Author: Masamune Okazaki ✦ Illustrator: Hayase Jyun



From Two-Bit Baddie to Total Heartthrob

This Villainess Will Cross-Dress to Impress!


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CHARACTERS

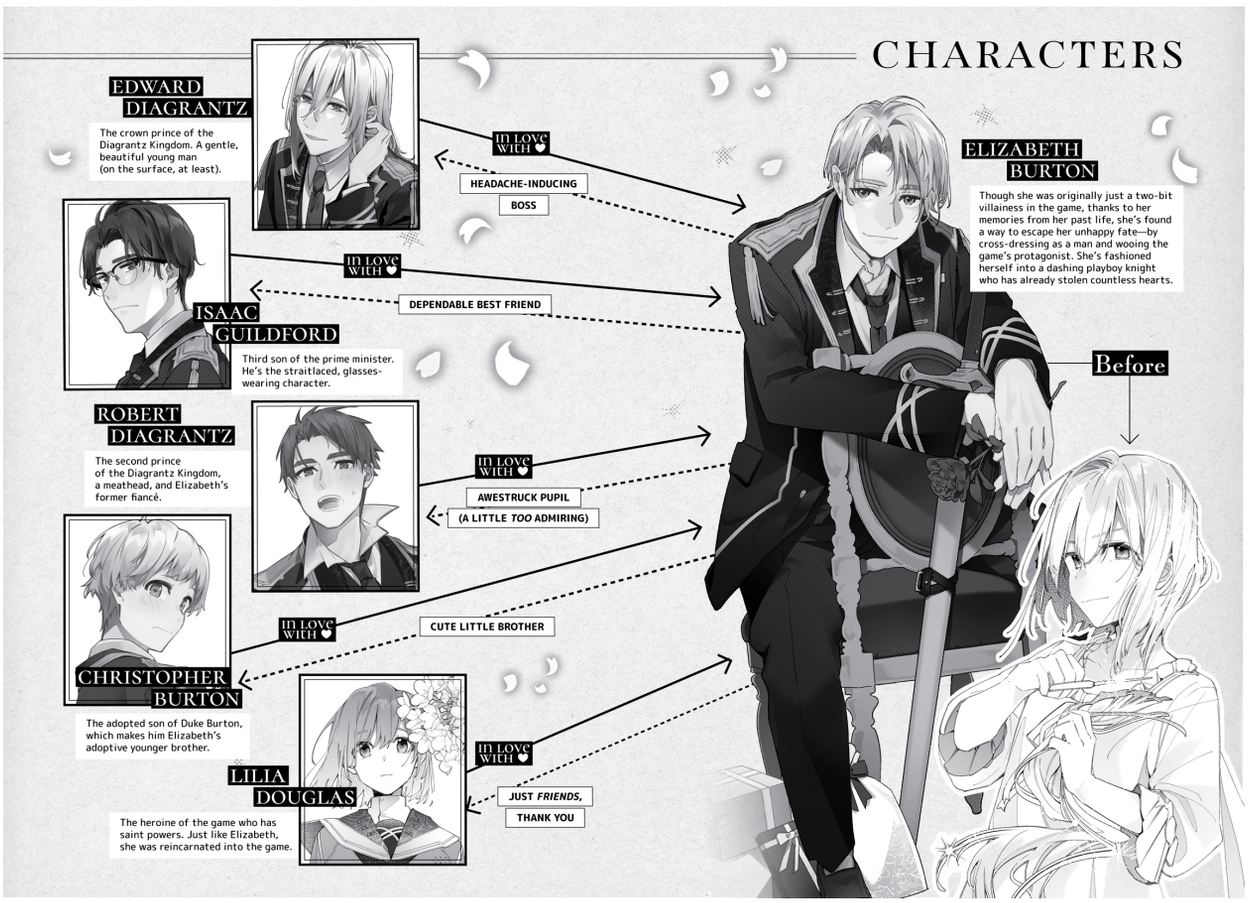

EDWARD DIAGRANTZ
The crown prince of the Diagrantz Kingdom. A gentle, beautiful young man (on the surface, at least).
IN LOVE WITH
HEADACHE-INDUCING BOSS
ISAAC GUILDFORD
Third son of the prime minister. He's the straitlaced, glasses-wearing character.
IN LOVE WITH
DEPENDABLE BEST FRIEND
ROBERT DIAGRANTZ
The second prince of the Diagrantz Kingdom, a meathead, and Elizabeth's former fiancé.
IN LOVE WITH
AWESTRUCK PUPIL (A LITTLE TOO ADMIRING)
CHRISTOPHER BURTON
The adopted son of Duke Burton, which makes him Elizabeth's adoptive younger brother.
IN LOVE WITH
CUTE LITTLE BROTHER
LILIA DOUGLAS
The heroine of the game who has saint powers. Just like Elizabeth, she was reincarnated into the game.
IN LOVE WITH
JUST FRIENDS, THANK YOU
ELIZABETH BURTON
Though she was originally just a two-bit villainess in the game, thanks to her memories from her past life, she's found a way to escape her unhappy fate—by cross-dressing as a man and wooing the game's protagonist. She's fashioned herself into a dashing playboy knight who has already stolen countless hearts.
Before

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Prologue

I woke up this morning at the same time as always. Now that autumn had begun, the days had been getting shorter and shorter, and the sun wasn't fully up yet.

I changed into some clothes that would be easy to move around in and set off for my daily morning training. As I looked up at the sky, which was gradually brightening, the reality of recent events suddenly hit me with full force.

That's right... It's over.

I'd finally achieved my goal. I'd claimed my victory against the love interests and the world of the otome game I lived in.

I'm not gonna lie, it was pretty invigorating. The crisp morning air felt extra refreshing—almost as if it were sparkling—and I found myself enjoying it more than I usually did.

After I finished my run, I took a shower and changed into my school uniform. This would be my first day back at the academy following a school break that had served as a buffer after the chaos of the second-year dance. I'd been away from school so long now that I was *actually* kind of starting to miss my classes.

I started styling my hair as usual, but stopped midway through.

Now that I'd won the main character's heart—Lilia's heart—I didn't need to worry about being a hit with the ladies or obsess over distinguishing myself from the other love interests. In fact, it was probably in my best interests to fly under the radar now and act more like the two-bit baddie I was *born* to be; I'd play the wingman and hook Lilia up with one of the love interests.

The moment that dawned on me, I felt the tension release from my body again. It was like a massive weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Honestly, I'd never felt so relieved.

But... Hmm, how should I put it? I also felt an indescribable *emptiness*.

Huh. Maybe this is what people mean when they talk about "burnout."

Ultimately, I decided to just comb out my hair and call it a day. Styling it constantly was kind of a pain, to tell you the truth, so I

was perfectly content cutting it from my routine.

I wasn't planning on calling it quits right away with the menswear, but I had a feeling that I'd probably have to start giving that some thought before too long.

I took a look in the mirror.

Oh, who am I kidding? I thought. *I can't just skip my makeup. I look washed up—I'm like the human equivalent of gruel right now.*

If I wanted to keep my spirits up, then I figured I needed to at least put on a *little* makeup. So I took my kit out and began the routine that had become second nature to me now.

It was kind of a wake-up call. I realized that it didn't matter if Lilia had locked into my route or if the game was over—this was just how I wanted to keep living.

I just hope my life will be as peaceful, quiet, and chill as possible now.

When I took my seat for breakfast, Christopher eyed me suspiciously.

"Sis? Did you oversleep?" he asked me.

Figures...

Even Ambulances Won’t Come Unless You Call —Lilia—

It hit me one day that I had been reborn into the world of an otome game I’d played in my past life—*Royal LOVERS*. I realized that I was now Lilia Douglas, the main character of the game.

The problem was, I’d always felt uncomfortable around 3D men—even in my past life. So how was I supposed to make it in the world of an otome game?!

The game begins when the main character transfers into First Royal Academy, and my favorite character, the crown prince, is one of the first that she meets. Or, at least, that’s how it’s *supposed* to play out. The character I *actually* met was a hot duke’s son who’d never even *appeared* in the game.

Huh?! Wait, is he just a side character? I thought. *This sucks! I wanna do* his *route!*

But, weirdly enough, every time I tried to trigger events in his route and lock in, the other love interests showed up and butted in.

Oh man, where’s this gonna go?! I wondered.

So, without further ado, this is the slapstick rom-com story of how I pursued the hot side character and found true love.

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All right. Enough messing around.

Lilia Douglas here, starting us off with a misleading summary of events. The problem is, for the most part, all of the above really happened.

Well…except for the part where the duke’s son was actually the duke’s *daughter*.

I know what you’re probably thinking—“Isn’t that a pretty *massive* difference?” I get it. Most people would probably agree. But the funny thing is, once you wrap your head around it, it doesn’t actually feel that significant.

Also, I’m sure you’re waiting for a follow-up on the question

“where’s this gonna go?!” Turns out, the answer is “absolutely nowhere!”

I guess life’s just funny like that sometimes, huh?

Anyway, let’s get back on topic…

I know we’re only at the start of book 3 here, but if I’m allowed to be a little meta about this, what I’m about to tell you is more like an epilogue.

Don’t get me wrong, though—the game isn’t over. I mean, who ever heard of an otome game in which the *prologue* was the main event? It’s all about the story that unfolds *after* the routes branch and you choose one. And since I’d already done that, I was basically just barrelling towards the ending now. All that was left after that was a bonus “after story”—something to tie a nice little bow on everything.

Romance endings always feature a nice dose of heartwarming events, with several dramatic ones sprinkled in to shed some light on a love interest’s dark past. These are critical events if you want to really understand their character.

As it happened, though, I’d found myself at the finish line of a friendship ending. And so, the story that unfolded was just a harmless, forgettable one.

I knew that was probably exactly what Ellie had wanted. In her eyes, the story was probably over.

Honestly, though? That wasn’t gonna cut it for me.

I hadn’t given up yet, and I had absolutely no intention of doing so. I wasn’t going to let things end this way, and I knew I wasn’t the only one.

So, I guess you could say this was a “curtain call.” All of the other unsatisfied characters were lining up onstage with me for one last hurrah.

Though, at this point, I’ll admit that it didn’t feel all that likely that any other major story points would appear to shake things up. I mean, I was already fast approaching the bonus content and the epilogue. But it didn’t seem likely that the ever-dashing Elizabeth Burton would be there. Nor did it seem likely that the simpleminded, cheerful Robert; the ethereal, placidly smiling Edward; the serious-to-a-fault Isaac; or the sweet-as-an-angel Christopher would be there either.

In fact, even the sweet, clean-cut saint probably wouldn’t make

an appearance—after all, she'd never even existed in the first place.

Things don't always turn out like you hope, though. I mean, here I am looking down the barrel of a friendship ending. I'm sure *some people* enjoy those, but I imagine they're few and far between.

So, there wasn't really any point now. I know this is probably getting old, but just in case you forgot, all that's left now is the bonus content—just a nice little bow to tie up the story.

It wasn't like my whole *life* would be over the moment the epilogue ended, though. In all likelihood, it would probably just carry on as usual. After all, I couldn't exactly go back to my original life once I'd cleared the game. The person I'd been in my past life was now dead—cremated, no less. There was nowhere for me to return to.

If you look at it that way, I guess maybe this isn't really an epilogue after all. I might even go so far as to call it the *prologue* of the long lives we had ahead of us. So, what I'm about to say isn't so much a bait and switch or a summary of true events so much as it is a hope for the future.

Without further ado, ladies and gentleman, this is a classic love story about how I fought to win Ellie's heart and found true love.

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I arrived at the classroom and spotted Ellie from behind as she sat at her desk. After checking that my hair wasn't a mess, I called out to her.

"G-Good morning!"

"Oh. Hey, Lilia," she said, turning her head to face me.

She still had her chin in her hands and gave me a weak smile. I'd never seen that expression before—it was like her walls were totally down.

"Morning," she added.

Her tone was somehow different to the one I was used to hearing from the ever-dashing, perfect Ellie. There was no *edge* to it. It felt lifeless, almost *languid*, but also...hopelessly soft and sweet. Paired with her defenseless smile, it was downright *sultry*. It was exactly the kind of greeting you'd expect her to give a girl

lying in bed next to her who'd just woken up.

I couldn't believe how sexy she was.

I had a very vivid imagination, and I was letting it run wild. I pictured being that girl, rolling around in white sheets on the bed and basking in Ellie's smile as she greeted me with a view of her naked upper body.

Then I heard a sigh come from somewhere behind me.

Apparently, I hadn't been the only one admiring her. The other girls in our class were looking at her with bright red cheeks.

Oh, crap. Ellie, you're going to give these refined young ladies the vapors! This isn't even appropriate for a game that would be rated for older teens—even higher than the one this game has! This scene could get slapped with an 18+ rating!

"E-Ellie? Can you come here for a sec?" I asked her.

"Huh? What's up?"

Ellie cocked her head at me quizzically as I tugged her arm, but she relented and followed me into the hall. I dragged her to a private corner and confronted her.

"Wh-What the heck happened to your hair?! And your face! And your *voice*!"

"My hair? Oh... I didn't style it today. Does it...look bad?"

"No. It looks so hot I could die."

She chuckled. "Aw. Thanks."

The soft smile she gave me was unlike any other. It didn't look anything like the carefree, confident smile I was used to seeing from her, nor did it look like the loving gaze she sometimes gave me. It was languid, elegant, and captivating.

What the heck is going on? It's like she's turned into a heartbreak cannon that fires in every direction! A weapon of ultimate destruction!

"S-Seriously, what's gotten into you, Ellie?! It's like you've transformed from a carefully manufactured playboy into a natural one!"

"A 'manufactured playboy'? What is *that*?" she repeated, somewhat confrontationally, as she cocked her head.

Um, exactly what it sounds like?

"L-Look! Like I said, your facial expressions and your tone feel different than usual!"

"Huh... Do they? Well, maybe I've just kind of lost the motivation to keep up appearances. I think I may be burnt out."

“B-Burnt out…?”

“Yeah, you know…from trying so hard to get you to choose my route. Now that the game’s over, I don’t really know what to do with myself,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Even the way she spoke felt a little more natural than the gentlemanly way she used to speak. It was different…but it wasn’t bad.

Not bad at all…

“Plus, maybe if you see this side of me, you’ll fall out of love and give up on me.”

“Not a chance. If anything, it only makes me love you *more*,” I said. Then I added, in a singsong voice, “‘Cause I caaan’t stooop lovin’ youuu!”

“Sheesh. I’ll never understand women,” Ellie replied with a pained smile.

Pretty sure you’re *a woman too…*

“Well, I think it’d be your best interest to hurry up and move on. Wouldn’t you have better odds of finding true love if you pursued someone else?”

“Weirdly enough, my saint’s powers have actually grown a lot stronger since the Stargazing event,” I replied, looking down at my hands.

Ever since that day, I’d started to actually feel the flow of magic throughout my body. Now, I could actually heal small injuries like bumps and sprains. But it was hard to say if it had been triggered simply by feeling that my life was in danger, or if it was something else.

Maybe I’d awakened to my power because my love for Ellie was so strong that I didn’t care if she was a girl anymore? Or maybe it was because I’d been desperate to heal her after that fight with the bear, even if it hadn’t benefited *me* in any way? Those feelings sounded an awful lot like true love to me, and I couldn’t help but think that that’s what had ultimately done the job.

“Being turned down has only made my feelings for you stronger. And isn’t that what true love is? Never giving up on the one you love?”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure the universe is trying to send you a message by bestowing you with those powers. Something like, ‘here, we’ll give you these powers if you give up on her,’” Ellie said,

laughing uncomfortably.

Even the way she laughed seemed different now. It felt like she opened her mouth a lot wider.

"Seems different"? Who am I kidding—I know *it's different! I've practically got a PhD in Ellie-ology, so I think I'd know!*

Now that she was opening her mouth wider, I had a much better view of her perfectly aligned, beautiful teeth. Even *that* was sexy… *Too* sexy. I was going to have to put a stop to this.

Ellie, you are hereby banned from laughing like that. You can't just go around making girls faint from your uncontained sex appeal.

"L-Listen, Ellie. I really need you to tone down those R-rated facial expressions."

"Huh? Hang on, are you trying to insult me?"

"N-No! I meant 'R-rated' in a good way…"

"'R-rated in a good way'? Is that a thing?" she shot back. Then, after a moment's pause, she burst out laughing.

Huh? Wait, what's with that face she's making? I've never seen her laugh so carefreely like that. Please…I need *a CG of this! Come on, Lilia—you'd better burn this scene into your retinas so you can enjoy it later!*

"Ahh, man… It feels good to finally be able to butt in when you start talking to yourself. It's been hard holding back all this time," Ellie said.

"All this time?" I repeated. "Y-You mean…you've been *hearing me*?"

"Uh-huh. You talk to yourself pretty loudly. Also, you talk about your past life an awful lot too."

"Wait… Huh?"

She laughed. "You really didn't have any idea, did you?"

She looked at me as I stood there, momentarily frozen by this realization, and then broke into a laugh again.

"All right, Lilia. Let's head back to the classroom," she said.

"Nngh… J-Just give me a moment…please. I'm…still kinda in shock."

Just like I'd done to her when I dragged her out of the classroom, Ellie grabbed my arm and dragged me back in. I'd taken her out into the hallway to warn her about her out-of-control sex appeal, but it didn't feel like I'd even come *close* to accomplishing my goal. All I could do was hope that the girls in

class didn't wind up fainting.

Wow, though… I had no idea I'd been saying all my thoughts aloud*! That…makes me kind of cringe, doesn't it?*

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"Oh. There you are, Douglas," Isaac said once we'd returned to the classroom.

That's weird, I thought. Sure, he, Ellie, and I spent plenty of time together, but the whole point of that (for both of us) was just to be with Ellie. The two of us had barely ever spoken alone.

"Come to the student council room during lunch," he continued. "Prince Edward wants to speak with you."

"P-Prince Edward?!" I blurted out, much louder than I meant to.

Ellie, who was standing next to me, turned to look at me in surprise. Unfortunately, so did the rest of the class. I could see the question all of the girls wanted to ask written all over their faces: *What does the crown prince want with you?* Honestly, it was a fair question. I might have been a small-time saint, but it was pretty much unthinkable that Prince Edward would ever want to speak to a mere *baron's* daughter (and an adopted one, at that).

Unless, of course, it was all part of an otome game plot.

"E-Ellie…?" I tried, looking up at her for support.

She gave me a cheerful wave, looking completely unconcerned by my plight.

Omigod, she's waving at me! This is, like, the ultimate fanservice! But…for some reason, I'm not enjoying it very much…

"See ya later," she said.

"Y-You're not coming with me?!"

"Sorry. I've already got plans to eat lunch."

"So do I, you know?!"

Before the events of the dance, it would've been a given that we'd eat lunch together…but Ellie's heartless reply and unbothered expression suggested that things had changed.

Guess all she cares about is the chase, huh? Now that she's caught me, she's lost interest. She's ruthless. Stone cold! I love her, though. It's actually kind of hot when she's cold to me. Ahh, I really do love her…

After squealing over her internally for a bit, I came back to my senses.

If things were playing out the way they did in the game, then it would certainly be possible that Prince Edward would call the main character into the student council room. But…that didn't make sense. There was no way that any otome game developments would be playing out in this universe—not now, after everything that had happened.

After all, I was competing with Prince Edward and the other three love interests for Ellie's heart now.

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"I appreciate you coming, Lady Lilia," Prince Edward said as I entered the student council room. He was sitting at a desk in the center of the room.

The corners of his mouth were turned up into a pleasant smile, but there wasn't even a trace of friendliness in his eyes. I was pretty nervous, so I was especially attuned to things like that. The hostility radiating off of him was palpable. His beautiful face only amplified the effect. I could practically *feel* him shooting ice beams from his eyes.

He offered me a chair, so I quietly took a seat. I didn't have the courage to decline, which left me with no choice but to do as I was directed.

I took a look around the room and noticed that Prince Robert was standing at his side behind him, while Lord Isaac and Lord Christopher were sitting to his left and right.

As I'm sure you can imagine, seeing all of the love interests lined up right in front of me was an impressive spectacle. I felt like my eyes might burn if I looked at the lineup of perfectly proportioned faces for too long.

Maybe they don't let you into the student council room unless you're at least a seven? I wondered. *Wait… What the heck am I saying?! What about my beloved Ellie?* She's *way hotter than anyone in this room!*

I was beginning to realize that I wasn't picking up on just Prince Edward's hostility; they were *all* looking at me like I was the enemy. Well, no…I take that back. Actually, Prince Robert didn't look like he had a single thought going through his head.

Come to think of it, what's Prince Robert even doing here in the

student council room? He doesn't belong here.

For that matter, Lord Christopher didn't really belong either. There was an event in the game where he sneaks in with the main character, but for the most part, the student council room was Prince Edward and Lord Isaac's turf.

But back to Prince Robert: I couldn't think of a single instance when he'd ever stepped foot into the student council room in the game. He and Prince Edward didn't exactly get along, so there wasn't really any reason for him to go there. And now here he was, standing deferentially behind Prince Edward's seat. You wouldn't be treated to a sight like *that* in *any* of the game's endings.

Prince Edward must've noticed that I was looking behind him, because he let out a pained sigh and said, "Guildford has every right to be here, but I *did* try to ask the other two to leave."

"But you didn't call her in to talk about student council business, did you? Some might call that an abuse of authority," Christopher said.

"I think I have a right to be a part of any discussion that relates to Commander!"

I squinted, dazzled by their radiance, as the love interests began to bicker. For a moment, it felt like none of this had anything to do with me. *I'm too distracted by their gorgeous faces to pay attention to what they're talking about*, I distantly thought to myself.

(Speaking of gorgeous faces, Prince Edward's was definitely the standout. Of course, he was my favorite character, so admittedly I was a little biased.)

Who would've thought that my favorite character would become my rival in love? Past-life-me wouldn't have believed it. Even present-life-me probably wouldn't have believed it, but here we are.

But, favorite character or not, I wasn't about to just hand Ellie over to him. I was a self-insert fangirl, not a shipper. Remember?

I let them all argue for a bit, but it was starting to seem like we'd be here all day if I didn't intervene.

So, hesitantly, I raised my hand and asked, "Um... C-Can I say something?"

"Hm? Yes, go ahead. What is it?"

"May I ask why you called me here?"

Prince Edward elegantly uncrossed and crossed his legs again.

“I was hoping you might be able to share a little information with us,” he said pleasantly. “You’re her *friend*, after all, aren’t you?”

The emphasis he put on “friend” had a nakedly malicious ring to it, and I felt pretty confident that it wasn’t just in my head. To be fair, Ellie and I *were* just friends—for now, at least. But there was no need to rub it in. *Are you implying you and Ellie aren’t even friends?* I wanted to snap back.

By now, I’d figured out the real reason I’d been called in here. Clearly, they were trying to keep me in check. This was all just a roundabout way of saying, “She turned you down, so do us a favor and back off.”

“Each of us in this room is in love with the same person. Since we’re all in the same boat, shouldn’t we try to cooperate?” Prince Edward added.

“Um, actually…” I began, raising my voice.

I cringed a little inwardly at how shrill it came out. But can you blame me? I was pretty frickin’ scared. I mean, I was talking to the *crown prince*. And let’s not forget: He was hot. *Really* hot.

Up until recently, I’d thought my heart would shatter into pieces if he was mean to me. But I wasn’t gonna let any of that stop me. I’d have no right to call myself a main character if I just withdrew from the fight now. So, pushing myself to keep going, I faced all of the love interests and continued, undaunted.

“I-I’m not sure it’s fair to say I’m in the same boat as all of you.”

I could swear I saw the temperature in Prince Edward’s eyes drop several degrees at this. *Oh, crap*, I thought. *This is actually terrifying.* To be honest with you, I was trembling on the inside. Why did attractive people have to be so terrifying when they were angry?

“I… I know she turned me down. B-But that’s because *I* actually told her how I felt about her.” I put my hands on my knees, which felt like they were about to start trembling violently, and tried to shake off the fear I felt by raising my voice defiantly. “H-Has anyone else done that? Have any of you told her that you’re in love with her, or that she’s special to you? Have you tried asking her out?”

I looked around the room at each of them as I said this, but all of them refused to meet my gaze.

I let out a smug snort.

Yeah! That's right! Not one of you had the balls to do what I did!

"If you can't manage that, then you'll never beat me…no matter how hard you try."

As far as I could tell, Ellie didn't have a clue that any of them was in love with her. What's more, she didn't seem the least bit interested in any of them either.

Something about their relationships with her had struck me as odd for a long time, but it had taken me a while to figure out what was going on. I mean, until recently, I'd just chalked it up to the game's forces-that-be trying to keep the two of us apart. It was hard to blame Ellie for not picking up on their feelings either.

The problem, of course, was that *no one had told her how they felt about her*. And here's the thing: Even ambulances won't come unless you call.

"I don't appreciate being lumped in with cowards who just make m-moon eyes at her from a safe distance."

Oh, God… I can't believe I actually said that.

I could feel four pairs of eyes boring into me, their anger unmistakable. I wasn't going to let that stop me, though.

Or…so I say, but—to be honest—I was shaking in my boots. I felt like a chihuahua surrounded by the Four Horsemen of the apocalypse. But that just went to show that for the girl I loved, I'd face *any* threat!

I puffed out my chest, trying to put up a brave front.

"I-I'll think about giving you some advice, though…if you bow down and lick my boots." I punctuated this with a little snort for emphasis, hoping that might lend it an air of mockery and confrontation. "I've only known Ellie for six months. Y-You've all known her for a lot longer, haven't you? But now I've caught up to you. I-I've *overtaken* you. S-So what are you still doing here, meeting up just to lick each other's wounds?"

I surprised myself by how easily the words came to me.

That's funny… These don't really feel like a heroine's lines.

"Keep this up, and someone may come and pull the rug out from under you again," I continued. "Hee hee HORF!"

Whew… That felt great.

I'd even been able to get through that whole sentence without stuttering. In the middle of my taunting, it was almost like someone—or some*thing*—else had started speaking through me.

Prince Edward gave me a look of pure revulsion.

"This is nothing like the way you act when you're with Lizzie. It's almost as if you're a completely different person," he said, his tone dripping with disgust. It was clear he was making absolutely no effort to hide it now.

"You think so? Well, isn't it the same for *all* of *you*? Aren't you just showing Ellie the side of you that you *want* her to see?"

No one said anything in response.

It was only natural, though. That's just how humans are. I mean, was there *anyone* out there who felt comfortable being a hundred percent themselves around other people?

"How would you even *know* what kind of person I am? I mean, I...*I* don't even know who I am," I said, looking down and shrugging my shoulders.

Then I realized something— *Oh. This is what Ellie's always doing.* Whenever she was around people like Lord Isaac or Prince Robert, she was always shrugging her shoulders like this, looking totally done.

"You've got no right to criticize me," I added.

"Hmph... I see you're every bit as devious as your *friend*," Edward replied.

His insult made me stop to think for a moment. Then I gave him a meaningful chuckle—one as audacious as I could manage.

"Heh... Maybe I am."

He may have a point, I thought. After all, the main character changes a little in every route based on which love interest she's pursuing and what they want or need from her. In Edward's route, she's a girl fit to be queen. In Robert's, she has a fiercely competitive spirit. In Isaac's, she's clever and put-together. And in Christopher's, she's brimming with maternal love.

So, it made sense to me now why these taunts were beginning to come to me so easily.

"After all, I...I've picked the villainess's route."

Look, See? He’s Even Got Glasses

“I’d like to introduce our new transfer student,” my homeroom teacher announced one morning.

Immediately, the class broke out into an uproar.

It had been unusual enough when Lilia had transferred into the academy back in April, but it was pretty much unheard of to have a new transfer student now, in *October*—I mean, we were halfway through the school year already.

I glanced over at Lilia, who shook her head slightly as if to say, *I didn’t expect this either.*

Our teacher motioned towards the door, and the new transfer student entered the classroom.

His skin was a few shades darker than most of ours in the kingdom. He wore his long black hair in a ponytail that draped down his back. His eyes were narrow and had a slight upward slant that might’ve made him look somewhat severe, but his pleasant smile was enough to soften the effect.

At a glance, he looked like an amiable, gentle young man. If I’d met him in my past life, the overall impression he gave would’ve made me think that he was from somewhere in Asia.

Oh, I should also mention that he was very good-looking. My eyes shot wide open when I looked at him, and I’d be willing to bet money that Lilia had the same reaction.

“Hello, everyone. It is nice to meet you. My name is Yoh Won Lei, and I come from the East. I am the sixth prince of my family. I will only be here at your academy for half a year, but I look forward to getting to know you all,” the transfer student said.

He put his hands out in front of him, covering one fist with the palm of his other hand, and gave us a bow that had a distinctly foreign air to it.

Yoh Won Lei…

I remembered him from the game. He was a hidden character—a prince from one of the kingdom’s neighboring nations you could only meet on your second playthrough.

In case you haven’t caught my drift yet…he was another love

interest.

As he lifted his head upwards from his bow, our eyes met.

“All right, Mr. Won Lei,” the teacher said. “You can sit…”

Without letting the teacher finish his sentence, Yoh walked straight past him and over to the seat next to mine.

Huh? I’m pretty sure his first event involves him proposing to the main character out of nowhere. What the hell is he doing making a pit stop by my desk?

