insisted it wasn’t croquettes she wanted), but after a number of leading questions, Mary gradually narrowed down the possibilities until they arrived at the right answer. By the end of the

exchange, Parfette had revealed that she wanted Mary to buy some limited baked goods from a popular cake shop.

Mary was so invigorated when she finally got the girl to spill the truth that she had ended up making a victory pose with her fist raised high above her head before she could even stop herself...

“And that’s why I have to buy a cake on my way back to Elysiana,” Mary said, wrapping up her explanation.

Alicia’s eyes glittered upon hearing the word “cake” and learning the name of the shop Mary would be going to. Whatever the lifetime or era, girls were always weak to sweet things, regardless of the strength of their mental fortitude. (In contrast, Adi and Patrick flinched a little at Mary’s words. “Milady’s become fond of another strange girl,” Adi commented, at which Patrick stomped on his foot. But in fact, the reason he put more force into it and ground his heel down into Adi’s foot was precisely because the term “strange girl” had a ring of truth to it.)

Usually, when the time for Mary’s departure came, Alicia would insist she stay a little longer, dragging it out to the last possible minute. But only for today, the girl rushed Mary instead. “I’m sure there’ll be a line!” The patriotic princess side of her, who was proud of her country’s excellent goods and wanted them to be shown off abroad, intermingled with the girly side of her who adored cakes.

“Well then, until my next holiday.” Mary bid them farewell with Alicia pushing on her back, and then departed. Adi followed in her steps, so only Alicia and Patrick were left behind. It was rather strange to have the first son of House Dyce and the princess of the nation together at Albert Manor, but their interactions were becoming frequent enough that it was a common sight by now.

“They may be married, but they haven’t changed a bit,” Patrick said with a sigh. Alicia nodded at his words with a little giggle.

As always, Mary and Adi were not at all like a mistress and her servant, and though they’d gotten married, they were also not at all like a wife and husband. And yet, they were very much like themselves.

After the two of them had vanished from sight, Patrick began to walk away to

accomplish what he had come here for in the first place, when Alicia caught his arm. The girl looked up at him with a slightly sulky, coquettish expression.

“Alicia?”

“Lady Mary seems really happy...”

“So much so that she’s getting carried away, if you ask me,” Patrick replied with a sigh, glancing back the way Mary and Adi had gone with another sigh.

“That must be nice...” murmured Alicia, and Patrick turned his eyes on her in surprise.

The girl was looking up at him. Her sweet, beguiling purple eyes captivated him, as if coaxing him into doing something. “Lady Mary’s very lucky...” she went on softly, her words full of meaning. Of course, Patrick Dyce was the kind of man who could understand at once that his darling lover was wishing for something when she said such things.

Hence, his cheeks reddened as he cleared his throat and called out for her. “Alicia... Would you like to have a meal with me tonight?”

“A meal?”

“Yes. I... I’d like to talk to you about something important,” Patrick said bashfully.

“Of course!” Alicia agreed with her most brilliant smile of the day so far.

Chapter 4

Back at Elysiana College, on the first day after the holidays, Mary and Parfette were sitting in the classroom together. Mary was holding her head in her hands while a heavy aura emanated from her. Parfette glanced at her worriedly, but said nothing against this oppressive, gloomy atmosphere.

Mary knew Parfette was concerned for her, but she couldn't do anything about it.

After thinking everything over, she was unbelievably happy—so very happy she almost couldn't bear it.

Time had passed, she'd gained some distance from everything, changed her environment, and her head had cooled off a little. And now that she thought it all over with a clearer mind, she realized she was helplessly in love with Adi. She couldn't stop thinking about him.

Although that thought was somewhat exciting, Mary felt resentful towards herself for not realizing her own feelings sooner. How shameful! Looking back on it now, she knew that Adi had always been by her side, and he'd made quite obvious advances towards her. He may not have been direct enough to bring up "love" by name, but he'd desperately tried to appeal to her with his words and deeds countless times.

But Mary had been so estranged from the concept of romance that she'd taken no notice of it, drawn her own peculiar conclusions, and responded to him in ways so off the mark that even she'd surprised herself. No, mere ignorance didn't even begin to cover it. This was a whole other level.

Ahh, I'm such an idiot. Why didn't I realize it sooner?

If I'd just thought a little more about it, it would've been obvious.

But instead I completely trampled on all his efforts, and even suggested he marry me for achieving some kind of a goal*! Goodness, what an imbecile I am... Wait, does that mean* I *was the one who proposed?!*

"Er... Lady Mary..."

Hearing a timid voice call out her name, Mary snapped back to reality. Parfette was looking at her anxiously, and the worried slant of her eyebrows implied she'd already tried calling for Mary multiple times.

"Did something happen, Lady Mary? You've been lost in thought since this morning..."

"Indeed, I've been agonizing over the many times I acted like a fool, and feeling ashamed of myself. I'd quite like to dig a hole with my drills and then crawl into it."

"D-Drills...?" Parfette asked. "I'm not sure what you mean, but it seems like something terrible happened that's caused you a lot of suffering..."

"Suffering?! Absolutely not! In fact, I'm so happy that I feel like I'm surrounded by an entire field of flowers!"

"Then...what's the problem?"

"That *is* the problem! I can't believe I'm feeling *this* happy! It's just pathetic! I could shed tears at my own low tolerance threshold when it comes to romance! You can't even call me a fledgling—I'm like a chick that's only *just* broken out of its shell... No, actually, I'm the *shell* itself!"

As Mary continued to wail noisily, question marks began to flit about Parfette's head. Even so, she tried to help Mary to calm down. "You two must have a very precious bond," she said with a smile.

Mary had fallen into a dilemma the likes of which she herself couldn't comprehend, yet it was all because she was happy, and her happiness was the reason behind her lamentations.

"I'm very curious what sort of person you married," Parfette said.

"Right, I'd love to tell you myself, but my mother and even the princess are insisting we keep it all under wraps until the party."

"Hee hee. I look forward to it... Ah!" Parfette, who'd been giggling cheerfully, exclaimed suddenly as if she'd noticed something.

Mary looked over her shoulder to follow Parfette's line of sight, and spotted a number of girls heading somewhere, Carina among them. Every single one of

them was a rival character from *Heart High 2*, and Lilianne had stolen each of their fiancés. The group was gazing their way as if they were trying to call over Parfette.

The girl hesitated at first, but then rose to her feet with her mind made up and returned Carina's look resolutely. She seemed valiant for a moment, but her chair fell over with a loud clatter from her vigorous movement, and Parfette squeaked in surprise and grew flustered over the commotion she had made. She was still very much herself, then.

"Is something going on?" Mary ventured.

"Y-Yes... We need to talk to someone for a bit."

"Oh, very well. Though they don't seem to be in the mood for just a quiet conversation."

Parfette glanced at the group Carina was spearheading, and her shoulders started to tremble. Her reaction was proof enough that something more was in store. Yet she still anxiously insisted, "We're just going to talk," as though she couldn't share any details with Mary. "I'll be gone for a little while."

"Right. You look a bit pale, though. Are you really okay?"

"Are you sure you don't need me to come with you?" was Mary's indirect inquiry.

Parfette seemed to have understood it, because she responded with a nod. "Yes. I'm okay."

Despite her words, her expression was feeble. The idea of her joining that troop which blazed with a fighting spirit was like releasing a little lamb into a pack of wolves. Mary may have known they were supposed to be Parfette's allies, but it was impossible for her not to worry anyway.

It didn't help that Parfette's gait was extremely nervous as she made her way over to them, tripping on air and generally making a terrible spectacle of herself. The sight was enough to drag Mary out of her field of flowers, and with a defeated sigh, she got to her feet and followed the group to the back of the school building.

It may have been the rear side of the building, but this was still an academy for nobles. Every corner boasted well-cared for, beautiful flowers—perhaps "garden" would've been a better-suited term to describe the area. Even so, given its location, most students didn't normally stray here. At least, not unless they had a reason.

Yet today, the back of the school building was unusually busy. Curious bystanders must've overheard something about a "talk" happening here. Pretending their being here was a mere coincidence, they encamped in the place and stole glances here and there to see what would happen.

I must admire your guts, Mary thought as she glanced over the onlookers in exasperation before continuing on her way. It was obvious that they didn't have the nerve to confront anyone directly, but they were still curious to find out what was going on, looking around in every direction. The chatter only heightened upon Mary's arrival, and she didn't know whether to feel astounded or infuriated.

Meanwhile, the group of girls spearheaded by Carina faced off against the reverse harem commanded by Lilianne. They were emanating an atmosphere that screamed, *"Yes, this is exactly what it looks like!"*

The tension between them was so high that it seemed like all the greenery around them would wither at any moment. This was definitely not going to be a simple conversation. *Oof... It's going to be difficult to find a good place to step in*, Mary thought with discomfort.

She really didn't feel like breaking into the middle of this. She would've refused even if someone offered her money for it—no, even if someone offered her a pile of croquettes. That was why she decided to keep her distance for now and see how things would play out.

Mary didn't love the thought of assimilating with the onlookers, but while the conversation was unlikely to go amicably, she'd be glad if it didn't escalate to the point of her having to step in. After all, she had no relation to any of this. Lilianne hadn't stolen Mary's fiancé, nor had she played any hand in the downfall of House Albert. According to LIlianne's own words, "nothing presently happening here had anything to do with her." Equally, Mary had no interest in

something so boorish as sticking her nose into the confrontation between Lilianne and Carina.

The only reason she had followed the troop this far was because she was worried about Parfette, who stood among them trembling. No one had even said anything yet, but her eyes were already filled with tears. Watching her like this was almost sufficient to guess which side would lose. That was why Mary stood vigilantly nearby and strained her ears, waiting for a moment when something might happen to Parfette.

As the conversation began, everything went just as it had in the game—it was the last event of the reverse harem route.

Unlike in the prequel where, regardless of the route, Mary Albert was always the enemy who got denounced by the end, in *Heart High 2*, each of the rival characters had a different conclusion.

Parfette and Carina were a good example. The former would become good friends with the heroine, whereas the latter would act as a villainess and get her just deserts at the end. From among these various stories, the reverse harem ending was the most convenient one of all.

It went like this: Lilianne, surrounded by all her men and her friends, denounced all the rival characters with whom she couldn’t reconcile in the end.

It played out just like the kind of corny, morally self-serving story where the good guys won and the villains were punished. Even children would tilt their heads upon reading such a conclusion. Alas, this route was almost like a joke route from the developers, so the story itself was of secondary importance. The players would constantly check online guides to make sure they were selecting the right choices, all so they could savor the taste of victory upon unlocking the final CG. There was no deeper meaning to the reverse harem route beyond that.

Mary watched this final scene unfolding before her eyes with mixed feelings, then looked towards Lilianne, surrounded by her admirers. She seemed apprehensive, but who could say what she was really thinking?

Was she secretly triumphant that she’d been able to trigger the event? Or perhaps she was actually the most afraid of all the people gathered here.

The event was happening earlier than it had in the game, and Lilianne hadn't even bothered to reconcile with Parfette or any of the other rival characters. Originally, only a few of the girls were denounced in this event, yet right now, all of the rivals were facing off against Lilianne. Mary, who was aware of the contents of the reverse harem route and a certain "special bonus" that came after, believed that Lilianne had decided to go down a dangerous path precisely because she had managed to deftly capture all the romanceable characters.

That was just how much of a hurry she was in.

Lilianne had a specific reason to rush through this incredibly difficult-to-attain reverse harem route and even omit certain game components on her way. That reason was definitely because she wanted to acquire that special something—no, rather, she wanted to meet a certain *someone*. And she had to hurry before it was too late for their encounter...

"What a farce," Mary murmured, gazing at Lilianne with nothing but pity.

Just as Mary had inferred Lilianne's intentions, a sudden buzz of noise started up among the bystanders.

The romanceable cast remained by Lilianne's side, and one after another they started saying their goodbyes to their fiancées. Everything proceeded just as it had in the game, so smoothly that it was almost as if the reverse harem had held a preliminary meeting before all this to arrange their speaking order. All the girls who were receiving these final farewells turned pale.

Some of the men even compared their fiancées to Lilianne, at which point even Mary's brow creased. Not only were they breaking off their engagements for the sake of their own convenience, but they even went as far as to shift the blame onto the girls. It was beyond pathetic!

"Just you try doing that too!" Mary's eyes said as she glared at Gainas. As though he could sense it, a sudden shudder went through him and he glanced around in a fluster. But soon enough his turn came, and he only apologized to Parfette with his head lowered. Within the lecherous harem, he was one of the only decent men left.

Once the last person had said his goodbyes, Lilianne, who'd been observing it all, took a single step forward with a remorseful expression. (She did look

genuinely remorseful, but it was certainly a tour de force—a performance put on well enough to fool anyone who didn't understand what was happening into thinking that she was the victim here.)

"I'm sorry, everyone," Lilianne said, addressing the girls. "But... I do believe that what's between us is true love." Her words were perfectly in line with the game.

"My, I suppose this is how it ends," Mary murmured with wide eyes, shocked to see it all wrapped up so quickly.

The "true love" that Lilianne had mentioned was a theme of the game, and it tied directly into the event itself. A portion of the girls held their breaths and admitted their defeat upon hearing her, and that seemed to function like the magic words that let Lilianne gain even more support from her men and the characters with whom she had forged friendships. One might wonder if this was a line someone who had amassed a reverse harem should say, but these gentle, sweet words were designed for the sake of the players—and therefore, Lilianne.

And thus, the event would end, and the protagonist would leave the scene.

While Mary pondered upon her memories of the game, Carina's bold laughter reached her ears. At the sound, Mary snapped back to reality and looked towards her.

Carina was sporting a smile beautiful enough to induce shivers as she stared Lilianne down without any hesitation. Even now, there was no sign about her that she was ready to admit defeat.

"My! True love, you say? Such wonderful words. Don't you think so too, everyone?" Carina asked, looking over her shoulder to seek support from her gathered compatriots. She looked every part the villainess. Cornered at the eleventh hour, she laughed even more daringly and put on airs as she presented her trump card. Her lustrous black hair swayed in the breeze, and coupled with her dignified manner, it made her seem like a true villainess.

"Oh no. She looks a little attractive..." Mary murmured, unintentionally smitten.

The rest of Carina's troop followed suit and began smiling. It was almost as if

their previously sorrowful and pallid expressions and the way they'd hung their heads down as if they couldn't even look up had all been a lie. If that was truly the case, then Elysiana College should start offering a drama course immediately. Though, one person was still tearful and shaky. Mary's fears were not dispelled, as she felt like she was watching a pack of fighting dogs who'd been mistaken for lost puppies now bare their fangs, with a little lamb thrown in their midst.

Little Lamb Parfette aside, the group of girls laughed fearlessly, and thus commenced their counterattack against the men who had just thrown them away.

"Oh, you still haven't realized? Our engagement's already long since been canceled," spoke up one of the girls with a smile. "Your father apologized to me for such a terrible thing happening, and we began talks about me marrying one of your brothers instead. If everything goes through, they'll even consider changing your family's heir."

The man she was speaking to paled immediately at her words.

Mary pulled up a mental list of nobles. Indeed, from what she could recall, this man's family had several sons, and the battle for the inheritance was fierce. Though he was the eldest and the present heir, his brothers were close to him in age, so changing the heir wouldn't be a difficult matter. That said, given that he had decided to dump his fiancée for the sake of getting involved in some peasant's reverse harem, it was almost as if he was *asking* to be ousted from the succession battle.

How awful... But in fact, it wasn't awful in the slightest, nor was it any of Mary's concern—whatever heir this family decided to choose, it would have no effect upon House Albert anyway.

Soon enough, another of the girls stepped forward, as though a baton was passed to her. "I wonder if you still remember that I agreed to the engagement with you on the terms that I'd be the mother of the future family heir. If you can't fulfill that promise, then I suppose our breakup is inevitable. As such, I've decided to annul our betrothal, and your parents have agreed to adopt me as their daughter. We'll be looking for a different man for me to marry, and our

children will be in line for succession.”

“Huh...?” The man she was talking to looked pallid from the shock.

The chatter around them grew louder, and even Mary murmured, “Oh my,” before she could stop herself.

“What’re you so surprised about?” the girl continued. “Adoption is completely expected if your only son can’t produce an heir. Both your parents were very supportive and gave me a warm welcome! Although, they were quite angry with you, and mentioned they won’t let you use the family name in the future.”

“What? Hold on...”

“I mean, you’re not interested in me anymore, right? You said yourself how charming, kind, and considerate you think Lilianne is. And I need to focus on finding a partner who’ll be able to produce a healthy heir, so I don’t have the time to concern myself with you,” she declared, and then she and her compatriots began happily wondering out loud what kind of man she should go with instead.

Faced with such treatment, the fiancé...or rather, *ex*-fiancé, could only stand there in a daze.

However, what the girl had spoken of was not such an unusual thing. While some families faced harsh succession battles like in the previous man’s case, this man’s family had only one son. As such, they’d want to allocate him a bride who could bear a healthy heir. And yet their son had chosen to become a part of some reverse harem, so it was no surprise his family had decided to wash their hands of him.

“But if we need an heir, then Lilianne could...” the man murmured under his breath, glancing at her. Yet Lilianne quickly turned away, making an even more pathetic sight out of him. Supposing that she would agree to bear an heir for him in the first place, his parents certainly wouldn’t wait while all the other men took their turns.

Normally in such a situation, the adopting side would take in a second or third son from their relatives, or a family they knew very well. But in this case, for the

sake of preserving their honor, the family had decided to cast away their only son, adopt a daughter, and let the man she married be taken into their family as well. It was quite a risky move, but if they put their feelings aside and cut off their biological son, they could still retain some dignity within high society. True, there was no trace of love within these actions, yet they were very much par for the course in the aristocratic world.

And so, the girl who was supposed to have been thrown away ended up attaining a better social position than she held before and taking over her ex-fiancé's family in the process. *I see... So they had the son expelled, and the adopted daughter became the heir. What a splendid move*, thought Mary with admiration, and then another girl stepped forward.

On one side were the men who had declared their betrothals had to end and their fiancées be cut off from their families, and on the other side were the girls now revealing how the men's families wanted to keep them around and had promised to sever relations with their sons instead. Some of the girls had already become engaged to other men, including a few who'd managed to secure fiancés with even higher ranks than their previous ones. Both the men hearing these tales and the crowd of onlookers had grown silent, lost for words at the news.

After all, the topic of discussion was political marriages. In other words, this wasn't just some love quarrel, but something that could change the pecking order for each noble family, and could even affect the hierarchy within the entirety of high society. Many of the bystanders began to leave in a hurry, perhaps because they were the cronies of the affected men, or perhaps because they feared getting caught up in the cross fire of a breakdown of relations between the families.

Yet House Albert would stand firm regardless of what happened, and Mary remained where she was, gazing at Carina with rapt attention. "Villainy looks wonderful on her," she muttered to herself. Carina was still smiling fiercely as she listened to her compatriots' stories, as though this all were some kind of vaudeville and she was waiting for her turn at the stage. She looked so very villainous that Mary found herself enchanted by her. And her imposing stance was such a sight to behold that Mary even tried to mimic the way Carina was

standing, eyeballing the particular distance between her feet.

