Story by Saki

Illustrations by Haduki Futaba



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3



YOUNG LADY ALBERT IS COURTING DISASTER

Young Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster: Volume 3 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10

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Tea Party

A few young noble ladies sat around a table, sipping tea and chatting pleasantly.

Were one to look upon this from an outsider's perspective, there was no doubt it'd seem like a beautifully glittering scene, especially since the gathered ladies were all pretty and graceful. Any woman would've wanted to become like them, and any man would've been enchanted by them, lamenting that they were out of his league.

Indeed, the girls were simply *that* elegant. In addition, they were seen as heroines here at Elysiana College.

Sitting among such company, Mary smiled calmly. "As long as you two are happy," she said.

Her friend, whom she hadn't seen for a long time, nodded in response. Even though she was smiling, in contrast to that, she also seemed on the verge of tears as she clung onto the hem of Mary's dress. She had been in this state since the tea party had begun—no, in fact, since she'd first laid eyes on Mary.

Mary couldn't keep ignoring it anymore, and she sighed as she placed her hands upon her friend's, which were still holding her dress. As she rubbed and gently squeezed them, her friend's tearful eyes immediately twinkled.

"Lady Maryyy...!"

"Don't cry just because we haven't seen each other in a while, Parfette," Mary said in exasperation, and Parfette nodded with still-dampened eyes.

Parfette had always been highly codependent on Mary, so when Mary had returned to Karelia Academy, the girl said she often felt like crying from loneliness. But now that they'd reunited, she was still crying. It was no longer sufficient to describe her as a crybaby—rather, crying was her default state of being. Yet despite knowing this, Mary just couldn't bring herself to abandon the girl, and perhaps that was exactly why she'd become attached to Parfette in the first place.

Nonetheless, Mary didn't plan to just allow Parfette to get away with being coddled. The second that the teary-eyed girl felt comfortable enough to let herself smile, Mary felt the urge to tease her stir in her heart.

She glanced behind Parfette, at the young man a short distance away who was presently reading a book. He was far enough removed so as not to overhear the girls' conversation, but still kept waiting nearby.

"I see a certain someone is waiting very patiently for you."

"I have no idea what you mean!" Parfette insisted, now suddenly puffing out her cheeks.

Mary couldn't stop herself from grinning. That "certain someone" was, of course, Gainas—Parfette's ex-fiancé. It seemed that the adorable young lady still held a grudge against him.

While Mary smiled mischievously and enjoyed herself by poking fun at them, Carina, who was also present, chuckled along. Each time Carina laughed, her black hair swayed, and her lips drew up in a lovely arc.

"Oh my. Do you wish to join in on teasing Parfette, Carina?"

"Please stop, Lady Mary! Lady Carina doesn't behave in such a way!"

"It's just as Parfette says—I do not tease her. If I were to have a say in this matter, however, I would opt for doing something so painful to him that I hesitate to even say it out loud..." Carina trailed off, gazing at Gainas as she spoke. Though he was too far away to hear what she said, he still trembled as though sensing something in the air.

Despite what Parfette had said about him moments ago, she was ready to jump to his defense as she hurriedly grabbed hold of Carina's arm. She clung to the other girl like a desperate kitten. "Y-You mustn't, Lady Carina!"

"Oh dear, are you actually defending him, Parfette?" asked Carina.

"I-It's not like that..."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. There's a few things I'd like to test out, and he seems sturdy enough."

"Waaah! Lord Gainas, please run...!" Parfette cried weakly.

Though he shouldn't have heard this either, Gainas once again shuddered. He rubbed his arms and looked around for the cause of the sudden chill in the air.

For a moment, Parfette gazed at him in concern, but then suddenly she snapped back to herself. She'd finally realized she was being teased at the sight of the other girls' calm, cheerful smiles, and once again puffed out her cheeks as though to say, *"You two are so mean!"*

But when Mary clasped the other girl's hand to soothe her, soon enough Parfette returned to her good humor. Mary's smile only grew bigger at the way Parfette's expressions kept changing in rapid succession.

"I feel like I'm looking after a toy dog, really."

"Indeed, that does describe Parfette quite well," Carina agreed.

"At least *this* dog doesn't jump at you out of nowhere or pound your shoulde __"

Mary's words cut off suddenly. That was, of course, because Alicia had embraced her from behind. The sheer vigor of her action made Mary jump to her feet and screech out, "How vulgar!"

Her words didn't discourage Alicia in the slightest. The girl grasped the hem of her own dress and curtsied politely in greeting towards Carina and Parfette, and then turned back to Mary. "Now then!" she said and squeezed Mary's waist. The fact that she'd actually hugged Mary again like she was launching a second round of attacks only made Mary scream more. "Hello, Lady Mary!"

"Why did you greet *them* normally?! Can't you greet me like that too?!"

"Thank you so much for having me! I really wanted to visit Elysiana College at least once!"

"Hey, listen to me...! Why do you keep hugging me tighter and then relaxing your hold over and over again?!"

"Oh, by the way, I have a letter from your brothers, Lady Mary," said Alicia, fishing around in her bag.

Mary inhaled deeply as she was finally released. She took the letter from Alicia, when something suddenly grabbed her shoulder from behind. Naturally,

it was the ambitious girl. Today just like always, her eyes were blazing with determination.

Without thinking, Mary smiled tensely and turned around so very slowly that her body seemed to almost creak audibly.

Behind her postured a beautiful young lady. That elegant smile of hers should've looked pretty, but... Was Mary imagining it, or could she actually see a bright cloud of flame burning behind the girl? Could this have been a manifestation of the girl's ambition, or was it just an illusion caused by the aspirations which still blazed within her heart?

"G-Greetings, Margaret..."

"Greetings, Lady Mary. By the way, I believe I just heard words that sounded like, 'Here is the perfect chance to aim for the heir of House Albert.'"

"Nobody said anything like that," Mary responded with a strained expression, and sighed when the rest of the girls giggled.

Everyone was so boisterous... And that included Mary herself too.

The Ambitious Young Lady Preys for a Prince

Margaret Brownie, maiden name Margaret Riadora, had been born into an aristocratic family, albeit not one of high standing. That wasn't to say House Riadora was lower class, nor were they such a minor house as to be subservient to other families. Yet they also couldn't boast of being able to proudly reign over the rest of high society—rather, they were exactly average, a perfectly ordinary middle-class noble family.

Margaret didn't find that particularly unfortunate. She wanted for nothing, and she wasn't so thankless a daughter as to curse her fate in such circumstances, understanding perfectly well that she had been born with a silver spoon in her mouth.

Yet if someone had asked Margaret whether she felt satisfied with what she had, she would've shamelessly shaken her head in denial while her eyes blazed with ambition.

Unlike her parents, who had modest wants along the lines of, *"So long as we can leave our children with a little something more than we had, it will be enough,"* Margaret had held an unbridled ambition in her heart from a very young age. Even when she was so young as to not yet grasp the disparities among noble families in full, she'd already had a sense of how their world functioned and wanted to climb to the top of it.

And so a turning point in her life had come when she'd gotten engaged to Rigg Brownie...

House Brownie were an upper class family. The marriage proposal had come about as Margaret's and Rigg's parents had attended Elysiana College together, and Margaret happily responded with an acceptance right away.

She celebrated the fact that she could marry into House Brownie, though there was not an ounce of love between herself and her fiancé. In fact, she'd never even met Rigg in person before accepting, and had only heard terrible

rumors about him, which didn't make for a great impression. Nonetheless, Margaret paid them no heed.

No matter what kind of man he was, she was prepared to support him as a wife, have children with him, and maintain the family line. She would be a wife her husband could be proud of among their peers, and she'd love their children unconditionally... After all, such was the role of the wife in an upstanding family, and Margaret was ready to face anything in order to keep the Brownie name as her own. Nursing such determination, she worked on improving herself day by day.

House Brownie possessed a long-standing upper middle-class family lineage, enough so that everyone in high society scrambled to bid them greetings whenever possible. Given their status, the Brownies had always been able to choose marriage candidates however they pleased. No matter what kind of acquaintanceship they might've had with House Riadora, there was no reason for them to settle for a bride from such an ordinary noble family.

On top of that, Rigg was their only child. House Brownie's obvious course of action should've been to choose a woman of corresponding status as Rigg's bride to continue the family line. If they'd been able to obtain a bride from another upper class family, it would've added further prestige to their own name too.

However, it was their very son who was the cause of all of the family's problems.

Rigg was a selfish and tyrannical man. He despised the nobility despite being a part of it, and had gone through an aggressive, rebellious phase that his parents had found difficult to handle. Always assuming any woman who approached him was after his family name, Rigg would reject them all coldly, and refused any attempts at friendship with other nobles, claiming he didn't see any meaning in it. Sometimes, he'd even go into the town under a false name to mingle with the craftsmen and make a poor imitation of their tailoring.

His parents regretted having spoiled him so much, but by the time they'd realized their mistake, it was already close to being too late. That was why they'd decided to rely on their old friends and begun marriage talks with

Margaret's family. They had to act before their rebellious son did something foolish, such as impregnating another woman, especially one who wasn't a noble...

And so, with both parties' interests aligned, Margaret had become engaged.

As for the first conversation between Margaret and Rigg...

"I bet you're just after our family name like all the others."

"Yes, you are correct."

That was about how it had gone. There was no romance between them, nor did it seem like there'd ever be a chance for it to bloom. But in high society, this was simply how political marriages worked.

The reason the two of them had carried on with their betrothal all the way to college was because Rigg, despite his hatred of aristocrats, wouldn't throw away the benefits that came with his family name. For her part, Margaret endeavored to do all she could so as not to make a single mistake and threaten the annulment of their engagement.

The second—and greatly undesired—turning point in Margaret's life came when Lilianne transferred to Elysiana College...

Right after her transferral, Lilianne made contact with Rigg and then found all kinds of excuses to follow him around. Witnessing these events unfold, Margaret, like the other young noble ladies, assumed her fiancé would give Lilianne the cold shoulder until the girl left. After all, none of them could have guessed that Lilianne was operating based on her past life memories of a video game she'd played.

And yet, though Rigg had treated Lilianne coldly at first, gradually he began smiling softly at her instead. Moreover, he'd even start conversations with her himself, and in the end, he became one of the men who surrounded her at all times. How could this have happened, indeed?

Alas, it had occurred because Lilianne was aware of his complex regarding the aristocracy, owing to her knowledge of the game. In fact, someone like Rigg, who was starved for love and kindness unrelated to his family name, must've been an easy catch for her. Though, just as always, there was no true love to be

found there.

Under such unforeseen circumstances, Margaret couldn't believe how much Rigg had changed. At the same time, her own expression had soured. She had gone out of her way to form a connection with House Brownie, only to have some other girl steal it all away.

Filled with anxiety, Margaret was the very first of all the noble girls to make a move. She acted so quickly that even Carina, who was aware of everything and carefully taking action of her own, didn't notice it nor expect it to happen. (Afterwards, Margaret would comment, "When it comes to hunting, initial speed is critical.")

The first thing Margaret did was to show Rigg's parents how their son was acting after having joined Lilianne's reverse harem. Their expressions darkened immediately upon witnessing such a pathetic display. They already had no idea what to do with him, and now their worst fears were being realized. As such, they were full of unease.

While the Brownie couple started thinking about adopting a new heir, Margaret made a proclamation before them: "I vow to you that I will find a new groom and give birth to a fine baby boy!"

It was an absurd assertion, and yet they'd nodded their heads and adopted Margaret into House Brownie. The couple had been won over by her ambition. Margaret was overjoyed, and the Brownies had decided to recompense House Riadora for sending out their daughter without faulting her for her aspirations.

The third turning point in Margaret's life... It was here and now, during Mary Albert's wedding reception party.

Mary herself was enveloped by an aura of joy from having made public the identity of her beloved, and she was presently stirring the other young ladies into action. As Mary explained that someone else might steal away the girls' objects of affection if they did nothing, Margaret nodded in agreement in her mind. Indeed, taking action was crucial.

And so, having listened to Mary's advice, the girls went off one by one to find the individuals they had set their hearts on.

Unfortunately, Margaret didn't have a specific target herself, and she watched the others vacate the area before softly placing her hand on Mary's shoulder when the other girl had her back turned. Mary jolted in surprise.

"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."

Margaret giggled at Mary's words and headed towards the venue.

The other girls were starting conversations with their desired partners. Patrick Dyce was particularly popular, and a number of girls who yearned for him were waiting for their chance. They all gazed on as he and Carina danced hand in hand. For once, Carina didn't look like her usual composed self, but instead seemed ecstatic, her cheeks flushed.

Margaret slowly surveyed the venue and let out a deep sigh at the magnificent view before her. Indeed, Albert Manor was truly splendid. Everything in sight was extravagant, yet stylish enough so as not to feel distasteful like some new money boasting. Every detail of the party had been meticulously attended to, and every single servant continued to offer hospitality to the guests without showing an ounce of exhaustion.

There were first-class goods as far as the eye could see. Everything within this mansion was a testament to House Albert's historical significance and the fact that they now held authority equal to the royals.

I'm so jealous... Margaret thought, gazing out the window at Mary. She was talking about something or other with Parfette, and she conducted herself beautifully, just as one would expect from a daughter of House Albert. The girl

had been raised in this high degree extravagance as though it were the most normal thing in the world, and she passed through the mansion doors day by day without ever pausing to admire any of it.

A son of House Albert might really be the best choice... Margaret told herself as she pictured such scenes in her mind and decided to return to the garden. But on her way there, she noticed a lone boy loitering around, seemingly lost in thought, and that made her stop in her tracks.

The fact that she had noticed him and now spoke to him was all mere coincidence. She didn't know who he was, and they hadn't even made eye contact. Nor had he called out to her. Simply put, Margaret had grown curious about him for some reason and decided to talk to him on a whim. As this decision would end up changing her fate in a drastic way, one could also say this "coincidence" had come about as a result of her ambition, which had drawn her to the boy.

"You're pulling quite the long face in the middle of a party," Margaret told him gently.

He snapped out of his thoughts and quickly looked towards her. His soft hair swayed with the movement, and his darkly colored eyes captured hers. He was a beautiful boy, and though young, there was a sharpness to his features. Yet there was also something dark about his expression, and when Margaret asked him what was wrong, he hung his head down as if to avoid meeting her gaze.

That expression is ruining his pretty face... Margaret murmured in her mind and moved slowly to stand next to him so as not to frighten him. She followed the line of his sight from moments ago, looking over the sight of Albert Manor.

It was so very opulent that she could almost fall under the illusion that the mansion was trying to show her the difference in class between House Albert and herself. But at the same time, seeing it made her think of how she wanted to stand on the same level as its owners. Margaret wanted to be able to walk through the doors of Albert Manor with dignity, and then invite Mary Albert to visit her own equally lavish mansion in turn.

Even I can admit such an aspiration might be impossible, Margaret thought with a small smile.

Right then, the boy next to her murmured, “I’m...”

He was probably around ten, maybe eleven years old. His beautiful looks matched well with his prepubescent voice. Margaret felt as though she was gazing upon a lovely work of art. Yet his expression was still dark, and the tone of his voice sounded dispirited. She was certain he’d look even more beautiful if he smiled instead.

“What is it?” she prompted.

“I’m jealous of the people who can confidently walk around such a fine mansion.”

“Oh my. Why is that?”

“Well, I have two older brothers... They’re both really dignified, and they always act the part too. But I’m so nervous just being here, and I have no idea how I’m supposed to behave,” he explained pitifully, casting his gaze down.

Margaret smiled at him softly. *How adorable...* she thought, and the feeling rising in her chest caused the corners of her lips to lift up by themselves. *The third son, is he?* she noted all the while—such scrutiny was indeed very in character for Margaret Brownie. After all, the Brownie name was nothing to sneeze at, both in terms of their pedigree and the reputation they had carved out for themselves.

“The truth is, my eldest brother was supposed to take over the family. But lots of things happened, and now my other brother’s the heir. I know they have a lot of burdens, but I wish I could play my part too. Seeing them work so hard, I wonder if it’s really okay for me to do nothing...”

“Would you like to be the heir instead of your brother?”

“No, of course not!” The boy shook his head in a fluster at the question. Alas, it would seem he didn’t have the desire to kick his brother down and take the title of heir for himself. Margaret was impressed; he really was a kind boy. (If Mary were here right now, she’d have definitely coldly declared, *“Not everyone is as ambitious as* you*.”*)

Even so, the boy raised his face and looked over Albert Manor. When the breeze swayed his indigo hair, he emanated a mixture of adorableness and

masculinity, creating a youthful sort of charm.

"I don't want to replace my brothers or anything like that. But still... I also want to be responsible for something, just like they are. I want to be able to stand proudly and without hesitation in this resplendent world of high society," the boy asserted.

Though his words were juvenile, there was a distinct sense of manliness in them, which made Margaret's breath hitch a little. He had a boyish cuteness about him, yet a powerful determination dwelled in his eyes, blazing so strongly that it almost made her feel timid. But very quickly his expression fell again, and he sighed as he cast his gaze down once more.

The boy had the pure and innocent aspiration to help his brothers, yet at the same time, he felt resentful towards himself over his young age. The flame that had lit up in his gaze for a moment was so small it was easy to miss it, and now there was no trace of it left as he anxiously cast his indigo eyes to the side.

Even so, Margaret was certain the flame had been there for a second. That was why she, from the bottom of her heart, wanted to keep that fire burning, and to support him somehow in achieving his goal.

However, what held her back was the thought that she had been intending to compensate both House Brownie for trusting in her ambition, and House Riadora for allowing her to leave. It would be inexcusable to both families if she were to marry someone of a low standing.

Her thoughts were fueled by her own ambition, but she was also a woman who possessed a strong sense of duty. In order to repay a debt of gratitude to both families, Margaret felt she was obliged to find a groom whom they all would be satisfied with.

Ideally, it'd be someone with equal standing to House Brownie, or else of an even higher rank. Finding a candidate like that would repay her debts, as well as enable her to spite Rigg for having chosen Lilianne over her. Alas, there weren't many men around who met such criteria. Margaret knew this, and she sighed quietly as she looked at the young boy before her.

She'd never had any delusions that some prince might come and take her away. Though, if one *did* appear, she'd certainly go out to meet him...

Margaret shook her head lightly at her own thoughts. She had to focus on the boy and his troubles for now. Although she certainly had no intentions of disavowing her own aspirations, that didn't give her an excuse to neglect someone's appeal for help.

Hence, she turned to face the boy again and stared fixedly into his eyes. His deep, indigo-ringed pupils seemed to almost absorb her, reflecting a note of sorrow. He looked back at her as though waiting for her to say something.

"Indeed, you might be immature compared to your brothers."

"Exactly..."

"But that's just because you're young. It's only natural that you're more inexperienced than them. In fact, you aren't even aware of how natural that is, and that's what makes you put your older brothers as they are now on a pedestal. That's also why your immaturity is so wonderful."

"Wonderful...?" The boy's eyes widened. He hadn't expected his immaturity to be praised as something positive.

His adorably shocked expression made Margaret chuckle softly. "So long as you keep thinking of yourself as immature and paying attention to the difference between you and your brothers, that will give you room for growth."

"Growth?"

"Yes. If you continue to pursue your ideals, then by the time you're their age, you will become an incomparably wonderful man. I guarantee it," Margaret told him, puffing up with pride herself as though to say, *"So have some confidence!"*

The boy stared blankly ahead as if overwhelmed by her words. In the next moment, his cheeks reddened suddenly.

Margaret pressed her hand to her mouth at his reaction, as though to say, *"My, how adorable."* His reactions and expressions stirred up a particular kind of affection within her, and an indescribable sense of cuteness filled her heart.

She simultaneously wanted to support him, be there for him at times, watch over him at others, and see him grow up closer than anyone else. This was the first time in her life that she'd felt such emotions for someone, despite not even

knowing his social standing.

Suddenly, Margaret remembered she hadn't asked the boy about his house, let alone his first name, and she cast a sideways glance at him. If he had a rank on par with House Brownie, and if his family lineage was equally prestigious, then...

That was how far her thoughts had gotten when Margaret opened her mouth slightly, as if to say, *"I want to call out your name, but I don't even know what it is."*

The boy conjectured the meaning behind her gesture and lowered his head in a fluster as he apologized. He must've been thinking about how rude he'd been, talking about himself without ever giving his name. His demeanor was adorable, and Margaret smiled gently at him.

"My apologies for going on at length about my issues without even introducing myself. My name's Bernard—Bernard Dyce."

"Bernard...Dyce?" Margaret echoed at the sound of the familiar name. It wasn't that she hadn't heard what he'd said. In fact, his clear voice resounded in her ears very pleasantly. She just couldn't believe it. "You're...from House Dyce?"

"Yes." The boy—or rather, Bernard nodded decisively in response.

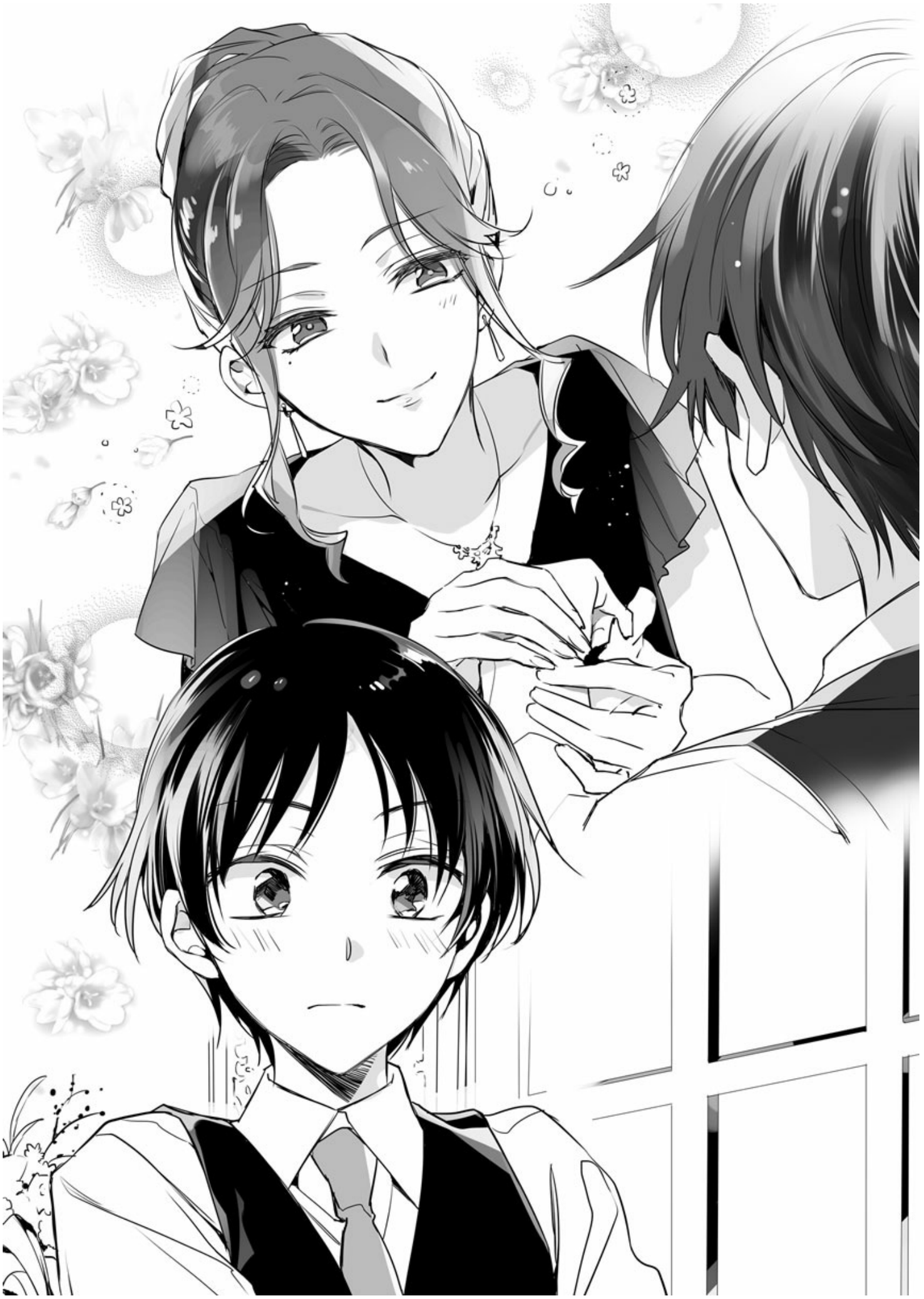
Margaret suddenly saw the air around him sparkle and glitter. So he was a member of House *Dyce*!

There was no person alive who didn't know of the Dyce family, both within their home country and in the neighboring nations alike. Originally, they'd been second in power only to House Albert, and their first son, Patrick, would reach an even higher standing if he and Princess Alicia were officially tied. Nowadays, they were no longer second to the Alberts—instead, the two families mutually supported one another. Margaret remembered Mary saying as much with a smile on her face.

This went beyond crème de la crème. In comparison to House Brownie, House Dyce was as far out of reach as the heavens themselves. Their family lineage excelled above nearly all the other nobles.

And Bernard Dyce was their third son.

Ah, I see. So that's why their first son, Patrick, won't inherit the family, leaving it to the middle brother instead... Margaret thought as she gently clasped Bernard's hand. His slender fingers, not yet having grown into a manly form, twitched at the action. But he didn't shake her off or retract his hand, and as Maragret looked upon him, she noticed his cheeks turned even brighter red. Even the tips of his ears peeking out from his indigo hair were dyed red. How adorable!



“I had no idea you were from House Dyce. My apologies for all the things I said to you...”

“No, not at all. It was my fault for not introducing myself first. Um... What’s your name?”

Margaret didn’t respond right away, instead smiling sweetly at him. Bernard’s cheeks flushed even more, and he gazed back at her as though enchanted.

I’ve been polishing my beauty even more in an attempt to keep Rigg in check, but... All of that was for this moment, Margaret told herself inwardly. She gripped Bernard’s shaking hand a little tighter. “My name is Margaret Brownie,” she said to him.

The boy echoed her name in a clear, quiet voice.

It made Margaret so happy that she could feel her own expression brighten into a genuine smile. “If talking with me makes you feel even just a little bit better, then please, feel free to speak about anything you like,” she said.

In response, the blushing Bernard nodded.

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“Oh my,” Mary murmured, reaching out to pat her own shoulders. All of a sudden, they felt lighter, as though a great weight had been lifted.

At the same time, Patrick, who’d been looking at her questioningly, shuddered.

“I wonder what happened? My shoulders feel so light,” she commented.

“What’s going on? I just felt chills...”

While Mary touched her shoulders curiously, Patrick looked around his surroundings suspiciously. Everyone around them tilted their heads at this behavior.

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A few months after the wedding reception party, Mary and Adi had just finished wrapping up some business at the Dyce estate when Bernard approached them. He said he had something he wanted to talk to them about,

and having known the young boy for a long time, there was no way the two of them could refuse. They followed him to a guest room and sipped on the tea that the servants had brewed for them while watching Bernard expectantly.

The boy seemed to struggle on how to begin, but finally he opened his mouth to speak. “Lady Mary... Um, I’ve been wondering, what sort of gifts do women enjoy getting...?” he inquired in a muddled tone of voice, his cheeks pink.

Mary and Adi exchanged a look. *“This could only mean one thing,”* they seemed to think simultaneously. And because both of them knew just how pure and sincere Bernard was, they also knew they were obliged to answer him earnestly. The pair nodded their agreement to each other.

“Ah, sending ladies gifts is not a difficult matter,” Mary responded.

“What kind of gifts would make you happy, Lady Mary?”

“Croque—”

“Lord Bernard, please don’t use milady as your sole reference point,” Adi interrupted immediately, which made Mary snap back to her senses.

That was close; she’d almost let the truth slip out! She would have felt remorseful if Bernard actually took her words as advice. Mary rebuked herself inwardly, then looked up at Adi, trying to apologize with her eyes. Seemingly picking up on it, Adi nodded at her.

Bernard didn’t notice the look they exchanged as he turned to Adi instead. “Adi, what kind of things have you given Lady Mary lately?”

“Me?” Adi asked as both his and Mary’s eyes grew wide at the question.

They leaned in together as though they were about to discuss secrets. It was an emergency meeting.

“I mean... Yesterday I bought some croquettes for you on my way home. Would you count that as a gift?”

“Didn’t you *just* tell him *not* to use me as a reference point?”

“That’s because I didn’t want him doing that, but thinking it over, all I *have* given you lately are croquettes.”

“So what now?”

“Well, is there anything you’d like as a gift?”

“I’m feeling peckish.”

“So you just want more croquettes?!”

Following their whispered discussion, Mary cleared her throat. She then faced Bernard again, looking into his indigo eyes. “Bernard, I see you must’ve met someone very important to you. Am I right?” she asked gently.

Bernard blushed, but he didn’t deny it or try to hide it. He nodded honestly, true to his pure character. To top it off, that person was evidently a woman. Mary’s face broke into a smile at the thought.

“Yes, she’s really important to me,” he confirmed.

“She must be an irreplaceable existence to you, then.”

“Nobody could ever replace her,” he asserted.

“In that case, you cannot use *us* as your reference point,” Mary said with a smile. “Especially if she’s such a precious, irreplaceable person to you.”

Bernard gasped, as though realizing something. “You’re right,” he said, casting his eyes down and then smiling in embarrassment. “I’ll think on it and decide what to send her myself,” he added with such adorableness that Mary and Adi couldn’t help but smile at him. His gaze was brimming with purity. Perhaps he was picturing the girl in question and how pleased she’d be with his gift, which in turn made him happy.

“She must be a very charming person, for you to think of her so fondly,” Mary commented.

“Yes. She’s very pretty, and kind, and full of mature charm.”

“Oh, so she’s older than you?”

“She’s a student at Elysiana College, and she’s in the same grade as you, Lady Mary.”

“The same grade as milady...? The same age...? *Mature charm*...?”

“I wonder why you look so confused by that, Adi?” Mary asked, smiling

elegantly at him. Adi smoothed over his words by laughing dryly.

But Mary couldn't blame him for having doubts. After all, by his standards, the other girls Mary's age included Alicia, who'd barged into Albert Manor first thing this morning for a playdate, and Parfette, who'd come over a few days ago teary and shaking all over. They were the furthest thing from "mature charm."

Adi, not wanting to explain as much to Bernard, forcibly shifted the topic back on track. "So, that woman..." he prompted, and Mary cleared her throat again.

"Bernard," she addressed the boy. "Would you mind telling us the name of that lovely lady friend of yours?"

"Of course," Bernard said, smiling fondly as though just the idea of saying her name out loud made him happy. "Her name is..." he began slowly.

Watching him, Mary smiled softly as she brought her teacup closer to her lips...

"Margaret Brownie."

...and barely stopped herself from spluttering her tea all over the place at those words.

Indeed, how very in character for Mary Albert. No matter what kind of surprise attack came her way, she'd never do something so disgraceful as spit out her drink.

She just about managed to swallow it down and coughed lightly. Then, before she could stop herself, she murmured, "That woman finally did it..."

However, the blissful Bernard didn't catch her words.

The Arrival of Spring

The following story occurred at a time when Mary's hair was still curled into tight, sturdy drills.

Mary was sitting next to the nonchalant Patrick during a very ordinary tea party. Every other person present lionized the two of them, commenting on how they looked perfect for each other and what a beautiful pair they made.

For Mary, it was just tiresome, but as the daughter of House Albert, she had no choice but to force a smile and say things like, "Oh my, not at all!" Even as she sighed inwardly in exasperation, she had to play her role in the charade.

There's such a lovely breeze in the air today, and yet I have to sit here and listen to this brownnosing twaddle. On a day like this, I'd much rather take a walk and then dine outside on some croquettes.

Such were Mary's current thoughts, though of course she couldn't verbalize them. At the very least, she could hold her own single-player game of word chain in her mind. But just as she thought that, she noticed something move out of the corner of her eye.

What was that? Mary thought as she looked around.

Yet nothing around them seemed to have changed, and everyone else was still in the middle of their flattering prattle. As both the Albert and Dyce wives were present, the other nobles made use of this opportunity to desperately try to appeal to them.

Whenever Lady Albert made a remark along the lines of, *"The tea is quite delicious,"* everyone quickly agreed and praised her refined tastes.

If Lady Dyce commented, *"Those flowers are so pretty,"* everyone would scramble to hold out a single flower and extol how it reflected the beauty of nature.

Then, everyone followed the gazes of the two ladies towards their daughter and son respectively, and sent compliments on how well they looked together. Mary had already watched the exact same scene play out countless times, and

she was fed up with it.

But she was certain that for a brief moment, she'd seen something fly right by her shoulder...

She glanced at her shoulder in search of whatever it was, and her eyes widened at the sight which signified the arrival of spring.

While the others chattered away, Mary called Patrick's name, quietly enough so that nobody else could hear. Thankfully, this was right around the time when the others were busy currying favor with Lady Albert, so they hadn't noticed it.

But Patrick, who was sitting next to her, heard her and looked over. He must've been bored with this situation too, and all the compliments went in one ear and out the other as he turned to Mary. Though he was sitting upright and chimed in when asked to, he mostly kept his mouth shut stiffly in order to stifle yawns.

"What is it, Mary?"

"Patrick, please take a look at my drills."

Question marks flitted about Patrick's head at Mary's words, but such a reaction was to be expected, considering she'd just said this in the middle of a tea party.

Of course, he knew what she was referring to—he'd inferred from her usual banter with Adi that "drills" meant Mary's ringlets. (Actually, he didn't reproach nor try to stop Adi from using the term, for in fact, Patrick also referred to Mary's hair as "drills" in his mind. Furthermore, there might have even been times when he'd let it slip out loud too.)

But why was she telling him to look at them? Plus, Mary was in possession of several drills, so Patrick had no idea which one he was supposed to look at.

Surmising as much from his expression, Mary cast a glance at her own shoulders. "The front drill on the right."

"Front right...? Ah, that one," Patrick murmured. She must've been referring to the ringlet posturing by the side of her face. He looked down at it as instructed, and then let out a muffled noise.

Right there on top of her tightly curled silver strands of hair was a small, red shape... It was a ladybug.

It must've flown into them by accident. Ladybugs sitting on one's hair was a common occurrence during early spring, all the more so given they were in a courtyard full of blossoming flowers.

However, having landed on a drill, the ladybug looked like it was being absorbed. Or rather, it moved around restlessly as though struggling to free itself from the drill which had captured it. It was like a scene out of one of the circles of hell—or perhaps *spirals* of hell.

"M-Mary..."

"There's been a roadside accident."

"Pfft..." Patrick let out another muffled sound as though trying to keep in his laugh, and then he coughed vigorously.

Of course, he was just trying to cover up his laughter, but Mary still patted his back and with mock gentleness asked, "Are you all right?"

Everyone else glanced at Patrick in worry, and then hurried to praise Mary's kindness at the sight of her comforting him. Throughout all this, the ladybug remained caught in Mary's drills. It couldn't get itself out of the vortex of silver threads.

"Mary, why did you tell me about this...?" Patrick asked.

"I let Adi know earlier too."

"I see—so *that's* why he went to get more cake with such odd timing. He was making an escape," murmured Patrick bitterly, glancing in the direction Adi had fled to and imagining the way he was probably still rolling around with laughter in the servants' canteen right now.

Unlike the servant Adi, who could make a reasonable excuse to run away, the eldest son of House Dyce couldn't just carelessly vacate the tea party. Especially now, as the topic of conversation had shifted to that of his father, the head of the Dyce family—no matter how tired Patrick was of hearing about it, he *had* to pay attention (or at least pretend to).

So what he really should've done in this moment was to cast his eyes and focus away from Mary's drills and the ladybug. But Mary, who knew exactly what he was thinking, decided to give him live coverage of the situation.

"Attempt number eight," she'd say, before shortly after appending, "and we're down."

Each time, Patrick trembled at her commentary, and envied Adi for having sent back a maid to take his place.

Amid all this, Mary quietly muttered, "Oh my." Then, just as quietly, she called Patrick's name again.

Fortunately for the two of them, nobody had noticed what they were doing. Well, even if someone *had*, they'd probably just perceive it as a beautiful, intimate couple having a friendly conversation together. At this rate, even if Mary and Patrick didn't listen to the other nobles' chatter, it'd be interpreted as them simply getting lost in their own private world. Tiresome though it was, it was also convenient.

But who could've thought that while one of them was reporting live on the scene of a roadside accident, the other was shaking while trying to keep in his laughter? Alas, from an outsider's perspective, the two of them were simply close enough that they were able to avoid any suspicion.

"Patrick, please take a look at the front drill on the left."

"Come on, give me a break already..." Patrick whined in a manner very unlike himself. And yet he still leaned forward to take a look.

There on Mary's front-left drill was another small, red ladybug.

"The tragedy repeats itself."

"Mmph..." Patrick frantically covered his mouth with his hand. But that alone was not enough, as he started having a coughing fit and therefore took out a high-quality handkerchief from the pocket on his chest, using it to cover his mouth instead. Naturally, the other aristocrats looked over at him in concern, but he lifted his hand and very calmly said, "Pardon me." Just as expected of Patrick Dyce, he managed to put up a good front, and thankfully the only person who noticed the way his shoulders trembled was Mary.

“Mary, are you sure you aren’t giving off ladybug-attracting pheromones?”

“How rude. No daughter of House Albert would emit such a thing. This simply means that ladybugs are just like humans,” Mary responded before turning back towards the rest of the tea party.

Some of the others were complimenting Lady Albert’s attire, while others yet were praising the gardens admiringly to try and curry favor with her. The rest of the sycophants ceaselessly chattered to Lady Dyce, telling her how her splendid outfit was just perfect for spring, and how her talented son would have no trouble securing a bright future.

Every single person was desperate to put the Albert and Dyce names first.

Observing this scene, the fed up Mary punned, “Both humans and ladybugs alike get caught up in the long things.”

At that exact moment, both of the ladybugs softly took off from her drills.

What a springlike view, indeed! Mary couldn’t help smiling fondly.

In contrast, Patrick had reached his limit. He quickly got to his feet as though suddenly remembering something important he had to take care of, and then walked away briskly in the same direction Adi had gone earlier.

The Crybaby Lady Would Like a Flower and Words of Love

Parfette was overwhelmed with happiness to be invited to Mary and Adi's wedding reception held at Albert Manor. She'd intended to enjoy her time at the venue while carefully keeping the invitation that Mary had handed her over personally in both hands, but she couldn't fully immerse herself in the lovely party on account of the man waiting behind her, whose presence distracted her. Of course, the man in question was Gainas Eldland.

Lady Mary went out of her way to invite me here, but I can't even enjoy it! Parfette's eyes seemed to say as she glared over her shoulder at him. Gainas must have conjectured her feelings, for his eyebrows tilted downwards remorsefully. And yet, not only would he not leave her alone, he also didn't stray too close to her. While he glanced at her hesitantly, Parfette openly turned away from him with a huff.

The truth was, if Gainas were to leave her alone, Parfette would get angry and exclaim, *"So that's as far as his determination goes, huh?!"* On the other hand, if he were to approach her any closer, she'd also get angry and exclaim, *"Don't act so friendly with me!"* In other words, though this half-baked distance between them was unmanageable, neither of them could take a step backward or forward.

"How about you take a look at our gardens? They're very famous around here," Mary suggested.

"Y-Yes! I'll do that! I'll go by myself!" Parfette asserted, and proceeded towards the Albert Manor gardens without looking back (although, the sound of Gainas's footsteps confirmed to her that he was still following).

Flowers were in full bloom all around the garden, and the sound of the music playing from within the venue flowed quietly along on the wind. It was the most picturesque view imaginable—so beautiful that Parfette had no choice but to agree with Mary's boastful claims.

But even such scenery couldn't improve Parfette's mood. No matter how many pretty flowers she looked at, and no matter how much their sweet fragrance tickled her nose, it would not clear the dispirited feeling clouding her heart. The one to blame for that was, of course, Gainas, who trailed after her.