“Pardon me, but I think you’re a little lost,” I said quietly. “The saint is sitting one more row behind me.”

Why does this feel like déjà vu? I thought. *Well, here I go again, racking up some more good karma. At this rate, I’m bound to reach nirvana, right? Not that I’d know anything about that…*

Yoh looked at me. Suddenly, his face lit up. “How beautiful you are! Fate must have brought me here so I could meet you!”

“What?”

He knelt down, and then, to my surprise…he took my hand and planted a kiss on the back of my palm.



“Tell me, my beautiful lady. What is your name?”

“Hey, Lilia…?” I called out, turning to her for help. “Do you think you could use your ‘saint’s prayer’ on him? I think he’s going to need the strongest one you can manage. There seems to be something very wrong with his eyes.”

“There is nothing the matter with my eyes!” he protested.

“Then I guess it’s your head that’s the problem?”

“I have fallen in love with you at first sight! I beg of you, please marry me!”

“Marry me”?

“L-Lilia!” I cried.

“I-I’ve been using my prayer on him, but it doesn’t seem to be working! I think… I think he’s actually sane!”

Easy, girl. I know I’m one to talk, but that’s downright rude. Still, I don’t think I’ve *ever proposed to a girl my age, even as an empty flirtatious gesture. Wait…have I?*

No… No, of course I haven’t!

Sure, I had plenty of lines I liked to use on girls that *kind of* sounded like proposals, but I had absolutely no idea how to respond when a man pulled that on *me*. I was completely dumbfounded.

But, come to think of it, though…the girls were always responding with things like “If only *you* were my fiancé, Sir Burton.” I just had to spout off a line like that, right?

Trying to imitate the precedent the girls had set for me, I gave Yoh a bright smile and said, “Thank you. I’m honored that a man of your caliber would—”

“Don’t!”

“Mmf!”

Suddenly, I felt someone’s hand clamp over my mouth from behind. Judging from his voice, it must’ve been Robert.

Nice. Thanks for having my back, Robert.

“Mr. Fisher?” Isaac called out.

Mr. Fisher seemed to suddenly snap back to his senses and realized that he needed to step in.

“All right, all right. That’s enough messing around,” he said, clapping his hands. “Class is about to start, so take your seats.”

“I was not ‘messing around’!” Yoh replied.

“Uh-huh. Well, thank you for the show, but save the rest for

after class."

Yoh seemed to understand that Mr. Fisher was genuinely annoyed, so he reluctantly let go of my hand.

"There goes the rug…" Lilia muttered, unconsciously verbalizing her interior monologue again.

I looked down at the ground, but I didn't see a rug.

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"Oh, my beautiful lady… May I have the honor of knowing your name?" Yoh asked theatrically.

As soon as lunch break started, he was back at my desk and down on one knee again.

What the hell is with this barf-worthy behavior? Why does he keep trying to put the moves on me?

He reached his hand out to take mine, but I grabbed it and pulled him up forcefully so he was standing. I tried to smooth things over by transitioning into a handshake, as if that's what I'd been after all along.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Elizabeth Burton, the eldest daughter of Duke Burton."

"Such a lovely name! What shall I call you?"

"You can call me whatever you like."

"Then I shall call you 'my beautiful birdie.'"

For a moment, I was speechless. *I'm begging you, stop throwing me these curveballs. No one wants to talk to someone who can't play nicely.*

"I go by either 'Burton' or 'Elizabeth,'" I amended. "Please call me whichever you prefer."

His dark eyes flickered as he looked at me. As I peered into them and gazed back at my own reflection, I realized how strained my smile looked.

Crap. I can't let him dictate our conversation like this.

"Then I shall call you 'Elizabeth,'" he said.

"Excellent. I look forward to seeing you around, Prince Won Lei."

"Please! Call me 'Yoh'!"

"As you wish, Prince Yoh."

"There is no need for titles! We are friends, are we not?"

Friends? Listen, pal…we literally just met.

To be perfectly honest, it didn't exactly bother me to drop his title. I mean, I didn't have even an ounce of respect for him. But he was a foreign prince, so I felt like I had to keep up the pretense. I wasn't prepared to take the blame for a diplomatic crisis.

I looked over to Robert, hoping he might be able to provide me some guidance as a fellow royal. But he just shook his head, as if to say, *You think* I *know anything about diplomacy?*

Yeah... I don't know what I expected.

Oh, well. The academy's policy was that, on school grounds, we were to all treat each other as equals regardless of status. So, if anything happened, it was on the principal's head.

"Sure thing, Yoh," I said finally. "Well, I've got some stuff to take care of, so I'll see you around."

"What?"

"Let's go, Lilia."

"Huh?"

I slipped past Yoh and scooped Lilia up from her desk behind me, carrying her off in the crook of my arm. I walked briskly towards the door and made my gallant getaway from the classroom.

Mission accomplished.

But I wasn't free of him yet. I had to make sure he wouldn't follow me, so I flung a random window open and eyeballed the distance between where I was and the adjacent building's roof.

"Huh? Ellie? Um...?!"

"Hold that thought. We can talk once we've relocated to somewhere a little more private," I said.

I stepped up onto the window sill and leaped, ignoring Lilia's screams.

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I landed on the roof and set Lilia down. Her legs wobbled underneath her, like she was a newborn fawn, before giving out entirely.

"Hm? Are you afraid of heights?"

"I-I think *anyone* in my shoes would be afraid..."

I rubbed her back as she gasped for air. Gradually, the color returned to her ghostly pale face.

Come on, have some faith in me. I wouldn't have jumped if I didn't know we were gonna make it. I do stuff like this every day.

"What do you think Yoh is after?" I asked as I sat down beside her.

"Maybe you're just his type? I'm as surprised as you are, but I think that may be all there is to it."

"But…I mean…do I even look like a woman?"

After a thoughtful pause, Lilia replied, "Nope. Not one bit."

"Exactly. So how did he immediately recognize me as a woman? And why did he propose to me?"

When he's first introduced in the game, he seems like a friendly guy who's supposed to fill the archetype for the character who talks funny. But over the course of his route, it's revealed that he's actually a spy from the East whose mission is to track down the saint.

Even though he's actually a good guy deep down, the adults in his life are using him as a political pawn. As he spends more and more time with the main character, though, he falls in love with her for real.

It was certainly possible that he was a spy in this universe too, just like he was in the game, but things didn't add up. I was just a duke's daughter, and unfortunately, that granted me no real power or influence whatsoever. I wasn't even engaged to a member of the royal family anymore, so I couldn't imagine what value he could possibly see in spying on me.

If he was after Lilia, like he was in the game, then surely he would by trying to get close to *her*? There was nothing to be gained by trying to cozy up to *me*.

There must be something more to this…

"Plus…I can't explain it, but I feel like I'm getting a whiff of something familiar from him."

"'Familiar' how?"

"He reeks of deception, just like me. And just like me, I can tell he doesn't even feel bad about it."

I heard Lilia gulp.

If anyone knows what kind of person I really am, it's you, Lilia. You've had a front row seat.

"B-But! He wasn't like that in the game, right? I know he was a spy, but it kind of seemed like he didn't really have a choice. Plus,

he's a good guy at heart. His main archetype is the 'in-your-face character who talks funny,' you know?"

"Robert's not the same person he was in the game either, though, remember? It wouldn't be all that surprising if Yoh was different too."

"I-I guess so but…"

"Okay, let's entertain your theory for a bit and give him the benefit of the doubt," I said. "We'll assume he's a good guy at heart who's been pushed into the role of a spy, just like in the game. But despite his goals and his personality being the same as they are in the game, he didn't propose to you—which means that he must've meant it from his heart when he proposed to me. Which would prove…"

After a brief, dramatic pause, I presented my conclusion.

"That he's into guys."

"Huh? Wait… Whaaat?!" Lilia cried, bending backwards dramatically as if *literally* taken aback.

It felt uncharacteristically naive coming from someone who'd disdainfully called other students a bunch of "extremist yaoi fangirls."

Maybe Yoh was actually gay, but because he was a prince, he basically had no choice but to marry a woman? If that were the case, then it was certainly possible that he'd find a masculine-looking woman to be a more appealing candidate for marriage. At least…that was the only thing I could come up with.

"I know he's a hidden character, but don't forget that he's still a love interest!" Lilia exclaimed. "He falls in love with the main character in the game and everything! Besides, he clearly saw you as a woman! He's *canonically* interested in women!"

"Okay, then maybe he's bi? It wouldn't be *that* out there if he were."

If we were going to get really specific about it, then it'd probably have been more accurate to say he was probably bi with a preference for men.

I'd heard plenty of stories of gay men in our kingdom who had married women for purely practical purposes, since preserving the family bloodline was a top priority. Of course, that didn't stop them from having a dalliance or two with their footmen…and when their wives found out, that was pretty much the end of their

marriages.

Who was to say that things weren't different over in the East, though? I had no idea how their culture thought about sexuality.

"Maybe two men can marry each other in the East?" I mused.

"Then that would mean...two *women* can get married too, right?" Lilia asked after a thoughtful pause.

"That look in your eyes is freaking me out a bit, Lilia..."

"Oh, don't worry, Ellie. I'd never do anything to hurt you!"

"You know, I think we have very different ideas about what that means," I said with a sigh.

Lilia had turned into a real man-eater lately. Fending her off was getting to be kind of a challenge.

"I still think he's up to something, though," I said, returning to the topic of Yoh. "I can tell when someone actually has feelings for me. I may not seem very perceptive, but I've spent the last ten years of my life doing everything I could to turn myself into the love interest you'd pick. So, I think I'm pretty attuned to how people feel about me."

"I think that's a little rich, actually, coming from you..."

Um, ouch.

It seemed I wasn't ever going to live down my blunder at the dance. Okay, so maybe I hadn't been able to give a proper answer about who was my type, but that was just because I'd never given any thought to my *own* romantic preferences. When it came to other people's, though, I prided myself on my perceptiveness.

"I wish he'd just proposed to *you*, like he did in the game. That's what I would've done, if I were him."

"S-Seriously? Again, *little rich* coming from *you*..."

"Yeah, well...come on. I'm just a side character. An *evil* one, at that. He's different. I mean, he's a love interest. He was literally created to fall in love with you."

This was the world of an otome game, after all.

Sure, after living here for a while and getting to know all the love interests, I'd realized that they were all real people with real lives. But I knew—*we* knew—that the game's "powers that be" were still at work.

The bear I'd fought was a prime example of that. The game's canon always had the final say, even in this universe.

"It's the same for all the other love interests too, you know. If

my meddling hadn't made things so chaotic and confusing, I'm sure they would've all fallen in love with you."

"Your 'meddling'? Well, I guess that *is* a pretty accurate way to put it. You've certainly caused plenty of chaos and confusion...in more ways than one," Lilia said, looking away.

I'd stolen the main character from all of the other love interests. If that didn't count as "meddling," I didn't know what did.

"Like I said, the love interests are supposed to fall in love with you, the main character. That's how these games work."

"I mean, I agree...*part* of it is probably related to me being the main character. But I think the fact that I'm a saint actually plays a bigger part."

I cocked my head, confused.

In the game, the main character's allowed to transfer into the academy because she's a saint, and she's able to heal the love interests with her powers. Her status as a saint is also the reason she's allowed to have relationships with blue-blooded, upper-class men who would otherwise be completely out of her league. But, in my mind, that didn't necessarily mean that they fell in love with her *because* she was a saint.

"I-I've been doing some research into past saints ever since my powers activated. When I read over the church records carefully, I realized that saints don't just have the power to heal with a 'saint's prayer.' A-Apparently, they can use the power of 'charm' too."

"Charm?" I repeated.

"I-I mean, no matter how beautiful she is, don't you think it's a little weird that everyone would fall head over heels for some plain peasant girl from the sticks?"

"Well, Robert's a total sucker, so...it's not *that* weird."

"True," she replied without hesitation.

Sorry, Robert...

"But everyone has a type, right?" she continued.

"Sure. Some people won't be interested in someone others would consider a ten if they're not their type. But a seven who's their type will have them drooling all over themselves. Is that what you mean?"

"Y-You really don't mince words..."

I thought I was just stating the obvious, but Lilia looked a little uncomfortable. Sometimes I had no idea what she was thinking.

Oh, well. If anything, it's a good thing if I'm making her uncomfortable. The sooner she gets over me, the better.

"Well, my theory is that 'charm' magic *makes* the saint everyone's type. That would explain why every saint is glorified in the records as being an incredible, beautiful woman."

"They're starting to sound more like witches than saints…"

"Yeah. That's because we're talking about magic, right? If you think about it, any church-affiliated person who uses magic is a 'saint.' But if they're a heathen, they're a 'witch.'"

I saw her point, but it still felt a bit far-fetched. Lilia's talk of magic wasn't really landing for me. There are barely any fantasy elements in the *Royal LOVERS* game, and they're not very fleshed out. There's a bit more in the sequel, but still…the only thing that even comes close to magic is the saint's healing power, and it certainly isn't labeled as such.

"H-Haven't you felt it? D-Don't you ever find yourself overwhelmed by how cute I am, or feel like your head goes blank and fuzzy when you look at me?" Lilia asked.

"Wait… *You* were doing that to me?!" I blurted out.

It was starting to come together now.

I *had* always wondered what was going on there. I mean, I'd always placed my own self-interest over everything else. My policy had always been to look out for number one (which is to say, *me*). That's the whole reason I'd shed so much blood, sweat, and tears over the past ten years. Even if guilt crept up on me for toying with the emotions of a real person sometimes, and even if I was dealing with the most beautiful girl in the world—who was sitting right in front of me, by the way—none of that should've overshadowed my own self-interest.

And yet…sometimes, when I looked at her, I couldn't help but feel like I just couldn't leave her alone. I even had moments I couldn't help but wonder if I might actually be in love with her.

These feelings would come on suddenly, without warning. I'd feel my head grow fuzzy, like I couldn't think about anything else. My body would start moving on its own. It was a bizarre sensation—one that I could remember experiencing several times around her.

But whenever we'd go our separate ways, or whenever something else would catch my attention, those feelings would

vanish in an instant. If my feelings towards her were genuine, then surely they'd have had more staying power than that?

"I-I don't think the magic is very strong, at least in my case. And I don't think it's ever the case that *everyone* is under the saint's spell. I-I mean, obviously… It'd be a living hell if your parents and siblings were infatuated with you."

"Lilia, please. We're living in the world of a T-rated game here. Don't ruin that for us by saying ominous stuff like that."

"I don't think the magic works on anyone who's a blood relative or whose heart is already set on someone else…which makes sense. Saints wouldn't have their reputation for purity if they regularly tore apart happy lovers."

She had a point. I could see how that would easily be compatible with the philosophy of otome games, which placed a lot of importance on "true love." It wasn't about external measures of love like being married or having a fiancé, but about how people really felt in their *hearts*. That probably explained why the main character was able to come between Robert and Elizabeth Burton in the game—because in their hearts, they weren't *really* in love with each other.

"A-Also…it seems the magic is especially effective on side characters."

"Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Think of it this way: It's like how you can't one-hit kill named enemies in an RPG…I think."

"Okay… I guess that makes sense."

So that's why Isaac and Robert had looked so nonchalant when Lilia was first introduced, even though all of our other classmates were already making moon eyes at her. I mean, that was in character for Isaac…but Robert was supposed to be a sucker. I would've expected that he'd easily fall prey to whatever hypnotic powers this "charm" magic held. If it was more effective on me than *him*, then that implied I was even more pea-brained than the Pea-Brained Prince.

Not sure I love that line of reasoning…

"B-But if you really are just a side character, then I feel like the magic should be having a bigger effect on you…" Lilia added.

"Oh, I think it's working pretty well on me. I can think of plenty of times I've been under your spell."

“But if it were *really* working, then you’d be tripping over your feet and swearing your love for me. I mean, you don’t even get hearts in your eyes.”

“Yeah, no. I’d die before I made a fool of myself like that,” I replied with a wry smile.

Even if I did *act like that, would that really make you happy? That seems like a pretty massive turnoff, if you ask me*, I thought, flabbergasted.

“If my magic works on you…then that means I still have a chance, right?” Lilia mumbled quietly as she looked at me.

“What?”

“Because it means you don’t have your heart set on anyone else.”

I chose not to dignify that with a response. Sure, I *didn’t* have my heart set on anyone, but that didn’t reserve a spot for *her*.

I looked deep into her amber eyes, trying to scheme up a way to make her give up on me. *Maybe I should start acting more feminine?* I thought. *No… I don’t think I have it in me. Maybe I should just pretend to yield to Yoh’s advances? Yeah, no thanks. I definitely don’t have it in me to do that either.*

I knew that the moment I gave in to Yoh, everyone would think, *She may dress like a man, but she just wanted to be treated like a woman all along.* I couldn’t let that happen. I’d bring dishonor to every cross-dressing young noblewoman in the kingdom if I set that precedent. (I mean, I had no idea how many cross-dressing young noblewomen there were out there, but…my point stands.)

It wasn’t that I necessarily wanted to be treated like a man…but I didn’t want to be treated like a woman either. If I had to take some sort of stand, then I’d say I just want to be treated like a *person*, I guess. I just didn’t want people thinking I was malleable.

“O-Of course, I wouldn’t want you to fall in love with me because of my ‘charm’ powers. I’d…want you to fall in love with me for real,” Lilia said.

“Listen to you,” I teased. “You sound like a real main character now.”

“Well, there’s no point if you fall in love with me just because of my magic, right? That’d just be a sham. It’d feel empty.”

“Hmm… Love is invisible, though, right? If something *looks* like love, then does it really make any difference whether or not that’s

what it actually is?"

"Jeez, Ellie... You always seem like you understand, but you don't actually get it, do you?"

"I hear that a lot, yeah."

I don't think we're ever gonna see eye to eye on this. Guess we'll just have to agree to disagree.

I understood what she meant, of course. I just didn't agree with her.

"B-By the way... Who was your favorite character in *Royal LOVERS*?"

"Hm?"

"Like, when you played the game. Which character did you like the most?"

"Where'd this come from, all of a sudden?"

"I'd just like to know...for my own reference."

I cocked my head in confusion. "For your own reference...?"

Lilia seemed intent upon waiting for my answer in silence, so I just shrugged my shoulders in a show of resignation.

Sheesh. What is she up to?

"Do you really have to ask?" I said.

I heard her gulp.

"I liked whoever's route I was doing at the time the most," I said plainly. There was no point in putting an emphasis on it.

"What?" she said.

"What?" I asked back. "Wait... It's not the same for you?"

"N-No...my favorite character was Edward. Wait, what? Is it normal for you to not have a favorite character? I know they're all likable, but wasn't there anyone who, like, stood out to you...?"

"So did you only do Edward's route?" I asked her, confused.

"No. I liked Yoh's a lot too. Plus, I like to collect all of the CGs, so I completed all of the endings in everyone's routes. Oh... I guess I did do Edward's route multiple times to see his romantic ending and his best ending, though."

Yep, that figures. I had a feeling she'd played the game a ton.

I was only getting more and more confused, though. If she liked Edward so much, then wouldn't it have been more efficient to just keep playing through his route? I mean, wouldn't that have been better for her mental health? Why suffer through the friendship endings of characters she didn't even like?

“Aren’t you just saying that you play through everyone’s route—even the routes for characters you don’t like—just for the sake of being a completionist? I feel like that’s kind of disrespectful to your first choice…and to all of the other characters too, actually.”

“D-Disrespectful…?” Lilia repeated incredulously, looking at me wide-eyed like I was some kind of cryptid. “Are there seriously people out there who play otome games with that kind of mindset?!”

“Uh, yeah. You’re looking at one.”

“I-I feel like you’re one to talk, considering what you do in *real life*…” she retorted.

“Touché. I guess I can’t argue with that,” I said with a laugh.

I stood up. We’d been here on the roof for a while now. Our lunch break was supposed to be for lunch, but so much for that. I decided I’d just ask the cafeteria lady to wrap up something I could eat on the go.

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“Excuse me, Elizabeth! I beg you, please show me around your academy!”

Just as I was about to make my way back home, Yoh cornered me.

I felt myself frowning deeply in contrast to his vibrant, friendly smile.

“Not gonna happen. Why me, anyway?” I said.

“Your beautiful voice—it is just like a bell! I know I will remember everything so much better this way!”

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never heard a bell this low-pitched…

Thanks to his “compliment,” my voice—and my mood—hit an all-time low. My tone grew so deep and heavy that it would’ve made a shrine’s offertory box bell sound light.

“You know…you ought to ask a member of the student council,” I said. “Hey! Isaac!”

“What?” he said, turning around to look at me with blissful ignorance in his eyes. He had no idea what I was about to sign him up for.

I hugged him around the shoulders and pulled him in so I could

introduce him to Yoh.

"This is Isaac. He's a member of the student council, and he's super smart. Real serious guy. Look, see? He's even got glasses. He'd do a much better job of showing you around than I would."

"Hey!" Isaac cried, glaring at me.

I gave him a wink that said, *You've got my back, right?*

Isaac opened his mouth to protest, but then he closed it suddenly.

Yoh began to protest, "Non, non! Elizabeth, I want *you*—"

"Fine," Isaac interrupted. "I'll show him around."

He straightened his glasses as he held Yoh back with his arm and inserted himself between us.

I found myself pondering something I'd often asked myself while playing the game: Why in the world did Yoh pepper his speech with French if he was supposed to be from somewhere in *Asia*? I could only imagine that the staff had only known how to write French foreigners.

I felt like there were better ways to give him an Asian flare…but, to be fair, they might've ruined any serious scenes. Probably best not to go there.

"I'll show you around the academy. I'll be sure to give you a *thorough* rundown so you never have to ask another question about it again," Isaac said.

Classic Isaac. I knew I could count on you. Nothing like a true friend, right? No…a best *friend!*

I clapped him on the shoulder and whispered into his ear, "Thank you, Isaac! I love you!"

"I love you too," he said after a long pause.



I laughed. “You know, I’m always pleasantly surprised when you decide to play along.”

He shot me a sidelong glance and let out a sigh.

For the most part, he was serious to a fault, but he could indulge in good banter when he wanted to—or a good aristocratic bout of beating around the bush. He always did it with such a serious expression on his face too. And since he wasn’t really the type to joke around, it was so surreal that I couldn’t help laughing every time he did it.

Isaac, you sly bastard!

Yoh watched on, blinking.

“You two must be very close,” he said.

“Oh. Yeah. We’re best friends,” I replied.

“Best friends?” Yoh repeated, cocking his head.

Isaac and I glanced at each other, nodding slightly.

“That’s right. That’s why I’ll always step in when she needs a hand,” Isaac said. Then, to me he said, “Just don’t cause *too* much trouble for me.”

“Best friends should not interfere in romantic rendezvous.”

“Romantic rendezvous”? Is that *what you’re calling this? I think you need to pull out a dictionary and try that again.*

Despite his smile, it was clear that Yoh was making a threat. But Isaac stood firm, refusing to take even a single step back.

“Actually, it’s a best friend’s *job* to weigh in on romantic prospects. Best friends talk to each other about everything—and that includes giving romantic advice,” Isaac declared proudly, as if he were stating the obvious.

That’s a little bold, considering we’ve never had any heart-to-hearts about romance before.

I appreciated the sentiment, but if I ever found myself in need of romantic advice, I certainly wasn’t going to go to Isaac for it. It seemed a bit silly to expect any wisdom from a late bloomer who didn’t even feel comfortable around women.

“As your friend, Burton, let me give you a word of advice: Stay away from this degenerate. No respectable man would throw himself at a woman the moment he meets her.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t want anything to do with him.”

“Well, you heard her,” Isaac said, turning to Yoh. “Only a stalker follows someone around when they’ve already been rejected. I

won't let you keep bothering her."

Yoh looked over at me. Although it didn't seem like he was ready to give up, it apparently dawned on him that Isaac wasn't going to back down. His shoulders slumped, and he fell silent.

Good riddance. Thanks for the assistance, Isaac.

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"Man… I'm exhausted."

"I can tell," Isaac said, looking down at me as I limply sprawled over my desk.

Ever since Yoh had transferred into our school, he'd taken every opportunity to propose to me and practically climb all over me. Honestly, I'd had enough.

For the most part, I'd done everything I could to get away from him. Lilia, Isaac, and Robert would help fend him off, but they couldn't always be there to save me. Yoh struck during short intervals of time, like in between classes, when I had no means of escape.

I had a naturally quick temper, so there was a real risk that I might end up losing it and come to blows with him before too long. Lately, I had found myself starting to entertain how I might finagle myself a lighter sentence if I ever found myself accused of strangling a foreign prince.

Fortunately, Yoh and Robert had to leave school early today on official business. Under normal circumstances, I would've been jealous they could skip, but today I was just eternally grateful to the royal family. I felt like throwing my hands up and shouting, "All hail the Diagrantzes!"

"You should just tell him clearly that you're not interested. Don't leave any room for doubt," Isaac said.

"Uh, I feel like I've been *pretty clear*."

"You're still going too easy on him."

"Yeah? I dunno, I mean…he's foreign royalty, y'know? I don't want to be disrespectful."

I couldn't exactly just fling him out of a window to get my message across. That was practically *begging* for a diplomatic crisis.

My bangs were gently falling in front of my face, and I could

feel my hairstyle coming apart. I combed them back into place with my fingers. Three members of my fan club had been sent to the nurse's office after I'd come to school with my hair unstyled that day, so I'd gone back to styling it as usual. I'd also started putting effort into my makeup again.

To be fair, though, it really had more to do with the fact that the game's hidden character had arrived and proposed to me out of nowhere. I felt like this was no time to be slacking off and letting my guard down.

"Want me to pretend to be your boyfriend to scare him off?" Isaac offered.

I laughed awkwardly. "That's all right, but thanks. I appreciate the thought."

I must've looked *really* tired if he was willing to go that far.

Trying to pull myself together, I straightened my spine and sat up. I could see my profile in Isaac's red-brown eyes. When I returned his gaze, his eyes darted around. He reached into his bag and pulled out a notebook, which he presented to me.

"Here. This is for our next class. You didn't do the homework, did you?"

"Thanks. You're a lifesaver."

The next class was math. I was doing pretty badly on the exams, so I figured I should at least try to make sure my homework wasn't a mess too. I rummaged around inside my desk and pulled out my own notebook and textbook. Then I flipped through the textbook's pages.

Pretty sure we're studying derivatives right now. I'm not proud to say this, but I have absolutely no idea how those work.

There'd been a change in seating assignments after the summer break, but since I'd been on bed rest at home—at least, that's what they'd called my *house arrest*—my seat had been picked for me. I'd wound up sitting at the front next to Isaac again.

To be perfectly honest with you, I'm pretty sure that teachers deliberately place the worst students at the front of the class so they can keep an eye on them. I wasn't too happy about that little arrangement, but I *was* extremely grateful that I'd been seated next to Isaac again.

I knew it wasn't great to rely on him for everything, and that I'd probably pay for not actually trying to learn through my own

work… But hey, it was just homework, right? I knew I would have only myself to blame for the situation I'd find myself in when it was time for exams, but that didn't mean I wouldn't also blame Isaac for spoiling me with these touching (and surprising) gestures.

"You know, I feel like you spoil me too much. I think I'm turning into a worse and worse student for it. Is that what you want?" I joked.

"If you can do the homework by yourself, then by all means," he replied, snatching his notebook back from me.

"I take it back. Please, Isaac, let me copy your homework! I'll worship the ground you walk on!"

I clapped both of my hands together pleadingly. With a sigh, Isaac returned the notebook he'd offered.

"Huh?"

As I was flipping through my textbook to look at the homework questions, I noticed a letter I'd never seen before wedged between its pages. It was sealed in an envelope with dainty flowers all over it. There was no address, but I could tell it had to be from a girl.

Curious, I flipped the textbook over. Isaac's name was written on it.

"Hey, Isaac… This is *your* textbook, right?" I asked him.

"Hm?"

I showed him the textbook, and he checked inside his bag.

"Sorry," he said. "I must've taken yours by mistake when we had our last study session."

He took a textbook out of his bag and compared it to the one that had been in my desk.

Yeah, that's my textbook all right. Looks good as new.

"You write your name on your textbooks?" I asked.

"Yes. Doesn't everyone?"

They do? I wondered. *We're in high school. Do we really need to?*

I felt pretty confident that probably eighty percent of our class didn't write their names on their textbooks…but I had no idea where that confidence came from.

"I found a letter from a girl wedged between the pages. You know anything about that?" I tried asking him as I returned his textbook.

"What?"

He looked genuinely puzzled. I watched him flip through the

pages gingerly. Then he stopped suddenly.

It looked to me like he'd put the letter in his textbook and forgotten about it until now.

"But why would he do that?" you ask? Well, my theory is that he didn't want anyone to find the letter and make fun of him, so he hid in there…or something like that, anyway.

"You don't have to hide your love letters from me. Just so you know, I'm happy to dish out romantic advice too."

"No, I—"

I chuckled. "I never knew you were such a smooth operator."

I peeked at his face as I laughed, and he glared at me like he wanted to protest. Then, as if resigned to his fate, he pushed his glasses up and let out a sigh.

I Do It For Her —Isaac—

Wedged in between the pages of my textbook was a letter from some random girl in my class. We'd never spoken, but I was reasonably confident that she was an up-and-coming viscount's daughter.

When I opened the letter to read it, I found a plea to meet her after class behind the school.