Alas, the fact that Carina and the rest of her troop had prepared a counterattack was no surprise. These were political marriages—whether or not the partners actually loved each other aside, they were engagements that both parties were supposed to benefit from. If one side decided to selfishly toss aside their partner like some trash, then of course those partners would weaponize the benefits they were originally bringing to the table.

If there was any love between them, then they would only lose that love's worth.

And if there was no love, then they'd only lose the benefits' worth.

Moreover, these men had stooped to the level of becoming but one among many males inside of a reverse harem. Surely the girls' pride had taken a massive hit as a result. That became the very thing that lit their fighting spirits (and for some of them, even the ambition to take over their ex-fiancés' families), and thus they delivered these crushing blows without mercy. In reality, few women would've cried themselves to sleep and then backed out in such a situation, much less sat around waiting mournfully until the day they were forced to admit defeat.

Their fighting spirits were so ignited that even Parfette was standing among them. Mary glanced at the girl. Though she was still trembling, she took a step...no, half a step...half of a half step forward. (Honestly, rather than step forward, it was more accurate to say that she *moused* forward, but considering her personality and the current situation, it was still such a brave move for someone like her that Mary wanted to send her compliments.)

"U-Um, I..." Despite the fact she was now suffering the weight of the limelight, Parfette still gazed up at Gainas. Then, with renewed determination, she gripped her skirt tightly and exclaimed, "Lord Gainas!"

Confusion flashed in Gainas's eyes at this.

"Y-You see, I... I d-d-don't even care for you one bit *anyway*!!!" Parfette declared, shouting out the last word with all her might.

Instantly, the air froze still.

What finally broke the total silence was the sound of Mary as she quickly rushed over.

One of you is a total ham actor! Mary shrieked in her mind. She broke into the gathered troop to stand by Parfette's side and lightly poked the girl with her elbow in a way that others wouldn't notice. As Mary began quietly scolding her, Parfette's teary eyes dampened even further.

"What was *that*?! If you're going to be putting on an act, then at least perform your role well!"

"N-No, I'm not p-putting on an act! I really, really...don't care about him anymore!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake! You really are a ham actor! No, you're not even at the 'ham' stage yet! I'll have you cured, smoked, and processed!"

"P-Please don't do that..."

With Mary quietly rebuking her, Parfette (who was weak to mental blows as it were) was certainly very close to reaching her limit. The girl grasped Mary's skirt as though she couldn't endure it any longer and pathetically cried out Mary's name. Her fragile countenance stole a sigh out of Mary.

Well, I reflexively interjected after that ham performance of hers, so of course I ended up entering the stage... Mary thought, glancing at their surroundings before purposefully patting Parfette on the back. The girl was trembling so much that Mary could feel it through her hand, and she suppressed Parfette's tremors with brute force.

"Since this is such a special occasion, perhaps you'd like to explain everything more fully to everyone, Parfette?" Mary prompted, masking her voice in composure. She had spoken a little louder than usual so that all those gathered could hear her. "How about it?" she urged further in an exaggerated tone as she put on airs. "You should let everyone know about how my brothers invited you out to a meal."

At her proclamation, every single person's eyes widened in shock, including Parfette's. Of course, this was because Mary's brothers were the sons of House Albert, and therefore wielded power equal to their country's royalty. Plus, one

of the twins would become the next head of the family.

It'd be impossible for everyone to *not* be surprised upon hearing that Parfette would dine with such individuals, let alone the extra meaning added to Mary's words when they were said here in this context. The crowd was struck dumb, and when Parfette finally snapped back to herself she hurriedly clasped Mary by the arm.

"L-Lady Mary! What are you saying...?!"

"It's fine; just go along with it."

"B-But that's terrifying...!" Parfette squeaked in a panic, still shivering. Mary sighed.

On one hand was House Marquis, which had a low social standing even within Elysiana College, and on the other, House Albert, which held unshakable authority within its country. As such, Parfette's reaction was completely normal.

But then Mary quietly inquired, "You don't want to lose to Lilianne, do you?" and Parfette swallowed her protests. A small flame lit up in her eyes, for even someone as cowardly and timid as her wanted a chance at taking revenge.

"I... I'm sick of just losing all the time," she responded.

"Then nod your head and agree with me. If you do, I'll really introduce you to them," Mary whispered, then turned to once again face Lilianne and her horde of men.

Lilianne's reverse harem stood in place blankly, so much so that their good looks were wasted on them. Gainas seemed splendidly uneasy. Nobody had expected the influential Albert name to come up in the quarrel, and the onlookers all snapped back to reality as another clamor began.

"Lucky her..." The voice resounded from the troop of girls who had just made a display of their magnificent skills and declared their familial takeovers. How wonderfully ambitious, to decide that a fiancé's noble house was not enough and get jealous over the Albert sons!

Though for a moment it had seemed the tides might turn in Lilianne's favor, Mary's declaration was enough to capsize the atmosphere beautifully.

The girls were supposed to have been tossed aside, yet they'd hurled the hammer down upon the men instead. To top it off, Parfette, who had been terrified of the curious and pitying glances everyone cast at her due to her low ranking, had now received the divine protection of House Albert, making her the subject of everyone's envy. It was a brilliant reversal of events. That said, even though Mary had told Parfette she'd introduce her to the sons of House Albert, the girl was still gazing at Gainas...

And then there was Lilianne, who had been numbed by this theatrical turnaround. She had wanted to sing the praises of true love, yet the switch had flipped in an instant, and now the men around her were all pale. She must've realized she was in dire straits, and in light of the development, decided to step out of the mens' shadows and approach Mary.

"Lady Mary, I don't think you have anything to do with this."

At her assertion, Mary's eyebrows creased. She'd decided to burst in to save Parfette, but she had ended up dragging out the last boss and stealing Carina's turn in the limelight. The girls had probably planned the talking order in advance, so it was quite an unfortunate thing. Plus, Carina hadn't said anything about her side of the story, and Mary was dying to hear it.

I wonder if we could still take a step back if I were to say I want to see this all play out to the end... But indeed, though Lilianne was pressing her, this was all somebody else's affair. It was just as the girl had said—it had nothing to do with Mary.

“You’re right. This has nothing to do with me,” she agreed. “It’s not like some lecherous woman stole *my* man. In fact, the man who loves me is wholeheartedly devoted to me and has me on cloud nine, so I couldn’t care less about your petty love dramas.”

Mary stole a glance at the reverse harem. Some of the men still looked pale, while a few of their expressions twisted with discomfort at her words. Others even looked flustered. All had responded differently to her proclamation. From among them, only Gainas looked regretful with his head hanging low. Yet if he looked up now, he’d notice that Parfette was still staring at him. What an incompetent man!

“That’s *my* situation, so I’ve no interest in participating in your tragic revenge story either,” Mary continued, turning her gaze on Carina and the rest of her troop.

Most were still keeping watch on the men, but now that they’d handed them over letters of annulment, the girls had no further use of them and looked back at Mary. A few of the most ambitious ladies shot Parfette envious glances. One even whispered, “Twins, hmm?” which implied she’d like to take advantage of Parfette to aim for one of the Albert sons for herself. Such an appetite left even Mary shuddering for a second.

“And honestly, I don’t even feel like watching this farce like the rest of these gawkers,” Mary said with a pointed look at their surroundings, at which the rest of the students hurriedly turned their faces aside. Some even coughed lightly, shamelessly feigning ignorance.

Having looked at each of these groups in turn, Mary at last fixed her gaze on Lilianne. “I’ve no relation to any of what you’ve been talking about.”

“E-Exactly. So why...?” The rest of Lilianne’s inquiry was slurred, but it amounted to something like, “*Why are you getting in my way?*” At that, Mary laughed coolly.

Indeed, just as Lilianne had said, Mary Albert had nothing to do with *Heart High 2*. She was merely the villainess from the prequel, with no further appearances to speak of. Lilianne could use her game knowledge to amass her harem all she liked, and in contrast Carina could toil away just as much to avoid

her own ruin—but none of it had any relation to Mary. Her screen time was over.

That was exactly why, up until now, Mary had remained a spectator, without ever getting herself involved. However...

“I’m not going to just abandon a friend in need.”

This wasn’t about a game, or her past life, or any such thing. Simply put, Parfette was in trouble—and that meant that Mary Albert herself *was* involved. “I think I’m realizing this a little late, but... Strangely enough, it seems my friends are my weakness.”

Lilianne’s eyes clouded with confusion at Mary’s assertion. At the same time, she looked visibly impatient, likely because she was thinking of what would come after this event. The girl was desperate to find a way to make Mary leave the stage as soon as possible.

But it seemed she was out of time, for the crowd of onlookers erupted with noise. Hearing some of the girls squeal in shrill voices, Lilianne’s expression grew distorted. Gone was the mild-mannered princess who could heal men with but a gentle smile, and in her place was simply a lone panicked girl. Her brow was creased, and her mouth contorted with frustration at having lost her chance to clear the stage. Everyone, confused by her transformation, followed her line of sight.

And what she was looking at was a certain figure among the crowd of bystanders, his indigo hair swaying in the breeze...

Lilianne’s eyes widened before she whipped back towards Mary. “For goodness’ sake! Your turn is already over, so *stop* getting in my way!” With that shriek, Lilianne shoved Mary aside.

“Ah!” Mary exclaimed in shock, the force of Lilianne’s impact sending her tumbling back.

In the space of a breath, she heard three sounds occur at the exact same time.

First, someone shouted out: “Mary!”

Along with his voice, a pair of feminine voices—Lilianne and Carina—called out to him: “Lord Patrick!”

Lastly, a loud *crack* resounded as something broke apart.

The reverse harem ending was the most difficult route of *Heart High 2*, and in fact the entirety of the series as a whole. It was an extremely convenient, almost unintelligible story that could be passed off as a mere joke from the developers. Even so, those who worked hard to clear it would be rewarded with a magnificent CG of the heroine surrounded by all the romanceable love interests. And as a special bonus, the one who appeared at the very end of the story...

...Indeed, it was none other than Patrick Dyce.

A love interest from the prequel, and the series’ most popular character, in *Heart High 2*’s reverse harem route, he appeared for one brief moment—one single CG appearance.

Patrick, who happened to be present when the protagonist fell over, reached out his hand to help her to her feet. He didn’t even get a name tag; his dialogue was purposely tagged with question marks instead. Yet for a game where all other NPCs were referred to as “Male Student” or “Professor,” for one character to show up as “???” was quite the achievement.

Moreover, Patrick appeared the same as in the prequel, with his indigo eyes and matching hair, still sporting his good looks even as an adult. In fact, he had even *more* charm about him than before. Anyone who’d played the original game would’ve recognized him at once.

It had just been a bit of fun from the developers, a guest character who appeared for the briefest of moments. And yet, countless players had undertaken the challenge of this route just to glimpse him.

“Mary, are you all right?”

Patrick had leaped out of the crowd of confused bystanders to rush over to her. Yet she was in a daze and couldn’t find the words to answer him.

Lilianne and Carina called out to him again. Just like in the game, Patrick was reaching his hand out, yet very much unlike it, it was *Mary* he was reaching out

for...



There was no doubt about it—Lilianne’s aim all along had been Patrick Dyce,

the man who appeared at the very end of the reverse harem route. But in reality, he was already involved with the prequel's heroine, Alicia, and Lilianne must've been rushing through the route in the vain hope that she could get here before they publicly announced their engagement. Similarly, Carina had been working to avoid her downfall while letting Lilianne proceed, all so they could drag Patrick out onto the stage.

Truly, what a farce!

No, never mind that for now.

Patrick called out to her again, but Mary, still stunned, slowly reached for her skirt pocket.

The moment she had fallen, she heard a crack from inside of it. Carefully, Mary put her hand into her pocket and started feeling around for the bracelet, and at the sharp sting of pain against her finger, she quickly withdrew her hand. Mary looked down, watching a red rivulet form around the pad of her index finger. Gradually, the blood began to run down her finger. The wound very much suggested something had broken and cut her...

The instant understanding dawned on her, Mary felt the rage within her release with an almost audible hissing sound.

"What's wrong, Mary? What happened?"

Patrick was peering down at her with a worried look on his face. Not far off, Parfette, who went beyond the point of being tearful and had openly broken into sobs, was nevertheless screaming away at Lilianne. Both Lilianne and Carina looked disoriented, unable to process the events that had unfolded so very much in line with the game yet so very unlike it.

Having carefully looked over each person, Mary abruptly got back up to her feet. Then, she approached Lilianne and drew her right hand back.

Smack!

Such was the light sound that reverberated through the air.

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"My younger brother's going to be attending Elysiana College next year, so I

came to bid my greetings to the board chairman in place of my father. I thought it might be nice to take the opportunity for Mary and me to have a meal together," Patrick explained.

"So that's why you went to the back of the school building," Parfette mused.

"Right. But the moment I arrived, I saw a female student send Mary flying. What a shock!"

"W-Well, I understand your surprise, but I promise Elysiana College is usually a lot more peaceful than that. It's a great place to quietly settle down and focus on your studies..."

"No, I was just surprised about the Mary flying part. Up until now, she's always stood her ground no matter what blows came her way."

Patrick was sitting on a lavish sofa, teacup in one hand as he talked. Opposite him was Parfette, grasping her teacup in both hands while nodding away at his words. "Just what kind of things does Lady Mary go through usually...?" the girl questioned with a worried slant of her eyebrows, though she'd never guess the answer was tackle-hugs from the princess.

They'd since left the back of the school building and were now in Elysiana College's parlor.

The confrontation from earlier had been broken up by the professors and parents of those involved, who'd rushed to the scene, and the crowd of onlookers had dispersed. Only a few of the most involved figures were taken to the staff room. The school staff had decided Patrick was uninvolved with the disturbance and guided him to stay in the parlor for the time being. As such, he'd managed to save Mary—who had still been spacing out—and Parfette—who'd tearfully followed Mary about—from further involvement.

The staff had apologized to Patrick profusely in an attempt to preserve the academy's dignity, imploring him not to share what had happened. Afterwards, he watched them head for the inquiry, leaving the three of them behind. As a side note, the staff had wanted Parfette to come along with them, but despite her damp, reddened eyes, the girl had openly refused: "I'll be staying with Lady Mary."

“Still, to think Mary managed to make a friend like you,” said Patrick, looking Parfette over in surprise.

Though her cheeks had been a little red until now, the girl immediately paled at his words. She had been close to calming herself down, yet in an instant her eyes overflowed with tears again. “You’re right... For Lady Mary of House Albert to be friends with s-someone like me... It’s absurd, isn’t it?!” she sobbed.

“Wh-When did I say any of *that*?!” Patrick exclaimed in a fluster.

He had dealt with many frail maidens in the past (and of course, girls who *pretended* to be frail), yet even for him this level of faintheartedness was a first. Hence, he stopped himself from saying, *“How did Mary manage to deal with this?”* out loud and instead silently peered at Parfette. It was difficult to picture this girl, adorable as a small animal, standing next to someone as aloof as Mary.

Parfette, who’d previously lowered her head, now glanced up at him with newly flushed cheeks. “U-Um... Please, could you refrain from staring at me like that?”

“Ah, pardon me.”

“N-Not at all! I should apologize for asking that of you, Lord Patrick... But you’re such a wonderful man that my heart starts pounding when you look at me... Oh, but of course, Lord Gainas is the one I... I don’t care about at all! Not one bit...!” Parfette began trembling, hurt by her own proclamations.

“F-Fine! I don’t really understand, but I’ll stop looking at you, so don’t cry...!” Patrick said in an attempt to pacify her.

The girl wiped her tears away, and murmured, “By the way...” with a quick glance towards the corner of the room. “Um... What’s wrong with Lady Mary...?”

In contrast to the bright interior of the rest of the room, the place Parfette was looking at radiated a dark, dismal atmosphere. It was a level of gloom nigh unthinkable for the prestigious noble academy of Elysiana.

Alas, Mary was sitting facing the wall and grasping her knees while emanating an aura of total defeat extremely out of character for a young lady Albert. “I can’t believe it... I, Mary Albert, lost my cool over some lusty girl and actually

raised my hand against her... How pathetic! I can't stand it..." she kept muttering under her breath, agonizing over her own actions.

Mary was in such a severe stage of grief that the professors who had so profusely apologized to Patrick turned a blind eye to her state. It was bad enough that even Parfette, of all people, felt concerned enough to speak up about it.

Patrick shot a single glance at Mary, then turned his gaze back to his teacup without letting an ounce of worry show on his face. "I can't claim that she's completely fine, but there's nothing we can really do. Best to just leave her be."

Parfette's eyes widened at that assured diagnosis. She was surprised to see this attitude from him towards the tragic girl who had stepped aside despite still harboring feelings for him, as the tale went. Yet Patrick seemed oblivious to Parfette's gaze, leisurely remaining seated on the sofa. He made no attempts to comfort Mary whatsoever and hadn't even offered her a single consoling pat on the back.

"If she doesn't get better by herself, I'll bring over someone who can fix her, so don't worry," he told Parfette.

"Someone who can...fix her?"

"Indeed. It's a person who knows how to handle Mary's antics better than anyone."

Patrick chuckled to himself at his own words, and in response Parfette glared at him reproachfully. The scene before her eyes was a far cry from the story of the love-stricken prince and the tragic maiden. In fact, on occasion Mary mumbled bitter complaints like, "If I really think about it, it's basically all Patrick's fault..."

Question marks floated around Parfette, but even so, she looked over the other two and inquired, "Lady Mary, how about we go have some dinner?"

"I can't believe you'd just invite me out like this when you can clearly see how busy lamenting I am. I've scheduled several more hours of despondency and self-loathing, so leave me be."

"I have Adi's list of the most delicious croquette shops around," Patrick

interjected.

“All right, let us depart,” Mary said readily as she stood up.

Patrick looked entirely unsurprised at her sudden transformation. He simply agreed with a nod and got to his feet as well. The two of them moved to vacate the room, but paused to look back at Parfette, who was still sitting upon the sofa.

“Lady Parfette, won’t you join us?” Patrick suggested.

“You might as well come along. It doesn’t seem like anything interesting will happen here, anyway,” said Mary.

On one hand was the dreamy first son of House Dyce, desired by all, and on the other, a daughter of House Albert, whose power didn’t waver even abroad. Parfette may have been a noble herself, but these two individuals were countless rungs above her. Yet despite that, they extended an invitation to her as though they were all equals.

Parfette could almost see the sparkles glittering all around the scene before her. She blinked repeatedly before offering the two of them a nod of assent and following them.

“Um, I’ve heard a lot about you, Lord Patrick. It’s an honor to meet you in person and join you for dinner!”

“Hmm? Ah, right. Thank you, Lady Parfette.”

“Waaah! I told you to please refrain from looking my way! And you even smiled at me...! I’ve already dedicated myself to Lord Gainas, so... *No*! No, I have not...!”

“Seriously, why all this...? You really do cry often.”

“You’ve got that wrong, Patrick,” Mary joined in. “It’s not that she cries often. Rather, she smiles sometimes.”

“Right, crying is her default state of existence, huh?”

And so the three of them continued this discussion as they exited the parlor.

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Following that day, it would've been nice if peace and tranquility once more returned to Elysiana College... Alas, it was not meant to be.