The man didn't speak, only following Parfette silently. He seemed to believe he didn't have the right to start a conversation with her, and so didn't utter even a single word. If she ever stopped walking for a moment, he did the same, and once she resumed, he followed suit. Against the music resounding lightly from the venue, the sound of Gainas's footsteps seemed heavy in Parfette's ears.

No... Perhaps she was just subconsciously searching for that sound, which the music and wind so easily drowned out. After just a few steps, she couldn't tell if she and Gainas were close or far apart. It would've probably been easier for her if she could've gotten herself to tell him to leave her alone.

Such were her thoughts as Parfette walked on, until she reached the place she had started from. Before she'd even realized it, she had managed to walk through the entire garden, but she'd been so lost in the swamp of thoughts that she didn't remember even a single flower she had seen. The flowers were so beautiful that it was almost an insult to the gardener, or so Parfette told herself self-deprecatingly.

Looking around, she could spot neither Mary nor Adi. There was only the wind, blowing past as if to highlight the lack of any human presence. Parfette's eyebrows sank down uneasily. Though she could still hear the lively music in the background, it almost felt like it was coming from some other world.

She wanted to celebrate Mary's marriage from the bottom of her heart, yet the pain inside her chest wouldn't allow it.

But everyone else managed to get over this pain... Parfette thought. With heavy footsteps, she turned to face the venue, but couldn't get herself to move. Her own actions made her feel like she was a spineless good-for-nothing, which only depressed her further. (In fact, though she believed the other young ladies had managed to overcome their wounds and stand back on their feet, the truth was that while they were partly angry, they were also feeling refreshed and

sunny. After all, some of them had managed to cunningly take over their partners' families, and they blazed with ambition to climb to an even higher place than before. Meanwhile Parfette, who had once adored Gainas, then was hurt by him, and was still suffering the pain of that now, was completely ignorant of their feelings.)

And so while Parfette agonized over what she should do, a familiar figure walked out of the venue. He had rust-colored hair and the Albert family crest pinned to his formal attire.

"Lord Adi."

"Hmm?"

Indeed, it was Mary's husband, Adi. But for some reason, he appeared to be confused even as she called his name, and he looked over his shoulder to check if she had meant someone else. Seeing nobody else behind him, he turned back to Parfette, once again looked behind himself, and...

"Wait, you're talking to *me*?!"

...exclaimed loudly in shock.

"What do you mean, Lord Adi?"

"Please stop, Lady Parfette. You don't need to address me so formally!"

"What? I couldn't! I don't wish to be rude to a member of House Albert!"

Both of them conversed in a fluster, making for one ridiculous spectacle. But it was understandable, as Parfette's family, House Marquis, had a low standing even among other nobility, whereas Adi, despite having married into his bride's family and joining House Albert, still couldn't get rid of his servile disposition.

And so the two of them panicked and acted humbly towards one another, but eventually they somehow managed to calm down. Adi then cast an awkward glance at Parfette and the man standing behind her.

"I must've interrupted something..." Adi's expression seemed to say.

Sensing his thoughts, Parfette quickly shook her head. "N-No! I was taking a walk by myself in the gardens! Lord Gainas—I mean, this man... I don't know him, but for some reason he's been following me around! That's all!"

“That’s absurd...” Adi sighed. It was just as Mary had said. He cast another glance at Gainas, while the still-rattled Parfette reached out her hand. Adi looked at her arm, outstretched in his direction, and tilted his head. “Lady Parfette?”

“L-Lord Adi!” Parfette squeaked. Her voice cracked a little, but of course nobody would point out as much. “I’ll be returning to the venue now! P-Please lead me there!”

“Me?”

“Th-There’s nobody else here I could be talking to!” she said, urging him to hurry.

The tone of her voice was not at all like that of a selfish lady giving out harsh orders, but rather that of a fragile girl who had made up her mind and was doing the best she could to appear strong. Her hand shook slightly, and her eyebrows were tilted downwards. She seemed on the verge of trembling and bursting into tears. No... She was already trembling all over.

Adi sighed quietly at the sight. He paused for a moment to mull something over in his mind, then cleared his throat before speaking up. “Did you really think that *I*, a member of House Albert, would hold the hand of someone like *you*?!” he exclaimed, puffing out his chest as he rejected her.

His unsubtle attitude bore some resemblance to that of a certain young lady. (If Patrick were here, he’d have said something like, *“You’re two peas in a pod,”* while biting back a snicker. And a certain young lady would certainly send him a glare.)

In any case, the one Adi was talking to was none other than Parfette, so of course she responded with, “Y-You’re right... No member of House Albert would want to pair up with someone like *me*...!”

In but a second, her eyes welled up with tears. To top it off, even Gainas spoke up in response. “Lord Adi, you may be an Albert, but please don’t say such horrible things to her!”

At this development, even Adi, who’d been the very cause of it, let his true intentions slip out as he murmured, “Oof, it’s way harder for this to go as

planned than I thought...!”

What a match those two made, with how they both took things so literally and seriously to the point of foolishness. But it was clear that if Adi voiced his thoughts, Parfette would only grow more stubborn, so he swallowed his words.

Instead, he quickly attempted to console the quivering and tearful Parfette. “Please listen, Lady Parfette... I have absolutely no issues with taking your hand. But that’d be wrong, don’t you think?”

“Wrong?”

“Because it shouldn’t be me. Right?” he prompted.

Parfette blinked her dampened eyes at his words. Her breath hitched, and she cast a brief glance over her shoulder at Gainas. She picked up on what Adi was implying, and precisely because of that, she felt at a loss and couldn’t get herself to move.

Adi chuckled quietly and shrugged his shoulders. He had to admit, it was near impossible to just abandon this young lady who so resembled an adorable little animal. He could now perfectly understand the feelings of Mary, who’d always worried over the girl despite how much she complained about her.

“It’s a little embarrassing to admit it, but milady’s my first love,” Adi said.

“You mean Lady Mary?” Parfette asked, her eyes widening at the sudden topic change.

Adi’s cheeks reddened a little over his admittance. “Let’s keep this a secret between all of us,” he said in warning. (If Patrick were here, he’d have said something like, *“Secret? Everybody already knows,”* while biting back a snicker. And Adi’s first love would’ve certainly flushed bright red.)

“I’ve been in love with milady since she was born. Of course, in the beginning, I was too young to feel romantic love towards her, but at some point, she became the only woman I was interested in. She truly is my very first love.”

“So that’s how it is...”

“Things just kept getting more complicated between us, and I even considered giving up on my love for her, but I couldn’t do it. It got so

complicated that even I myself was astonished... But in the end, we made it to today. That's why I've no interest in defending a man who became infatuated with some other woman while his significant other loved him so dearly," Adi declared, gazing coldly at Gainas.

Though Adi had been regarding Parfette warmly, the look in his rust-colored eyes changed completely, to something harsher now. Gainas knew Adi was referring to him, and he sank in on himself regretfully.

Parfette cast him a glance. Despite his large frame, Gainas looked strangely small, which made Parfette feel like she wanted to comfort him, just the tiniest bit. It was one thing when she herself cast blame on him, but seeing others do the same made her chest ache. How selfish of her!

"I don't know Lord Gainas's circumstances. But Lady Parfette, you are milady's treasured friend. I can't bear to watch you stuck in place like this."

"Lord Adi..."

"If you wish, I will lead you to the venue. But please consider carefully whether it really is me whom you'd like to take your hand right here and now," Adi said, as though he were trying to make Parfette see reason.

The girl gasped at his words. Her right hand, which was still outstretched towards him, had stopped trembling at one point, but her fingertips twitched slightly. "I... I'm..." she whispered with a shaky voice, gingerly withdrawing her hand. She pressed it to her chest instead, tightly grasping the fabric of her dress. "S-Since I have the opportunity... I'll spend a little more time viewing the garden," she responded, so quietly it was almost inaudible.

Adi smiled gently. "As you wish," he told her, bowing his head deeply. "If you need anything, please feel free to call on me."

"R-Right..."

"Well then, excuse me," said Adi, sounding not at all like a member of House Albert but rather somewhat like a servant as he walked away.

All that was left in his wake was an indescribably heavy atmosphere. Parfette and Gainas observed one another, each hoping the other would make the first move. Neither could predict how the other would react, which made them both

nervous, yet at the same time, a faint sense of hope rose in their hearts. They were frozen still due to their jumbled up feelings, and the air around them was stifling.

What finally broke the stillness was Gainas's voice, which was tinged with uncharacteristic anxiety. "Parfette..." he said, as though he were testing the waters.

Parfette, having made up her mind, clenched her hands tightly and turned around to face him.

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"Flowers and words of love?" Mary inquired thoughtfully after hearing Parfette's retelling. The other girl nodded insistently as she took a bite of cake, her cheeks reddening.

Half a month had passed since the wedding reception. Mary and Carina had grown curious over the slight change between Parfette and Gainas, so they'd asked her about it. Now here they were, visiting House Marquis and sitting inside Parfette's very own room.

It was filled with stuffed toys and decorated with cute cat paintings, and the soft-hued curtains by the window swayed gently. The room was so adorable and girly that at first Mary and Carina had both felt uncomfortable and out of place. But honestly, this room suited Parfette perfectly.

"Ever since then, I told him that every day, he had to give me a single azalea flower—which is House Eldland's family crest—and some words of love..." Parfette explained with flushed cheeks.

Before she could stop herself, Mary mumbled, "I want to lick some salt," under her breath. From the atmosphere of Parfette's room to the topic of this conversation, everything was just way too sweet right now.

As Mary looked around the room again, she noticed that some of the flowers Parfette had mentioned were on display. They were beautiful, with magnificent pure white petals spreading out, and they complemented the adorably charming room very well.

Looking carefully, she saw that a few were displayed as pressed flowers,

others were collected together in vases, and some occupied a single vase each... It was all unbelievably sweet, as was the cake she was eating, which was just getting exasperating now.

While Mary was fed up with the sweetness, Carina listened to Parfette with perfect calmness while sipping her tea. “Hmm...” she hummed quietly. “So you’re saying that if Gainas Eldland fulfills these conditions for a full year, you’ll forgive him?”

“I’m still wondering if it’s okay for me to forgive him... I’m still reluctant about it!”

“Oh, so you won’t mind anything I might do to him, yes? Let’s see...” Carina smiled threateningly.

Parfette cried out pitifully and grabbed Carina by the arm. She tugged on it with tearful eyes, which was the most she could do to try and inhibit Carina. The latter girl giggled at this and soon enough began pacifying Parfette.

“What *are* you going to do to him?” Mary asked Carina.

The girl responded by smiling elegantly. Her lustrous black hair swayed, highlighting her beauty, but she did not say a word.

Mary’s face stiffened at the icy air emanating from her. “How terrifying...” she commented.

“Oh? I haven’t said anything yet.”

“Your smile says it all.”

“Would you like to hear about it?” Carina prompted, still smiling softly. Mary shook her head.

After all, compared to the other young ladies, Carina had been particularly ruthless and thorough in her retaliation against Lilianne back then. In fact, the word “retaliation” felt like too soft a phrasing for what she had done. If her wrath still hadn’t cooled off, then even Mary would rather plug her ears and look the other way.

As such, she decided not to push the subject further as she cast her eyes on Parfette and Carina, who were gracefully drinking tea. Both of them had been

thrown away by their fiancés—and yet, what completely opposite conclusions they'd arrived at! One puffed out her cheeks at her ex and shouted, *"I won't forgive you!"* while turning away huffily. The other was still zealously toiling away at horrifying methods of retribution. And now both of them were here together, enjoying their tea.

Mary couldn't hold back a sigh. "Do as you like, both of you," she murmured sardonically.

In response, both of the other girls nodded with smiles charming enough to enslave any man in the world in but an instant.

***

A few months had passed since Parfette's promise with Gainas.

The days went by in a hectic frenzy for Gainas, who was scrambling around restlessly. He had to gift Parfette azaleas, and though they were House Eldland's emblem and therefore grew in their garden, the flowers were not in bloom year round. After brainstorming on the matter with the gardener, Gainas went in person to the neighboring nation to acquire the flowers, bowing his head low even if he acquired them from ordinary private houses.

Though it was but a single flower, he had to give one to her every day.

On top of that, Parfette went on outings at her leisure, and Gainas had to run around every day in search of her, often finding her just in the nick of time before the day was up.

Many times, they had a conversation along the lines of the following:

"There you are, Parfette..."

"Oh my, Lord Gainas. You're in quite the hurry; what's the matter?"

Of course, Parfette was purposefully feigning ignorance.

As the days passed by, Gainas never tried to delegate the work to his family's gardener, nor did he send any servants to collect the flowers. Obviously, he also didn't try to make anyone find Parfette for him.

He carried on the trial and error process by himself, bustling about in every direction. His parents, who'd once almost disowned him, started to trust him

again upon seeing his desperate efforts. Most importantly, Parfette also felt moved by it.

Each time she felt depressed upon remembering that Mary had returned to Karelia Academy and lamented, *“Lady Mary... Waaah, Lady Mary...!”* with teary eyes, Gainas was always by her side. (Parfette’s dependence on Mary was an issue in and of itself, but at the same time, nobody could blame her. When Parfette had watched her fiancé be stolen away by a peasant girl, become the target of strange glances within the school, and ended up totally and helplessly isolated, Mary had been the one to save her.)

Gainas was fully aware of that, as well as how he was to blame for it all. That was precisely why he remained by Parfette and rubbed her back while she whimpered and sobbed for Mary.

Eventually, Parfette stopped crying and looked up at Gainas as if she wanted to say something. She then held out her right hand as if to urge him on, and Gainas hurriedly reached for the flower. His cheeks turned red in a flash as he held the flower out towards her.

“I know you’re lonely with Lady Mary gone, Parfette. I’m not presumptuous enough to think I could take her place, but... Please, just don’t cry. I’m... Seeing you cry tears me to pieces.” That line was unbearably mushy, although he had said it in a clumsy and faltering way.

Gainas had an earnest and awkward character as it were, and he was the type of man who struggled to voice such sugary proclamations of love. He was bright red, and he fumbled with his words, to the point that it was impressive that he’d managed to get them out at all.

In contrast, Parfette’s teary eyes glittered upon hearing him. “Thank you!” she responded while accepting the flower.

The entire scene was so sickly-sweet that Carina and Margaret, who happened to be present, exchanged a look with each other and shrugged their shoulders.

Nonetheless, at times Gainas would run around, cross the borders, and sweat in front of the surly ladies. But without fail, he would bring Parfette a single azalea flower and some words of love each and every day.

Of course, he wouldn't just tell her simple phrases like *"I love you"* over and over, but rather speak to her from the heart in a way suited to the moment. However, the awkward Gainas couldn't always spin such words well, and sometimes he'd get lambasted or told to start over. Gainas himself had even made the effort to read romance novels, watch love dramas, and ask others for their opinions.

And so the things he'd say to Parfette began with, *"I'm sorry,"* and, *"Please forgive me."* Then he'd request, *"Give me one more chance,"* and finally implore, *"Let me be by your side!"* Parfette, being on the receiving end of this plethora of love declarations, had at last begun to feel the wounds in her heart healing.

But Carina and Margaret, who were often present during these encounters, couldn't stand any of it. Margaret wanted to make complaints to Mary for leaving Parfette behind and vacating the country. Meanwhile, the mushy atmosphere gave Carina heartburn, and it only motivated her to torment her ex-fiancé even more.

In any case, anyone who looked upon Parfette and Gainas found the scene so very peaceful, all believing the pair's reconciliation was just a matter of time (and a very short amount of time, at that).

At last, exactly one year had passed since the day Parfette had made her demands to Gainas.

She woke up early in the morning, put on her favorite dress, and couldn't find a way to calm herself down. She made preparations so that she'd be ready to receive Gainas whenever he would arrive, but at the same time, she was trying to practice acting nonchalantly.

She wondered what she should say when he arrived. Perhaps she should feign ignorance and inquire, *"Oh my, is today some kind of special day?"*

Or perhaps, if she were to say something like, *"I'd like to take a walk by myself. Excuse me,"* and make as though she wanted to leave, would Gainas stop her?

Maybe he'd made a reservation for them in some lovely restaurant. Or maybe he would take her to someplace with beautiful scenery. Parfette would be

happy to go to a special place today, but she'd be just as happy if they were to take a walk in the Eldland estate's gardens, where they'd spent so much time together in the past.

The girl kept wondering, but then lightly slapped her own cheeks so she wouldn't look so happy at the thought of Gainas visiting. But then she'd think of him again and get absorbed in her thoughts ecstatically... That was how Parfette passed her time today.

But her joy lasted only until midday. Gainas still hadn't come, nor had he sent her any word, which made Parfette puff out her cheeks. Then twilight came, and eventually night fell, and still Gainas was nowhere to be seen...

"Lady Maryyy! Waaah! I don't care about him at all!" Parfette wailed, drowning her sorrows inside of Albert Manor (with cups of tea, that is).

"Mm-hmm," answered Mary. "By the way, how did you end up at our house, anyway?"

"By carriage..."

"Well, obviously! I didn't think you *walked* here! I'm asking *why* you're here!" Mary exclaimed angrily, pouring Parfette some more tea.

The girl's eyes were teary as she answered. "Lord Gainas would always let me know if he had any kind of plans..."

"I'm sure he's busy now that they've made him the heir of House Eldland again. Ah, but... Still..."

"I stopped by House Eldland's estate before coming here," Parfette said. "But Lord Gainas wasn't there..." Her eyes overflowed with more tears. The second a single droplet fell, the girl broke into sobs as if a dam had burst. "M-Maybe he's gotten sick of me b-because I've been so selfish...!"

"Parfette."

"I bet Lord Gainas h-hates me by now...!" Parfette's voice trembled as if she were afraid of the very idea, even though it was just her conjecture.

Mary comforted the girl, rubbing her trembling shoulders while murmuring, *That's just impossible*, in her mind.

Gainas Eldland was not that sort of man. Even after he'd become Lilianne's captive, he still cared for Parfette's welfare. When he'd brought up the annulment of his and Parfette's engagement, he said he would shoulder all the blame too. He *had* carelessly let himself be enticed by Lilianne, yes, but at his core Gainas was an earnest man.

Even if one were to argue that Parfette had pushed him around selfishly, he was incomparably lucky when compared to the rest of the men from Lilianne's reverse harem. He was just reaping what he had sown, here.

Mary snapped out of her thoughts at the sound of a forceful knock on the door. Perplexed, she got to her feet and opened it, only to come face-to-face with a serious-looking Adi.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

"Milady, Lady Parfette. Your schoolmates are here to see you. Please come right away."

"Schoolmates?" Mary echoed, tilting her head as she wondered who it could be. Behind her, Parfette's dampened eyes also widened in surprise.

An uproar had overtaken Albert Manor thanks to these unexpected visitors. However, given House Albert stood equal to royalty, they had plenty of room for hospitality, even towards sudden guests. So as for the reason everyone was in such an uproar...

"Is it true Lady Mary's friends are here?!"

"*Friends*! Lady Mary has friends other than Lady Alicia and Lady Parfette!"

"Are you sure it's not just some cats or dogs that she's been feeding?!"

Mary, who had quickly come out of the room at Adi's urging, stopped in her tracks upon hearing such things. "Excuse me!" she roared. "Who just made that comment about cats and dogs?! How rude!"

"To be clear, I think it's fair to say they're *all* being rude," Adi advised calmly. "But we don't have the time for this right now!" he added, getting the topic back on track (as well as casually changing away from that subject), after which he, Mary, and Parfette headed towards the reception hall.

Waiting there were Carina and Margaret. Upon seeing Mary—or rather, Parfette cowering behind her, the two girls quickly rushed over. The fact that they called out to her without pausing to offer any greetings must've meant they were in quite the hurry, indeed.

(Unlike a certain someone of peasant origins who always came flying in without any proper greeting, whenever Carina and Margaret came to visit, the first thing they'd always do was to say an elegant greeting befitting of noble ladies. Though, even excluding the nobility aspect of it, a greeting should always come first anyway...)

"Parfette, do you know where Lord Gainas is?" asked Margaret.

"Lord Gainas? I don't know anyone by that name!" Parfette responded, turning away in a huff.

Carina and Margaret exchanged a look. Parfette's stubborn, easy-to-read disposition was the same as always. But in contrast to the usual way the two girls would smile sarcastically at this, right now there was something different about their expressions. In fact, they both looked quite pale.

Noticing their unusual behavior, Parfette slowly turned back to face them. "Did something happen to him?" she inquired.

"Parfette, stay calm and listen," Margaret prompted.

"Right..."

"Gainas Eldland has gone missing."

At those words, Mary's eyes widened slightly.

"It's my fault," Carina said quietly.

Mary glanced over at the girl. Her countenance wasn't as coolly beautiful as always, for her expression was distorted with unease, and her gaze wandered anxiously. Mary was about to ask what she had meant, but at that moment Parfette collapsed, and Mary just barely managed to catch her.

Earlier that morning...

Knowing the last day of his promise with Parfette had come, Gainas woke up earlier than usual, went for his daily jog, and had a quick breakfast.

He used to feel unbearably uncomfortable at home, when he'd been close to being disowned by his family, but now he was back to feeling at ease with his surroundings. There was no more discomfort between him and his parents, whom he had once feared would disinherit him, and his father had officially approved him as House Eldland's heir again. The servants, who had once also treated him with cool formality, now respected him as the family's future successor.

And it was all thanks to Parfette. Each time he thought this, his sense of gratitude towards her intensified. That was why he wanted to make today as special and as much to her liking as possible.

First, I must pick the most exceptionally beautiful flower for her... Gainas thought. But right then, a maid with a dubious look on her face came over to notify him that his schoolmate was here to see him.

"What? I haven't made any plans with anyone," Gainas replied.

"It seems someone is here on urgent business. They say they have to speak with you, no matter what..."

"I see... Well, all right, then. Please lead them over to the guest room."

Gainas had intended to visit Parfette right away, but since a schoolmate had taken the trouble to visit him, he couldn't just bluntly refuse to see them.

At first, he had thought he might stay in the guest room with the visitor until noon... But that didn't happen.

When the maid had returned to the guest room after some time to bring them refreshments, nobody was there. The white curtains swayed in the breeze from the open window, and the only thing left was Gainas's jacket sprawled on the floor.

Finding this suspicious, the people of House Eldland searched the mansion, its gardens, and the nearby shops, even visiting the houses of Gainas's schoolmates to try and locate him. They went around to other obvious places where he might've been (including House Marquis, which they were careful to do without Parfette's notice), and yet he was nowhere to be seen...

Margaret finished her retelling of events there and handed Parfette Gainas's

jacket. It was embroidered with the azalea flowers of House Eldland's family crest. Gainas, who'd once been excluded from his family for a time, had finally been allowed to wear this jacket following months of desperately chasing after Parfette. The idea that he'd just toss it aside and abandon it was unthinkable.

That was just how sincere of a man Gainas was. Even on the day his family had given him permission to wear the jacket, Gainas hadn't put it on right away, but went to see Parfette instead. He hadn't demanded her permission either, and just spent time alone with her until the sun began to set and Parfette had said, "It's a bit chilly today. Lord Gainas, since you have a jacket with you, perhaps you should put it on?"

And then, instead of slipping his arms through its sleeves, he'd put the jacket around her shoulders instead.

There was simply no way Gainas would just leave this jacket behind, much less ignore Parfette while he went on an outing with a schoolmate.

With such thoughts on her mind, Mary cast a quick glance at Carina. The girl occasionally joined the conversation, but then hung her head down and frowned as though she was mulling something over in her mind. It was a waste of her icy beauty, really.

Mary was about to say something to her, but right then Parfette, who up until now had been lying down, slowly picked herself back up. "Who was it?" she croaked out in a faint voice. "Who came to visit Lord Gainas this morning?"

Parfette was pale, and everyone looked over at her with worry. Carina's expression was particularly dark, but she nonetheless opened her mouth slowly to reply.

"It's all my fault..." she said weakly.

In the next moment, the name Carina uttered—*Randall*—made Mary's breath hitch in her throat. After all, that was the name of a student at Elysiana College, as well as the name of a romanceable character from one of the otome games Mary had played in her previous life, *Heart High 2*.

Most critically of all, Randall was the name of Carina's ex-fiancé.

In *Heart High 2*, Carina was a high-handed and domineering character, strict with herself and even stricter with other people.

Her fiancé, Randall, was the so-called extreme sadist type himself. His sadism was portrayed as an attractive part of his personality, as he'd often purposefully bother the heroine and force reactions out of her for the sake of his own enjoyment.

Given their characters, they obviously weren't a good match. Moreover, conscious of their reputation, the two would ostensibly put up a front of having a good relationship, so nobody knew the truth.

And then Lilianne, the game's protagonist, appeared, and Randall schemed for a way to make her his. Carina's pride took a hit as a result, which sent her into a fury. The girl used all kinds of underhanded methods to try and bring Lilianne and Randall down, but in the end, she got her comeuppance from the two of them.

That was about how Randall's route went in the game. The level of harassment Carina put Lilianne through was so graphic that it was incomparable to that of the prequel's villainess, Mary, and the players considered his route to be the heaviest one in the entire series.

However, the real Carina was not as high-handed as her in-game self. Not to mention, she likewise possessed memories of that game. There was no way she'd resort to the sort of harassment her game version carried out, and even when Lilianne had been in the process of building up her reverse harem, Carina had remained cautious and made her moves behind the scenes. Of course, she'd been on the lookout for Randall the entire time.

And by the end of things, Carina had come out on top. She'd crushed Randall to pieces more mercilessly than anyone else, and she was still tormenting him to this day.

But there was a reason she was relentless to such a degree.

If Randall had decided to choose Carina over Lilianne, Carina had been ready to toss aside her past life memories and stick by him. And if he'd fallen for Lilianne but still treated Carina with sincerity, she would've been ready to act as

his ally. There had been no romantic love between the two of them from the start, but the relationship they once shared wasn't as bad as it was portrayed in the game. They competed against one another and in turn helped to better each other—or at least, that was how Carina had seen it. Even knowing of his sadistic side hadn't put her off, as she was confident she could handle it.

But just like in *Heart High 2*, Lilianne completely captivated Randall, and he started keeping Carina at a distance. He coercively called their engagement off without ever asking her consent—it was beyond disrespectful. That was why Carina held a grudge against him.

She'd been ready to stay with him, or keep him as an ally, yet her kindness was rejected in a single stroke. That filled her with loathing towards him.

After all, there's a certain etiquette when it comes to breaking up with a woman.

"I've been keeping a very tight leash on Randall," Carina whispered slowly as all eyes turned to her. "But it looks like it just wasn't tight enough. I can't believe he managed to get away..." she continued, lamenting her own carelessness.

Mary paled upon hearing those words. The term "keeping on a leash" didn't even begin to describe the kind of treatment Randall had received from Carina.

Randall, you utter fool... Why didn't you just escape by yourself while you had the chance? She's going to get you! This woman will chase you to the ends of the earth! A chill ran down Mary's spine at her own thoughts. But soon enough she found herself thinking, *Ah, whatever.*

After all, she truly did not care about Randall. No matter what happened to him now—whether he faced an even harsher punishment from Carina, or if the "leash" she kept him on became not just metaphorical but a literal one—Mary simply didn't care a whit about it. It was Randall's own fault for never noticing the true character of the woman who'd been by his side this whole time, despite being a sadist himself.

Just as Mary decided as much in her mind, Margaret sighed and murmured, "I suppose he must've been jealous of Lord Gainas."

She went on to explain that her ex-fiancé, Rigg, had at one point screamed about Gainas. Why was it that even though Gainas had been enraptured by Lilianne, stuck by her side, and wanted to break off his original engagement just like the rest of the men, he was the only one to get a chance at redemption? The men must've surely wondered as much.

"I told Rigg that him saying such things was the very reason he won't get his chance," Margaret added triumphantly. Mary and Carina both nodded vehemently, sharing the same sentiment. "He finally gave up after that, and now he's living his life with no relation to House Brownie. But it seems like things didn't work out the same way for Randall."

"He's such a sore loser that I'm embarrassed on his behalf," Carina responded. "I bet he decided he wanted to hinder Lord Gainas after hearing about how he was faring," she said with a massive sigh.

Parfette gripped the jacket in her hands more tightly, her expression anxious. "Th-Then maybe it's my fault... It's all because I still have feelings for Lord Gainas..." she whispered, her eyes welling up with tears from the chaos.

"No. It's all because Randall is a fool who doesn't know when to quit," Mary asserted. Parfette had no blame in any of this—in fact, she had the right to be angrier at Randall than anyone else right now.

Carina, perhaps thinking the same thing as Mary, smiled gently and rubbed Parfette's back as she dried the girl's tears with her fine scarf. How beautiful the scene, indeed!

"Parfette, you didn't do anything wrong. In fact, I should be apologizing to you for this," Carina told her.

"No! This isn't your fault, Lady Carina."

"I appreciate you saying that. I'm definitely going to catch that man, and when I do, I will tie him up and break him completely. This will never happen again—no... I will make it so that he never even *considers* doing something like this ever again. I promise you."

"Lady Carina..." Parfette nodded, then wiped her teary eyes as though to show that she was fine. Her anxious expression shifted to a slightly more

relieved look, and Carina smiled at the sight—so gently that she looked like some sort of holy woman.

"I should've plugged my ears," Mary murmured to no one in particular while watching the two girls. Though the scene before her was lovely, every one of Carina's words had been as cold as ice.

How truly frightening... Mary thought while rubbing her arms from the chill. Right then, she became aware of some kind of a light pitter-pattering noise. Looking around, she realized the sound came from raindrops falling against the windows. "Oh, it's raining," she commented as both Carina and Margaret glanced towards the window as well.

It was already dark outside, and the rain was only getting stronger, judging by the large drops smacking against the glass. Everyone sighed, knowing that trying to search for Gainas in the middle of a rainy night would be a complicated endeavor.

Glancing at the window as well, Parfette quickly got to her feet. "I-I'm going to go look for Lord Gainas!"

"And where exactly will you search?"

"S-Somewhere!" Parfette declared. She seemed worried that Gainas might be in danger if exposed to such weather conditions, and fell into a total state of panic as she rushed around exclaiming, "Quickly! I must hurry!"

Carina shrugged her shoulders. "I can see how going out to look for him would make you feel better than staying cooped up here. Plus, it'd be troublesome for me if somebody else were to catch Randall first."

"Lady Carina, are you saying you'll come with me...?" Parfette inquired.

"I feel the same way," Margaret piped up. "Nothing will change if we just stand around here, and I prefer chasing my prey rather than lying in wait for it."

"You too, Lady Margaret...?!" Parfette asked, her expression brightening despite her tearful eyes as she watched the other two girls stand up. What a beautiful sight was unfolding once again!

"We'll definitely find him." The girls nodded at each other—this scene was the

very thing friendship was made of.

“So... Is this one of those moving tales?” Mary grumbled to herself, failing to keep up with the air of camaraderie.

Needless to say, this was because every one of Carina’s and Margaret’s words were filled with such coldness that undercutting them as mere words of friendship simply didn’t sit right. Nevertheless, Mary drank the last of her tea and stood up as well, since despite her reaction to the girls’ chilly words, she felt much the same.

And so they all hopped into Margaret’s carriage and started combing through all the most obvious locations they could think of. However, since it was already dark and most shops were closed, there weren’t actually that many places they could check.

They had little success in finding information about any individuals who resembled Gainas or Randall, and before long, a stalemate was on the horizon. Plus, the people of House Eldland were already on a manhunt, and even they still couldn’t find Gainas, so no matter how proud Margaret might’ve been of her carriage, it was unlikely the girls would have more success.

“But you know, this really *is* a fast carriage. The make seems very good too,” Mary commented.

“My, thank you very much,” Margaret responded with an elegant smile, happy to hear the praise.

Mary stroked the edge of the carriage window. This vehicle was fast, the exterior was beautiful, and it didn’t shake around too much. It would’ve been easy even for a novice to tell that it was of quality make.

Now, since the carriage seems to be in Margaret’s personal possession, then... That’s quite a lot of financial prowess House Brownie must have, no?

Mary’s thoughts were interrupted as, right at that moment, she spotted the family crest engraved on the carriage doors and her hand froze. It was the image of a rose. That wasn’t House Brownie’s emblem, nor was it one belonging to Margaret’s previous family, House Riadora. In fact, this crest was even more familiar to Mary than the aforementioned two families’ would’ve been.

Just how many times had she seen this crest? She'd seen it at celebratory events, on the seats during tea parties, at the top of documents... It was the emblem she knew best outside of House Albert's, and her face stiffened at the sight.

There's no doubt about it...

"I see you're making steady progress..." Mary said, casting a quick glance at Margaret.

"Oh my, I've no idea what you're talking about." The girl was still smiling elegantly as usual. Mary decided to look away and leave the topic there.

Patrick had at times started to say that he suddenly got the shivers, and this must've been the cause of it. But no matter how close House Albert and House Dyce might've been by this point, it would've still been unsophisticated of Mary to try and wedge herself into the Dyces' private matters.

And anyway, she wouldn't go up against this kind of terrifying hunter for anything.

Therefore, she pretended she hadn't noticed House Dyce's family emblem, and she once again cast her eyes out the window. Everything was dark, and even the houses in the distance slowly started to put out their lights one by one. Few people were about; anyone they did pass by was hurrying on their way home.

Alas, that was no surprise, for today's date was just about to change to the next.

"A single flower and some words of love, each and every day for a year." That was the promise made between Parfette and Gainas, and exactly a year had passed since they'd agreed on it.

Who could've guessed that it'd end like this? Mary thought, and right at that moment, the carriage came to a sudden halt with a clatter. The trail of clues they'd scrambled together pointing the way to Gainas and Randall had finally cut off.

Of course, the two in question were still nowhere in sight, and the crossroads the girls had arrived at stretched wide before them as if in mockery. It was a

true deadlock—all that was left to do was wave the white flag of surrender.

But Mary couldn't just say as much out loud, and so she looked at the other three girls questioningly. Carina and Margaret must've shared her sentiments, for their usually beautiful countenances were sporting sour expressions. Silence settled within the carriage, broken only by the relentless rain as it grew ever more ferocious by the minute.

"Um..." Parfette spoke up at last. "Please start heading in the direction of Albert Manor."

The other three girls blinked, wondering if this meant Parfette had given up as well. They knew how precious this past year had been to Parfette, which was exactly why they felt frustrated and sorry for her. *Here at the very end, I couldn't do anything to help her*, Mary thought, and unable to look at the girl, she hung her head.

A moment after speaking, Parfette suddenly stuck her face to the window. Everyone else glanced over in surprise, wondering what was going on. Hadn't she given up already?

But Parfette shook her head, staring resolutely through the glass with no trace of surrender in her pupils. "I'm not sure what state Lord Gainas is in, but as long as he's able to move, he'll be heading towards me... I'm certain of it."

"Parfette..."

"I'm sure he thinks that I'm sulking over at Lady Mary's place. So he should be on his way to Albert Manor right now!" Parfette proclaimed earnestly.

Carina and Margaret both looked deeply moved by her words. Their faces seemed to say, *"Parfette trusts that Gainas knows her so well!"*

As usual, Mary was the only one who didn't get caught up in this atmosphere. "Hey! Does everyone think my house is some kind of nursery?" she asked nobody in particular. (Unbeknownst to her, at that moment, Patrick, who was in House Dyce's estate, smiled wryly.)

The carriage lurched into movement, heading towards Albert Manor as instructed. The journey continued until Parfette suddenly shouted, "Please stop!" The wheels halted with a screech, and everyone quickly turned to her.

Amid the darkness, an expanse of dense brushwood spanned into the distance. There were no streetlights around, and it was impossible to see too far ahead on account of the heavy rainfall. Yet after looking with all their might, the girls could spot some kind of artificial light flickering against the dead of night.

Could it have been a person? But the carriage wasn't able to traverse the terrain, so the girls had no choice but to ready themselves to step out one by one.

However, Parfette didn't wait, flying out of the carriage all by herself. Mary reached out her arm towards the girl in a fluster, but she was too late, and her fingers grasped nothing but air.

Parfette cared not whether her clothes would get wet in the rain or dirtied with mud as she raced forward and cried out, "Lord Gainas!"

Mary followed after her. Soon they reached the source of the light, and Mary's eyes widened at the sight she came upon—it was Gainas and Randall, the very people they'd been searching for!

But the men didn't look like their usual selves. Randall, upon spotting Carina, let out a small shriek as his face grew pale. Gainas seemed devoid of all strength, leaning against Randall for support.

Randall started trembling, mumbling things like, "What the—?!" and, "Why is Lady Carina here?!" (As a side note, Mary was curious why he was referring to Carina as "Lady" when he hadn't addressed her in such a way before.) Meanwhile, Gainas's eyes seemed vacant as he glanced towards the girls, and in a weak voice he called out Parfette's name.

It was obvious Gainas was in a bad condition. Parfette realized as much before anything else, and she hurled a harsh glare towards Randall. "What have you done to Lord Gainas?!" she demanded roughly, her eyes moist. In fact, large teardrops already spilled down her cheeks. But even so, she did not hesitate, and her anger was clear despite her quivering and crying.

Back when Lilianne had pushed Mary over, Parfette had also shouted at her tearfully. While everyone else was frozen still and dumbstruck, Parfette had expressed her anger for Mary's sake.

Though she was a crybaby who'd often cower behind Mary, at her core Parfette was stronger than anyone. Were that not the case, she wouldn't have been able to impose such conditions upon Gainas, after all.

"Let go of Lord Gainas, Randall," Carina ordered next, making Randall shudder at her icy tone of voice.

The charisma which once had attracted the girls to him during his time in Elysiana College was nowhere to be seen, nor was there even a sliver of his sadistic side in sight. Randall had turned completely pale, and his body was trembling all over from fear. He looked on the verge of screaming. Alas, on the off chance he actually managed to get away from here, Carina would definitely pursue him to the ends of the earth.

With such chilly thoughts in her mind, Mary cast her eyes towards Gainas.

It was hard to bear the sight of him as he sagged limply against Randall. Even so, he reached out his hand towards Parfette, as if wanting to draw near to her. But Randall yanked him back, and it seemed like Gainas didn't have the strength left to resist. In fact, he looked barely conscious.

"What the hell? Damn it... Why is *he* the only one getting another chance...?" Randall growled resentfully.

As I thought, Mary murmured in her mind. Sure enough, Randall despised Gainas due to the fact that the latter man's wrongdoings had been forgiven, and was trying to thwart him at the very last moment. It was unbelievably shallow. Mary let out a sigh, but then her body quivered suddenly at the icy air emanating from Carina, who was standing next to her.

So cold! Mary shrieked inwardly. *I want to go home and have Adi pour me some hot tea! No, I want him to hug me!* she thought, reaching for whatever bit of escapism she could.

Of course, Mary couldn't blame Carina for her feelings. Randall was her ex-fiancé, and that aggravated the girl's fury. Instead of trying to pull himself together, the man who'd tossed her aside was hindering a friend of hers who was finally so close to reaching happiness.

It would've been ridiculous for anyone to ask Carina *not* to be angry over this.

Her feelings had nothing to do with the game anymore—this was the wrath of one girl, for her own sake, the sake of her pride, and the sake of her family.

That's exactly why she's so frightening right now! Mary thought, doing her best to avoid looking at Carina. Right around then, Randall seemed to have at last realized the position he was in, and he started looking around as if searching for aid.

Of course, nobody was around to help.

"Damn it! Aren't I and Gainas just the same?! We both fell for Lilianne and broke off our engagements... So why?! Why is *he* the only one being forgiven for that?! I'm exactly like him!" Randall yelled in desperation.

Everyone else looked exasperated at his words. The ladies were about to get this over with and catch him, but they all froze and gasped as Parfette suddenly raced at him, one hand raised.