This letter couldn't have been meant for me, I thought, even though the letter contained no egregious manners of address such as "to my beloved." While there were some girls in our class who—for reasons beyond my comprehension—sometimes spoke to me in an effort to support my relationship with Burton, they were an anomaly. Whatever quality it was that drew a woman to a man, it was not a quality I possessed.

Chief among the reasons that I was convinced this letter wasn't for me, however, was that my textbook had been in *Burton's* desk when the letter had been smuggled into it—she had taken mine by mistake. It was likely that someone had assumed it was her textbook.

Yet, as plausible as that was, there was something amiss.

The Sir Burton Fan Club had a strict rule—any letter addressed to Burton must first pass an inspection from its members and undergo any necessary censoring. The letter's sender didn't need to go through the trouble of stuffing it into "her" textbook—there were easier ways to get it to her. It was possible that they'd wanted to avoid any censorship, but the letter's contents were so unremarkable that it seemed unlikely it would have been subject to any.

Furthermore, the fan club had no rules against summons. Even if someone were to ask Burton to meet them at school somewhere for a short period of time—to profess their love for her, that is—the fan club would have permitted it.

I'd heard that Burton had received fewer and fewer such confessions ever since Douglas had transferred into our school, but apparently they'd been on the rise again. In fact, she'd received

several in the past week alone. On more than one occasion, I'd caught sight of her in the rear courtyard, smiling uncomfortably as a young woman shed tears of rejection.

The fan club had a reputation for being strict and swift in its punishment. I'd even heard rumors of students being "purged" from the academy at its behest. Any student that went behind its back did so at their own peril, and the letter in my textbook simply didn't seem important enough to merit the risk.

Taking that all into account, I could come to only one conclusion: Someone needed to speak with Burton privately, and they couldn't risk anyone witnessing or knowing about their meeting. Whatever their reasons were, the need for secrecy suggested that there was something dubious or unsavory afoot…for instance, that they intended to threaten her.

Of course, it was entirely possible that they meant no harm. Were my theory disproved, I would be all too happy. But if any harm *were* to come to her, I knew I would never forgive myself. And so, I prepared myself to do whatever it took to keep her safe; I put into place any and every precaution I could think of.

As I considered all my options and weighed which among them would be the most effective, I folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. I cast a sidelong glance at Burton, who was grinning next to me, and let out a sigh.

Must be nice to be so blissfully ignorant.

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After classes let out, I set off alone to the designated meeting spot behind the school. I stood in wait for the letter's sender for a while. Then, just a few minutes before the designated time, I noticed a female student walking over. She stopped and stood a deliberate distance from me.

"You're Viscount DeMille's daughter, aren't you?" I asked her.

For a moment, she was silent. Then, she spoke up. "And *you* are?"

She moved only her eyes as she addressed me, glancing up at me as if trying to assess my intentions. It was difficult to see her face under her long chestnut-colored bangs, but I spotted a distinctive mole on the right side of her mouth. Her hunched

posture and hung head gave her a docile, insecure appearance. I was immediately struck by the dissonance in her tone, which was cool and composed in contrast.

"Um, excuse me…but where is Sir Burton? My letter was addressed to *her*."

"Why don't you answer my question first?" I pressed. "You *are* Viscount DeMille's daughter, are you not?"

After a long pause, she conceded. "Yes," she said, nodding.

"Why are you lying?"

"I am not—"

"The viscount's daughter was absent for a fortnight, recovering from ill health. But according to her classmates, she's seemed different since returning to school."

I pushed up my glasses as I scrutinized the girl in front of me. She clammed up and hung her head, looking at the ground again.

"You've never had anyone close enough to call a 'friend,' but people have noticed that you're hunching and hanging your head even more than usual. They say that your voice sounds unnatural when you answer questions in class, and your excuse is that you've caught a cold."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Why are you lying?"

Despite my probing, she didn't budge. She didn't even seem flustered that I was calling her out—if anything, the fidgety nervousness that she'd been displaying earlier seemed to have suddenly vanished. No longer was she glancing up at me timidly; in fact, she seemed to be *glaring* at me through her bangs now.

The academy's policy was that all students were equals on campus. That being said, it was unthinkable for a viscount's daughter to regard a member of an earl's family this way.

"Why are you pretending to be Viscount DeMille's daughter?" I asked again.

"You insult me with your ridiculous accusations."

As she turned to walk away, I spoke up again. "Let me tell you something else I've heard—the viscount's daughter apparently has a mole by her mouth."

"And what of it?"

She turned back around. This time, she wasn't hanging her head, so I could see the mole to the right of her mouth clearly.

I peered behind her bangs to see what expression she was wearing. Given her frown, she looked thoroughly peeved.

I stared straight at her. “It’s on the *left* side of her mouth.”

“What?”

“Shall I repeat myself? The *real* Viscount DeMille’s daughter has a mole on the opposite side of her mouth.”

“How dare you!” the girl said, suddenly covering her mouth with her hand.

I smiled back at her. It was a Machiavellian smile that reminded me all too well of a certain someone. “You’re lying.”

“Y-You cretin!”

“Now tell me: Who are you, and why are you masquerading as the viscount’s daughter? What business do you have with Burton?”

The girl—the fake viscount’s daughter—didn’t answer me. Instead, I watched the upper half of her body sway slightly forwards. Then, in the time it took to take a breath, she’d closed the distance between us.

Instinctively, I took a step back, ready to make a run for it, but I fumbled my timing. In the next moment, I found myself flying backwards and landing on my rear with a surprising amount of force.

There was a loud rustle of dry leaves and the sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

“Lord Isaac!” Marquis Micheli’s daughter cried from the second-floor window.

“I’m fine!” I called back, standing up and wiping the dirt off of my pants.

Then, several brawny boys jumped out of a window on the first floor.

“Can’t believe she actually fell in.”

“You need to work on your footwork, Miss Imposter.”

The boys gathered around the gaping hole in front of me, chattering excitedly. It was about two meters in diameter and three meters deep. I was impressed they’d managed to dig a hole that big on such short notice.

At the bottom of the hole lay the woman pretending to be Viscount DeMille’s daughter along with a heap of leaves that she’d taken with her in her fall. She looked up at us with bewilderment in her eyes, probably trying to figure out what in the world had

just happened to her. A wisp of black hair was poking out underneath her chestnut-colored hair, which appeared to be a wig.

In case you haven't figured it out yet, I'll explain: The fake viscount's daughter had fallen into a pitfall that we'd dug and covered with leaves. She'd fallen for—and, well, *into*—the most pedestrian, childish trap imaginable.

It was exactly the outcome I'd planned for in my simulations. I had laid the trap in hopes that the shock of meeting someone unexpected at the designated meeting spot (i.e., me) and having her ruse revealed would be enough to distract her from noticing it—and I had been right.

"Your biggest mistake was engaging with me," I said to her as I peered down into the hole. "The moment you realized that I was the one waiting here for you, and not Elizabeth Burton, you should have retreated."

The fake viscount's daughter's face contorted into a look of bitter frustration. It was a wholly unladylike, vulgar expression unbefitting a nobleman's daughter. But, then, she probably *wasn't* a nobleman's daughter.

"Or did you think you could shut me up if you caught me alone?" I asked her.

Several brawny boys stood at my side. They were, of course, members of the Burton Battalion. Once I'd informed them of the danger that might come to their beloved Commander, they'd been quick to lend me their support. Naturally, they were the ones who had dug the pitfall.

Several girls from my class, including Marquis Micheli's daughter, peered down at us from the second-story windows. They'd volunteered to help figure out the best positions for the pitfall and me, run through simulations, and stand at the ready to call for a teacher if worse came to worst.

"Well, unfortunately for you, I'm not alone...and neither is Burton."

"Ngh! Take this!" the fake viscount's daughter exclaimed in a deep voice. Then she withdrew something from her pocket and threw it at her feet.

In an instant, a huge cloud of smoke erupted from the hole, obscuring my vision. She'd probably thrown a smoke bomb. In a worst-case scenario, the fumes might have even been toxic.

I covered my mouth with my sleeve and did my best to avoid inhaling any of the smoke. Fortunately, it didn't seem to be particularly toxic, but when it cleared, the hole was empty.

"She got away?"

"Sorry, Guildford. We couldn't catch her."

"No, that's all right. Don't worry about it."

I looked around at the boys from the Burton Battalion, who were gnashing their teeth in frustration. Fortunately, it didn't seem as though anyone was injured or sick from the smoke. We'd even gleaned some useful information on the enemy, even if it wasn't much. All in all, I felt this made the mission a success.

I looked up at the second floor at the girls who looked worriedly down at us.

"Let a teacher know what's happened," I told them. "And let Prince Edward know too."

"B-But..." Marquis Micheli's daughter began. The other girls looked equally displeased by my request.

I quickly discerned why. It had taken time to plan out our strategy, and the girls had been strangely eager to (in their words) "show Sir Burton what they could do." They didn't want to let this opportunity go to waste. Some of the girls—the ones who were rooting for Burton and me to be together—were probably also concerned that Edward would steal my thunder, so to speak.

While I appreciated their support, as far as I was concerned, they had their priorities mixed up. Nothing was more important than keeping Burton safe.

I shook my head slightly. "It pays to have powerful allies. Besides, I don't need to be the one to save the day. All that matters to me is her safety, and I'll make use of any means I can to guarantee it."

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It felt like everything had changed so suddenly. And by "everything," I mean the way that Burton treated Lilia Douglas.

Until now, she'd been handling Douglas as if she were something precious and delicate. Out of nowhere, however, they had suddenly become comfortable friends instead. It was such a baffling one-eighty that I couldn't help but wonder if Burton had

hit her head wrong during that fight with the bear. I had no idea what had happened between the two of them to have prompted this shift.

Well, no…that's not entirely true. I'd heard Burton reject Douglas and say she just wanted the two of them to be friends. Yes, I'd heard it with my own ears, but…it felt impossible to wrap my head around. Until that moment, she'd seemed downright *smitten* with the other girl.

What about the whole thing with "soulmates"? I wondered.

But the truth of it was, I was mostly just relieved.

I'd thought we'd be able to go back to the way things used to be—with *me* by her side. At least, that's what *should* have happened…

"I have fallen in love with you at first sight! I beg of you, please marry me!"

The moment that scoundrel took her hand and laid a kiss on it, a torrent of emotions swept over me and rendered me paralyzed. Because he'd just done what I'd always, always longed to do. And yet I'd always, *always* restrained myself.

I hadn't felt that I was good enough for her. I thought I needed to work even harder to gain her trust. I thought I needed her parents' blessing, and that I'd need to climb the ranks to convince them I was a suitable match. Those convictions were what had been keeping me in check this whole time.

It was the reason that I'd been able to grin and bear it whenever I saw her looking lovingly at Lilia Douglas instead of letting my jealousy get the best of me and doing something rash. I felt confident that the foundation of our relationship was too strong to be defeated by something as unscientific as "fate." As long as I never gave up, I couldn't lose.

Believing that helped me to keep pushing through, and I knew that that was unlikely to change. I *couldn't* change those beliefs now, not even if I'd wanted to.

I felt that was the best I could do—both for myself and for her. And that's exactly why I couldn't stand idly by as someone just reached out his hand and grabbed what I'd dreamed of all this time, right in front of my eyes. I couldn't stop thinking about how much I wished it were *me* planting that kiss on her hand.

Then I recalled Lilia Douglas's warning from the other day: that if I kept dragging my feet, someone might come and pull the rug

out from underneath me. As I watched Burton respond to the new transfer student, I felt pretty confident that I had nothing to worry about. Still, doubts flitted through my mind.

If it isn't one thing, it's another. All you ever do is make me worry about you.

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As I—privately disgusted—watched that scoundrel continue to hound Burton, I suddenly felt her hand wrap around my back. She pulled me in for a side hug.

Instantly, my face grew hot at the unexpected touch.

"Hey! Isaac!"

"What?"

"This is Isaac. He's a member of the student council, and he's super smart. Real serious guy. Look, see? He's even got glasses. He'd do a much better job of showing you around than I would."

From the sounds of it, it seemed she was trying to rope me into giving the scoundrel a tour of the school.

"Hey!" I said, glaring at her.

I was prepared to protest, but she disarmed me with a wink that was so crisp, it could've made an audible "snap." I knew she was hamming it up—and that she did this with everyone—but I couldn't help but feel a bit giddy at being on the receiving end.

Hmph. I bet you think all you have to do is make that face at me, and I'll do whatever you want.

Well...she was right.

"I'll show you around the academy. I'll be sure to give you a *thorough* rundown so you never have to ask another question about it again," I ended up saying, knowing that I was playing right into her hand.

The fact of the matter was that I simply couldn't stomach seeing this prince from the east act so chummy with her. I wasn't about to let him wander off with her alone—not if I could help it.

She gave me a toothy grin. Then she leaned in and whispered into my ear, "Thank you, Isaac! I love you!"

I knew she was only messing around, but my heart wouldn't stop pounding.

It's just a joke, I told myself. *You know that better than anyone.*

There was no hidden meaning behind her words nor any trace of sincerity. And yet, they had come from her mouth, in her voice—and she had said them to *me*. That was enough to make my heart beat so loudly that I could hear it.

And, at the same time, I felt a painful constriction in my heart, as though someone had it in a viselike grip. It said a lot about our relationship that she could make an offhand joke like that. Some of those things were good. Some of them…were not so good.

"I love you too," I choked out.

For a second, her eyes widened. Then she let out a laugh, like I'd said something funny.

It felt frustrating to know that we weren't close enough for our exchange to be anything other than a joke. And yet, I was comforted by the thought that she would only ever joke like that with *me*.

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One day, I would tell her how I felt. And until that day came, all I could do was try my best.

Someone out there wanted to hurt Elizabeth Burton, and that was all I needed to know.

Until I’m Satisfied

“You’ll be getting lunch A, right?”

“Hm? Oh. Yeah.”

“Y-You always pick that one, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

It was lunchtime. Lilia had caught up to me with a little jog and was now peering over at my plate.

“The likelihood that you’ll choose lunch A is…98.25 percent. It’s been that way ever since I transferred here,” she said in a halting manner.

“That’s…*specific*.”

“It would be 100 percent, but it’s off-kilter because of the à la carte options.”

“If anything’s off-kilter, I think it might be *you*.”

Honestly, she was starting to freak me out. *Why do my friends have to act like such stalkers?* I wondered, dejected.

I found an empty seat and pulled out a chair. Once Lilia sat down in it, I took the seat on the other side of the table.

“Look, there’s no special meaning behind it. I don’t really have any foods I love or hate, so I just order whatever I see first,” I explained.

“You don’t have a favorite food?”

“Nothing really comes to mind… I mean, obviously I’d prefer to eat something tasty instead of something gross, but that’s about it.”

After clapping our hands together in thanks for the food, we dug into our lunches. Of course, we didn’t really do the whole “itadakimasu” thing here, but since Lilia was doing it, I ended up doing it too.

As I chewed on my sautéed chicken, I reflected on how grateful I was to finally be able to eat my lunch in peace. It felt like it had been ages. Fortunately, Yoh was absent from school on official business again today. I couldn’t help but wish he’d never come back.

Then I thought about my answer to Lilia’s question. I did like to

eat anything tasty. But since I'd happily dig into anything sweet or spicy, my idea of what qualified as "tasty" was probably a bit broader than most people's. Sure, I hated bell peppers…but in my book, that wasn't even considered food. So that didn't count.

"What was your favorite dish in your past life, then?" Lilia asked.

"Hmm… I dunno. I'm just not that fussy about food, so I assume I must've been the same in my past life."

"There's nothing you could have stuffed yourself full of? Like, ramen or sushi…?"

"My memories of my past life are all pretty hazy, so I wouldn't know," I replied, stabbing a potato with my fork. "Did I never mention that?"

Lilia's hand suddenly stopped moving. She didn't seem to be making much progress on the potato gratin on her plate.

"You don't remember anything about your past life?" she asked me.

"Well, I remember stuff about the game. Not much other than that, though. Oh, I remember stuff from other otome games too. There was this one called *Crouching Love, Hidden Blade*—that one was my favorite."

"Oh! I've played that one. The graphics were beautiful, huh?"

"Yeah. The portrait expressions and mouth movements were really natural too."

I soaked up the rest of the sauce on my plate with some bread. Every lunch option came with a loaf. As I said, I wasn't really fussy about food. But ideally, I'd have loved to swap out the bread for cabbage…and maybe the potato for broccoli too. It would've been great for my training, and I imagined that I could get quite a few of the girls on board too. They had to pay attention to their diets too, after all.

"Do you remember stuff like…your name or your age? Or what you did for work?"

"Nope. Not a thing. Do you, Lilia?"

After a long pause, she answered. "Yes. I…wish I didn't, though."

A gloomy expression crossed her face.

I'd gotten the sense that Lilia didn't have the best past life, and it seemed I was right on the money. Since "good" and "bad" are so subjective, though, I'd probably never really know what it was like.

"D-Don't you ever wonder about your past life?" she asked,

looking up at me awkwardly. “Like, what kind of person you were, or how you died?”

“Not really,” I replied as I swallowed a bite of bread.

Lilia’s eyes grew wide.

“I mean, I don’t really have any grudges or anything…so I guess I must’ve lived a pretty decent life, right? Otherwise, I probably would’ve carried whatever bad memories I’d collected with me somehow. I figure that makes me pretty lucky, actually.”

“You sure are an optimist…”

“What can I say? You kind of *have* to be an optimist if you’re gonna dedicate ten years of your life to seducing someone who may not even ever make an appearance,” I replied, laughing.

Lilia slumped down over the table, whispering something like “I’m so in love…”

I pretended not to hear her.

As I watched her fangirl, I thought back to my past life again. My memories had been as lacking in substance as rice gruel when they first came back, and now that ten more years had passed in this world, they’d grown even thinner.

“The only things I really remember are…getting stitches in my head after falling off the top of a ten-person tower in gymnastics as a kid and being rushed to the hospital after getting alcohol poisoning at a college farewell party.”

“Oh my God! So you were a troublemaker in your past life too?!” Lilia exclaimed, suddenly shooting up in her seat.

Would those things stick out to me if I really had been a troublemaker? I wondered. But more than anything, I found myself hung up on the word “too.” I didn’t appreciate the implication that I was a troublemaker not only in my past life, but also in *this* one.

“Well, I dunno about *that*. If anything, I think I probably found it hard to let loose.” I racked my brains, trying to think of anything else I could remember from my past life. “Oh, I know—I remember that you’re supposed to drop-kick someone if you’re trying to help them survive an electric shock.”

“Wait…what?”

“And that you can open a new window by pressing the ‘Ctrl’ and ‘N’ keys at the same time.”

“Th-That’s probably not going to be of much help to you *now*…”

“Right? That’s pretty much the only stuff I remember, though.”

I downed the glass of water in front of me. Then I reached across the table for Lilia's and drained hers too. I filled it up again with water right after.

"Don't you ever miss life in Japan? Isn't there anything that you wish we had here, or that you'd like to try making?" Lilia asked.

"Uh… Nope. Don't think so."

"What about baths?"

"Showers suit me just fine. Besides, I've got a tub if the urge for a bath ever hits me."

"What about Japanese meals?"

"I'd eat some if they were offered. But…I guess I don't miss them enough to try making them myself."

"Hmm… How about gas? Or electricity?"

"Hasn't really been much of a problem living without 'em."

"What about g-guns? Or bombs?"

"I don't know about you, but I don't think I ever touched those in my past life."

Lilia kept trying different things as I laughed awkwardly, but eventually, she fell silent and looked down at her hands.

I've had it pretty good living my whole life as a duke's daughter. Lilia's probably experienced all kinds of hardships having grown up in a peasant family. I'm sure she must have plenty of things that remind her of her past life, or that she wishes she had in this one.

I rubbed my chin, trying to think of anything I could add to the conversation.

Surely there's something *I wish I had from my past life? What can I think of that would liven things up a bit?*

"Okay," I said. "I *can* think of one thing that I wish we had here."

"What's that?" Lilia asked, lifting her head up suddenly. Her eyes were brimming with excitement.

One minute she's in tears, the next she's all smiles. Well…all right, maybe "tears" is exaggerating things.

"Wouldn't it be funny if we had the *Royal LOVERS* game in this world? Robert and Isaac would probably lose their minds if we played that in front of them."

"Ellie…were you a demon or something in your past life?"

"I don't think so… Why? What makes you ask?"

"Because you *clearly* don't have a heart! At least, not a human one!"

Hey, come on. Is that *what I get for contributing to the conversation?* I thought, more than a little insulted.

"You'd better hurry up and finish your lunch before the break's over," I grumbled irritably, then propped my elbows on the table to rest my chin in my hands.

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"Elizabeth! I beg you to duel me!" Yoh called, jumping out at me as soon as I arrived at the training grounds. Apparently, he'd been waiting for me.

Come to think of it, I think he did *mention something about wanting to go to the training grounds with me once. I guess he must've followed Robert and the others here.*

I swiftly sidestepped him, ignoring the prince entirely as I entered the instructors' quarters. Once inside, I began to take off my coat. It had gotten pretty cold out lately, so I'd started walking to the training grounds already in uniform. Fortunately, as long as I wore a coat over my uniform, odds were slim that my secret would get out.

Robert, who'd apparently been waiting for me inside, took my coat and put it away on a hanger for me. Then he took my bag and put it on top of the table where all of the instructors left their stuff. He seemed to be getting a *little too* comfortable in the role of a porter.

Aren't you supposed to be a prince? Where did I go wrong? I thought. *Wait, what am I saying? It's not like* I'm *the one who raised him.*

"Sorry, Commander. He saw me leaving. I *told* him not to follow me."

"Don't worry about it. I figured this would happen eventually," I said, grabbing a training sword.

When I opened the door to head back out, I saw Yoh waiting right in front of it. He immediately ran over.

I think one *puppy dog character is more than enough, thanks*, I mused, as my mind jumped to Robert. *Although…as far as facial resemblances go, this guy is more fox-like than anything.*

"Elizabeth!"

"I know, I know. You want to duel, right?"

“Robert has said to me that you are *very strong*! Please duel me!”

“Okay. If that’s what you really want,” I said, tearing him off of me.

His face lit up.

“Then…if I win, please marry me!” he said.

“Wh—” Robert began to interject.

“Sure.”

“C-Commander?!”

Robert rushed over from behind. He looked like he was ready to leap at Yoh, so I held him back with my outstretched arm. I glanced over at him out of the corner of my eye. For some reason, he looked nervous.

Hey, what’s that look for? You don’t actually think I’ll lose, do you?

Honestly, I was a little offended.

I gave Robert a look, signaling him to wait. Then I took my position. I relaxed my shoulders and gripped my sword.

“Watch and learn, Robert. I may look cool as a cucumber, but I could really use this opportunity to let off some steam.”

“Let off…some steam…?” he repeated, seeing me off with a look of confusion.

At Gried’s signal, we began our sparring match.

“Huh?”

It lasted only 0.02 seconds.

Yoh was sitting on the ground, my sword at the base of his throat. For a few moments, he just stared blankly up at me. Eventually, he looked over at me with fear in his eyes, clearly bewildered as to what had just happened.

“So?” I said, looking down at him and snorting through my nose. “What was it you wanted in return for a win again?”

I drew my sword back and sheathed it—not that I needed to, since it wasn’t even a real sword. Still, as much as I might have wanted to, I couldn’t exactly just throw it on the ground dramatically.

“Th-This must be a mistake! Let us fight again!” Yoh cried, standing up and readying himself for another round.

The posture he took this time was different to how he’d been standing earlier. He seemed to recognize now that I was his superior and was bracing himself for a proper fight.

Without even drawing my sword again, I curled my finger at him daringly and smirked.

"Fine by me. Keep coming at me till you're satisfied."

Till I'm *satisfied, I mean.*

We kept fighting, and I took the opportunity to vent all my pent-up frustrations. It was apparently enough of a show to draw the other instructors and cadets over to watch.

"Come on, get up. Had enough already?" I asked Yoh.

"P-Please, Elizabeth. I think I am at my limit…"

"Limits aren't meant to be respected. They're meant to be *overcome*!"

"H-Have mercy! I am dying!"

"Hmph. This is a poor show, maggot!"

"Commander!" a voice—Robert's voice—yelled out. "Commander!"

Suddenly, I came back to my senses.

Robert had come over to my side, and before I'd even noticed, he was pulling my arm. If he hadn't stopped me, I probably would have let out a villainous roar of laughter.

Crap. I'm an instructor. I can't give anyone special treatment, or I'm abusing my authority.

"Sorry," I said. "I let my personal feelings get the best of me."

"Seems like you were enjoying yourself out there, huh?" Robert said.

"I won't deny it."

I felt much better now. I could only hope that I'd taught Yoh a lesson—and that he'd leave me the hell alone after this.

If the only experience I'd had in combat was sparring at the training grounds with other knights, he probably would've made for a pretty challenging opponent. In fact, there's even an event in the game where Robert, who's pretty confident in his skills, loses in a fight against him. As it stood, the two were probably an even match.

Yoh had gotten sloppy with his swordsmanship on several occasions, and his skills were nothing to write home about, but the way he moved made it pretty clear that he was a good spy. He was light on his feet, and I was impressed by his agility. He was pretty good at blending in with his surroundings and taking me by surprise with his attacks too.

Thanks to all the experience I had sparring with the similarly skilled Royal Guard, though, I'd defeated Yoh handily. Despite his knack for blending into his surroundings, he still had a long way to go; I could follow his movements without much trouble. And as long as I could catch him, I had no trouble winning through sheer brute force.

"Commander," Robert said.

"Yeah?"

"Please let me have a match against you too!"

"Okay. Sure."

We stood facing one another. Gried, who'd abandoned his role of giving the signal sometime in the middle of all my matches with Yoh, was back on the ball again. He gave us the signal, and we began.

Robert and I traded blows. I could tell that he'd improved since our match at the swordsmanship tournament a few months ago.

But today wasn't an exhibition match, so there was no need to show off. I finished him in five seconds.

"Looks like I've still got a ways to go, huh?" he said.

"I'd give it another ten years."

I offered him my hand and pulled him up. Looking up at him from such a close distance, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd grown even larger. He seemed both taller *and* more jacked. His hand was even bigger than mine now, and the blisters had hardened into calluses. It was a knight's hand.

"Ten years..."

"Hm?"

He gripped the hand I'd offered him in both hands.

"You think I'll be able to catch up to you in ten years?" he asked.

"Well, it was more just a figure of speech than anything..."

"You said a *hundred* years before, though. So that means I'm getting closer now, right?"

"Uh... You know what? Yeah. Guess that means you're improving, huh?"

Huh. Did I say that? I don't remember that at all.

Either way, it didn't really mean anything. Like I said, it was just a figure of speech.

Robert looked at me with a serious expression. There was something almost pleading in his eyes.

“Will you…wait for me? Will you wait until I catch up to you?” he asked.

Wait for what*?* I wondered.

As I cocked my head in confusion, Yoh inserted himself between us.

“Non, non! This handshake is going on for *too long*!” he said.

“You’re one to talk.”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing that from the guy who took any and every opportunity to take my hand in his and was always begging for a hug. I didn’t think he had any awareness of how weird that was.

You know what they say about people who live in glass houses, Yoh.

He looked back and forth between Robert and me as I gave him a weary look.

“I heard that you used to be engaged,” he said.

“Yep. Sure did.”

“But you seem very close. Why did you call it off?”

I couldn’t help but feel that “close” was overselling it, but we *did* get along. That wasn’t exactly the only prerequisite for getting married, though.

“Do you really have to ask? I mean, look at me.”

“But I *am* looking at you,” he said, confused.

“I dress like a man, and I’m stronger than he is. Who’d want a fiancée like that? Not to mention I’d make a terrible queen. Get it now? Here, I’ll even spell it out again for you: I’d make *a terrible* queen.”

“I cannot believe my ears. How could anyone fail to see your many charms, Elizabeth?!”

Oh, for God’s sake…

I’d even gone through the trouble of saying it twice for him, and he still didn’t get it.

“You’re probably the only one who sees me as a woman, you know,” I said, giving him a wry smile.

“That’s not true!” Robert cried out. He looked weirdly serious. “Commander… I…”

“Robert?”

“*I* don’t think you’re a man!”

“Well, I’m clearly not, so…glad we’re on the same page there.”

Not helpful, Robert. You sure you didn’t grow up in a barn?

It seemed to me that the royal family had been a little negligent in his upbringing. If he was going to be interacting with foreign royalty, then surely he could've been taught how to behave a little more like the blue blood he was?

If he and Edward combined to make one person, they'd…actually, scratch that. I'm not gonna go there. There are some things you should just never mix unless you want to create a dangerous chemical reaction.

"I cannot understand you either, Robert. You canceled the engagement because you did not wish to marry her, yes? Then tell me why you are here with her now."

"Because…"

"You will create a scandal. People will think she is still in love with the man who did not want to marry her. They will say you are toying with her. You bring her dishonor."

"I-I…"

Yoh was coming on surprisingly strong, and Robert seemed at a loss.

I had no idea what weird ideas Yoh had dreamed up, but the annulment had actually been exceptionally amicable. Besides, even if Robert had been the one with the final say, the annulment probably had a lot more to do with my father's suggestion than anything. And after I'd asked Edward to make a case to the king on my behalf, I could hardly blame Robert.

"Knock it off, Yoh. Obviously, none of that's happening. There's nothing between us," I said with a sigh as I inserted myself between him and Robert.