After all, everything had ended in quite the extreme role reversal. The hierarchy within the academy was turned upside down as Lilianne's admirers fell into disgrace. Their cronies, who used to cling to them due to their familial influence, had all quickly changed their tunes and abandoned them, while the female students, who used to shriek and yearn for the men, now only cast them icy glares. Indeed, the house of cards had crumbled beautifully.

Considering the severity of the situation, it wouldn't have been a surprise to see the men skip school as a result, yet for most of them, their *homes* were the bigger bed of thorns at present. In fact, it wasn't just that they felt out of place at home—some of them weren't even allowed to *enter* their estates! As such, many continued to show up at school and...

"Listen, about the other day..."

"Just hear me out one more time, I beg of you...!"

...insistently followed around the very girls they had once tossed aside.

Naturally, this was because the girls were the ones who had thrown them off the cliff, and so were the only ones who could save the men from being cast out of their families. This was especially the case now that their beliefs that Lilianne loved them even if she had other men around her had proven completely false, and so they clung all the stronger to the connections they had once thought they'd sever.

As for Lilianne herself, she was under house arrest while awaiting disciplinary action. Apparently, the teachers and parents of those concerned had cross-examined her and found out that, despite the fact she was in the center of the reverse harem, she pleaded that she was in love with Patrick. (Upon hearing of this, Mary felt no pity for the men nor Lilianne. All she thought was that she had wanted to see Carina's villainy play out to the end. The only good thing to have come out of Mary leaving the scene early was the fact that the croquettes from Adi's recommended shop list were, indeed, delicious.)

"Most of the families have decided to forgive their sons if they accept their previous betrothals. Desperate, isn't it? As for me, however, I have no

intentions of forgiving anyone, no matter how much they beg, cry, or try to intimidate me."

The icy assertion had come from Carina, who was sipping on her tea as she talked. Sat facing her was Parfette, and the way she puffed out her cheeks was probably supposed to suggest that she agreed.

Watching the two of them, Mary sighed. Numerous glances were being cast their way. It would've been hard for them not to draw attention, as they were the three central figures of the maelstrom of rumors, all assembled together—Carina, who had spearheaded the reverse confrontation; Parfette, whose hierarchical position had shifted more drastically than anyone else's, with a few even claiming she'd be the next wife of House Albert; and Mary, who'd put an end to Lilianne's reign (although Mary herself would rather pretend it had never happened).

On top of all that... Mary thought, shifting her attention to the side. By their table was a certain objet d'art that didn't match the scene of three beautiful girls' tea party. Indeed, it was a lovely curio depicting a handsome man bowing his head...

"Seriously... How can you just keep drinking your tea with something like *this* going on?!" Mary demanded. "He's been standing here like this for the past two hours!"

"Oh? Lady Mary, I've no idea what you're talking about," said Carina. "What about you, Parfette?"

"Yes, me neither!"

"How terrifying!" Mary exclaimed. "In what world would a group of noble ladies enjoy their tea while staring at a man with his head down for hours on end?! No matter what I eat or drink, I can't taste anything I'm having at all!"

Carina and Parfette exchanged a look over Mary's lamentations. Their expressions seemed to imply they truly had no clue what she was talking about, at which point Mary felt a pang of vertigo. Their actions felt especially icy on account of how pretty they both were.

As may have been obvious, the identity of the objet d'art was Gainas Eldland.

His brawny body was bent almost at a ninety degree angle. His posture had remained unchanged as a true show of apology for the past two hours. That much could be expected of a man who excelled in academics, sports, and athletic ability—his strength and endurance were outstanding. Yet this was no time to be impressed with him, especially as it seemed his physical limit was drawing near, judging by the way he was growing more and more pale with each passing minute.

However, Carina and Parfette were content to ignore him entirely while sipping their tea. In fact, they acted as though he wasn't there at all. Mary shuddered at these stark contrasts in attitude.

"W-Well, anyway... I was thinking of having something to eat. What do you suppose?" Mary asked the girls falteringly while peering sideways at Gainas. The two of them happily nodded in assent. (Mary was sure that if she had been a man, seeing the adorable Parfette and beautiful Carina smile like that would've made her fall for them immediately. At least, if a certain objet d'art wasn't in her field of vision.)

The two girls, still smiling brilliantly, began chatting away about what they should eat. Mary encouraged them to vacate this place by suggesting they should decide by seeing their options for themselves. "Also, if you'd be so kind as to get a portion for me, I'd appreciate it. My legs are hurting, so I'd rather not have to stand."

"My, even though we've been sitting this entire time?" asked Carina.

"It's *because* we've been sitting around in a situation like this that I'm in a state... A-Anyway, please just get something for me."

"Very well. We'll be back soon," Parfette said, getting to her feet alongside Carina and sporting a wide smile as though she couldn't see Gainas at all.

The two girls walked down the stairs, chatting away in a carefree manner.

All right!

The moment they both were out of sight, Mary got to her feet. She rushed over to Gainas, placing her hand on his back to guide him to the nearest chair. "Here! Now lift your head, but be careful! Slowly, you hear me?" she insisted,

certain that if he were to recklessly straighten up, he wouldn't just wind up dizzy, but might even collapse right then and there.

But despite her concern and attempts to help him, Gainas murmured, "I don't know if I should..." in bafflement. *"Because Parfette still hasn't forgiven me,"* was the unspoken yet implied second part of his sentence.

"You should focus on recovering your strength while she's away," said Mary. "You're deathly pale! It's been making me so uneasy, I feel like I've eaten my tea and drank my cake!"

"I'm afraid that might be bad for your digestion, Lady Mary... You might even choke."

"You stupidly overserious man! Ugh, never mind—if you want to be able to keep apologizing to Parfette, then do as I say."

Mary wiped away the sweat around Gainas's brow with her handkerchief, then slowly made him sit down in the chair. He must've been truly exhausted—normally, he kept a stiff posture at all times, but now he sank into the seat and leaned back against the chair.

Seeing him in this state, Mary sighed. "She must be so troubled..." Mary muttered without thinking.

Gainas, guessing that she'd meant Parfette, quickly stood up...and swayed on his feet for a moment before collapsing back onto his seat. "N-No, I... She shouldn't feel that way. She didn't do anything wrong. It was all my fault."

"Obviously," said Mary. He may have openly admitted his guilt, but she didn't feel like reassuring him.

Even so, Gainas was one of the better men for acknowledging the blame lay with him. Some of the others made all kinds of contemptible excuses, insisting that Lilianne had seduced them and forced herself on them. Obviously, such excuses were hardly effective, and it was just a matter of the men not knowing when to give up, which only caused their reputation to plummet even further.

"My selfishness and immaturity ended up wounding her," Gainas went on. "Still... I am blessed just to be able to apologize to her like this."

“Indeed.” Mary nodded while serving him a drink.

The apology that Parfette had imposed on Gainas was quite harsh and ascetic, but so long as he could keep his head lowered while by her side, he still had a chance. Some of the girls had told their exes that they never wanted to see their faces again, without ever giving them the *chance* to apologize. Though, quite a few had also agreed to revert their engagements while saying, *“From now on, I’ll fool around and indulge myself all I like!”* and flirting with other men in front of their fiancés.

There was no point in wondering which man had it worse—each of them was going through a hell of his own. They were growing more and more haggard with every passing day, to the point Mary couldn’t even look at them. The popularity they once had had evaporated, and now they spent their days pitifully clinging to the women they’d tried to toss aside while facing laughter and public humiliation from the rest of the school.

In contrast, Gainas was indeed blessed. Parfette’s anger hadn’t faded, but she was letting him stay by her side while continuing to apologize to her. She hadn’t flirted with other men, nor did she laugh at, insult, or try to publicly expose his miserable state. Parfette allowed him to be nearby while pretending he wasn’t there.

She couldn’t forgive him, yet she didn’t want him to leave. She didn’t want to hurt him, yet she couldn’t forgive him.

It was a complicated situation. In fact, earlier, Mary had asked her, *“So when would you like to dine with my brothers?”*

And Parfette grew flustered in response, shaking her head frantically. *“Wh-What?! No, I couldn’t!”*

A dinner invitation that anyone else would be deathly envious of, and yet Parfette had rejected it. Why on earth would she do that? Still, Mary felt like she wasn’t in the position to go digging deeper into the matter, so she didn’t bring it up again. (Incidentally, someone had patted Mary’s back when she’d made the invitation to Parfette. *“Lady Mary, perhaps* we *could discuss that instead?”* Of course, the serious voice belonged to the ambitious noble lady, who emanated such a deep sense of intimidation that it felt like she was a

hunter marking her prey. It was enough to make Mary's face stiffen and twitch.)

Regardless, it seemed like Parfette still harbored feelings for Gainas. It was unclear whether Gainas himself had picked up on this, but if he persevered, there was a high likelihood that he'd come out victorious.

His earnest attitude had never faded, even when he'd fallen for Lilianne. And though it had been awkward, he had sincerely tried to avoid hurting Parfette by shouldering the blame, even at his own expense. As a result, he'd been given one last chance.

This was why Mary was lending him a hand. Parfette wasn't able to hide the fact she still had feelings for him—if she'd decided to give up on him completely like some of the other girls, she wouldn't have cared whether he turned pale or even collapsed. Mary was not so compassionate as to worry over a man who'd tossed her friend aside. After all, she was originally the villainess, and the only reason she was showing Gainas any kindliness was because Parfette was still considering taking him back.

"I bought you some time, so if you want to keep apologizing until she makes up her mind, then rest while you can," Mary told him.

"Thank you, Lady Mary..."

"Oh my, it's not as if I'm doing this for the sake of some lecherous man like you. Don't get the wrong idea," she asserted coolly.

His breath hitched for a moment, and then he dipped his head. "My apologies..."

Mary sighed, then got to her feet at the sound of approaching voices—Parfette and Carina had returned. To Mary, their fun conversation and adorable voices only sounded like a time-up announcement. But Gainas still looked sickly, and though he hurriedly stood up too, he soon lost his balance and collapsed back down onto the chair.

"I'll go meet them outside, so keep resting," Mary said. "I'll signal you when we're about to come back, so be sure to fix your stance by then."

"I... You don't have to go this far for me, Lady Mary—"

“My, it’s all right. It’s not like I’ll always be around to help out, after all. Next time, you might have to keep bowing for three or four hours, or maybe even until the end of the day.”

“P-Please help me out...!”

Gainas grew even paler at the threat in her words. Mary shrugged her shoulders lightly, bid him a short farewell, and headed towards the two voices.

“Oh, Lady Mary. Did something happen?”

Parfette and Carina were both carrying trays of cakes and scones, having cut short their conversation to tilt their heads at Mary. She’d told them earlier her legs were aching, so to have her come out to greet them now must’ve been quite the surprise.

But Mary wasn’t about to tell them the truth, and she smiled elegantly. “The weather is so nice today. How about we eat outside?” she proposed.

“Outside?”

“Indeed. I’ve heard Elysiana’s gardens are quite beautiful. Apparently, they planted a number of lovely flowers which were donated by some students’ families... I’ve never heard about such flowers, so I’d like to go see them for myself. Is that all right with you?”

Carina nodded in agreement, while Parfette beamed and cheerfully responded with, “Of course!”

Seems like they bought it, Mary thought with relief.

However, Carina glanced at her and said with a laugh, “How very kind of you, Lady Mary.”

Mary looked startled. “Wh-What do you mean?” she mumbled, immediately regretting her carelessness.

Carina’s smile widened. “Oh, nothing,” she said evasively, and Mary didn’t need to ask to know what her words implied.

Meanwhile, Parfette didn’t pick up on this verbal battle in the slightest, heading towards the cabin where the gardeners usually were. “If someone’s around, we can ask them to tell us about the flowers!” she said excitedly. Her

hurried trot was adorable, as if she were a bustling little animal. (That she was trotting was a good thing, for if it had been Alicia, she would've sprinted away with all her strength and earned a scathing rebuke from Mary.)

While Parfette was ahead, Mary walked slowly side by side with Carina. The girl had a frigid beauty about her, and the way her lustrous black hair swayed in the wind only added to her haughtiness. Her eyes were leveled straight ahead, as though there was no indecision about her.

"You..." Mary murmured.

"What was that?"

"You don't intend to forgive them, do you?" Mary hadn't said who she meant, but she was certain Carina would know.

As expected, Carina inferred what Mary had meant. She laughed, her looks alluring enough to captivate any man. "That's right," she agreed curtly. There was not an ounce of indecision or upset in her eyes, only an indestructible volition.

It was a complete contrast from Parfette, who exclaimed things like, *"I don't care about Lord Gainas! I'll never forgive him!"* with puffed out cheeks while turning her face away.

"It's not just because of canceled engagements or betrayal. I simply will not forgive them for my own sake," said Carina with a dazzling smile.

"My, how scary," Mary commented in jest. (Though, the reverse strike Carina had set off against her ex-fiancé definitely couldn't be passed off with such a mild expression!)

"I'm sure it must be difficult to understand, but this is for my own benefit." Naturally, Carina couldn't just come out and say it was for the sake of avoiding her downfall. Instead, she spoke matter-of-factly while leaving the game details ambiguous.

It seemed that Carina had classified Mary as someone she couldn't speak to about the game—or in other words, someone without past life memories. Alas, Mary was continuing on a path entirely different from that of her in-game self, and she'd only gotten involved in the turmoil for Parfette's sake, so there was

no surprise about Carina's judgment. In fact, how could she have ever imagined that Mary had past life memories and had used them to pursue her own ruin? Their situations were entirely reversed.

Mary, blind to her own shortcomings, proudly praised herself in her mind. *I'm quite the actress, aren't I?*

Right then, Carina quietly spoke up. "But... It's not like I don't understand Lilianne at all."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"She and I have our similarities... I'm not sure how else to explain it, but both of us were in love with someone when it was already too late." A light wind breezed past, swaying Carina's black locks.

Moving her own silver-thread hair aside, Mary whispered, "I knew it..." But she feigned ignorance and responded with, "That must've been hard for you."

It was likely that Lilianne and Carina had both remembered their past lives right around when the story of *Heart High 2* began, or perhaps just before. In order to meet Patrick, Lilianne had decided to aim for the reverse harem route, while Carina hurriedly amassed her allies—based on that, it was likely they didn't have the game knowledge far in advance. If they *had* gotten their memories any earlier, they would've employed different methods in order to approach Patrick sooner. Yet Mary, who was closer to Patrick than any other noble lady, had been unaware of their existence.

Since they hadn't employed any other tactics, their memories *must've* returned right before the start of the game. And by that time, Alicia was already by Patrick's side.

Hence, Lilianne and Carina had no choice but to rely on the reverse harem ending, or else they would've never been able to meet Patrick. Or—even if they had met him later on—to him they would've never become anything other than just another pair of noble ladies. However, despite the fact that what occurred after the event may not have been directly depicted in the game itself, if they were to put their faith into that power, perhaps there was still some small hope...

Indeed, it was for the sake of their too-late love that Lilianne had rushed to collect all the romanceable characters, and though Carina had kept a vigilant eye on her, she let Lilianne proceed on that route.

Since Carina had conjectured that Mary wasn't someone with past life memories, she kept the details of her situation ambiguous. All she could do was murmur things like, "I wish I would've realized sooner," and "If only I'd found some other way to meet him earlier." It was uncharacteristic of her to let such deep regret color the tone of her voice.

"Lilianne was in a similar situation to you, yes? What do you intend to do about her?" Mary prompted.

"I do sympathize with her, but I cannot forgive what she's done. I think I'd quite like her to go to someplace far from here, where I don't have to concern myself with her anymore."

"You mean exile, then."

"I do. That way, I'll never have to see her again..." Carina said with a rigid frown.

"In that case, I think I know of the perfect place," Mary proclaimed brightly, the cheer in her response suggesting she'd just had a great idea.

Carina glanced at her in surprise. "Is that so?"

"I know of a *very* strict boarding school, managed by my mother's side of the family. If I tip them off, they're sure to keep surveillance on her long after she's graduated too."

"I see... That does indeed sound like a place she couldn't come back from."

"Yes, she won't be appearing again."

"Huh...?" Carina cast Mary a questioning look at the subtle hint of nuance in her words. Her jet black pupils were wide, as though to ask, *"What are you talking about?"* The girl tilted her head to the site, her dark hair swaying with the movement.

Finding her reaction humorous, Mary's lips quirked upwards into a mischievous smirk. "A university far from here, in the northern lands... It's the

perfect place for banishment, don't you think?"

At Mary's sarcastic laughter, Carina's eyes slowly widened, and her breath hitched. "Lady Mary, could it be that you...?"

The rest of her question was swallowed up by Parfette's voice calling out to them from up ahead.

***

A few days later, Mary was standing in front of the board chairman's office with a single envelope in hand. An oppressive atmosphere emanated from beyond the door, keenly suggesting that a very dire conversation was occurring at the moment. Any other student would've waited outside stiffly, or grown timid and taken refuge in a different room. But Mary Albert was not one to be perturbed by such a thing. In fact, she was killing time by practicing an imposing stance inspired by Carina's villainy the other day.

After a short while, a click resounded as the door slowly swung open. A dispirited voice bid farewell to those remaining in the office, and seconds later the one who emerged was none other than Lilianne.

Gone was the sweet countenance of the girl who, up until only days ago, had been waited upon by an entourage of male admirers. With a darkened expression, she bowed before turning on her heel and, upon seeing Mary, grew even more pale.

"Greetings, Lilianne."

"G-Greetings, Lady Mary." In contrast to Mary's elegant greeting, Lilianne's voice wavered when she replied. The girl's eyes strayed aside as though she were searching for a means of escape. Now that she was no longer able to hide behind her men, facing off against Mary Albert filled her with dread.

Well aware of this and intending to look even more haughty, Mary adopted the imposing stance she'd practiced by shifting the distance between her feet and tilting her chest. To top it off, she lightly flipped the silver hair that'd been resting against her shoulder. She certainly looked the part of a nasty villainess. It was perfect enough to be enchanting. Nobody could've guessed that up until a few minutes ago, she'd been repeatedly fine-tuning her pose while saying

things like, “I wonder if I should keep my legs apart just a little more...? Ah, but this makes my thighs ache.”

Faced with Mary’s villainy, Lilianne shrunk in on herself timidly. Her once-daring eyes were now filled with nothing but fright and confusion. Her disorientation was understandable, as in her mind everything should’ve played out according to the game, yet she’d arrived at a completely different conclusion. Having left the realm of events covered by the game, she was anxious about what would happen to her now.

Seeing her like this, Mary chuckled and held out the envelope in her hand. “I’m sure the board chairman’s informed you already. The matter of your punishment has been left for me to arrange.”

“Right... Thank you for taking the trouble to bring this to me yourself.”

Lilianne’s gaze dropped to the envelope as she took it from Mary. Contained within were the details of how to arrive at her next destination—the northern lands. There was also an enrollment form inside. Lilianne held the envelope as though it was a heavy burden to bear. Her face was pallid, and there was no light in her eyes. She was acting as though the word “loser” had been branded across her forehead.

Mary lightly shrugged her shoulders at the sight. “Both you and Carina are being a little rude about this, considering this is a place run by my relatives.”

“Huh...?”

“It *is* in the provinces, yes, but it’s an excellent area for sightseeing. You can even find migratory birds there... It’s got rich business potential.”

“But the northern provinces are—”

“The location may be a little inconvenient, but it won’t be so bad with some *company*,” Mary said, purposely emphasizing the last word.