She was the smallest of them all, and yet she didn't hesitate as she lifted her slender hand above the much taller Randall. Mary expected to hear a smack, but instead...

Bam!

A thump resounded against the rain.

She went with her fist! Mary exclaimed to herself. Parfette had punched Randall magnificently!

She may have been petite and weak, but running up to someone and punching them with all one's might still resulted in a reasonable amount of force. Randall lost his balance and fell back into the mud with a pathetic splash. Naturally, since he'd been holding Gainas up, the man followed suit and slipped into the rain-slicked mud as well.

"Lord Gainas!" Parfette cried sorrowfully, running up to him.

She crouched next to him, and as she did, her lacy dress immediately sank into the ground as a stain grew across it. But Parfette paid this no heed, repeatedly calling out Gainas's name as she patted his cheeks and shoulders.

"Lord Gainas, are you all right? Lord Gainas!"

“Parfette...?” Gainas asked, reacting to the sound of her voice as he slowly turned his head to look at her.

His eyes seemed somewhat vacant, but even so, he reached out his hand to touch Parfette’s cheek, as if to confirm it was really her. His touch dirtied her pale skin with mud, but she didn’t seem to care about that either as her expression morphed into one of relief and she nestled into his hand.

“I’m here, Lord Gainas.”

“I’m sorry, Parfette... It’s too late...”

“No, it’s all right. The date still hasn’t changed yet.”

“Right... But the flower... I’ll bring it to you soon, Parfette...” Gainas spoke unsteadily, desperately trying to stop her from leaving.

Parfette smiled. “Please hold on a moment,” she told him, squeezing his hand briefly before abruptly getting to her feet.

The girl headed back towards the carriage and shortly returned. In her hands, she was holding House Eldland’s jacket. She wrapped it around Gainas’s shoulders and put her hand around the azalea flower embroidered on its chest.

“Lord Gainas, will you give me the flower of House Eldland?” she inquired with a tearful smile.

Gainas gently grasped her hand, and despite his strained voice, he responded clearly with, “Of course.”

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Gainas was in a daze after Randall had made him drink strong alcohol laced with sleeping pills, but after a few days of rest, he would regain his strength and there’d be no serious side effects. Or at least, that was the prognosis given by Albert Manor’s in-house doctor after they all woke him up.

Naturally, the following day Gainas was still in poor shape. He must’ve been given quite a lot of sleeping medication, and that combined with a terrible hangover meant he was in no state to be getting up. Therefore, he’d been confined to Albert Manor’s guest room.

The same was the case for Parfette, who after punching Randall had snuggled

up close to Gainas in the cold rain and ended up catching a cold.



“Is it fine for them to be in the same room?” Adi asked as he poured Mary’s tea.

“It’s fine; leave it be,” she answered, taking the teapot from Adi. Lately, she’d been into this whole idea of being a wife who pours her husband’s tea. Alas, she still wasn’t used to doing it, and there had been times when she was inattentive and accidentally spilled the tea all over the table, but such was her form of entertainment as a newly wedded wife.

In any case, once they both had their tea in hand, they each took a sip before Adi spoke up again. “Still...” he murmured, glancing at the window to the guest room where Parfette and Gainas were confined. “Is it really all right to let two young people sleep in the same room together?”

“Gainas has a hangover, and he can’t even stand up straight right now. It’ll be fine. Besides, he’s an earnest man, and he’d never try to do anything to Parfette just because she was asleep.”

“Right, so that’s how it is.”

“At the very least, he’s not the kind of man who’d kiss a person when they’re asleep, unlike a certain someone I know.”

“Wha—?! Why didn’t you tell me you were awake?!”

“Because I *was* asleep! I’ve been meaning to tell you, but if you’re going to kiss someone when they’re sleeping, at least keep it light! Obviously I was going to wake up with you going all out like that! I mean, I’ve even started having dreams about suffocating to death because of you!”

“Is *that* why you’ve been complaining about having nightmares recently?!”

“Yes, that’s right! And why do you look like you’re about to say, ‘It all makes sense now’?!”

Following their shouting match, they both took a deep breath of relief. Then, Mary once again glanced at the guest room window.

“Just leave them be,” she repeated. “In fact, it’d be cruel to separate those two right now.”

She had a reason to make such assertions. Originally, Parfette and Gainas

actually had been put in separate rooms. After all, Albert Manor had plenty of guest rooms to spare, and they wouldn't be put out by having two sickly people to look after. The estate could easily provide a first-class environment for recuperation.

But however spacious the rooms, and however many nurses stood at the ready, right now Parfette and Gainas could only think about each other. At every opportunity, they'd ask, *"How's Lord Gainas?"* and, *"What is Parfette's condition?"* respectively. To top it off, they were so worried about whether the other was in pain or suffering that neither of them could sleep.

This continued, with both incessantly asking about each other over and over, until Mary finally lost her patience and proposed putting them in the same room together. Normally, it would've been objectionable for the daughter of a rich and powerful family like the Alberts to put two of her guests into the same room, but this was an exception.

Though, when Gainas had been informed of this, he quickly shook his head. "Absolutely not!" he'd exclaimed. (He also grasped his head and groaned in pain from the shock, but that seemed very in character for a man like him.) He and Parfette may have reconciled, but only at the verbal stage, and they hadn't even informed their respective parents of this yet. He probably found the idea of them sharing a room unthinkable.

Mary smiled wryly at the earnest man's response and sighed. "I can move you two into the same room together so long as you vow that you won't put a hand on her, or you can watch me smash through this wall right now and remodel the two rooms into one. Your choice," she threatened.

At her words, Gainas hurriedly picked up his pillow and rushed towards Parfette's room.

And so, the two had been put into the same room. As for what was happening in that room at present...

"Ahem... This is awful, Lord Gainas... I... I can't believe I caught a c-cold..." Parfette complained endlessly in a nasal voice, every word laced with coughs.

"Sorry, Parfette... Ugh... R-Really, my bad..." Gainas apologized endlessly in return, leaving the room in quite the state of chaos.

Of course, their beds were separate, with a partition screen set up in between just in case. But one thin screen wouldn't stop their voices from reaching one another, and they could each check in on the other. So even though there was no end to the complaints and apologies, it was most likely a perfect set up for these two.

"Th-This is all your fault, Lord Gainas... Ahem..."

"I know. Sorry... It's my fault... You can blame it all on me..."

Parfette coughed.

"Parfette?" Gainas asked.

She coughed again.

"What's wrong, Parfette?"

Until now, she had complained in between her coughs—or rather, coughed in between her complaints, but now her voice fell silent. Gainas straightened up on the bed. He could still hear her coughs, but he grew worried at the way she didn't say anything.

Wondering anxiously if he'd said something wrong, Gainas took a peek behind the partition screen and timidly asked, "Parfette, are you asleep?"

"Lord Gainas... May I please come over to your side?"

"S-Sure, I don't mind." Gainas paused to get himself in shape, sitting up more properly at the edge of his bed. His head ached with every tiny movement due to his hangover, but Parfette was his priority right now.

He waited for a moment, and soon enough the partition screen slid out of the way. Though they shared a room, the screen still acted as a kind of boundary, which had now been removed.

"Pardon me," said Parfette as she shyly peered over to Gainas's side of the room.

The girl's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were moist as she breathed shallowly, sweat dampening her forehead. Without thinking, Gainas gulped at the sight of Parfette so different from her usual self, but then quickly shook his head and asked worriedly, "Are you all right?" (Thankfully, the act of shaking his

head brought about more pain, which helped him to recover his composure. If Mary were to find out that Gainas had any guilt-inducing feelings about seeing a feverish, cold-ridden Parfette... Just imagining the outcome of it had a chill racing down his spine.)

"Do you want to sit on the bed?" he asked her. "I'll move if you don't want to sit next to me."

"Don't ever..."

"Parfette?"

"Don't ever betray me again or hurt me. Can you promise me that much?" Parfette appealed in a shaky voice, her eyes so moist that she looked like she might start crying at any second. Even so, she kept her gaze locked on Gainas's.

Gainas met her eyes in return and nodded. Then, he slowly tried to reach out for her, but his hand froze when Parfette continued grumbling.

"I'll forgive you this time...because I love you. But if you ever do something like that again, you'd better be ready."

"Ready...?"

"All of my love and forgiveness will transform into utter hatred for you," Parfette proclaimed. There was no trace of doubt in her eyes as she stared sharply at Gainas, almost glaring.

Gainas gazed back into her eyes. There were no heavier words than those, as he understood the depth of Parfette's love for him that allowed her to forgive him.

But to think that Parfette had loved him this much, had been hurt by him just as much, and now once again loved him so much... It made him feel all the more affectionate and remorseful, and he tried reaching out to her one more time.

"I won't betray you ever again, or hurt you. I swear to you that I'll spend the rest of my life making all of this up to you. So please, Parfette, join me in growing House Eldland's flowers together," he said pleadingly, holding out his hand towards her.

Parfette let out an emotional breath. Slowly, her brows slanted downwards, and a small teardrop rolled down her cheek, soon to be followed by more and more. Her sharp expression faded away, and in but an instant, the usual crybaby Parfette was back.

“Lord Gainas... Lord Gainaaas!” she sobbed, and instead of taking his outstretched hand, she threw herself into his arms. She pressed her cheek to his chest, wrapping her arms around his large physique in a tight hug. The comfort of his hands caressing her back only made her cry harder. “I... I was so scared and worried! You idiot... You’re such an idiot, Lord Gainaaas!”

“I’m sorry I made you feel that way, Parfette...”

“I love you, Lord Gainas! So please, don’t ever leave me again... I... I won’t *let* you!”

“I won’t be going anywhere. I love you, Parfette,” Gainas said, gazing at her lovingly as she clung to him desperately. He kept rubbing her back to soothe her, smiling fondly as she began to hiccup from all the crying, before placing a kiss against her forehead.

It was soft, like a good night kiss one might give a child. Parfette’s dampened eyes widened, and after a moment, her cheeks flushed pink and she smiled gently. She hugged him tightly one more time, and then slipped out of his arms and crawled onto the bed—Gainas’s bed, that is.

“Parfette?”

“I’ll forgive you for Lilianne, but not for making me catch a cold,” she said with a mischievous smile as she snuggled under his blanket. “That’s why I’m going to share this cold with you,” she added with a giggle adorable beyond belief.

Surmising what she was trying to say, Gainas’s expression softened, and he slowly lay down next to her, holding her close. “Very well. Share it with me, Parfette.”

“All right, Lord Gainas.”

The two of them laughed as they cuddled together—what a sweet scene, indeed!

***

“Huh?! For some reason, I feel like I’m about to start throwing up sugar!” Mary exclaimed.

“What are you talking about, milady?” Adi prompted. “If you’ve eaten too many croquettes, you’d obviously throw up panko instead.”

“Throwing up something coarse like that would hurt my throat!”

While the breeze carried with it the mushy atmosphere of a certain pair, a little distance away in the gardens, such a conversation was taking place.

***

Following these events, Parfette and Gainas were engaged once again.

That said, Parfette’s stubbornness hadn’t completely faded away. At times, she acted purposely obstinate towards Gainas, and he, knowing it was a sign of her love for him, pretended to be troubled by it while sporting a lovestruck expression. Just looking at the two of them was enough to give one a sour stomach.

“Whenever anything happens, Lord Gainas always rushes over to Parfette’s side. And whenever *she* gets some free time, she spends every second of it just gazing at him. Truly, the two of them live in a field of flowers,” explained Margaret.

“Oh my. I wonder if any of those seeds originated from my flower field?” Mary mused.

“Speaking as someone in the vicinity of you all, it is utterly unbearable. I don’t need any of you releasing spores.”

“We’re not mushroom farms, you know,” Mary said with a glare as she sipped her tea.

Margaret responded with a wry smile and a shrug of her shoulders. Her expression implied that the closeness between Parfette and Gainas was simply *that* palpable.

Mary decided it was time to change topics. “By the way,” she began. “How’s Carina doing?”

“Ah, Lady Carina is doing very well.”

“Right...” Mary murmured, averting her eyes upon hearing Margaret refer to Carina as “Lady.” But in any case, it seemed that Carina was indeed doing well, which was a great thing...for the girl herself, that is. “And what about Randall?”

“Do you *think* he’s doing well?”

“No, I don’t think so in the slightest, smallest, tiniest bit,” Mary answered, and Margaret nodded in affirmation...

Back on the day of the incident, once they had returned to Albert Manor, Gainas, who looked obviously unwell, and Parfette, who mentioned she felt dizzy with flushed cheeks, were left in the care of the family doctor. Mary decided that it’d be best for Carina and Margaret to stay the night at the estate as well. It was already past midnight, and it would’ve been a stain on the Albert name had they forced their guests—let alone two young ladies—to leave at such an hour.

“Indeed, Albert Manor is close by to our home, after all,” Margaret agreed.

However, Carina shook her head and declined the invitation.

“Oh my, there’s no need for reservation,” Mary told her. “If you have plans tomorrow, you can leave by carriage first thing in the morning.”

“No, it’s not that...” replied Carina. “I just want to get back as soon as possible and ensure this never happens again. I must immediately, thoroughly, and completely crush that man’s mind beyond all recognition.”

“I...see. I suppose you have a point.”

Mary then bid Carina farewell (*“Take cawe on youw way back,”* she mumbled brokenly). The latter smiled and responded in kind, before elegantly boarding the carriage. At the sight of her, Mary inwardly bid Randall a final farewell as well...

After such a conversation, and having recalled Carina’s beautiful, chill-inducing smile, there was absolutely no way Mary could imagine that Randall was fine. In fact, she couldn’t even be sure he was still alive.

“It was obvious at a glance that he was terrified of her. It’s like his past glory is

nothing but a lie," Margaret remarked.

"Oh, so he's still alive," said Mary.

"Well, of course... But while he's obviously scared of Lady Carina, he's also frightened of me and Parfette. And the other day, when Lady Carina called out to him from behind, he got so scared that he fell over onto his rear."

"My, how pitiful. He's getting his just deserts, though," Mary asserted nonchalantly, and Margaret nodded in agreement.

They did pity Randall for having failed to escape Carina, but in the end, he was only reaping what he had sown. And while the girls did discuss the topic and expressed hollow sympathies towards him, none of them had any intention of helping him.

Mary and Margaret exchanged a smile and paused to drink their tea. Mary then breathed a sigh of relief. "Anyhow, I'm really glad to hear that everyone is doing well."

"Indeed. And I'm very pleased to be able to have tea with you like this, Lady Mary," Margaret responded with a sweet smile.

Mary did the same, but then murmured, "However... This place..."

"Isn't this room simply wonderful?" Margaret went on. "And please look—the view from the window is sublime."

"Well, *of course* it is... I mean, this is House Dyce's estate, after all!"

Just as Mary was about to demand to know what Margaret was even doing here, Patrick peered in through the door. "Sorry I had to call you over like this, Mary, but please hang on a little longer. The documents aren't ready yet."

"I mean, it's not like I mind."

"I apologize for making you wait too, Lady Margaret," Patrick added, turning to the other girl. "Bernard should be back any moment now."

"It is no trouble at all, dear brother-in-law."

"B-Brother-in-law?!" Mary screeched, dropping her teacup.

However, both Patrick and Margaret glanced at her with confused

expressions. The two exchanged a look, as if having a nonverbal conversation, with the former asking, *"What's the matter with her?"* and the latter answering, *"I've no idea."* They both shrugged their shoulders.

These days, Patrick would often complain that he'd been getting the shivers, but it seemed he wasn't aware of the root cause of them. No, perhaps the hunter just hadn't shown her claws yet?

Soon enough Patrick left, and it was just Mary and Margaret once again. A light breeze blew in from the open window, swaying the curtains with a pleasant, comforting sound. "I'm...truly glad *everyone* is doing well for themselves," Mary said with a strained look on her face.

Margaret took a sip of her tea. "Indeed, we are well. You could even say we're in full bloom," she replied with a smile.

Head Over Heels: The Scheme

“I’m going to tell you a secret scheme for making Lady Mary fall head over heels for you, Adi!” Alicia exclaimed enthusiastically.

Sitting opposite her, Adi calmly responded, “Why, thank you,” as he knocked down one of Alicia’s pieces with his own on the chess board.

“Ah!” she cried when she noticed it.

It was a vulgar sound, improper for the princess of a nation to make, but she was still a beginner to the game, and even though Adi was playing at a disadvantage, she was starting to lose anyway. Now that another one of her pieces had been knocked down, of course she wanted to scream.

“Oh no, my knight! Run, bishop! Run awaaay!” she squeaked. “B-But Adi! I’m going to tell you a super secret scheme for making Mary fall madly in love with you! It’s amazing!”

“Your attempts at distraction are futile. Here we go, another piece down.”

“Nooo! My pawn! Ugh, even though I’m playing at an advantage, I still can’t win against you...”

“It’s because you focused your advantages too much on your king and queen pieces, Alicia. I mean, increasing your king’s and queen’s mobility and having them run rampant on the front lines? What kind of strategy is that?”

“As royalty, we will brandish the swords and wage war personally! Ahh, the knight’s at it again!” Alicia shrieked pitifully once more as another one of her pieces tumbled down.

The game was as good as decided—the spectacle was nigh unbearable to look at. If this were a true battlefield, Alicia’s army would’ve been fluttering the white flag by now.

But even faced with such insurmountable odds, the girl’s eyes were still blazing with fighting spirit, and she suddenly picked up her queen piece and slid it towards the center of the board. “Adi, let’s have our queens fight one-on-

one!”

“This really can’t pass as chess anymore.”

“If you can win against me in a one versus one, I’ll tell you the secret scheme to make Lady Mary fall head over heels for you!”

“Unfortunately for you, I plan to finish this in three moves.”

“I already used it on Lord Patrick to great success! When I did, he instantly cleared his whole day and spent the rest of it cuddling with me!”

“Hmm...” Adi was about to move a piece, but his hand stilled. Three of his fingers had been headed towards his knight piece in order to assure victory, but now they jolted...and changed course towards his queen piece instead. He cleared the rest of the chess board and sent out his queen to the middle. “So how will this duel work?”

“When I count us down, we’ll both strike simultaneously, and whoever tips over the opponent’s queen piece first wins!”

“There’s not even a trace of chess left here.”

Following this conversation, a light clatter resounded through Albert Manor early on that dusky morning.

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“Honestly! What’s all this ruckus about a picnic first thing in the morning?!” Mary shrieked furiously while Adi tried to pacify her.

The hour was late, and they were in Adi’s room, where they’d been chatting idly as always—going over what had happened earlier in the day and discussing what plans they had for tomorrow. Although typically the two of them would have already retired for the night by now, Mary had started airing her grievances regarding Alicia.

But however much she screamed or expressed her discontent, for Adi it was just business as usual. “There, there,” he said to soothe Mary as he poured her tea. “Lord Patrick took her back before dinner, right?” he offered as a means of patching things up.

That said, Alicia *had* twirled Mary around all day until precisely dinnertime.

Mary's farewell to Patrick had been, *"My house is not your cloakroom!"* As such, there was no guarantee Adi's assurances would have any effect.

"Pfft, Patrick! He's always on about how you have to reprimand people the second they make a slipup, and yet when it comes to that girl, he spoils her rotten!"

"Milady, if you keep screeching like that, your hair might screw itself back up!"

"Stop nonchalantly adding fuel to the fire!"

As Mary kept shrieking, Adi gave her a wry yet soothing smile. Then, he abruptly approached her, wrapping her in his arms under the guise of trying to calm her.

Mary was surprised by his audacity, but she was determined not to get swept up in his actions. "Stop trying to distract me," she told him with a glare.

"My lady, tomorrow's our day off, no? How about you stay the night here?"

"Oh, look at you. Minutes ago you were doing all you could to add fuel to the fire, and yet it seems like you know your way around seduction. But too bad for you—I'm going back to my room to finish reading *Dog Training 101: From Toys to Giants*," Mary said as she turned away with a huff. It seemed like her anger had reached its peak.

I absolutely have to finish reading that book tonight. And when I do, I'll shove it into Patrick's hands and make him read it too!

Just as she resolved to do as much, Adi suddenly and forcibly pulled her closer. Mary couldn't hold back a sound at his high-handedness. But upon hearing what he whispered into her ear the next moment, all of her furious reprimands died in her throat.

"Don't be like that...*Mary*."

The sweetness of those words made her heart flutter. He addressed her differently, both from his usual "milady" and the way he'd refer to her as "Lady Mary" in public. It was a special, soft, and enticing way to call her...

Her heart started pounding, and her cheeks flushed. When she looked up, she

was met with his seductive rust-colored eyes gazing back at her gently. There was no way she could resist the tight grip of his arms around her.

Though she meekly remained in his hold, Mary nevertheless tried to put up a brave front as best she could. “W-Well... I suppose I’ve no choice...”

In response, Adi laughed quietly and placed a kiss upon her forehead.

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In the middle of the night following that exchange, Mary blearily opened her eyes.

She was still half asleep and not fully back to her senses. *Oh my*, she thought when she realized she wasn’t wearing anything, reaching for a nearby shirt and slipping it on. *Is this Adi’s?* she pondered as she stretched out her arm and looked over the sleeves. They were quite long, but this shirt was the perfect replacement for a nightgown.

While she dressed herself, Adi, who was lying next to her, stirred in his sleep. His top half was also naked. He must’ve felt the cold against his skin when Mary had lifted the covers as she sat up after waking.

“Mmm... Milady...? What’s wrong?” Adi inquired drowsily. He rubbed his eyes, and Mary giggled at how sleepy he sounded.

“It’s nothing,” she answered, lying back down and snuggling into his chest.

Adi brushed his large hands through her silver hair soothingly. But his movements were slightly messier than usual, and his fingers occasionally touched her ears instead, so he must’ve been quite out of it. Yet it still felt pleasant, and as Mary looked up at him, she noticed his eyes were already closed, with faint breaths escaping through his slightly opened mouth. It wasn’t just that he was sleepy—most likely, he was still half in a dream.

And even so, he still petted her hair. Finding it endearing, Mary shifted upwards a little. “Good night, dear,” she whispered before kissing Adi on the lips.

In that instant, his eyes flew open. “Milady! What did you just say?!”

“Hmm, what indeed? Good night, Adi.”

“You said it, didn’t you?! Call me that again!”

“There’s no meaning to something like that if it’s not a surprise attack. Now, I’m going to drag Patrick to a dog training course tomorrow, so I’d better get some rest.”

“Milady!”

Adi continued pleading with her, promising he’d cuddle her, and pet her head, and kiss her if she just said it again. But Mary smiled, knowing he’d already done all of that, and fell into a blissful sleep.

The Cold Young Lady Would Prefer a New Hobby

Mary's eyes widened at the sight of her unusual visitor.

Of course, the girl was a schoolmate of hers, so the visit itself wasn't entirely surprising, but rather it was the fact that she had come alone. (Also, Mary found the way she had courteously apologized for the unexpected visit strange. After all, when it came to Mary's early morning visitors, they consisted of Alicia, who'd always vigorously barge into Albert Manor, or else Parfette, who'd arrive on the verge of tears. Neither of them had any consideration for whether their visits were to Mary's convenience or not.)

Hence, upon seeing such a respectful visitor, whose expression clearly suggested there was a special reason for her visit, Mary decided to ask a nearby maid to prepare some tea, and then led the guest to the courtyard.

There was a pleasant breeze in the air as the two of them sat down in their chairs, taking a moment to enjoy the steaming tea. Mary cast a sideways glance at the visitor. The girl, sitting across the table from her, averted her gaze in a manner quite unlike herself.

Even when she'd canceled her engagement with her fiancé, the girl had done so with unwavering frigid beauty, and yet that was nowhere to be seen now. Her countenance was downright grave, and Mary racked her brain for what the reason behind that could've been.

I wonder what happened?

However, just like Mary, this girl possessed something almost unbelievable—the memories of her past life. No matter how much Mary pondered, coming up with an answer by herself might've been impossible. Concluding as much, she opted to ask the girl directly.

"So, what brings you here today, Carina?"

Carina raised her head a little towards Mary, but soon enough dropped her

gaze again. It seemed the matter was difficult for her to talk about, as at intervals she'd glance at Mary then open her lips a little, only to repeat the cycle, full of hesitancy.

Eventually, Carina seemed to have made up her mind as she lifted her head and met Mary's eyes. "Er... I apologize for coming over so suddenly. I'm sure you must be busy, Lady Mary."

"It's fine. Nearly everyone else makes sudden visits here, anyway."

"Really...?"

"Just the other day, right after I got up in the morning, I found a certain peasant girl having tea with my mother. I couldn't stop myself from screaming in surprise."

"I... I see..."

"With that said, don't worry about this. Just speak freely," urged Mary.

At those words, Carina hesitated for another moment, then slowly opened her mouth. "Well... It's about Randall..."

"Oh my. What's the matter with him?" Mary tilted her head.

Randall was one of the romanceable characters from *Heart High 2*, as well as Carina's ex-fiancé. The comeuppance he'd gotten was the harshest of the bunch (setting aside the fact that "comeuppance" seemed like an adorable phrasing in light of what he'd been put through), and he'd also tried to hinder Parfette and Gainas. Randall's glory was nothing but a specter of the bygone past, and he lived in utter fear now. Or at least, such was the tale Mary had heard from a certain young lady whom she'd often encounter in the Dyce estate.

"Don't tell me—did he run away again?" Mary inquired.

"Yes, that's right. Actually...he runs away periodically. Of course, each time, I recapture him, tie him up, and torture him, but... Well..."

"What's wrong?" Mary prompted, peering curiously at the girl as she uncharacteristically faltered in her speech.

Carina's alluring pupils were colored with bafflement, and her brow was creased in a frown. To top it off, she seemed uncomfortable with meeting

Mary's eyes, as she purposefully turned to look the other way. It was very strange to see the girl avert her gaze like this, so Mary assumed this must've been quite the heavy matter.

"What is it?" she again prompted gently, trying to comfort Carina.

"Um... Lately, whenever I torture Randall, he..."

"Yes...?"

"I feel like... He seems kind of happy about it..." Carina said slowly with a pale face.

The pleasant wind breezed past, swaying the two girls' hair.

After a few seconds of being dumbstruck, Mary answered, "Take responsibility!"

Carina turned to face her again in a fluster. "But Lady Mary...!"

"How terrifying! You opened his eyes, didn't you...?!"

"No! I mean, this is *Randall* we're talking about!"

The two girls shrieked at each other, making for a merry sight to any outsiders. That said, the topic of their exchange was very grave indeed.

"It's your responsibility!" Mary insisted once more, sticking to her point.

Meanwhile, Carina was pale, seemingly being confronted with the truth of a matter that a part of her had always suspected was the case. "But... Randall wasn't supposed to be that sort of person...!" she appealed desperately.

Just as she was saying, Randall was supposed to be the so-called extreme sadist. If he found someone he liked, he enjoyed driving them to the wall, and he had always been a prideful man, who looked down on others... Key words: *had been*.

"Right, he did have that sort of personality," Mary conceded. "But that's in the past tense now."

"P-Past tense...?"

"You're the one who broke apart that personality of his and planted something new in its former site."

“Please stop saying such scary things!” Carina screamed, uncharacteristically losing her composure. Mary just turned away in response, refusing to acknowledge the other girl.

Alas, such was the truth. Something within Randall had sprouted in the wake of Carina’s tight hold on him, and his personality had shifted in the exact opposite direction of sadism.

How truly frightening... Mary thought, casting an icy glance at Carina before she could stop herself. Sensing Mary’s feelings, Carina only paled further.

Suddenly, a voice called out to the two of them. Mary glanced over and spotted Adi, making his way towards them. At the appearance of her beloved husband, who was bringing them a second helping of tea, Mary jumped to her feet hard enough to rattle her chair.

“Adi, no! You can’t come over here! This woman is dangerous!”

“Lady Mary! That’s so horrible of you to say!”

“Excuse me...?” Adi questioned. “Er, but I brought you more tea and some cakes.”

“Adi, let’s go back inside!” Mary insisted. “This woman might open a door that ought to remain shut!”

“Lady Mary! Please don’t abandon me!”

As Mary screeched, high on her guard, Carina clung to her and lamented.

Adi’s eyes widened as he observed these two. “Door...?” he muttered, tilting his head.

Eventually, Carina once again explained everything, this time with Adi present. Though, the contents of what she said changed slightly from before. “When I torture Randall, sometimes he looks at me expectantly,” Carina told them, amending her story.



Having heard this (or rather, having been forced to listen), Adi replied with, “I believe you should take responsibility.”

Mary nodded in agreement, while Carina once again began screaming. In the middle of all this, Mary suddenly interrupted Carina as though remembering something. “Wait, did Randall run away again today?”

“Yes, he did. But I already know exactly where he ran off to.”

“You know exactly where, do you?”

“Yes. He has a few escape routes, but I’m already aware of all of them.”

“R-Right... In that case, why not catch him and destroy every little sprouting thing so that he never runs away again?” Mary proposed with a slightly stiff look on her face.

Carina looked up swiftly upon hearing those words. Then, she smiled so icily that Adi quickly gulped down the rest of his tea before it could get cold. “You’re right,” she replied.

That smile of hers was dazzling, indeed. By the sight of it alone, Mary recognized that the Carina she knew had returned.

“Once again, I apologize for my sudden visit. However, I have some very important business to attend to, so I’ll be taking my leave here.”

“Very well. The next time you’re free, by all means come visit with a less objectionable purpose,” said Mary. “Let’s have a nice, normal warm meal together.”

“I’d be happy to,” Carina responded with a sweet smile, bowing her head. The way she gripped her skirt and dipped her body forward slightly was very ladylike. Her elegant gestures meant she was likely second only to the daughter of House Albert in etiquette—well, if it weren’t for the coldness emanating from her, at least.

Watching Carina leave, Mary let out a massive sigh.

But Carina, you are...

Mary swallowed her words, taking a sip from the fresh tea Adi had poured for

her. Yet the frigid air left behind by Carina could not be alleviated by a cup of tea, and when Mary sent Adi a silent look, he came over and gave her a hug, as though he, too, had been hit by an icy breeze.

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Earlier, in House Eldland's estate...

Having finished his daily jog, Gainas was in his room reading a book when a maid notified him that a friend had come to see him.

He had no recollections of making plans with anybody, and it was still too early in the day for Parfette to visit. *Who on earth could it be?* Gainas wondered. As he tried to surmise the visitor's identity, he headed over to the entryway.

"Gainas! Let me hide here!"

At the sight of the lamenting Randall, Gainas sighed in exasperation. "You again? How many times have I told you to stop coming here?"

"Are you abandoning me, Gainas?!"

"Actually, I already *have* abandoned you, so just leave already. You being here sets Parfette ill at ease."

"You monster!" Randall shrieked.

"You're calling *me* that?!" Gainas yelled back, raising his own voice in turn.

In the end, Gainas led Randall over to the garden as a compromise, because at one point in time, they'd been in the same boat. Lilianne had made them both lose their reason and cancel their engagements. Gainas had been able to earn back the Eldland name thanks to Parfette's resilience and the depth of her love for him, but one wrong move and he could've been on the same path as Randall. As such, Gainas felt he couldn't just forsake the other man.

And no matter what he does, it won't be long before... These thoughts were on Gainas's mind as well.

For a while, he listened to Randall's incessant complaints, until eventually a high-pitched voice resounded within House Eldland's garden. "There he is!"

Randall's shoulders jolted at the sound. His whole body was overcome with fright, and his face paled in an instant. In contrast, Gainas remained completely unaffected, and in fact began clearing away the table.

Several pairs of footsteps resounded before a group of brawny men captured Randall and tied him up. By this time, Gainas had skillfully finished tidying up the table, and when the person who had called out earlier finally made an appearance, Gainas had already handed the utensils over to the maid to be taken away.

"Greetings, Lord Gainas. I know this happens a lot, but I do apologize for all the fuss," said Carina.

"It's fine. I knew you'd be coming to get him soon, so I paid no attention to whatever he was saying and just thought about some other matters."

"Ah, in that case, I'm glad to hear it."

With an elegant smile, Carina ordered Randall to be taken into her carriage. She looked beautiful as always, but at this point, Gainas found her beauty and her leisurely attitude nothing short of terrifying. It was hard for him to look her in the eyes, so he turned away from her a bit.

But as a result of this, what came into Gainas's field of vision instead was the image of Randall, tied up and gagged. Gainas winced, having no good place for his eyes to settle.

"I brought you some cake as thanks," Carina went on. "By all means, enjoy it together with Parfette."

"Th-Thank you very much..." Gainas responded, suddenly speaking formally out of sheer instinct as he accepted the package containing the cake.

Following this, he watched as Carina bid an elegant farewell and vacated the estate grounds. Gainas sighed, but just then, another carriage arrived as though in replacement. He recognized it as one of House Marquis's, so it must've been Parfette.

Randall had left Gainas feeling exhausted, and Carina left an icy air in her wake. Yet the sight of his beloved Parfette, peeking out at him from the carriage door before stepping out, instantly flooded Gainas's chest with warmth. The

way she rushed up to him with small, quick steps was utterly adorable.

“Lord Gainas, did something happen?” she asked him.

“No. Randall was here for a bit, that’s all.”

“Him?! Again?!” Parfette exclaimed with puffed out cheeks as Gainas quickly tried to reassure her.

He explained that Randall hadn’t been allowed inside the house, nor had Gainas even listened to any of what the man said. “In the end, Lady Carina came to retrieve him,” he concluded, and Parfette’s face brightened at the sound of her friend’s name. Gainas was relieved to see her spirits lifted, after which he showed Parfette the cake he’d received.

“Lady Carina bought some cake for us. Let’s enjoy it together.”

“Okay!” Parfette’s dissatisfied expression melted away as her eyes lit up at his words. “Let’s have some tea too,” she added, calling over a nearby maid.

Observing her, Gainas let out a sigh. The image of Randall at the very end of their meeting today was horribly miserable, and there’d been no trace of his past glory left in his appearance when he was forcibly dragged off. “Pitiable” was the only word left to describe him.

Of course, Gainas was aware that the reason Randall had fallen so low was because that was just how much Carina condemned him. And the more the man ran, the harsher her condemnation and torture would get.

I wonder what she’ll do to him this time? Gainas felt chills run down his spine at the thought.

He murmured about how cold he was under his breath, and perhaps having overheard him, Parfette reached out to rub his arm in concern. The warmth of her hand made Gainas breathe a sigh of relief, even as he pictured his friend likely getting trampled under Carina’s foot in that carriage right about now.

Despite the distance between them, at that moment, Mary and Gainas both sighed in unison.

But you know, Carina... thought Mary.

But you know, Randall... thought Gainas.

What exactly am I supposed to think about that happy look you had on your face? the both of them pondered.

Alas, though there was but one conclusion to be drawn from this, it was best left unspoken, and as their respective partners called out to Mary and Gainas, the two decided to switch their focus to their beloveds.

Shuffle Dance

Mary's dance with Adi had been a moment in time so enjoyable that there were no words to describe it—it was almost unreal.

Her heart filled with reluctance at the sound of the soft music coming to an end, and she squeezed Adi's hand to coax him into one more dance. But in the next instant, her eyes widened as something pulled at the ribbon on her dress.

It must've been an attempt to get Mary's attention, although the action lacked any real force. Mary, who'd been floating on cloud nine, giggled and remarked, "My, how boorish." But when she turned around, this time her eyes narrowed.

Behind her stood a teary-eyed Parfette, trembling all over. "Lady Mary, w-won't you... Won't you dance with me for one s-song too?" she appealed in a barely audible voice.

In contrast, standing next to the tearful Parfette was a brightly beaming Alicia. "I want a turn after Parfette, Lady Mary!" she proclaimed.

Mary didn't even have the strength to get angry anymore as she let out a colossal sigh and her shoulders drooped. A few minutes later, while the gentle music played on, Mary elegantly danced along. As for her partner... No, it was indeed not Adi, but rather Parfette.

"Lady Mary! Lady Mary, I'm honored... This is such a privilege. I'm so happy... Wah!"

"Don't you dare cry in the middle of a dance!" Mary rebuked the girl when she noticed tears spring to her eyes.

Apparently, Parfette was just that happy over being able to dance with Mary. But upon receiving a scolding, her trembling hand squeezed Mary's tighter as she nodded resolutely and voiced her agreement.

When Mary prompted, Parfette spun around, the hem of her frilly dress following in time with her movements. It looked just like a puppy wagging its fluffy tail. Mary sighed at the sight, but even so, she couldn't fight back a

sardonic smile as she murmured, “Ah well.”

The next time, Mary did a single spin herself. Both she and Parfette were noble ladies, so of course they had an interest in dance, and there was no way they’d put on a disgraceful performance, even if their partner might have been of the same sex. Quite the opposite—they moved perfectly in tune with each other. Mary smiled, thinking that dancing between women could be fun too.

While they danced, the stares of those around them were warmer than one might’ve expected. Two ladies dancing hand in hand was very unusual, so much so that it wouldn’t have been surprising if the others had gazed upon them with coldness and contempt. And yet, for some reason everyone regarded the two girls dancing with mirth in their eyes. There were a few among them who shrugged their shoulders and murmured, “Oh dear,” with wry smiles, but even their voices held no loathing. Rather, their tones suggested they found it heartwarming.

There were two reasons behind this. First, though they were both women, Mary and Parfette nevertheless danced with great elegance together. Second, there was another very unusual pairing that stole most of the crowd’s attention from the two girls.

Hmm, Mary murmured inwardly as she thought about the other pair while continuing to move in step with Parfette. The other girl’s hand trembled lightly in hers, but compared to the “Swinging Mary Albert Around Competition” held by Alicia in the past (and likely again in the very near future), it was hardly a bothersome thing.

“I must say, it *is* pretty frustrating not to be in the limelight,” Mary remarked.

“D-Don’t say that, Lady Mary,” Parfette replied. “I mean...”

“I know. There’s no match for *that* pair.” Mary smirked, casting a glance to the side. She followed the onlookers’ chilly line of sight towards a certain duo dancing gracefully along to the music. One was a tall, handsome young man with rust-colored hair that swayed with his movements, and the other... The other was an indigo-haired young man with looks so perfect as to resemble a true prince.

Indeed, they were Adi and Patrick. The two of them were dancing together

hand in hand.

“Why do I have to do this?” Patrick muttered, sporting a tart expression and a deep frown, very unlike that of the Prince Charming beloved by all the girls. His voice was low, and far more frigid than was strictly necessary for maintaining an air of composure.

Never had Patrick behaved in such a way during a dance, nor even during any party. Seeing this attitude, Adi, who was holding his hand (or rather, keeping his hand just close enough to make it seem that way), purposely exclaimed, “What?! Are you dissatisfied dancing with me, Lord Patrick?!”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Indeed, I feel the same way.”

Both of them had a thousand-yard stare as they talked. (As a side note, Mary, who was watching the two of them, uttered a simile: “Their eyes are like cold, grease-soaked croquettes.” Parfette couldn’t comprehend what she was saying as question marks floated around her head.)

Dejected as the two men were, they nevertheless made enough effort to move in time with the music, as after all, they were on the dance floor right now.

Or rather, they had reluctantly teamed up together in order to remain on the dance floor. The laughs and icy glares the crowd hurled their way were unbearably harsh, but even so, Adi started discussing matters with Patrick. At this point, neither of them cared if they were stepping on the other’s feet or giving up the lead role to the other.

“Listen, Lord Patrick. The song’s about to end.”

“Yeah.”

“The next song will start immediately, and at that moment, I will take milady’s hand.”

“I get that, but why do I have to dance with you now? Depending on your answer, I might mobilize House Dyce.”

“Please don’t say such frightening things. Right now, Alicia is standing by the

front lines and vigilantly staring at milady like she's waiting for her opportunity to catch her prey. Please stop her when the time comes. We must launch a charge together as soon as the song ends," Adi explained.

"Look at her... She's so cute..."