"Then what *is* your relationship?" he asked.

I glanced over at Robert, who looked kind of nervous. There was a hopeful sparkle in his eye as he looked back at me.

"He's my pupil," I said.

"Her *best* pupil!" Robert clarified.

"Sure… What he said."

I wasn't about to deny him that. After all, he'd been in my charge since I first started working at the training grounds, and he'd probably wind up being my pupil for life.

Does that really matter to you that much, though? I wondered.

"Right now, I'm just her pupil. But one day, I'm gonna be good enough to stand at her side…and good enough to beat her!"

“Big words. We’ll see,” I said, shrugging.

Robert just kept looking at me with his sparkling laser eyes.

Suddenly, the meaning of his request to wait for him dawned on me. I realized now that he wanted to keep dueling me until that “one day” came. I didn’t want to get his hopes up, so I figured I’d better set him straight sooner rather than later.

“I’m happy to keep fighting you,” I told him, “but I don’t know that I’ll be here forever.”

“Huh?! Wait, you’re not gonna work here once you graduate?!” Gried—who had just been listening in on our conversation quietly until this moment—yelled.

When did I say that?

It was a pretty sure thing that I was going to work here, but I didn’t know everything the future had in store for me. Who knew where I’d wind up eventually?

The other instructors gathered around, grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking me.

“We’ve already accounted for you in the staffing budget!” they cried. “Don’t disappear on us *now*!”

“I never said anything about working here, though.”

“Aw, don’t be like that!”

“The fourth regiment is counting on you joining them too, you know.”

That sounds like a problem for the knights’ admin and accounting team, not for me. I’m just a part-timer.

As long as the peace held, the knights were bound to lose numbers and funding anyway.

It’s a tough world out there. Get used to it.

It wasn’t a good sign that they were *this* upset if one of their part-timers were to disappear. At this rate, I seemed like I was headed for a promotion to permanent staff. I privately resolved to pay close attention to anything the knights’ order might ask me to sign in the future.

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Even though it was the weekend, the head maid came barging into my room first thing in the morning to rouse me out of bed. Unfortunately, she’d awoken me from my blissful post-morning-

run-and-shower sleep, which I only ever got to indulge in on the weekends, so I was now in an exceptionally foul mood.

I put on my clothes and did the absolute bare minimum to make myself presentable before I headed to the entry hall to greet my visitor.

"Robert," I regarded him.

"Good morning, Commander!"

As soon as I stepped into the entry hall, Robert ran full speed at me, beaming. I couldn't believe he was so full of energy so early in the morning.

The head maid had apparently tried to show him to the drawing room, but she said he'd insisted that he was happy to meet me in the entry hall. Maybe he thought he was making things easier on me, but it was actually more of a bother to have to meet him here. I wished he would've just waited in the drawing room like a normal guest.

What kind of prince waits around by the front door?

"Please come train with me today!" he said.

"You're here about *training*?"

*You little brat...*that's *what you woke me up for?*

I had a feeling we were going to need to have a little conversation about this—a conversation with our *fists*, that is. To be fair, though, I'd been planning to stop by the training grounds this week anyway, so this actually worked out pretty well.

"Fine," I said. "Let's head over to the training grounds, then. I need to get some things ready first, though, so just wait in the living room for me."

"Actually, I was hoping for a private lesson today!"

"Huh?"

"I don't care where we train, as long as it's just one-on-one!" Robert said, practically throwing himself at me.

"Okaaay..."

I'd barely even opened my eyes and he was throwing a bunch of exclamation marks at me. It was like my brain refused to parse them.

As far as I could tell, though, he was just looking to have a one-on-one chat...with our fists. Which was convenient, because that was exactly what *I* was after.

"You're always just *full* of energy, aren't you?" I said,

sarcastically.

He gave me a pleasant smile and replied, without a trace of irony, “Yes, sir! It’s all thanks to you, Commander!”

I couldn’t help but break into a smile at his spiritedness.

“All right. We’ll have our one-on-one in the garden, so wait for me in the living room.”

“Yes, sir!”

Once we started training, the time flew by surprisingly quickly. I was really impressed by how much stronger Robert had gotten. Still, I didn’t plan on losing to him—not even in ten years’ time, when he was hoping to catch up with me.

We were coming up on lunchtime, and it seemed like we might just keep training. I told the head maid that Robert said he’d be sticking around for lunch. When Robert was out of sight and earshot, though, she unloaded her fury on me. I felt like a husband getting chewed out for bringing a coworker home with him unannounced after a night out drinking. I’ll spare you the whole tirade she gave me, but the gist of it was “Why didn’t you say something about this sooner?!”

I didn’t see how it was supposed to be *my* fault, though. *Robert* was the one who’d shown up at our doorstep unannounced.

If anything was my fault, it would’ve been that I’d only told Edward off for visiting unannounced, not his younger brother. I made a mental note to correct this.

Royalty shouldn’t visit without a little advance notice. All of the princes in the land, take note: If you should find yourself at some poor, unsuspecting soul’s doorstep, just turn around and go back home.

Just as the head maid began to fret about whether or not Robert might also stay for dinner, he excused himself with a satisfied expression on his face and left to go home with a spring in his step.

For Her, I’d Do Anything —Robert—

After I’d finished my private lesson with Commander, I returned to the training grounds. That was where I saw a boy wandering around the perimeter of the little hut by the instructors’ quarters.

“What are you doing?” I called out to him.

He was wearing the gray uniform of the knight cadets, but I’d never seen him around before.

I didn’t see any of the other cadets in the vicinity either. The sun had been setting earlier and earlier lately, so the training grounds had started closing up along with it. It was still dusk, but without any lamps, it was a little hard to see.

It didn’t help that all of the lights were off in the instructors’ quarters—they’d probably all gone home already too.

The boy turned around, looked at me, and scratched his cheek.

“Uh, I think I lost something…” he said awkwardly.

“You lost something? I’ll help you look for it, then.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly ask *you* to help me look for it, Your Highness. It’s nothing that important.”

As he spoke, I took a good look at his face. The cadets almost never called me “Your Highness.” But no matter how hard I strained to make out his features, his face didn’t ring a bell.

I knew it. I’ve never seen him before.

I drew the sword at my hip out of its hilt and thrust it right in front of his eyes. It wasn’t one of the blunted swords we used for practice; it was a real sword.



“Drop your weapon. Put your hands in the air and kneel,” I told him.

“What?! Y-Your Highness, why—”

“I know every cadet that trains here,” I said. I saw the boy’s breath catch in his throat. “And you’re not one of them.”

In a split second’s time, the boy vanished completely.

I swung my sword, blocking a blade that came flying at me from out of nowhere. The sharp *clang* of metal echoed as our weapons clashed. The boy had tried to hit me.

As I pushed back against his blade to repel it, the boy launched himself into the air, did a somersault, and landed behind me. As soon as he hit the ground, he took a couple steps towards me to close the distance. I tried to use my sword to swipe at him from the side, but I never felt the impact of it hitting him.

I kept swinging at him, not wanting to give him a moment’s rest. If there was one thing I prided myself on, it was my stamina. My opponent seemed pretty light on his feet. He kept dodging my attacks by a hair’s breadth. Just like Isaac had warned me about the girl he’d faced, my foe moved more like an assassin or a spy than a knight.

His blade was short, but with the way he leaped at me with his whole body and threw his arm out wide to attack, the difference in our reach was minimal. The only advantages I had were my stamina...and my raw power.

I swung my sword down at him from above. The boy lost his balance trying to evade my strike and took the full force of it just as he was leaping into my range.

“Ngh!” he cried.

This time, I could feel my strike land.

I spun my sword around so that I was holding it in a backhand grip and thrust its hilt straight into his solar plexus. Choking, the boy fell to the ground.

In seconds, my guards had him surrounded. I wasn’t about to let him get away.

I yanked him up by his hair and pointed my sword at his throat.

“Who are you?”

“Tch! Aren’t you supposed to be royalty? And yet here you are, acting like the duke’s lapdog!” the boy spat.

I had no intention of being the duke’s errand boy. But of course,

if it was for *her*, I would do anything I could to make myself of service. If that meant being her sword—or even her lapdog—I'd happily do it.

"Are you her enemy?" I asked him.

"What?" he cackled, almost mockingly. Then he looked into my eyes and growled, "I have nothing to say to you. Hurry up and finish me."

I looked down at him. I applied the slightest bit of pressure to the sword I held to his throat, prodding his skin. The skin broke, and a trickle of blood dripped down his neck.

Still, the boy remained silent as he stared right back at me. I'd had a feeling that I knew his aim when he'd called me "the duke's lapdog," but now I was certain. His real target...was Duke Burton.

"You're after Duke Burton, aren't you? Well, that's a relief," I whispered, not actually talking to him.

The boy looked at me with a strange expression on his face, his eyes growing wide.

If he'd been after *Commander*, then I wasn't sure I had it in me to keep my head on straight. I might not have been able to follow my brother's directions.

"If it'd been Commander—uh, Elizabeth Burton herself—that you were after, then I was ready to tear you into pieces," I said, staring fixedly at him.

The boy's eyes shone brightly in the moonlight, and I could see my own reflection in them. It was a terrible sight. My face looked like it had been stripped of all emotion. No matter what, I couldn't let her see me looking like that.

"Looks like you just narrowly escaped your death," I said. "Though maybe you would've been better off dead."

I unfurled my fist, letting go of the boy's hair, and he tumbled to the ground.

As I turned around, Gried emerged from the shadows to take over for me. He walked over to the boy, cracking his knuckles purposefully. As we passed each other, we exchanged glances. I could see a predatory glint in his eyes as he surveyed the boy on the ground.

Now that Gried had retired from the front lines, he'd earned a name for himself as the best interrogator among the knights. When it came to getting information, I knew he was the man for

the job. Mine would come later.

As I sheathed my blade, I heard Gried's gleeful voice echo behind me.

"So... You ready to 'fess up?"

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I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven.

For a while, I thought Commander was in love with Lady Lilia, and that I should back off if I cared about her happiness...but fortunately, there was actually no need for me to worry. Commander was *single*.

That's not to say I didn't have any rivals competing for her love. But neither my brother, Guildford, nor anyone else had been successful in winning her heart. So all I had to do was mold myself into the perfect man for her and declare my love!

With that goal in mind, I found myself naturally putting more effort into my training. Commander had been stopping by the training grounds more frequently lately, and she seemed to be throwing herself into her training even more zealously than I was.

Everything was going great. At least, I thought it was... Until Yoh, a transfer student from the east, showed up out of nowhere and proposed to her.

"I have fallen in love with you at first sight! I beg of you, please marry me!"

He was the sixth prince of the kingdom to the east. He'd stayed at the castle recently as a royal guest, so we already knew each other (at least, to the extent that we'd exchanged pleasantries a few times). I never would've guessed—not even in a million years—that he'd been transferring into my school and proposing to my ex-fiancée, though.

That's when I finally realized something: Maybe Commander hadn't picked Lady Lilia, but several others were bound to make a move. It was only to be expected that a woman of Commander's caliber would be in demand. Until I caught up to her, there was every risk that someone might swoop in and steal her away. I had no guarantee that Commander would wait for me, after all.

Then I remembered what Lilia Douglas had said. *This must've been what she was warning us about*, I thought. But I'd already

made up my mind. I wasn't going to tell Commander how I felt about her until I was strong enough to best her in a duel, and I wasn't going back on that. After all, how was a man who bent his principles and retracted his promises supposed to protect her?

Ultimately, the only thing I could do was devote myself to my training even more.

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One day, Yoh ended up following me to the training grounds.

I couldn't help feeling a little sour about it. I mean, the training grounds were where Commander and I trained together. It was *our* special spot.

Yoh trailed after Commander, begging her to face him in a fight. I looked at Commander, pleading silently with her to duel me next.

Suddenly, Yoh smiled and said, "Then...if I win, please marry me!"

"Wh—" I blurted out.

How...could he say that? That's...that's what I've *always wanted to say to her!*

"Sure."

"C-Commander?!"

I was so shocked by her reply, it was like my brain froze. Before it could kick back into gear, my body was moving on its own. But just as I was about to try to insert myself between them, Commander blocked me with her outstretched arm.

Why are you stopping me? I wondered, crestfallen. *And why are you agreeing to his terms?*

Commander glanced over at me, then she walked over to take her place for the duel.

"Watch and learn, Robert," she said.

She was really doing this.

I couldn't find any words to say in reply. All I could do was watch her from behind, helplessly.

I have to do something. What if... What if she really does *end up marrying him?*

But just as soon as I'd formulated those thoughts, Commander had knocked Yoh down. It all happened in less than a second. It was so fast, I didn't even see her sword move.

“So?” Commander said, looking down at Yoh as she laughed.

I couldn’t help being captivated by the dignified posture she took. Even the way she drew her sword was beautiful.

“What was it you wanted in return for a win again?”

“Th-This must be a mistake! Let us fight again!”

“Fine by me. Keep coming at me till you’re satisfied.”

Seeing that Yoh was clearly no match for her, I breathed a sigh of relief and let my hand fall from my chest.

*Of course. My commander—*our *Commander—would never lose so easily.*

I watched the rest of their duel with relief. But as they continued fighting, I began to worry about the strange look of delight that was playing across Commander’s face. Plenty of people enjoyed sparring, of course, but…she seemed to be enjoying it a *lot more* than normal for some reason.

I felt a wave of anxiety wash over me again. *Why does she look like she’s having so much fun?* I wondered. *Is it because she’s sparring with* him*?*

I watched her as she urged Yoh to get up each time he sank to the ground. Then, without even thinking, I felt my body move on its own again. I reached out and grabbed her by the arm.

“Commander!” I yelled. “Commander!”

“Hm?”

She froze. Then she looked at me.

I hadn’t even thought about what I’d say next. Fortunately, after a second’s pause, she let out a gasp and cleared her throat to say something.

“Sorry. I let my personal feelings get the best of me.”

“You were…really enjoying yourself, huh?”

“I won’t deny it,” she replied, an irrepressible smile spreading across her face.

Something about her smile made me feel oddly sour.

Oh… It’s probably because I’m in love with her. I love her so much, I don’t want anyone else to have her. Even seeing her enjoy herself with someone else is enough to make me jealous.

I’d always thought that I didn’t understand love. But now, I was slowly beginning to grasp it, seeing the hazy edges of its contours.

“Commander,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Please let me have a match against you too!”

She looked at me and smirked.

I didn’t end up beating her that day. But…she gave me hope.

“I’d give it another ten years,” she said.

It brought me right back to our first year at the academy, when I’d asked her to the dance—the day she’d turned me down. It had been such a punch to the gut, I knew I’d never be able to put it behind me. I replayed the scene again and again in my dreams, remembering exactly what she’d said to me.

Right after whispering that she was out of my league, she’d added, “Try again in a hundred years.”

And so, without thinking, I tightly squeezed the hand she offered me. I’d remembered it feeling bigger when I’d first joined the knight cadets, and she’d offered me a handshake after my first victory against my brother. But now, my hand had grown much bigger than hers.

I’d been shorter back then too, but at some point, I’d surpassed her in both height and hand size.

“You think I’ll be able to catch up to you in ten years?” I asked her. The words were tumbling out of my mouth before I’d even realized.

The bar I’d set for myself was so high, even *I* wasn’t confident that I’d ever be able to reach it. Even so, I knew I could never lower it. If I did, I’d never be able to say with pride that I deserved her.

“Will you…wait for me? Will you wait until I catch up to you?”

I knew I must’ve looked pretty desperate. Commander cocked her head, giving me a funny look.

I’d made up my mind: I’d keep chasing her until, one day, I was standing next to her. And when that day came, I’d be able to proudly tell her how I felt about her. All I could hope for was that, until then, she’d keep running—so no one else would catch her.

If anyone tried to get in her way or block her, I would be there to deal with them. For her, I’d brandish my sword again and again…no matter how many times it took.

I Wouldn’t Lay a Finger on You

After hopping up to the roof to get away from Yoh during the lunch break, Lilia and I made our way back to the classroom. As we made it to the floor our classroom was on, though, we found Edward and Christopher standing there.

It was weird enough to see them together, and it was even weirder to see them *here*. Given they were in different years, their classrooms were on different floors, so they shouldn’t have had any reason to be on this one.

“Hello, Lizzie,” Edward said when he saw us approaching. He gave us a little wave.

“Your Highness,” I regarded him, nodding, as Lilia and I approached. “What are you doing here?”

“Robert has been keeping me abreast of the goings-on in your class. Some of his status reports have been rather concerning, so I’ve come to assess the situation for myself.”

Right, of course. Yoh is *a royal guest, after all. It makes sense that Edward would want to see how he’s holding up here.*

“And what’re you doing here, Christopher?”

“We just happened to run into each other,” Edward answered for him.

“I’m worried about you, sis—I mean, *Ser*. Is everything going okay with that annoying prince you told me about? He hasn’t gotten offended and laid a hand on you or anything, has he?”

Busted. Leave it to my little brother to read my thoughts.

As concerning as Yoh’s behavior was, though, he hadn’t laid a hand on me yet. (I mean, unless you counted our little sparring match at the training grounds—which I wasn’t, since we’d both consented to that.)

So I gave Christopher an easygoing shake of the head. “No. Everything’s fine.”

There was a hint of doubt in Christopher’s eyes as he looked at me, but eventually he seemed to take my word for it.

But just then…

“Elizabeth! You are so cruel to leave me!” a voice cried.

Speak of the devil…

Yoh leaped at me from out of nowhere, but I ducked slightly and dodged him. Edward and Christopher looked on with shock as the force of Yoh's onslaught carried him right past me and he slammed into the wall. I couldn't help feeling sorry…for myself, I mean, because this had become part of my everyday routine.

Yoh righted himself, eyeing me with a look of naked resentment.

"I do not understand. You wanted me so badly before," he whined. "Remember how you made my legs quiver?"

"Hey, cool it. You're making that sound a *lot* weirder than it was."

"S-Ser?!" Christopher cried, lunging at me.

I held him back with my hand.

"It's not what it sounds like!" I protested. "He hasn't laid a hand on me. He hasn't even laid a finger on me—in any sense of the phrase."

Edward glanced at us out of the corner of his eye. Then he turned to Yoh and smiled.

"Well, hello, Yoh. I hope you're finding our academy to your liking?" he said.

"Edward!"

Yoh's face lit up. He walked over to Edward and shook his hand. I was starting to get a sense that he doled out handshakes pretty indiscriminately, although I didn't know enough Easterners to know if that was cultural or just a personal quirk.

Then Yoh threw both of his hands up theatrically and began to loudly extol the virtues of our kingdom.

"Your kingdom is truly magnificent! It has given me the gift of a soulmate!" he exclaimed.

"Oh?"

"Right, Elizabeth?" Yoh said, winking at me.

I discreetly whipped around so I was standing behind Lilia, letting her take the brunt of the wink.

"Oh, yes. Our kingdom is nothing if not generous. I've found my soulmate here too," Edward agreed. Not to be outdone, he threw a wink in our direction too.

Oh, yeah… I guess he did, huh? He met the main character here at school, after all.

I could feel Lilia freezing up, probably in shock after receiving not one, but *two* winks from handsome men. I felt for her, but hers was a necessary sacrifice.

Thanks for your service, Lilia, I silently prayed to her.

"Hang on, sis. What's going on here?" Christopher asked quietly as he tugged on my sleeve.

"That's what *I'd* like to know," I told him honestly.

I had absolutely no idea what was going on or how we'd even gotten here.

"You're not going to get married, are you?! Because I...I object!"

"Well, I'll probably get married *one day*," I said.

I glanced over at Yoh, who was expounding to Edward in great, flowery detail on his love for me. I let it go in one ear and right out the other. As I watched the muscles in his face tense, threatening his polite smile, I noticed that even Edward seemed perturbed.

"But that day isn't today, and it certainly won't be to *him*," I added.

"Thank God..."

Christopher dropped his hand, which had been clutching his chest. I couldn't blame him for being relieved. I mean, who'd want *Yoh* for a brother-in-law?

Yoh approached me again, apparently having caught what I'd said to Christopher.

"Elizabeth, why do you reject my love for you? Do you hate me?" he asked.

"Well, if I'm picking between 'love' and 'hate,' then yeah, I guess so."

"Please tell me, what is it that you hate? I will fix it!"

"How strong you come on."

"How 'strong' I 'come on'? Yes... Okay. Will you love me if I fix this?" Yoh asked, inching ever closer. His face was so close now, I could practically feel his breath.

"See, this is *exactly* what I'm talking about!"

I grabbed his beautiful face and pushed it away, creating some distance between us. (As aggressive as that might sound, hear me out: It was self-defense. I've got every right to secure my personal space, okay?)

I felt like I'd been rejecting him pretty bluntly lately, but he just wouldn't give up. I was at the end of my rope.

I knew he was just putting on an act, but when he came on so strong, it made me think about how a certain saint in my life had suddenly turned into a real man-eater. I couldn't stop myself from putting up my guard in response.

"Look, there are plenty of men and women out there who are much more attractive than I am. Just look around you," I said.

"Non, non! I have only eyes for you, Elizabeth!"

Yoh knelt down on the ground again, took my hand, and looked up at me pleadingly. There was a kindness and a softness in his eyes, as if he was looking at someone he loved dearly.

"It was love at first sight, certainly. But now that I have spent this time with you, I know. My love for you is *destiny*," he said bombastically, without a trace of embarrassment.

It was so over the top, I found myself at a loss for words.

It might've been an act, but admittedly, it was a pretty good one. It was so sweet, I thought I might get diabetes.

"I love your kindness, which I felt when you introduced me to that tour guide. I love the way you joke and laugh with your friends. I love how serious you get about fighting with swords. I have never met anyone else like you. The more I know you, the more I love you."

His voice was like a sweet whisper, with a pleasant touch of hoarseness. It was the kind of voice that might melt your heart.

If I didn't watch myself, I knew I might get taken in by it.

"You are a cruel woman, Elizabeth, for making me fall so madly in love with you. Please...can you not give me even a small piece of your heart? I swear I will only have eyes for you for the rest of my life."

But with those words, I found myself tuning out again. I was used to piling on the lies, so I knew a fellow liar when I saw one. I could tell from Yoh's tone that he was an old hand at this. When I looked into his eyes, I could see that they weren't smiling. They were black pools of dim light: the eyes of a liar.

I fixed my gaze on them in silence, searching for his true intentions, when—

"Hi-*yah*!"

Out of nowhere, Lilia struck him down with her hand in a swift motion.

Nice. A Saint Chop.

Lilia turned to face me. Then she stepped over to me and yelled, “I-I-*I* love you *way* more than he does, okay?!”

“Huh?”

“I don’t want a small piece of your heart, I want *all* of it! I want your mind, body, and soul!”

“Whoa, hold on—”

“No matter how cold to me you are, I’m still madly in love with you! My love for you actually grows stronger and stronger by the day, okay?!”

“Hey, you’re being a little intense right now…”

Please don’t turn this into a competition over who can come on stronger, I begged her silently.

As Lilia kept snapping and yapping at me, I grabbed her by the shoulder and whipped her around to face Yoh. She was panting heavily as she glared at him. I couldn’t imagine he found that very intimidating, considering Lilia was basically the personification of a cute little critter.

What were you doing coming after me*, anyway?* I wondered. *If you’re gonna snap someone’s head off, shouldn’t it be* his*?*

“Lizzie,” Edward said.

“Ser,” Christopher called out at the same time.

I swiveled my head left and right to look at them. Both of them looked dead serious.

Edward put his hand on my shoulder, and Christopher grabbed my arm.

Huh? What’s going on?

Are they pissed at me again? Do they think all this brouhaha is my *fault?*

I sure hoped they didn’t, because if you asked me, that was totally unfair.

Just as I was thinking about silently pleading with Christopher to keep this from our older brother, my homeroom teacher stuck his head out and locked eyes with me.

“Enough horsing around, kids. Class is starting,” he said, looking thoroughly fed up.

At his urging, we each went our separate ways to our respective classrooms. As I trailed behind everyone, I quietly blended into the background and disappeared.

I could’ve sworn Mr. Fisher had looked my way for a

second…but I decided it must've just been in my head and kept walking.

I felt a wave of exhaustion hit me out of nowhere.

Maybe I'll treat myself to a little break until everything's settled down, I thought. It seemed to me a little hooky was just what the doctor ordered.

◇◇◇

It was the weekend, and Lilia had come over to chat and drink some tea in the living room. By this point, I felt like I was at my wit's end with Yoh.

"I know this sounds weird, but…don't you think he's kind of like *me*?"

"Huh?"

"I'm talking about Yoh," I explained. "I mean, I never came on strong as he does, but I kinda acted the same way when I was trying to make you fall for me. Doesn't it feel like he's kinda the same archetype, just…hammed up a bit?"

"Oh… Well, um…" Lilia mumbled hesitantly.

To be fair, it was a little uncomfortable to admit it, but the two of us weren't really that different. I remembered my over-the-top playboy ways all too clearly, back when I was flirting with not just Lilia, but any and every woman. That was the difference between Yoh and me, though—I was an indiscriminate playboy, and he was a suitor of single-minded tastes. But while our archetypes (does "single-minded suitor" even count as an archetype?) were different, we shared the same strategy. We honed in on a target and smothered them with kindness, flattery, and way more physical contact than necessary.

"Sorry. I had no idea how annoying my behavior was," I said. "Honestly, this is hell."

"I-It isn't annoying! I love you, so if anything, getting that treatment from *you* made me feel like I'd died and gone to heaven."

It was sweet of her to say that, but I knew that her seeing my behavior in a positive light didn't change the ugly reality. I'd never felt more remorseful. Ever since I'd had this revelation, I couldn't look at Yoh without suffering extreme secondhand

embarrassment. It was so bad, it made my chest hurt.

Maybe this is some kind of sophisticated psychological warfare? I wondered. *If it is…it's working pretty well.*

"He even followed me to the training grounds recently. It felt pretty good giving him a beating, though. Great way to let off steam."

"Aww, I wish I could've gone too," Lilia said with a pout.

I entertained this for a moment, but then said, "You…should probably never visit the training grounds."

"What? Whyyy?!" Lilia whined as soon as the words left my mouth.

"Well, I mean…you *can*, but you'd probably be in for a real shock. One thing led to another, and…I wound up taking on kind of a 'Demon Drill Sergeant' role."

"One thing led to another…? What kind of things are we talking about here?"

"It's a long story," I replied evasively. Honestly, I just couldn't be bothered to explain it all to her.

If seeing me in my Demon Drill Sergeant mode was enough to make her fall out of love with me, though, then she was welcome to come as many times as she liked.

Wonder if that'd work…?

I had a feeling it wouldn't, though. If my cold attitude towards her wasn't enough to make her give up on me, then she must be pretty smitten.

"Is that how you got so strong, Ellie? From doing drills at the training grounds?" she asked, as if suddenly remembering what we were talking about.

"I guess you could say that. I started off as an instructor there, though, so it was probably everything I learned from the other instructors that made the biggest difference."

"So, you've always been strong, huh?"

"I dunno that I'd say *that*. I think my strength probably came from all the training I've done. But…I guess I might've also had some innate physical talents. The Elizabeth Burton from the game probably went her whole life without ever realizing what she might've been capable of."

As far as I could tell (which wasn't much, considering she'd barely made any appearances in the game), the Elizabeth Burton

from the game was a pretty average duke's daughter. At the very least, she played the part a lot better than I did. She might've received good grades in her self-defense classes, but that's probably as far as she got in discovering her physical talents.

"Um…I've been thinking."

"Yeah?"

"Don't you think you should've been reincarnated into the world of *Crouching Love, Hidden Blade* instead?"

"Huh?"

"*Crouching Love, Hidden Blade*! That's your favorite otome game, isn't it?" Lilia repeated.

Come to think of it, Crouching Love, Hidden Blade *is a bit spicier than* Royal LOVERS*, even though they're both rated T*, I suddenly remembered.

"The main character in that game is a kunoichi, so she's really strong, right? Since she's a ninja."

"Yeah…?"

"Well, don't you think you're too strong for this world, Ellie?"

"I mean, it's not like *I'm* not the one that's strong. The original Elizabeth Burton was just naturally strong, so—"

"Are you sure about that?" Lilia pressed, interrupting.

She stroked her finger with her chin, looking doubtful. Her crimson hair fell gently over her shoulder. Every little thing she did was so cute, it made it seem like she was always trying to be flirty.

"I read something once in a book in my past life about how humans can only use about twenty percent of their full muscle power. It's like the body sets a limit, so you can't do too much damage to it," she continued.

"Oh, yeah. That's why people suddenly get hulk-like strength when there's a fire, right? The body removes its usual limit and people can access more power than usual."

"Yeah, exactly. But maybe it's not a *physical* limitation. Maybe it's a *mental* one?"

"Hmm… I dunno. Does it work that way?"

"What I'm saying is, maybe you were reincarnated into this world with that limit already removed."

It felt like our conversation had taken a dramatic turn towards the philosophical.

Suddenly, we were talking about how a "soul" might basically

just be our cognitive-emotional experience, and what that would mean about the relationship between our souls and our memories. Or...something like that, anyway. Those words were definitely thrown around in some form or another, but honestly, it was all pretty beyond me. Even if someone sat me down and explained it all, I probably wouldn't get it.

"Wouldn't it be weird that I haven't seriously injured myself, then?" I asked.