Lilianne tilted her head, not knowing what Mary was trying to imply. But soon enough, her eyes widened, as she’d realized the envelope contained documents for *two* people. Upon reading the name written on one of the forms, she whispered in a trembling voice, “But why?”

The reason the girl had been radiating the aura of a loser and acting as though her world had come to an end was because she was sure she'd end up in the northern boonies all by herself, the same way the in-game Mary's exile had gone. But at the sight of another name on one of the forms, the light slowly started to return to her eyes, which had begun to dampen.

Despite the way she'd tried to pick fights with all the girls whose fiancés she had stolen away, at the end of the day, Lilianne was still just a lone girl. She had been reduced to a point where she couldn't do anything to fight back anymore, and that was why when she saw the helping hand she'd been given, her eyes had moistened.

Mary smiled slightly at her reaction. "It's game over, Lilianne."

"Huh? Lady Mary...?"

"I've told you everything, so don't resort to petty tricks anymore. From now on, do your best to work hard." Mary snickered, then turned on her heel and started to walk away.

The swaying silver hair and the *click-clack* of her heels against the hallway floor added depth to her exit scene. *I wonder if having some cronies follow after me here would've made this truly perfect?* Mary mused, but the trembling crybaby Parfette lacked any sort of edge, while someone like Carina could've easily stolen the show. As for the exceedingly ambitious girl, she was more likely to leave *Mary* trembling, so she was best left aside.

Pondering such things, Mary continued walking down the corridor and spotted a man trotting up the hallway in the opposite direction. He was fashionably dressed and had a high-quality suitcase in hand. It was a little too big to be acceptable within the school corridors, but that was hardly an issue considering he was departing Elysiana College as of today.

The man was hurrying along, but upon noticing Mary, he slowed down his pace and offered her a bow of his head. Naturally, Mary returned the gesture with an elegant curtsy of her own.

"I'm so sorry you've been wrapped up in this turmoil during your study abroad, Lady Mary," he told her, bowing once more for emphasis.

Mary shrugged. Indeed, Elysiana College had lost face after they'd welcomed an exchange student from a different nation only to get her wrapped up in such a scandal. Luckily for them, Mary wasn't trying to make a big deal out of it, for if she'd truly acted like a selfish, haughty noblewoman, even the board chairman would've been forced to resign.

But for Mary, it was sufficient to deal with the students who'd been the direct cause of the conflict. Some might have even called her kind for going through the trouble of arranging the enrollment procedures herself. In fact, Mary had only decided to send Lilianne to the northern boonies for the sake of irony, but no outsiders could've guessed that. A few people even secretly referred to Mary as "an incredibly compassionate young lady who didn't forsake a peasant girl despite her insolence." Mary, however, was oblivious to such things.

"You don't have to concern yourself with me," she told the man. "Although, I do think it's a great shame that I won't be able to hear the rest of your lectures."

"You honor me by saying that, Lady Mary. I heard you were very passionate about the subject, and as a teacher, I feel regretful as well. If you ever need anything from me, please don't be afraid to contact me in the future."

"Indeed, I'll get in touch," Mary said with a smile, then glanced to the side. Conjecturing that she was telling him to get going, the man bowed one last time and hurried off.

He was heading in the direction of a certain girl—a girl who'd pursued the wrong path and, as punishment, would be sent off to the northern lands... Seeing him walk swiftly to pick her up with a suitcase in hand was the very image of manliness, and Mary smiled wryly.

In her mind, she apologized to him for having thought he was but a lighthearted playboy. She had explained to him all the details regarding the game and their past life recollections, and despite it all, he had decided to go with Lilianne. This was not the sort of decision any run-of-the-mill man could make, and it went beyond the scope of the game. Even Mary had no idea what would happen to him and Lilianne now.

Yet seeing the way Lilianne tearfully grasped his hand, Mary had a feeling

their futures wouldn’t be all that terrible.

“I told you, didn’t I? It’s not so bad when you have some company,” said Mary quietly to the two figures behind her. Then, she turned around to proceed down the hallway, the sound of her footsteps echoing off the walls.

Chapter 5

Sure enough, the cracking noise Mary had heard when she'd landed on the ground from the force of Lilianne's shove was the sound of the bracelet she'd received from Alicia breaking. Two of the beads, one silver and one rust-colored, were cracked and chipped.

Originally, these bracelets had been official merchandise of the prequel game, *Heart High*, and were highly beloved among the fans since they could mix and match the beads' colors to suit their preferences. The silver color signifying Mary Albert hadn't existed, but Mary did recall the rust-colored beads of Adi being around.

However, at present she wasn't concerned about the colors or combinations of the beads, but rather some means of reassembling them. If she recalled correctly, there had been a number of fans who exchanged the beads for different colors and sizes long after purchase.

In other words, there was one way to resolve her conundrum.

"If I just buy the parts that need replacing, I should be able to reassemble the bracelet myself," Mary declared, at which Adi nodded in understanding.

They were currently in the town center, and just as during their last shopping trip together, Mary was waltzing down the middle of the street like a reigning monarch.

"Indeed, if the bracelets are customizable in the first place, it makes sense to only get the parts that need replacing," Adi agreed.

"Exactly. No time to waste—let's go shopping!"

"As you wi—" As if noticing something, Adi abruptly cut his response off.

Mary looked up at him. His rust-ringed pupils were not looking at her, but instead at something behind her. Wondering what it could be, Mary looked over her shoulder, when...

"Lady Mary! Hi!!!"

Alicia launched herself at Mary's back, clutching onto her as she yelled loudly. Mary almost jumped a thousand feet in the air from the surprise, screeching out a high-pitched shriek.

"Wh-What on *earth*?! Why are *you* here?!" Mary demanded.

"Hi, Adi!" Alicia chirped.

"Hello, Alicia. Are you out shopping today?" he asked her.

"My parents are inspecting the town center today, so I came along with them. And then I spotted Lady Mary!"

"Honestly, why were you behind me?!" Mary questioned again while clinging to Adi from the shock.

Alicia tilted her head, not understanding why Mary was complaining so much. Her wide purple eyes almost seemed to ask, *"Why are you so angry?"*

"Because if I had run over, you'd be angry, Lady Mary."

"That doesn't mean you should stand behind my back and scream at me out of nowhere!"

As Mary continued to gripe, Alicia still looked at a loss, apparently truly unable to grasp Mary's reasoning. Adi couldn't bear to just stand there and watch any longer, so with a wry smile he began to pacify Mary, acting as the mediator. Mary was holding on to his arm, hissing out complaints like an angered cat with puffed up fur. Alas, any cat would've reacted the same if they'd been jumped by a massive dog without any warning.

"Please try to calm down, milady."

"Y-You're right..." Mary assented. "It's a waste of time to explain things to her, anyway. I've already come to accept she only hears half the things I ever say."

"Ah, so you've given up on reciprocal communication?"

"And it's not the first time she's appeared out of nowhere..." Mary told herself, letting go of Adi. The reason she proceeded to stomp on his foot was, of course, because he should've warned her when he saw Alicia's impending approach—and also because he'd gotten carried away making unnecessary

remarks to her.

Afterwards, Mary turned to face Alicia and curtsied in a ladylike manner. “Greetings, Alicia,” she said with a bow of her head. Her previous shriek was all but forgotten as she carried out this elegant conduct. Alicia happily returned the gesture, at which Mary screeched again, “If you know how to greet people normally, then do it correctly from the start!”

But Alicia turned a deaf ear to it as she looked at Adi. “Are you two here for some shopping?”

“Hmm? Uh, well... Yes, I suppose we are,” Adi admitted hesitantly, since the bracelet they were here to mend had been given to Mary by none other than Alicia.

“Your gift to Mary was broken, though it was an accident, honest!” Adi glanced at Mary, finding the thought of saying something like that to Alicia was a little nerve-racking.

Without missing a beat, she said, “I broke the bracelet you gave me.”

“Oh, you did?” Alicia asked.

“Yes. Take a look for yourself.”

Mary took out a small pouch from her bag. Inside the pouch was a handkerchief crafted from fine cloth. Opening it revealed a bracelet which, other than its differently colored beads, matched the one around Alicia’s wrist. Mary moved the bracelet around to show Alicia the damage, pointing out each of the two tragically cracked beads.

“Oh no! They really *are* broken,” exclaimed Alicia.

“Worry not. I avenged them,” Mary declared.

“Avenged...?” Alicia asked. Then upon realizing something, she added, “Oh! I see. You came to the town center to repair it.” Alicia looked up at Mary, and after a brief pause, grabbed hold of her right arm. Mary’s eyes widened at this, as did Adi’s as he observed the scene.

“Wh-What is it?” Mary inquired.

“Let’s go, Lady Mary!”

“I... What?!” Mary screamed. “Why are *you* coming too?!”

As she lamented, Alicia began dragging her over to one of the shops. To make matters worse, for some reason Adi decided to follow Alicia’s lead, because he grabbed hold of Mary’s left arm and started pulling her along too. She may have been Mary Albert, but there was no way for her to fight back against *two* people. In fact, Alicia was plenty stronger than Mary all by herself.

“Why are you going along with this, Adi?! You... You traitor!”

“Indeed!”

“Seriously, why do we have to have this conversation every ti— Wait, now you’re *admitting* it?! No! I don’t have the capacity to keep up with these curveballs anymore!”

“Lady Mary, this is the shop!”

“Okay, okay! You can come too, so unhand me already!”

With Alicia on one side and Adi on the other, Mary complained all the way as they dragged her over to the general store.

The shop they entered wasn’t particularly large. In fact, it was rather cozy and compact for a store located in the town center. However, its shelves were lined with all kinds of cute miscellaneous goods, so it was surely a popular spot with women.

It was definitely a store aimed at commoners, so the unannounced appearance of the daughter of House Albert and the princess caused quite the uproar (especially since the former was being forcibly dragged inside by the latter).

A woman who must’ve been the manager emerged from the back and, with a nervous countenance, began attending to the two of them. (Though the manager was polite, the way she serviced them was very much the way any regular folk would be serviced, which could’ve been seen as terribly rude from the perspective of Mary, who’d always been on the receiving end of first-class hospitality. However, she had just been hauled inside of a shop by the princess and her own servant, so she wasn’t exactly in a state of mind to notice such a trivial matter.)

“H-How can I help you today...?” asked the manager.

“It’s regarding this,” Mary said, pulling out the bracelet, which was still carefully wrapped up in the handkerchief. “Can you repair it?”

The manager’s eyes grew wide as saucers at the fact that the daughter of House Albert owned a bracelet from her shop. Mary was a noble lady who was always dressed in top-quality haute couture outfits. For her to have a bracelet from a simple general store, and on top of that inquire worryingly if it could be fixed... The manager was stunned, glancing in a panic at the princess, who stood next to Mary. Around her wrist was another bracelet too.

“C-Could it be that the two of you are both wearing bracelets from my shop...?” The manager was in disbelief. To think that the girls who exemplified their nation would favor bracelets from her shop... If someone had tried telling her this before the two had shown up in person, the manager would’ve definitely brushed it off with words like, *“They may look similar to ours, but I’m sure they’re of much higher grade.”*

Yet Mary herself was standing before the manager, anxiously imploring for the bracelet to be repaired. To top it off, the princess happily smiled and announced, “We’re matching!”

What on earth? The manager, all the other staff, and every other customer inside the store were dumbfounded.

Inferring their thoughts, Adi sighed and clapped the manager on the shoulder. “You see, these two are a little...eccentric,” he explained.

At his words, the two girls raised complaints. “What is *that* supposed to mean?!”

The poor manager felt dizzy, but managed to stay upright.

Eventually, one of the other clerks took the baffled manager to the back of the store, and instead the person in charge of handling accessories came up to Mary and gingerly inspected her bracelet.

“Hmm... The beads really *are* broken,” they commented.

“Worry not. I avenged them,” Mary responded.

“A-Avenged them...? Er, at any rate, the beads are usually replaceable, but...”

Mary tilted her head questioningly at the stuttering employee.

“Unfortunately, these colors are currently out of stock. My deepest apologies.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“I’m afraid they are. I’m truly sorry... However, if there are other colors you’re interested in, we could still fix the bracelet,” the employee said with a remorseful bow, anxious at being unable to fulfill Mary Albert’s request.

Mary glanced down at the bracelet with a troubled expression. The colors of the beads were supposed to represent herself and Adi. When she’d first received the bracelet, Mary had been convinced the silver and rusty colors were matched purely because Alicia didn’t have enough money to buy two separate bracelets (though, the memory was embarrassing enough that Mary wanted to dig herself a hole to crawl into), but now she understood what the girl’s intentions had been. If the colors of the beads were changed, the bracelet would lose its meaning.

The clerk brought out some of their stock for Mary to view just in case, and as she peered over it, something caught her eye.

A while later, Mary emerged from the store. Adi and Alicia, who’d been waiting by the front door, both turned to look at her.

“My lady, did you get it fixed?”

“How did it go, Lady Mary?”

But Mary had already tucked the bracelet back into her skirt pocket and only said, “Sorry I kept you waiting.”

A moment of silence washed over the three. Of course, this was because Adi and Alicia were curious to see the newly repaired bracelet, whereas Mary purposely looked away from them in an obvious attempt at feigning ignorance. Adi and Alicia glanced at each other.

“Wh-What’s the matter with you two? I’m ready to go home,” Mary proclaimed.

“But Lady Mary... What about the bracelet?” asked Alicia.

“They fixed it. Wonderful news, isn’t it? Now hurry off and go home too,” Mary replied coolly.

Finding her demeanor increasingly strange, her two companions tilted their heads. They exchanged another look, and when Mary began to walk ahead, Adi grasped her by the arm. He dragged her over to an alleyway between the shops and embraced her from behind.

“A-Adi?!”

“Milady...”

“Wh-What are you doing?! What if someone sees us?!”

“Don’t worry. This is a blind spot.”

“But still...”

Adi held on to her forcibly, and Mary found herself at a loss for words. His strong arms were wrapped around her body, the sweet sound of his voice tickled her ears, and she could feel the warmth of his body against her back. He was holding her so tightly that she couldn’t move, which caused her heart rate to skyrocket.

For Mary, the idea of PDA was extremely embarrassing. Yet the embarrassment also quickened her pulse, and she softly and absentmindedly reproached Adi. She had always brushed off couples who flirted openly in public as lovestruck idiots, but now that she was the one doing it, the feeling of guilty pleasure only made her heart pound even faster.

“G-Goodness, I can’t believe you... Alicia’s still here, remember?”

“My lady...”

“Adi...”

“Now, Alicia!” Adi exclaimed suddenly. “Aim for the right pocket of her skirt!!!”

“Got it! Pardon me, Lady Mary!”

“Oh *no*!” shrieked Mary. “You’re not embracing me—you’re *restraining* me!”

Mary's demands to be freed fell on deaf ears as Alicia's hand dove into her pocket. She pulled out the bracelet and looked it over.

Whereas previously the bracelet had beads that alternated between silver and rust, now two of them were glittering in the shades of gold and indigo.

"Lady Mary..." With the bracelet in her hand, Alicia turned her eyes to Mary.

Adi, who was still embracing—or rather, restraining Mary from behind, also cast his gaze at her. Mary in turn faced away from them both in annoyance. Her cheeks were slightly red, but no sane person would point out as much in this situation.

"Your Ladyship..."

"*What*?! They were simply out of stock on the original colors, so I picked these instead! Th-There's no special meaning behind it or anything!"

"What a transparent lie..."

"Excuse me?! I really wasn't thinking of anything in particular when I chose these colors! I just thought they looked decent enough, that's all!"

Adi sighed, continuing to restrain the screaming and raging Mary. Meanwhile, Alicia gazed down at the bracelet for a few moments, until her eyes gleamed suddenly as though she'd just had an idea. "I'll make an order at the store!" she announced happily and raced off, evidently intending to reserve the out-of-stock beads for when the new batch would arrive.

Just like Mary's silver and rust bracelet had two beads of gold and indigo, so would Alicia's gold and indigo bracelet have two beads of silver and rust. Surely there's no need to explain exactly what these colors would symbolize.

Mary's cheeks reddened further. "You copycat!" she cried, hurling childish abuse at the retreating princess.

With Adi still holding—or rather, restraining her, Mary cast a spiteful glare at him from the side. Yet this was entirely ineffective on him, as he looked at her with a strangely pleased grin. "Lovestruck idiot," Mary said. It was the very term she'd used against Patrick several times in the past, but needless to say it didn't have any effect on Adi either.

“Your Ladyship, it’s terrible.”

“What is?”

“You see, I got married a few days ago, and my wife is being unbearably adorable,” he said, hugging her even tighter. “What shall we do about that?”

Mary puffed out her cheeks. “Allow me to answer that as Mary Albert, who just married her servant—you.”

“I’m listening.”

“I believe your doting wife would like a nice cake and a hot cup of tea,” she demanded, pressing the back of her head against his chest.

“That is indeed a very good answer,” Adi said happily, and Mary sighed at the mushiness of it all.

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Once the shopping had been wrapped up, they returned to the estate to have dinner, and Mary prepared to depart for Elysiana College. (Alicia had wanted to join them for dinner, but Mary somehow managed to convince her to go back to the palace...only to have Alicia return to Albert Manor once more for some reason, only this time with Patrick in tow, so that they could see Mary off. Exhausting as it was, it happened every time, and Mary was used to it by now.)

Just as she was about to board the carriage, someone called her name. She turned around to see her father, which was very surprising as, on account of his business, he didn’t usually come to see her off. Noticing her confusion, he cleared his throat and looked down at her. Anyone else would’ve cowered under the gaze of the head of House Albert, but as his daughter, Mary didn’t feel any anxiety.

Instead, she returned his gaze firmly. “What is it, father?”

“I was shocked when Patrick Dyce delivered this news to me, but apparently you’ve made a close friend at Elysiana College.”

“Indeed I have. I’m not sure why that’s so shocking.”

“Is she a good person?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Given that you’re such an odd duck— Er, I mean, given your fierce individuality, I was a little worried about whether you’d made her cry.”

“No, but that’s purely because she’s a crybaby all by herself.”

“I see...” Her father looked a little dubious at her statement, but eventually cleared his throat once more and resumed the conversation. “Well, if she’s important to you, you should hand over the invitation letter to her personally.”

“Personally?” Mary questioned.

The preparations to deliver the wedding reception invitations had already been completed. They were written on fine-quality paper with beautiful handwriting, and the envelopes were sealed with House Albert’s family emblem. A few days from now, they were set to be delivered all across the nation, and even to a few families abroad. Though, the identity of Mary’s partner was still being kept secret.

“She’s not just some acquaintance of the daughter of House Albert. She’s your friend, Mary,” her father said. “That’s why you should ensure to hand her the invitation directly.”

Her father continued to insist, emphasizing that this matter concerned a friend Mary had managed to make. Mary blinked at him several times, but having finally inferred what he was trying to say, she nodded in embarrassment. “Yes, you’re right,” she concurred. This wouldn’t be some formal invitation, but rather, the act of informing her friend about her wedding party. The thought made her feel happy and awkward at the same time.

The head of House Albert watched Mary’s reaction with a warm smile before turning his gaze to Adi, who was standing next to her. Their relationship had always been that of a master and servant, and now with the weight of him being Adi’s father-in-law, Adi looked strangely tense as he straightened his back.