"Can you please get out of your tunnel vision and face reality for once?!"

"Anyway, I got it. I'll push forward... I'll invite Alicia to dance with me before she gets to Mary," Patrick said, amending his previous reply as he agreed to the assault.

Adi still wanted to mention a couple of things, but the song's end was hanging over their heads, so he opted for nonchalantly moving towards Mary and her partner. Of course, he did so while matching his steps with Patrick's.

Moments were left before the songs would change, and it was a sure thing that Alicia would rush towards Mary to invite her to a dance (though, given her coerciveness, "invite" might not have been the most accurate word for it). Before that could happen, Adi would take Mary's hand, and Patrick would stop Alicia... Or at least, such was their plan.

Gainas was waiting within the crowd, and Adi occasionally made eye contact with him as well. The idea was that at the moment of the attack, Gainas would have Adi's back and take Parfette's hand to invite her to a dance.

If all went well, they'd each be able to have the next dance with their respective beloveds.

Adi and Patrick nodded at one another to confirm the plan. Right on time, the music began to fade...and then stopped. Under usual circumstances, they'd bow their heads deeply and extol their partner's dancing skills, but why should either of them praise the sorry foot stomping that just occurred between them? Both men skipped the courtesies to face their lovers instead.

Just then, a vigorous voice resounded around them. "Lady Mary! Me next!"

Of course, it belonged to Alicia. Just as soon as the dance had ended, the girl went flying out onto the dance floor, decisively heading for Mary. (Patrick inwardly murmured, *I see; she was there because it's impossible to catch her from among the bystanders.*)

The two men, unwilling to let this happen, reached out their hands.

“Milady, me next!”

“Alicia, come with me!”

They called out as such (their voices somewhat tinted with heartbreak). At the same time, Mary let out a shriek at the sight of the approaching Alicia.

The gentle music began flowing yet again, and Adi, who had closed his eyes due to the impact of bumping into something, slowly opened them. The hand in his felt soft—it was unmistakably the hand of a girl.

“Milady! Thank goodness,” he said, feeling relieved their strategy had been a success, but...

“Waaah! I’m so sorry you ended up with meee...!”

...his eyes widened at the sight of the tearful, quivering Parfette.

“Lady Parfette?!”

“I’m so sorry... I know... I know you don’t want to d-dance with someone like me...!”

“Ack, please don’t cry! B-But why...?”

For the next few moments, Adi prioritized pacifying Parfette and ensuring he stepped in time with the music. As expected of the daughter of House Marquis, the girl matched her own steps to his and moved with surprising elegance, given that she was still teary and trembling imperceptibly. Her hand was lightly quivering, but only Adi, whose hands were connected to hers, could tell as much.

The girl began recounting the moment of their peculiar turnaround. “Wh-When my dance with Lady Mary ended, I was about to walk away, but...something really powerful bumped into me. I was so startled I nearly fell over.”

And then Adi must’ve caught her hand. In other words, Alicia had crashed into them, and as a result, Mary and Parfette had switched places. (Adi decided to remain silent on the fact that the “really powerful thing” that had bumped into Parfette was the princess of his very own nation. There was the matter of

keeping up appearances for the sake of his country, and he couldn't get the words out even if he wanted to, what with Parfette crying out about how afraid she had been.)

Having listened to the girl's explanation, Adi nodded in understanding. "In that case, may I have the honor of being your partner for one dance?" he asked her belatedly, as even though his plan had failed, he held no ill will towards Parfette in the slightest. Rather, he felt bad for getting her involved in all of this.

Perhaps surmising his feelings, or thinking it had been the will of fate, Parfette smiled slightly at his late invitation. "Of course," she responded, squeezing his hand lightly. "But are you sure? I know you wanted to dance with Lady Mary."

"I'm sure. You're an important friend of milady's, and it is a privilege for me to dance with you. Besides..." Adi glanced to the side, and Parfette followed his line of sight. "If I'm heard complaining about that scene, I'll earn someone's wrath."

"Oh dear..." murmured Parfette.

Indeed, the spectacle unfolding before their eyes was unendurable.

"Lady Mary! Isn't this so much fun?" Alicia exclaimed, a huge grin on her face as she moved with hearty steps. Needless to say, her dance partner was Mary.

She'd been able to spot Alicia's incoming charge, but she hadn't had enough time for an evacuation. Tragically, the "Swinging Mary Albert Around Competition" had recommenced, and Mary screeched at Alicia to stop spinning her so much.

Not far from them was Patrick, who for some reason was sporting a thousand-yard stare again (in all probability, Alicia's crash was the cause). As for the person in front of him...

"Um, my deepest apologies, Lord Patrick..."

It was Gainas, who despite the pale look on his face, tried his best to match his steps to the music.

Indeed, Patrick's dance partner was Gainas—once again, he'd ended up with a man.

After noticing the disastrous combination of Patrick and Gainas dancing together, Adi turned his gaze away and back to his own partner, Parfette. He shouldn't let his attention wander after inviting her to dance with him, after all—it was bad manners...and it didn't help him escape from reality. So he decided to ignore the resounding shrieks, shouts of joy, and apologies he could hear all around, focusing on dancing elegantly with Parfette.

Right around then, the girl suddenly looked up at him. "Ah, that's right," she said with a smile. Actually, she was downright giggling at him.

Confused, Adi tilted his head. "What is it, Lady Parfette?"

"You're very tall, aren't you, Lord Adi?"

"Hmm...? Well, yes, I suppose I am," he responded, bewildered at this topic of conversation as question marks floated around his head.

Parfette's smile grew, the girl clearly finding his reaction amusing. She then began speaking slowly, her voice full of nostalgia. "Back when she was attending Elysiana College, Lady Mary would always look up and to one side. Sometimes she'd even say something and wait for a reply, and then look surprised upon realizing there was nobody there. I always found it quite strange, but I understand now."

"What do you mean?" Adi prompted.

"You've always been by Lady Mary's side, right? That's why she'd look up, expecting for you to be there as if it were par for the course, even at Elysiana," Parfette said with another smile, adding that Mary would glance up to right around his height.

Adi's mouth closed tightly at those words. He was struck with joy and embarrassment, but he couldn't let himself get distracted during the dance. The fact that he couldn't do anything to conceal his flushed cheeks was quite inconvenient indeed.

Parfette giggled again upon seeing his reaction, even more amused. As the song drew to an end, she clasped the hem of her skirt and bowed lightly. "But I still want to dance with Lady Mary again," she said, sticking her tongue out a little.

“No can do. I’ll be dancing with her next,” responded Adi.

“Oh my. I suppose the fastest one shall win.” Parfette smiled mischievously, and Adi bowed his head in return before smiling at her adorable proclamation of war.

At the same time, they both looked up quickly, because they didn’t want to miss their chance.

“Milady! Dance with me next!”

“Lady Maaary! Please dance with me agaaain!”

The two exclaimed simultaneously, extending their hands out to where they knew Mary was.

At the same time, another pair of voices cried out:

“Alicia, come here already!”

“Parfette, please dance with me!”

The two men who’d been dancing together separated in a split second, each outstretching a hand to their respective lovers.

As for Alicia and Mary themselves...

“Lady Mary! One more song!”

“Someone, save me! Anyone will do at this point!”

One was trying to spin the other with great enthusiasm, while said other screeched and tried to escape. Shortly thereafter, another crash occurred. That much was to be expected when every single person rushed forward, aiming for their objects of affection at the same time.

“Wait... Alicia?!”

“Huh? Adi?!”

Adi’s and Alicia’s eyes widened at the sight of one another. Both of them had been aiming for Mary’s hand, and yet instead they were faced with someone completely different. Alas, such was the result of the crash, so next on their agenda was to check who their target had ended up with this time. If Mary’s partner was neither Adi nor Alicia, then it must’ve been someone else involved

in the collision. With such thoughts, the pair glanced around curiously.

“Whoa...”

“Oh dear...”

The two of them murmured quietly at the grand spectacle unfolding before their eyes.

“Oho ho! Your physique is so large that my legs just can’t keep up, Lord Gainas,” Mary said with a graceful smile, stomping on Gainas’s feet with every one of her steps. Needless to say, she was doing it on purpose—after all, she was the daughter of House Albert, who could dance elegantly even with her eyes closed. As a matter of fact, her expertise was the very thing that allowed her to nonchalantly trample on Gainas’s feet under the guise of carelessness.

The beauty of her false smile must’ve been putting considerable pressure on Gainas. He’d paled significantly and was only leading Mary in pretense. “Please don’t worry about it and go at your own pace...” he uttered, having resigned himself to his fate.

“Oh, in that case, I will do just that,” Mary responded, starting to twist her foot on top of his with each stomp.

For any outsiders looking at them, the two made a beautiful sight, yet at the same time, Mary and Gainas had an icy air emanating from them.

Not far away was another pair dancing gracefully together—Parfette and Patrick. Though, once again, they only seemed graceful to the outsiders.

“I can’t believe I’m dancing with you, Lord Patrick! This is such an honor! I’m so happy! I think I’m going to cry...!”

“None of the things you mentioned should be making anyone *cry*! Mary, how do I deal with this girl?!”

It was quite the spectacular state of affairs. After all, this was Parfette—the girl cried whenever *anything* happened. In fact, even if *nothing* was happening, she’d spontaneously burst into tears. Even now, her bottom lip was quivering for some mysterious reason as she cried out, “Lord Patrick, you lead so perfectly...!”

“What do I do with you?!” Patrick exclaimed in a fluster.

“What a scene...” murmured Adi.

“Lord Patrick is so wonderful, even when he’s flustered,” Alicia remarked.

“If that’s your opinion, then you should go back to him next...”

Alas, it was tasteless to be interfering with another pair when dancing with someone, so for the duration of the song, at least, Adi and Alicia turned back to each other. At any rate, they couldn’t escape from reality...probably.

They ignored the voices rising up here and there, continuing to move together. In the middle of the dance, Adi smiled slightly as Alicia spun before him. Her golden-thread hair swayed lightly, and she grasped his hand again in a fluid motion. Her movements would’ve been beautiful, if only Adi didn’t remember the swinging competition and the collisions.

“You’ve become skilled at dancing, haven’t you, Alicia?” he commented, recalling their high school days, back when Mary had invited Alicia to a party hosted by the Alberts.

At that time, Alicia hadn’t had a clue about her identity as the princess, nor did she have even an inkling regarding the mystery behind her origins. And yet, as though she’d longed for the life of a noble lady, she watched Mary and Patrick’s splendid dance and decided she wanted to try it too. Then, in the middle of the estate gardens, she practiced her dancing with Adi.

But Alicia had been a novice at the time, and Adi could dance about as well as anyone, but not well enough to teach—there was no way the two could’ve had a proper dance. In the end, they’d just stepped all over each other’s feet, concluded they were getting nowhere, and brought over Mary and Patrick instead.

“Hee hee, it’s nostalgic, isn’t it?” Alicia giggled.

“Back then, I could’ve never imagined things would turn out like this. To think that milady and I...”

“Really?” Alicia asked with surprise.

Adi was taken aback in turn by her reaction. After all, back then, Mary had

possessed no self-awareness about any possible romantic feelings she might've had for him, and Adi had been convinced that there was too great a difference in status between himself and his first love, and that it would only end in misery. Most critically, everyone had been convinced that Mary and Patrick would end up married (and that included Adi himself, as resigned and jealous as he'd been over the fact).

"Well, if you're taking ranks into consideration, then I guess you'd come to that conclusion," Alicia said. But in the next moment, she smiled brightly. It was a dazzling, sunny expression, so very much like her. "But as for me, somewhere deep down in my heart, I kind of knew that things would end up like this all along."

"You...did?"

"Adi, do you remember how I'd always chase after Lady Mary when we still attended Karelia Academy together?"

"I do. Milady used to be quite frightened at the time, saying things like, 'Why does she always find me no matter where I go?! How scary!'"

"Frightened? How mean! But actually, that was all your fault, Adi."

"My fault?" Adi blinked in shock at the notion.

Alicia's smile only grew in response. "Let's keep this a secret from Lady Mary," she began, putting on airs. "Her beauty does make her conspicuous, but it's hard to spot her from among a busy crowd, right?"

"Her silver hair certainly stands out, but she's not exactly a tall person. Indeed, if she's in a crowd..."

"But it's different with you, Adi. You're super tall! And your hair color stands out too!" Alicia pointed out with a giggle.

Surmising what she was trying to say, Adi nodded in understanding. *I see, so that was all my fault...* he murmured in his mind. Upon remembering Mary's shaken terror from a few years ago, he smiled wryly.

"In a crowded cafeteria, in the lecture hall, or the congested town center... No matter the place, your height and red hair make you easy to spot," Alicia went

on. “I knew that if I just followed that sight...”

Next to the servant with rust-colored hair, there would always be a silver-haired noble lady.

“Just like how you’re always by Lady Mary’s side, *she* is always by *your* side too!” Alicia said happily, and Adi flushed a little at those words.

He took pride in the fact that he was closer to Mary than anyone, and how that had always been the case. He’d vowed to Mary that he would always be by her side, after all. But having it reaffirmed like this and listening to someone else cheerfully discuss it embarrassed him.

Alas, concealing his shyness in the middle of a dance was no easy feat. He couldn’t employ any of his usual methods, such as scratching his head, looking away, or ordering some tea and cake and then changing the subject. *How cruel the act of dancing is...* Adi told himself.

However, soon enough the timbre of the music changed as the song drew to a close, so perhaps this thing called a dance had some compassion for him after all. Adi bowed deeply with reddened cheeks, whereas Alicia continued smiling brightly, and yet curtsied to him in a notably refined, princessly manner, praising his ability to lead.

Of course, in the next moment, they both looked up swiftly. *That was then, and this is now*, so each of them thought, fully aware of the other’s intentions. No matter what anyone might’ve said, Adi and Alicia had been friends for a long time. All those years ago, when Alicia had first met Mary, she’d met Adi at the same time too.

“I’m going to ask this just in case,” Adi began, “but how about you let me have the next dance with mila—”

“Absolutely not!”

“I knew it...”

Following this exchange, they turned to look as Gainas bowed much lower than usual to an elegantly smiling Mary (who in contrast didn’t bow as low as usual and whose expression was slightly condescending).

As per the established standard, they each extended their hands towards Mary and exclaimed at her.

“Milady! Dance with me this time!”

“Lady Mary! Let’s have an encore!”

The other expected voices resounded around them simultaneously.

“Alicia! That’s enough now! Come here already!” shouted Patrick, trying to reach for her.

“Waaah! This again...?!” Parfette cried pathetically.

As the son and daughter of noble families, they had of course thanked each other for the dance courteously, but the second that was done, their demeanor switched in this manner.

As for Mary herself...

“I’ve had enough! Whoever’s next, I’m taking you down!”

...for some reason, she was determined to indiscriminately launch a counterattack.

Next to her, Gainas looked mentally exhausted. “Parfette, I’m begging you, just come with me now...” he said, reaching a hand out towards his lover (although, he struggled to bring himself to do so right before Mary’s eyes).

Another collision occurred, and at this point, even the onlookers were wondering what on earth was happening. But in fact, in the face of all this clamor, some among the crowd found the whole spectacle entertaining, as they began discussing who might end up paired with whom next. They stared at the turmoil with tepid, inquisitive glances, waiting to see whose hands joined this time.

“I’ve finally got you...” Adi murmured in exhaustion. Mary was before his eyes at last, and their hands were clasped together. It seemed that in the middle of that crash, he had firmly yet almost accidentally captured her hand.

“How rude. I was trying to escape, didn’t you see?” Mary said with a strained expression, on the verge of complaining that she was vexed. Of course, that was all talk, and in the next moment, she smiled and strayed closer to Adi’s chest.

“Make sure to hold me properly,” she told him, by which she meant, *“Embrace me.”*

Adi, who was closer to her and understood her better than anyone else, naturally picked up on this. In response to her words, he tightened his grip around her waist. He had danced with Parfette and Alicia before, but now that Mary was finally in his arms, his body seemed to almost say, *“This is it.”*

The way she fit into his arms, her swaying silver locks, her happily smiling eyes, and the way she sweetly called his name... This was the only girl his heart longed for.

“I knew it. Dancing with you is the best, my lady.”

“Exactly. You should tell that to those girls next,” Mary responded, glancing away. Adi followed her line of sight, noticing a beautifully dancing pair nearby.

“Alicia, I think you need to calm down a little.”

“Hee hee! Dancing with you is the best after all, Lord Patrick!”

Patrick and Alicia were talking as such. Following all that jumping and running around, Patrick finally had his beloved in his arms, and he looked relieved beyond belief. Alicia snuggled closer to him, as if enraptured by him, and he even placed a kiss upon her cheek. (Usually, Mary would exclaim something like, *“It’s because you spoil her so much that we can’t teach her any discipline!”* at seeing this, and then be forced to endure a tackle hug from Alicia.)

The uproar from before was all but forgotten, and the way Patrick and Alicia smiled at each other was so beautiful that they almost looked to be out of some painting.

Beside them was another pair—of course, it was Gainas and Parfette. They weren’t as openly lovey-dovey as the previous pair, but that made sense for their relationship.

“I’m tired! That’s the only reason I’m grudgingly treating you to a dance, since I’m used to having you as my partner, Lord Gainas!” Parfette huffed, and yet she held his hand tightly. Occasionally, she also stepped on his feet with a mischievous giggle. There was no malice behind her words or actions, nor was there even a hint of resentment or an attempt at revenge. Her behavior was

comparable to a kitten trying to paw and nibble at someone.

Fully aware of all that, Gainas responded happily with, “How kind of you to dance with me even though you don’t want to.”

Another beautiful, sweet scene was unfolding between that pair too.

As he witnessed all these sugary moments, Adi’s cheeks reddened again. At the same time, he held Mary even tighter, pulling her closer to him. She didn’t complain, and in fact just snuggled against his chest. After a moment, she looked up at him with half-lidded eyes, obviously coaxing him to kiss her. There was no way he could refuse such a request.

They exchanged innocent kisses several times. Satisfied, Mary looked up at Adi once more. “Don’t let go of me again,” she told him, squeezing his hand.

“Kissing on the dance floor is improper.” Alas, such sentiments were certainly not held by the onlookers at present. After all, they’d been forced to witness all that turmoil, so things like kissing were of little concern by now.

Rather, the people smiled sardonically, thinking that the rowdy youngsters had calmed down at last. They could all sense that the conclusion was at hand —

“Lady Mary! Have your last dance with me!”

“Alicia! Calm down already!”

“Waaah! Things are heating up again for some reason... Huh? Lady Alicia?!”

“Let’s get out of here, Parfette...!”

“Give it your all and come right at me! I’ll take every single one of you down!”

“Milady, why are you posturing like you’re ready for a counterattack?!”

The boisterous clamor began again, and all the onlookers heaved a massive sigh, unable to keep up with these youngsters.

The Daughter of House Albert Desires Some Affection

With the way Mary was groggily sprawled out on the bed, nobody would've thought her to be the daughter of House Albert. If any outsiders were to have witnessed her right now, they might've remarked she was being improper and unladylike. Some might have even averted their gazes, unable to bear the sight of her.

Mary was sleeping *so* carelessly that she wasn't even wearing proper nightclothes, but rather a mismatched combo of shirt and pants. If she were to roll up her sleeves, her hands would still be hidden, and only when she fully outstretched her whole arm did the tips of her fingers finally become visible. As for her legs, they were completely wrapped up in the pants, including her feet. Her attire most certainly wasn't suited for a young lady.

The reason Mary let herself look like this was because right now was her downtime. She'd never actually expose such a careless side of herself to the public eye. No matter how unladylike she might've been, it was Mary's firm belief that a certain standard had to be maintained. There was a difference between "unconventional" and "disgraceful," after all.

The current time was her only exception. She slovenly rolled onto her back, causing her shirt to slide up and reveal her navel. She didn't bother covering it up, only squeezing her pillow tighter as she started to doze off.

But then she heard a giggle, which made her look up abruptly. There was no reason for her to ascertain who it might've been, however, as the only ones present in this room were herself and him. Plus, this was his room.

"Adi."

"I poured you some tea, but I see you're still asleep. Shall I leave it for later?"

"No. Since you made it for me, I'll have it now."

Mary lifted herself with a heave and eagerly scooted over to sit on the edge of

the bed. She raised the teacup to her lips, took a single sip, and inhaled deeply.

It's warm and delicious. It has the distinct taste of tea that Adi always makes for me. I've been drinking it for as long as I can remember, but to think I'd have it in his room, much less on his bed...! Mary's musings made something tickle within her chest, and she couldn't help smiling. How sweet this feeling was!

To top it off, Adi sat down next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Your Ladyship, how about you stay the night here?"

"Indeed. It's supposed to be chilly, after all," she responded. "I hope you'll warm me up," she proclaimed, and her cheeks reddened at the boldness of her own words.

Picking up on her intended meaning, Adi smiled gently and kissed her forehead. The sweetness of the sensation made Mary's chest burn, and memories of her first night in this room flooded her mind...

Following their marriage, there was no drastic change in Mary's and Adi's daily lives. They were still the eccentric lady and her impudent servant.

Adi was closer to Mary than anyone else, and had always been by her side—ever since she was born, in fact. Their relationship had formed over this length of time, so there was no way it'd become something pure and innocent at this stage. Neither of them wished for that either.

However, there had been some slight changes. For example, whereas in the past, the postdinner teatime would be held in the garden, now the location had shifted to Adi's room instead.

That said, the contents of their conversations remained the same. Mary would complain about how Alicia had sneaked up behind her and sprung at her, or how the ink in the letter from Parfette was blurry with tear marks, so she couldn't read it. It was the typical sort of chatter that the two of them would have, without any special mood.

"It's quite cold tonight," Mary remarked, her gaze on the window as she sipped the tea Adi had made for her.

Adi looked outside as well, and nodded in agreement. There was a chilly breeze in the air tonight, and it had gotten dark a little faster than normal. It

was pitch-black outside, with no moon or stars in sight as the thick clouds shrouded the sky.

“Looks like it might rain,” he responded.

“Perhaps I should request to have my bed warmed.”

Following this trifling conversation, Mary got to her feet, saying that she should head back to her room. It was the usual time she’d leave to go home (which simply involved walking over to the building right next to this one).

Adi also got up in order to walk her back. Since the distance was short, they would usually walk very slowly, and once in front of Mary’s bedroom door, they’d exchange a good night kiss. All of this was part of their daily routine. Their relationship hadn’t changed in a major way—it only got a little sweeter.

But tonight, Adi looked a little nervous as he called out to Mary before she could leave his room. “Milady... Since you have a free day tomorrow, how about you stay a little longer?”

“I want to get back to my room before it starts raining,” she replied. “And there’s this book I want to read... Ah right, speaking of, about that book I lent you recently...”

Mary turned towards the bookshelf, when something seized her arm. She let out a startled noise as she was forcibly pulled, and her back ended up hitting the bookshelf. It was almost painful; she was about to shriek out a complaint, but the sight of Adi standing before her made her breath hitch.

One of his hands felt hot as it held her arm. His other was in her peripheral vision, touching her face. Mary was trapped between Adi and the bookshelf behind her, and she looked up at him with a troubled expression. His rust-ringed pupils were staring at her fixedly.

“Adi...”

“Milady.”

Mary was cornered by the bookshelf, and had nowhere to run. Yet even so, she let out a small breath and then looked back into Adi’s eyes with a soft smile. “Didn’t I tell you to hide your dirty books properly?”

“I’m sorry! I forgot to hide one! So please don’t turn back, don’t look at the shelves, and slowly move away, following my lead.”

“Goodness.”

Mary allowed Adi to lead her away from the bookshelf, murmuring about how he’d startled her. She then reached for the door, intending to leave, but a larger hand overlapped her own. Warmth radiated from their intertwined fingers. Then, Adi wrapped his arms around Mary’s body below her chest and hugged her from behind. His grip wasn’t painfully strong, but it wasn’t so light as to enable her to easily slip out either. The way he held her felt very pleasant.

Mary smiled wryly at this sudden embrace. It seemed Adi still had something he felt guilty about. “What is it this time? Are you hiding something by the door too?” She giggled, trying to turn back to look at him.

At that moment, she felt him softly call her name right into her ear, and she gasped. His voice sounded different from before. It was deep, sweet, and lustful. Mary’s ears grew hot in response, and a shiver ran through her.

Adi’s body was pressed against her back, and she could feel him exhaling into her ear. The way he held her made her body heat up all at once. Her heart was pounding, and a sweet sensation was starting to spread through her.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Adi? What other lewd thing are you—”

“There’s nothing lewd in here besides me,” he whispered to her. His sweet, ticklish, and alluring voice made her gasp, and she let out a feverish breath.

Ahh, I’m going to melt... Mary thought, narrowing her eyes a little.

“Please don’t go,” Adi murmured.

“Adi...”

“Stay right here, and sleep in my arms tonight.”

Mary’s heart fluttered at his direct appeal, and her body grew even hotter. She wasn’t so innocent as to not understand the meaning behind his words. She had thought this would happen at some point and felt ready for it.

But now that it was actually happening, she had a rising sense of anxiety and fear while Adi’s warm, inviting voice made her chest tighten.

Adi was requesting her permission because Mary was important to him. She knew that, but at this moment, she almost thought it would've been easier on her if he just took it from her forcefully. Giving her a choice made it difficult, and it wasn't as if she could refuse him.

"Milady..." Adi held her tighter, awaiting her response.

Mary closed her eyes. "No... I have to show up back at my room. She'll be worried, you know?" she pointed out. Of course, she was talking about the maid waiting in her room. She was there to help Mary change her attire, plus assist with her bath and other sleeping arrangements that Adi, as a man, wouldn't be able to do. The maid would stay in Mary's room until her arrival.

If Mary didn't return, the maid would definitely worry, and might search through Albert Manor and its adjacent building. Or...she might even come directly to this room without checking anyplace else first.

In any case, Adi heaved a sigh at Mary's words and was about to let go of her, but paused. "So... You will *show up* at your room. And afterwards...?"

"Tonight seems a bit cold. Don't you think so, Adi?"

"Yes, that's right."

"It'll be too cold to sleep all on your own." Following this proclamation, Mary slipped from his arms and stepped out of the room.

She walked quickly down the hallway, without Adi to accompany her this time. They didn't exchange their nightly greetings, nor discuss what their plans were for tomorrow—in other words, they knew they'd see each other again.

The cold night breeze felt pleasant against Mary's burning skin, and by the time she got back to her bedroom, her heartbeat had regained some composure.

"While you're in the bath, I'll heat up your bed for you. It's quite cold tonight, after all." The maid chatted as she helped Mary get ready for the bath.

Mary hesitated at first, then spoke up. "Listen... Um, there's no need to heat up my bed."

"Why not? You'll get a cold stomach, you know."

“I... I’ll be fine...” Mary murmured, looking away on purpose while the maid tilted her head in wonderment.

After a moment, the maid conjectured there must’ve been some kind of reason, and bowed her head respectfully. “Very well, then,” she said before guiding Mary to the bathroom.

Naturally, as the daughter of a noble house, there was no reason for Mary to carry with her a towel, pajamas, or even her undergarments—the maid had prepared all of these things in advance and left them in the bathroom.

Noticing the lineup of items, Mary spoke up yet again. “Hey... Are there any other options?”

“You mean your underwear?” the maid prompted. “Of course there are, but is there something wrong with those? Are you worried you’ll get a cold stomach if you wear them?”

“Why are you so worried about my stomach? No, it’s not that... I just want something cuter... A-And I’ll be stepping outside, so please prepare a coat for me as well.”

“Outside? Is this another one of Lady Alicia’s nocturnal assault pajama parties?”

“No, I told her we’ll only do those once a month, and we just had one a few days ago. I, um... I’ll be staying the night somewhere else.”

“Where?”

Mary paused. “Adi’s room...” she said, her cheeks flushing. The maid’s eyes widened at her words, and then...

“Number seventy-seven!”

...she exclaimed suddenly, running over to the nearby maids.

“Number seventy-seven!”

“N-Number seventy-seven?!”

“Number seventy-seven!”

It was a back-and-forth unthinkable for the employees of House Albert (or for

any decent people, really) to engage in. Hearing this, one of the people immediately sped away, their urgency suggesting they were racing off to inform someone about it.

A few seconds later, Mary finally came back to her senses and hurriedly tried to catch up with the maids. But all around the mansion, she could already hear various voices repeating, “Number seventy-seven!” which caused her to crumple to her knees.

As expected of House Albert staff—their transmission speed was the best in the nation. In but a flash, everyone within the mansion had heard the news. And their communication had been carried out in a way that could only be understood internally, using code words.

The voices kept calling out in the distance. Mary narrowed her eyes as she realized just how exceptional the messengers of her house were. But no matter how much she lamented, it was already too late. Defiantly, Mary decided to take up the offense and got back to her feet.

“You heard me. So there’s no reason to come wake me up tomorrow morning,” she said nonchalantly.

“Understood,” responded the maid with a nod. But the tone of her voice and her expression were mightily happy, indeed. She must’ve been glad to see that the two people she’d always watched over were finally about to have their union.

However, Mary was too embarrassed to openly accept any congratulations. “You must really dislike waking me up if that’s how happy you are about not having to do it tomorrow,” she said, pretending to be peeved.

Once Mary’s bath was finished, the maid waved her off. “Number seventy-seven! Off you go!”

“That’s right—I’m going! Wait, that makes it sound like *I’m* number seventy-seven! Ugh!” Mary shrieked as she put on her coat and walked to the next building over. She made her way straight towards a certain room and stopped before a familiar door. Then, she took a deep breath and slowly knocked on it.

After a few seconds, Adi peered out. “Come in,” he said, inviting her inside.

It was a natural exchange between the two of them, same as always. But tonight they were both oddly shy, and turned away from each other. Any attempts at talking were so jumbled up that they couldn't even pass as conversation.

Within this awkward atmosphere, Mary suddenly looked up at Adi as though she remembered something. "Listen, Adi... Before I came here..."

"What is it?"

"Number seventy-seven..."

"Worry not. The word's already spread throughout the dormitory, my room included."

"Their transmission abilities really are something else, huh? They're so reliable it makes me want to cry."

"I was wondering why there were no codes for numbers seventy-five through eighty. Turns out they do exist, and they're about *me*..."

They both sighed in unison with a thousand-yard stare. The news was surely sweeping through the entire mansion at this very moment (in fact, it may have already spread to every last corner of it). By tomorrow morning, it would likely be common knowledge.

Of course, the ones passing the news along weren't doing it in a condescending manner. The information was something that the maids should be aware of as the servants of the family. Mary understood that, but...

"It's kind of embarrassing," she remarked. "I don't know what sort of face I should make when I see them tomorrow... I bet they'll make fun of me."

"Ah, you don't need to worry about that. They'll all get bored of the topic by then and move on to something else. I doubt they'll say anything in particular when you see them tomorrow."

"I don't know how to feel about that either! I've been thinking this for a while, but isn't it strange how everyone treats me here?! I'm the daughter of the precious, illustrious House Albert, you know!"

"There, there. Calm down."

While Mary vented her frustrations, Adi gently rubbed her shoulders. Slowly, he slid his hand down and enveloped her in his embrace.

“Oh my,” Mary murmured when she realized she was snuggled up in his arms.

However, she didn’t try to shake him off, much less slip away from him. Rather, she only hugged him tightly and pressed her forehead against him in a coaxing manner. Adi picked up on it, and held her even more closely in response.

Mary was spellbound by the sensation, and began smiling fondly. But then she quickly snapped back to her senses and looked up at Adi. “Hey, what now? I don’t really know how things work from here.”

“That’s all right. I’ll lead the way.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Then I suppose I’ll leave it to you.”

Following this anticlimactic exchange, Adi slowly led Mary to the bed.

And so, the two of them should’ve spent a sweet night together. However, in the middle of it...

“Wait! This is pretty scary after all! Let’s call it off on account of the rain! I declare postponement!!!”

“Should light rain occur, the event will proceed as planned!!!”

...such a conversation took place. And also...

“You’ll be okay. If it hurts, please raise your right hand.”

“My past life memories are assuring me those words are *not* to be trusted!!!”

Such idiotic exchanges played out. Sweet as it was, on the whole, the mood was not exactly there—how perfectly Adi-and Mary-esque the night was!

The morning after their night together, Mary slowly woke up to the realization that she was naked. “Oh dear!” she mumbled, drowsily grabbing a nearby shirt and throwing it on.

Having done so, she looked around the room and noticed that her pajamas were folded neatly on the side of the bed. *So he’s already awake...* she thought absently.

Right then, Adi peered in from the kitchen as though he’d noticed she was awake. As expected of a servant, he was already fully dressed and groomed. Seeing him this way almost made it seem like nothing at all had happened last night. However, the manner in which his expression softened when he laid eyes on her wasn’t quite like his usual behavior.

“Good morning, my lady. I’m preparing the tea right now, so please wait just a moment.”

“I see you already changed your clothes,” Mary remarked, sleepily slipping her pajamas on before snuggling back under the covers. “What a shame,” she murmured.

Adi, who was midway through bringing the tea tray over, tilted his head at this. “What’s a shame?” he asked cautiously, presenting her the teacup. Mary accepted it, even though she was still in bed. The idea of drinking tea while lying down was improper not just for her as a daughter of House Albert, but for any noble lady of her age.

But today’s an exception, Mary told herself as she took a sip of the warm liquid. “I thought it would’ve been nice for us to wake up together,” she said with a sleepy chuckle.

Having spent the night in one another’s company, the two of them could’ve still been wrapped up together by the morning, and dozed until the afternoon... What a sweet idea it was!

“Ah well. Since you went through the trouble of making me tea, I suppose I should get up too,” she continued, gingerly sitting up and moving towards the edge of the bed. She took another gulp of the tea, the warm steam tickling her nose as a slightly sweet flavor spread inside her mouth.

I'll get dressed properly after I've finished this. I'll comb my hair and change out of my pajamas... Ah, right. I don't think I have a change of clothes with me.

Mary had been lost in thought while gazing down at her drink, but now she looked up again. She was about to ask Adi what she should do about her clothes, but the sight before her made a shiver run through her, and she swallowed her words.

Adi was there.

Alas, the fact that he was present was obvious, since this was his room. But he was wearing his pajamas. Just moments ago, before Mary's gaze had dropped to her drink, he'd been dressed like the usual servant of House Albert. And yet now...

"A-Adi... When did you change your clothes?"

"Even I myself don't know the answer to that," he responded. "I suppose people can do anything when they put their minds to it."

"The power of love is truly something else, huh?"

"To be honest, I don't even remember taking my uniform shirt off."

"Don't tell me you kept it on or something," Mary said jokingly with a smile.

Adi smiled wryly in return. "That's impossible." But just to be sure, he pulled back the collar of his shirt and peered down at his own body. Immediately, he froze still. "I see... So *that's* why I have no memory of taking my shirt off. I really *didn't* take it off."

"Hurry up and get changed." Mary sighed in exasperation.

While she drank tea, Adi got up to finish changing. When he returned back to bed, he was wearing his pajamas properly this time.

"Oh my," Mary said upon seeing him. She then smiled in a way her husband could easily understand, and though he'd just gotten redressed, his cheeks reddened at her mischievous teasing as he got back into bed.

Adi took the teacup from Mary, setting it aside for later on the small bedside table. Then, he started gently caressing her cheek. Slowly, he shifted closer and kissed her, and Mary closed her eyes in ecstasy.

How sweet it was—sweeter even than the tea!

Adi's large, masculine hands pulled on her shoulders, and Mary, having no reason to resist, allowed herself to get back into bed as well. She lay down on her back with a light thump, and Adi enveloped her in his arms.

"Adi, today's our day off, remember? Let's take the chance to stay like this for a while."

"Brilliant idea as always, milady."

The two of them giggled and snuggled closer, throwing the duvet over their heads...



Mary had been recalling that time, and she mentioned out loud how similar today was. Adi smiled softly and nodded in agreement.

That night was a precious, sweet memory for the two of them. Adi, sharing Mary's sentiments, reached out to gently stroke her silver-thread hair as his cheeks turned slightly pink.

How pleasant his hands felt to Mary. *I'm so happy...* she thought, smiling fondly as though spellbound.

But at the sight of her expression, Adi suddenly got to his feet. "Excuse me for a moment," he said and turned away.

Mary frowned in response. "Hmph..." she grumbled, but Adi paid her no heed.

Instead, he walked over to the window, opened it, and looked around outside. Soon enough he called out, "Hey!" so he must've spotted someone. After another moment, he proclaimed, "Let her know it's number seventy-seven."

Mary's frown only deepened upon hearing that foolish statement. She was aware that the maid waiting in her room had to be notified if Mary was staying the night elsewhere, even if it was just the next building over. In fact, if the maid *wasn't* informed, there was even a risk that Mary and Adi would hear a knock on the door right in the middle of the good part.

Mary knew all of that, but even so...

"Hey, do you really have to say it like that?" she appealed.

Adi pondered upon the matter seriously for a few seconds. "Number ninety is still unaccounted for. Would you prefer to switch to that?" he proposed, going completely off the mark. At first he had been as confused as her about the meaning of the phrase "number seventy-seven," but now he'd started to use it just like the other servants at Albert Manor.

Mary, who mere moments ago had been ecstatic, let out a frustrated sigh and almost considered returning to her room...but instead, she threw herself into Adi's bed and crawled under the covers. She was certain he would follow suit

soon enough. With a giggle, she wondered if she should feign sleep, or kiss him when he joined her, and right then, the duvet swayed.

The Encounter

Before Mary was born, Adi used to serve the twin sons of House Albert.

Needless to say, as Adi came from a family line that had served the Alberts for generations, he'd been aware from a young age that he wanted to be like his father and brother. But the twins were two years older than him, and they had Adi's older brother by their sides. The three boys, though still children, were beginning to show signs of great wit and intelligence. As such, the twins were already viewed with warmth and respect by those around them, who claimed they had bright and secure futures ahead of them.

Obviously, this resulted in Adi having a bit of a complex. He was on the verge of turning five years old, and in his eyes, the seven-year-old twins seemed like a pair of splendid grown-ups.

By this age, Adi was already able to write well and could understand more difficult books than other children his age. Yet the age difference between himself and the twins was despair inducing. He couldn't keep up with the three boys' conversations, and would impatiently ask them to explain things to him. He'd even started to worry that he was annoying them.

Witnessing his dilemma, everyone would laugh and say, "An age difference of two years will hardly matter when you're adults!" But for the young Adi, the concept of "adulthood" was nothing but the tale of some distant future.

His frustration soon turned to impatience, and it wasn't long before he grew pessimistic. He started to think that he'd never be able to catch up to the Albert brothers, and that he'd only ever be a burden to them. It became a catchphrase of his to say, "One day, they're going to tell me they don't want me around anymore..."

(By the way, if one were to remind the present Adi of this, he'd turn bright red, shriek, and try to make an escape, so of course this topic became a favorite way for those around Adi to tease him.)

In any case, while others would laugh his worries off as foolish, for the young

Adi, it was a true source of pain and worry. So when Keryl approached him one day and formally declared that she had something she needed to discuss with him, Adi paled and assumed the day had finally arrived.

He'd been working so hard, and reading so many books, hoping he could one day proudly stand side by side with his father and brother in serving the Alberts. He really believed he'd done everything he could to try and achieve his goal.

But it was all for nothing, Adi thought as his vision turned blurry. Perhaps as a result of seeing the differences between himself and the Albert brothers every single day, a feeling of resignation had welled up somewhere in his heart.

Will they assign me a different job? Or maybe send me off to some other family? Adi wondered. (As a side note, if one were to allude to this incident to the present-day Adi, he'd cry out, *"I really did think that would happen!"* in despair.)

Keryl smiled warmly at him, and gently patted his rust-colored hair with her slender fingers. "Adi, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"I know you've been doing your best to keep up with those three. But I'd like for you to do something else from now on."

"Right..."