"Maybe it's because you also came into this world with an abnormally tough physique?" Lilia suggested.

I didn't reply. As wild as that sounded, it *did* feel plausible. I couldn't deny that it felt like I'd always been pretty tough.

How in the world could a god in charge of reincarnating people mess up *that* badly *and* put someone in the wrong world, though? I mean, this was a *god* we were talking about.

Can't you be just a little more, you know, dignified*? How about earning your reputation for being omnipotent and infallible, huh?*

It made me more than a little nervous to know I was living in a world created by such a careless deity. I also didn't appreciate the implications of all this. It felt like it would be a lot better for my mental health to keep believing that my strength was simply a result of my innate capabilities and my hard work, rather than some kind of cheat-level power.

"Okay, let's say, for the sake of argument, that you're right. So, the god that created this world messed up when he put me here, and thanks to his little mistake, I've gone and rewritten the plot, huh? Well, if that's what happened, then I've got just one thing to say."

"What's that?"

I leaned in and gave Lilia a little smirk.

"Take *that*, otome games."

◇◇◇

I'd just delivered the items Edward had asked me to pick up to his office, and he was launching into a lengthy exposition about knitting, when there was a knock at the door.

I heard the panicked voice of his usual guard on the other side. Just as I was starting to wonder what the hell was going on, a

joyful voice called out.

"Elizabeth!"

Yoh burst into the office, beaming. It was the kind of wide smile that, if we'd been in a video game or a manga, would've warranted a giant flower in the background.

Instead of wearing his usual uniform, he was wearing his casual attire. I recognized it from the game: It was a two-piece made from some thick material like velour, with a style that felt vaguely Chinese. The buttons and strings looked like they would be ridiculously hard to do up.

Can he put that on by himself? I wondered, but then I remembered that he was a prince. *Maybe he had a servant help him into it.*

As I was pondering this, I felt Edward tug on my sleeve.

"Robert has apprised me of the situation. I'm here if you need me," he whispered, barely moving his lips as he spoke.

Huh. He'd make a pretty decent ventriloquist, I thought.

There were actually quite a few high-ranking nobles who'd mastered that skill—including, naturally, members of the royal family.

"With all due respect, Your Highness, I'd rather not find myself indebted to you," I said quietly, trying not to attract Yoh's attention.

"What if we write this one off, then?"

I didn't hesitate. "Please help me," I pleaded.

Edward gave me a knowing look that signaled his understanding and promptly stood up from his seat.

"Yoh," he said. "To what do I owe this *most unexpected* visit?"

"Hello, Edward. I hope you'll pardon the intrusion," Yoh replied appropriately, giving him an Eastern-style bow.

So all that stilted English was *just an act?*

Smiling, Edward offered him a seat.

"Is anything the matter? I hope you haven't been finding your stay at the castle unpleasant in any way?" Edward asked.

"Non, non. I have been enjoying it very much. I heard that my most beloved was here, so I had to come at once!"

He looked over at me as he spoke, his words sickly sweet.

My eyes wandered around the room absentmindedly, falling eventually on the floor. Then I noticed the rug we were standing

on.

Huh. Nice rug you've got here, Edward.

"Is that so? Well, please accept my apologies, but I'm afraid she and I are in the middle of a work-related discussion. Perhaps you could try again later?"

"You are? Tell me, Elizabeth, what kind of work do you do with Edward?"

Edward and I answered at almost exactly the same time.

"We're just discussing some business to do with the knights," Edward said.

"Nothing that you're privy to hear about," I said.

Crap.

For a second, I thought we might be in hot water, but fortunately Yoh either hadn't heard my answer or had chosen to ignore it. Instead, he pressed Edward for details.

"The knights? And what work is that?"

"You know...knight stuff. Patrolling the town, night's watch..." I started.

Edward pinched me on the back of my hand.

Ow! Jeez, what's your problem?

"I cannot believe it! You are doing such dangerous work as that?!"

"I mean, it's not really *dangerous*. The kingdom's at peace, so there's not really any—"

"Your kingdom must be very short on men to make women dress up as knights!" Yoh interrupted.

"Well, I'm kind of a special case. Other women aren't really allowed," I explained.

Edward pinched me on the back of the hand again.

Ow! Stop pinching me where there's no fat or muscle, would you?

I glanced over at him. I could see the glare in his violet eyes that hid behind his smile. It held a clear message for me: "Don't say *anything unnecessary*."

Sheesh, you didn't have to pinch me to tell me that. Can't you just use your words?

"Then all of the other knights you work with are *men*?! How could they release you into such a pack of wolves?!"

"Uh...yeah. I dunno."

That was all I could manage. I didn't want to get pinched again.

Of course, if I were to ask the men in the fourth brigade—the ones that I patrolled with—if there were any wolves among us, I'd bet you eighty percent of them would've pointed straight at me.

Apparently, I'd earned myself the moniker "Bear-Killer" recently. Of course, I hadn't *actually* killed that bear—I hadn't even beaten it. But things got blown out of proportion. Why let the truth get in the way of a good story, right?

"Elizabeth, please come with me back to the east. You will never have to do such dangerous work in my country," Yoh said as he approached me. He took my hand in both of his and squeezed it tightly. "I promise you will live a comfortable life as a princess. I would never, *ever* make a delicate angel like you carry such burdens as you do here."

"That's pretty bold, coming from the guy who couldn't land a single blow on me," I retorted.

"That has nothing to do with this!" he cried, fixing his passionate (or at least, pretend-passionate) gaze on me.

Each time he inched closer towards me, I slowly moved farther away.

"Perhaps they do things differently in your country, Yoh, but in *this* one, we don't ever touch unmarried women unless there's a *very good reason*," Edward said, nonchalantly inserting himself between the two of us.

But it's okay to let an unmarried woman carry you princess-style? I wanted to snap back. Since he'd just graciously saved my hide, though, I kept my mouth shut. Thanks to his intervention, I was able to get some personal space.

"There is no problem if she will be my future bride!" Yoh replied, smiling as he threw a wink at me.

Future bride? Keep dreaming, pal.

I took another step back from him.

Edward watched me out of the corner of his eye. Not to be outdone by Yoh, he gave me a radiant smile of his own. "Surely a single glance is all it takes to see she doesn't seem very fond of that idea?"

"You think so? It seems to me that *you* are not fond of that idea, Edward!"

For a moment, it seemed Yoh had rendered Edward speechless. Then he looked over at me before turning back to face Yoh.

“Yes, you’re right. I’m *not* fond of it, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t touch Lizzie again,” he said.

Yoh’s eyes grew wide in surprise.

Edward’s back was turned to me, so I couldn’t see his expression, but I didn’t need to. I knew without even looking that he was wearing his classic fake smile.

“And you, Lady Elizabeth,” Edward said. “Don’t let anyone else lay their hands on you like that.”

“Yes, Your Highness. If that’s your command.”

“Elizabeth!” Yoh cried, a complicated look of despair and knowing in his eyes.

Edward’s command was essentially a royal decree. He’d played up his high-handedness, signaling that a lowly duke’s daughter like me was in no position to refuse him, and I—of course—played along.

I tried to thank him telepathically for the gesture. I knew he said I wouldn’t owe him for his help, but I privately resolved to subtract the cost of his yarn from his bill.

“Poor Elizabeth. *I* would never command you like that, or make you do what I say,” Yoh whispered.

Well, yeah… You don’t have the authority *to boss me around.*

He made it sound like he’d never lean on his status as a royal, but what he didn’t understand was that I’d have strung him up outside the school gates by now if he wasn’t a prince. It was just lucky for him that I liked to butter up anyone with power.

After gazing past Edward to stare at me for a while, Yoh finally returned his attention to Edward.

A brief silence fell upon us all. Yoh and Edward seemed to be exchanging meaningful looks.

“Pardon my intrusion, Edward. We will talk about her later,” Yoh said.

“We certainly will.”

“I will invite you to our wedding, of course. I hope you will give a speech, please.”

“What are you talking about?!” I interjected despite my best attempts to stay quiet.

Yoh looked at me and smiled sweetly. Then he gave an Eastern-style bow and exited the room.

What exactly went down between the two of them when they

exchanged those meaningful looks? I wondered. I was starting to get a bad feeling about all of this.

Wait… I haven't been sold out, have I?

I wanted to get a look at the expression on Edward's face as he watched Yoh leave, but I couldn't see from where I was standing.

The door closed.

As Edward and I found ourselves alone again in his office, Edward took a seat at his desk again and a silence fell—an exceedingly *awkward* one.

Now that Yoh had come and gone like a swift summer storm, I considered breaking the silence by asking Edward what he made of the foreign prince. Lilia had suggested that he didn't seem to have a dark side, but I didn't exactly trust her opinion on the matter. Edward, on the other hand, excelled in the art of implication. If anyone could see through Yoh's words, it would be him.

"So…? How do you feel about him?" I tried.

"In what sense do you mean?"

"Don't you feel kind of…on edge when you look at him? Don't you feel a flutter in your chest?"

"I beg your pardon?!"

It was strange to hear Edward raise his voice like that.

Huh… Guess he doesn't *feel any of that, then.*

"Well, personally, I think he's scheming something," I said.

"I…think you may be right," Edward agreed. But, after a pause, he shook his head and took it back. "No…I can't be sure. I'd be lying if I said I was in any position right now to consider this with a clear head. I'm likely biased, so don't put your faith in my judgment."

"Your Highness? *Biased?*" I repeated without thinking.

Ever since he'd returned from his treatment abroad, it felt like he fit the role of the perfect prince even more than before. So, it was weird to hear him say something like "Don't put your faith in my judgment."

"Yes. And whose fault do you suppose that is?" Edward retorted.

"Yoh's, surely?"

"Yes," he replied after a pause. "It is his fault, isn't it?"

As he regarded me with a cold look in his eyes, he rested his chin in his hands and let out a sigh.

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"Hello, Lizzie."

"Welcome, Your Highness. Thank you for coming."

Edward and I exchanged greetings as I showed him to the living room. Miraculously, he'd actually *scheduled* his visit today on account of having some plans with my older brother.

See? That's *how a guest should behave.*

Unfortunately, though, he'd apparently arrived a little early—which meant that I was now responsible for entertaining him until my brother was ready to see him. It was just part of the job, so I had no choice but to go along with it.

We sat at opposite sides of the table so that we were facing each other diagonally. A maid quietly began preparing some tea for us. After she was done, she pushed the tea trolley to the corner of the room and took her leave.

"Apologies for the wait. It seems my brother's just started his afternoon break," I said.

"No need for apologies. I simply arrived a little too early," Edward replied with an elegant smile.

Couldn't you have just waited in your carriage until his tea break was over, then? Now my poor brother's going to have to save his snacks for later.

"Hey, Lizzie?"

"Yes?"

"How do you feel about me?"

"How do you feel about me?" God, what a question... I blinked as I considered it. *Seriously, what is this? An interrogation? No...more like an interview?*

I felt a bit put on the spot. It seemed to me that he was basically asking me for my opinion—and, by extension, my brother and my whole family's opinion—of his performance as a crown prince.

I was just a knight—and a part-time one at that. I probably had less authority to speak on behalf of my family than the garden shrubs that lined the lawn. The reality of life as a noble was actually kind of sad, when I thought about it. With all the strict hierarchies, it really wasn't all that different to being a white-collar wage slave. And here was some bigwig asking me how I felt about

him.

Realistically, did I have any choice but to butter him up? After taking two seconds to ponder my answer, I finally managed to choke out some compliments.

"I have every confidence that you'll make an excellent king," I said. Then, after a pause, I added, "And I believe you should be the one to accede to the throne."

"That's not what I'm asking," Edward replied with a sigh.

No? Guess I missed the mark…

What did he want from me? The honest, tough-love style of advice from a loyal advisor?

"How the hell would I know how to advise you?" I wanted to say. I was hardly in any position to do so. Honestly, I would've had an easier time counting backwards than doling out whatever tough love he might've been looking for.

Edward shook his head in his disappointment as he picked up his teacup. I reached out for mine too, hoping a few sips of tea might calm me down.

Huh. This seems a little darker than most black teas. There's something a little different about its scent too… Maybe it's a different variety?

"Oops."

Edward had just been returning his teacup to the saucer after taking a sip, but he dropped it. The cup fell to the floor and shattered with a *clink*.

Yep…that's gonna stain, I thought, dejectedly, as I watched the tea slowly spread across the nice high pile carpet. It was going to be a real pain to get that cleaned, and given the cold weather we'd been having, it seemed improbable that it'd dry out within the day.

Wait, what am I thinking? I'm *not the one who has to clean that.*

"Apologies. My hand slipped."

"Don't worry about it. Let me get that mess out of your way."

I bent down to scoop up the big pieces of the broken teacup. As I put them on the tea trolley, the maid rushed into the living room—the noise must've alerted her. I hadn't even had the chance to try the tea yet, but the maid immediately put the teapot on the wagon and took it away, presumably to pour another pot.

Suddenly, I was struck by a sense that something was *off*. The head maid was typically the one in charge of looking after us, but

the one who was currently carting off the tea trolley was someone random. If the head maid had been around, she *never* would've let a young woman get this close to me. In the odd case she herself wasn't there to attend to me, I would've been looked after by an apprentice butler.

Is the head maid sick today? Maybe she's got a day off…

"I think we should get you a different tea," Edward said, watching the maid leave out of the corner of his eye. "If you're not fond of bell peppers, then I doubt this one will be to your tastes."

"How do you know about that?" I whispered without thinking.

Edward looked at me with a proud smile. "Your older brother told me."

My brother's soft smile flashed in my mind. *Why would he tell someone about that?* I wondered. *Wait…why are we even talking about bell peppers in the first place?*

Edward chuckled. "I think I may know more about you than you realize."

I shrugged my shoulders. "You think so?"

"First of all, you hate bell peppers," Edward began, putting up a finger as if counting all the facts he knew about me.

"They just don't agree with me."

"You wake up early, but you hate getting out of bed."

"Well, I doubt anyone *likes* getting out of bed…"

"You eat your omelets with salt and pepper instead of ketchup."

I didn't reply.

"You have a habit of rubbing the back of your neck whenever you feel uncomfortable."

I slowly dropped the hand that had been at the back of my neck.

"You can't fall asleep unless you're barefoot."

"What exactly do you talk about with my brother?" I asked, bewildered. I couldn't even begin to guess what kind of topics they were conversing about to somehow elicit all of these facts about me.

I was also a little miffed at my older brother. Honestly, his tongue was looser than a yam sweet bun that hadn't been properly sealed before steaming—you know, when the filling ends up spilling all over the place…just like he'd spilled my *personal information*. Well, not that these were particularly juicy secrets.

Can't you guys just talk about the future of the kingdom, or the Dow Jones or something?

"All we talk about is *you*," Edward answered.

"Think you could talk about *work* instead?"

"Oh, we do. I'm here today to discuss work-related matters with him, as a matter of fact."

Edward stood up and headed for the door. It seemed he was ready to relieve me of my duties as an entertainer.

"Give my question some thought, will you, Lizzie?"

"Pardon?"

He had opened the door and was just about to leave, but he paused and turned around. I could feel his purple eyes fixed on me. They were bright and clear, but I could sense a searching glint in them.

"How you feel about me. Not your feelings as a knight, or your feelings about me as a crown prince…but your personal feelings, as Elizabeth Burton, towards me, as Edward Diagrantz. Give it some serious consideration in between now and when I ask you again."

"Right…" I replied half-heartedly. I had no idea what he was talking about.

With a satisfied smile, Edward took his leave.

Huh. Didn't expect to be given homework today, I thought. *And why do I feel like this is some kind of riddle? Like, what do the crown prince and knitting have in common?*

Well, that one's easy: They're both extremely time-consuming.

I had a feeling Edward wouldn't appreciate my little joke, though. I figured I'd better come up with something else.

Really, though, it was bad form to ask something as vague as "How do you feel about me?"

I mean, think about a meeting: If you don't set a goal from the start, then everyone just goes around exchanging pointless opinions and you never end up reaching a conclusion.

If someone was going to ask me a question, then I'd appreciate it if they set expectations about what kind of answer they were looking for. That way, I could just give them the answer they were after and be done with it.

Well, whatever. If he asks me again, I'll just leave that to future me to figure out my answer.

In all likelihood, he’d probably forget anyway.

If Only She Would Say “Yes” —Edward—

“Where is Earl Burton?” I asked the maid once I’d shut the door.

“I-In his study, Your Highness. Shall I call him over?” she replied nervously, hanging her head.

“No, that’s all right. We were planning to meet in his study anyway. Would you mind showing me there?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

The maid led me through the duke’s manor. As we passed by a staircase, I was reminded of my visit to Lizzie’s room. *We’re probably exactly underneath it right now*, I thought. I remembered how sparsely decorated it was, save for the handmade crafts that were, essentially, a representation of myself. Suddenly, I found myself breaking into a smile.

“By the way, that tea you served earlier…it had quite an unusual flavor.”

“Y-Yes…” the maid replied, her head still low. “The family bought it from a recent trade partner. It’s a foreign tea, and I’ve heard it has special properties, which, um…which…”

The maid trailed off, as if struggling to get the rest of the words out. It was as though she’d realized, halfway through her previous sentence, that she was about to say something indelicate.

“Which brings out a woman’s femininity,” she finished, lowering her voice.

I found myself speechless.

No doubt that tea was intended for one *specific member of the family…if, indeed, it has any real effect at all. It seemed a dubious proposition at best.*

“Oh, it would be such a relief to all of us if a gentleman were to ever propose to Lady Elizabeth,” the maid muttered, as if talking to herself.

“If a proposal was what she wanted, then I’d happily offer one myself,” I replied with a sigh, also talking to myself.

If only she would say yes…

Sometimes, I wondered if things might be different if I weren’t a prince. Surely that would have made things simpler? And yet,

there were also special privileges that my status afforded me.

Being a member of the royal family came with a certain degree of danger—both visible and invisible. From a young age, I'd undergone training to prepare for that.

There were many things I'd learned—from swordsmanship, lock picking, and self-defense to the art of the bedchamber and escaping rope bondage. I'd also learned how to distinguish poison and built up a tolerance to it, along with other drugs. The last skill, in particular, had alerted me to traces of poison in the tea we'd had earlier. I'd had only a niggling sense that something was off, but it had been enough to clue me in. That was why I'd deliberately dropped my cup and suggested another drink.

Of course, this was a duke's household. It was likely that the staff tested food and beverages for poison. Whatever had been in the tea, it didn't seem to be anything quick and lethal—rather, it was the sort that took action only after you'd ingested a fair amount. It was slow-acting, initially weakening whoever consumed it, before finally accumulating enough in their body to lead to death.

I'd suspected that the maid showing me to the study might have been behind it, but from what I could tell from our conversation, her ignorance didn't appear to be a ruse. That meant that the merchant, who'd been in and out of the manor lately, was probably to blame.

First it was the academy, then the training grounds, and now her own home. Strange things are happening wherever she goes.

Things were accelerating at a much faster pace than I'd expected.

The maid opened the door to the study. I entered without so much as a greeting.

"Hey, Ed," the earl said. He wore a lifeless smile.

"Earl Burton," I regarded him.

At my tone and manner of addressing him, he instantly straightened up. Then, with a serious look in his eyes, he stood.

I heard the soft *thunk* of a door shutting behind me.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?"

"Yes. There's something I need to discuss with you urgently."

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Robert had told me all about Yoh's inappropriate behavior, but it wasn't until I'd seen how he'd knelt before her, taken her hand in his, and professed his love for her that I'd really believed it.

As the sixth prince, he might have been far down the line of succession, but he was still *royalty*. The relationship between our kingdoms was "complicated" at the best of times, but even disregarding his diplomatic obligations, it was unthinkable for a royal to propose in earnest to a foreign aristocrat.

But now I'd seen the way he'd knelt down in front of her. I'd seen the gentle, loving look in his eyes as he'd gazed at her.

"In the beginning, it was love at first sight. But now that I have spent this time with you, I know. My love for you is *destiny*," he'd professed.

I wondered how in the world he'd brought himself to declare something like that…and why she'd fixed her gaze back at him without brushing his hand away.

If I were to say in earnest that I wanted her, then surely it would be a simple matter to make her mine. All I had to do was command her, and she would have no choice but to say yes to me. That was what it meant to be royalty; such was the relationship that we had with the aristocracy.

Originally, she'd been betrothed to Robert—so there was no status barrier that would preclude a partnership between us. The duke might be opposed to it, but his opposition could easily be overcome.

But if I were to take that route, then she would only be mine by virtue of the blue blood that ran through my veins. It would be because I was the crown prince and nothing more. *Her* wishes would have nothing to do with it.

It was a horrific notion.

I wanted her to see me for who *I* was. I wanted her to fall in love with me, and I would do whatever I could to make that happen. Until I'd made her say the words "I love you," I'd resolved not to make a move. And yet, what Yoh had said as he'd intruded upon a rare private moment between us stuck with me.

"Elizabeth, please come with me back to the East. You will never have to do such dangerous work in my country."

He'd barged into my office as if he were interrupting a lovers' tryst, and then he'd had the nerve to take her hand. Even that

small gesture had infuriated me.

I knew Lizzie well enough to know that she could have evaded his advances if she'd really wanted to. She wasn't some helpless maiden, powerless to stop his manhandling.

"I promise you will live a comfortable life as a princess. I would never, *ever* make a delicate angel like you carry such burdens as you do here."

Every little thing he'd said rubbed me the wrong way. I felt I might go mad from the jealousy and rage that he stirred in me.

Lizzie? A princess in the East?

Was it really such a simple matter? Could he truly just say something like that so casually? I couldn't believe that he would just reach out and try to grab something I'd longed for so desperately as if it were nothing.

I couldn't let him get away with that.

If *I* could do that, I wouldn't ever need anything else.

"Perhaps they do things differently in your country, Yoh, but in *this* one, we don't ever touch unmarried women unless there's a *very good reason*," I'd said.

"There is no problem if she will be my future bride!"

Now I was furious.

It was plain as day that his words were meaningless. If I cleared my head and tried to think about it rationally, I could see that immediately—but that was *precisely* what made it all so impossible to endure.

"Surely a single glance is all it takes to see she doesn't seem very fond of that idea?" I'd replied.

"You think so? It seems to me that *you* are not fond of that idea, Edward!"

I'd been speechless. Typically, I would have brushed off the accusation with a smile and simply said, "I'm afraid I have no idea what you mean by that."

Instead, I'd dropped my smile and glared at him.

I love her so dearly, yet I cannot speak a word of that love aloud. Why should he *get to? And what's more, why should* he *be permitted to touch her?*

I knew full well that I was lashing out. My jealousy had gotten the best of me.

But was that really so wrong?

“Yes, you’re right. I’m *not* fond of it, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t touch Lizzie again,” I’d replied.

Yoh’s eyes had grown wide in surprise.

Didn’t expect that*, now did you?*

“Poor Elizabeth. *I* would never command you like that or make you do what I say,” Yoh had muttered as he’d left.

He’d made it seem as if he’d been saying that to her, but it was obvious his words had been intended for *me*. It felt like a parting shot.

If I weren’t the crown prince, I would have reached for her hand just like he had. And yet…if I weren’t the crown prince, I likely never would have been able to call her here to meet me like this.

No matter how much I tried to deepen our relationship, it would always be that of a crown prince and a noble, and that pained me. Yes, it was unavoidable…but by *God*, did it pain me.

I’d never realized what a selfish, greedy man I could be.

I’d known for a long time that I wasn’t the one her heart belonged to. I’d understood that from the moment I’d first seen her with Lilia Douglas. And yet, I’d made up my mind—I would do everything I could to make her fall for me.

Ultimately, it seemed the feelings she harbored for Lilia Douglas weren’t romantic. Even before she’d made that clear, I’d had a feeling that was the case. After all, love is painful and suffocating, but I’d never seen that in her eyes when she’d looked at the other girl. It was merely a surface imitation of love and nothing more—just like what I saw in the way Yoh treated *her*.

I want her.

I want to be her first love.

I wanted her to feel the same painful, suffocating love for me that I felt for her. I wanted our hearts to be entwined as one, without any regard for how we might look to others. I wanted her to burn with jealousy just like I did.

Simply being near her set my heart aflutter, and simply being the target of her gaze was enough to make my day. Hearing her voice was all it took to set my face aflame in a crimson blush, and the touch of her hand made me feel as though I were dreaming.

I wanted her to feel that way about *me*. I wanted her to look my way, regardless of whoever else was there.

One day, I want her to want me.

It's time to get rid of this noise, I thought, turning my attention to the irritating buzz of an insect flapping its wings.

It seemed whoever was after Lizzie had suddenly turned up the volume. Now, they were bold enough to try to poison her directly. But did they know who they were up against?

Do you have any idea who you've just made an enemy of?

I Thought You Liked Me

As I rode home in the baron's carriage with Lilia, I found myself letting out a big yawn.

"Are you not getting enough sleep, Ellie?" Lilia asked, concerned, as she took a peek at my face. I saw a haggard version of myself reflected in her amber eyes.

Crap. I'd better watch it, or she's going to say something about my "R-rated" expression again.

It felt like a trumped-up charge, if you asked me, but it was hard to argue against—especially after the school nurse had backed it up. She'd pleaded with me, asking me to stop adding to the count of fainting female students being sent her way. I hadn't *meant* to make anyone faint…but apparently I really was having that effect on people.

Honestly, it was a little hard to contend with the realization that I was somehow *more* popular now that I was slacking off on my looks than when I'd been leaning hard into my playboy knight characterization. All that effort, and for what?

Maybe I could've just gone this direction the whole time instead of wasting all my energy? I thought, feeling dejected. *No… There's no point in thinking like that. It's not good for my mental health.*

Results were all that mattered, not how I'd attained them. The ends justify the means, right? And I'd gotten what I wanted, so there was no point dwelling on it.

I broke into a stretch and tried to will some life back into my face.

"Yeah, I just can't seem to get to sleep lately no matter what I do. Actually, that's not it… I *fall asleep* just fine, but I keep waking up in the middle of the night. I've never had this problem before," I said.

"Do you think it's because it's too hot?" Lilia offered. "Or maybe you're thirsty?"

"I dunno… Maybe it's stress?"

I could certainly think of some reasons—actually, a *lot* of reasons—why I'd be stressed. For one, I'd failed to escape from my

greatest stressor during lunchtime, so he'd ended up tailing me like a lost dog throughout the entire break. I preferred to eat my lunch in peace, but thanks to his hounding, I'd been thoroughly robbed of that opportunity.

"I wish he'd just get run over by a carriage or something…not *mine*, of course, and preferably somewhere as far away from me as possible," I muttered.

"You can be so vicious sometimes, Ellie."

"It's not like that's a new thing. My origin story is that I'm a villainess, so it's only fitting if I've got the personality to match, right?"

"You know, I've been thinking about that…" Lilia said. She stroked her chin and cocked her head a bit. "The character Elizabeth Burton is Duke Burton's daughter, right? I'm just imagining you as a kid, a tiny little aristocrat— *Hnngh!*"

Lilia suddenly covered her mouth and shrank away. I peered over at her, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened, and found her frantically trying to conceal her nose with her fingers. From it, a trail of blood dripped down. It was a truly terrifying sight.

"When I picture that, I'm just…*overwhelmed* by how cute you must have been. God, why couldn't I have met you back then…?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"What if we could've been, like, childhood friends? What if we'd sworn to meet again in the future?"

"Not a chance," I said.

I was absolutely fed up with her, but I graciously handed her a handkerchief. *Sheesh*, I thought, *what was I even worried for?*

"I was a pretty normal kid, you know. The only reason I'm good-looking now is because I worked hard to make that happen. I wasn't *nearly* this perfect as a kid, so you probably would've just been disappointed."

"I can say with full confidence that a less-than-perfect Ellie would be every bit as mouthwatering—just in a different way."

"I don't like that look in your eyes," I said, scooting away from her slightly.

She looks like a sweet, harmless girl, and I know she'd have no chance of physically overpowering me… So how is it that I wind up shaking in my boots when she gets like this?

I didn't want to let on that I was actually getting the jitters, though, so I made a show of shrugging my shoulders.

"I've always looked older than my age. And if you were picturing a prepubescent boy or something, then I'm sorry to say that was never me. By the time I hit twelve, I already looked like a high schooler."

"Yeah, that makes sense. On the maturity scale, you'd probably be on the 'more mature' side now too," Lilia said. Then she added, "Appearance-wise, I mean."

"Didn't have to add that last part..."

"Back to what I was saying, though... Um, Duke Burton's daughter ultimately ends up becoming a villainess, right?"

This time, it was my turn to cock my head. "Where are you going with this?"

Sure, that *did* happen in the game. But Lilia knew that, so why would she ask?

"I mean, your father is the Honorable Duke. And I've heard *aaaall about* your 'amazing' older brother. In the game, Elizabeth Burton grows up in a family of great role models, but she still ends up becoming a villainess, right?"

"Okay, sure... But this Christopher grew up in the same circumstances he did in the game too, and he didn't end up starved of affection."

"I think it's a little more complicated in his case, since there were a lot of things in his life that changed from the game. But the fact that you grew up as Elizabeth Burton, the eldest daughter of the Burton family, hasn't changed at all."

I thought back to the time before I'd regained my memories of my past life—back to when I was still just seven-year-old Elizabeth Burton living her life as the game dictated. I'd had my moments of haughtiness, but it seemed pretty clear that I'd been on track to become a proper young noblewoman.