“You should do the same with those close to you, Adi.”

“Your Grace...”

“I know we’re keeping your identity a secret, but I’m sure you have people you’d like to invite yourself. Of course, try to keep any rumors from spreading, but by all means, feel free to invite any of your close friends.”

“Your Grace...! You’re so very kind!” Adi exclaimed, his eyes glittering as he gazed at his father-in-law.

In an extreme contrast, Mary’s gaze shifted to a thousand-yard stare. She’d always loathed Adi’s partiality to her father, but ever since the relationship between those two had renewed, she’d found it even more loathsome. (To make matters worse, recently she’d witnessed Patrick begin to display early symptoms of a similar affliction, so Mary was left feeling truly fed up with it all.)

“I’m very thankful for your thoughtfulness,” said Adi, bowing deeply in gratitude for his in-law’s care. “However...” he continued after a moment with a troubled frown. “My friends are, well...”

“Oh! You don’t have any friends, do you?” Mary interjected.

“Please don’t lump me in with yourself, milady.”

“Adi!”

“Mary, you shouldn’t use yourself as a reference point for everything.”

“*Father*?!”

Neither of them hesitated, mercilessly cutting her down with their words. Mary placed a hand over her chest in offense. *That stings...* she thought, keeping quiet momentarily in order to recover from these blows and see what Adi had intended to say.

Whatever it was, it must’ve been hard for him to utter, for he paused, his eyes wandering astray. Finally, he opened his mouth to speak. “I do have a number of people I’d like to invite, but...”

“Is there some kind of problem?” the head of House Albert prompted.

“Well... All of my friends work for other families, and when they heard about the party, they decided to apply to help out with the service because House Albert pays well. So they’ll all be at the venue on the day of the event,” Adi explained with a faraway look in his eyes.

Upon hearing his words, both Alberts turned their gazes aside.

Indeed, the wedding party would be on such a grand scale that their usual household help simply wouldn't be enough. As such, they had to invite servants and maids from other families to assist on the day. Naturally, many families were more than happy at the thought of House Albert owing them a debt and had agreed to send over their staff. As for the servants themselves, they conjectured that since the Alberts already had a great reputation, they'd surely splurge on a major celebration like this.

To think that these servers would be Adi's friends... Mary cast her eyes aside, but even so she tried to help by saying, "That's very helpful of them."

Finally, the head of House Albert broke the stiff air with a cough. Deciding to ignore Adi's words, he turned to face Mary and took out one of the invitation letters from the inner pocket of his jacket. "Do give this to that friend of yours at Elysiana, Mary."

"Thank you, father," Mary replied as the two of them exchanged warm smiles and she took the letter.

The...*letter*.

A *singular* letter.

"But father, I'll need more than this to give to my friends."

"You... You made *more* than *one* friend?!"

"What exactly is there to be so shocked about?! Even I can make a few friends if I want to!"

"Ah, I see you've matured, Mary. Very well, then please hand these out to your friends," her father said as he reached for his pocket again, though he still looked a little shaken by the news.

Mary smiled and accepted the *two* letters he handed over.

Except, her father added, "Give one of these to the board chairman, will you?"

So, in reality...he was only giving her *one* additional letter.

At this, Mary finally lost her patience. “You’re a *bully*, father!” she shrieked, reaching out to pull more letters from his jacket by herself before hopping onto the carriage. “Just you wait! The venue’s going to be *flooded* with a bunch of my friends!” she exclaimed as her parting remark—how pitiful those words were, indeed!

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“So in the end, I wound up grabbing about ten letters. But if I really think about it, I don’t actually have that many people I’d like to invite,” Mary concluded, taking a sip of her tea and sighing.

“W-Well, it sounds like it’ll be a very busy party... I’m sure it’ll be very fun...” Parfette said as an attempt to respond to Mary’s turbulent story, holding her invitation letter in both hands as though it were a precious treasure.

Counting the letters Mary’s father had given her, as well as the ones she’d stolen at the last minute, the total came to ten. She had to dispose of all the letters—Mary Albert’s pride was at stake here, given her harsh proclamation at the moment of her departure.

But no matter how she thought about it, she could only count on one hand the number of people she was close to. Obviously, anyone would gladly accept an invitation to a party thrown by the Alberts, but Mary stubbornly wanted this to be a special case where she *personally* handed over the invitations to her *friends*. If she chose to rely on her social status, or else if she failed to hand out all the invitations, there was no doubt in her mind that her father and Adi would both say, *“See? I told you so.”*

“So, I’d like to invite everyone from Carina’s Troop.”

“Please refrain from coming up with strange names like that,” Carina, who was sitting next to Mary and elegantly drinking her tea, asserted coldly.

Yet despite her disapproval of the term, when Mary had first handed her over the invitation, Carina had politely bowed her head and accepted, so she would certainly attend the party. “You’ll definitely enjoy yourself,” Mary had told the girl with a secretive smirk. Carina, who also had memories of *Heart High*, smiled wryly in response.

Mary rose to her feet, intending to hand out the letters to the members of Carina's Troop (needless to say, they were all rival characters from the sequel, and the very same girls who had thrown their ex-fiancés off the cliff a few days ago). But right as she did, something powerfully gripped her by the shoulder.

"I would also like to be there to congratulate you on the day, Lady Mary." The speaker, who emanated an aura the likes of a hunter after its prey, was none other than the ambitious girl from before. The air around her had a different kind of iciness about it than that which usually emanated from Carina, and Mary's face stiffened.

How strange... I'm pretty sure there was nobody behind me just moments ago, she thought with something close to a shiver. "Really? And yet I can't say you seem in the mood to congratulate me on anything," Mary told her.

"That simply isn't so! I fully intend to congratulate you, and hunt down a good man while I'm at it."

"And what are the ratios of how much you want to do those two things?"

"One to nine, respectively."

"Do sugarcoat it some more."

"That ratio's already sugarcoated as it is."

"I'd usually accuse you of insolence at this point, but strangely enough, that attitude of yours makes me feel like I'm back home," Mary said, easing a massive sigh at the girl's ambitiousness before turning around to pass her a letter.

She'd planned on inviting her from the start anyway, but giving her the letter *after* this kind of banter had a certain air of grace about it, and it made Mary feel all the more at home. *Perhaps these types of people are my weakness*, she pondered.

Meanwhile Parfette, who'd opened the letter and read it over, quietly muttered, "Escort partners are...*not* required?" She must've seen a certain line in the letter which was very unusual for aristocratic events.

Mary laughed quietly and nodded. "That's correct. You're welcome to come

by yourself, or with a friend. It's up to you."

"Is that so? How unusual."

"It's something Patrick and I discussed—anyone should be able to take another's hand without having to worry about things like escorts."

It may have been unprecedented among high society, yet for two people like them—Patrick, the first son of House Dyce, who'd taken the once-thought to be a commoner Alicia's hand, and Mary, who'd chosen a servant like Adi as her partner—this was very much in line with their characters.

"No escorts necessary..." Parfette repeated quietly, glancing behind her. Today, just like every day, Gainas Eldland stood behind her, having by now become her luggage carrier. Lately, she'd been walking around with him while puffing out her cheeks and saying things like, *"I don't know anyone named Lord Gainas! That over there is just a self-operating baggage carrier!"*

Seeing her easily readable concern, Mary smiled sardonically and patted the girl on the back. "Of course, if someone *wants* an escort, they're more than welcome to invite one."

"N-No! I... I'd never want someone like Lord Gainas as my escort! I was just worried about going b-by myself!"

"Oh? No problem. I'll arrange for one of my brothers to meet you on the day, then."

"Waaah! N-No...! You mustn't!" Parfette cried out in a panic.

At her consternation, Mary couldn't hold it in anymore and burst out laughing. Carina sighed at Mary's antics, while the ambitious girl's eyes glinted fiercely as she once again approached Mary from behind.

Of course, she grasped Mary heartily by the shoulder again. "Lady Mary, I'm also worried about going all by myself."

"*I'm* the one who should be worried, having a hunter like you coming over to my house."

Indeed, scenes such as these had become a stylistic feature of Elysiana College.

Chapter 6

When the day finally arrived, things were very busy at Albert Manor from the early hours of the morning.

Alas, it was the wedding reception of their daughter, and on top of the invited guests, many people without an invitation had put their contacts to use and planned to visit the estate in hopes of getting a glimpse of the groom. As such, the expected number of visitors was immense.

Naturally, a corresponding number of decorations and facilities had to be prepared, as well as plenty of food and drink provisions. There was a hectic bustle in order to arrange everything proportionately to the guests. Other than those in the employ of House Albert, the helpers included those who'd already retired but decided to return, even from distant places, to chip in for the special occasion; servants from their relatives, House Dyce, and a few other families; and even staff from the royal palace—they were busier than a beehive.

Adi couldn't find a place for himself among all this chaos, and after wandering around aimlessly for a while trying not to get in the way, he finally arrived at the servants' canteen.

Typically, it was only used by the household staff, but for today it was transformed into a provisional kitchen, and there were a number of chefs Adi had never seen before lining the tables with dishes that were all but unsuited to the canteen in their extravagance. Another bunch of people were hurriedly picking these dishes up, whereas others shouted furiously about how they had run short on ingredients. The entire place almost felt like some sort of a war zone.

Adi felt like the scene before him only highlighted the scale of the party, and with a pallid face, he began to retreat...except then he noticed a maid, straining to stand on her tiptoes in an attempt to reach a bottle set high up on a shelf. Her fingertips could barely graze the bottle, and concerned for her safety, Adi called out to her before he could stop himself as he walked over.

"Hold on; I'll get it for you."

“Oh, Adi!”

“Is this what you were after?”

“Yes! And while you’re at it, could you get the bottle in the very back too?”

The petite maid had fought valiantly to try and reach the bottles, whereas Adi could easily reach them without any struggle. Though, even the shorter maids could reach the higher shelves by using a stepladder or a chair. “You slacker,” Adi commented with a laugh, grabbing the bottle (and numerous others the maid continued asking for) and handing it over to her.

In the end, they emptied the shelf by about half, when the maid gasped suddenly and exclaimed, “Oh no! What have I *done*?! I can’t believe I made demands to a member of House Albert!”

Adi paused. “Yeah, *right*...”

“P-Please pardon my insolence!” the maid cried, as if having recalled her own low station only after ordering Adi around.

Noticing this, everyone around her joined in on the farce. “Please, forgive her!”

Though he felt exasperated over their transparent lies, Adi chuckled, knowing this banter was proof that their attitudes towards him wouldn’t change. After a moment, everyone else started to laugh along.

“Come on, Adi! You’ve gotta act the part better than that!”

“Yeah, good point. I’ll get it right next time.”

Their jesting continued as such, and some people even clapped Adi lightly on the back. They weren’t treating him like a member of House Albert in the slightest, but that actually made him happy, and in fact he was grateful for it.

Their group chatted for a little while longer, but one by one they returned to their posts. Some, as though suddenly remembering they had something to do, raced off in a fluster, whereas others were scolded by their supervisors and forced to get back to work while shouting apologies.

Adi looked at their retreating figures remorsefully, until the petite maid from before called out to him, “You’re the star of the show, so look the part!”

Though he'd been slouching, when she hit him on the back, he quickly straightened up.

Eventually Adi was left by himself. He took a look around the bustling canteen, sighed quietly, and...

"So? Just how long have you been here shelling those beans, milady?"

...turned to face the corner where the daughter of House Albert had been sitting and continuously shelling beans.

"Oh? Is the play over already? What about act two?"

"Everyone's busy."

"Well, so am I. See? I'm working away," Mary said, tossing a shelled bean into a basket.

Judging by the fact that there were already three full baskets of shelled beans next to her, she must've been here for a long time. Adi started to walk towards her, and right then one of the chefs dashed past him.

"I'll be taking that!" the chef said while picking up the three filled baskets...and leaving behind three empty ones.

"Your Ladyship, truly, just *how long* have you been here...?"

"I suppose I was looking forward to today more than I realized," she mumbled in reply.

Adi had been reaching for a chair to sit opposite her, but at those words his hand jolted in surprise. It may have been silly at this stage, but to hear her openly admit she was looking forward to this day made him happy. "R-Really...?"

"Yes. Even I surprised myself with how early I woke up."

Indeed, it was true. When she'd woken up, the sun was only just beginning to rise, and she could've easily gotten several more hours' worth of sleep. She'd gone back to bed, snuggled under the covers, and closed her eyes. And yet...

"What on earth is this?!" Her astonished voice echoed within the walls of her bedroom.

She just couldn't sleep! Her drowsiness had disappeared, and she wasn't sleepy in the slightest. Rather, the fact that she could already hear the very faint noises of some kind of uproar outside seemed to almost scream that today was *that* day, and lying around in bed with everything going on outside irritated her.

In the end, she got up without fully comprehending her own restless excitement, blaming the faint ruckus outside and her having gone to bed early the night before as the reasons for her early rise. After all, someone like Mary Albert couldn't simply admit that she was so childishly excited about something that it had made her wake up early, not even if it was her own wedding day.

She left her bedroom with an air that suggested, *"I simply woke up a little early today for no particular reason, and definitely not because today is what it is!"*

However, none within the mansion had the leisure to ask for her excuses, as everyone was so busy that they didn't pay Mary any attention. The situation was dire enough that most people just raced by her saying, "I'll bring you your tea later!" and "We can play later, okay?"

After a while of aimlessly loitering around the estate in a daze, Mary finally made her way to the servants' canteen.

Not only was she the daughter of House Albert but also the star of today's event, yet she couldn't find a place to stay and so sat in the corner of the canteen. What a sad tale, indeed! Yet her father and brothers were dishing out instructions all over the mansion, while her mother was finishing up the decoration and tea arrangements—they were too busy to chat with Mary. Even if she wanted to start getting ready, her dress had already been picked, and it was still too early to start having her hair done. If she stepped outside the manor, there was a risk some of the uninformed visitors would swarm her to try and get the identity of her wedding partner out of her, but at the same time, she just couldn't stay quietly in her room and do nothing. She even found herself thinking, *I'd do anything if only you'd come here right now*, as she wished for a certain someone to pay her an early morning visit.

And so, one of the maids found her in such a state. "Lady Mary! Since you're free, how about lending a hand with the beans?!" she inquired, and then

disappeared with a cry of, “Thanks very much!”

That was how Mary’s morning had gone...

“So in other words, you couldn’t find a place for yourself, and therefore you’ve been sitting here shelling beans,” Adi concluded.

“Well, I’m fully aware how difficult it is arranging a party of this scale. That said, I don’t know how to feel about being neglected to this degree. Also, I’ve already added the name of the person who promised they’d play with me later to my list of layoffs.”

“Ah, the list you’ve no intention of actually realizing?”

“Indeed. After all, your name’s at the very top of it,” Mary responded, playing along with the banter as she deftly shelled the bean in her hands.

Adi sighed and reached out his arm. At the end of the day, he had also arrived at the canteen because he couldn’t find anything to do with himself. “By the way, I see you’ve become strangely proficient at this, my lady.”

“Do you even realize how often I’ve done this already? You only help out on occasion, so you’ve nothing on my level of expertise.”

“That’s really nothing to be proud of... But still,” Adi said as he rose to his feet with a daring smile.

For a moment, he seemed to have disappeared somewhere, but when he returned, he had a knife in one hand and a basket full of vegetables in the other. He then retook his seat and started to skillfully peel the vegetables.

“Oh my,” said Mary, impressed at his dexterity. “Not bad. I see you’re pretty proficient with that side of things.”

“I’ve been doing odd jobs like this for a long time now. My skills lie not only in peeling vegetables, but also imitating the gardener.”

“That’s really nothing to be proud of.”

Both of them started laughing at the rehashing of the previous remark. For a while, they continued their trifling banter as they worked away, until...

Bam!

The door of the canteen flew open.

“Lady Mary! Congratulations!” exclaimed a chirpy voice that could easily reach every nook and cranny of the battlefield-esque kitchen. Of course, it belonged to Alicia.

She was wearing a yellow dress with golden lace and a silver hair ornament. The vibrancy of her gown and personality both were just like the sun. But Mary found the sunlight harsh, and today like any other day, she spewed venom about the girl. “The noisy one’s arrived,” she said, then addressed Alicia. “Greetings, Alicia. Why did you get here so early? Does growing up in the boonies give you a bizarre sense of time, I wonder?”

“I was so happy about your guys’ party that I woke up really early! Tee hee!”

“R-Right... I see. They do say mornings come early in the countryside, I suppose,” Mary replied. “Anyway, your dress is quite wonderful. And here I was convinced that you’d come with a massive ribbon on your head, another ribbon wrapped very tightly around your waist, a corsage attached to your chest, and a sun parasol in hand. You looked wonderful back then too.”

“Aww, how nostalgic!”

“It’s not getting through at all, is it?! Are my words still not strong enough?! Get a little hurt already!” Mary lamented. She’d been trying to dig up a painful point from the past, here!

But instead Alicia, upon having recalled her fashion of that particular evening, only said, “Thank you very much for helping me out back then!” Her expression wasn’t ashamed at all, nor did she feel humiliated for having her dark history dragged out into the light like that—she only seemed to find it nostalgic.

“By the way, just what are you two doing?” the girl implored.

“Well...”

Mary and Adi paused to glance at their own hands. One was holding some beans, the other, vegetables. Gazing at the scene, Alicia realized what was going on and enthusiastically shouted, “I’ll help out too!”

“What?! Alicia, that’d be too much...!” Adi said in a fluster.

“Who do you think I am, Adi? I’m a princess raised in the countryside, remember? Shelling beans and peeling vegetables are both my forte!” Alicia proclaimed, proudly jutting out her chest.

She then took a seat next to Mary, before quickly and efficiently getting to work. Her movements were so dextrous and nimble that Adi and Mary stared at her with wide eyes and then exchanged a look with each other. “That’s really nothing to be proud of,” they murmured in unison.

“Chop, chop, you two!” Alicia reprimanded swiftly.

For some time, the trio of Mary, Adi, and Alicia continued diligently beavering away, until the kitchen door swung open again.

The one who walked inside was a handsome youth. He was dressed to the nines, which only increased his good looks to the point where he seemed like some fairytale Prince Charming. Or at least that would have been the case, were it not for his stiff expression.

“Why are you all here?” he asked in a voice that almost resembled a growl as he stepped forward, which was truly a shame. Any maiden would’ve surely fallen in love with him upon seeing his icy glare, but right now the only people witnessing this were Alicia, who’d already fallen for him, and Mary and Adi, who remained entirely unaffected.

“My, Patrick. Did you get up early today too?” Mary asked, elegantly bidding her morning greetings with a bean in hand.

Patrick’s expression only grew all the more severe. “I figured it’d be impossible for us to talk peacefully once the party began, so I came early.”

“Oh, thank you so very much for taking the trouble.”

“I searched all over the mansion and the reception room for you, to no avail. I even wondered if you were taking your tea, so I looked high and low in every corner of the gardens...”

“...So why on earth are you here*?”* Patrick’s statement seemed to imply as his shoulders drooped.

His dejection was entirely understandable. In what world would an aristocratic couple laboriously toil away in the servants’ canteen on the very morning of their wedding reception? To make it worse, his own lover and the country’s princess was here too, so of course he was on the verge of yelling at them in anger.