It's really happening, Adi murmured inwardly. He had desperately tried to catch up to those brothers, yet it had all been for naught. He was too wet behind the ears to live up to the expected level necessary to serve House Albert.

He had only just turned five years old and didn't yet know the expression "good-for-nothing," but an unbearably heavy feeling gripped his heart all the same. Determined not to cry no matter what, he tightened his hands into fists, although he did cast his gaze down and away from Keryl.

In contrast, Keryl smiled kindly at him, brushing away his hair to lightly graze the corners of his tearful eyes with her fingertips. "Adi, from now on, I want you to live for *this* child."

At the sound of her soft proclamation, Adi kept his head low and nodded, as if looking up was too difficult for him. He assumed Keryl was referring to some other noble family's son or daughter. After all, House Albert had a rich history. Their family tree was so grand that it could not fit onto a single page, and they had many relatives around the same age as him.

So I'm going to have to serve someone else... Adi thought. But when there was no sign of the aforementioned person appearing, he glanced up questioningly.

Keryl was still smiling warmly, but there was no one next to or behind her. Rather, the woman gently placed her hand on her own abdomen, as if watching over her child.

Her hand is...on her abdomen?

The moment realization struck Adi, his rust-colored eyes lit up with a shine.

Actually, hasn't Madam been wearing loose outfits lately? And His Grace has been making a fuss about her well-being, asking in a fluster for cushions and blankets for her. And there's been a different doctor than the in-house one visiting the mansion, yet His Grace and Madam seemed pretty happy about it...

Also, I think someone mentioned lately that when a maid asked Madam about the doctor's visit, she laughed cheerfully and said that all was well, and that she'll announce the news soon enough...

Thinking all this over, and seeing the smiling Keryl clad in a loose-fitting outfit, Adi could only arrive at one conclusion.

"Congratulations!" he exclaimed, bowing his head deeply.

From then on, Adi's life became extremely busy. Of course, he continued studying as diligently as he had for the brothers, but when Keryl went to a summer resort to give birth and they found out the child was a girl, it also changed the kinds of things Adi had to learn about.

After all, he'd be serving a daughter of House Albert. It would be his duty to help raise her into a fine lady, and so he had to build a thorough understanding of the kind of conduct and manners expected of a woman in high society. He had to learn about things like brewing tea, as well as how to organize and hold tea parties. He studied the art of choosing dresses, and learned flower language

so that there'd be no issues when it came to gifting flowers.

In fact, even before this, Adi already had plenty of knowledge in order to serve House Albert well, though only the adults realized this. Moreover, it was clear that he'd already engraved the concept of "living to serve" in his heart, and the extent of his dedication was remarkable to them.

And so around one year later, Keryl, who'd taken up residence in a resort dedicated to helping raise children, finally returned to Albert Manor. Of course, she brought her daughter, Mary, along with her.

The mansion had been in a clamor since early that morning, with everyone anticipating their arrival. The twin brothers were excited beyond belief, running back and forth between the entry hall and their bedrooms.

Adi was more restless than anyone. He'd go round and round the massive entry hall like a hound, and the sight of him calmed down any passersby. (Those who had worked for House Albert long enough to remember that day would say, *"No matter how flustered you were, seeing Adi like that instantly returned you to your senses."*)

Eventually, the carriage slowly approached and stopped in front of the estate.

Unable to hold back any longer, Adi came flying out of the entryway. A well-made horse-drawn carriage stood before him, and from behind the open door stepped out Keryl's maid. She turned around and reached inside the carriage, urging someone to mind the footholds.

With the maid's support, Keryl stepped out of the carriage. Her husband and her children, who'd all been awaiting her arrival, rushed over to her side.

Perhaps due to having waited for too long, Adi stood there dumbstruck in front of the mansion, with no idea what to do. But soon enough, Keryl looked in his direction, and their eyes met. Her soft eyes were creased into a gentle smile. She began walking towards him while slowly swaying something in her arms.

"It's been a while, Adi."

"W-Welcome back, Madam."

"I see you've gotten quite big. Oh dear... Mary's woken up. She'd been asleep

all this time—I wonder if she noticed the sound of your voice?”

The mound of towels in Keryl’s arms started wiggling, and a strange gurgle resounded from it. The sound made Keryl smile again, and she crouched down gently to introduce the new mistress and servant to each other.

“Mary, look. This is Adi,” she prompted, lightly rocking the baby in her arms.

Adi slowly peered over, and his eyes met with the large, adorable eyes of the baby. Though she was young, her features were already shapely and graceful, and her long eyelashes fluttered each time she blinked. The silver hair which had only just begun to grow was wound up in curls, making her look like a cherub straight out of a painting. She regarded Adi for a moment, and then let out a happy, childlike noise as she smiled.

“Wow, Mary! You like Adi, don’t you?” Keryl giggled, looking up at Adi as if to say, *“That’s great news!”*

Adi’s eyes were shining, and his cheeks flushed—he couldn’t hide his excitement at his first meeting with the little lady whom he’d serve for the rest of his life. He looked at Mary, and then, in a manner that was respectful and characteristic of a servant of House Albert, he bowed his head. The gesture was a little unrefined on account of his young age, but it was very servant-like nonetheless.

“N-Nice to meet you, my...” Adi trailed off, swallowing the rest of his words.

I need to make an effort to sound more like an adult. I have to protect this cute little lady no matter what! I may have been disheartened before, but I have to cast that weakness aside and become stronger...

With such thoughts, Adi once again looked at Mary. She’d inherited her mother’s beautiful eyes, and they were gazing back at him as though awaiting something. In response to those eyes, Adi resolutely said:

“Nice to meet you, my lady!”

***

“And that’s what happened! Adi really was so adorable back then,” Keryl said with a smile.

Alicia had been spellbound by the woman's retelling. "How wonderful!" she exclaimed. Mary, who was sitting next to the girl, didn't say anything, but judging by the grin on her face, she was clearly very satisfied with the story.

Meanwhile, Adi, who was sitting next to Mary, looked the very opposite of satisfied. Rather, he was covering his face with both his hands. His ears were even redder than his hair at this point, an obvious result of his embarrassment and the fact that he couldn't make an escape on account of the identity of the storyteller. Plus, Keryl would pause at intervals and prompt him to share his feelings at the time, which of course he couldn't refuse.

Patrick was patting Adi's back—he was Adi's sole supporter here. Although normally the two of them bantered together, right now, Patrick was overwhelmed with sympathy for the other man.

"Things were really fun back then. My sons had no idea how to treat a little girl like Mary, and each time they tried to make her happy, they'd just make her cry instead," Keryl went on, continuing her retelling...

Though the young twins were the sons of an illustrious noble family, at the end of the day, they were still only children. They could interact with girls of their age well enough, but they didn't know how to handle their little sister, who still wobbled on her feet with every step.

She'd cry when they showed her the frog they caught from the pond, and she'd cry when they tried to give her a bug as a gift. She'd cry when they showed her an imposing horse, and she'd cry when they tried to read her an exciting war chronicle.

One year of strenuous effort later, the twins concluded she was a mystifying creature. Oblivious to her brothers' feelings, the little Mary followed Adi around all the time, so they decided to ask him for help.

"Frogs and bugs won't make her happy. She's a girl, so you should give her flowers or ribbons instead," Adi advised. He put the frog back in the pond, then picked a single flower that was in bloom nearby and presented it to Mary.

She'd been sobbing frantically, but she immediately stopped. Sniffling and hiccupping, she accepted the flower. When Adi reached out to neatly fix Mary's ribbon that had come loose, her tearful expression morphed into a happy smile

instead.

Mary was a girl, so rather than frogs and insects, she liked flowers and ribbons, and rather than a tough and fierce horse, she'd prefer to look at small animals like cats and rabbits. War chronicles wouldn't interest her—she'd rather listen to a fairy tale about a prince and princess falling in love. And if one were to praise her beautiful dress and tell her she looked like a princess herself, she'd squeal in joy...

"Seeing Adi teaching those three boys like that, it was almost as if their age difference was reversed. Especially on Mary's birthday..." Keryl laughed quietly at her memories.

Mary grinned at those words, elbowing Adi at the same time. The reason she'd done so was, of course, because hearing that story made her so happy. The idea that Adi had understood her better than anyone and treated her so preciously since before she could even form her own memories... There was no woman in this world who wouldn't be happy upon learning of such a thing.

However, having Mary poke him only made Adi even more fidgety, and in order to hide it, he picked up Patrick's teacup and said, "I'll pour you some more tea." Naturally, he was bright red.

In one hand he held the teacup and in the other the teapot. Though both were shaking greatly, he nonetheless managed to miraculously pour the liquid without spilling a single drop, just as one might expect from a servant of House Albert.

Mary found his attitude all the more endearing, and she glanced at him with a mischievous smile. "Now that sounds like the ultimate love at first sight."

Adi couldn't get any redder at this point. He cleared his throat at her happy proclamation. "It was no such thing," he asserted. "To me, you were the most important and precious person in my life back when you were still in Madam's belly. That was *before* I ever laid eyes on you."

Mary's cheeks flushed at his resolute remark, and Keryl and Alicia exchanged a happy look with each other.

As the only person who didn't get carried away by this atmosphere, Patrick

grudgingly downed the entirety of the bitter tea Adi had poured for him.

The Peasant Princess Wishes for Friendship

“Let’s go, Adi!”

Adi looked at Alicia with surprise as she tugged on his arm. His expression seemed to say, *“Are you sure you don’t mean milady?”*

But Alicia continued pulling on his arm. “Come on, let’s hurry!” she urged. If she were rushing both Adi and Mary, then it would’ve been par for the course, yet Mary’s name hadn’t crossed the girl’s lips today.

“And where exactly are we going, Alicia?” Adi asked her.

“We’re going to hand over the invitation letters!”

“Invitation letters...? Ah, you mean for your and Patrick’s wedding.”

“Lady Mary said you should give the letters to your friends in person!” Alicia exclaimed, continuing to pull Adi along.

He nodded in understanding. In fact, it was His Grace who had told him and Mary these words, back when they were inviting guests to their own wedding reception. Mary had given invitations to her friends from Elysiana College, and she’d been proud to show her father just how many friends she’d managed to make.

In other words, Mary must’ve informed Alicia about this, and now Alicia was making moves of her own.

Right, I get it. This is all so very much like Alicia. However...

“And why am I coming with you?”

Indeed, that had been the source of Adi’s doubts. If Alicia wanted to invite her friends personally, she was better off taking Mary or Patrick along.

When Adi mentioned as much, Alicia frowned a little. “Well... Both of them seem busy right now...”

“Excuse me? I have work to do too, you know?! It’s true that I’m always with milady in both public and private life, but that public part is still my job!”

Naturally, as a member of the family who'd served House Albert for generations, Adi felt the need to make some amendments to what Alicia had implied.

(If Mary were here, she would've probably said something like, *"I suppose I missed my chance to fire the public part."*)

In response to his desperate appeal, Alicia's eyes widened momentarily, but then she nodded in understanding. "It's okay! I know you're a hard worker, because you always give me sweets!"

"Er, no, I'm not in the business of handing out sweets..."

"Oh, and pouring tea is your job too, right?" Alicia added, missing the point and apparently failing to understand the kind of work a servant would do (or rather, working off an understanding based on Adi's overly liberal attitude towards Mary). Her gaze was utterly earnest, so she must've actually believed in what she was saying.

A servant's job didn't consist of the things Alicia had mentioned. They were supposed to respect and support their masters, working from the shadows to nonchalantly provide assistance. And yes, for Adi, on occasion the job also consisted of using sweets and tea to lure the clingy princess away from his mistress.

But obviously, he wasn't about to say that out loud.

"Anyway, why do you want me to come?" he prompted.

"To be honest, I tried to invite Lady Mary in the beginning, but..."

"Yes?"

"But then she said, 'I'll lend Adi out to you, so put down that delicious-smelling lunch box and go on your way!'"

"I've been sold off! It's a total sellout!"

"And there you have it! Now let's get going, Adi!" Alicia exclaimed, tugging on his arm enthusiastically.

"All right, fine... I'll follow you anywhere at this point..." Adi mumbled pitifully under his breath, vacating Albert Manor together with her.

***

“Hmm...” hummed Mary, watching Adi and Alicia leave through the window. By turning Adi into a sacrifice, she’d successfully been able to get Alicia to leave the estate. As a bonus, Mary even got some croquettes out of it, so she couldn’t hold back a proud smile.

The documents were mostly all ready now. Mary glanced over them, and soon enough, a knock sounded on the door of the room. A moment later, a maid peered inside and announced the name of Mary’s guest.

***

Alicia and Adi boarded a horse-drawn carriage and headed towards the mansion of House Marquis in the neighboring nation.

Even among nobility, House Marquis had a fairly low rank, so the news that a princess was paying them a surprise visit caused quite the uproar. Everyone from the servants to the head of the family was in a state of panic. It was probable that House Marquis had never faced this kind of chaos in the entirety of its history.

For their part, Adi and Alicia were flabbergasted by this. After all, Alicia viewed her visit in the exact same way she viewed visiting Albert Manor for playdates. Anyone would’ve been surprised to see the head of the family rushing about and the house in a state of turmoil when they came over to pay their friend a visit.

“Ah, right. Alicia is a princess...” Adi murmured, reminding himself of the fact. Whenever Alicia came to Albert Manor, everyone referred to it as a “surprise attack,” but if he actually thought it over, it was a royal visit.

At any rate, Alicia’s unexpected arrival caused a massive tumult within House Marquis, but soon enough, the person they’d come to see rushed towards them from the estate. “Lady Alicia! Lord Adi!”

At Parfette’s appearance, Adi and Alicia finally snapped back to their senses and exchanged their greetings with her.

“Good day, Parfette,” Alicia proclaimed calmly as she curtsied, looking nothing short of elegant. She was beautiful and refined, and yet also cheerful—

in that moment, she truly played a convincing part of the visiting princess.

In his mind, Adi heard the voice of his wife complaining, *“If you’re able to greet other people normally, then do the same for me!”*

“What brings the two of you here today?” Parfette inquired.

“We’re here to give you this!” Alicia replied with a smile, reaching into her bag and pulling out a single letter. Of course, it was the invitation to her and Patrick’s wedding, and Parfette’s eyes glittered at the sight of it. “There’s going to be plenty of delicious cake, so I really hope you’ll come, Parfette!”

“Yes, of course!” Parfette said, happily accepting the letter from her cake comrade. She held it gently in both hands, as though she’d just been handed over something precious. (Of course, from the perspective of House Marquis, the invitation that a princess had given them in person was like an heirloom, but needless to say, that wasn’t the reason Parfette was so joyful in this instance.)

“I’ll be waiting for you!” Alicia added with a smile.

Their happy expressions were utterly adorable. Adi smiled wryly upon witnessing the friendship between these two beautiful girls and said, “If this is how it’s going to be, then I don’t mind accompanying you for the rest of the day.”

However, he’d promptly withdraw those words by the time they reached their second destination.

***

“It’s an honor to have you visit us personally, Lady Alicia. But you could’ve given this to me at any point... In House Dyce’s estate, that is.”

“Hee hee! I wanted it to be a surprise!”

Margaret smiled gracefully. “Oh my, that does sound like you. But I wouldn’t have guessed that you were thinking of doing so! I mean, we even spoke earlier today. At House Dyce’s estate, of course.”

Alicia nodded happily in response. “We talk all the time, so I was really nervous that you’d figure it out eventually!”

Based on Alicia's simpleminded answer, it seemed Margaret really did visit House Dyce *very* frequently. Adi grimaced at the thought. *I see, so that's why Patrick's been sneezing and getting the chills lately...*

While Adi was thinking as much, Margaret's elegant smile fell as she glanced down at the invitation letter and let out a small sigh. "So with this, Lord Patrick will be officially married too..."

"Lady Margaret?"

"Now those who will give up on Patrick as a result of this could set their eyes on Bernard instead... I really need to go in for the kill here."

Noticing the way Margaret's eyes suddenly blazed like a hunter's, Adi hurriedly covered Alicia's ears. "Are you really going to say that in front of my nation's princess?!" he demanded.

"Oh, pardon me. I accidentally let my true nature slip out for a moment."

"How terrifying... But this is going to be a party hosted by our royal family, so please refrain from killing, or any other sort of disturbing actions!"

"Worry not. I only plan to wear a gorgeous dress and let Bernard escort me," Margaret responded with a light and pleasant laugh, while Adi cast her a dubious look.

However, in reality, he didn't dislike Margaret, nor did he doubt her words. Rather, he simply knew that there was nothing less trustworthy than the feigned innocent smile of a young lady. He wasn't about to say any names, but his past experiences of being totally pushed around by a certain someone told him as much. (Unbeknownst to Adi, just as he thought that, a certain young lady in Albert Manor suddenly sneezed and sniffled before saying, "Oh, excuse me. Please continue talking.")

Margaret giggled in response to Adi's caution, perhaps having guessed what he was implying. "You needn't worry," she added to reassure him. Her tone of voice wasn't as jesting as before, and sounded noticeably calmer. "I mean it. You see, I found a really good designer for my dress, so...I'm just in a good mood."

"Designer?" Adi repeated, realizing Margaret didn't seem like the same

hunter she had been a moment ago. She appeared more composed now, and even in high spirits, so much so that Adi estimated she wouldn't make any more dangerous claims and removed his hands from Alicia's ears.

"Though they're thoroughly aware of the rules of high society, they don't follow the aristocratic mold. They're an excellent designer, indeed."

Is it House Brownie's personal designer? Adi wondered as he nodded, impressed by Margaret's proud boasting.

He himself was well aware of how difficult the process of choosing a dress could be. In addition to high society's overt rules regarding personal appearance that depended upon one's rank and the season, there were also unspoken rules based on the relations between the two parties' parents, and between the young ladies themselves. One had to follow the fashion trends, yet wearing the same dress as someone else was an unforgivable faux pas that would turn one into an open laughing stock. Dismissing it all as mere vanity would be a mistake—in the aristocratic world, it was the sole ammunition the ladies had to battle against each other.

In addition, such fashions were also a way to increase one's attractiveness. For the parents, dressing up their daughters was a means of displaying their family's dignity, and as a result, the family was more likely to receive good marriage proposals.

All these reasons made designing an outfit a difficult task. For example, if someone were to wear a large ribbon on her head, a flower corsage on her chest, and a tightly tied ribbon around her waist, all while carrying a parasol to an evening party... Indeed, dressing in such a ridiculous manner would cause every single family present to laugh in mockery.

Alas, it seemed the designer Margaret had found understood these stiff aristocratic rules, yet didn't follow the mold. That was certainly a valuable individual to have around. Of course, for someone like Margaret, who'd taken on the Brownie name and set her sights on the third son of House Dyce, the art of choosing a dress was a momentous matter. She needed a first-rate combat uniform in order to keep Bernard's eyes on her at all times.

"Most critically of all, my designer understands my goal and what's in my

heart of hearts," she proclaimed.

"Your heart of hearts?" Adi asked. He immediately covered Alicia's ears again at those words, making Margaret giggle. "Are you talking about your ambitiousness?"

To Alicia, it seemed like the other two were having a fun conversation. Though question marks flitted about her head, she started eating her cake so as not to interrupt them, while Adi was still plugging her ears.

"Indeed, he knows my ambition better than anyone," Margaret confirmed. "That's why I didn't have to hide it from him, and in fact, he'll be making me a dress which satisfies my goal."

"*He*...? How unusual," Adi murmured.

There were some male designers, but it was usually women who could understand the feminine sensitivities when it came to dressmaking. Famous designers and those employed on a personal basis by the nobility were most commonly women as well. After all, to make a suitable dress, one had to know the wearer's measurements. The designers wouldn't have to actually touch their clients, but nonetheless, many women got hung up on it and stuck to female designers.

Sensing Adi's thoughts, Margaret spoke up again. "My, this is a dress I wish to show off to Bernard, you know? Don't you think it makes more sense to have a man design it? He'll be able to hit the nail on the head."

"Right..."

"I wore this gown which I thought was quite risqué the other day, but Bernard praised it highly when he laid eyes on it. Actually, he stuck by my side the entire time, and said he didn't want anyone else to get close to me. The way he got so red and kept stealing glances at me was just *so* adorable!"

"Riiight..." Adi replied in monotone with a stiff smile, resisting the urge to tell Margaret to stop talking. Eager to leave as soon as possible, he bid his farewell to her.

Alicia followed suit after finishing her cake. "Let's talk again sometime, Margaret," she told the other girl.

“Indeed, feel free to invite me anytime...to House Dyce’s estate, that is. And Lord Adi, please send Lady Mary my best regards. Although, I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon...at House Dyce’s estate, of course.”

Hearing such words of farewell, Adi hurriedly urged Alicia to climb into the carriage, and then got in himself.

Margaret watched them leave and then whispered to herself, “He couldn’t become a prince, but he really did become the very best designer...”

Unfortunately, her words went unheard by those in the carriage.

But soon enough, Margaret smiled again, deciding it was all for the best. She turned on her heel and called out to a nearby maid, telling her to summon the designer for the sake of making a dress for the party she’d just been invited to.

A wedding reception for Patrick and Alicia was sure to be a party on a yet unheard-of scale. It was best to prepare early. Margaret had a principle to always take the initiative, whether it came to parties, seizing a noble house, love, or anything else.

“If things go well with Bernard, I might even introduce the designer to House Albert and House Dyce,” she told herself with a chuckle.

At present, he was still a novice, but if the Albert and Dyce families committed his name to memory, his standing and popularity would soar in a flash. And if he got a whiff of that, then it’d certainly serve as motivation for him to design a wonderful dress for Margaret. She highly valued his own ambitions too, and she viewed his decision to stop clinging to his family name and pursue a career as a designer in a favorable light.

Indeed, he understood her ambition very well, and he could make her the perfect dress with which to shoot an arrow through Bernard’s heart...

Now then, time to meet with the designer and discuss the makings of my gorgeous dress! Margaret thought with a grin.

Their only topic of conversation would be ambition—there was no trace of love between them. Though of course, the idea of love between a noble lady and a dressmaker would’ve been laughable in the first place.

***

Following their departure from House Brownie's estate, Adi and Alicia headed towards Carina's place next.

Upon realizing where they were going, Adi lamented that he should've brought along a heavily insulated winter outfit, but when they arrived, Carina greeted them in a splendidly ladylike manner. She didn't even say anything troubling when Alicia handed her the invitation, but rather smiled in sincere joy.

Her expression was so lovely that it practically radiated refinement. Yet from time to time, she glanced down at the letter and seemed bashful over her own happiness at receiving such an invitation from her friend. There was no hint of coldness in the air, nor was there any sign of the love Carina had once grieved over as she carefully held the invitation in her hands.

During the party at Albert Manor, Carina had revealed her feelings for Patrick, then decided to lock them away in her heart as a good memory and simply move on. (Though, it was a little unclear whether she was actually moving straight ahead... Rather, she appeared to be proceeding along a slanted path. Still, she seemed happy with it, so this was best left unsaid.)

"Thank you so much for coming all this way to give me an invitation. I look forward to attending," Carina said with a smile so beautiful that it emanated a sense of nobility all its own. In response, Alicia nodded with a grin as bright as the sun.

Seeing the two of them like this, Adi realized his worries about insulated clothes had been unfounded, and inwardly he sent Carina an apology. He was about to join this peaceful conversation, when a knock resounded on the door.

Carina granted permission, and a maid gingerly pushed the door open and peered in. "Er, Lady Carina... I apologize for the interruption."

"What is it?"

"Um... The people you sent to House Eldland are going to be returning shortly..." the maid mumbled, trying to find the right words.

Adi and Alicia both tilted their heads in unison. House Eldland was the family

of Parfette's fiancé, Gainas. Why would Carina have sent her people there?

He pondered the question, and in the next moment, a chill ran down his spine. This was because Carina, having heard the maid's words, smiled in a way that was happy, beautiful, yet utterly icy. For those in the know regarding Carina's true nature (despite the fact that the girl herself still denied it), that smile was a terrifying sight to behold.

I should've worn something extra warm after all! Adi shrieked in his mind and then rushed to end the conversation. *We have to get out of here, before we're forced to witness a certain someone's capture...*

"We still have other places to visit, so we must take our leave now," he told Carina. "Come on, Alicia. Lady Carina seems busy too, so let's get going."

"That's true. Well then, pardon us, Lady Carina!"

In response to Alicia's spirited farewell, Carina once again dipped her head gracefully. Alas, graceful though her conduct may have been, needless to say it was also incredibly frosty.

Adi hurried Alicia along, gently pushing her into their carriage. As if an exchange were taking place, another carriage arrived right around then, and a pitiful man, tied up and gagged, was thrown before Carina. There was no trace left of his past glory; the sight of him dropping onto the ground with a loud *thunk* was simply pathetic. In a word, the man looked miserable, while Carina smiled happily as she gazed down at him.

Tragically, Adi had glimpsed that scene from the carriage window, and one last powerful shiver ran through him. *When I get back, I'm going to warm myself up by hugging milady*, he declared in his heart.

***

"And here's the last place," Alicia proclaimed, gazing at the orphanage in the middle of town.

She had explained to Adi earlier that the person who'd looked after her during her childhood still worked in this orphanage. The moment Alicia passed through the door, the woman who had been waiting for her grinned from ear to ear at the sight of her. She addressed Alicia without using any titles, and rather

than bowing, she enveloped the girl in a loving hug before any conversation took place. It might've seemed improper to treat the nation's princess in this manner, but the two looked so much like mother and daughter that all who beheld their exchange could only smile.

"You came all this way to give me the letter, didn't you? Thank you," said the woman in a gentle tone of voice, and in response Alicia smiled like a little child.

Adi watched the scene unfold with a warm smile of his own, when something suddenly pulled on his clothes. He looked down and spotted a few young children staring at him with sparkling eyes. The boy who'd grasped his sleeve, perhaps the youngsters' representative, held out a ball towards Adi.

The children's expressions seemed to say they wanted a playmate. Adi glanced over at Alicia and her caretaker. They were still engaged in a familiar, friendly chat together, and he was sure they had plenty of things to talk about. Deciding it might be good to give the two of them a private moment, Adi smiled wryly and accepted the ball from the boy.

***

"Sorry to have made you wait."

Adi, who'd been sitting in a corner of the orphanage and watching over the children, looked up at the sound of Alicia's voice.

"I see you've become friends with the kids," she added.

"Mmm, well, I'm used to it by now."

"Really?"

"Albert Manor gets a lot of visitors. If any guests or relatives come over with their children, I often entertain them," he explained with a smile, waving his hand at the little ones.

"That's so you," Alicia said quietly with a giggle. "You like taking care of others, don't you?"

"Do you think so?"

"I mean, you stayed with me all day long, and you always pay attention to the smallest details," she responded, and with another giggle, she began recalling

the daily occurrences. Adi scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

If someone finished their drink, Adi always smoothly refilled it. He'd help Mary, Alicia, and Parfette carry their belongings at any time, and if someone's dress tore or her hair came undone, he'd fix them right up. These were merely the little things, but the embarrassment over having them listed one by one was overwhelming to Adi. And though he'd joined the Albert family, he was once their servant. Therefore, while his actions may have been natural given his past station, it was still nice to have his efforts recognized—even if it was embarrassing.

Eventually, Adi stopped Alicia from listing any further things, by which point the children of the orphanage had run over to say their goodbyes. He smiled wryly while they surrounded him, and he told Alicia, "I like that sort of thing. It may be trivial, but I want to be able to do something for the sake of other people."

"Other people?" Alicia prompted.

"Of course, milady comes first."

She chuckled at his straightforward proclamation. "All right, let's go home," she said, and the two of them vacated the orphanage.

***

"Your Ladyship, I'm home."

"Welcome back, Adi. You must be tired after riding in the carriage. Do you want to rest a bit?"

"Lady Mary, I'm home!"

"Ah yes... What, did you really think I'd say, 'Welcome back, Alicia,' or something?! Why did you come back to *my* place?! Your home's in the palace! Get going!"

Mary continued screeching, but there was no way Alicia would reform her way of thinking at this point. In fact, while listening to Mary's appeals, the girl looked around and remarked, "Something smells delicious!"

Adi chuckled, realizing their princess was hungry, and started making

arrangements for some tea and cakes. Mary kept shrieking throughout this process, but Alicia peered at her curiously and asked, “Did you like my handmade croquettes?”

In response, Mary glanced the other way with a huff and pushed a lunch box into Alicia’s hands. Of course, it was empty.

***

If there was one event that could surpass the wedding reception of the daughter of House Albert, it would be the wedding reception of Princess Alicia.

She was the tragic princess who’d been abducted when she was still a baby and grown up in an orphanage without even knowing of her own identity. Later on, she’d been able to reunite with her family with the help of Mary Albert (who still scowled at the mention of such a notion), become a splendid princess, and entered into a relationship with the popular and beloved first son of House Dyce.

Her story moved all who heard it, and little girls listened to the retellings with rapt attention. The tale was so powerful that it had started to spread abroad, and parts of it were even adapted into books and plays. (Looking these over, Mary would tilt her head in confusion at the appearance of a character she didn’t recognize and ask, *“Who is this goody-goody?”* Adi, unwilling to give a clear answer, would hold out a mirror.)

In any case, the scope of the wedding party for the girl who’d lived through such a fairy tale would be far beyond the usual bounds. House Albert was providing full-scale assistance with the arrangements too, adding to the level of extravagance.

As for the daughter of said house, she arrived at the party clad in a classic-style gown with a cool hue, her beauty enough to enrapture anyone who looked her way. Naturally, by her side was her husband, Adi. The color of his suit matched his wife’s dress, and they both had complementary ornaments pinned to their chests. Everyone smiled gently upon seeing their affection for each other.

“My lady, do you know where Alicia is?”

“I believe she’s changing into her dress right now,” Mary told Adi. “But... Why would you ask *me* about that girl’s schedule?”

“I was certain you would have been informed of it.”

“I’m simply a visitor. There’s no way anyone would tell me that peasant’s schedule! I... I just helped to make it, that’s all!”

“Ah, so *you* made her schedule.”

“I mean, originally the first thing on her schedule was to come to *my* place early in the morning! What a joke!” Mary appealed.

Adi sighed quietly, but then looked up quickly at the sound of a certain voice.

“Lady Maryyy!” The energetic voice, which was gradually getting louder and louder, undoubtedly belonged to Alicia. At the sound, a shiver ran through Mary, and she quickly turned around, high on her guard.

“Wow, how impressive...” Adi commented. “I can’t believe she can achieve such speeds despite wearing that heavy-looking dress.”

“This is no time to be praising her!” exclaimed Mary. “But fine... Bring it on!”

Hearing his wife’s determined words, Adi glanced down at her in surprise. Up until now, whenever Alicia came running at Mary, the latter would scold her for being disgraceful and then have to endure a charge attack. But it seemed that today—and today only—Mary was eagerly awaiting Alicia’s arrival.

Is she readying a counterattack against Alicia’s speed? worried Adi, glancing between the two girls in a fluster. (Perhaps he was at fault here for not surmising that the two might simply hug each other, but Alicia’s speed was truly extraordinary. It even surpassed the boundaries of what one might consider “running up to someone.”)

“Milady, please don’t do anything dange—”

“Worry not! I won’t do anything hazardous. But we’re settling this today!” Mary proclaimed enthusiastically.

Alicia had accelerated to her top speed by this point. “Lady Mary!” she cried out, throwing herself upon the other girl. However, Mary jumped back at precisely the right moment.

“I saw right through you!” she declared victoriously. Alicia’s arms would’ve usually been wrapped around her by this point, but now they were flailing in the air instead.

“Y-You dodged it?!” Adi exclaimed.

“Behold, Adi! Today, *I* am the winne—” Mary suddenly cut herself off. She thought she’d just avoided the embrace, and yet a pair of arms wrapped around her waist from behind and squeezed her tightly. This style of greeting was definitively Alicia’s, but the girl was right before Mary’s eyes, so it couldn’t have been her.

Who on earth is that?! Mary shouted inwardly, hurriedly turning around. She was met with the sight of a teary pair of eyes as a certain young lady clung to her. Needless to say, it was Parfette. She looked adorable, clad in a soft and fluffy dress with a flower pinned to her chest, but now was not the time for complimenting her.

“Good day, Lady Mary...”

“Parfette?! Don’t tell me, you used Alicia as a decoy?!”

“Lady Alicia told me that you run away when she tries to greet you, so she said I had to catch you... Th-That’s why I—!”

“If someone approaches me *slowly*, I greet them properly! So stop crying!” Mary argued, trying to pacify Parfette while also peeling the girl off of her. She then pushed her against Gainas, who’d been standing behind Parfette in a daze.

When Mary turned to glare at Alicia next, the latter beamed her usual sunny smile in response. “Thank you for coming today!” she said, delivering a refined greeting much too late.

Her white dress was covered in lace, and the hair ornament she was sporting looked pretty against her golden hair. Each time she laughed happily, her locks swayed with the movement. Her beauty was downright dazzling.

She looked both adorable and elegant, and Mary inhaled a quiet breath, as though enchanted. Alicia looked exactly like the princess Mary had always pictured in her mind whenever she read the storybook she’d had since childhood.

Yet that princessly aura didn’t last long, for Alicia’s usual expression and peasant manners returned in an instant. “Sorry I made you wait!” she exclaimed and enveloped Mary in a vigorous hug.

Mary had been gazing at the other girl in admiration, but now the other’s typical behavior made her snap back to her senses. “Cease this at once!” she rebuked, trying to push the girl away.



“Stop hugging me at every turn! It’s disgraceful!”

“Oh, Lady Mary! Lord Patrick said he wants to talk to you about today’s food arrangements!”

“How many times do I have to tell you to listen when others are speaking?!” Mary shrieked, but Alicia didn’t look remorseful in the slightest. She was back to her usual self through and through.

Moments ago, Mary had been worried she might be carried away by the atmosphere of this place and cry, but now she sighed at her own foolishness in having such thoughts at all as she surveyed her surroundings.

If Alicia was there, then it must’ve meant that Patrick was there too. Mary looked around, eager to foist Alicia onto him, and soon enough she heard high-pitched cries coming from around one corner. Everyone turned to look, and all the girls’ cheeks flushed in unison at the sight.

There was no doubt about it—Prince Charming Patrick was here.

His formal outfit was white, matching Alicia’s dress and adding even more of a luster to his indigo hair and eyes. There wasn’t a girl on this earth who wouldn’t have let out a sigh of admiration at the way he looked right now. Even Mary, now that her own prince was beside her, found herself sincerely thinking that Patrick looked attractive, without any intent of mocking or teasing him.

“Alicia, you shouldn’t run around in that dress. It’s dangerous,” Patrick told her. “What if you trip and fall over?”

“Hee hee... I just got so happy when I saw Lady Mary!”

Patrick sighed in exasperation, gently petting Alicia’s hair, which had become slightly disarrayed from her running.

The pair looked indescribably beautiful together. Patrick gazed affectionately at Alicia, who in turn grinned joyfully at the way he stroked her hair. Everyone regarded the two of them with gentle smiles. There was no need to put it into words—the happiness in the air was clear as day.

Mary, too, smiled fondly at the scene before her. In contrast to that, Adi’s eyes widened as he spotted something odd about her. Alicia and Patrick were

the next ones to tilt their heads in wonderment. After all, Mary was smiling. It was a soft, gentle smile, beautiful enough to enchant anyone and full of ladylike refinement. However, for those who knew her, it was clear that her smile was forced.

"What's wrong, Mary?" Patrick inquired, peering at her face and the fake smile he'd seen so many times in the past.

The girl would always put on this expression whenever she was faced with certain situations—reluctantly attending parties, having troublesome people strike up conversations with her, or being forced to listen to someone's insipid bragging. The smile was like a mask she'd wear to conceal how bored she was, or how much she wanted to go home. Patrick was aware of all this, hence his confusion as to why Mary would pull such an expression under these circumstances.

But before the man could make any guesses, Adi quickly put his hand on Mary's shoulder. "Pardon me, Alicia, but...is there a free room we could borrow for a moment?"

"A free room? None of the ones on this floor are in use today," she responded.

"I see. In that case, we'll be right back." With that, Adi pulled Mary away, and the two of them vacated the area.

They entered one of the unused rooms, with Mary still smiling like a lovely young lady. Though her countenance was beautiful, it was also quite unlike her. "What is it, Adi?" she asked him.

"I should be asking *you* that..." he replied with a sigh, reaching out his hands towards her. At first, he lightly placed them upon her hair, gently brushing his fingers through her silver locks before touching her cheek. His hands moved to her shoulders, then her arms, as if he were slowly trying to soothe away the tension in her body. At last, his hands moved to her back and pulled her close as he enveloped her in an embrace.

Initially, Mary was surprised at the sudden hug, but in the next moment, her eyes gradually began filling with tears. When Adi gently patted her back, one large teardrop after another started pouring down her face.

“Wh-What are you doing...?! I was t-trying so hard to keep it in too...!”

“You don’t have to be so stubborn on a day like this. You could’ve just let the tears flow back there.”

“No! I vowed to m-make *her* cry, not the other way around...!” Mary appealed through her tears, clinging to Adi’s chest. He smiled wryly and continued rubbing her back. The girl must’ve reached her limit by this point and couldn’t hold back any longer, bursting into tears openly. The way she sobbed and hiccuped was a far cry from refinement.

“Are you still going on about making Alicia cry and all that?” Adi asked her.

“Th-That’s right! I’ll make her cry! B-But... She looks so pretty today, and Patrick seems so happy too... That’s why I... I...!”

“Mm-hmm. I know, I know,” he said in a soothing tone of voice. He held her for a moment longer, then gently unraveled her fingers from his clothes and kissed her knuckles. Caressing Mary’s cheeks, he wiped away her tears, and right then somebody knocked on the door.

The door cracked open, and someone peeked inside through the small gap. “Lady Mary, Adi. Is everything okay?” asked Alicia, sounding worried. However, when she noticed the scene unfolding in the room and saw the expression on Mary’s face, her own purple eyes overflowed with tears. “Lady Mary... Lady Maryyy!”

Overcome with emotion, the girl came flying into the room and sprung upon Mary, hugging her tightly. Normally Mary would reprimand her and try to escape, but this time, she didn’t resist—she only earnestly called out Alicia’s name and accepted the embrace. (The force of Alicia’s hug was so strong that Mary stumbled backwards and landed on the sofa behind her, but thankfully it was a quality sofa of the royal palace, and it easily softened their landing.)

The two girls cried openly like a pair of children. It was unbelievable to think that they were the nation’s princess and the daughter of the family equal in power to the royals.

Adi watched them with a small smile, when another knock came on the door before Patrick glanced into the room. He must’ve been worried when Adi and

Mary didn't return and then neither had Alicia. However, as his indigo eyes swept over the scene, he smiled in relief. "Ah, so that's what's going on. And here I was worrying."

"My apologies," Adi responded. "It seems like milady was holding it back out of sheer obstinance."

Patrick chuckled. "That's so like her."

"Indeed," Adi agreed, shrugging his shoulders. Then, he turned to face Patrick fully and cleared his throat. "Congrats."

"Hmm?" Patrick, who'd been observing the girls, glanced at Adi in surprise at this uncharacteristic line. Though Adi had felt more comfortable speaking casually, using sarcasm, and bantering with Patrick ever since he'd entered the Albert family, he hadn't ever dropped the formalities in such a way. "What's the matter, Adi?"

"Ah, well... You've known milady since a young age, and therefore you and I have known each other for a long time too."

"That's true."

"So although I know it's impolite, I wanted to congratulate you as a friend," Adi said bashfully, glancing away.

Patrick's eyes widened, but soon enough he was smiling happily. "Thanks," he replied, his words uncharacteristic of the first son of House Dyce, much less the man who'd just married the nation's princess.