"Well, if we're just looking at Elizabeth Burton's behavior in the game, I don't think she did anything all *that* villainous. Sure, she lashed out at Robert sometimes...but I feel like that's about it," Lilia said.

"Isn't that just because she was basically a side character, though?" I retorted.

"I mean, honestly, I feel like even the 'pushing the main

character into the fountain' event could've just been an accident. Or maybe her posse was just acting on their own when they did that?"

"I dunno... Are you sure you're not just glossing over everything she did because you don't *want* her to be a villain?"

"No, look, what I'm trying to say is..." Lilia began, her face dead serious.

Then she *poked* me.

Excuse me. Didn't anyone ever tell you it's bad manners to poke people?

"Think about it—you're not a villain because Elizabeth Burton was a villain, Ellie. Maybe you're a villain because *you yourself* are evil," Lilia finished.

"Huh?"

"You toyed with a sweet, purehearted girl's feelings all for personal gain. Only a terrible person would do that, wouldn't you agree? And you don't even feel bad about it. You're *heartless*."

"Uh... Let me just get something straight here. I thought you *liked* me?"

"I do. I love everything about you: the good, the bad, and the ugly," she said, with a smug tone that seemed to suggest maybe I was just too young to understand.

What's wrong with loving the good and hating the bad? I wondered. *If you ask me, the mature thing to do is compartmentalize.*

This exchange only further cemented a feeling that I'd had for a while—Lilia had a surprisingly teenage perspective on life (and love) for someone who'd lived once already before this, especially considering that she still retained her previous memories. At least, she seemed to remember a whole lot more about her past life than *I* did.

Maybe she died young? Nah... I'm probably reading too much into this.

"You've been a pretty effective otome game villainess, you know. When it comes to interfering with the main character's romance, the original Elizabeth Burton couldn't hold a candle to you," Lilia said.

"Huh... Never thought about it that way."

Sorry, Original Elizabeth, I thought. I felt like I'd wronged her in some way. *You grew up with the love of your parents and your older*

brother, so I'm sure you were a proper young noblewoman.

Wait, what am I saying? It's just like I said to Lilia before: The original Elizabeth was only ever a side character, so maybe she just didn't have the chance *to enact all her villainous schemes.*

If Lilia were to be believed, then the original Elizabeth Burton was just a normal noblewoman, and *I* was the one who had turned her into a villain with my twisted personality. I could follow her that far, but she'd lost me when she'd tried to frame that as a *good* thing—as if my descent into villainy was somehow a marker of success.

The question also remained—what ever happened to the Elizabeth Burton I'd been *before* I regained my past life memories? Was she still a part of me somehow? I had no idea.

It didn't feel like the person I was now was *exactly* the same as the person I'd been in my past life, so it seemed plausible that our personalities had just combined somehow. But, in saying that, I also had a weird feeling that pre-past-life-memories Elizabeth Burton had just vanished.

If her soul left me and went off somewhere far away, then I hope she's happy, I thought. I felt a certain sort of gratitude towards her for the memories and the knowledge that her life experience had brought me. Honestly, they'd been a huge help.

"Remember when I said that you were probably supposed to be reborn into the world of *Crouching Love, Hidden Blade*?" Lilia mentioned.

"Oh, yeah. That does ring a bell."

"Players are supposed to be able to easily project themselves onto and empathize with otome game protagonists, right? The main characters are specifically designed with that in mind so that players can feel like they've actually *become* them. But the paradox is that otome games *need* someone to play them. If a player isn't inserting herself into the story, then the main character is nobody—they're just an empty shell. The story can never begin."

I nodded. That was pretty much exactly the way otome games worked.

"So, I *became* Lilia Douglas right from the beginning. But that wasn't the case for you, Ellie. If my theory's right…then I think the original Elizabeth Burton is probably living in the world of *Crouching Love, Hidden Blade* right now."

“What?”

“Think of it like…a pile-up car crash.”

“A *pile-up car crash*?” I repeated.

Does it work like that…?

Lilia’s wild theory just reinforced my sense that her concepts of things like “world” and “God” were a little *too* anthropomorphic—or a little too *convenient*, I guess. It felt weird to hear her talk about all of this like we were just discussing everyday life.

I did have a faint memory of Greek gods and ancient Shinto gods being portrayed as pretty humanlike, so maybe the way she talked about all of this was just a reflection of her religious beliefs or something?

I thought back to the world of *Crouching Love, Hidden Blade*. From memory, it was a pretty brutal one. There were plenty of bad endings, including ones in which the love interests died. Some endings even featured the *main character’s* death.

“Kind of a tough world for your average noble villainess to be reborn into, don’t you think?” I said.

“Yeah… I guess I wouldn’t know. But I’m sure she’s making it work somehow,” Lilia replied with a shrug. For some reason, she seemed completely uninterested. “I mean, she *is* the Honorable Duke’s daughter.”

“I guess you’re right.”

I’m not so sure honor transcends lifetimes like that, though, I thought. *Even if it did, it probably wouldn’t be much use in a war-torn world where lives are at stake. Besides, the only person who gets to inherit the duke’s reputation for being honorable is the eldest son. It’s not shared between all the family members.*

If the original Elizabeth Burton was living in that world, though, then there wasn’t a whole lot I could do for her…except pray that she didn’t die a dog’s death, I guess.

“I know you don’t think of yourself as very honorable, Ellie, but *I* do,” Lilia said.

“Huh?”

I blinked in surprise. How could a “heartless” person like me be *honorable*?

“Well, maybe not in the sense that everyone respects your integrity…but they do *adore* you.”

“Yeah… I’m not sure that’s the same as being ‘honorable.’”

“You think so? If the end result is the same, then does it actually matter how you get there?” she said, laughing, as if giving voice to exactly the same thought I’d had earlier.

“Yeah. I guess we’re all a bit contradictory, huh?” I replied, shrugging.

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“Elizabeth! You look so lovely out of your uniform! But do not misunderstand me. You look lovely *in* your uniform too!”

That’s funny… I could’ve sworn I warned all of the princes in the land not to visit without an appointment.

I regarded the foreign sixth prince who stood in front of me, pressed my fingers into my forehead, and let out a long sigh.

I couldn’t believe he’d had the nerve to come to *my house*. His behavior had escalated well into the territory of *proper stalking* now.

This has to be in violation of some kind of public nuisance laws. Although, now that I think about it, I’m not even sure if those exist in this kingdom…

“Truly, I must give my thanks to God for this chance to see you on a weekend!”

“I don’t think God endorses unannounced visits,” I shot back.

“Sis? What’s going on?” Christopher asked, apparently having heard the commotion.

“Oh, Christopher…”

Christopher looked back and forth between Yoh and me with an expression that told me he’d figured out what was going on here. He quietly took a few steps towards us and stood next to me.

Yoh cocked his head quizzically as he looked down at Christopher, then looked over at me.

“Elizabeth? Who is this boy?” he asked.

“Oh, did you never meet him at school? This is my little brother, Christopher.”

“Your little brother? Then he is *my* future *brother-in-law*! I hope we can be very close, Christopher!”

“Sorry,” Christopher said, after a long, fraught pause, “but I only have *one* older brother.”

He flatly refused the hand that Yoh offered him. He was still

wearing a pleasant expression on his face, but there was an unmistakable anger in his voice.

I was pretty loyal to our older brother too, but Christopher was on a whole other level. You could say he was a little obsessed. Of the two of us, his feelings were *much* stronger.

"We were supposed to go out together today, remember, sis? Are you ready to go yet?" Christopher asked, turning back to look at me.

Ah-hah... I thought. *I see where you're going with this.*

"*Right!* Sorry, Christopher. I completely forgot," I replied.

"Jeez, sis. You're always so forgetful!"

"Well, sorry, Yoh," I said, turning to address the prince. "Christopher and I are heading out, so you're gonna have to head home."

I mirrored Christopher's smile as I spoke. Obviously, we weren't *actually* going anywhere. It was just a ruse to get Yoh out of our hair.

Unfortunately, the guy just couldn't take a hint.

"That is all right. I will accompany you," he said with a smile.

"Sorry, but we planned for this to be just the two of us. Right, sis?" Christopher said, squeezing my arm tightly.

He had a small frame, but his body was still very much a *man's* physique—it didn't feel soft against mine the way that a girl's did. It caught me off guard, and I found myself reflecting on how much he'd grown since I first met him.

My little boy's growing up...

"We're gonna get my suit tailored, order some shoes for sis, and buy some of our older brother's favorite snacks for him. Right, sis?" Christopher added.

"Yeah, that's it. I'm so excited," I chimed in.

"*Sis*," Christopher whispered, so only I could hear, "you're laying it on a little thick."

Some of my friends prefer me like that, you know.

"Elizabeth, why would you let him touch you? Edward told you not to 'let anyone else lay their hands on you,'" Yoh whined, pouting and eyeing us with envy.

Yeah, but I don't have to listen *to him. I'm just one of his many subjects, not a loyal advisor. I only heed orders that benefit* me*.*

"Christopher isn't just anyone. He's my little brother, so it's no

big deal. Right, Christopher?"

"That's right!" Christopher exclaimed, drawing closer to me.

I gave his strawberry blond head a pat.

The way he cozied up to me might've been flirtatious coming from anyone else, but the way he did it, it came off as precious—just like some cute little critter nuzzling against me.

Guess it pays to be a pretty boy.

"You two do not look alike," Yoh muttered.

Christopher's reaction was immediate.

"We're not related by blood—I was brought into the family. Sis is only a year older than me. As a prince, I'm sure you understand what it means for a family to take in a son around their daughter's age?"

The way he said that, it made it sound like he'd *married* into the family. Obviously, that wasn't the situation...but he hadn't exactly lied either. He was just being intentionally misleading.

Sheesh... When did my sweet little brother turn into such a trickster? I thought. Deep down, though, I knew it was probably my fault for being such a bad role model. I couldn't help feeling a little guilty.

To be fair, the Christopher in this universe was a much better behaved kid than the prankster he was in the game...but I knew my older brother and I were probably the only ones who knew him as an angelic little sweetheart.

"Non, non! It is craziness to marry someone you do not love just because you are noble!" Yoh cried.

"Love?"

"I love her! A marriage of love will bring her *much* more happiness!"

I burst out laughing. At this point, he was clearly just hamming it up.

"*You* may love her, but if sis doesn't feel the same way, then that doesn't mean anything," Christopher said, staring straight at Yoh. Then, he looked at me. His honey-colored eyes were flickering with emotion. "No matter how much you love her, it's pointless."

I nodded. I highly doubted that Yoh actually loved me, but I knew for *certain* that I didn't love *him*.

Unrequited love is just infatuation, right? Or at least, that's what some wise person said in my past life, I think.

"Sis isn't ready for a relationship yet," Christopher added.

“Hey, Christopher—” I started to protest.

“You act like you are her *older* brother!” Yoh interrupted.

“No. Just like me, sis only has *one* older brother. I’m her younger brother—her *adopted* younger brother.”

I couldn’t help but notice the emphasis he placed on “adopted.” *Come on*, I wanted to say, *don’t be like that. You’ll make big brother and our parents cry. Nobody thinks of you as being adopted anymore. You’re a real member of our family now.*

“Now, please leave,” Christopher said, clinging to me much more than necessary as he gave Yoh a big smile.

Despite Yoh’s observation that we didn’t look much alike, I had a bad feeling that Christopher was starting to resemble me in some unflattering ways. I’d have to get our big brother to step in and teach him some sense.

I just hoped it wasn’t already too late.

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“Oh, hey, sis. Good morning.”

“Morning, Christopher.”

It was the day after our heated exchange with Yoh. I came down for breakfast just as Christopher was finishing polishing off most of his plate. Our older brother had apparently already headed off for the day, so it was just the two of us.

I took my seat and began eating.

“Do you have all the textbooks you need for today? You’ve got a quiz in history,” Christopher said.

“Yep. I’ve got everything I need,” I replied. It wasn’t true—I was just telling him what he wanted to hear.

I looked over at the grandfather clock nervously. I was running late, so I’d have to down my breakfast quickly.

“Did you oversleep?”

“No, I just didn’t sleep well. It’s weird… I slept through the night, but I don’t feel like I actually got any sleep. I started dozing off after my morning run, and before I knew it, I was running late.”

Halfway through this explanation, I let out a yawn.

I can’t go to school like this, or I’m gonna get scolded for looking too sexy again…

“I woke up weirdly early today, so I feel sleepy again already. I’m

so tired, I might just skip school and get some more sleep," I said.

"Sis..."

"Yes?"

"Don't even think about it."

"I know..."

He was joking, but I could tell he was actually mad.

I couldn't help feeling that my little brother was starting to act more and more like the head maid lately. It was like he'd taken on a mix of the head maid's tendency to nag, a few of the Burton family's characteristics, and (unfortunately) a dash of my worst qualities.

I wish he could take after our older brother and be a bit more laid-back, I thought.

I dipped the last of my bread into my milk and finished my breakfast. Christopher watched me with an exasperated look on his face.

"How about we take the carriage to school today? I just want to sleep in a little longer," I said.

"All right. I'll head over to the carriage and meet you there," he replied.

"Sounds good."

I quickly brushed my teeth, did my final hair and makeup check, and threw on my coat and a scarf.

I was feeling pretty freshened up today, which, as far as I was concerned, was always a good thing. Good how, you ask? Good for my *mood*.

I made my way to the front door, where I expected to see Christopher waiting outside with the carriage. Instead, he was standing outside the door and holding reins in his hand.

"Christopher?"

"Let's take the horses today, sis," he said.

"Huh?"

He took me by the hand, smiling, and pushed me towards Lady. The fact that he'd gone through all the trouble of bringing Lady out suggested he was serious about this.

"I'll take the reins, so you can just sit behind me and get some sleep," he said.

"Uh... Won't that look a little *odd*?"

"Stop complaining and just get on the horse already," he

chided.

“Oh, fine. You win. You can be so stubborn sometimes, you know that?”

I knew he wasn’t going to listen to my protests, so I climbed up to take my seat on Lady. At the very least, it was a small consolation that I didn’t need to worry about maintaining my image or attracting the ladies as much anymore.

Besides, the last thing I wanted to do was to upset Christopher first thing in the morning.

“Hold on tight, okay?” Christopher said as he sat in front of me and took the reins.

He seemed to be in oddly high spirits. I let out a sigh. Just like our older brother, I couldn’t help but be soft on Christopher.

Christopher gave Lady a kick, and she slowly began to walk forwards.

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I’d been pretty skeptical that I’d actually be able to get any sleep, but shockingly, I had.

When I’d wrapped my arms around Christopher, I’d felt an odd but pleasant warmth radiating from him—like the kind that children often seemed to emit. He smelled nice too, and he was just soft enough to be the perfect body pillow. I’d been focusing on training my core lately, so I didn’t even have to worry about falling off of the horse.

I’d fallen into a pleasant slumber. I must’ve been deep asleep, because I didn’t wake up until we got to the academy.

“Sis… I mean, Ser. We’re here,” Christopher said.

“Just five more minutes…”

“We’re gonna be late.”

“Mm… Okay. Sorry. I’m getting up now.”

I slapped my cheeks and—while still leaning against him—managed to force my eyelids open.

Christopher gave me a concerned smile as he looked up at me. Fortunately, it seemed I hadn’t drooled on his uniform, at least.

Despite being an early riser, I was terrible at waking up in the morning. So, mustering all the motivation I could manage, I switched gears into my playboy knight mode.

“Thanks, Christopher. Sorry ’bout that,” I said, patting him on the head.

I slipped my foot into a stirrup and nimbly hopped off of Lady. Then I turned to Christopher and offered my hand to help him off too.

“Here. I’ll help you off,” I said.

“No fair…”

“Hm?”

“It’s not fair when you act like that.”

I cocked my head, confused, but it wasn’t long before I figured out what he meant.

Right. I’m making it look like I let him *ride with me, rather than the other way around. He’s probably upset that I’m stealing his thunder.*

He was at that tender age, after all. It was understandable that he’d want to look cool in front of the girls. No wonder he was pouting—his older sister had stolen his opportunity.

But just as I was about to retract my hand, Christopher hopped off of the horse and straight into my arms. I caught him easily in a hug. He was as light as a feather.

“Christopher?” I asked as I eased him onto the ground.

“Sis…” he whispered back, tugging on my uniform. “Please…don’t go anywhere.”

I cocked my head, unsure of what he meant.

Are you sure you wanna be hugging your older sister right outside of school? I thought. *This definitely isn’t gonna help your chances with the ladies. Maybe I’d better set you straight.*

No… Christopher’s a love interest too. He’s got a lot more going on for him in the looks department than I do. Trying to give him romantic advice would just be preaching to the choir.

“I don’t know where you think I’m gonna go, but don’t worry—I’m not going anywhere,” I said.

“We’re gonna be together forever, right?!”

“What’s gotten into you, Christopher? Did you have a bad dream?” I asked him, worried.

Suddenly in a huff, he turned away. “Jeez… Stop treating me like a kid, sis!”

Well, you are *a kid. At least, compared to me, you are. Our big brother and I are always gonna see you as our sweet little brother, you know.*

“Go to class like you’re supposed to, okay?! No skipping!”

“I know, I know. I will.”

I watched him take Lady to the stables, still in a huff, as I shook my head laughing.

Sheesh. They oughta teach a course on how to talk to pubescent little brothers.

Can’t Let Her out of My Sight —Christopher —

I pretended to take the horse to the stable, but then I returned to the front gate and hopped onto Lady again. On her back, I rushed back to the manor.

I spotted my brother at the front of the house and rode over to him.

“Big brother!” I yelled.

“Hey, Christopher.”

“How’d it go?”

“You were right—someone must have tampered with the carriage’s wheel.”

Immediately, I felt all the blood drain from my face.

He’d told me that someone was probably after sis’s life and that we needed to keep a close eye on her surroundings. I hadn’t realized something was amiss until it was almost too late…and neither had anyone else at the manor.

The Burtons (especially the head of their family, the Honorable Duke) were known for being trusting people. In some ways, you could certainly argue that their nature was a unique asset… Unfortunately, in the cunning world of the aristocracy, it also put them at risk of having the wool pulled over their eyes. Trust wasn’t enough to survive on.

That being said—actually, *precisely for that reason*—the family’s employees were oddly willing to do things that their masters would never dare. Most of them would go to any lengths necessary to protect the family. I considered myself one of them, despite technically being an adopted son. I was more likely to doubt someone than to trust them, and more likely to deceive than to be a victim of deception.

And yet…as watchful as I’d been, someone had managed to tamper with the carriage wheel right under my nose. That was *extremely* alarming.

More alarming still was that it was only by chance that I’d even *noticed*, in the end. It was all because of sis’s unusual decision to

take the carriage earlier—she almost *never* traveled in it. I was struck with a gut feeling that I ought to double-check everything was in working order. But that's all it had been: a gut feeling. And that was how I'd realized that something was off.

My father—my birth father—had died in a horse carriage accident.

"A faulty wheel isn't the sort of thing that results in immediate death. It wasn't like she was traveling by a cliffside either. In all likelihood, she probably would've just been a little late. Knowing Lizzie, she'd have figured something out. But…there's still a chance she could've been hurt," my brother said.

I nodded.

As far as I was concerned, sis was way too indifferent to her own safety. She was much more perceptive than most, but she apparently was oblivious to any sign that *her own life* was in danger.

To be fair, big brother and I—along with her friends—had kind of been hiding that from her…but it probably had more to do with the fact that sis wasn't used to looking out for *herself*.

Instead, she was always looking out for me, big brother, or…literally anyone else but herself. She'd grown too strong, and she'd never been put in a position where she'd had to defend herself. She'd do anything to protect someone else, but she didn't give her own safety a second thought.

That's why she was always getting in trouble—and why I couldn't let her out of my sight.

We're worried about you, sis. We just want to protect you. Can't you think about how we feel? About how your actions impact us?

I couldn't help but wonder if, subconsciously, she *did* know she was being targeted. Maybe that was why she was getting such poor sleep—her body was only letting her get light sleep so she could jump into action if someone tried to slice her head off. It was pretty unlikely…but it was still possible, especially considering that it was *sis* we were talking about.

If anyone tried to attack her directly, she'd probably turn the tables and give *them* a thrashing. But what if they used poison? What if they tried to stage a horse carriage "accident"?

What if there was someone even *sis* couldn't beat?

"I'm sorry, Christopher," my brother said. I could tell that he'd

figured it all out. He must've known that my birth family, the Wilsons, were behind this somehow. "This must have brought back some painful memories for you. I really didn't want you to have to get involved in this."

He clutched at his chest as he spoke. He wore a devastatingly sad expression on his face that made me think he was probably taking this a lot harder than I was.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

I shook my head. "Don't be, big brother. You, sis...and the mother and father I have now...*you're* my family. And nothing makes me happier than to protect you."

That's right. If anything, this is actually for the best, I thought.

I was actually grateful that Earl Wilson's filthy blood flowed in my veins, because it was thanks to our shared bloodline that I'd caught onto his schemes. And if that helped me to protect my family—to protect *sis*—then that was a good thing.

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After I'd talked things through with my big brother, I headed back to my room. My thoughts on the way there were, unsurprisingly, of sis.

I'd always been watching her.

There was a time I'd wondered why it seemed like no one else could see how amazing she was. I'd resolved then to make her happy myself...because I loved her. I wanted us to find happiness *together*.

But when I finally started attending the academy, I realized how wrong I was—actually, *everyone* saw how amazing she was. The only person who didn't was sis herself.

Still...

"In the beginning, it was love at first sight. But now that I have spent this time with you, I know. My love for you is *destiny*."

That was the first time that I'd ever witnessed another man profess his love for her right before my eyes. And it was the first time I'd felt such intense heartache—so painful I thought I might cry. It felt like a hole had opened up in my chest.

But it didn't stop there. He had the nerve to barge into our home on a weekend, of all days. When sis introduced me as her

younger brother, I offered my hand to shake his.

He had the nerve to say, “Your little brother? Then he is *my* future *brother-in-law*! I hope we can be very close, Christopher!”

He spoke as if it had been decided that he and sis would get married. He declared his love for her openly, both publicly to anyone who would listen and privately into her ear.

That was something that I, as her younger brother, would never be able to do. If I did, it would only make her uncomfortable…

I didn’t want to ruin the relationship we had now.

I had an older sister, an older brother, a father, and a mother. This was the happiness I’d always, always yearned for—and now I finally had it here in my hands. The thought of doing something that might destroy that happiness—and my family—was terrifying.

I knew big brother would probably cheer me on…but if sis wasn’t interested, then there was no point. I wanted the two of us to be happy together. And until I could say with the utmost confidence that we would be, I just wanted things to stay the way they were now. Maybe it was unfair for me to wish for that, but I did.

“Sorry, but I only have *one* older brother,” I replied, refusing to take his outstretched hand.

I wrapped my arms around sis’s arm and drew away from him.

When sis and I made a big show of smiling and being close, he looked pretty unhappy.

“Elizabeth, why would you let him touch you? Edward told you not to ‘let anyone else lay their hands on you,’” he pouted.

“Christopher isn’t just anyone. He’s my little brother, so it’s no big deal. Right, Christopher?” sis replied.

I made a mental note to question her later about what exactly had happened to prompt Prince Edward to say something like that. For the time being, though, I nuzzled my cheek against her shoulder as she looked down at me with a gentle expression.

“That’s right!” I agreed.

Yes, that’s right. I’m her little brother.

I know all too well that she only sees me as a younger brother. I know that better than anyone else. But…so what? What would a guy who’s barely just met her know anyway?

He had no clue how amazing sis was. He had no idea how special she was to me, or how much I needed her.

“*You* may love her, but if sis doesn’t feel the same way, then that doesn’t mean anything,” I said.

The words tumbled out of my mouth before I’d even realized what I was saying. It was like I was trying to convince *myself* of them.

No matter if I wrapped my arms around her or took advantage of the confusion to invite her out on a date, sis just wore the same clueless expression.

“Sis isn’t ready for a relationship yet,” I said.

Those words felt especially bittersweet to say as her younger brother.

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I wish she’d hurry up and stop seeing me as a younger brother, I thought. *I want her to see me as a man.*

But as I felt her warmth against me as she slept, arms wrapped around me, the sentiment wavered.



I was the one who'd suggested we ride to school together on horseback, and I was also the one who'd told her she could sit behind me and sleep. I hadn't actually expected her to pass out like she had, though.

She'd sat up at first, alert and awake. But in the span of no more than three minutes, she'd leaned against my back and fallen into a deep sleep. And now, she had her arms wrapped around my stomach. Her head was buried into the back of my neck as she breathed softly in her slumber. I could feel her pressed close against me, as if she were giving me a hug. I was too nervous to move.

I knew it wasn't the time to be thinking about that—not when there was probably someone in our house right now who was plotting to hurt or kill her—but I couldn't help myself.

All I could think about was the feeling of sis here with me now, sitting right behind me. A breeze carried the scent of her hair product gently past my nose. *Her* scent.

I could hear my heart pounding. It was so loud, it felt like it had taken over my entire body—so loud, I almost worried it might wake her.

I fixed my gaze straight ahead of me and tightened my grip on the reins, which were slick with sweat. I couldn't go and cause an accident after I'd made a point of insisting we take the horse instead of the carriage, or it would've all been for nothing.

Safety first!

"Mm..." sis grumbled, tightening her grip around me as she moved her head.

I felt her hair tickle the back of my neck, and I reflexively jolted.

Different desires battled inside of me. Some part of me wanted her to wake up, another wanted to hurry up and get to school, while another hoped this moment would go on forever. Part of me wished to remain her younger brother forever—especially if it meant getting to see this side of her—while another wanted to hurry up and break free of that label.

Of course, I knew it wasn't the time to be thinking about *any* of that.

When I recalled that heart-pounding feeling and the warmth of her body as she'd napped against me, I felt myself pursing my lips. I clenched my fist.

Sis was always protecting me…always protecting *us*.
This time, it was my turn to protect *her*.

The Play

"You seem to be spending a lot of time with Prince Yoh lately, Sir Burton," one of the girls from the fan club pointed out.

I blinked.

The phrase "spending a lot time with" felt a little misleading in its implication of…well, a mutual *willingness* to be together. It felt more accurate to say he was "following me around."

I knew that I'd only add fuel to the fire and set myself up for a "Methinks the lady doth protest too much" if I tried to argue, though.

Instead, I just settled for an evasive reply. "I guess so."

"He brings out a cute side of you when you're together."

"Huh?"

"Yes, I've noticed that too!" another girl chimed in. "We almost never get to see you look so flustered, Sir Burton."

I smiled as I watched the fan club girls twitter excitedly like a bunch of little baby birds. But underneath my poker face, I was privately frowning.

If by "flustered," they meant half bewildered, half on guard (and a touch disgusted), then sure, I was flustered. But was that what they saw?

The way I responded to him was uncharacteristically spontaneous and subconscious. In a sense, didn't that mean that I'd been outpushed? I couldn't deny that, but at this point I was honestly so fed up with his pushiness that I was too tired to fight back.

I certainly hadn't intended to create such a juxtaposition in my image, though, so it didn't feel great to hear the fangirls' praise. I wished they'd squeal over something I'd actually *worked* for, like my handsome looks, strength…or maybe even my ripped back.

"If you ask me, kittens, you're *much* cuter," I said.

The girls all let out shrieks of delight.

That's it… That's the reaction I'm looking for.

The blushing girls suddenly gasped, coming back to their senses, and slowly exchanged glances. Then they turned to me

with resolute looks on their faces.

"Um, Sir Burton?" one girl spoke up.

"We were thinking of putting on a sort of class production," another added.

"A production?" I asked.

"Yes. You know how the Mr. First Royal Academy contest was canceled this year?"

Oh, yeah. I forgot we had one of those last year.

(I'll spare you the details, but it had turned into a bit of a political quagmire last time, so there'd been no choice but to cancel it this year.)

"Well, our class was thinking it would be nice to do something to make up for it. You know, make some memories," the girl continued.

"It's just such a shame that we've made so few memories at school with you despite being lucky enough to be in the same class, Sir Burton," another girl said. She looked up at me sweetly with tears in her eyes that seemed to plead, *"We'd love the chance to make memories with you too."*

I was deeply moved by the display. And yet...something didn't sit right with me. I couldn't help but feel a niggling sense that I was about to be talked into doing something I'd regret.

Just then, I heard the faint whispers of some girls in the back row.

"—chance to make her see—"

"Yes, if Prince Yoh swoops in to—"

I only managed to catch a few snippets, but it was enough for me to put the pieces together. "Chance" had been the key to the puzzle. When I focused on that piece, it all came together.

Right... Now that I've turned Lilia down, I'm single. If there are any girls who want to get closer to me, this would be the perfect chance.

Now, not to toot my own horn here, but I was popular enough with the ladies to warrant my own fan club. Sure, it was more along the lines of a pop singer fan club than anything else, but hey...pop singer fan clubs take all types, and some of those fans are *very* passionate. Some even fall in love with their favorite singer. Anyway, it was undeniable that there were some among my fangirls who were in love with me.

Fortunately, since I was a woman, that love wasn't ever going to

go anywhere. These girls would realistically have no choice but to marry noblemen when they graduated, so our time together would be strictly limited to our school days. And since it was a same-sex infatuation, there was no risk of scandal or misunderstandings from parents, nor would they have to explain their "brief, youthful indiscretion" to their future husbands.