“So? What are you even doing?” Patrick asked with a sigh. He pressed his hand to his forehead, as though he’d been looking at a reality he couldn’t face and the view had induced a headache.

The trio exchanged a look, and then each of them replied in turn as though it

were all very obvious.

"Shelling beans."

"Peeling vegetables."

"I'm doing both!"

Patrick had endured it so far, but this finally made him snap. "Well *quit it*, and start getting ready!" he shouted, his furious voice echoing within the canteen.

At his (very reasonable) anger, the trio's eyes widened, and all of them turned to look at the clock hanging on one of the kitchen walls. Time had passed without their notice, and it was already getting close to the hour when they should start preparing themselves.

"Good point. I suppose it is about that time," Mary responded. "I got a little absorbed in the work. But at the end of the day, *we* are the stars of the show today, not the beans." She finished tidying up the things on the table and got to her feet.

"That's true," said Adi, following suit. As he did so, someone patted him on the back rather happily.

Patrick's anger and exasperation had disappeared in an instant, replaced instead by a brilliant smile. If any noble ladies had been present, they'd have surely flushed bright red at the sight, and some might've even fainted at Patrick's radiance. Yet Mary and Adi, who were highly resistant to that smile—and in fact were aware that it did not always mean good things—only looked at him with puzzlement.

"Lord Patrick...?"

"Do your utmost today, Adi."

"Er, right... Of course."

"After all, everyone will be paying *very* close attention to you—the mystery partner chosen by Mary Albert herself, the lady who could turn high society on its head!" Patrick proclaimed as though he were enjoying himself, while Adi's face stiffened at those words. "I mean, you're the man whom Mary Albert chose after our engagement was canceled, despite her flatly rejecting every

other marriage proposal she received! Every noble and scholar in the nation has been talking about almost nothing else recently."

As Patrick spoke matter-of-factly, Adi turned more and more pale. Yet it was true—though the venue hadn't yet opened, plenty of people had already gathered around, impatient to get a glimpse of the groom. They spewed all kinds of excuses for their early attendance, such as, "It's just that we won't be able to talk leisurely once the party starts!" or, "I'd simply love to help out!" while in reality, they all kept a careful eye on the Albert Manor to see if they'd spot a man who could be the groom.

Some of them had even called over the servers and asked them to reveal the groom's identity in exchange for a monetary bribe—that was just how serious of a matter today's wedding announcement would be. Everyone was dying to know the groom's identity, and they were surely already devising ways to curry favor with his family.

None of them expected for the groom to be one of House Albert's servants. Even at the sight of Mary drinking tea with no one else but Adi, they would only ever shrug it off as par for the course. In fact, some of the early arrivals were just as likely to grab Adi by the arm and ask him who Mary's husband was. That was their present reality.

With all this curiosity and attention, and with today being the announcement day...Adi had grown pallid at the thought. He, a mere servant, would now be in the limelight of high society, alongside the very person who could turn it on its head, to boot... Though Adi's realization had come quite late, he stood there white as a ghost.

Seeing this, Patrick smiled pleasantly. "And it's not just our country. There are guests arriving from several different nations too," he added unhelpfully.

In response, the sickly pale Adi finally opened his mouth.

"I'm going home to my parents!"

Such was his announcement.

"Come on, Adi. Your parents live just around the corner! You'd only have to come right back. In fact, I bet your whole family's home!"

“It’s okay, Adi!” Alicia chipped in. “Even *I* managed to get used to fulfilling my duties as the princess. You’ll only get all this attention in the beginning!”

“Right, that reminds me,” Patrick continued. “I heard that the previous members of the student council are in attendance too. All they’ve been talking about lately is how they’re curious to see who on earth Mary could’ve chosen as her partner.”

“Stop pushing him around, you bully!” Mary interjected. “Adi, come on! Get out from under that table! The head chef’s glaring at us something fierce!”

Mary and Alicia tried to reassure Adi, who reluctantly emerged from underneath the table at last. Then, he glared at Patrick and said, “Thank you very much for your lovely words of congratulations.” His voice was overflowing with resentment.

“You are very welcome,” Patrick replied with an easygoing smile.

Mary and Alicia both shrugged their shoulders in exasperation. It was a very Patrick-esque way of congratulating someone. In fact, Adi soon began to chuckle along, so perhaps this was just what friendships between men were like.

“Twisted, isn’t it?” murmured Mary.

“My, are you really one to say that, Lady Mary?” Alicia asked with a giggle.

Mary turned to her in surprise. “You really *have* started to say these things,” she said with a glare.

Alas, the two stars of the show went off to get ready. But when it came to dressing up, a woman’s preparations would take longer, especially on her wedding reception day.

Adi had finished dressing himself on his own, and once again wandered around the mansion aimlessly, not knowing what to do, until a familiar voice called his name. He turned on his heel to the sight of Karelia Academy’s ex-student council members—or in Mary’s words, “*Heart High*’s romanceable cast.” All of them were clad in outfits adorned with their family crests, and to Adi’s shock they were all headed his way. The dreamy sighs and shrill voices of the noble ladies followed their every step.

“Thank you very much for your attendance on this day,” said Adi with a deep bow of his head.

The men returned the greeting with waves of their hands. “Thanks for inviting us,” they replied casually, without adding much formality because in their minds, Adi was simply a servant of House Albert.

“I heard Patrick’s already here,” one of them prompted.

“That is correct. I believe Lord Patrick is currently speaking with His Grace.”

“And Lady Mary?”

“Mila— Lady Mary’s currently preparing in the salon.”

“Right, I see... By the way, Adi...”

“Yes?” Adi looked at them questioningly and realized that all the ex-council members were grinning mischievously. Then, the former vice president clasped Adi by the shoulder, which couldn’t mean anything good.

“I bet you know who Lady Mary’s husband is. Right?”

“I... Huh?”

“I just can’t imagine her keeping a secret from you, Adi.”

“Er, well. I suppose I *do* know, but...”

“I knew it! So, who is it? Don’t worry; we won’t tell anyone. We’ll keep it under wraps until it’s properly announced.”

Adi hesitated at their persistent hounding. He was sure they were only asking out of pure curiosity. They wondered who Mary could’ve chosen precisely because, at one time, they’d had an unpleasant experience with her. Plus, the men knew Patrick, whom Mary always used as an excuse for why she constantly rejected other marriage proposals, so they were probably *dying* to know who her chosen partner was. It was hard to think they’d spread the information, let alone try to curry favor with the husband’s family. Adi was sure they’d keep quiet until the official announcement if he implored them to.

Yet despite knowing this, Adi just couldn’t tell them. While he was trying to vaguely dodge their questions, another familiar voice called out to the group.

They all turned around and saw Patrick approaching them. All of the ex-council members turned to face him, and the ex-vice president let go of Adi's arm. Adi quietly sighed in relief, glad he'd been saved.

"Oh, it's you, Patrick. Darn, and we were so close too."

"I just knew you guys would try to pressure Adi into spilling the truth about Mary's husband," Patrick said with palpable disappointment. The way he scolded them was almost as if he were the student council president again, and Mary's accusation that he was a bully certainly couldn't ring true against *this* image.

"We figured you wouldn't tell us no matter what, so we tried our luck with Adi."

"Yeah, I had a feeling that'd happen. Adi, I hope you didn't tell them anything."

"Of course not. I couldn't," Adi responded with a vehement shake of his head, pleading innocent. Patrick nodded in satisfaction.

Realizing they wouldn't get any answers, the rest of the ex-council members watched this exchange with discontent. Yet their sour expressions didn't seem to sour their good looks, for the shrill voices around them exclaimed how adorable their sulking was.

"Still, he must be a very unexpected individual, if everyone's being *this* tight-lipped about it," the ex-vice president commented.

"Unexpected?" Patrick asked thoughtfully. Although anyone else would be shocked to hear the groom's identity, Patrick was of a different opinion, and so he tilted his head.

"I mean, he's someone *Lady Mary* chose! And there's been not a single credible rumor about who it could be, so everyone is convinced it's someone unexpected. You must've been shocked when you found out who it is too, right, Patrick?"

"Shocked? No, not at all." Patrick shrugged with a laugh.

All the other men looked at him in confusion. After all, he was Mary's former

fiancé, and the two of them had always been seen as a perfect match ever since they were children.

“But didn’t everyone always tell you that *you’d* be engaged to Mary? It’s hard to imagine you weren’t surprised...”

“This idea that she and I are a perfect match is just something that everyone else around us decided. However, I always believed that *he* was the only one for her,” Patrick explained with a smug chuckle.

Question marks floated around everyone else. None of them could imagine who Patrick was talking about that fit that description. Though the very person of concern was right next to them, and they knew Mary and Adi were always together, they still couldn’t connect the dots. This only made Patrick laugh harder, and Adi sighed at the sight.

The ex-council members observed the other two as one of them seemed to be having plenty of fun, while the other was just exasperated. However, surmising they wouldn’t get any information out of either, they decided to give it up and walked away to bid their greetings to the head of House Albert and his wife.

Once they were gone, Adi sighed again in relief. “Having fun, Lord Patrick?”

“Of course. What else could I be doing right now?”

“You have such a terrible character... So this is the Prince Charming all the ladies yearn after, huh? At least half of them would turn tail if they saw your true colors.”

“I don’t mind, as long as Alicia stays.”

“How lovey-dovey.”

“Anyway, you say all the ladies adore me, but your one and only didn’t seem to adore me in the slightest,” Patrick said with a smirk, glancing sideways at Adi.

Caught off guard, Adi’s face reddened, but he quickly coughed to distract from the fact. Then, he took a deep breath and turned to face the chuckling Patrick. Indeed, he was the ideal prince that everyone (except for Mary, as the man himself had said) longed for. His indigo hair fluttered in the breeze, and his

eyes seemed to ask, *“What is it?”* as they captured Adi’s gaze.

Patrick had the charm, talent, and political influence to have any girl under the sun as his partner, regardless of her rank. And yet, he’d chosen to chase after and take the hand of a girl with peasant origins. He’d even been willing to give up his family name for her...

“My greed got the better of me after I saw you and Alicia so happy together. Though I should’ve given up on those thoughts a long time ago, I ended up desperately wanting to have milady be with only me. I didn’t want to hand her over to anyone else.”

“Adi...”

“Thank you very much, Lord Patrick.”

Patrick had followed his feelings rather than social standing, and he’d chosen love over politics. He’d been willing to give up everything he knew for the sake of being with Alicia, and seeing her happily cuddling up to him these days had inspired Adi. Though he’d once been willing to give up on his feelings as long as he could serve Mary and her future family, the sight of Patrick and Alicia ignited his aspiration again—not as a servant, but as a man.

I don’t want to give her up to anyone else. He’d started to think that way because of them. And because that had led to this moment today, Adi felt he had to give his thanks to Patrick.

Faced with such a straightforward proclamation, Patrick scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “Don’t worry about it. You helped me out plenty of times too.”

“Lord Patrick...”

“Besides...” Patrick paused and put his hand on Adi’s shoulder. He was grinning mischievously in a way that was very him (and very unlike the dreamy Prince Charming). “I *am* the chief commander of the Adi Support Squad, after all.”

Adi’s eyes widened at these words.

Patrick chuckled again as though enjoying the other’s reaction.

“Congratulations,” he said again, addressing Adi as his friend.

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A while later, the reception hall of Albert Manor was brimming with people, and what had once been the rush of preparations had transformed into an extravagant bustle of a party. The orchestra played in the background, having arrived from a distant land specifically for today. The waiters and waitresses were exceedingly busy, yet nevertheless served the guests alcohol with utmost elegance. Every dish was beautifully presented, tempting the appetite of the onlookers. Each item wafted an air of luxury, and it was nigh unimaginable that the dishes had been prepared in a warlike kitchen.

The atmosphere was exquisitely celebratory, and Adi, who’d finished the last of his preparations, stood behind a door with a nervous countenance. He was clad in a new jacket, with House Albert’s crest embroidered by his chest. Just glancing down at it caused his anxiety to spike.

On the other side of the door were the stairs leading down to the reception hall. When the time arrived, Adi would take Mary’s hand and slowly descend them under the scrutiny of all the guests. The visitors were also eager for this moment as they waited impatiently. The gag order imposed upon anyone in the know had especially attracted a lot of attention, and though typically many of the guests would spread out into the gardens, Adi could tell by the number of voices he could hear that almost all of them chose to remain inside the manor today.

Picturing the moment he’d have to step out in front of all those people made beads of sweat form around his temple. He quickly wiped it off with a white lace handkerchief before it could drip down any further.

“Madam...” he murmured weakly.

“You’re much too nervous, Adi,” Keryl, wife of the head of House Albert, commented with a refined chuckle. Adi smiled dryly in response, still looking troubled. “You should stand tall and proud today.”

“I know, but...”

“Come on, now. You’re wasting your good looks!” Keryl laughed like she was

having a great time, patting Adi's shoulder. He could see a close resemblance in her gestures and expression to those of Mary, and her gently wavy silver locks truly brought out their mother-daughter similarities.

"By the way, do you know where mila—Lady Mary is?"

"Her preparations should be finished by now, so I'm sure she'll get here soon. Once she does, both of you should exit this room together. Make sure you escort her properly, all right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well then, I'm off! I must go where I can have the best view of the guests' reactions! I can't wait to see their faces!" Keryl exclaimed. "If anything comes up, you two just think of something and deal with it yourselves." Such was her irresponsible parting remark as she turned to leave, clearly enjoying herself.

Adi watched her walk away with a quiet murmur of, "She's the same as ever."

Right then, he heard a pointed cough. Reflexively his spine straightened in a split second, and he whipped around on his heel, coming face-to face-with the head of House Albert, the very man at the top of Adi's perceived hierarchical order.

"Y-Your Grace!"

"Ah, don't bow your head. Your hair will be ruined," the man responded, holding out a hand to stop Adi from bowing as usual. In the next moment, he approached with a leisurely gait.

Despite the scale of the party, the man seemed at ease, and his presence even emanated a sense of majesty. Adi straightened his back to an almost painful degree under the other's gaze. To say that he was nervous would've been an understatement—after all, the Head of House Albert was his employer (the employer of Adi's entire family, no less!), *and* his father-in-law.

As if perfectly aware of this, the older man smiled wryly. "This is your special day, so don't make such a scary face," he said, fixing the collar of Adi's jacket. As a finishing touch, he tapped the House Albert crest embroidered by Adi's chest. This was his way of lifting Adi's spirits and offering his welcome.

“Your Grace, I...”

“What is it?”

“Are you truly all right with this? Lady Mary is the daughter of House Albert, and her marriage could serve your family...”

“Oh? In that case, are you willing to return her?”

“No, it’s much too late for that. No matter what, I will never give her up,” Adi declared resolutely.

The head of House Albert smiled calmly as though he’d expected this. “Indeed,” he replied.

Originally, the plan had been to marry Mary off for the sake of the family. Political marriages were the norm in their society, and that was especially the case for someone born into a prestigious noble family like the Alberts. Even Mary herself didn’t see this as particularly tragic, simply taking it as fact.

But in the end, Mary had canceled her engagement to Patrick, the man she’d been arranged to marry, and committed herself to Adi instead. She possessed enough merit to marry nobility, or even royalty, both within her nation and abroad, and yet she’d chosen a servant. From the perspective of her family, her choice of partner was someone who couldn’t bring any benefits to House Albert. Many aristocrats would find this unbelievable, and a complete waste besides. Surely, every single noble house who learned the identity of Mary’s husband would think as much.

“I admit, I had planned to have my daughter marry into House Dyce for the sake of our family,” the head of House Albert said. “But those two opted for a very different path. And as a result, what happened?”

“Huh? Well...” At the question, Adi suddenly thought of the current situation between House Albert and House Dyce.

Though the engagement of their children had fallen through, the two families had formed a strong bond. House Dyce even owed the Alberts a favor for helping them handle the problem of their family’s succession. Plus, the country’s princess, Alicia, adored Mary. As a result, House Albert, who’d once been seen as second in power to the royals, was now officially acknowledged as

standing equal in power to them. Alicia, Patrick, and both their parents besides all had regular tea parties and meals with the Alberts.

There was no sense of rivalry between the three families, and as such, nobles and commoners alike had begun to believe that their country could keep flourishing precisely thanks to them.

“Thinking it over, the present situation is even better than what Lady Mary and Lord Patrick’s marriage would’ve brought,” Adi murmured quietly.

At his words, the head of House Albert nodded in satisfaction. “Mary’s a bit of an odd duck, and sometimes she behaves in ways that even we cannot predict.”

“My apologies, but I cannot comment on that statement in any way.” Adi couldn’t exactly follow the other’s words up with something like, *“She aimed for her own ruin by picking fights with the princess,”* especially because the current situation was a direct result of her failed attempts.

“She may be an odd duck, but she brought more to our family with her own actions and beliefs than the marriage we had planned for her ever would have done. With that in mind, why should we as her parents protest against the path she has chosen for herself? Besides, the reason she was able to achieve as much as she did was because you were by her side the whole time.”

“Your Grace...”

“We are grateful to her, but we’re also grateful to *you*. So take Mary’s hand and leave this room proudly.”

“Yessir!”

“I’m going to take up positions with Keryl, where we can clearly see the guests’ faces. If anything comes up, you two handle it yourselves. I’m off to make a bet with Keryl on what kind of reactions there’ll be. See you later.” The older man gave Adi a single pat on the arm, then left.

It was obvious he was enjoying himself. Adi had been feeling deeply moved, yet the sight overturned his emotions. “What a match those two are...” he muttered to himself.

Before he knew it, Adi had been left all alone. Of course, the guests, along

with the lord and lady of House Albert, were waiting on the other side of the door. The thought made his nerves crawl back up his spine, and he took deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself.

In contrast to the lively voices outside, the empty room he was in felt strangely quiet.

“Seriously... Where *is* everyone?! Do they all want to see the guests’ reactions *that* badly?!”

“Oh? Is my company not good enough for you?”

Adi, who hadn’t intended for his questions to be heard by anyone, quickly turned around in a fluster at the unexpected response. Before him stood Mary, dressed in an all-white gown. The dress was radiant, and the House Albert family crest pinned to her chest only added to her glamor. With each of her steps, her hair swayed— No... The tightly coiled silver ringlets remained steadfast on each side of her face, posturing just like they used to back in the old days.

“Milady...”

“Is something the matter?” Mary smiled proudly, spinning on her heel to show off her dress.

The hem of the gown was wide like a blooming flower, and the tiara upon her head further highlighted her beauty as it shone brilliantly. At the same time, her drills swung vigorously—how nostalgic the sight! They didn’t sway; they *waggled*.

Adi gazed at Mary admiringly, captivated by her beauty combined with that sense of nostalgia. Then, he reached out his hands towards her. “May I touch you?”

“Yes, I don’t mind.”

Having received her permission, Adi lifted his hand to touch her hair, but...

“Ah, hold on!”

...at Mary’s sudden appeal, he froze still as a statue.

“If you touch them too roughly, the drills will come apart!”

“Come apart...? The *drills*?!”

“Indeed. The whole reason I took so long getting ready was because my hair just wouldn’t curl properly... It made me realize how much effort we were putting into creating them *artificially*. These drills are the product of miracles.”