The two were speaking as casually as a pair of close friends who'd known each other for a long time. And yet the exchange was somewhat embarrassing. Unlike the two girls in front of them, Adi and Patrick couldn't exactly embrace each other and cry loudly to celebrate. The men both murmured, "Anyway," to smooth over the awkwardness, before Patrick abruptly pulled out a handkerchief.

"Time to carry out a desperate defense of that dress."

"That's true," Adi agreed. "If we don't intervene, they might blow their noses into the lace."

The two men nodded, and then each tried to pacify his respective beloved, both of whom were still sobbing and sniveling.

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The clamor continued for a while longer, until Mary and Alicia were taken away by the maids for an interval. By the time the party was about to officially begin, Mary had recovered enough to pat her own reddened cheeks and mutter, “How humiliating!”

As the daughter of House Albert, the way she’d burst into tears earlier ashamed her. And three other people had been in that room with her, no less! That said, one of those three had been in the same state as her, so perhaps she shouldn’t have worried about it. Even so, her pride made Mary’s cheeks flush red.

Adi stood next to her with a wry smile, soothingly rubbing her arms. “What an adorable way to celebrate the day,” he remarked.

“But as a daughter of a noble house, it’s quite embarrassing for me. Don’t tell anyone what happened, okay?”

“Alicia really did look beautiful, didn’t she? I felt so moved that my eyes welled up with tears too.”

“Hey... Don’t tell anyone, *okay*?”

“And Lord Patrick looked great as well. What a gorgeous pair they make.”

“Hey... Adi! Hey!!!”

“M-My lady, look over there! Lady Parfette and Lord Gainas are talking together. I know a lot happened between those two, but I hope everything works out for them.”

“Starting today, I’ll veto any attempts at physical contact from you for a month, and we’ll only be allowed to communicate via exchanging diaries.”

“I’m so sorry! Please, anything but that! I only told His Grace, Madam, your brothers, and my own brother! Also Lady Parfette, Lord Gainas, and Lady Carina, as well as the ex-members of the student council from our time at school! But that’s it!”

“You’ve been going around telling absolutely anyone and everyone, haven’t you?! I can’t believe the transmission speed you’ve achieved in such a short span of time!”

“By the way, I haven’t told Lady Margaret, but she already knows about it too.”

Mary glared at him for spilling the truth about how she’d burst into tears in such an unladylike manner. “This is *beyond* embarrassing for me!” she huffed, but in the next moment, her eyes widened in surprise as Adi grasped her hand. He squeezed it tightly, making warmth seep into her skin, and the way he rubbed her fingers tickled her and made her smile.

As always, her husband knew how to put her in a bad mood, and how to make her feel better afterwards. Mary’s anger dissipated as she murmured, “Goodness,” with a happy countenance. And just like that, she all but forgot about the threat of exchanging diaries.

For a while, the two continued chatting about silly things, until the orchestra started to play, and the party began in a solemn, yet glamorous manner.

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Throughout the party, Mary’s tear ducts came close to collapse three times, but as the daughter of House Albert, she managed to cover it up by gracefully wiping the corners of her eyes with her scarf. Her conduct was beautiful, and everyone else smiled fondly at the way her eyes filled with tears as she watched her friend’s celebrations. Some even teared up at the sight of Mary in turn.

After all, this was Mary Albert—the very person who, during their time at school, had taken Alicia under her wing before the other girl had any inkling of her identity and set an example for her, teaching her how to become a proper lady. She’d even encouraged Alicia to pursue Patrick. Mary was a crucial character in the love story of the princess that spread among the public. (Although Mary, whilst reading the book adaption of said story the other day, had angrily declared, “I wouldn’t want any softies like that to associate with me!”)

In any case, the party continued, and Alicia and Patrick stood on the stage together, greeting their guests. Alicia was clad in her beautiful white dress, and

in her hands she held a bouquet of white flowers.

Seeing this, Adi glanced at Mary. The girl was eating a rare dish not usually seen around these parts and nodding proudly at the taste. He decided to call out to her.

“Hmm? Bouquet toss?” Mary asked him in confusion, wondering what that meant.

“Alicia will throw her bouquet towards the crowd, and there’s a superstition that the person who catches it will be the next bride,” Adi explained.

“I see... But that has nothing to do with me,” Mary said, implying she had no interest in the act since she herself was already married.

“True enough...” Adi muttered ambiguously, a hint of discomfiture in his expression.

Mary looked up at him in surprise. “What’s the matter?”

“Well, it’s true that the bouquet toss isn’t relevant to you, milady, but... For some reason, to me it seems like Alicia is assuming an excellent pitching stance and very clearly aiming in this direction.”

“What?!” Mary whipped back around towards the stage. Earlier, Alicia had been sweetly greeting the guests, yet now she was displaying a formidable pitching stance. Though, of course, in her hand was a bouquet and not a ball.

As for Patrick, who was standing beside Alicia, his dignified conduct seemed to have evaporated, and he turned away from her as fast as he could with a distant look in his eyes. Alicia may have been his beloved bride, but looking at her directly must’ve been difficult for him at the moment. Despite the fact that he was the Prince Charming everyone pined after, he was sporting quite the sorrowful expression.

However, Mary didn’t have time to feel compassion for him, as Alicia was aiming right at her. To make matters worse, she even openly declared, “Here I go, Lady Mary!”

“No! Stop it! I don’t need that bouquet!”

“There’s no need for modesty! Here I gooo!”

“No! I’m scared! Cease this at onc—!”

Alas, Mary didn’t get to finish her sentence because right then, Alicia hurled the bouquet at her. The flowers hit Mary square in the face, so effectively that she couldn’t even scream, let alone stop the other girl.

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“I know peasants have no manners, but don’t you think that smacking me in the face with the bouquet in front of that huge crowd is going a little too far?!”

“Hee hee! Sorry!”

“Ugh! You don’t seem sorry at *all*!” Mary screeched, glaring at Alicia sitting next to her.

But the other girl just smiled happily. “When I considered who I should give the flowers to, I couldn’t think of anyone other than you, Lady Mary.”

Mary sighed heavily. “Forget about it,” she murmured, deciding to give up since she’d already scolded Alicia countless times before and today she’d endured a fastball.

Presently, they were in the palace gardens. Three beautifully dressed girls—Mary, Alicia, and Parfette—were sitting together in the chairs, their respective husbands and fiancé surrounding them. From afar, it must’ve looked like a peaceful scene of beautiful young men and women chatting together. However, Mary was grumpily rubbing the tip of her nose where the bouquet had struck her, while Patrick sighed after having witnessed his wife’s perfect pitching stance from up close. Despite the apparent glitz and glamor, internal chaos abounded.

Mary turned her glare from Alicia to Adi. “This wouldn’t have happened if *you’d* caught the bouquet,” she complained.

“Me? Please stop joking around.”

“Joking around?!”

“What would you do if *I* were to become the next bride?” Adi asked with a serious expression, completely missing the point.

“I could ask *you* the same thing!” screeched Mary, before turning her anger

towards Patrick next. “And you should’ve stopped her, Patrick!”

“No, I couldn’t do that. Besides...”

“What?”

“It’d be troublesome if *I* were to become the next bride, no?”

“Well, you *should* have!”

While Mary continued her shrieking, Adi and Patrick smiled in amusement, which only added fuel to the fire. Of course, the two men were well aware of that, and enjoyed witnessing Mary’s rage.

From among the group, only Gainas troubled himself about how to reassure each person involved. As for Alicia, who was the cause of this situation, she’d already put the flower fiasco behind her and was chatting away with Parfette while eating cake.

“Honestly, you should pass a bouquet like that to an unmarried woman,” Mary continued, lightly touching the bouquet in her lap. Though some of the petals had fallen off upon impact with her face, overall the flowers still looked splendid. They’d definitely have looked pretty if they were put on display in a vase. Thinking as much, Mary decided to pick up the bouquet and place it upon the lap of Parfette, who was sitting next to her.

“Lady Mary?” Parfette questioned with surprise.

Mary didn’t respond, instead turning to look at Alicia. “This is what I’m talking about, see?” she asked, prompting Alicia to agree.

“Yes, I do!” Alicia nodded, her expression brimming with joy. “It’s your turn next, Parfette!”

“M-Mine...?”

“That’s right,” said Mary. “If the person who gets the bouquet is to become the next bride, then you should’ve been the target of that toss, not me.”

“Um... I don’t think I could’ve caught it if it were thrown at me with such speed...”

“It’s okay!” Alicia reassured. “I wouldn’t have thrown it at you like that,

Parfette!”

Mary paused. “What?”

“Ah, really?” asked Parfette. “I’m glad to hear that. I think I would’ve gotten scared and ran off.”

“Hee hee! You’re a bit of a worrywart, aren’t you?” Alicia giggled. “Isn’t that right, Lady Mary?”

“Huh? Right, yes... What?” Mary murmured, confused about what was going on as question marks flitted around her head. In response, Alicia and Parfette smiled at each other.

The atmosphere was tranquil (or so it seemed to the outsiders), and everyone turned to look at the venue when suddenly the tune of the song the band inside was playing changed. It was a gentle song made for dancing. Men and women started gathering together, but as for the present group...

“Let’s go, Lady Mary!” Alicia vigorously stood up, announcing the opening of the “Swinging Mary Albert Around Competition.”

“Why do you keep insisting I dance with you every single time?!”

“Come on, Lady Mary! It’s starting!”

“I *told* you to listen... Goodness.” Mary’s shrieking changed into a sigh as she turned to look the other way with a huff. But after a moment, she slowly raised her arm and held it out towards Alicia. “Well, since this is a special occasion, I *suppose* I can go along with it for one song...” she said, offering her hand as if she were asking Alicia to escort her.

Alicia blinked several times at this, but upon conjecturing Mary’s wishes, her expression brightened. “Okay!” she agreed, taking Mary’s hand. Their different colored bracelets clinked, and Alicia smiled even wider, as though the sound made her happy.

Mary, still unable to be up-front about her feelings even now, glared at her. “I won’t tolerate you stepping all over my feet,” she proclaimed with a dissatisfied expression as Alicia pulled her along towards the venue.

After watching them leave, Adi made his move next. He seemed to have

conjectured something and reached a conclusion as he took in a deep breath and looked at Patrick. “Well then, Lord Patrick. Let us go as well.”

“Stop reopening that door. I don’t want your invitation.”

“And I don’t want to invite *you* either! But Alicia will never let milady go if we don’t take some drastic measures!” Adi cried out. As for said “drastic measures,” they of course involved the two men dancing together (while pretending to hold each other’s hands) right next to Mary and Alicia and changing partners the moment the song ended. In order to do so, they had to be on the dance floor, meaning they had no choice but to dance.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, after all—if they didn’t do this, Alicia would truly never release Mary.

“You know, we wouldn’t have to do this if you’d just stopped Alicia, Lord Patrick. If you had, I’d be dancing with milady right now.”

“All right, let’s do this, Adi! We can’t fall behind!”

“Waaah, the tears are distorting my vision...”

Following this pathetic exchange, the two poor men who’d been abandoned by their beloved spouses headed towards the dance floor together.

Only Gainas and Parfette were left in the gardens now. Parfette purposefully let out a small cough to hint to Gainas that she wanted him to invite her to dance. She fumbled with the bouquet in her hands, and the way she kept casting adorable side glances at her fiancé was simply enchanting.

Gainas’s expression softened, and he got closer to her before going down on one knee. He looked just like a knight about to pledge his loyalty to his princess. However, rather than a sword, he had in his hand an azalea flower, the emblem of House Eldland. He’d had it pinned to his chest as decoration specifically for this occasion.

“My beloved Parfette, won’t you honor me with a dance?” he requested, holding out the single flower to her as if begging her to grant his wish.

A faint blush spread across Parfette’s cheeks. “I’d be happy to,” she replied, accepting the flower with a nod. But in the next moment, her eyes lit up as she

jumped to her feet and grasped his arm. “Let’s go, Lord Gainas! We can’t fall behind either!” she urged with excitement.

Seeing her happy expression, Gainas smiled wryly. Their fingers were entwined together, and he squeezed her hand in response.

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And so the wedding reception of Alicia and Patrick drew to a close, and the peaceful normalcy of everyday life returned.

Or such would’ve been the case, except that the occasion for the next party promptly arose, for the birthday of the lady of House Albert was coming up soon. When Mary informed Alicia, the other girl’s eyes gleamed.

After all, when the baby Alicia had been kidnapped, it was none other than Keryl Albert who’d left the royal seal in her clothes so she’d at least have some sign of her royal origins. From Alicia’s perspective, this was the birthday of the person to whom she owed a great debt, so it was no wonder she was so thrilled about it.

On top of that, Mary had helped to arrange plenty of things for Alicia’s own wedding party, which took place a few days ago, so of course she wanted to return the favor when it came to the birthday party of Mary’s mother.

“I’ll do anything for the sake of Lady Keryl!” she declared.

“My, is that so? What a privilege to have the very princess herself offering us help.”

“I’m going to visit Albert Manor every day from now on! Let’s make this the best party ever!” Alicia added, her eyes shining with excitement.

“Don’t just decide that all by yourself! And anyway, you come almost every single day as it is!” Mary screeched. She turned away with a huff, taking a sip of the tea Adi had poured for her. Before long, the corners of her lips tilted upwards in a satisfied smile. This was not the expression of a daughter thinking of her mother’s birthday party, but rather the look of someone who was scheming something.

“Mary?” Patrick inquired, shooting her a mistrustful, probing look. They’d

known each other since childhood, so he was aware that Mary's current expression didn't foretell anything good. "What are you plotting?" he questioned bluntly, but Mary's mischievous smile didn't falter.

"How rude of you to accuse me of such a thing," she answered with feigned ignorance, showing that she wouldn't reveal the truth.

Patrick turned his gaze to Adi, because he knew the other man was always involved when it came to Mary's schemes. However, Adi hurriedly made his signature escape by saying, "I'll get more tea ready for everyone."

"I hope you're not plotting anything nefarious, Mary..." Patrick told her.

"My, of course not. Nothing *nefarious*, anyhow..."

"So you *are* plotting something."

"I simply wish to prepare a wonderful surprise for my mother's birthday party," Mary said, purposefully keeping her words vague.

Patrick stared at her, silently urging her to continue. But Mary, having no such intentions, only continued smiling sweetly as she drank her tea.

"Please tell us, Lady Mary!" Alicia appealed, pulling on Mary's arm, but even so, the girl's insincere smile did not waver.

Patrick sighed, knowing it'd be impossible to get anything out of her at this point. He also knew perfectly well that he could neither predict nor uncover this young lady's schemes. "Just stay out of trouble," he warned her, ending the topic there.

Still smiling elegantly, Mary responded with, "I'm sure you'll be *very* surprised," before cackling wickedly.

The Young Lady Albert Longs for Prosperity

Although there had been some turbulent moments in Mary Albert's life, for the most part, it was smooth sailing.

From the boisterous troublemaker to the crybaby, she'd managed to make a few friends, and the number of people who understood her as a person had increased. The jealous gazes she'd once been the target of had disappeared along with the malicious gossip of those who'd call her an "eccentric." Instead, these days people viewed her more favorably, referring to Mary's conduct as "just her being herself."

Above all, her beloved husband was by her side. She'd been the most important person in his life since before she was even born, and now that they were married, she received his affection on the daily.

It would've been insolent of her to wish for anything more than this. And yet, it is human nature to keep wishing for more regardless.

"And that's why I think I should go all out and open that migratory bird restaurant!" Mary declared.

"Again, how did you arrive at that conclusion?!" Adi responded with exasperation. They'd just finished having their lunch in Albert Manor's gardens and were enjoying a serene teatime. "I see you still haven't given up on that," Adi went on, sighing in frustration. In an elegant movement, he poured some tea into a cup and then handed it to Mary.

Mary looked unruffled by his words. "I have no *reason* to give up," she replied curtly. She then imitated Adi's conduct from before as she took the teapot into her own hands to pour his serving. "Sales are very steady in the northern lands, so we should take advantage of the momentum and open up a shop in the town center!" she continued as she poured the tea.

Perhaps because she wasn't used to doing this, the liquid bounced around in the cup vigorously. It didn't give an elegant impression, but ah well—that was no real issue. It's the thought that counts, Mary figured. Besides, no matter how

full the cup was, as long as the liquid didn't spill, everything was still fine.

Having said her piece, Mary handed Adi the teacup, which was filled to the brim.

"I don't think you should get overly enthusiastic. You'll just end up spinning out of control all over again," Adi remarked nonchalantly, placing a slice of chiffon cake from the platter onto a plate. How practiced his movement was, indeed!

The cake was garnished with cream on the side, and waves of berry sauce were painted on top. It looked delicious, baked to fluffy perfection, and it glistened in Adi's hold like a work of art, stirring Mary's appetite.

When he held the plate out to her, she thanked him, and then reached for his empty plate to return the gesture. "My, how rude. When have I ever made such a blunder?"

"When you aimed for your ruin."

"Shush," she rebutted, as if to tell him she wasn't having it.

Directing her gaze to the cake stand in the center of the table, she took a slice of the chiffon cake as well. As she did so, the slice fell off-balance and collapsed on its side atop the plate. But ah well, it was no big deal.

"The equipment is all ready, and the interior looks stylish. It's going to be the ideal wild game restaurant," Mary said while scooping up some fresh cream. The moment she tilted her spoon towards the cake, the cream plopped down on the plate with a *thud*, but surely this was fine as well.

She'd intended to finish it off with a few drops of the sauce, but the viscous liquid was hard to control and spurted out in a single dab, painting the center of the cake bright red.

The cake could not have been called delicious looking, even under the guise of flattery. It slumped miserably on its side, slathered in copious amounts of berry sauce and a dollop of cream that looked ready to spill from the plate at any second.

It did not pass as a plate of cake. In fact, it looked more like...

“This is the murder case of the chiffon cake! The culprit, cream, is making its escape at this very moment! How sinister!” Mary exclaimed at the threatening aura that emanated from the plate.

Adi let out a small sigh in response and took the plate away from her.

“It doesn’t look very pretty, does it?” she remarked. “It’s more like a crime scene.”

“Really? How odd,” said Adi. “To me, it looks like the tastiest cake in the world.”

Mary paused. “It does?”

“Yes. It’s cake that my beloved gave to me, so whether it resembles a crime scene or any other such thing, it still looks delicious to me.”

Mary’s cheeks flushed at his kind words. Even though she hadn’t tasted her own cake yet, the air around them seemed so saccharine! As if spellbound, she reached for her plate and took a bite of the cake Adi had prepared for her. It had just the right amount of berry sauce, adding a nice tartness to the flavor even as it melted away into sweetness.

She’d had about half of her cake when she paused and murmured, “But still...”

This was a lovely way to pass the time, yet she couldn’t fully immerse herself in it, for there remained a source of worry in her heart.

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“Distribution channels?” inquired Adi.

Some while after their teatime, Mary decided they should go out for a walk and see the migratory bird restaurant. She nodded in response to Adi’s question, and then sighed to show her suffering.

As if wanting to help demonstrate her pain and worries, a gust of wind blew past and fluttered her silver hair. She lifted one hand to press it back down, and the sight of that combined with her sigh truly painted the image of a tortured, melancholic young lady.

Adi cast a sidelong glance at her. “The wind sure is strong today, isn’t it?” he

commented, then looked up. It was far from a clear day—the clouds rolled across the sky, obscuring the sunlight from view. Though night was still far off, it was already dark, and the wind carried a trace of dampness on it as it breezed past. There was no doubt it would start raining soon.

“Your Ladyship, I know you’re glad about having unscrewed your drills, but even so, I don’t think you should have an outing on a day like this.”

“Excuse me? I didn’t decide to go out just because the wind is strong today... Ah! Another gust! No, my hair’s going to get all messed up!”

“You seem very happy about that fact.”

While Mary enjoyed making a fuss and trying to contain her hair against the wind, Adi refused to play along and simply shrugged his shoulders. “Anyway, what’s that you were saying about distribution channels?” he prompted. “Is there some kind of problem?”

“Right, right, about that. I want to secure the shortest route, but the landowners of a certain area have refused to grant us passage. Ah, the wind!” As Mary’s silver-thread hair danced in the gales, she cheerfully pushed it down and added, “I’m so upset!”

“Wouldn’t using the Albert name be effective in having them grant permission?” suggested Adi.

“Actually, it’d have the opposite effect. They seem to loathe the nobility, and no matter how many letters I send, they’ve been completely unapproachable.”

At present, the biggest hurdle in the way of the wild game restaurant plan was the distribution channel. There *were* other routes that could be secured, but they’d have to take the long way from the town center shops to the northern lands. Securing the fastest possible avenue would be best in terms of preserving the food’s freshness, after all.

However, the owners of a certain parcel of land constantly rejected Mary’s appeals for passage. In theory, she could force their hand into agreement by using the power of the Albert name, but that wasn’t her style.

“It’s not like I’m giving them a bad deal either. I wonder if there’s any way for us to reach an agreement?” she mused as she and Adi turned the corner

towards the town center.

Perhaps on account of the weather, the central area wasn't as lively as usual. Most likely, everyone had raced home before the incoming rain could catch them. It was as if the typical hustle and bustle of this place were only a fabrication as Mary and Adi made their way through empty streets, devoid of any sign of life.

"They probably think I'm trying to swindle them, even though I really *do* want to open that restaurant..."

"I mean, suddenly having *that* young lady Albert proclaim she's requesting passage for the sake of opening a wild game restaurant *would* be pretty hard for anyone to believe."

"I wrote out all of my passions and exact vision for this restaurant on ten pieces of paper for them, and even that didn't convince them. Maybe an in-person negotiation is the only— Ah!!!"

"The only way to persuade them," Mary had been meaning to say, until she cut herself off to let out a shriek instead. A sizable figure—larger than Mary herself—came flying out from between two buildings with an outstretched arm aiming right for her.

She was completely unprepared for anything like this and felt convinced she was about to be captured. But before that could happen, another power grabbed her by the shoulder and pushed her away.

"Milady!" Right as he called out for her, Adi half forcibly pulled Mary back. She was still dumbstruck, and to protect her, he caught the arm of the man who'd been aiming for her.

Indeed, it was a man—and as Mary caught a glimpse of him, she immediately realized what a suspicious character he was. He wore a hat low over his head, and half of his face was concealed behind a mask. It was obvious he was trying to hide his appearance, and after a moment's delay, a sense of dread rippled through Mary at that nefarious sight.

"A-Adi..."

"I'll hold him off! Please get out of here!"

“N-No! I don’t want to leave you...” Mary whispered weakly.

If they’d been merely mistress and servant, then Mary surely should have left him behind. Even from the perspective of a married couple, the powerless Mary should’ve raced off to call for help. That went all the more so considering that the man, though he was being held off by Adi, was still trying to aim for Mary even now.

But I can’t just leave him here! Mary decided as she steeled her gaze. While Adi held the man, she made her way behind him.

“Adi! Keep holding him like that!”

“I *told* you to get out of here! This is dangerous!” Adi raised his voice as he appealed to her.

Meanwhile, Mary took aim and slightly raised the hem of her skirt while rearing back one leg. There was no way she’d run—right now, her eyes were blazing with a fighting spirit.

“In Mary Albert’s dictionary, there is no room for the term ‘escape,’ only for an ‘honorable death’!” she proclaimed. With an elegantly smooth movement, her graceful, pretty leg cut through the air as she kicked her foot forward.

Her aim was flawless, and she whacked the man right in a certain region. Along with the dull sound of the impact, the man’s groan resounded through the air as he crumpled down.

Mary felt a rush of pride at the sight, whereas in turn Adi blanched. “M-My lady... People like you are just...”

“This is part of a noble lady’s etiquette! People are starting to gather, so give it up already,” Mary said, certain of her victory. Glancing towards the end of the road, she could see a couple of people making their way over to them, perhaps having sensed something strange was afoot.

But in that moment, the man seemed to get his second wind as he suddenly sprung to his feet. Thinking he was about to escape, Adi grabbed his arm to stop him. Yet the assailant violently shook Adi off, clenching his fist and swinging it towards Adi’s face.

Mary shrieked as she witnessed this, staggering over towards her husband desperately.

“Don’t get cocky, bitch!” the man rasped as his parting remark, and then made his escape. His deep, hoarse voice was intimidating enough to give Mary chills. Rather than ringing in her ears, his words seemed to seep into her very being, but she decided this was no time to pay him any attention as she rushed over to Adi to check on him.

“Adi, are you okay?!”

“Milady, are you unhurt?!”

They both worried over one another, each making sure the other was all right and not hurt anywhere.

Mary noticed there was a streak of blood seeping out of the corner of Adi’s eye. Though Adi had mostly dodged it, the cut must’ve happened when the man’s fist grazed him during his final attack. Adi insisted that it was nothing and that he was fine, but as Mary watched the blood seep into her handkerchief, her face fell as though she herself had been wounded.

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“Don’t get cocky, bitch!”

Those were the departing words of the assailant. His gravelly voice still blared in Mary’s ears. The hat he’d been wearing mostly obscured the direction of his gaze, but there was no doubt that those words had been aimed at her. She’d been the only woman present during that situation, after all.

Still, why on earth...? Mary wondered anxiously with a sigh.

“Milady, are you all right?” Adi asked, peering at her in concern.

A black eye patch covered his left eye, which made quite the painful sight for Mary. “I should be asking *you* that, Adi. Are you okay?”

“Yes. It’s just a little swollen, that’s all. I don’t think I even need this eye patch, really.” Adi laughed, recalling how the doctor who’d treated him had said a bandage wouldn’t stick to his eyelid and made him wear this instead.

Mary recalled that Adi had said something similar earlier when their friends

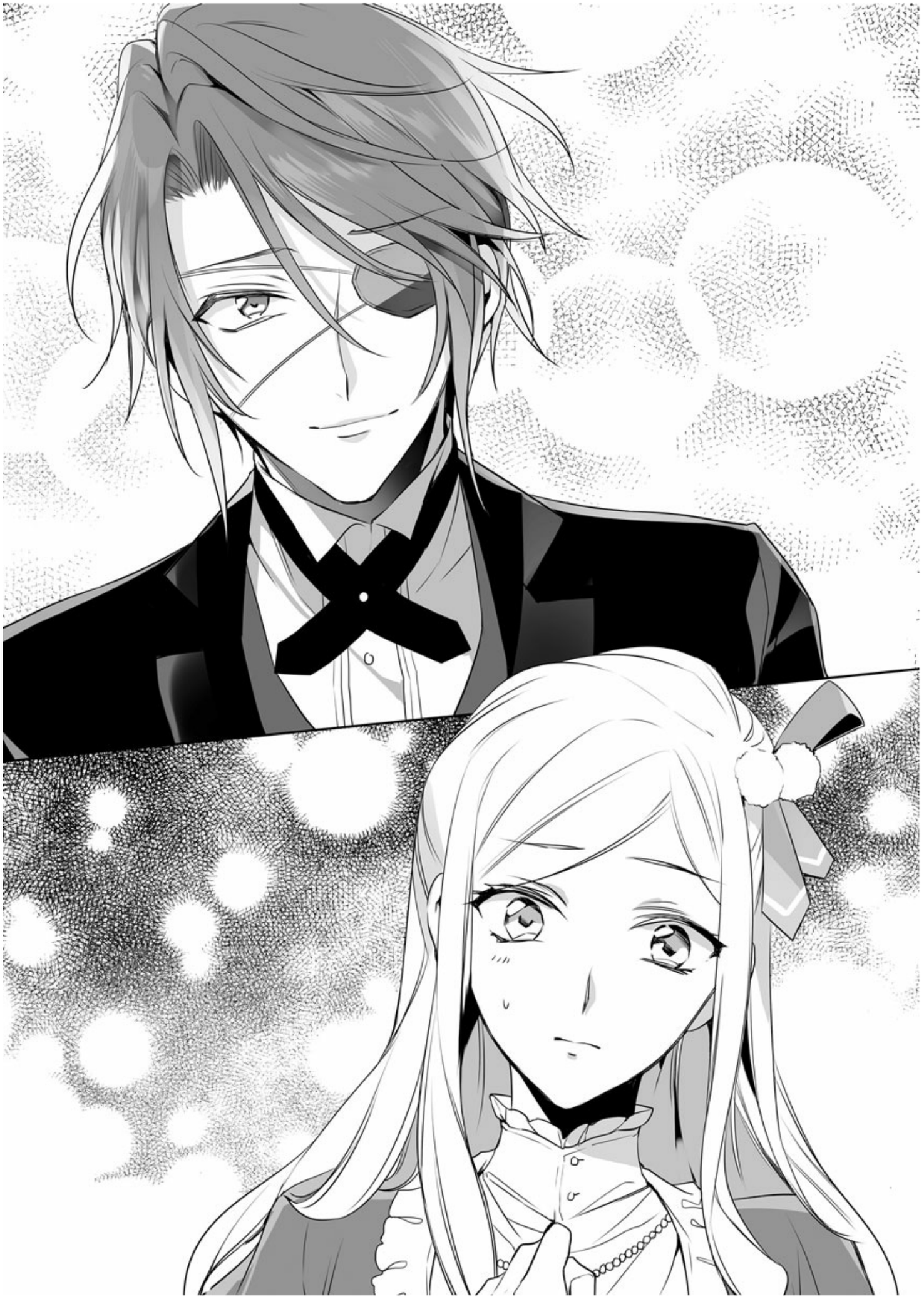
came to pay him a visit. In fact, Adi had only allowed Patrick to see the wound, the sight of which prompted him to say, “Looks pretty bad.” But when Alicia and Parfette had tried to take a peek, Adi put his eye patch back in place, perhaps unwilling to let the ladies see it.

Now that the others had left and it was just the two of them, Adi simply kept repeating that he was glad Mary was unhurt. He didn’t seem concerned over his wound in the slightest, and if anything, he only looked relieved that Mary was all right.

The wound itself, which Mary had glimpsed, did look painful, but just as Adi was saying, it was a minor injury. And when considering how he was still playing the part of House Albert’s servant despite having married into it, it was especially more presentable for him to wear an eye patch rather than a bandage over his eye.

But just the sight of that eye patch pulled Mary back to the moment of the attack, and a sense of unease filled her all over again. Each time she remembered it, that man’s last words flashed through her mind as well.

“Adi... Do you remember what that man said at the very end?”



At her question, Adi's expression shifted to a more serious look. He gave her a single nod, indicating that he, too, recalled the assailant's words and the fact that he'd been aiming for Mary. "But why did that man attack you, milady?"

"I bet it was for the sake of stopping the opening of the migratory bird restaurant."

"You think the Bird-watching Society is giving you the eagle eye?"

"But if I yield here, it'll be an insult to the Albert name. And anyway, why *shouldn't* women be cocky? I'll give them even more where that came from!"

In contrast to Mary's enthusiasm, Adi looked exasperated. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but stopped himself when Mary loudly declared, "This is *our* wild game restaurant, after all!"

"She hit right where it hurts..." Adi mumbled, though Mary was too excited to pick up on it. Besides, by now it was redundant to point out that Adi had a weakness for her. "Indeed, it *is* our restaurant, as you say."

"That's right! It'll definitely be a huge success!"

"That's why you should keep going as you were, my lady. If anyone tries to stand in your way, I'll protect you," he proclaimed, his rust-colored eyes looking right into Mary's and causing her heart to throb.

Back then, Adi had gallantly protected her without a second thought, and here he was now, being so sweet to her. Plus, because she was finally certain his injury wasn't major, Mary could see a different kind of appeal in the way he looked with that eye patch. And all of him belonged to her.

Mary's anxiety and fighting spirit both dimmed, and a radiant sense of euphoria overcame her. Right then, Adi reached for her hand and gently squeezed it. Her fingers tangled with his slender yet masculine ones, and Mary smiled happily at the way his hand was large enough to envelop hers completely. "Yes, as long as you're with me, I'll be fine. *We'll* be fine together," she responded.

"Indeed. I'll be by your side no matter what."

"Adi..."

“I’ll stay with you always. Yes, in fact... You may even sit in my lap. I don’t mind.”

“Goodness, how audacious and fervent of you! Be that as it may, I’m counting down from three. Three...”

“Of course, we should spend the nights together as well. Please stay in my room every night from now on.”

“Two...”

“I know! Let’s start taking baths toge—”

“Have some restraint!!!”

“Wait! You still haven’t counted all the way down to—!”

Following a dull thud, Adi buckled over while clutching his side. Mary’s cheeks were flushed, and she looked the other way with a huff, as if to say Adi only had himself to blame (although, she did also blame the small part of her that thought, *“Using Adi’s arms as a pillow every night would be quite lovely”*).

Now’s not the time to let myself get swept up in this! The wild game restaurant plan must continue. I, Mary Albert, shall not be seen giving in to some vague threats!

Her mind made up, Mary turned to look at the clock hanging on the nearby wall. “Oh, it’s already that time.”

“Ah... R-Right... You’re supposed to have a visitor...? Ugh, I’m still feeling the aftereffects...”

“Adi, can’t you hurry up and call them over?”

“Can I do it *after* I’ve recovered?” he groaned.

Mary let out a sigh of frustration and then crouched next to him. “Here’s a good luck charm for your recovery,” she told him, and lightly kissed him on the cheek.

Adi promptly sprung to his feet. “I’ll fetch them right away!” he announced and walked out of the room.

At this, Mary had no idea whether to blush, smile wryly, or be fed up with

him.

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“I believe House Albert decided to leave the incident to the national guard, but personally speaking, I’d like to find that man and settle the matter myself.”

The one voicing such dangerous thoughts was none other than Patrick. As for the rest who happened to be present, each responded differently to his words. Some shared his sentiments and were equally as outraged, some calmly agreed with a nod, and the last one trembled slightly at the iciness of his assertion.

The two who’d reacted with anger were Alicia and Parfette. They were openly venting their indignation, with steam rising above their heads while they grumbled things like, “How could someone do that to Lady Mary?!” and, “To think that Adi got injured!”

Carina and Margaret were in the camp who’d remained cool and composed. The two girls kept sipping their tea in a refined manner, smiling at each other beautifully while saying things like, “Capturing escapees is a speciality of mine,” and, “Let us thoroughly eradicate him.”

Caught in between these temperature differences was the shivering Gainas. He could neither get angry nor smile icily, much less raise his voice against Patrick’s measured dialogue. Yet, surmising he should take some form of action (or perhaps worried he might catch a cold due to the differences in temperature), he raised one hand and weakly called out, “Um... D-Do we know the culprit’s motives yet...?”

“Yeah, I have a bit of an idea about that,” Patrick answered in his usual manner, his dangerous proclamation from before all but forgotten—a fact which calmed Gainas down slightly.

Alicia and Parfette let out even more furious steam upon hearing the term “culprit,” but Gainas pretended not to see. And while Carina and Margaret turned to smile coolly at Patrick as the man spoke, Gainas was too afraid to even glance in their direction.

In contrast to him, Patrick was perfectly collected. After taking a moment to sort out his thoughts, he began his explanation with, “There’s a certain rumor

spreading within high society...”

“House Albert will most likely let their daughter be the family successor.”

Such tales were still a very recent development. After all, not long ago, some would claim that Mary didn’t seem like she belonged in House Albert in the first place. However, her reputation had taken a turn for the better lately, and even Mary held herself in high regard.

Mary Albert was the person who had troubled herself over Princess Alicia before the girl had even known of her origin, taught her how to behave like a lady, and supported her in her romantic pursuit of the first son of House Dyce. Her actions had led to her family making great advances. (Or such was the public view of events. Nobody would’ve ever suspected that Mary had actually been aiming to quarrel with Princess Alicia and fall into ruin.)

As a result, House Albert had earned the royal family’s trust and stood equal in power to them, making them the most prestigious of all noble houses. As if that weren’t enough, the Alberts had developed a deep friendship with House Dyce, the family next in power to them. The apex of high society was being upheld by very powerful bonds indeed.

No matter how strange the other aristocrats might’ve found Mary, they couldn’t ignore the extent of her contributions. Consequently, they’d begun spreading rumors that she would be her family’s heir.

“Mary definitely has the skills for it,” Patrick concluded. “Even I used to believe that once she and Adi got together, they should be the successors.”

“Did Lady Mary herself also think as much?”

“No, she flatly rejected the idea and made it clear that she had no such intentions. I guess I was overthinking it,” Patrick concluded.

Alicia giggled upon recalling that particular conversation. But just as quickly, her expression morphed back to seriousness, as she couldn’t understand why such a rumor would put Mary in danger. “Lord Patrick, what has that rumor got to do with anything? I mean, someone tried to hurt Lady Mary! How could they?!”

“Calm down, Alicia.”

“It’s unpardonable...!” she declared spitefully.

Patrick started petting her head to calm her down and resumed his explanation.

Currently, the idea of Mary becoming heir was still nothing more than a rumor, denied by both Mary herself and, critically, her father.

According to the head of House Albert, the reason the family’s successor was still undecided was because he believed in his children and wanted to allow them to live freely. He and his wife had always cared for their children greatly, and Mary managed to contribute to the family by following her own judgment, which must’ve been the basis of this belief.

This rationale demonstrated the extent of the Alberts’ financial prowess and placidity. The fact that the Albert couple could smile warmly and place their trust in their children’s futures was proof of both their majesty and their broad-mindedness.

Back when the head of House Albert had first told him this, Patrick’s eyes gleamed at the sheer caliber of the man. Adi, who happened to be present, joyfully exclaimed, “As expected of His Grace!” Meanwhile Mary had glared at the two young men with a cloudy thousand-yard stare.

As such, the seat of House Albert’s successor was still empty for now, which had allowed the theory of Mary becoming the heir to be born. The idea of a female successor wouldn’t have crossed anyone’s mind had the matter pertained to any other noble family, but since it concerned the Alberts, and especially *that* Mary, it was a different story.

Moreover, lately Adi and Mary had been making some kind of moves, but nobody really knew what for, and Mary wouldn’t share any details no matter who asked her about it.

Patrick would inquire, “What are you plotting this time?”

Alicia would cling to Mary and exclaim, “What is it? Is it something fun?! Please let me join too!”

Parfette would tearfully appeal, “If you please, wouldn’t you mind sharing with me...?!”

And still, Mary didn't reveal a thing. Instead, she'd respond with, "I can't tell you for now," while clearly enjoying herself. She'd then laugh and add, "I bet you'd be so surprised if I told you!"

Adi also kept his lips sealed shut, and no matter how hard the others tried, he always skillfully evaded their questions.

All of this only raised suspicion, and led to the rise of more rumors.

"Could it really be...?" Patrick mused. He'd already changed his mind on the matter once, but now he was close to reverting to his previous line of thinking upon seeing the way Mary and Adi were acting.

This *was* Mary, after all. Patrick could practically hear her saying something like, *"I changed my mind! Adi and I are going to take over House Albert together!"*

He could even picture Adi murmuring, *"Goodness, milady..."* while secretly operating behind the scenes to assist her.

With such rumors abounding, there were plenty of nobles who felt they'd be in hot water if Mary really did succeed House Albert. Those were the same people who used to slander her behind her back, saying she didn't fit into House Albert, or calling her an eccentric. Such numbers also included those who felt affronted by the idea of a servant like Adi attaining such a position.

"My theory is that these people have begun making moves against Mary to stop her from taking over House Albert," Patrick announced. "Alicia, stop drowning your sorrows in tea."

"I see. That's definitely a possibility," Gainas remarked. "Parfette, if you puff out your cheeks any more than that, you'll hurt yourself."

"Still, which house would try to meddle with things like this? If we start putting our oars into this, that'll put us on *their* radar too. Alicia, drowning your sorrows in cake isn't any better."

"Indeed, it'll be difficult for us to take action. If we knew someone whom the rest of high society wasn't familiar with, or someone who could quietly move through aristocratic social circles without having any connections with them... Why are you shaking so much, Parfette? Are you in pain?"

The two men continued the discussion, until a small knock resounded on the door. (As a side note, during all this, Carina and Margaret continued smiling at each other and saying terrifying things like, “I’m *particularly* good at tying up captives,” and, “I know *just* the way to bring down prey in one fell swoop.” How icy, indeed!)