What's more, any girl who won the heart of a lady-killer like me was bound to become the envy of everyone—and who wouldn't want that?

But now that I was single, a newcomer (i.e., Yoh) had arrived on the scene to shake things up and steal me from right under their noses—at least, that's how it must've looked. It was only natural that they'd want to swoop in before he might "steal me away."

A production, huh? What kind of "production" would a bunch of young noblewomen dream of, though? A tea party, maybe? No, that doesn't exactly scream "school day memories"...

The game often used the church as a backdrop for events, possibly because it was right near the bazaar. It was possible that the girls wanted to put on a play or a musical performance of some sort, but...it would probably be hard to start getting everything in order for that *now*. I couldn't imagine us all being ready to play a bunch of instruments on such short notice, but maybe we could get a band to play for *us*?

A music appreciation event like that seemed like a reasonable compromise. Even though the thought of having to listen to a classical music concert put me straight to sleep, I felt I ought to humor them as thanks for all the attention they regularly showered on me. I wanted to give the fangirls as much fanservice as I could.

So, with that in mind, I gave them my blessing.

"That sounds lovely," I said magnanimously.

I'd been going off of the assumption that they'd surely landed on a concert, but to my surprise, they put forth a suggestion to put on a class play in our afternoon homeroom.

I felt like we probably would've needed to prepare a little further in advance for something like a play, but the girls all seemed really fired up about it. I knew better than to question them—in this life and in my previous one, girls always had stronger opinions. Any objections raised by the boys in our class

were swiftly shot down with a sharp glare pointed in their direction.

The play they ended up picking was *Snow White*. Not to sound too uncultured, but I was a little surprised to learn that the fairy tale existed in this world too.

"We're going to take a vote today to decide on the cast!" one of the girls announced.

It was basically treated as a given who would be chosen to play the part of the prince (though apparently, everyone seemed to have forgotten that we had a *literal* prince in the class), so we began by casting our votes for who would play the role of Snow White. Of course, it seemed like we already had a pretty obvious pick for that role too—after all, we had a *main character* in our class.

A girl came around and collected our voting slips. After she'd opened and counted each slip, she took a tally and made an announcement.

"The voting has ended in a draw, so we'll run a tiebreaking vote for the top three contenders," she said.

On her signal, one of the boys in our class, who had taken on the secretarial duties, wrote a list of names on the board.

The first name was, obviously, Lilia Douglas.

The second was Isaac Guildford.

As soon as his name appeared on the board, I heard the clatter of his chair as he jolted up from his desk.

"Wait… What is *my* name doing up there?" he cried.

The vote tallier simply regarded him with a smile. "The voters have spoken."

"Don't be ridiculous. Why am *I*—?"

"The voters have spoken, fair and square," she interrupted, repeating herself. Then, as if closing off any further questioning, she turned to look at the secretary.

This is shaping up to be pretty interesting, I thought, watching him write the next name on the blackboard out of the corner of my eye. *I feel like most people will cast their votes for Lilia in the tiebreaker, but…honestly, there's probably a pretty big handful of people who don't really care about the play and just want to see Isaac be a princess for shits and giggles. Hard to say who'll win at this point.*

Smirking, I turned to look at the blackboard. That's when I saw

the third name.

There, next to Isaac's and Lilia's, was *my* name: "Elizabeth Burton."

I had a pretty good idea who'd had the nerve to vote for me. Immediately, I whipped around to look at Yoh. He smiled and blew a kiss my way.

Oh, screw you…

Some pranks are funny, and others are just plain stupid. This prank *clearly* fell into the latter camp.

But as I looked around the room and saw everyone's curious gazes on me, I knew I was screwed. The people who had voted for Isaac for shits and giggles had found an even *funnier* target. They'd already seen Isaac in a dress *twice*—and now they were itching to see me in one.

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Just as I'd expected, the shits-and-giggles crowd won out, and they'd decided they wanted to see *me* as Snow White…unfortunately.

Are you sure about this? You're really just gonna pass up an actual main character for the job?

They had no idea what horrors they were about to subject themselves to.

Fortunately, I found some solace in knowing that the fangirls had almost certainly wanted me to play the part of the *prince*, not the princess. Surely they'd overthrow the results, right?

I cast the tally-counter a meaningful look, but she just smiled back at me.

"The voters have spoken, fair and square," she said. Despite her pleasant smile, her tone made it clear that she would not be accepting *any* questions.

Now I was at a loss.

Without missing a beat, Yoh raised his hand and said, in his usual chipper voice, "If Elizabeth is the princess, then I request to be the prince!"

"Huh?"

"Th-Then I'm putting in a request too! *I'd* like to be the prince!" Lilia exclaimed, standing up abruptly from her seat.

"*Huh?!*"

Yoh's ridiculous request was one thing—I expected as much from him—but *Lilia's*? Now *that* was a surprise.

Yoh stood up too and walked briskly over to Lilia. Imitating a gesture I often employed, he took her chin in his hand and looked down at her.

"Hmm… *Non.* You are too short to be a prince, Lilia," he said.

"S-So?! We've got a tall princess; why can't we have a short prince?!"

She had a point. Modern society made space for a diversity of people, so why *couldn't* we have a short prince? *If we're cool with casting 180-centimeter-plus-tall Snow White, then anything goes, right?*

Yoh clapped his hands together dramatically.

"It does not matter! I will be prince! I am the best candidate of anyone in our class!" he exclaimed.

"Wait! In that case…*I'd* like to be the prince," another voice half shouted.

It was Robert. He'd stood up so quickly that he'd knocked down his chair, and he was staring at us now intently. First he looked me in the eyes, then at Yoh, and finally back at me again.

"I'd like to nominate myself for the role of the prince!" he repeated.

"Then I'd like to nominate Isaac," one of the girls in our class announced, standing up as she spoke.

I was pretty sure the girl who'd nominated him was Marquis Isabella's daughter. I'd heard that she and a friend had picked out Isaac's dress for the dance. Isaac was officially the class's beloved loner, and she particularly had a real soft spot for him. She'd been rooting for him to get closer to Lilia and me.

"What?!" Isaac exclaimed, jumping up out of his chair and slamming his hands on his desk. "Wh-Why do you all keep picking me?!"

"Quiet, coward!"

"There's no rule against nominating someone, is there?!"

"Yeah! That's right!" the other girls spoke up in support.

The classroom quickly descended into chaos.

I just wanna get out of here, I thought. *I want to hurry up and go home so I can eat sweets with my brothers.*

I desperately wanted them to make this all better.

After looking momentarily bewildered, the tally-counter took a look around the room at the four people who were standing up and let out a gasp, as if an idea had suddenly come to her.

"How about you *all* play the role of a prince, then?!" she suggested.

Uh… What? Have you lost your mind? This isn't a preschool production of Momotarou *where the kids'll throw a fit if you don't give all of them the main role. Don't let this generation of special snowflakes push you around!*

"W-Wait, please! We haven't even asked Sir Burton what *she* thinks!" another girl pointed out, standing up in her chair.

"Huh?"

I was flabbergasted to hear my name again all of a sudden.

What I *think? I'll tell you what I think: I just wanna go home!*

"She's right! We need the princess's— Pfft! Uh, I mean, *Comm*— I mean, *Lord Burton's* perspective!" one of the boys said.

Hey, quit laughing!

I had no doubt whatsoever that he'd voted for me to play the role of Snow White for shits and giggles. I made a mental note to make him pay for it at the training grounds.

Everyone looked over at me. I looked off into the distance and, giving up entirely on making any meaningful contribution, I said, "Come on, guys. Can't you just rock-paper-scissors this?"

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"This sucks… This seriously, *seriously* sucks," I grumbled.

"I voted for you too, Ellie!" Lilia proudly declared.

Unfortunately, even the other candidates for the role had been allowed to cast a vote for me—and there was nothing I could do about it.

I couldn't help but wonder if Lilia actually *hated* me.

"Can you blame me?" she continued. "Getting to see you cross-dress in women's clothes is like winning an SSR card from a gacha game!"

Lilia, please…this isn't a gacha game. The stakes are a hell of a lot higher than getting the rarest card possible.

"Seriously, whatever your expectations are, I'm not gonna live

up to them. You know who *can* pull off a dress, though? Isaac. If you ask me, he's a much better man for the job," I protested.

"Isn't that part of the appeal, though? Seeing someone who can't pull off a dress is a uniquely enriching experience."

"That's...not the issue," I groaned, my head in my hands.

Sure, it might've been funny if I looked completely *ridiculous* in a dress...but the thing was, I didn't.

If you're hoping for a hoot, I can promise you right now, you're going to be sorely disappointed. It's gonna be a half-assed, sorry sight. The most it's going to elicit is an awkward "Oh...right."

No one would benefit from that. For everyone's sake, it'd be better to give Isaac the role.

"Please, Lilia. Switch with me."

"No."

"C'mon... I'll treat you to something for it?"

"Only if you announce, 'I think Lilia should be the prince! ♡'"

"You know I don't have it in me to do that."

Lilia puffed her cheeks out in a pout, and I let out a discouraged sigh. There was no way I was going to say that about someone I'd turned down. That was way too awkward, even for *me*.

Yoh had won the rock-paper-scissors competition fair and square. Of the four contenders, he was the one I'd most dreaded acting alongside. Unfortunately, there was no fighting it—such was the nature of rock-paper-scissors.

Considering I had no choice but to rehearse with him, though, I figured I might as well make the most of an otherwise crummy situation. The silver lining was that it gave me an opportunity to get to the bottom of what the hell he was after. If I could figure that out, then maybe I could present him with some alternative way to achieve it—one that *didn't* involve following me around all the time. That sounded like a win-win for both of us.

"Thank you for your patience, Sir Burton!" Marquis Isabella's daughter exclaimed as she entered the classroom.

She had a man in tow (presumably, her butler) who was carrying large, multicolored bolts of fabric. As he laid each piece on the desk in front of me, it became clear they were bolts of *dress* fabric.

I couldn't believe how unlucky I was. How had I managed to avoid countless family commitments that had required me to wear

a dress, only to finally be forced into one—and for a *school play*, of all things?

"Quite a commotion you've got going on here," an elegant voice said.

I looked up to see Edward standing in the classroom doorway.

"Your Highness! My apologies, but this meeting is strictly ladies-only," Lady Isabella's daughter said, doing her best to kick him out politely.

"I'll only be here a minute," Edward replied, giving her a sweet smile.

In mere seconds, she was won over. "Very well…"

Sheesh. The girls in this world sure are suckers for a pretty face…

"I heard the news from Robert. Is it true you'll be wearing a dress?" Edward asked me.

"Not willingly…but yes."

"Have you decided on anything yet?"

I shook my head, and Edward took this as an invitation to enter the classroom. He looked over the piles of fabric, took two pieces in his hand, then draped each of them across my shoulders.

"You're quite fair-skinned, so cool tones would likely suit you better than warm ones. Perhaps black or navy… No, I think something deep red with a blue undertone would be best."

"Your Highness…"

"A one-shoulder dress would suit your broad shoulders. Something with a nice drape…and big frills that redirect the eye. A two-tone color scheme and long, straight lines will help emphasize your tall stature. And if we concentrate most of the visual weight on top…"

"Your *Highness*," I said again, quietly, as I tugged on his sleeve.

He let out a little gasp as he snapped out of his reverie, suddenly aware of the astonished looks on the girls' faces as they stared at him. He put on his classic, princely smile and stopped speaking.

Well, so much for keeping your sewing addiction under wraps. I can't believe you just dug your own grave like that.

"I'm *honored* that you would put so much thought into helping a mere fellow student like me, Your Highness," I said. "This kind of care towards your subjects is exactly what will make you such an exemplary king one day."

“What?”

Edward whipped around suddenly. I gave him a wink—discreetly, so the girls wouldn’t notice. His eyes widened as he looked up at me.

Come on, Your Highness. I’m throwing you a lifeline here. Are you gonna take it or what?

“We’ll all work hard to repay your thoughtfulness, Your Highness. Thank you for making the time to stop by, but I’m sure you must have a very full schedule. Please feel free to return to your duties now,” I said—all in one breath—as I pushed him out the door.

“Y-Yes… Right. Another time, then.”

He must’ve finally caught on that I was trying to cover for him, because he put on a perfect, princely smile for the girls and hurried out of the classroom.

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During rehearsal, Yoh and I practiced reading our lines together.

That being said, we didn’t actually *have* that many. There was barely any time to practice before the big day, so a bunch of them had ended up being cut. We’d shortened scenes wherever possible, putting the bulk of the work on having the narrator simply summarize them. That left us, the actors, with the bare minimum of lines to memorize. Most people were already familiar with the story of *Snow White* anyway, so we didn’t have to stress too much about getting the dialogue exactly right either. While it was an admirable effort to cover for our lack of preparation time, I couldn’t help but wonder if the audience would actually *enjoy* the play after it’d been ripped to shreds like this.

If things had gone according to plan—with Lilia as Snow White and me as the prince—then it probably would’ve been a nice spectacle. Unfortunately, I couldn’t say the same for the cast we’d ended up with.

“The story of *Snow White* does not exist in my country,” Yoh said.

“Yeah?”

“I do not understand—why does the queen want to kill Snow White? Is she not Snow White’s mother?”

“I think Snow White’s actually the daughter of the king and his *former* wife. So, the queen isn’t her *real* mother.”

“Oh. Yes…I see.”

Yoh’s question reminded me of a version of *Snow White* that I’d read in my past life, from an anthology with a title like *The Terrifying, True Versions of Grimm’s Classics*. In that version, the queen orders a huntsman to kill Snow White. He brings the queen Snow White’s liver or something (spoiler alert: it’s actually a boar’s), which the queen cooks and eats. In the end, Snow White and the prince get back at her by making her dance in red-hot iron shoes.

Pretty hardcore, right?

I guess it’s a fair enough punishment for attempted murder, but yeesh. There must be a real demand for good-versus-evil stories like that in *every* universe.

Fortunately, this world was based on an otome game created in modern Japan, so we were putting on the more mild, uplifting version of the play. No one would be eating any livers or dancing in any red-hot shoes.

From memory, though, the climax of the play is when the prince orders Snow White’s coffin to be brought out. He wakes her from her slumber with a kiss, and she coughs up a bite of poison apple that had been stuck in her throat.

If you ask me, it’s a *little weird* that the prince orders her coffin to be brought out. Apparently, being dead or alive isn’t enough to deter him—he insists on planting one on her kisser.

Yikes, huh? Honestly, maybe Yoh *was* the perfect person to play him.

“What happened to Snow White’s *real* mother?” Yoh asked.

“Uh… I think she died of illness or something?” I offered, after racking my brains for any past life memories I had of the story. “Yeah… Pretty sure that’s it.”

“I see.”

Yoh suddenly looked down at the floor, a strangely pensive expression playing across his face. I couldn’t help but feel that he was infringing on my territory again—after all, everyone knew that the ladies went crazy for the rare brooding moment from a guy who was otherwise all laughs and smiles. There was too much overlap between our character archetypes.

Listen, pal: I could play up that angle too, if I wanted to. I could

totally pull off a sullen look or two, and the ladies would eat it up.

"I have not seen my mother's face for many years," Yoh explained, his voice almost a whisper. "She stays with the harem in the inner palace because of her poor health."

"The harem"? I thought, puzzled. I couldn't help but feel that it was a little anachronistic. To be fair, though, we were living in an otome game that was only *loosely* based on medieval Europe. As you'd expect in the world of an otome game, *our* kingdom was pretty strictly monogamous, but that apparently wasn't the case for the neighboring kingdoms.

The kingdom to the east seemed to have particularly different customs. If I had to ascribe a culture from my past life to Yoh, his facial features and dress would certainly suggest he was from some Asian country. Japanese rulers had kept harems throughout history, so I guess it wasn't unusual that the ruler of his country might too.

Where did the word "harem" come from again, anyway? The Middle East?

For some reason, any foreign character that came from a country that had harems always seemed to have a bright, sunny personality...which made it all the more surprising (and probably all the more appealing) when they showed a serious side out of nowhere.

I certainly wasn't about to let him steal my thunder, though.

"It is strange, is it not? She is my real mother, yet I never see her. I wonder how she is doing..." Yoh continued.

Oh...shit.

I'd been so focused on figuring out how I could one-up his contrasting characterization that I'd completely neglected to stop him from trauma dumping his whole life story on me. I was in for it now.

Yoh might have been a prince, but he was the *sixth* prince. What's more, his mother was just a lowly concubine. He couldn't exactly just wait around and hope he'd get his turn to rule the kingdom one day; he had to be proactive if he wanted to improve his prospects (and his mother's). That was why he'd come to the Diagrantz Kingdom in the first place.

He was here to either kidnap or kill the "saint" of the kingdom that was one day bound to come after his own in a bloody war. If

he could return to his home with that achievement to his name, then maybe it *wouldn't* be such a distant dream for him to one day sit on the throne. At least…that's how his kingdom had talked him into coming here as a spy. And that was just the carrot—the stick was that they were basically holding his mother hostage in the harem.

As I looked at Yoh, I couldn't help but think how similar he and his in-game counterpart were. Unlike the other love interests, there were virtually no differences between them…except for the suspicious look in his eyes.

In-game Yoh's eyes had an innocent gleam. He was the earnest, single-minded foreigner archetype who spoke in stilted phrases and had a penchant for over-the-top romantic gestures. Despite cozying up to the main character on the pretense of wanting to marry her, he actually *does* end up falling in love with her. In short: He's a sweet, purehearted character.

So…how in the world did he turn into this shady, unsavory character?

"It is best for mother and son to be together," he whispered, his voice strangely hoarse.

"Yoh…"

Without even thinking, I called his name. He turned to face me, and I watched his dark eyes swallow all the light around him until they took on a dull luster.

"What are you after?" I asked.

"Hm? What am I 'after'?"

"Why are you trying to get close to me?"

"Because I love—"

"That's not why," I interrupted, shaking my head. I wanted to make it clear—even to someone as thickheaded as him—that it was pointless to play dumb with me. "There's something you're after, right? A goal? Didn't you come here to find the saint?"

"What are you saying?"

I looked him straight in his jet-black eyes as I spoke. "You know…to save your *mother*, maybe?"

The loving look in his gaze quickly vanished. He now wore a very serious expression, but it was a lot better than that fake, smarmy smile he'd been wearing before. It was downright creepy when he tried to contort his face to look affectionate.

“Maybe I can help,” I said.

His eyes widened slightly.

“I’m not really much of a patriot. I’m more interested in serving *myself* than my country, and I’d take power and riches over honor any day. If I’ve got something to gain from helping you, then I’ll probably take the opportunity.”

For several moments, Yoh was silent. Then, he took in a small breath and contorted his face back into that creepy, fake smile I was so used to seeing.

“Elizabeth, I think you are misunderstanding me. All I was saying was that it is best for a mother and son to be together,” he said.

“Oh… Okay.”

I let out a sigh. It seemed my attempt at negotiation had failed miserably. I’d thought that this was the perfect opportunity to get to the bottom of his true intentions and put a stop to this silly little charade, but…so much for that. Guess he wouldn’t be stepping down from his role as prince now either.

I looked back down at my flimsy script and flipped through the pages.

“Well, it probably wouldn’t have made for much of a story if Snow White had gotten along with *her* mom,” I said.

“Ooh! So it is thanks to their poor relationship that I get to kiss you, yes? This is quite a—how do you say it?—*silver lining*!”

“It’s a *fake* kiss, remember? We’re not kissing for real.”

“We will see about that,” Yoh said with a meaningful chuckle and a wink.

Pull any funny business, and I’ll hang you to dry outside the school gates. I don’t care if I have to march right off the stage and throw off the audience to do it either.

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“That’s great. I wish I could come watch it too,” my older brother nonchalantly said, as I grumbled to my family after dinner about the play.

“*Don’t.* Please.”

“I’m sure mother and father will be sorry to miss it too.”

“For the love of God, I’m *begging* you not to come,” I said,

sighing.

My older brother gave me a wry smile as he stuffed his cheeks full of dessert. Then, he turned to address Christopher.

“Chris, you go cheer her on for me, okay?” he said.

“I will!” Christopher replied, beaming. He made eye contact with big brother, and they nodded conspiratorially.

“Christopher! Sheesh, come on…” I grumbled, glaring at him.

“It’ll be my first time seeing you in a dress, sis,” he said, turning suddenly bashful.

“It will?”

“It’s…kind of exciting.”

“Well, don’t get your hopes up,” I said with another sigh.

I know I’m repeating myself here, but I was very confident that this whole spectacle wasn’t going to be *nearly* as entertaining as people seemed to think. I wasn’t going to look astonishingly beautiful in a dress, nor was I going to look like a clown. As far as I was concerned, Christopher was just setting himself up for disappointment, and then *I* was going to feel bad for disappointing him.

“No one has anything to gain from this,” I wanted to say. “Stop living in la-la land and open your eyes to reality already!”

I’d do everything I could to make sure this didn’t wind up a disaster, of course. I was even holding back from my training a little so I wouldn’t hulk out too much. Still…I knew it was too little too late. It certainly wouldn’t be enough to turn me into a showstopper.

Suddenly, I remembered a snippet of conversation I’d overheard from the servants.

“By the way,” I said, turning around to address the head maid, who was standing off to the side. “I heard from the butler-in-training that we’ve bought some sort of tea that enhances ‘feminine qualities.’”

Apparently, it was the kind of tea that you were supposed to drink before meals to slim down. It felt a little dodgy—like doping up for a big game—but I figured it couldn’t hurt.

“That’s been disposed of,” the head maid replied bluntly, wearing her typically unfazed expression.

Great. So, they’d thrown it out before I could try even a single sip. Honestly, it felt like both my family and the servants had given

up on me now.

Guess it's better than when they were constantly pestering me about getting married, at least.

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The day of the play had finally arrived.

Apparently, we'd booked the school's auditorium for the weekend. I had a hard time imagining that anyone would come all the way to the academy on a weekend, but according to my fan club, advance tickets had sold out immediately. Even the seats behind the theater equipment—with the worst views in the auditorium—were all booked out.

It felt a little iffy to be taking anyone's money for this, especially considering that we were using the auditorium of a royal academy. I couldn't help but wonder if we might be jeopardizing any future endeavors to put on shows at school, but I didn't really *need* to be worrying about any of that. Honestly, I was just trying to think about anything except the situation at hand.

I looked around at the audience seats from my view at the wing of the stage. Sure enough, it was a full house. The front row seats had been blocked off for staff, friends, and family; there, in the center of that row, sat Edward and Christopher. The two of them seemed to be having a pleasant conversation.

I'd already known that Christopher would be coming, but I hadn't expected to see Edward too. If I thought about it, though, I could come up with all kinds of reasons that he'd be here. For one, Yoh—a VIP guest of the kingdom—was playing the role of the prince. Edward also seemed to be getting along pretty well with Robert lately, so it wouldn't have been out of the question for him to come just to see his little brother onstage.

Yesterday's incident over the dress didn't sit right with me, though. For some reason, anxious thoughts such as "*What if he's here to laugh at me in drag?*" and "*No...he's probably here to get some dirt on me!*" kept flitting through my mind.

I wish he'd just leave, I thought.

As I retreated backstage, I ran into Isaac, who'd apparently just finished getting ready. He was playing the part of the queen.

I'd seen him in women's wear twice now at the dances, but this

didn't feel like the same thing. I mean, those had been for an annual event, and it had been partly thanks to *my* bad influence. Today, something about his overall vibe felt different.

He wore a long-haired wig styled in an updo. Since he was playing the evil queen, he wore sharp eyeliner to call attention to his long, narrow eyes. Even with his severe look, though, he was drop-dead gorgeous.

That's a love interest for you…they look good in anything.

He looked up at me, and instantly, his lips drew into a taut line.

Then, after a beat of silence, he said, "You look beautiful."

"Why does that feel like an insult, coming from you?"

"I—"

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Isaac," I said, waving him off.

That'll do, bud. Consider your "flatter the ladies" quota met. Great job doing the bare minimum for a nobleman.

I was wearing a slender blue dress and a curly wig. Just as I had predicted, it was a pretty lackluster sight. The only thing worth complimenting was the fact that I didn't look like a total trainwreck.

Isaac was serious to a fault, so it didn't necessarily surprise me that he'd insist on treating me like a woman when I was dressed like one (read: when I was cross-dressing), but it felt wrong to hear him compliment me like that when *he* pulled it off so much better than I did.

He looked like he still wanted to say something, but—no, actually, maybe he was trying to hold back laughter? *Yeah, that's it.*

Anyway, the silence continued for a while. Then, he finally broke it. "I…was just remembering the first time I met you."

"Huh? *Oh.* Back when we were kids, right?"

I kind of forget we first met so long ago… I had my hair up in something like a haphazard ballerina bun back then, right? Come to think of it, that was probably the last time I cross-dressed in public.

That had also been the first time that I'd thrown anyone except for my older brother and our swordsmanship instructor. Even ten years later, I could still remember that moment vividly.

I'd grown a lot taller since then, and I'd put on a lot of muscle. Even the way my face looked had improved thanks to my makeup technique. And a lot of time had passed since wearing my elevator shoes (and flinging people into the air) had become a part of my

everyday routine.

As I thought back to distant memories, I found myself breaking into a smile. “I’ve changed a lot since then, huh?”

“No…” Isaac began, shaking his head.

I gave him a puzzled look. He looked straight back at me, his burgundy eyes piercing through his glasses.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” he said.

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed. His already long eyelashes looked even longer now that they were covered in mascara. They were threatening to burst out of his glasses as they hit the lenses.

“You’re the same person you were back then. You always—”

“*Commander?*” another voice interrupted.

I turned around to see Robert, who was standing there looking utterly lost. He was the spitting image of one of those space cat memes.

Robert was playing the part of the huntsman—the one who’s ordered by the queen to kill Snow White. He was wearing suitably loose clothing (perfect for a huntsman who needs to be quick on his feet), a cloak over his back, and one of those tricorne hats that Robin Hood dons.

I was pretty sure that Robert’s character color from the game was green, but his current outfit had barely a trace of the color. Instead, he wore mostly inoffensive beige and khaki clothing. Honestly, that was probably a good call. With a hat like that, in green he could’ve easily been mistaken for Peter Pan.

“Hey, Robert. You’re all done changing too, huh?” I said.

“Y-Yeah…”

“Robert?”

Robert seemed to be frozen in place, so I tried waving my hand in front of him.

Helloooo? Earth to Robert?

He still didn’t respond, so I tried flicking his nose. *That* brought him back to reality.

“S-Sorry,” he stammered. “It’s just…this is the first time I’ve seen you in a dress.”

“What about that party?” I said.

“Yes, but it’s the first time *I’ve* seen you in a dress.”

“Robert…you were *there*.”

His eyes darted around the room nervously, as if he wasn’t sure

where to look. It made me think of the way a dog would react when his owner puts on a weird costume. He kept looking around nervously, mumbling God-knows-what, before his eyes eventually found their way to my chest.

"G-Great pecs!" he exclaimed.

I let out an aggrieved sigh. "Careful. I'm probably the only woman in the world who'd appreciate hearing that."

Robert... You bring shame to love interests everywhere with this behavior, I thought. It didn't bode well when Isaac—who couldn't *stand* being around women—was handling this better.

"I think this shows off my lats more than my pecs, personally," I said.

"Huh?!"

I turned around and flexed my muscles, readying myself to strike a pose that accentuated my lats. Before I could, though, Robert jumped in and threw his cloak over my shoulders in a panic.

It was almost winter now, but it wasn't all that cold yet. I didn't need a jacket. Besides, it was part of his huntsman's costume.

"D-Don't! You shouldn't go around baring your skin so casually like that!" Robert cried.

What are you talking about? I'll have you know this is a pretty exemplary noblewoman's dress. Sure, it may expose a bit more skin than most, but you need to remember that I'm not exactly like "most noblewomen" anyway.

Besides, if he was going to get worked up about exposing skin, then he should've directed it at the cadets who ripped off their shirts and paraded around with bare, sweaty chests in the summer. If I had to put up with that, then surely Robert could put up with a little skin from *me*?

"Isn't this part of your costume? Hurry up and put it back on. We're about to start," I said.

Just as I thrust the cloak back into a very flustered Robert's arms, the loudspeaker announced that the play was about to begin.

I wasn't up yet, so I watched Isaac step out onto the stage and tuned in to listen to the narrator.

Lilia had been tasked with narrating the play, and she was putting her main character potential to full use with her sweet

voice. Honestly, it was the perfect role for her—after the role of Snow White, that is. (I still couldn't get over the fact that they'd wasted the main character on a role other than Snow White, though. Seriously, what were they thinking?) With a voice like hers, she could have most men at her beck and call. That made her a good pick to narrate the play and cover up its shoddy quality.

"Once upon a time…" she said, opening the story in a classic fashion. And thus, the play began.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who in this land is fairest of all?" Isaac spoke in exactly the way he would have said it normally. There wasn't even a trace of theatricality to the line.

To be fair, though, Isaac did usually take a bit of a snobby tone, so it probably wasn't far off from what you might expect of a proud, domineering queen.

More jarring than his tone was the stark contrast between his beautiful appearance and his deep voice. It was so egregious, it wouldn't have been surprising if the audience burst out laughing. I could already sense them stirring with bewilderment. It was understandable. From the audience seats, all they could see was an incredibly forceful, beautiful woman. Hearing a deep, husky voice come out of that mouth would probably make them feel like they were losing their minds.