Mary had been talking with a serious expression, and Adi listened just as seriously. And then they both burst out laughing, unable to take it anymore.

“What are you even saying, on a day like this?” Adi asked her.

“My, how rude! I decided on this hairstyle specifically for you. Are you saying you’re not happy with it?”

“No, I’m happy. Very, very happy. From the bottom of my heart,” Adi responded. He’d teared up from laughing so hard, and he wiped the corners of his eyes. Then, he turned to face Mary properly again. “May I touch your hair?”

“Yes, go on.”

Once again Adi reached out towards her. This time, his fingers made contact with her hair, and Mary smiled fondly. He touched her hair cherishingly, and at intervals his fingertips brushed against her cheeks, which tickled her. She felt a sweet numbness spread through her. The feeling used to confuse and worry her in the past, but now she knew its name. The thought made a gentle warmth gather in her chest.

“My lady... May I embrace you?”

“Yes, I don’t mind.”

The hands that had been touching her hair slowly slid down to her back. Adi held her cautiously and reservedly, as to not wrinkle her dress, which made Mary smile wryly. Softly, she wrapped her arms around his back too, gingerly resting her arms against it so as not to crease his jacket either.

Hugging Adi felt so pleasant that Mary even found herself thinking that she didn’t care about her dress, or her makeup, or even her hairstyle—she just wanted him to hold her even tighter...

As if thinking the exact same thing, Adi’s arms tightened around her for a brief moment. “May I kiss you?” he asked, the sweet whisper tickling her ear.

Ah, how could I possibly refuse? Mary wondered. “Of course,” she replied, wallowing in the sensations surrounding her.

Her words caused Adi to smile warmly. That sight alone made her heart swell with love—that was exactly why she simply couldn’t refuse him.

And so they leaned in closer to each other, closing their eyes...

Knock! Knock!

Both of them jumped in surprise at the sudden sound of someone knocking on the door as if saying, *“How long are you two going to take?!”*

“Oh dear...”

“And we were almost there too...” Adi murmured.

Nonetheless, he reached out his hand towards Mary. She joined her hand with his, at which he smiled happily. Pretending not to notice, Mary lightly squeezed his hand as if to hurry him along.

Mary had made an appearance at countless parties in her life, yet this would be the first time she’d be escorted by the person she loved. When Adi gently squeezed her hand in return, she felt her cheeks flush against her will.

So the door slowly opened, and the looks on the guests’ faces when they saw the two of them were priceless.

Everyone stared at the pair vacantly in unison, and then question marks started floating by their heads. Some of them didn’t seem to notice the Albert crest on Adi’s chest, and they looked around everywhere, believing this to be the buildup to the final surprise reveal. Their expressions practically said, *“Where will the husband come out from?!”* Meanwhile, those who *had* noticed the crest looked like they couldn’t process the situation.

Alas, their reactions were to be expected, for Mary had come out in the company of her servant, as usual. Such a sight didn’t surprise anyone at this stage, as they simply thought, *“That eccentric girl has a servant with her even on this day.”* And so they continued to search around for the groom.

At the scene, Adi and Mary both smiled lightly.

“I wonder who they’re all looking for?” mused Mary.

“Indeed. Please look, His Grace is really enjoying this.”

“You’re right. And I think my brothers will burst out laughing any minute now.”

“It looks like Lord Patrick’s close to his limit too.”

While the guests were entirely dumbfounded, those in the know were enjoying themselves immensely. After all, they’d been keeping Adi’s identity under wraps for this very reason. Everyone certainly seemed exceedingly satisfied with the guests’ reactions.

Seeing all these expressions, Mary suddenly said, “I just had a great idea!” She grabbed Adi and turned him to face her.

“What idea, my lady?”

“Let’s shock everyone even more with our trump card!”

“What do you mean...?”

The moment he asked, Mary grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down towards her, standing on her tiptoes to meet him halfway.

...

The hall fell into total silence.

“M-Milady!” Adi exclaimed in a fluster, leaning away and flushing bright red.

In contrast, Mary looked around the venue like she was having great fun, still holding on to his collar. “Look at their faces, Adi!”

The guests, who simply couldn’t believe Mary’s husband was a servant, stared at the pair open-mouthed with foolish looks on their faces. Among them, only one person squealed in joy, while a certain other person next to her trembled as if unable to hold in his laughter. Someone else cackled away happily as though to say, *“That’s my daughter!”* But alas, they were just a tiny percentage of the crowd.

“Milady, you can’t just... There’s such a thing as moderation!”

“I couldn’t help myself. I just wanted to surprise them all. Besides, that was just a continuation of earlier.”

“Continuation? That’s incorrect. Before, *I* was the one who asked your permission...” This time it was Adi who leaned down towards Mary. Then, he gently touched her lips. “That’s why, *I’m* the one who has to kiss you for it to count,” he said with a smirk.

Mary’s cheeks reddened as she looked into his captivating rust-colored eyes. “I see; you have a point,” she agreed with a nod.

Yet her voice was drowned out by the instantaneous buzz that reverberated around the hall.

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The party, having started with such a massive surprise, was a booming success. As expected, the guests pulled Adi left and right, curious to hear about his rise from the rank of a servant to joining House Albert. In fact, he received even more attention than Mary herself, so much so that for her, the party passed leisurely, and she even had some time to relax in the courtyard. After all, whether in the past, present, or postmarriage, she was still the same Mary Albert—by this point, everyone knew there was little point in toadying up to her.

“This is much more peaceful than I anticipated. Actually, can’t people start paying a little more attention to me?”

“Should you really be taking it easy right now, Lady Mary?” asked Alicia. “Adi looks like he’s in a pinch!”

“Oh, he’ll be fine. Look, Patrick and my brothers are there for him.”

They were sitting on a bench in the courtyard, and while Mary talked in a carefree manner, Alicia puffed out her cheeks sulkily. But even as she pouted away, she held on to a plate of cake in her hands, so she clearly had no intentions of going over to assist them herself, despite her reproaching.

While the girls observed their busy husband and lover respectively, someone called out, “Um, Lady Mary...”

The unassuming greeting had come from a pair of noble ladies: Parfette, whose floaty pale pink dress, decorated with a small floral ornament, fluttered in the wind, and Carina, who in contrast was dressed in a chic navy blue gown.

Their completely opposite styles, one adorable and the other beautiful, only highlighted their respective charms. They both looked nervous to be standing in front of the princess (who from Carina's perspective was also the heroine of the prequel game), and Parfette was quivering like a small, frightened animal.

"Greetings, Parfette, Carina. I'm glad you came," said Mary.

"C-Congratulations, Lady Mary! You look so lovely and happy! I feel really moved... I'm so, so happy for you..." Parfette's eyes welled up as she spoke.

Flustered, Mary quickly called out, "Stop shedding tears over every human emotion in existence!" But in the next moment, she purposefully shifted her gaze to the person behind Parfette and added, "Oh my."

Of course, it was Gainas Eldland. He looked very presentable, with his sturdy body clad in formal wear, and there was a flower ornament pinned by his chest that matched Parfette's. Evidently, he was her escort partner for the night.

Realizing as much, Mary smirked at her. The girl, conjecturing what Mary was trying to say, hurriedly shook her head. "N-No, Lord Gainas isn't my escort! H-He's just here because he insisted he wanted to come to the party and congratulate you!"

"Oh, really? How strange, considering I did send an invitation to House Eldland. He could've come by himself just fine."

"Waaah! He's... I'm... There's this café! A café which I really wanted to go to, and he knew about it, so he came with me to guide me there!" Parfette claimed, desperately making excuses with a flushed face.

"Right, I see," Mary responded with a grin. The way Parfette blatantly turned away from Gainas was just too funny and adorable, and it made Mary want to tease her. "So, he took you to a café?"

"Y-Yes, exactly! Then it was time for the party, and... He insisted he wanted to attend, so we came together! That's all this is! He isn't my escort!"

"Oh, wonderful. In that case, wait right there. I'll fetch my brothers."

"Wh-What?! No, wait! Y-You can't...!" Parfette cried, hurrying to stop Mary from walking away.

Mary snickered at her reaction, while Alicia and Carina both shrugged their shoulders in unison. *“They’re not being subtle at all,”* their expressions seemed to say as they watched the other two girls.

“Ah, is it still too soon? All right, but please make some time for them later,” Mary continued.

“F-Fine... Someday...” Parfette responded incoherently, her eyes wandering elsewhere. It was quite obvious her agreement was insincere.

At the sight, Mary asked herself whether she’d gone too far in her teasing, and she was about to offer some consolation, but...

Grasp!

...something caught her by the shoulder.

“Congratulations, Lady Mary. As a side note, my schedule’s always open!”

“I *knew* you’d show up, no matter what...”

The ardent voice had naturally come from the ambitious girl, whose eyes glittered like those of a hunter closing in on her prey. Her bright red dress certainly brought out her beauty, but to Mary it only looked like a combat uniform. Was the gown truly red, or did it just look like that as a result of the girl’s blazing desire to realize her ambition?

Even Mary felt intimidated by the overwhelming atmosphere emanating from the girl. But right then, once again, someone timidly called out her name.

This time it wasn't Parfette or Carina who called out to Mary. (That said, Parfette was currently trying to threaten the ambitious girl with her puffy cheeks, because the other girl had commented to Gainas that House Eldland was a rather influential family. Carina just watched the two of them with an exasperated sigh.) When Mary turned towards the voice, she noticed a few noble ladies who were looking at her awkwardly.

I recognize them... Mary thought. Having searched her memory, she realized they were the girls who would always stare daggers at her back out of flaming jealousy during any party she'd attended in the past. Their glares had been icy, and yet as hot as fire. They had always envied Mary for hogging Patrick's attention all to herself.

However, right now there was no jealousy in their eyes—rather, they looked perplexed. Alas, these girls had once feared that Mary would steal their dreamy prince from them, but now that her actual husband had been announced... Of course they'd be shocked!

That was precisely why Mary smiled leisurely when they looked at her, and dipped her head when they congratulated her. "Why, thank you," she replied. *"Now cease your misguided jealousy and misgivings towards me,"* her words implied with a hint of sarcasm.

At that, the girls glanced away awkwardly and quietly murmured, "But why...?"

Then, one of them asked, "Um... Please don't take this the wrong way, but... Why *him*?"

Mary's eyes widened at the question. She knew they were asking about Adi. It was quite offensive to be asked such a thing in the middle of her wedding reception, but these girls had been born into a world where political marriages were the norm. As such, their question was likely out of genuine bemusement. They wondered why the beautiful, talented daughter of House Albert, whose influence enabled her to get any man she wanted, had chosen a servant as her partner.

Of course, they weren't about to ask anything like that directly, but the looks in their eyes made it clear. To top it off, they even started saying things like, "If I

were you...” and misguidedly listing some other men they would’ve chosen in her place.

Mary didn’t recognize any of the men they named. But to the girls, they must’ve been like princes—the kind of candidates they thought a daughter of House Albert, who could monopolize Prince Charming himself, was likely to choose.

In other words, the girls had prepared themselves to lose their beloved princes to Mary when they showed up to the party, only to find themselves struck dumb when her husband turned out to be someone completely unexpected.

Surmising as much, Mary smiled wryly and shrugged her shoulders. “Why, you ask? That should be obvious.”

“Huh...?”

“That’s because there is no better man in existence than Adi,” Mary replied with a smile, and the other girls stared at her in shock.

They had never seen Mary smile so openly, honestly, and above all, happily. To everyone’s envy, she’d always taken the hand of Patrick, yet she had never seemed overly joyous about it, nor did her cheeks flush. Instead, she dispassionately played the role of the noble lady. In fact, she even looked entirely composed, causing the other girls to become jealous. Some even wept at the sight of the power of House Albert, whom they knew they could never compete against.

But in contrast to all of that, Mary now spoke about her beloved with reddened cheeks and a happy smile.

“Lady Mary, we may have been misunderstanding you this whole time.”

“Well, then I’m glad it’s all cleared up. So, what do you all plan to do now?”

“What do you mean?” The girls tilted their heads as question marks flitted around them.

Mary glanced to the side at the main hall. The party was brimming with people, as expected of an event held by the Alberts. The guests even included

individuals who'd arrived from abroad, and the very princes whom these girls had worried Mary had stolen were in attendance as well.

"Do you girls plan to just do nothing and watch from afar like before?"

"Well..."

"If your determination only goes so far as sitting around and twiddling your thumbs, some peasant girl could snatch your dream man from right under your nose. Surely you learned as much after what happened with Patrick, no?" Mary asked with a smirk.

Everyone gasped at her words. But even so, none of them moved, still sporting bewildered expressions, and Mary sighed at these immutable late bloomers. "In this world, there are some people who are so appallingly dull that they realize how much they love someone only *after* their own feelings are pointed out to them," she said.

When she added that she wasn't about to specify who she meant, Alicia, who overheard her, giggled at her words. Mary cleared her throat as though to reproach Alicia's reaction, since they both knew Mary was talking about herself.

First Adi had confessed to her, then Alicia had reasoned with her, and only then did Mary finally realize that her heart had always belonged to Adi. Her own thickheaded ignorance humiliated her, so she certainly wasn't about to expose herself, and for emphasis she once again repeated that she wouldn't name the person.

"There truly are such blockheads out there. So don't you think that just waiting around and hoping that the other person will magically realize your feelings is a waste of time? I can't say that making a move will always guarantee victory, but even so, there is someone among us who came out on top because she *did* make a move."

Mary glanced to the side, and Alicia smiled bashfully at her implication.

Alicia had taken action in order to make Patrick notice her. She had chased after him with no hesitation, and she hadn't backed out despite how widely desired he was. In the end, she had captured his heart. She'd been up against rank differences, her own peasant origins, and countless love rivals—but she

overcame them all in one fell swoop.

Plus... Mary glanced towards Adi. It had been thanks to him taking action that Mary, despite her own dullness, had learned the name of the feeling that enthralled her heart.

Of course, just because someone made a move, that didn't mean they'd always be successful. There were those who veered off onto the wrong path, like Lilianne, or those who were too late, like Carina. Worst-case scenario, such things could end with nothing but pain.

But even so...

Mary continued talking in a calm voice as though to admonish the girls. "Taking action requires guts. I understand you're worried that the person you're after might end up hating you, or deem your behavior improper. But... I find people who take action despite all of that quite wonderful."

Her cherishing tone of voice caused a moment of silence to hang over the courtyard.

The sound of mellow music echoing from within the venue broke the silence eventually. The tune had changed, so perhaps the dances had begun.

"Since it's the perfect occasion, how about you try inviting your desired partners to a dance?" Mary proposed, as if she'd just had a great idea.

The girls' eyes widened. It was unthinkable for a woman to invite a man to dance. The first dance was always taken with one's escort partner, and after that the girls would simply stand to the side and stare while wishing the men would ask them first. At most, they might use their parents or acquaintances as intermediaries, but that was all.

So the girls stared at her like she'd just said something absurd, and Mary smiled mischievously in response. "My, come now. Today's the day Mary the eccentric announced her marriage to her own servant, you know? A woman inviting a man to a dance at an event like this would hardly be remarkable."

All the girls exchanged a glance with each other at Mary's smug proclamation. *"She's being eccentric, as always,"* they seemed to want to say.

Yet gradually, their expressions shifted. It seemed like they were getting some ideas at last. Perhaps the girls were anxious that they might have their dream men stolen away again if all they did was stay silent and yearn for them in secret. But their habits of just waiting around were like a vice holding them hostage, and they once again exchanged troubled looks.

Right around then, someone called for Alicia from the pathway connecting the venue and the courtyard. Everyone turned at the sound of the voice, and three different reactions swept through them. One smiled affectionately, a few became impassioned with yearning, and the last felt the sorrow of capitulation.

Although faced with such an assortment of expressions, the young man paid them no heed. “So this is where you were, Alicia,” he said, only addressing his dear lover.

“Is something the matter, Lord Patrick?”

“The dances are about to begin, so I wanted to ask you— Oh, Mary? You’re here too?”

“Excuse me? I’m supposed to be the star of the show today, you know,” Mary said in jest while glaring at Patrick, to which he responded with a wry smile and an apology.

However, their idle chatter was soon interrupted when Carina walked over to Alicia with a visibly nervous countenance. “Lady Alicia...” she called out, peering at the other girl without an ounce of her usual resolve. Her head was lowered, but the way she stole sideways glances at Patrick was almost perplexing to see. Then again, considering the ranks of Alicia and Patrick, as well as the viewpoint of the game, it was natural that Carina felt timid around them.

“I’m aware this may sound very rude, so please pardon me... But may I ask Lord Patrick for a dance?”

At this demure invitation, the rest of the noble ladies gasped as their eyes widened. Patrick and Alicia may not have officially announced their relationship status yet, but they all knew Carina had just asked the princess’s lover to a dance right in front of her. Under usual circumstances, she’d be reproached, punished, and forbidden from interacting with the rest of high society ever again.

Yet Alicia simply smiled happily and said, “Of course!” with a deep bow of her head.

Having received permission, Carina quickly raised her head. She then slowly approached Patrick. Though he wasn’t aware of the full story, he seemed to have surmised what was going on and cast his gaze on her.

“Lord Patrick, I have always adored you, for a very...*very* long time. For so long...”

Though she tried to assemble her words coherently, they still came out jumbled and ambiguous. Everyone watched her carefully, wondering if she’d truly had feelings for him for *that* long.

Yet unbeknownst to them, Carina had indeed been in love with Patrick for a long time—she’d loved him in her previous incarnation, an unexplainable concept by all accounts. As though frustrated by not being able to say as much, Carina momentarily swallowed her words and looked away before looking back up at Patrick with renewed determination.

“I want to remember how I yearned for you. I would like to be able to move on while keeping my feelings for you as a good memory. For the sake of letting me do that, would you please grace me with a single dance, Lord Patrick?”

Carina’s voice trembled as she all but begged him. She had readied herself for this to be the conclusion, yet that was exactly why dread rose within her at the thought of being rejected now.

She’d longed for him for so very long—for as absurdly long as back in her past life—and the end of those feelings was drawing near. Moving on would be impossible for Carina if he were to reject her here. It would only result in her being filled with regret, agonizing over what had happened, and becoming trapped by her own feelings that she wouldn’t be able to give up on.

But there was one more reason Carina was so timid.

At the end of the day, the Patrick who existed in her mind was the character from *Heart High*—the attractive and talented Prince Charming embodying any woman’s ideals, whose cold demeanor pierced all the girls’ hearts. She thought him to be someone who was very strict with himself and others, yet only

allowed his lover, the heroine Alicia, to see his softer side.

The fact that Patrick was caring, he behaved more his age around those who knew him, he was surprisingly sarcastic and prone to jesting, and his shoulders shook whenever he tried to hold in his laughter as he pretended to retain his cool—these and many other aspects of his personality were inconceivable to Carina, who only knew his game version.

That was why she was afraid that since she wasn't the heroine Alicia, he might reject her invitation.

Yet Patrick, hearing this fainthearted plea from a young woman, smiled gently and grasped her hand in his. "I would be happy to," he told her, and began escorting her to the main hall.

At that moment, Carina looked indescribably delighted.

The rest of them watched the pair leave, and soon an uproar began inside the venue, for Patrick Dyce had come hand in hand with a woman other than the princess. But Patrick wasn't fazed by the clamor, for he knew Alicia had given her permission.