All the conversation died down. Alicia, who’d been devouring her cake greedily, froze still. Parfette, whose cheeks were puffed up mightily, released all the air stored up in her mouth.

Everyone turned to look, and then collectively gasped. For there by the door stood a girl with gently swaying hair, the very same one who had stirred up such turmoil back in Elysiana College—Lilianne.

“Why...?” someone whispered at the sight of her. The air was so oppressively silent that the quiet question seemed to reverberate around the room.

In response, Lilianne’s pupils trembled remorsefully, and she bowed before them deeply. “My sincerest apologies for causing you all such trouble back then. I know I have no right to be showing my face here now,” she proclaimed in a shaky voice, continuing to bow.

There was no trace left of her bygone self who used to be waited upon by the men. Quite the opposite—she seemed downright fearful. Considering her past actions and the fact that she’d ended up banished to the northern lands, it must’ve been difficult for her to face all the people gathered here. Even entering this room must’ve taken a feat of courage from her.

With slender, trembling hands, Lilianne gripped the hem of her skirt tightly. “Lady Mary saved me, and I owe her a great debt. If there’s any way I could help at all, please let me know...” she proclaimed shakily.

The first to respond to her was Carina. Gazing intently at Lilianne’s lonesome countenance, Carina stood up and slowly walked over to her. As the distance between them closed, Lilianne’s expression thickened with fear, but she made no attempts to get away nonetheless. Once Carina was right in front of her, Lilianne only deepened her bow.

“It’s been a while, Lilianne. Why are you here, I wonder?”

“L-Lady Mary summoned me,” she answered.

“I see.” There was a bite to Carina’s words, but she didn’t press this particular issue further. She believed Lilianne should spend the rest of her life under surveillance in the north, but if it was Mary herself who had the girl summoned, then Carina wouldn’t protest it. Still, her eyes blazed with hostility as she stared at Lilianne, so sharply that nobody dared to interject. “You say you owe her a debt, but I wonder if you’re just looking for a way to make your comeback.”

“No, no... I’ll go home right away once the situation is over. But since Lady Mary is in trouble...” Lilianne appealed falteringly. She looked, in a word, pitiful. Carina’s gaze must’ve felt frightful to her. No, in fact, the gazes of everyone gathered in this room must have intimidated her. She still kept her head down, hunching over so low it was painful to look at.

However, Carina seemed in no mood to forgive nor trust her. After staring her down for a while longer, Carina turned on her heel to return to her seat without giving the girl permission to speak up or straighten her back. Once she was in her chair again, Carina simply returned to sipping her tea. She was acting as though nothing had happened, implying that she had no further interest in Lilianne.

Perhaps surmising as much, Lilianne slowly lifted her head. Clenching her quivering hands once more, she surveyed every person in the room. She had already looked pale from the moment she’d appeared, but having squared off against Carina, she seemed on the verge of collapsing at any second.

“I know that my past actions were shallow and foolish. That’s exactly why I want to return the debt I owe to Lady Mary, for giving me a second chance.”

“Lilianne...” Parfette called out quietly at the other girl’s unsteady appeal. Her tone of voice was already tinged with a note of forgiveness, and she even seemed to feel bad that Lilianne was making such pained apologies. Parfette had always been a kind person, and especially now that she and Gainas were happily together, seeing Lilianne so full of fear and remorse must’ve stirred her emotions.

Though Carina and Margaret had been glaring at Lilianne relentlessly, Parfette’s sweet, kind remark made their shoulders relax. In fact, they even

exchanged a glance and smiled bitterly at each other, calming down a little. They were still angry and cautious of Lilianne, but it seemed they found Parfette's generosity touching.

As the beautiful girls' expressions softened, the strained air in the room melted away in an instant.

"To think that your feelings for Lady Mary are this strong, Lilianne..." said Parfette.

"Please believe me when I tell you I'll do anything to help her. I'm saying that as someone who was saved by her... And as someone who loves poultry!"

"Lilianne... Wait, *poultry*?!" Parfette exclaimed in shock, trembling all over.

Patrick glanced at her, seemed to think about something for a moment, and then said, "I have a favor to ask of you," while turning his attention back to Lilianne.

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"Oh my," Mary murmured at the sight of several familiar faces walking down the hallway towards her. First she spotted Patrick, then Alicia and Parfette... Indeed, all of Adi's visitors were heading her way, even though they'd seen each other and spoken only a few hours ago.

Mary wondered where they'd been as she peeled off Alicia, who'd come running at her full speed and hugged her waist tightly. She returned Alicia back to Patrick and then pushed Parfette, who was tearfully crying out her name, into Gainas's arms. Finally, she looked over each person present and once again muttered, "Oh my."

In the back of the group stood Lilianne. Mary had been certain the other girl had gone home, but apparently she was still in the mansion. What's more, she'd joined Patrick and the rest of Mary's friends at some point. When their eyes met, Lilianne bowed her head deeply.

Next, Mary turned to Carina and Margaret. Upon catching Mary's meaningful gaze, the other two girls smiled dryly and shrugged their shoulders. Based on their mannerisms and expressions, it was clear they hadn't forgiven Lilianne, but their anger had subsided enough that they allowed her to accompany the

group.

Mary thought their attitude was plenty good enough, and smiled slightly as well. Then, her smile twisted into a mischievous smirk as she turned to regard Gainas. “I see Lilianne is here. I wonder if a certain *someone* is doing okay? Whatever shall we do if he’s yet again lured in by her charms?” She spoke with the corners of her lips raised up in satisfaction, purposefully avoiding mentioning the name of the person she was talking about.

Of course, Gainas looked flustered by her words. He knew she was implicitly referring to him, and quickly shook his head. “Lady Mary, I only have eyes for Parfette now. I’ve decided I will stay with her for the rest of my life, and will never behave in that way again!”

“Mm-hmm. But if you *do*...” said Mary, her smirk never ceasing as she pointedly glanced at Carina.

It seemed like the girl hadn’t expected the focus to turn to her during this conversation, as her eyes widened a little. “Yes?” she prompted, looking back at Mary.

“If Gainas makes another mess, I propose we leave him in your custody for two nights and three days.”

“What are you talking about, Lady Mary?” Carina asked.

“Milady, I think you’re going too far,” Adi commented.

“Lord Adi, I thought you were supposed to back Lady Mary up?” Margaret chimed in.

“L-Lady Mary... I know I’ve done bad things in the past, but please do not say such horrifying things, I beg of you...” Gainas said.

Carina glanced at him. “What horrifying things are you talking about, Lord Gainas? Don’t just turn the other way! Please look me in the eye and explain yourself.”

“Waaah! H-How scaaaryyy!” Parfette trembled, as if asking them to finish this conversation.

“Parfette!” Carina exclaimed in response, demanding not to be poked fun at

in such a way.

Seeing the girl acting out with such uncharacteristic desperation, Mary couldn't hold it in anymore and burst out laughing. Their idle talk continued like this for a while, until Mary surveyed everyone present and inquired, "By the way, where have you all been until now?"

Earlier, they had come to pay Adi a visit, but then announced they had something to talk about and walked off. Mary had been convinced they'd gone someplace else, but it seemed they'd been in Albert Manor all along, and she had no idea what they'd done during that time.

When she asked as much, Patrick was the fastest to respond to her. "We discussed a few things. You'll see later," he told her noncommittally.

He thought it best for Mary not to know that they'd discussed apprehending the culprit themselves, or the rumor about her succeeding House Albert. Everyone else picked up on this and assured her they'd just chatted for a bit, and Mary accepted their explanations without much suspicion.

"By the way," Patrick added, now looking between Mary and Lilianne. "I heard this girl lives in the north now. Why did you summon her all the way here?" he asked inquisitively.

Mary laughed elegantly, and this time it was her turn to say, "You'll see later."

Patrick lifted an eyebrow, realizing Mary was evading the question on purpose. But since he didn't want to make any excessive allusions to the group's own secret conversation, he simply smiled in response.

A beautiful pair smiling softly at each other—to an outsider, how gorgeous this scene would be! If an uninvolved outsider were here, they'd surely have been enchanted and drawn in a passionate breath, completely unaware of the fact that the two were deceiving each other.

While this was going on, Alicia approached Adi and looked up at him. Parfette followed suit, timidly gazing up at him as well.

"Are you okay, Adi?" asked Alicia.

"I'm fine. My eye doesn't really hurt, and it's not even swollen."

“But it must be terribly inconvenient,” Parfette argued. “Life must be so difficult for you with just one eye. Merely thinking about it makes me—!”

“I’m really okay! Please don’t cry for my sake!” Adi exclaimed, trying to calm down the quivering Parfette.

“Oh, I know!” Alicia said suddenly, then searched through her skirt pocket. “I’ll give you a candy as a get-well-soon present!”

“All right, thank you.”

“M-Me too... I’ll give you some chocolate! I hope you don’t hate it...”

“Thank you very much. By the way, I know you’re the princess of a nation and the daughter of a noble house, but I implore you to refrain from keeping snacks in your pockets. That’s what we servants are for!” Adi declared, then rummaged through the pocket of his jacket.

After a moment, he pulled out some sweets. The lavish candies were covered in pretty wrapping, and just by their looks, one could surmise they were delicious. The two girls’ eyes lit up at once, and Adi chuckled in amusement as he handed them the sweets.

And so, on one side was a pair elegantly trying to sound each other out, and on the other was a pair loudly enjoying some snacks. Everyone else shrugged their shoulders at these contrasting atmospheres, chiming in at times and simply watching at others.

Hours passed like this, and gradually the group diminished one person at a time. Lilianne bowed deeply and said she had something to take care of, then left. Carina and Margaret both decided to depart before it grew dark outside. Parfette trembled all over from preemptive loneliness as she cried out to Mary that she’d visit again soon, and Gainas rubbed her back soothingly while urging her towards their carriage.

Finally, rather than giving him any get-well-soon gifts, Patrick patted Adi on the shoulder and then left as well. Mary let out a breath as she watched him walk away.

How boisterous all of that had been, indeed. Everyone had talked busily among themselves, sometimes joining in and sometimes leaving... That such

hustle and bustle would occur within the mansion of the nation's most influential aristocratic family was almost unthinkable.

Not to mention, standing around and chatting was far from an acceptable way to have a conversation among nobility. People like them ought to have sat down in an appropriate place and chatted while gracefully sipping tea.

But that was exactly what made having friends so very special.

Mary smiled to herself when she realized that just like with romantic love, she'd been a late bloomer when it came to friendship too. Yes, their gathering had been boisterous—but what a wonderful time she'd had! Just remembering it made her heart beat a little faster.

When she finally snapped back to herself and turned to look to her side, she saw Adi, gazing at her with a gentle expression. It was as if he could see right through her, and Mary turned away with a huff out of embarrassment.

But to him it was just another factor that made her so lovable. His rust-colored eyes softened into a smile, and he started rubbing her shoulders. The liveliness from before had vanished, and instead the air around them was that of a husband and wife.

"I'm feeling thirsty after all that talking," Mary said. "Why don't we have some tea in the garden until dinnertime?"

"Great idea, milady. I'll make the arrangements," he answered.

"Lady Mary, I'll pour your tea for you!"

"Adi," Mary began, "don't you think I've become quite proficient at serving tea? I know I spill a little bit sometimes, but not so much as to make the whole saucer wet, unlike before."

"That's true," Adi said. "But even if you spill it all over the saucer or any such thing, the tea you pour for me is the tastiest in the worl— Hmm?"

"I think I've become pretty good too! I want to pour some for you as well, Adi!"

"Huh?" Mary and Adi murmured in unison, exchanging a look. Someone was joining in on their conversation...

Upon realizing as much, both of them turned to look in the direction of the voice. Standing there was, of course, Alicia.

“Let’s get going!” she said, starting to lead the way to the garden as if this were all par for the course. When she realized the other two were staring at her, she smiled her sunlike smile, so dazzling that one could almost hear the sparkles accompanying it.

Adi instantly covered his ears, while Mary took in a deep breath and...

“Why are you still here like it’s no big deal?! Read the room and *go home*!!!”

...shrieked at Alicia as always.

Following a few hours of angry yelling, Patrick returned to the mansion. “Sorry, forgot to collect her,” he said, taking Alicia back home with him.

Needless to say, such scenes had become a frequent occurrence within Albert Manor.

***

A few days later, Mary was sitting in a chair in Adi's room reading a letter. "Ahh..." she murmured to herself.

Adi, who was standing next to her, inquired what was wrong. As a side note, she was sitting with her back facing him. But it wasn't because they were fighting—quite the opposite. He was doting on her by combing her hair.

Mary did think it was a shame that she couldn't see him, but the way he gently scooped up her hair and lovingly caressed it was immeasurably pleasant. The sound of his voice from behind her tickled her ears, and on occasion his hand softly brushed against her cheek.

Alas, Adi had just brought up the drill era, so Mary couldn't actually immerse herself in this sweet atmosphere in full.

"To think that I can comb through your hair and braid it... I wouldn't have dreamed of this back in your drill-hair era!"

"Indeed. Those curls were so firm that even I myself feared them."

"If you pulled on those drills, they'd pop back into place like a spring. I used to entertain myself like that sometimes."

"I know."

At the sound of her flat response, Adi's hands froze. "Huh?"

"I know that you liked to amuse yourself by testing the elasticity of my hair."

"Y-You don't mean..."

"I also know about the experiments you did, like trying to push a pen through my drills to see if it would pass," Mary went on.

"Wh-Why do you know all this...?"

"They may have been locks of steel that curled up against my will, but they were still connected to me. They weren't some separate part."

Adi paused. "But at this stage, the statute of limitations has run out, yes?" he insisted.

Mary smiled amicably...

“What are you *talking* about?! Of *course* not!!!”

...and shrieked at him.

“It has! Let bygones from the drill era be bygones!”

“As if I would! And what’s ‘drill era’ even supposed to mean?! I’m going to slap you in the face with a pink slip today!” Mary screeched furiously. Needless to say, the whole topic of dismissal and all that it entailed had been a never-ending exchange between them since the olden days.

Hence, both of them inhaled a long breath, and everything resolved with Mary muttering, “Goodness.” Then, she glanced back down at the letter in her hand while saying, “So anyway...”

Adi, who was still behind her, peered at the letter over her shoulder. He took the opportunity to place a light kiss on her cheek, which was his way of bargaining with her. Mary groaned at this sugariness, but then kissed his cheek in return as acknowledgment.

With that, the statute of limitations had officially expired. (*But only for* this *specific matter!* Mary appealed inwardly.)

“So, what is this letter?” Adi inquired.

“It’s about the distribution channel. The landowners finally responded, consenting to a meeting to discuss everything. Spelling out all of my passions for the restaurant on ten pieces of paper was worth it after all!” Mary said, squeezing the letter in her hands, her eyes sparkling as if to say, *“I got my feelings across to them!”*

Ten pages worth of her feelings about the wild game restaurant, the meticulously planned opening, and her vision for the future... Mary was certain that the landowners had read her letter and it had struck a chord with them, hence why they’d decided they wanted to meet with her after all.

But... she let out a sigh.

“Milady?”

“They mentioned that a merchant in the past wanted to use the same road as

well, so the feudal lord had it rebuilt."

"And what about it?"

"Well, apparently in the middle of it all, the merchant decided they'd found an even better road and abandoned the construction work halfway through," Mary explained. "So all that's left is an incomplete, unusable road..."

"I see. So that's why they started to hate the nobility," Adi conceded. "Still... I'm sure it'll be all right if it's you, my lady."

At his proclamation, Mary glared at him and jokingly said, "What, because I'm unladylike?" But though she was raising an objection, inwardly she felt a sense of relief wash over her just from hearing Adi reassure her. "You'll come with me to the meeting, won't you?" she asked him, though the answer was obvious.

"Don't tell me you planned on leaving me behind," Adi said in response with purposeful exaggeration. Mary's chest once again stirred in relief at this tit for tat.

Everything will be fine if Adi's with me. I'm sure we can persuade them... Ah, what a reliable husband I have! she thought, and affection filled her heart alongside the relief. "We should bring them a gift on the day of," she suggested.

"Like a wild game rice bowl?"

"Sweets would be a much safer choice, obviously," Mary huffed, pretending to sulk.

Adi chuckled. In the next moment, he scooped up her silver-thread hair and then embraced her from behind. He held her so tightly that she could feel the warmth of his body, making her cheeks redden. In an instant, all thoughts about the letter vanished from her mind.

The only thing she could think about now was Adi's presence behind her, as well as the pair of arms around her. It felt so comfortable that a sense of drowsiness filled her from head to toe, and yet her heart was pounding.

I want him to hug me from the front, but at the same time, I want him to keep holding me from behind like this... Ah, how blissfully self-indulgent!

While Mary was absorbed in her thoughts, Adi kissed the back of her neck. At

that delicate sensation, she turned around slightly. “No, Adi. No marks.”

“You can just hide them with your hair.”

“Goodness...” Mary murmured. Despite her words, she was smiling as she leaned her body back against his.

Pleased with her response, Adi wrapped his arms even tighter around her. But then suddenly, one of his arms reached towards Mary’s chest, which was covered by her dress. He unwrapped the ribbon around her throat, and his fingers started unbuttoning her blouse. “Oh my,” said Mary with a soft smile. Except then...

“Have some restraint!!!”

...she whipped around to face Adi and decked him with a right-hand hook.

This was all part of their familiar banter. But following Mary’s mighty shout was not the usual sound of Adi groaning, but rather the sound of Mary inhaling sharply.

She had aimed her punch at his flank...yet Adi had caught her fist in his hand. He’d managed to stop the blow from hitting its mark. The hand that had been trying to unbutton her blouse moments ago was now tightly holding on to her fist.

“Th-This can’t be...!”

“How naive, milady. Did you really think I’d let you beat me like this foreve—” Adi’s words swiftly changed into a strained groan as he crumpled down, holding his side.

Mary had landed a hit with the fist opposite the one he’d been holding. Indeed, her *left* fist had managed to sink into his flank.

“M-Milady... A southpaw?! How could this be...?” Adi lamented.

“Humph!” Mary grumbled accusingly, her cheeks flushed. She buttoned her blouse back up and fixed her ribbon, then wrapped a scarf around her neck. While Adi was still collapsed on the floor on his knees, she approached him and seated herself upon his back. “Look, Adi. The letter says we have to be careful on the way there since the road isn’t paved.”

“I will let the coachman know...”

“Since they dislike nobles, I shouldn’t put on anything too extravagant. Make the arrangements for my outfit, won’t you?”

“Understood.”

Having finished reading the letter, Mary held it out in front of Adi’s face. Despite the fact that she was using his back as a seat, he didn’t complain about it much and took the letter from her.

One could only wonder what any outsiders might think if they were to see Mary and Adi right now. And if their friends saw the pair like this, they’d probably do no more than sigh quietly. In fact, they might barely even spare the two of them a glance.

“I’m sure they’ll agree if they see we’re sincere about it,” Mary continued.

“I suppose...” The unsteady voice resounded not quite from behind Mary, but from somewhere beneath her—close to her waist, to be precise.

In response, Mary decisively said, “Yes, indeed.”

She was certain Adi was sporting quite the exasperated expression at the moment. She couldn’t see his face from this angle, but she could easily picture him on the verge of saying, *“Good grief, milady.”*

“I’m sure they’ll understand,” she went on. “I mean, in this wide world, there’s even a compassionate young lady who tolerates her servant’s insolent attitude.”

“That’s true. There’s also a bighearted servant who tolerates his mistress’s endlessly eccentric and erratic behaviors.”

The two of them smiled in satisfaction at this jestful exchange. Then, Mary hopped off of Adi’s back and turned around to face him. He was still stooped over reading the letter in his hands, with his back facing towards her.

This is revenge for before, Mary murmured inwardly as she drew her lips closer to the nape of Adi’s neck. She deliberately made a small sound as she did so, and Adi quickly looked over his shoulder with a flicker of shock.

“M-Milady?!”

“All right, Adi! Time to get ready for the talks!” she declared, clapping her hands together.

Adi stood back up, pressing his hand to his neck following Mary’s surprise attack. His cheeks were dyed red, and in fact, even his ears were a shade darker than his rusty hair. For a few seconds, he mumbled some things under his breath, but eventually consented with, “Very well, then.”

Mary was supremely satisfied to see how he’d been unable to conceal the way her actions had slightly shaken him, and she smirked. She could only imagine how mischievous her expression must’ve looked right now as she handed Adi a scarf. Of course, it was for the purpose of hiding the mark on the back of his neck.

“So, what kind of gift do you think we should bring them?” she prompted.

“They might not be too happy if we give them something exorbitant, so perhaps we should look for something appropriate in the town center.”

“We’ll make it work. And we’ll all reach an understanding—I’m certain of it!” Mary proclaimed, her eyes shining with enthusiasm.

While wrapping the scarf around his neck, Adi responded with a nod.

***

In one of the rooms of Albert Manor, someone uttered a dangerous proclamation:

“I don’t care about their circumstances. There’s nothing left to discuss. We’re going all the way.”

Of course, the speaker was Patrick.

Alicia and Parfette both agreed vehemently, while Carina and Margaret exchanged an elegant smile. Caught between these temperature differences, Gainas broke into a cold sweat as a chill ran down his spine. The scene was very similar to that of a few days ago.

The only things that had changed were the fact that Patrick held some documents in his hands, and that Parfette and Gainas were sitting a little closer to each other this time. The documents Patrick was holding concerned the

culprit behind the incident with Mary, and Alicia growled as she glared at them. As for Parfette and Gainas, the latter had probably moved their chairs closer together in advance, on account of the chilly air during their previous meeting.

“Lord Patrick!” Parfette called out as if trying to urge him on. “Who was that man who attacked Lady Mary and injured Lord Adi?”

“Don’t be so impatient, Lady Parfette. And...please don’t cry,” he added to console her, seeing the way she started shaking as angry tears sprang to her eyes. He then cleared his throat and continued. “I believe I’ve narrowed down which house might be responsible, and I’ve had Miss Lilianne infiltrate it.”

“Really? Lilianne?”

“Her deeds were well-known, but there aren’t actually that many people who recognize her face,” Patrick clarified. “And we’re the only ones who know she’s back from the northern lands for now. It’s easy for someone in her position to move around unnoticed, and she’s been doing well so far.”

“I... I see...” muttered Parfette.

“Thanks to her, the culprit’s most likely been found. We just need to gather the evidence,” Patrick said, and then he revealed the name of the suspected family.

House Lautrec—sure enough, they used to slander Mary behind her back, and they harbored an intensely disdainful attitude towards Adi. Even worse, back when Patrick and Mary’s engagement had been canceled, House Lautrec had sent a marriage proposal to her, as they wanted to access her authority. However, House Albert had bluntly rejected them.

Their motives for the attack included both their own past actions, as well as resentment over the rejected marriage proposal. They must’ve been determined not to let Mary take over House Albert no matter what.

A map was spread open on the table, and Patrick circled the territory controlled by House Lautrec with a pen as he spoke. Everyone peered at the map as they listened to him, and they all frowned when they realized the place he’d highlighted had a bad reputation.

Apparently, a wealthy merchant had once incited the start of some

development there, but had quickly changed course and decided to settle for another place.

The feudal lords—in other words, House Lautrec—were lacking in money and authority both, and when they caught wind of any get-rich-quick scheme, they would jump at it without consulting the opinions of others. Plus, they had a flighty temperament. Someone like Patrick could only raise his eyebrows at them.

The same must've been true for everyone else present in the room, for they all showed their dismay in their own way while looking over the map and the documents.

"How cruel... They have no consideration for the people living in their lands," Alicia said dejectedly. Her eyebrows slanted down while a pained look spread across her face as she learned of the family's insolence in blindly chasing after money and acting however they pleased. It must've been even harder for her, as a person who'd once lived the life of a commoner, to hear about nobles abusing their power like this.

Seeing her so dispirited and hearing her sorrowful tone of voice, Patrick gently wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

Parfette and Gainas were frowning at the documents as well, and they both vowed not to let things like this happen in their lands.

As for Carina and Margaret, they only glanced over the documents once, and then laughed in unison: "Oho ho ho!" Following this, they both bluntly asserted, "How disgusting."

"Most likely, they wanted to intimidate Mary into withdrawing her candidacy for House Albert's heir. And since *this* is what that house is like, I'm sure the evidence will turn up shortly... No, we *will* get that evidence," Patrick said, his tone both cold and matter-of-fact.

He then looked over the map. He placed his thumb where House Dyce's domain was and stretched his index finger to press down on House Lautrec's territories. "Hmm... Not bad," he said with a smirk. Beautiful though he was, the chilly expression upon his face was nothing short of terrifying.

Gainas shrieked slightly, having conjectured what Patrick was thinking, and in a hurry, he moved his chair closer to Parfette's. Of course Parfette was angry as well, but in comparison to Patrick's iciness, the way she puffed out her cheeks was adorable.

Patrick was unaware of Gainas's anxiety, still staring at the map. However, suddenly a slender, graceful finger entered his field of vision, and he glanced up.

It was Margaret. Just as Patrick had done earlier, she seemed to be surveying the territory she owned against the lands of their target. When her eyes met Patrick's, she smiled at him and uttered, "Oh my." Of course, her index finger was also placed on House Lautrec's domain, whereas her thumb rested on the territories of House Brownie. Despite her elegant smile, she showed no sign of retracting her fingers.

"Ha ha, what's the matter, Lady Margaret?" he asked her.

"Nothing at all. I simply think it's a good plot of land."

"What a coincidence. That's exactly what I was thinking. It's a waste for it to be controlled by that sort of family."

They both smiled gracefully at each other while talking. The scene would've been simply picturesque for any third-party onlookers. However, all kinds of things (mostly ambition, if one had to specify) were swirling in a vortex behind the duo's backs, so that if anyone looked their way, they might've even hallucinated the image of fierce beasts looming over them with stony expressions.

At any rate, both of them still had their index fingers pressed against the territories of House Lautrec. But then suddenly, Patrick murmured something about his younger brother, and then continued in a louder tone of voice: "I heard that my youngest brother has met a fine woman recently."

"My, you don't say."

"I've caused both my brothers a world of trouble ever since House Dyce's heir had to be changed. But if my youngest brother marries into that lady's house, I'd like for him to have as much land as possible," Patrick explained.

“Ah, I see,” responded Margaret with deep emotion, before removing her finger from the map.

Indeed, she was implying that she would yield House Lautrec’s territories to Patrick. Surmising as much, he smiled wryly at her.

Once again, a heartwarming scene was playing out. An ambitious lady had decided to withdraw after feeling moved by the story of the young man’s thoughtfulness towards his younger brother. What an inspiring tale, indeed!

As for the fact that the “fine woman” Patrick’s brother had met was Margaret herself, or the fact that Patrick was fully prepared to snatch House Lautrec’s lands for himself—well, there was no person around who’d point such things out.

If Mary were here, she’d probably have exasperatedly said, *“What a farce.”* But alas, she was not present. Alicia and Parfette seemed touched by the conversation that had just taken place, and Carina merely shrugged, refusing to go along with it. Gainas was the only one still shivering.

Following this ostensibly beautiful yet in actuality hollow exchange, Patrick once again spoke up. “That reminds me—it seems like Mary really *is* planning to succeed House Albert.”

Alicia looked up at him. “Do you really think so?”

“Yeah. I’m sure that’s the reason she spoke with Miss Lilianne too.”

The northern lands where Lilianne lived were managed by House Albert’s relatives. Patrick was certain Mary had spoken with her because she’d be taking over that area as the head of the house. Though Lilianne was once Mary’s enemy, the girl no longer held such sentiments—and it was always good to have an acquaintance around in the lands you were controlling.

Mary was doing this and many other things behind closed doors. She had mentioned she would make some kind of announcement during the next party, and it must’ve been related to that.

“House Albert is hosting a party soon,” Patrick went on. “Publicly, they’re saying it’s to celebrate Duchess Albert’s birthday, but I’m sure they plan to make an official announcement on that day. We’ve got to wrap this matter up

by then," he declared, and everyone nodded in agreement.

Only Alicia was still fixedly looking at him, and she tilted her head curiously. "Lord Patrick..."

"What is it, Alicia?"

"Are you opposed to Mary becoming the heir of House Albert?" she asked him, and everyone looked startled at her question.

But Patrick was the most shocked of them all. His indigo eyes grew round, and then, having realized something, he uncharacteristically scratched his head. "No, it's not that. I'm sure she and Adi can make House Albert even more prosperous together, and they'd do a lot to help the country too. I'll happily cooperate with her succession."

"In that case, why do you seem so displeased?" Alicia prompted, her purple-rimmed pupils boring into him.

Everyone once again turned to look at Patrick. They all seemed to wonder, *"Did he really look displeased?"*

On the receiving end of all their gazes, Patrick swallowed his words and hid his face with his hand to conceal his expression. His cheeks were tinged with red, and his blue eyes wandered around in discomfort.

"I think it'd be good for Mary and Adi to take over House Albert. I have no reason to object, and I know to keep quiet about it until they reveal it themselves. It's just that..."

"Yes?"

"I think they could've at least shared that knowledge with *me*..." Patrick mumbled under his breath, turning his face aside to escape from the group's gazes.

He was sulking in discontent, and he seemed embarrassed to have everyone's eyes on him. This was so unlike him that everyone else looked shocked. To think that the handsome and always composed Patrick Dyce, accomplished in both academics and sports, beloved by all the ladies, could make such an expression...

Alicia was the only one who giggled at this, rubbing Patrick's arm to comfort him as she affectionately called his name.

***

Mary stopped in her tracks when she noticed a familiar lineup of people walking towards her down the hallway. It seemed the group had once again been discussing something inside of Albert Manor. Realizing as much, she jokingly said, "Adi, let's start charging each of their families for the venue and tea costs."

Right then, a passing maid called out to Mary and Adi, informing them about something regarding the wheels of their horse-drawn carriage before lowering her head and vacating. It was a completely ordinary message, but Patrick stared at the retreating maid dubiously.

"The wheels? Did something happen?" he asked Mary.

"We're heading out for a bit, but the road we'll be traversing isn't paved, so we had to exchange our carriage's wheels for more sturdy ones."

"An unpaved road, huh? That sounds like a troublesome place to go to." Patrick's words implied he wanted to know the reason for their trip.

Picking up on that fact, Mary smiled gracefully. "I suppose it might be," she responded, purposely evading the unspoken question.

Of course, Patrick could tell what she was doing. "You had something to talk about with Miss Lilianne too, so I guess you'll be getting very busy from now on."

"And I'm grateful for it, really. But you seem to be busy recently yourself, Patrick," Mary pointed out.

"Well, I still have enough time to spend with you."

"My, how wonderful to hear."

The pair exchanged unspeakably chilly smiles.

But after a moment, Patrick seemed to lose interest in the mutual searching for their true intentions as he instead turned to face Adi. (At that exact moment, Alicia sussed out that Mary had an opening and flew at her, whereas

Parfette settled for grabbing Mary's arm in a reserved manner. The scene was so familiar to everyone that nobody even bothered to try and stop it. And of course, nobody paid attention as Mary shrieked, "Stop hugging me! Stop crying!")

"Adi, how's your eye?" asked Patrick.

"It's almost fully healed, but there's still a mark. As House Albert's servant, I didn't think it was appropriate for me to let our visitors see my scar."

"Wearing that eye patch must be inconvenient, though."

"Indeed, it's a bit difficult for me to see things on my left."

Patrick smirked. "So your blind spot's on the left, huh?"

"Please don't say such frightening things," Adi chided.

Obviously his words had no effect on Patrick, who proceeded to do as he pleased and lightly waved his hand in front of Adi's eye patch to test things out. In fact, he even played around by pulling on it, as if amused by such an unusual item. Conduct of this nature was very unlike the usual Patrick Dyce. Needless to say, however, this was Patrick's take on paying a visit to an ill friend without regard for family names or any other such thing.

The more a person can play the part of a good noble son or daughter, the more likely they are to be a devil at heart... Adi thought. This incomprehensible and contrarian behavior was like night and day when compared to Alicia and Parfette, who were diligently stuffing Adi's pockets with sweets.

"Alicia, Lady Parfette. Please stop putting candies into my pockets," Adi said. "You too, Lady Carina and Lady Margaret."

"I heard that this is the expected etiquette at House Albert."

"There's no such custom..." Adi replied with an exasperated sigh, stopping Alicia and Parfette from stuffing any more sweets into his pockets. Still, it was one thing to see these two girls act in such a way, but for Carina and Margaret to do the same? He was shocked, to say the least.

However intelligent and skilled a young lady might be, she may also be somewhat out of touch as well... Not that Adi would point out which of these

young ladies was at the top of that list, of course.

He *definitely* wouldn't specify that he was thinking of a certain someone who was presently munching away on some of the sweets while saying, "A married couple ought to share with each other."

As if remembering something, that certain someone—named Mary—gasped and quickly turned to face Alicia. "I have a favor to ask of you," she told the other girl.

"Really?! You have a favor to ask of *me*?!"

"I do. I have to find a gift for someone, so I was wondering if you knew of any good shops in the town center."

"Lady Mary's asking me for a *favor*! You can ask me for anything at all!"

"Don't hug me."

"No can do," Alicia responded without missing a beat, and Mary grumpily frowned at her.

***

Mary had asked Alicia to buy something that would make a good gift at the town center. Alicia had promptly rejected her demand not to be hugged anymore, but then immediately agreed to her second request and hugged Mary as she did so.

("I *told* you to stop that!" Mary demanded.)

("No can do!" replied the other girl.)

(Naturally, such an exchange took place.)

Not long after, Carina and Margaret decided to take their leave, and Gainas pulled the reluctant Parfette towards their carriage as well. Parfette was initially sorrowful over their parting, lamenting that she also wanted to join the shopping trip, but when Gainas wrapped his arm around her shoulders and whispered something in her ear, she meekly went inside the carriage. Most likely, he'd invited her for dinner—and judging by how red the man had gotten, the sugar content there would be very high, indeed.

Thus, the four remaining people made their way towards the town center.

Firstly, they visited a sweets shop by Alicia's recommendation. (At the time, Adi had wondered out loud, "By the way, why does the princess of the nation know all about the town center's shops and their clerks, and take great joy in being able to taste test their new products?" However, Patrick silenced him by smacking him once from the left side.)

Next, they walked around a bit more and finally ended up eating croquettes in Mary's favorite delicatessen. (That had been Patrick's turn to wonder out loud, "By the way, why does the daughter of House Albert know all about such a little shop and its clerks, and buy snacks from it?" However, Adi silenced him by coughing loudly.)

Eventually, their day out shopping drew to a close with the setting of the sun, and they began to disband.

"Retrieve her properly this time!" Mary insisted, pushing Alicia towards Patrick.

Determined not to forget, Patrick placed his hand upon Alicia's shoulder. Though the girl had heretofore been boisterous, the moment he did so, she calmed down substantially, and even snuggled up closer to him. Mary couldn't even get herself to sigh at them.

"Lady Mary, let's see each other again tomorrow!" Alicia said.

"Don't just make those kinds of plans all by yourself!"

"Adi, please take care," Alicia continued.

"Listen when I'm talking to you!"

While Adi pacified the shrieking Mary, Patrick pulled Alicia along to go home. Nobody would've been able to guess that the members of high society were the ones behind such a clamor.

Eventually, Mary and Adi returned to Albert Manor and headed to Adi's room. There, Mary let out a long sigh.

That graceless peasant reeks of the boonies as always! Mary fumed while munching on some cake she'd brought back from the trip.

Her anger didn't last long, however. "My, this is delicious!" she exclaimed brightly. "I have no choice but to acknowledge that girl's ability to choose a good cake. I'd better make sure Parfette gets a taste of this next time too. I bet she'll cry on account of how tasty it is... Though, knowing her, she'll probably start crying before even taking her first bite of it."

Mary could already picture the scene: an overjoyed Alicia delighting in Mary's praise, and Parfette sitting next to her, trembling all over from the deliciousness of the cake.

While Mary was imagining such things, Adi chuckled as he brought over a tea set. With practiced movements, he poured the tea and handed Mary a cup. "Once the restaurant is open, I'm willing to bet Alicia and Lord Patrick are going to be the very first customers."

"Let's wring them dry of all their money!"

"Please stop," Adi scolded in exasperation, and Mary just stuck her tongue out at him. Then, she took a sip of the tea he'd given her and sighed in satisfaction.

Indeed, she was certain that Alicia and Patrick would become their first regular customers. It was easy to picture Alicia declaring something like, *"Let's have all three meals at this restaurant!"* and Patrick sweetly trying to persuade her to at least have a lighter breakfast.

The image was far from elegant, but considering the status of those two, the restaurant could earn no higher prestige than that.

Their next regulars would likely be Parfette and Gainas. The two of them would harmoniously pass the time together inside the restaurant, and though sometimes Parfette might be in the mood to tease Gainas, the overall atmosphere was likely to be serene all the same.

"The wild game rice bowls are going to turn very sweet, aren't they?" Mary said in jest. Adi smiled wryly at her words as they both nodded at each other.

And since the restaurant would be associated with Mary, then Carina and Margaret were also sure to become its regular patrons. In fact, Margaret might even end up showing an interest in helping run the business. Considering her

ambition and her ability to take the third son of House Dyce for herself, allowing her to manage a branch of the restaurant abroad might not be such a bad idea, Mary reasoned.

Adi's smile grew as he watched her lose herself in her thoughts. "Back then..." he spoke up. "When you first told me about your idea for a wild game restaurant, it was only you and me. We thought we'd be up in the northern lands, just the two of us."

"Yes, that's true..."

Mary's mind wandered back to those days. How nostalgic—they'd spoken about it right here, in Adi's room. She hadn't yet been aware of his feelings towards her, and all of her focus had single-mindedly gone to her efforts in becoming a villainess.

Mary was supposed to have bullied Alicia, based on her own past life memories, and then been cast out into the northern boonies. There, she'd open the migratory bird restaurant... Yes, that had been her initial plan.

Yet reality had taken the complete opposite turn. Each day she enjoyed lively get-togethers with her friends, and she couldn't wait to tell them all about her restaurant.

"Things might've strayed a bit from the original plan, but I'd say it's not *that* bad," Mary mused.

"There you go again, being stubborn."

She turned to glare at Adi. "What are you talking about?"

"No, nothing," he responded, nonchalantly glancing the other way.

But soon enough, he reached his hand over towards hers, squeezing it lightly around the teacup she was holding. He caressed her fingers gently as if to soothe her, causing her expression to soften.

"Let's make sure our restaurant is a great success," he said.

"Yes, let's," Mary agreed, smiling at him as she squeezed his hand in return.

***

A few days later, Mary was paying a visit to a certain family.

Their house wasn't *rustic* per se, but its size didn't even compare to House Albert's mansion. The building's construction and the furniture therein showed signs of age and wear, and though the family was trying to keep everything neat, they couldn't fully mask the hints of usage and inhabitation.

It was a perfectly ordinary house, the likes of which could have easily been found anywhere. But having someone like Mary Albert summoned to such a ragged place was simply disrespectful.

"My deepest apologies for having you visit a place such as this," said the head of the household, lowering his head. Needless to say, he was the man in charge of the land Mary wanted to use as a distribution channel.

He sported a meek expression and used a mild tone of voice. The fact that he was apologizing to Mary for having her summoned here implied he was a gentleman of good disposition—it was hard to believe that he was someone who hated the nobility.

Mary smiled softly at his words and said, "Not at all. It was my suggestion, after all."

She believed that regardless of rank differences, the person who had a favor to ask of the other should be the one to make the effort to pay a visit. She loathed the idea of being the sort of person who kicks their feet up at home and demands, *"I need to speak with you, so come visit* me*!"*

Following her response, Mary paused to take a sip of the soup they had offered her.

It wasn't necessarily of poor quality, but nor was it extravagant. Rather than a chef, the one who had prepared it was apparently the man's wife—and indeed, instead of a maid or a servant, it was the wife who had brought the soup over while saying, "I'm not sure if it'll be to your taste, but..."

A lunch like that would've been perfectly in line for an ordinary household, but for someone from a fine family—and all the more so for a daughter of a noble house—it was extremely impudent and downright offensive.

Alas, the one present was Mary Albert. "What a delicious soup! It'll go well

with croquettes," she proclaimed with delight. In fact, she even added, "Adi, make sure to get the recipe from the wife." Apparently, she planned to dine upon the soup at home.

The head of the house, who was sitting opposite her, smiled wryly at this, then cast his gaze down at the table. The soup had been made by his wife; it was luxurious in its own right for common folk like them. And next to it lay a certain other meal...

"I admit, I didn't expect the daughter of House Albert to bring with her store-bought croquettes."

"A certain fussy princess told me that eating a nice meal together makes the discussion go smoother. I thought this was the perfect choice—I urge you to try some," Mary explained with a smile, having her fill of the crunchy croquettes.

That said, she hadn't brought the croquettes as her gift for the family. For that, she had an assortment of cakes purchased at the town center, as well as some seasonal flowers. But she'd thought those things might not be enough, hence why she had also included the croquettes. Of course, that was also a safer choice, considering the head of the house hated nobility.

"I received so many letters from you, Lady Mary... My apologies for not responding properly," the man said.

"You had your reasons. I saw that road myself on the way here," Mary replied, her voice full of concern. The man once again smiled dryly and shrugged his shoulders.

There was no other way to put it—the state of the road in the land he was managing was abominable. It was so dilapidated that Mary wasn't even sure if calling it a "road" was the correct terminology. At a glance, it was obvious that the paving work had been abandoned halfway through.

During the journey, Mary had stopped briefly to take in the damage, and the sight had made her brows furrow reflexively. Thinking about the hardship the people of these lands had gone through had made her avert her eyes. (If she hadn't done so, she might've noticed another horse-drawn carriage following hers at an awkward distance. Alas, the road was so neglected that Mary was distracted by the pain in her heart.)

The half-baked paving spoiled the scenery, and as fewer and fewer people passed through, conditions became less and less safe. Apparently, some shady figures traversed the road at night too. The evenly spaced streetlights had also been abandoned halfway through installment, and were unlikely to be lit. As such, the area was said to be pitch-black at night.

There were plenty of people who wanted the road fixed, but such efforts would cost money. Alas, it would've been one thing for the nobility, but raising that kind of money was not possible for the middle class. And when they complained to their feudal lord, he ignored any appeals that necessitated money leaving his pockets.

Such was reality.

I see. It's no wonder they hate the nobility, Mary thought.

"On the surface, it sounds good that they're letting us manage this area, but in truth, they've just foisted some undesirable land onto us," the man went on to explain. "And they know we don't have the money to interfere with them."

"That's just terrible," Mary remarked.

"That's the kind of people they are... House Lautrec, that is," he asserted lowly, his voice full of resentment. His intense expression was understandable, however, given how the family had tyrannically abused their power over him and forced a patch of neglected land into his hands. Just speaking their name out loud seemed to disgust the man, and in the face of such unbridled hatred, Mary quietly repeated their name out loud.

House Lautrec... Have I heard of them somewhere before? she pondered. But no matter how much she tried, she couldn't recall any of their faces, which spoke for itself. It was possible she had never even conversed with them at all.

After all, House Albert was the most prestigious family in the nation. There was no need for them to trouble themselves with buttering up families that didn't interest them, let alone conversing with them. Mary herself would respond when spoken to first, but she didn't go out of her way to proactively mingle with other families. All the more so when it came to tyrannical houses—no matter how good of a front they tried to put up, Mary could tell there was something fishy about them and instinctively avoided them.

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to approve your proposal once they hear of it, Lady Mary,” the man continued. “I think you’re better off speaking to them instead of us. If you do, I imagine they will be quick to confiscate the land from me and hand it over to you.” There was a note of bitterness in the man’s voice, as if he was already picturing the event. The way he tried to jokingly shrug his shoulders, his tone of voice, and the brief flicker of change in his countenance—all of it oozed hatred.

Still, it would’ve been difficult for anyone to pull a pleasant expression when talking of a feudal lord who’d slighted them, especially one who only cared about his own profits.

Seeing the way he smiled forcefully, Mary also let out a light laugh. “I don’t wish to speak with such dim-witted people,” she asserted frankly.

The man’s eyes widened. “Dim-witted...?”

“Yes. I’ve no interest in talking to people who are completely blinded by their own greed. See, just speaking *of* them feels degrading,” she said coolly, perfectly looking the part of a noble lady. Her dignity was such that it was almost as if she were seated in a beautiful mansion, had just received first-class hospitality, and was now elegantly speaking of her own grace.

But in actuality, she was inside of a common household, and while the teacup in her hands was stylish, it was a far cry from luxury. The same could be said for the tea, its cost likely not even a tenth of that which she usually tasted.

Yet Mary was enjoying it with perfect refinement, while also eating a muffin that hadn’t been prepared by a famous patissier nor a specialist maid, but rather an ordinary person. To top it off, she smiled broadly and remarked once again that the muffin was delicious too.

She was surrounded on every side by items that were nowhere near first-class goods, and eating a layman’s cooking. Yet that didn’t diminish the sense of nobility she exuded in the slightest.

The man stared at her for a few moments, and his shoulders relaxed slightly. “I see... So that’s how you feel.”

“*You* live here, not House Lautrec. Hence, I’d like to get permission directly

from you," Mary told him.

"Very well... I don't mind. You may proceed with your plan."

"I understand it must be difficult for you to believe me based on the poor treatment you've received in the past, and the condition of the road in your lands. But even so, please put your trust in me!"

"M-Milady...!"

"I swear it on House Albert... No, in fact, I vow in my own name—I, Mary Albert, will get this road paved and achieve prosperity!"

"Er... Like I said, you may proceed..." the man murmured.

"Pardon us," Adi appealed. "Milady has temporarily entered another world. She should be back shortly, so please wait a moment."

"We're going to serve the restaurant's food at a party in our nation soon to see how the people like it," Mary went on. "Favorable reception among the nobility will lead to popularity. Then, we're going to open the restaurant in the town center... We're aiming to have a clientele from a variety of social classes."

"My lady, please calm down a bit."

"We also have a solid plan in place for opening an international branch in the future. Of course, we're after the best district in the neighboring country!" Mary announced, springing to her feet and tightening her fists with enthusiasm.

The man's eyes widened, while Adi sighed and waved a hand in front of Mary's face. "Your Ladyship, please return from Drilltopia."

"I've already defected from that country! Er, I mean... That's right, we're discussing the migratory bird restaurant. So, will you grant us permission?" Mary asked, looking at the man dazedly.

He'd been left dumbstruck after witnessing her fervor, but a moment later, he smiled wryly and nodded.

"O-Oh really? I came prepared to deliver a two-hour long speech about the restaurant, though..."

"Milady, at this stage, you're borderline harassing this man."

Mary hadn't expected for things to work out so smoothly. She stood there blinking several times at this anticlimactic conclusion.

Perhaps finding this humorous, the man chuckled as he watched her, sipping his tea. Now that he'd calmed down, there was no trace of loathing or hostility in his expression—in fact, he was smiling warmly at her. "So the rumors I heard about you were true," he said.

"Rumors?"

"Indeed. Pardon my discourtesy, but I've heard you're eccentric, unladylike, and drilly... They say you don't really fit the mold."

"Right, they say all kinds of things about me... Wait, *drilly*?" Mary asked, tilting her head at this word she'd never heard before.

Regardless (and drills aside), she had received the permission she'd been after, and there was nothing more she could ask for. With that on her mind, Mary sat back down and looked towards the man once more. (As she did so, she also discreetly stomped on Adi's foot under the table. *"You kept calling my hair 'drills' over and over, and now it's stuck! Ugh!"* Such was her appeal.)

Mary gracefully flipped her silver hair, and then elegantly smiled at the man. "I'm very glad to hear that," she told him sincerely.

The man, unable to withstand it any longer, burst into laughter and then called over his wife from the kitchen. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but if you had turned out to be some high-handed lady, we'd planned to present you with *these*," he said, pointing to a bunch of delicious-looking...*croquettes*.

A few hours later, Mary whispered, "Those croquettes were magnificent..."

She and Adi were now back in Albert Manor, and Mary looked over the documents she'd exchanged with the man as she took a deep breath.

Even Adi nodded his agreement at this. "And now we can announce the grand opening at the party."

"Yes. I wasn't sure how it'd go, but I'm really glad everything worked out," Mary said, still looking over the papers in her hands.

We have to get that road paved by the time of the party. And we'll have to up

the security, since they said some bad characters cross it regularly... Thinking it all over, Mary could tell things were about to get very busy.

However, the head of the family had said he would cooperate with her. Plus, she had even come away with the family's soup recipe, which must've meant they trusted her.

They truly did put their faith in the eccentric young Lady Albert. No, perhaps the reason they trusted her at all was *because* she was so eccentric. Whichever was the case, it was clear they didn't care about her family name—it was Mary as a person whom they believed in.

"How wonderful it is to discuss things and understand each other," Mary said with shimmering eyes, and Adi once again nodded his agreement.

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“We’ve got the evidence. There’s nothing to discuss.”

Making such dangerous proclamations was, once more, Patrick. Needless to say, the location and the rest of the people present were the same as always.

“House Lautrec will be in attendance at House Albert’s upcoming party. They’re bound to try and make a move then. That’s when we’ll capture them,” he said with a pleasant smile.

Everyone nodded at his words—some with eyes blazing, some coolly, and one while shivering.

Alicia’s fury was so great that each time Patrick even uttered the words “House Lautrec,” she furrowed her brows deeply and glared at the evidence documents as if they were the very people themselves. This outward anger was very out of character for her, who’d usually smile her sunny, sociable smile and mingle with everyone happily regardless of status.

“Poor Adi’s been struggling without the use of one eye. I saw him get caught in the door once because he misjudged the distance...” she said. “These people tried to harm Lady Mary, and put Adi through such a tough time! It’s inexcusable!”

“We all feel the same way, Alicia,” Patrick told her. “As for the incident with Adi and the door, I’ll ask you for all the particulars on how that went down later, so for now just calm down,” he said, nonchalantly aiming to get the dirt on Adi before turning to face everyone else.

Their expressions were lit with fighting spirit, and each of them was considering what they should do during the party. Some of them were mentioning disturbing things, such as how, in order to achieve best results when capturing and tying up the culprit, said target would need to be allowed to move freely and be monitored for a bit at first. However, all in all, everyone was thinking of Mary and Adi and planning to make moves for their sakes.

None of them were attempting to curry favor with House Albert, nor did they expect to get anything in return. They were doing this on behalf of their friends, plain and simple. *You really did manage to make some more friends, Mary...*

Patrick murmured inwardly.

If he were to say this to her, she'd probably have responded with, *"As if I want this boisterous lot around!"* Then, she'd probably look the other way and feign indifference. He could picture it so easily, as well as the image of Adi standing next to her and shrugging.

Right then, Alicia, who was sitting next to Patrick, addressed him. "You look happy today, Lord Patrick."

He turned to look at her with surprise. Before, she'd told him that he looked discontent over Mary hiding her plan to succeed House Albert from him, but this time Alicia was saying he looked happy.

Having such a thing pointed out to him, Patrick covered his mouth with his hand. He'd been trying to come across as cool and composed, but lately a certain someone was easily reading his emotions. Though he wanted to keep up appearances, his beloved spouse saw right through him.

"So you can see it on my face again, huh...?"

"Yes. You looked very, very happy."

"Right... Let's leave that aside and focus on what will happen during the party," Patrick said, forcing the subject back on track while clearing his throat.

Alicia giggled at the obvious way he was trying to smooth things over. "Okay," she agreed with an affectionate nod.

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Thus, the day of the party arrived.

Mary was clad in a bright red dress, Adi in an all-black suit, and the two of them were enjoying the celebration together. It was her mother's birthday, so while greeting the guests, Mary really brought the house down with her charade of friendliness this time.

Everyone could tell that she was full of elegance today. It was as if her usual eccentricity were nothing but a lie, and right now she was truly the daughter of House Albert. However, that was only a front—inside, Mary felt restless and agitated at the thought of the upcoming announcement.

“Listen up, Adi. Father will be giving a speech to everyone soon, and then he’ll lead us in by saying I have something to share. Then, we’ll finally break the news to everyone! What do you think? Perfect, right?”

“His Grace’s magnificence is indeed perfect! Just look at him, in that freshly tailored suit!”

“Are you listening to me?”

“The other day, His Grace praised me, saying this eye patch looks good on me. I think I’ll keep wearing it for a while yet.”

“Have you forgotten that your left side is your blind spot?” Mary threatened, tightening her fist.

“Please stop that,” Adi replied in a fluster, quickly apologizing to her. “Right, so you were talking about the restaurant, yes?” he said, purposefully changing the topic.

Mary glared at him, sensing he was poking fun at her with his typically flippant, insolent attitude.

“As I recall, at the same time you announce the migratory bird restaurant, we’re going to have an explosion go along with it, yes?” he said.

“Didn’t you tell me *not* to do that no matter what?”

“Ah, that’s right. So the orchestra will liven things up instead,” Adi asserted, and Mary grumbled with resentment. But this was supposed to be a place of celebration, and they had an important presentation coming up. Mary told herself not to screech at a time like this, and swallowed her anger.

At that moment, someone called to her from nearby. “Lady Mary.”

Looking over, Mary spotted a young man approaching and elegantly bowing before her. *Who’s that?* she wondered, but of course she wouldn’t openly ask such a thing. Instead, she offered the man a neutral, inoffensive greeting, gracefully lowering her head in a ladylike manner.

“I’d like to speak with you, if you don’t mind. May I have a moment of your time?” the man inquired.

“Oh... All right, then,” Mary replied, putting up a polite front while searching

through her memories. She didn't have a single recollection of this man, and no matter how far back she tried to think, she couldn't recognize him. But of course, she couldn't just say that out loud either.

Despite his pleasant appearance, his voice was low and gravelly. Mary was certain such a disparity would've left a strong impression in her mind had she met the man before, but nothing rang a bell.

"In that case, might I trouble you to show me the gardens? I'd like to speak with you somewhere private, just you and me," the man proposed.

"But..." Mary murmured. She then glanced up at Adi, wordlessly signaling to the stranger that she'd reject his invitation, as she wanted to stay with her husband.

In the world of high society, rejecting someone's invitation wasn't desirable, but it was equally as undesirable to forcefully invite someone who had a partner someplace alone. A person of high status would've picked up on the meaning of her gesture and either given up and tried at a later date, or else invited Adi along as well.

However, the man showed no signs of backing down. "I have something to discuss with you," he insisted doggedly.

"My, you seem quite ardent about it," Mary remarked. "It's *that* important, is it?"

"Indeed. It's related to your future," he responded with a friendly smile. His countenance was pleasing to the eye, and his charming eyes gave off a warm impression. The suit he was wearing seemed of top quality, and the way he was inviting her was quite graceful.

But Mary couldn't recall his name, and she wasn't even sure if she'd ever met him before. "Thank you for the invitation, but my father's about to give a speech. I'm his daughter, so I ought to be present for it," she said, once again trying to turn the man down. But in the next second, her breath hitched.

The man tried reaching his hand out towards her, but Adi caught his arm. Mary's eyes widened at this sudden development as she found herself caught between two men going on the offensive and defensive against each other. Her

shock was understandable, and in fact it was a fortunate thing that she didn't let out a scream.

The two men's expressions remained cool and composed, as if trying to avoid drawing the notice of those around them. Despite that, Mary could tell Adi was holding the man with a considerable amount of strength, based on the deep creases on his sleeve. Glancing at Adi's hand, she could tell just how harshly his fingers were digging in, enough to make even her own arm feel numb. Usually, Adi's hands held her so gently, yet it seemed they were capable of this level of brutality.

At this lively, enjoyable party, only the two people caught in a conflict before Mary's eyes were frigid—yet also heated. She couldn't keep up with these temperature differences, and pressed her hands to her chest to try and calm herself down as she looked up at Adi.

"You upstart! You used to be a servant. Don't you dare get in my way," the man threatened, and though his voice was close to a whisper, it still sounded intimidating. His gentle, pleasant demeanor from before had vanished.

Adi didn't seem hurt by the man's words, nor did he try to refute them. His rust-colored eyes glared at the man, and in a low voice he retorted, "Don't you lay a hand on *my* lady." His tone of voice was downright aggressive, and completely different from his usual self.

At this harsh response, the man's scowl only deepened. Then, his shapely lips twisted with fury, and in a hoarse voice he growled, "Don't get cocky, servant!"

The uncanny words grated on Mary's ears as she let out a gasp. "You're that man from before..." she said quietly.

The words she'd heard on that day in the town center echoed through her mind. A man had appeared out of nowhere intending to attack her, and Adi had gotten injured while protecting her. Afterwards, the stranger had spat out these words while making his getaway:

"Don't get cocky, bitch!"

The words the man had said just now were like a rehash of the previous statement, only adjusted to apply to Adi. There were very few people within

high society who'd use such crude, violent language.

Not to mention, that hoarse voice—she hadn't noticed it at first on account of the man's good looks, but now everything connected in a moment of sheer dread.

Adi must've realized it too, as his glare only sharpened. "Don't make me repeat myself. She's mine, and I won't let you touch her."

Hearing his words, Mary opened her mouth to call out his name, but...

"Lady Maaaryyy!!!"

...Alicia's vigorous shout and sudden embrace stunned her, and she was knocked over by the momentum. It was a splendidly graceless fall; one could almost hear the dull thud as Mary landed on the floor.

"Wh-What on earth?!"

"I'll protect you, Lady Mary!"

"You tackling me is not a defensive move, but an *offensive* one!" Mary shrieked, missing the point slightly in her shock.

The next moment, her eyes grew wide as she noticed Parfette right in front of her. To be precise, Parfette's eyes were filled with tears, and she was quivering all over as she approached Mary, then hugged her tightly. The girl was shaking so hard that even Mary felt her own body tremble due to their proximity.

"L-Lady Mary, I'll protect you too...!"

"You're *way* too unreliable! If anything, you're making *me* want to protect *you*!" Mary yelled, attempting to peel off the two girls. But when they tried to move away, she caught the hems of their skirts to stop them, for she was actually glad they had tried to defend her.

Though, she couldn't bring herself to openly say something like, *"Stay by my side."*

By the time Mary managed to survey her surroundings again, the arrogant man from before was being apprehended by several guards. It was strangely fitting to see him, a man with an excellent physique, being subjugated by the guards as he sported a stern look on his face all the while. Carina and Margaret

were standing nearby, observing the scene with an iciness the likes of which contrasted their gorgeous gowns.

Carina even approached the guards and offered them frightening advice: “Tie his hands together palms up, please. That way, the pain will gradually get worse and worse over time.”

Mary was dumbstruck by this scene, which had at this point departed entirely from the previous standoff. A moment later, someone reached their hand out towards her. She looked up to the sight of swaying rust-colored hair. A pair of eyes in the same shade were now looking at her, much more softly than before, and with visible concern.

“Are you all right, my lady?”

“Y-Yes. What about you?”

“I’m fine.”

Mary put her hand in Adi’s and let him gently pull her back up to her feet. He then stroked her hair, though she couldn’t tell if that was because he was trying to rearrange it after her fall, or just out of relief that she was okay. Each time his fingers combed through her locks, all of the fear and anxiety within her melted away little by little.

Mary let out a deep breath. *It’s okay now*, she told herself.

While she reset her mental state, she glanced at Patrick, who was discussing something with the guards. He noticed, and soon walked over to her. “Mary, did you get hurt?”

“If you mean to ask whether that man hurt me, then the answer’s no. As for the injuries caused by a certain princess flying at me, yes—my waist hurts.”

“Adi, are you okay too?” Patrick continued, ignoring Mary’s appeal.

Mary knew there was no sense getting angry now and just sighed. She then fixed her gaze on the culprit, who’d already been fully arrested. But regardless of that fact, he was glaring at her, his eyes filled with ire.

However, she still didn’t recognize him. In spite of everything he’d done to her, she couldn’t even put a name to his face. She didn’t know whether that

meant he was simply someone that irrelevant, or if this was in fact their first proper meeting.

Hence, Mary cast an inquisitive glance at Patrick, wondering what this was all about. He looked over his shoulder at the culprit coldly before saying, “I didn’t want to make a scene, but that man made contact with you sooner than I’d expected. I suppose he was in a hurry.”

“Who is he? I don’t recognize him.”

“He’s from House Lautrec. I imagine you’ve at least heard of them.”

Mary gasped quietly. She had indeed heard of them before. They were the feudal lords of the land with the road she wanted to use as her distribution channel for the restaurant. They had come up during her discussion with the landowners, who seemed vexed just by the mention of their name.

Mary frowned, recalling the face of the family’s head as he lamented the state of the road, which had been abandoned halfway through construction. Surmising what had happened, she quietly said, “They found out my plan, and wanted to threaten me into backing down.”

“Most likely, they were afraid of the Albert name. When I started looking into them, I found out they’ve been involved with a number of sinister circles,” Patrick said dispassionately while glaring relentlessly at the head of House Lautrec.

At these words, Mary glanced sideways at Adi. He caught her gaze and nodded. They must’ve both been thinking the same thing.

If what Patrick said was true, then that would’ve explained the dilapidated state of the road. The landlord had been concerned by some suspicious characters traversing it, but the ones leading these very same characters were none other than House Lautrec themselves. Mary could feel the rage bubbling within her at the thought.

“They were probably trying to make a move before you could get any evidence against them,” Patrick went on. “I guess they were in a real panic, if they chose to do something right before the official announcement.”

“How foolish! The announcement has nothing to do with my family name,

after all.”

“It doesn’t?” asked Patrick in confusion.

“No, it doesn’t,” Mary insisted while glaring at the culprit. “If they had such a problem with it, they should’ve just told me that to my face, instead of using such underhanded means.”

“Mary...”

“I’m going to do what I want, and it has nothing to do with my family or gender. If you want to oppose me, go ahead and try! I’ll take the bait and fight you head-on!”

As the commotion died down, Mary’s mighty bravado echoed around the chamber.

It would’ve been difficult to describe Mary as looking ladylike at present. In fact, in the world of high society, it was inexcusable for a woman to openly put on airs and glare at a man. Not to mention, she’d used violent language. Under normal circumstances, anyone would’ve found her disgraceful.

However, Mary Albert could pull it off. In fact, her unladylike conduct was almost refreshing in a place like this. Her cynical speech and the way she’d boasted of some matter unrelated to her family name had made everyone think: *“She is worthy of the Albert name.”*

Watching the culprit get taken away, Mary’s expression shifted swiftly as she asserted, “What a nasty interruption!” Her gallant attitude implied she wouldn’t even pay any heed to a small fry like that. The rank difference between her, as she resumed her usual conduct, and that of the man who’d so underhandedly threatened her was clear as day.

Mary then walked over to her spouse, Adi, and angled herself so that she’d be all the more the center of attention. “Now then! It’s finally time for the announcement!” she declared enthusiastically, and anyone who held any doubts or misgivings felt them shift into conviction.

“Ah, she really will succeed House Albert...” So they all believed. Yet they felt no confusion nor anxiety about it, for the thought of such an unconventional lady inheriting the nation’s most illustrious noble house was actually rather

nice. The guests all smiled wryly and looked to Mary.

Sensing everyone's expectant gazes, Mary led Adi over to stand at her father's side. The man lightly patted her shoulder as a means of passing the baton to his daughter, and Mary slowly surveyed the chamber.

She could tell all the visitors were anticipating what she'd say next. She noticed Patrick serenely smiling in the crowd, with Alicia snuggled up by his side, her eyes twinkling. Everyone was clearly looking forward to Mary's announcement, and soon enough she glanced sideways at Adi.

"Adi, this is the moment we've been waiting for all along! Behold how they're all filled with anticipation!"

"I feel like things aren't quite matching up..." he responded.

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it. It's like something's not quite right, or perhaps there's some large discrepancy... Things just feel really out of sync..."

"Huh, you're more of a worrywart than I thought. But rest assured! The moment I make the announcement, it's sure to be a huge crowd-pleaser!"

"Riiight..."

Though Adi was making one evasive reply after another, Mary persisted: "It'll be okay!"

After all, she could acutely sense the guests' expectations. In fact, keeping them in suspense any longer would've just felt rude at this point. Hence, Mary inhaled deeply.

"Everyone, please listen up!" she called out, asking for the partygoers' attention, though it had already been on her from the start. Her heart pounded at the sight of the anticipation on their faces. She cast a quick glance at the band, whose members responded with a nod as if to signal that they were ready.

Despite the unforeseen incident, everything was still in order.

I've been waiting for this...! Mary exclaimed inwardly with delight, stopping herself from trembling at the excitement. And then...

“At long last, we’ve decided to open a wild game restaurant!”

...she loudly announced the opening of her restaurant in the town center.

The atmosphere in the room froze in an instant—to an unspeakable degree.

Everyone was struck dumb with astonishment. As understanding slowly dawned on them, their eyes glazed over dully. Some even let out massive sighs or scowled deeply. Only the orchestra unwittingly proceeded with the plan and played a rousing tune, which just highlighted the difference in temperatures even more.

Of course, Mary herself picked up on this. She regarded the crowd once again, then finally leaned closer to Adi and tugged on his sleeve. “Hey, Adi... I can’t put my finger on it, but this is not quite the reaction I was expecting...”

“Oof, Lord Patrick’s eyes are shrouding over... And for *Alicia* of all people to make such an expression...”

The air was icy, and even Mary and Adi’s own friends looked sour and unamused, huffing out a breath and turning their faces away. Alicia, too, who’d been so excited about what Mary was up to each day, averted her eyes as if to say this surely wasn’t happening.

Question marks flitted around the confused Mary’s head. “Huh? But *why*...?” she whispered pitifully, her graciousness and callous words from before all but gone.

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Some time after that chilly announcement, the usual liveliness returned to the party.

“Ah, there you are,” Mary said, addressing the splendidly dressed Carina and Margaret. Following Mary’s pronouncement, the two women had frozen for a while with narrowed eyes, but now they gracefully grasped the skirts of their gowns and bid Mary a ladylike greeting. In fact, they pretended as though the announcement hadn’t happened at all and sent Mary their compliments over the wonderful party.

She smiled in return and humbly thanked them. How picture-perfect the sight

must've been for outsiders! Three elegantly dressed young ladies chatting away pleasantly—it was a scene straight out of a painting.

"Would the two of you mind joining me in the courtyard?" Mary prompted.

"Is something going on?"

"We're having a tasting session for the restaurant," she responded decisively, and the other girls' eyes narrowed.

Their expressions seemed to say, *"We've been doing our utmost to forget all about it."*

But Mary wasn't going to be put off by that. "Someday, I'd like to open a branch in your nation too!" she appealed enthusiastically. Though their countries bordered each other, people's tastes were sure to be different abroad. To Mary, Carina and Margaret were precious advisors.

The two girls shrugged their shoulders and uttered slight apologies, almost as if to say they had some other business to attend to.

"Oh, are you busy?" Mary inquired.

"Yes," said Carina. "The guards asked me to teach them the best method of tying someone up efficiently and causing the pain to worsen over time."

"Right. I guess all I can say at this stage is good luck. What about you, Lady Marga— Actually, never mind. I already know the answer."

"Indeed, I'll be joining Bernard."

"I didn't ask," Mary murmured, her expression growing strained at the sight of the other two's refined smiles.

One's countenance was downright freezing, and the other's was fired up with great fervor. Both of their smiles were beautifully graceful, but the difference in temperatures was indescribable. Mary couldn't stop a shiver racing down her spine, and she told them, "This is my mother's party, so don't go too far." However, it was unclear whether her warning had any effect, for the icy and fiery air the two girls were radiating was extraordinary.

But soon enough, the girls looked around and inquired in unison, "What about Lilianne?"

Their question caused Mary to smile. Perhaps Carina and Margaret intended to speak to Lilianne about her actions in relation to today's incident.

Unfortunately, Lilianne had already returned to the north, without ever having stepped foot inside the venue. She, still reflecting on her past actions, had turned down the idea herself, saying that she was just glad she could provide assistance, and that she wasn't within her rights to join the party.

It was almost pitiable to think about the kind of end she'd met after reigning supreme at Elysiana College with all the men waiting upon her.

When Lilianne had earnestly turned down the invitation, Mary hadn't shown her any sympathy. She had simply smirked and wrote the other girl a letter of acknowledgment, then said, "Hurry home and get some praise."

Naturally, Mary had been referring to the person who was sure to be waiting for Lilianne back in the northern lands. If he were to find out Lilianne had done some work for Mary's benefit, he was sure to praise the girl. Mary had no idea what sort of relationship the two of them had now, but judging by the way Lilianne had flushed as she'd taken the letter, she supposed the girl had at the very least earned herself a head pat.

Mary explained as much to Carina and Margaret. The two exchanged a glance with each other, then smiled dryly and shrugged. They hadn't forgiven Lilianne, but that didn't mean they wished misery upon her. Their expressions insinuated, *"If she's happy in some other land, then so be it."*

Such contrarian ladies they were! Mary couldn't hold back a smile as she looked at them, and was about to propose that they try writing a letter to Lilianne next, when the girls spoke up first.

"Well then, Lady Mary. It seems my usual training dummy has been delivered, so I'll be excusing myself."

"And I can see Bernard has been stealing glances at me... In fact, he *only* has his eyes on me, so I'd better get going as well."

Mary couldn't say a thing to them as she watched the two ladies boldly walk away. "I suppose this means that everyone is happy," she concluded to herself as she made her way to the courtyard.

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“Mary was putting on airs and making it seem so significant, only for it to turn out to be a wild game restaurant. Seriously, she’s on some other plane of common sense, as usual... Ahh, but I guess this really isn’t that bad,” said Patrick, elegantly dining upon a wild game rice bowl.

The dish was beyond simple—it was downright plain, but when he took a bite with his refined conduct, it looked as if he were having a first-class meal, strangely enough.

Alicia was sitting next to him. “We were certain Lady Mary and Adi would be succeeding House Albert... But instead, it was about a *restaurant*! Oh, this is delicious! Seconds, please!” she called out, seemingly enjoying her rice bowl. She chewed a mouthful of it, beamed a joyful smile, and then took another bite as if she couldn’t put her spoon down. Her healthy appetite combined with her usual adorable grin made the dish seem all the more appealing.

“I suppose it *was* a big announcement, but to think it was something like this... Ah, so yummy!” cried Parfette.

“It *is* a pretty big deal that they’re opening this restaurant in the best district in town, but... Huh, you’re right. This is delicious enough to garner favor even abroad,” remarked Gainas.

This pair was happily having their fill of the rice bowls as they discussed the possibility of opening up a branch in their nation, which distribution channel to take, and where the restaurant should be located.

All of them were presently in Albert Manor’s courtyard. Following Mary’s chilly announcement, tables had been set up in the courtyard to hold a tasting session of the restaurant’s food.

“I *told* you I’m not interested in inheriting House Albert. It’s your own fault for making assumptions... And anyway, despite your comments, you all seem to be savoring your meals just fine!” Mary said resentfully. Then, she cleared her throat and once again regarded each person as they continued making complaints while enjoying their rice bowls.

Apparently, they’d all believed that Mary was planning to succeed House

Albert together with Adi, and had thought she would make the announcement about it today. They'd even gathered together and made arrangements for the capture of House Lautrec, who were intending to hinder Mary's supposed succession.

After being presented with the evidence her friends had gathered against them, House Lautrec had also confessed that they'd mistakenly assumed Mary would be inheriting her family and had wanted to threaten her in order to force her withdrawal.

Mary could only sigh at all of this.

After all, each one of her actions and preparations up until now had been simply for the sake of her restaurant. The same was true of the reason she had her eye on the road that House Lautrec were using to conduct illicit business, why she'd had the talks with the landowners, and why she wanted to tighten security in the area. She hadn't noticed the fact that House Lautrec were acting unlawfully at all.

In other words, *everyone* had been completely off the mark.

Mary didn't think there could've been a more exhausting conclusion to it all. While she sighed away in grief, Adi chuckled next to her. Hearing his mischievous laughter, she glared at him (to no effect, of course).

"Excuse me? How rude!"

"I was just thinking about how everything once again spiraled out of control," he told her.

"Humph! That was a total coincidence! I suppose even *I* make mistakes sometimes. But like I said, only *sometimes*."

"Such as when you aimed for your own ruin during our time at Karelia Academy."

"Stop it."

"Or when you insisted you'd just be a spectator at Elysiana College."

"Stop it!"

"And of course this latest incident, where you were convinced some anti

migratory bird restaurant organization was making moves against you."

"I *told* you to stop!!!" Mary screeched, stomping on Adi's foot underneath the table. She angrily turned away with a huff, but then cast another glance at everyone who was gathered around.

The conclusion this time had been full of misunderstandings. But everyone here now had been concerned for her, and taken action for her sake. And they certainly hadn't done it because Mary was the daughter of House Albert, but because they were her friends. It had nothing to do with her status—they'd been roused to action because their friend was in a pinch.

An indescribable feeling flooded Mary's chest at the thought. But she couldn't openly voice her sentiments, and only let out a small groan. Sensing something was off about her, everyone curiously turned to look.

However, Mary's embarrassment only grew at this, so she feigned ignorance and once again turned away stubbornly. "W-Well, it's not like I don't appreciate it..." she pronounced.

How contrarian and difficult to understand her words were! Alas, this was not the proclamation of the daughter of House Albert—rather, it was simply Mary Albert's best attempt at forming sincere words of gratitude.

Everyone else's eyes widened at this occurrence, and soon enough they all smiled warmly and giggled.

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After the party had come to an end, Mary and Adi took a walk together through the mansion's gardens.

The cleanup efforts had already begun within the halls of Albert Manor, and everyone's rushed voices echoed from inside. But the gardens were so large that walking in deep enough made even those sounds seem as if they were coming from some great distance away.

The wind whistled through the trees, causing Mary's silver hair to sway. She looked perfectly the part of a beautiful lady, but she pushed her hair down without comment and then furiously lamented, "Goodness! For all their whining, they sure had their fill!" Of course, she was referring to the tasting

session for the restaurant.

Her friends had complained incessantly after they'd drawn their own incorrect conclusions, yet they had gobbled up the food without delay. In fact, it was so much to Alicia's tastes that she'd even asked for seconds.

Mary was glad her restaurant was being received favorably, but she felt discontent each time she remembered the apathetic mood that had come over the room upon her announcement. Hence, she continued mumbling under her breath.

Adi easily understood her mindset, and he chuckled at her.

"Do you have something to say to me?" she demanded.

"No, not at all," he responded, and his satisfied smile was beyond detestable.

Mary glared at Adi and decided to direct her anger at him. "And what was all that about me being '*your* lady'?! Since when do I belong to you?!"

"What are you *actually* trying to say here?"

"Your gallant attitude had me spellbound," Mary said, letting out a fervent breath as she pressed her hands to her cheeks.

After all, back then Adi had valiantly said words so harsh they'd have been unthinkable for his usual self. Though Mary had felt anxious and uncomfortable during the conflict, seeing Adi like that had made her heart throb.

Just remembering that moment makes my cheeks feel like they're on fire...

Seeing her like this, Adi smiled calmly and reached his hand out towards her windswept hair. His fingers entangled with her locks, and his fingertips tickled her cheek.

Mary closed her eyes at this pleasant sensation, but when she heard Adi start to speak, she looked up at him while leaning into his touch.

"Ever since you were born... No, even before that, I've belonged to you, milady."

"Adi..."

"No matter what, that won't ever change." Adi's voice was soft as he spoke,

though there was a note of passion in it as well. His words strangely appealed to Mary, and she let out another hot breath. His rust-colored eyes narrowed as he beheld her.

Mary's heart raced at this, though she couldn't tell if it was because of his eye patch, or because of the situation they were in, just the two of them.

"I've always been yours. So please, milady, become mine as well," Adi begged, his gaze never straying from hers.

Mary's breath hitched. The breeze swayed her hair again, and she smiled as she pushed it down. "You fool..." she murmured. His hand was still pressed against her cheek, and she placed her own upon his.

Adi had always been by her side, and he lived for her sake. That had been the case before she was even born, back when she was still in her mother's belly, and before he'd even known her gender. He was here with her now, and no matter what, he always would be.

"My place is by your side," Adi had once passionately declared to her.

It's true that he is mine, Mary whispered in her heart. *But...*

"You're a fool, Adi..."

"Milady?"

"For a long time now, I've belonged to you as well," she told him with a smile.

His expression softened in delight, and then his face drew invitingly closer to hers. Knowing his intention, Mary closed her eyes. The soft, sweet sensation upon her lips made her whole body feel like it was melting.

They slowly parted, and Adi put his hand on her waist. He pulled her closer, gently enough so as not to distress her, yet with enough strength to suggest he wouldn't let her get away. This kind yet forceful embrace only made Mary feel all the more infatuated.

To top it off, his rust-ringed pupils were piercing into her, coaxing her for a second kiss. Mary had no reason to deny him, and they shared another kiss, slightly deeper than the first. His hand, which had been on her back, slid away and clasped her own, their entwined fingers leaving her entranced.

In the next moment, both of her hands were interlaced with Adi's, and their fingers linked together. Occasionally, Adi's fingers tickled hers, and he held her tightly, which was irresistibly pleasant.

How sweet it was, how hot, and how...*constraining*.

"This is an antimodesty tactic!" Mary exclaimed, realizing she couldn't form a fist like this.

Adi laughed in response, and then drew closer to her again, pestering her for another kiss. Since he was holding on to both of her hands, she couldn't lash out with her fists, and she meekly accepted the kiss. However, a moment later...

"So you're asking for a headbutt, huh?"

...she muttered as a last resort.

Adi let go of her with lightning speed. "I'm so sorry! I got a little carried away!"

"I'm not having it! Prepare yourself!"

While Adi put up his guard, Mary tightened her fists. But instead of punching his flank as usual, she took advantage of the way Adi had closed his eyes in preparation and changed the course of her movement, throwing her arms around his neck instead.

She hugged him tightly, pulling their bodies even closer together than they had been before. To finish it off, she kissed him on the lips. Adi, who'd been preparing to be hit, blinked as his rust-colored eyes glimmered.

Then, they both drew away. Mary was laughing, while Adi's face reddened at her surprise attack that had turned out to be a kiss.

"I... I'm truly no match for you, milady."

"Obviously. Who do you think I am?" Mary boasted, smugly flipping her hair.

Adi smiled cheerfully. "The daughter of House Albert," he replied.

Mary nodded in satisfaction, then held out her hand towards him. She took off his eye patch and gently caressed the skin under his wounded eye. He smiled fondly at this pleasing sensation. "And what else?" Mary prompted

mischievously, gazing into his eyes expectantly. Of course, she *was* the daughter of House Albert, but to Adi, she was something more. Hence, she looked up at him, coaxing him for an answer.

Sensing her intentions, Adi smiled. “You’re the daughter of House Albert...and my precious lady,” he said, and then gave her a light kiss (reserved enough not to incite Mary’s fists into action).



Afterword

Hello, this is Saki.

Thank you very much for purchasing volume three of my novel, Y*oung Lady Albert Is Courting Disaster*!

I wrote the girls' stories with the intent of letting everyone achieve happiness. I kept coming up with more material, and these short stories have now been bundled into a book. What did you think of Mary and Adi's sweet affections, and their friends' usual shenanigans?

To my manager, who laughed upon hearing my idea of including a story with a ladybug, but still listened to me...

To Haduki Futaba, who was once again in charge of illustrating the characters, which made me inexpressibly happy...

To everyone involved with this volume in any way...

And more than anything, to every single person who read this book...

Thank you all so much!

I hope we can meet again soon.

Saki