Meanwhile, Mary was much more invested in the way the other young ladies' expressions began shifting after witnessing what Carina had done. Soon enough, each of them whispered things like, "I should also..."

A few of them returned to the venue, wanting to dance with Patrick too. Others decided they'd had enough of waiting around and went off in search of their desired persons. One after another, the girls dispersed to find their beloved princes, and soon enough only a few individuals were left in the courtyard: Mary and Alicia, who observed as the other girls left, as well as Parfette and Gainas, who remained where they were.

And...there was also one more lady, who grabbed hold of Mary's shoulder from behind. "Lady Mary, I'd better get going too."

"Oh my. When *you* say that, all I can hear is, 'I'd better get hunting.' And anyway, I thought you'd take the initiative and be the first to go."

"I have a principle of not touching other people's prey. I thought I'd wait to see where the others would go, and then decide on my move."

“What a sensible hunter you are. If you need any help, just let me know; I’ll assist you. I’ll have you know I actually enjoy your voracity.”

“You may think of me as your sister-in-law, then.”

“Please refrain from saying such dreadful things. This is no joking matter,” Mary murmured.

The ambitious girl made her way to the main hall with a wide smile, as though she was having fun. Mary watched her retreating figure, which in her mind was like a blaring war horn.

Then, Mary turned to face Parfette. Ever since Carina had invited Patrick to dance and the other girls began taking inspiration, Parfette had been incredibly restless, as though she couldn’t bear to watch it anymore. Most likely, she was nervous that one of them might try talking to Gainas. However, Gainas himself was looking at Parfette with worry, as though anxious *she* might leave to find some other man.

Neither of them voiced their thoughts, yet their expressions clearly said, *“Please don’t come here!”* and *“Please don’t go anywhere!”* respectively. So obviously, nobody tried to get in between them.

“What will you do now, Parfette?” Mary urged. “If there’s someone you’re interested in, just let me know. Of course, I’m happy to call over my bro—”

“My brothers,” Mary had intended to say, but cut herself off and quickly looked over her shoulder. She’d expected the ambitious girl to grasp her by the shoulder at this point—but when she turned around, nobody was behind her. It should’ve been obvious, since the girl had left for the venue earlier, so there was no way she’d be here now. Realizing as much, Mary quietly said, “Pardon me,” for interrupting her own statement.

“Um, Lady Mary... I don’t really want to, um...”

Mary paused. “Right, I see. Then how about you take a look at our gardens? They’re very famous around here.”

“Y-Yes! I’ll do that!” Parfette’s expression brightened at Mary’s proposition. “I’ll go by myself!” she added purposefully. Perhaps it was to discourage Mary from egging her on, or to imply that she wasn’t about to go find anyone else.

Whatever the case, the girl walked off in high spirits, and Gainas followed after her. “What a handful she is,” Mary murmured to herself with a laugh and sat down on a chair.

And so only Mary and Alicia were left.

The pleasant breeze carried with it the melody from inside the main hall as it fluttered the two girls’ opposite-colored hair. Mary inhaled deeply as tranquility finally settled, and Alicia giggled at the sight.

“Oh? And just what is so funny?” Mary asked her.

“*You* seem to be having fun, Lady Mary.”

“Me?”

“You made lots of friends at Elysiana College, didn’t you?” Alicia prompted, happy as though this were her own matter. Mary’s cheeks flushed the tiniest bit at that, and she cleared her throat quietly.

As she took a quick side glance at Alicia, Mary couldn’t help but think that the day when the two of them had first met after she’d recalled her past life memories seemed like it was so long ago. As she reminisced over everything that had happened since then, Mary knew things hadn’t exactly turned out as she’d once hoped. And yet today, she’d arrived at the best day of her life. The times when she’d tried to get Alicia to loathe her and cause her own ruin seemed almost like a lie now. Just what had she been doing, following the game and trying so hard all that time?

As Mary pondered this, *Heart High* came to mind. She’d drawn a clear line between her actual life and the game from the start, and lately she hadn’t really thought much about it, so her memories of it had become hazy.

In *Heart High*, Alicia soothed the romanceable cast with her sunny smile and melted away their hardened aristocratic hearts. Recalling this, Mary smiled slightly. *Her sunlike light managed to melt my own heart more than anyone else’s...* she thought. Yet she couldn’t openly admit to such sentiments, and so she turned away and gazed towards the main hall.

A few people were calling for Patrick’s attention, while here and there the noble ladies were speaking up to the princes they yearned after. A few of them

had already managed to win the hearts of said princes and were dancing with them ecstatically. Even those who hadn't been in the courtyard to witness events still took advantage of the situation and began asking their desired partners for a dance.

As usual... No, even more so than in the game, and completely outside of its realm, this is a grand finale filled with beds of roses as far as the eye can see.

Mary smiled to herself as she thought this, and at that moment Alicia, who was sitting next to her, grabbed her hand.

Surprised, Mary turned to look at her. Alicia's whole face was lit up in a smile, and to top it off, she suddenly got to her feet, dragging Mary along too.

"What is it?"

"Lady Mary! Let's dance!" Alicia proclaimed with a sparkling smile.

Mary's eyes widened, and then she sighed. "My, no need to overreact," she said, as apparently seeing the other ladies had put Alicia in a mood to dance. But both their partners were already decided, so Mary felt like there was no need to be *this* enthusiastic about it.

Nonetheless, Alicia grabbed her arm and started hurrying her along. "Come on, Lady Mary!"

"Yes, yes, okay. But Patrick looks really busy right now, so how about you put it off for a bit?"

"What are you talking about? I want to dance with you!"

"I... *What*?!"

While Mary demanded explanations, Alicia pulled her along towards the venue. She was being overbearing as usual, completely unlike a princess. Mary, unable to properly resist, could only shout, "Hold it! Unhand me!"

As they pushed their way through the crowd, Adi spotted them and approached. "Milady! Will you dance with m—"

"Adi, your turn's after mine!"

"After *yours*?!"

Having decisively rejected Adi's invitation in a single strike, Alicia kept pushing on without stopping.

"Don't just decide things in my place!" screeched Mary as they went.

But Alicia still didn't slow down. In fact, right then a song had come to an end, and Patrick called out to her, asking her to dance with him next. Yet she rejected even that: "Lord Patrick, your turn is much later!"

While the two pitiable men stood there in a daze, Mary, who was more pitiable than anyone, found herself in the middle of the main hall.

Until that moment, everyone had been dancing elegantly along with the music, but they all stopped in surprise when the princess and the daughter of House Albert sprang out into the middle of the hall hand in hand (though from Mary's perspective, it was more accurate to say that she'd been dragged out here). The band continued playing, yet they all cast their gazes upon the pair as well.

Alicia paid them no heed, squeezing Mary's hand tightly with a bright smile. "All right, Lady Mary! Let's dance!"

"W-Wait a minute!"

"Come on, the music is starting!"

"Waaah! Stop pulling me! Don't spin around so much!"

"Isn't this fun, Lady Mary?"

Alicia went round and round in time with the music. As she was holding on to Mary, she couldn't shake free and went after her as though Alicia was spinning her around. It was a graceless display and a far cry from elegance—it couldn't even have been called "dancing" by any standard.

Everyone else watched the two of them with warm, wry smiles on their faces. Patrick and Adi exchanged a look with each other too, and they both shrugged.

Boisterous though it may have been, what an enjoyable scene unfolded before them! That said, Mary, who was being twirled around by Alicia, certainly wasn't enjoying any of this. But Alicia wasn't showing any signs of stopping, and for some reason the others simply looked on with no intentions of stopping her

either.

Mary was fighting desperately to avoid falling down. Finally, she took in a deep, long breath and...

“Listen when I’m talking to you, you peasant girl!!!”

...shrieked loudly during her very own wedding reception. And as though to cover up her voice, the two bracelets of different colors bumped against each other with a *clink*.

Epilogue

“Are you really, really, *really* sure? There’s no more sequels, and no more bonus content, right?!” Adi questioned frantically.

“Yes! I’m really, really, *really* sure! There’s nothing else!” Mary replied in frustration.

Right after her dance with Alicia had ended (though, Mary herself would’ve been hard-pressed to call it a “dance”), the completely exhausted Mary had persuaded the satisfied-looking Alicia to bring her back to the courtyard, where Adi was waiting to interrogate her.

What was wrong with this servant—or rather, this husband of hers, for him to be wondering about game sequels during their celebratory party? And from the looks of it, he was *very* curious, indeed.

Mary sighed and called over to Carina, who happened to be nearby. “Hey, the *Heart High* series ended after the sequel, right?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“See? She says as much too,” Mary insisted.

Adi still seemed somewhat discontent, but nodded anyway. “Very well.”

Yet he continued to look dubious, as though he didn’t believe their words, and Mary sighed at him again. “What’s wrong, Adi? Didn’t you say you don’t care about the games?”

“That’s right.”

“So then what’s the matter?”

“...stand it...”

“What?”

“I couldn’t stand it if there were any more of them!” Adi lamented in despair.

Mary’s eyes widened, and she was about to ask what he meant, but...

“Lady Mary! Let’s dance one more time!”

...Alicia jumped at her and grabbed her right arm. And to top it off...

“Um, L-Lady Mary... If you don’t mind, maybe you could d-dance with me too...?”

...Parfette grabbed her left arm and looked up at Mary apprehensively. And so, Mary swallowed her words.

As if in silent appeal, Adi’s rust-colored eyes seemed to coldly say, *“What do I mean?* This*, of course!”*

Mary had to agree he had a point as she sighed again. She then turned her gaze to the two girls who were trying to tug her along. “Listen, this is supposed to be a wedding party for me and Adi.”

“Lady Mary, look! There’s space in the main hall right now!”

“Ugh, I *told* you to listen to me when I talk! Patrick! Where is that man?! Come and get this girl off my hands!”

“L-Lady Mary... I knew it, you’d never want to—!”

“And *you*! Shouldn’t you be inviting someone else instead?”

Mary reproached the two of them, searching for their guardians (Patrick and Gainas). But the former was surrounded by even more girls eager to make memories with him, and when their eyes met, he just mouthed, *“Sorry.”*

The latter meanwhile shook his head as if to silently say, *“I can’t do it.”*

Mary sighed deeply at these two extremely unreliable guardians. She was about to open her mouth to say something to the two girls who were holding on to her, but right then something else pulled her away from them.

A pair of strong arms wrapped around her body, and her forehead bumped against something—or some*one*. By the time Mary realized someone was holding her tightly, the two girls had already let go of her.

“No, milady’s not going with either of you! She’ll be dancing with *me*!” said a voice above Mary’s head.

The words weren’t particularly stylish and failed to pass as a proper dance invitation. But Mary laughed quietly at that silly, very Adi-esque invitation

nonetheless, and wrapped her freed arms around his back. She held him tightly, grasping his jacket as if to cajole him, and drew closer as if to show him off.

“Sorry, you two,” she told Alicia and Parfette, then looked up at the man who was holding her.

Adi was looking at her with flushed cheeks, like he wanted to say something, and the corners of Mary’s lips quirked upwards at the sight of his seductive rust-colored eyes. How easy it was to tell that he wanted to monopolize her!

“Even I, Mary Albert, couldn’t refuse such a passionate invitation,” Mary said with a giggle, placing her hand in his when he offered it.

And so, hand in hand they made their way to the main hall.

As they walked slowly towards the center, Mary heard a few people chuckle wryly and mutter, “Ah, finally.” Indeed, the two of them should’ve been the first to the dance floor, yet their stage appearance came late. Not to mention, the previous incident with Alicia had caused quite a few people’s shoulders to droop in exasperation. Even the orchestra smiled at the sight of the couple, turning the pages of their sheet music as though to say they’d been waiting for this.

As the music flowed gently, Mary snuggled up to Adi. But when she looked up and saw his sulky expression, she couldn’t help letting out a quiet laugh. “Adi, are you still sulking?”

“I wanted to have your first dance.”

“What happened with Alicia can’t even be called a ‘dance.’ If anything, that was just a contest of swinging Mary Albert around.”

“Well, I want to be a participant.”

“Worry not. When it comes to mental carousels, you’re the winner by a landslide.”

They continued this exchange, which was very much like them (and very much unsuited for a wedding reception), as they held each other close and chuckled. To any onlookers, so long as they weren’t aware of the content of their conversation, the pair looked like something out of a painting. The sight

was like a dreamy moment in time capturing two people in love.

As this atmosphere spread around them, Mary squeezed Adi's hand in hers. His masculine hand was much larger than hers. Once, when he'd held her tightly like this, her heart would ache so much that she wanted to cry, but now their entangled fingers made a numbing sensation flow sweetly into the rest of her body.

"My lady, do you happen to recall who your first ever dance partner was?"

"Hmm. Perhaps my instructor? Or one of my brothers?"

"No, it was me. You still weren't steady on your feet back then, but you danced with me in tune to the music," Adi said with a grin, as though he was having fun remembering the old times.

"Really?" Mary asked with surprise.

Based on his description, it must've been so long ago that she couldn't even remember it. If that were the case, then at that age Mary probably didn't even grasp the concept of a proper dance, and it certainly couldn't have happened during any sort of party. It must've been at some other place where she'd grabbed Adi's hand and wobbled around unsteadily in a pseudo-dance.

As she pictured such a scene, Mary smiled lightly to herself.

"Then it's no wonder I don't like dancing with anyone else," she said. "After all, my very first dance partner was the very best of them all."

Even when the beloved Prince Charming Patrick took Mary by the hand to the center of a lavish party and led their dance so perfectly that she could surrender to it with no trouble, it never affected her in any way, nor did she find it a fun experience. She was so unmoved by it that she'd even worried that something was wrong with her.

But right now, she felt nothing short of euphoria. The hand that held hers was warm, and a flame lit up within her body just from cuddling up close to Adi. The bliss was almost soporific, and her chest was throbbing. She was happy from the bottom of her heart, and she felt like this moment was indescribably enjoyable.

Laughing quietly, Mary looked up at Adi.

His rust-ringed pupils gazed back into hers, and his matching hair swayed lightly. Combined with the flowing music, what a grand sight was before her. When he smiled softly at her, she felt like her heart was melting, and a delightful sense of glee enveloped her whole body.

Ahh, how wonderful dancing is...! Mary thought, having completely forgotten that up until now, she'd dismiss any such notions as something only boring fools would enjoy. She let herself be swept up in ecstasy as she nestled in close to Adi's chest.

"Let's dance together during every single party from now on," she told him.

"Of course we will."

"And you need to escort me every time."

"I shall do so."

"I want you to always be with me."

"My place is by your side."

"And mine's by yours too," Mary said with a fond smile on her face as she stood on her tiptoes, and...

Tap!

...blinked open her eyes when something lightly stepped on her foot.

"My, before anything, I believe you need to work on your dancing."

"I shall fully devote myself to that," Adi said with a remorseful expression.

Mary smirked, and even as she stomped on his foot in revenge, she also used it as a stool to give him a kiss.

In the Middle of the Party

“Not yet. Don’t open your eyes,” said Alicia quietly, leading Mary by the arm.

“I get it already!” Mary screeched just as quietly, keeping her eyes shut.

In the middle of the wedding reception party, while Mary had been busy interacting with the guests, Alicia had suddenly appeared, grabbed her arm, and coercively dragged her away. She told Mary to keep her eyes closed, so Mary couldn’t tell where they were going, but she’d lived in Albert Manor all her life, so she could more or less figure it out.

Most likely, they were heading for the courtyard, close to the fountain.

Still, Mary had no idea why they were going there, and she knew asking Alicia would be pointless, so she just let the girl take her along with exasperation. But just in case, she did warn Alicia, saying, “If you’re dragging me off someplace for no reason, I’ll slap you!” Though, it was unclear whether that was in any way effective.

And so Alicia merrily led her to the courtyard.

“Lady Mary, you can open your eyes now!”

At the sound of that chirpy voice, Mary slowly opened her eyes. “I’ll let you decide if you prefer the left cheek or the...right...” Her violent language faded out at the beautiful sight before her eyes.

The water in the fountain twinkled under the moonlight, reflecting all the flowers surrounding it as they swayed in the breeze. This whimsical scene had a different kind of charm about it than the rest of the opulent estate, and it made Mary’s breath hitch.

But what made her heart flutter more than anything was the person standing amid this beautiful scenery. He approached her with a smile as his rust-colored hair fluttered in the wind.

“Milady,” he called to her, and it caused Mary to feel a lump in her throat.

“Adi, what are you doing here?”

“Lord Patrick called me over, but when I arrived, he wasn’t here... What about you?”

“I... Ah, I see.”

Alicia had vanished at some point, and Mary smiled when she realized it. *For a country girl, you have some fancy ideas*, she thought in her own version of gratitude.

She then turned to face Adi again, and he—having conjectured what was happening too—smiled bashfully and reached out his hand towards her. Mary calmly remained still as his fingers brushed against her cheek. His touch was ticklish, and the way he occasionally caressed her hair made her chest swell with warmth. It was so pleasant that she felt like she was floating, and when she cuddled up closer to him, he placed his hands upon her waist as though they were in a dance.

The music from inside the venue quietly echoed outside. As they moved in time with it, Adi stepped back as if wanting to take the lead.

“Do try to avoid stepping on my feet,” Mary said with a mischievous smile, resting her weight against his chest.

The sound of his heartbeat comforted her, and she felt the rhythm within her own chest overlap with his through their skin. In a state of bliss, she lifted her face towards his and closed her eyes as though to coax him.

Sensing her intentions, Adi stopped in place. It seemed he couldn’t kiss her and dance with her at the same time, and Mary laughed quietly at his clumsiness, pulling on his clothes to urge him on.

He placed his hand on her cheek and drew nearer while stroking it gently. The way he kissed her as though in deep devotion filled her with tenderness, warmth, and more than anything, euphoria. It was the kind of sweetness no dessert in the world could rival, and Mary wrapped her arms around Adi’s back in return.

It was just the two of them, kissing under the watchful light of the moon... The moment was like the final scene of some fairy tale.

Mary was so pleased with this stage direction that she even allowed their

kisses to gradually deepen... But the second she noticed the way his hands started rubbing her waist, her eyes flew open.

“Have some restraint!”

And with that, her right fist sunk into his flank.

“Your right hook is powerful, as always...! You could beat the whole world with that...!” Adi praised her while crumpling to his knees, and Mary only glared at him with reddened cheeks.



Afterword

Hello, this is Saki.

Thank you very much for picking up volume two of my novel, *Young Lady Albert is Courting Disaster*!

With the previous book, I was aiming to write a love comedy, but the scales ended up leaning more towards pure comedy. However, with this work, perhaps I've finally managed to strike a good balance between the two... What do you think?

I tried to cram this novel full of as many fun scenes as possible, and I still recall the sunny feeling I had when I finished writing the grand finale.

This volume ends here, but I'm publishing a few short stories from the series online as well. As a writer, there would be no greater joy for me than if my readers still wished to see more of Mary and her companions.

Lastly, I would like to thank the artist, Haduki Futaba, for drawing the characters so adorably and attractively, as well as my manager for guiding me throughout the process.

And more than anyone, I'd like to thank every single person who picked up this novel from the bottom of my heart.

I hope we can meet again in the future.

Saki