Just as the commotion died down, the boy playing the part of the mirror recited his lines.

"Snow White," he said.

"Of course she is," Isaac replied.

Wait… Why are you agreeing? In what world are you *not the fairest? Have some confidence in yourself!*

"Furious, the queen called upon a huntsman to put an end to Snow White," Lilia, completely ignoring what Isaac had just said, narrated.

Then Robert stepped onto the stage with an awkward, stilted gait.

If you needed any evidence that nothing matters more than looks in this world, here it is, ladies and gentleman.

The audience was captivated by Robert's physicality, all right, but it wasn't by the way he swung his left arm up at the same time as his left leg—it was by his gorgeous face. All of the girls practically melted in their seats as they watched him, spellbound.

Robert knelt in front of Isaac to show that he had accepted the queen's orders. It suddenly occurred to me what a wild reversal of hierarchy this display was. *Is this allowed? Like, politically speaking?* I wondered. I peeked over at Edward in the audience for any signs of disapproval, but he was just wearing his typical, fake prince smile.

Well, I guess this kind of behavior isn't exactly new *for Robert… No point in worrying about it* now.

Suddenly, the stage lit up brightly.

It was almost my turn to make my entrance.

I passed Robert and Isaac as I stepped onto the stage. Just as I took my position, a spotlight moved to illuminate me. A clamor reverberated throughout the audience, though it was much more muted than when Isaac had begun speaking.

I was keenly, *painfully* aware of their consternation. They clearly had no idea how to react. Honestly, at this point, I was ready to just give up and phone it in.

Told you so, I thought.

I didn't pull off the feminine look well enough to inspire any cheers or longing sighs, nor did I look clownish enough for everyone to laugh the minute I stepped on the stage. It was just that perfect level of half-assery that could only elicit a collective "Oh…right" from all of mankind.

Basically, it was *exactly* the response I'd been expecting.

That's why I'd made so many attempts to stop this from happening. It was an excruciating experience akin to tripping over my own feet the moment I stepped onto the stage. I was ready to take advantage of that poison apple included in my employee benefits package ASAP.

Oh, God… What now?

I briefly considered telling a witty joke to break the tension, but I quickly dismissed the thought. This disaster was beyond saving—it would've been nothing more than a drop in the ocean.

Just as my mind was racing, Robert appeared back on the stage with his awkward walk, lifting both his left arm and leg at the same time.

"The huntsman pursued Snow White, ready to kill her on the queen's orders. But the moment he laid eyes on her, he was so captivated by her beauty that he secretly let her escape into the

forest," Lilia narrated.

Once again, a silence fell over the audience.

It was easy to see why. *Anyone* would have been dumbfounded by how poorly the scene onstage reflected that narration.

I'm begging you, hurry up and end my suffering already. Otherwise, I'm gonna have to get my hands on that apple early and end it myself.

I gave Robert a stern look that said, *Hurry up and say your line already!*

Unfortunately, either because he was too nervous or he'd just plain forgotten, he seemed to be struggling to get the words out. He just kept opening and closing his mouth. His face was getting redder and redder by the minute.

"Hey!" I whispered, quietly so that the audience wouldn't hear. "What's going on, Robert?"

"Um..." he finally sputtered, placing both hands on my shoulders.

He wore a deadly serious expression on his face. *Is he trying not to laugh?* I wondered. I was relieved that he seemed to be talking now, at least.

You don't have to get the lines exactly right. Just spit out whatever you can scavenge from the depths of your memory, I thought, silently trying to encourage him.

"What if I took you back with me to the castle?" he finally said.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I shot back without thinking.

His suggestion was pure insanity. He could pass off a boar's liver as Snow White's, but bringing her back directly to the castle could only end one way—death.

"I'll figure out a way to spare your life," he said.

"Uh-huh. Sure you will."

I tried to shake myself free of him, but he had an iron grip on my shoulders.

What's the big idea here, Robert? Let go of me!

Obviously, I wanted this whole ordeal to be over as soon as possible. And if Snow White died right on the spot, then the whole play would probably end. But...

"Also, I'm sorry, but that dress shows *way* too much skin!" Robert cried, apparently unable to help himself.

Excuse me. Don't treat me like I'm some kind of exhibitionist.

The cadets in our class, who were playing the seven dwarves,

must've sensed that the play was at risk of falling apart. They emerged from the wings, grabbed Robert, pinned his arms behind his back, and dragged him back offstage with them. I couldn't help but feel they were breaking character a bit by demonstrating such a show of force. But then again, the dwarves *were* miners, so maybe it made sense for them to be strong?

As the audience and I watched them in awe, Lilia started up again with her narration.

"Snow White and the dwarves she met in the woods began a peaceful life together. But one day, the evil queen learned that Snow White was still alive. Furious, she transformed herself with magic into an old woman and went to pay Snow White a visit."

As I waited for the (very large) dwarves to return after subduing Robert, Isaac entered the stage wearing a robe. He wasn't even trying to look the part. Instead of stooping, he stood tall and proud, and instead of shuffling, he walked with a measured, steady gait.

Don't think I've ever met an old woman this spry before...

Isaac faced me and thrust out the apple he clenched in his hand.

"H-Hello, my pretty," he stuttered.

I could understand why he'd hesitate to drop a line like that—even if it *was* just part of the act—but it just made the whole scene all that much weirder. And, to top it all off, his voice sounded completely out of place.

Don't think I've ever met an old woman with such an attractive male voice before either...

"Here. Have an apple."

"Thanks."

Despite being the main character, I felt like this was probably the first time I'd spoken any lines. The "edits" we'd made to this play felt well beyond the realm of "cutting corners."

When I reached out to take the apple, I noticed that Isaac's hand was shaking. He'd made absolutely no effort to play the part of an old woman, so I knew this couldn't be him putting his acting skills on display. There was no mistake about it: He was shaking from trying to hold back his laughter.

I swear, he and Robert would burst out laughing at the drop of a hat. It was no wonder otome love interests always found the

main character “fascinating” and “funny” since the bar was so low.

His hand was shaking so much that he bungled the handover and dropped the apple. And, thanks to the laws of gravity that Newton had discovered, it fell onto the stage and slowly rolled right off.

It kept rolling until it stopped right at Edward’s feet. He picked it up and handed it to Christopher, who was sitting next to him. Christopher took it, wiped it off lightly with his handkerchief, and ran up to return it to the stage. Apparently, walking up to the stage himself had been *beneath* the crown prince. I didn’t appreciate him fobbing the task off onto my little brother.

Christopher came up to the stage, and I took the apple from him. Then he leaned in a little closer to me and whispered something in my ear.

“Sis… Don’t bite that, okay? You wouldn’t want to ruin your nice lipstick,” he said, looking at me with concern on his face.

I gave him a wry smile, as if to say, *Come on, have some faith in me.*

I wasn’t about to go chomping on a stage prop. Sometimes I worried that Christopher thought I had absolutely no sense at all.

I gave him a meaningful look, trying to reassure him that everything was going to be okay, and returned to the center of the stage. The play began again.

“What a delicious-looking apple. Don’t mind if I do,” I said, making a show of wiping the apple on my dress.

Then I pretended to take a bite.

As the sound effects crew played a dramatic tune, I fell to the floor.

“After taking a bite from the queen’s poisoned apple, Snow White met her demise. The dwarves put the princess to rest in a coffin, where she lay as if she were merely sleeping, and mourned her death. Just then, a prince appeared. He’d gotten lost in the woods,” Lilia said.

With that, Yoh took the stage. He was dressed in magnificent, princely formal wear, but it was entirely different from the one that he wore in the game CGs.

In the game, his formal wear had an Asian flair that looked distinctly as if it had come from the East, where his kingdom was. It was a showy outfit made of embroidered satin, but it had a

loose, relaxed fit. This Yoh, however, wore a very Western-looking outfit. It was the classic jacket-and-pants look that I was accustomed to seeing in the Diagrantz Kingdom. It was a good look on him…but it was impossible to deny that he seemed a bit out of place in it.

Judging from the squealing girls in the audience, though, it seemed to be a hit. I couldn't help feeling a little jealous. *God, I wish that were me*, I thought. If I'd had a handkerchief on me, I probably would've bitten it in a bout of frustration.

"What a beautiful princess!" Yoh exclaimed.

In what had to have been the hammiest performance I'd ever seen, he clutched at his chest and knelt down at my side. Robert and Isaac could've really afforded to try a *little* harder to play their parts, but Yoh needed to dial it back *several* notches. It was like he was putting on a one-man musical. I couldn't bear to be onstage with him.

Yikes, Yoh. Are you trying to make me lose my lunch here?

My eyes were closed, but I could feel him brush his hand against my cheek.

Then he said, in the most singsongy voice, "Such lustrous hair, such long eyelashes… Such smooth, porcelain skin! Never have I laid eyes on such a beautiful woman before. Surely I was born just to meet you here today. What fortune to get lost in the woods, for it has led me to my beloved!"

My lustrous hair? A wig. My long eyelashes? Falsies. My porcelain skin? Boatloads of powder. And so, miraculously, nothing he'd said had been a lie.

All of the girls in the audience swooned as his over-the-top lines, letting out a collective sigh.

Despite being an unlockable character, Yoh was every bit as handsome and charming as the other love interests. It was understandable that hearing him utter those impassioned refrains of love (as fake as they were) would get the girls' hearts fluttering. But if you listened closely, they were nothing but empty sonnets for who Snow White was on *the outside*.

The moment Snow White and the prince first meet, after all, is when Snow White is already dead. She isn't capable of moving or speaking, so there's no way to judge what kind of woman she is on the inside. Basically, the prince falls in love at first sight and

decides he'll make some woman he's *completely in the dark about* his wife. I felt bad thinking this, but it did make me worry for his kingdom's future. What if Snow White turned out to be a selfish brat who emptied the kingdom's coffers for her own amusement?

Then there was the matter of *the prince's* character. What kind of prince lays eyes on a dead woman and immediately decides to bring her back to his kingdom with him? It certainly suggested he had some *strange proclivities*, to say the least. But one thing was for sure: Whatever it was that compelled him to do that, he was a lost cause. Most things could be explained away by the focus on appearances, but this was taking it a bit far.

I wish I could speak to the people of the kingdom and suggest that they flee the country as soon as possible—or better yet, start a revolution.

While I was busy getting lost in my thoughts and escaping the reality of my plight, Lilia and Yoh continued their lines and progressed the play.

"Oh, beautiful princess, please allow me to demonstrate my love…" Yoh said, bending over.

I could feel his face inching ever closer. Squeals of delight sounded from the girls in the audience. From their vantage point, it would've looked unmistakably like a kiss—and that was all we needed to pull the scene off. Yoh would pause briefly where he was. Then he would straighten up, and I would sit up in the coffin.

All that was left was to say a line or two, and then we were done. That was the "happily ever after" ending.

Or at least…that's how it should've gone, except that Yoh didn't pause. His nose brushed against mine, and the squeals from the audience grew louder. I saw his eyes as he closed in on me. They seemed to be narrowed, as if he were smirking.

Whoa… Whoa, whoa, whoa! Surely not…?!

"J-Just then!" Lilia's voice rang out. "The poison apple suddenly dislodged from Snow White's throat, and she woke up!"

"Huh?" Yoh muttered at the same time.

Just as Lilia was narrating the scene, I'd pushed Yoh away from me and sat up.

Nice ad-libbing, Lilia, I thought, impressed. Apparently all the words she'd pulled out of thin air at the confessional hadn't just been a fluke—the girl was a real professional.

I didn’t have any strong feelings about what I wanted my first kiss to be like, but I *did* know that I didn’t want it to be with someone I couldn’t stand.

As I stood up, I tried to recall the line I needed to speak after being awoken with a kiss. You know what they say: “The show must go on.” No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep going until the curtains close. That’s showbiz, baby.

“Oh, my. I’m embarrassed for you to see me like this, my prince,” I said.

“A wild prince appeared! Snow White was startled, and without thinking, she sent the prince flying into the air. Then she went full combo with ABBAAB→→←!”

Where’d that come from? How’d this turn into that video game from Crayon Shin-chan*?* I wondered, but I obediently followed the narration and sent Yoh flying with a Rising Dragon. *Personal space bubble: restored.*

“Realizing that she had acted terribly rude to the prince, Snow White decided that the least she could do to make up for it was to treat him to some pure, one hundred percent apple juice!”

I grabbed the fallen apple and the prop cup from the dwarves’ house. Then, I crushed the fruit with my bare hands and squeezed out all the juice.

“Ooh!” the crowd cried out.

Guys, please. You think this *is impressive? I won’t turn down an “ooh” though. Keep ’em coming.*

Yoh’s smile twitched as he watched me pulverize the apple. He backed away slowly.

“Excuse me? S-Snow White? That apple is poisonous, yes?”

“Oh? Does the thought of an indirect kiss disgust you?”

“That is not the problem…”

I smiled, thrusting the cup of apple juice into Yoh’s hands forcefully as if to say, *Go on. Hurry up and drink it, then!* Then the dwarves joined in and started taking the whole thing a little too far.

“Go on! Aren’t you s’posed to be a prince?”

“Be a man! Chug! Chug! Chug!”

They definitely learned that one from the training grounds instructors, I thought. *Don’t do this at home, kids—it’s a big no-no to force anyone to drink when they don’t want to.*

Yoh looked around nervously, first at the dwarves, then at me, and finally at Lilia, who was narrating from the wing of the stage. He must've been picking up on the vibe, which clearly dictated "this isn't gonna end till you down that juice." And so, with a face that said *To hell with it*, he downed it in one gulp.

"The prince, having just chugged a glass of poisonous apple juice, fell to the ground, dead! Snow White rushed over in a panic!"

As Lilia narrated the scene, Yoh played along, pretending to faint. I rushed over to him, cradling his head and shoulders.

"This is not how the story goes…" he grumbled, softly enough that only I would hear him.

"*You're* the one who ruined it," I retorted.

Then, without any warning, I dropped his upper body. It fell to the floor with a dull *thunk*. He let out a pitiful little cry, like that of an insect being smushed.

"But just then, Snow White realized that the prince had a dagger hidden in his pocket. The scent of almond wafted from it, and so she gave it a lick… Alas, that almond scent was none other than that of *cyanide*!"

I took the small prop dagger that Yoh had holstered at his hip and pretended to give it a lick.

Uh, am I doing this right? Wait…isn't ingesting cyanide lethal?

"It turned out that the prince was an imposter, sent on a mission from the evil queen to kill Snow White! Now that Snow White had evaded this assassin, she would go on to take down every assassin that came after him! And before she knew it, she had a bounty for three hundred million gold pieces on her head, so she formed a pirate crew with the dwarves and set off for the high seas! Before long, they'd conquered the world and found their happy ending! All's well that ends well!"

Huh… Never heard that *version of* Snow White *before.*

Lilia's attempt at embellishing the story felt a lot like when kids would take a wrapper and try to stretch it out way beyond its capacity so they could fold it again and again and again.

There's a limit to how far you can stretch things, though. You can't just throw everything you think sounds cool into one story and hope it sticks.

This certainly didn't feel like the kind of story that you could close the book on with a classic "all's well that ends well." But the

audience seemed to think otherwise. One audience member began clapping, and the rest soon followed. Before long, the auditorium was echoing with the sound of raucous applause until it became a standing ovation.

Yoh and I, along with all of our classmates, watched in amazement as they cheered. When I saw Lilia looking over at me with a thumbs-up, I couldn't help it—I burst out laughing.

Everyone else started laughing too, as if giving up the pretense. I could only assume it was Lilia's protagonist powers at work.

Ah, good grief. Why fight it?

There was no curtain call after that, but all of the actors performing the main roles lined up on the stage and gave the audience a bow. Just as I was lifting my head, I felt Yoh's arm snake around my waist.

The girls in the audience shrieked with delight.

Oh, all right. I guess we are *a prince and princess—well, even if he was a* fake *prince in the end. I can put up with giving them a little fanservice...but just a little.*

I turned to the audience to give them a wave, and Yoh pulled me in closer to him forcefully. Before I even realized what was happening, he'd planted a kiss on the corner of my eye.

In the next moment, just as the crowd's shrieking reached its apex, Robert sent Yoh flying with a dropkick. He landed the kick at such a perfect angle that it was hard to believe he hadn't even had any run-up.

I glanced over at them out of the corner of my eye as they vanished into the stage wing. Then, as if to reassure the audience that this was all part of the package, I gave them an innocent look and continued to wave.

Nice one, Robert.

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"I cannot believe he would kick *me*, his *friend*! What a horrible brute!" Yoh, who had plopped down on the floor of the stage wing, grumbled.

"'Friend' might be overselling it a bit, don't you think?" I replied, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye as I hauled off some set pieces that we'd taken down.

Yoh looked like he'd taken a pretty good beating. He had an impressive bump on his head and bruises all over his face. I knew drop-kicking a foreign prince was probably a huge no-no, but I have to admit that it'd been pretty satisfying to watch.

For his part, Robert had been dragged off by Edward and the principal—the former of which had appeared ice-cold and composed, and the latter of which had looked like he was ready to pass out on the spot. Honestly, though…even though Robert might have been a good-for-nothing second prince, the whole thing had been nothing more than a bit of horsing around. He'd probably just get a slap on the wrist, and Edward would probably manage to smooth things over somehow.

Lilia let out a sigh as she looked down at Yoh. "You're just a bit scratched up, that's all. Nothing a little spit won't fix."

"Yeah," I chimed in. "Poor Robert's the one you should be feeling sorry for. He's gonna get a real earful."

"Poor Robert? Non, *non*! Poor *me*!"

Lilia let out another sigh—a *big* one this time—and started working her magic with "saint's prayer." A faint light engulfed Yoh's head. In the blink of an eye, his bruises grew fainter and the big lump on his head shrank down to half its original size. There was still a small protrusion, but it was much better than what it had been.

"Excuse me, Lilia? Could you please heal the cut on my finger too?" one of the girls in our class asked.

"Oh! Of course! S-Sorry, Ellie. I'll catch you later," Lilia said, rushing over to help her.

The way people called on Lilia for help was so casual that she seemed a lot more like a class health officer than a saint…but she seemed pretty pleased to be making herself useful. When I thought back to how she'd cried about being "worthless" as a saint, this seemed like real growth.

"Elizabeth," Yoh suddenly said.

I turned around to look at him. He wasn't wearing his usual fake, dopey smile. Instead, there was a strange seriousness in his eyes.

"If you…believed I had a good reason to be here in your country…would you take my side?" he asked me.

"Such as…?" I prompted.

He stroked his chin with his finger, as if he were thinking. It was a strangely affected gesture, and I was instantly struck by the contrast between this behavior and his whining earlier.

Then, in a much deeper voice than before, he said, “Such as…if I were protecting my ill mother?”

I silently studied him, trying to figure out what was going through his head right now. In the game, Yoh becomes a spy because his sickly mother is practically taken hostage. He has no idea how she’s doing or what’s happening to her.

The Yoh in this current reality diverged from his in-game counterpart a fair amount, but they seemed to at least have this major plot point in common.

Every otome game love interest has some baggage and a suitably traumatic past. For Yoh, it’s his mother.

Regardless of whether he had a traumatic past or not, though, I wasn’t going to approve of him spying on the kingdom if it meant putting my own skin at risk. Of course, it was another matter if I stood to gain something. It was hard to make an informed decision without knowing the cards he’d been dealt, though.

If you want me on your side, you’ve gotta show me your hand.

“I don’t care about your reasons,” I said, shrugging. “All I care about is *results*.”

Yoh’s eyes shot wide open. Typically, his fox-like expression concealed them…but when his eyes were wide open like this, it was plain to see how jet-black and lifeless they were. They were the eyes of someone who could tell lies upon lies without even blinking.

“What matters to me is if I stand to profit or to lose from whatever you’re scheming—that’s all,” I explained.

“What about my love? That is a profit, no?” he asked.

“Nice try, but no.”

His face softened into his typical, smarmy smile, and his eyes returned to their usual expression.

“I would *never* hurt you, Elizabeth! I love you!” he proclaimed.

“Yeah? Well…that’s a shame,” I replied, sighing.

Unfortunately, despite my best efforts to get to the bottom of his motives during the play, I apparently wasn’t going to get my answer. He was intent on continuing his idiotic little charade.

I didn’t really care whether he failed or succeeded—or what

that meant for the kingdom—but I was disappointed that I was going to be forced along for the ride whether I wanted in or not. And boy, what a wild ride it was.

My One and Only Little Sister —Big Brother—

I entered the study and took a seat in the chair. Only the current head of the house was allowed to sit in it, and the only time I could claim it for myself was whenever father was out of the house.

“Any word about the apple that Christopher switched out during the school play?”

The head butler and head maid entered the study shortly after I did, shutting the door with a heavy *clunk*.

“According to the analysis run by the Royal Research Institute, trace amounts of poison were detected—the same poison as the one found in the tea leaves from a few days ago.”

I called Edward’s earlier warning to mind—he’d told me to watch out for tea leaves contaminated with poison that had made their way into our home. Ingesting it a couple of times was apparently relatively harmless, but any more than that and the toxins would start to accumulate and lead to serious harm. And apparently, the poison was a carefully refined mineral…one that was frequently mined from the East.

“Is father still not back yet?” I asked.

“The duke has taken a fast horse…but it seems he won’t be home until at least tomorrow.”

“I see. I’ll act on his behalf in his absence, then.”

I reached into my pocket and took out a key, which I then handed to the head butler. He went to open the grandfather clock in the corner of the study.

“The current whereabouts of the attacker who targeted Lady Elizabeth at school are still under investigation, but it seems the one at training grounds has made a confession. Just as suspected, he came from the East.”

“I see…”

The head maid cast her eyes down at my somber tone. We all knew what this meant: A certain family in the kingdom had especially close ties to the East, and it was looking ever more and more likely that they might be involved in all of this.

“The prime minister has sent a list of noble families that are believed to be involved in the matter,” the head butler said.

“And this list came *directly* from the prime minister?” I asked.

I scanned my eyes over the documents he handed me. For the most part, the names were wholly unsurprising. There were even notes attached detailing the results of any investigations into them. Sure enough, the sixth prince Yoh Won Lee had known associations with Viscount DeMille’s family.

“I knew it… Earl Wilson’s family is on this list.”

“Yes. Perhaps unsurprising considering the financial boon that business with the East has provided to the earldom…but what if their trade partnership was a *cover* for something?”

“I’d hoped to keep Chris out of this,” I said, “but I think it may be a little late for that.”

My heart ached when I thought of my little brother. He was such a kind boy. I’d wanted to spare him the pain that would inevitably come with the knowledge that his sister’s life was in danger. But he was kind *and* sharp. He’d probably realized what was going on by now—not just with our sister but the truth behind his birth father’s “accident” too.

I hated to harbor doubts about anyone, but I couldn’t deny that there was some overlap here. One of our family carriages had just been tampered with, and Christopher’s father had died in a carriage accident. It was all starting to feel more than a little bit suspicious.

I could only hope that my speculations were wrong.

“This map of enemy bases was supplied by the Knights’ Brigade,” the head butler said.

“Mm. Looks like they’ve begun making moves.”

There were four locations marked on the map, one of which was already crossed out with an “X.” It was marked on a tranquil grassland adjacent to a lake and a forest, not two hours from the capital. I recognized it as a tourist spot thanks to its status as a sanctuary for a particular breed of strange rabbits.

Looking at the spot on the map brought back memories of when Lizzie and Christopher had gone out for a picnic there not too long ago. I recalled hearing that they’d run into some poachers with guns. Considering that the east was known for pouring resources into the development of firearms, it seemed

there was a very high likelihood that the poachers might have been Easterners.

Does this "X" mean that the knights have already dealt with the Eastern presence here? I wondered. I flipped through the accompanying documentation and read that the base there had already been abandoned by the time the knights had arrived to investigate.

Suddenly, I felt the dots connecting.

On the day of their picnic trip, Christopher had hurt his ankle when they were running from the poachers. He hadn't told me what had happened, but I knew Lizzie must have been furious—he was our precious little brother, after all. I knew how Lizzie was when she got angry. She was notoriously unpredictable, but thinking back to how she'd marched over to the Wilsons' manor alone to rescue Christopher gave me an idea of what she might have done with those poachers.

When I pieced everything I'd learned so far together, a picture began to emerge of what the East was *really* after.

First they'd impoverished earl's family through trade restrictions, and now they were probably compelling him to assist with transportation of weapons and personnel in exchange for the financial assistance he so desperately needed.

But the earl and his family had been investigated after he'd kidnapped Christopher. Ultimately, the earl had been "persuaded" to confess his ties to the East. The kingdom hadn't gone so far as to strip him of his title, but his company had apparently been temporarily dissolved. This would have been a huge loss for the East, which had relied on the earl as a major trade partner and had poured a lot of resources into the connection.

Based on the information from Earl Wilson, the East had been planning to smuggle weapons into the kingdom and stash them at bases in meadows, forests, and other natural areas near the capital. It seemed there was a very simple criteria for choosing these bases: They were well hidden, but close enough to the capital to easily launch an attack from. What's more, they'd be able to get some target practice by shooting the rabbits in the forest—and make a little money selling them too.

It was a terribly convenient location for them, yet they'd already abandoned it by the time the knights had shown up.

It wouldn't do to suspect anyone without proper evidence…but as a thought exercise, how would the enemy feel if they lost one of their bases thanks to a certain someone *who's strong enough to take on a whole Knights' Brigade division?*

In all likelihood, their goal was to invade the kingdom, but now they'd lost a major connection and a key base. It wouldn't be all that surprising if they wanted revenge for those losses, and the target of their revenge had to be none other than us: the Burtons.

No…maybe the target is only one *of us: the person directly responsible.*

"There's more, my lord: We've received permission from the royal family to employ the first division," the head maid said.

"The first division?" I repeated.

Even the head maid, who had given me the news, seemed somewhat baffled.

"Aren't they supposed to be a top secret division?" I asked. "I thought they only protected the royal family?"

"I thought so too…but I suppose they've been given a royal order to redirect their efforts," she replied.

"Heh…" A chuckle escaped my lips, surprising even me.

I knew it wasn't the time to be laughing, but I couldn't help being a little tickled by my sister's magnetism. She was a real tomboy…and a bit of a troublemaker. But she had a surprising talent for roping everyone around her into her shenanigans. It was honestly nothing short of remarkable that the prime minister, the Knights' Brigade, *and* the royal family were all collaborating on this.

No one was being ordered to do anything…but Lizzie didn't *need* to resort to orders. Her charisma and the respect that she commanded was enough to inspire the people around her to act. And really, wasn't that what it meant to be "honorable"?

"Lizzie's far more honorable than I could ever claim to be… I'm not sure I even have a role to play in this all," I said.

"My lord…"

Oh, Lizzie…you're always full of surprises. All you do is make me worry about you, but it's hard to keep up when you have so many secrets. And most of all, you won't let *people worry about you.*

"She's grown so much in the blink of an eye. I wish she could just stay a kid forever…"

“My lord, you and Lady Elizabeth *are* still just children,” the head maid said. She and the head butler were both frowning with concern.

“Yes… I suppose we must be, in your eyes,” I replied, giving them a sad smile.

It hurt to admit it, but I knew that Lizzie didn’t need me. She could solve her own problems. Still, I would do everything I could to look out for her. After all, I was her big brother, and she was my little sister—my sweet, precious little sister who meant the world to me.

“Let’s start with the base near the harbor. Next is the base near the border.”

“Yes, my lord.”

My mind raced as I looked at the map. I wanted to start with any potential channels that the enemy could use as infiltration routes and ensure that they wouldn’t be able to call in any reinforcements. Once we’d taken care of those, we’d lure the enemy into the remaining bases until they’d be corralled into the final one. We’d have them cornered. Once we’d cut them off from reinforcements or supplies, we’d be able to launch a siege.

It was the perfect set up to get them to surrender, which would be the best possible outcome to minimize losses for *both* sides.

“And what about the list of names?” the head maid asked.

“I’ll speak to the people on this list directly. Ideally, we can reach an understanding,” I replied.

“I’ll prepare the carriage for you, then,” she said; with a bow, she left the study.

I’ll need to make some preparations too, I thought.

My family always came first, then my close friends, and, finally, the kingdom. If the people we cared about were in danger, then we had to do our part to protect them.

I looked over at the head butler, and he gave me a little nod.

“An enemy of the Burton family is in our midst. As the acting head of the household, I order you to eliminate them at once,” I said.

At my order, the head butler turned a cog inside of the grandfather clock. The clock hands began to spin counterclockwise, and when they landed on the designated hour, the bell on top of the manor rang out.

It was the sound of power. The whole kingdom would hear its toll and know that we were ready to act.

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My beloved little sister—my one and only little sister—was in danger.

When did I start noticing the changes in her? I wondered. They had come on quickly—dizzyingly so. I'd been keeping an eye on her ever since she was born, so it hadn't taken me long to notice these changes. It had been clear that she was being cornered, and that she'd found herself in an increasingly desperate situation. It was almost like she'd been fighting against some invisible force—or preparing for the fight. In the blink of an eye, she'd cut off her long hair and started wearing boys' clothing.

I'd felt like I couldn't ask her about what was happening. Even if I'd tried, she would just dodge the question with a troubled smile that made her look so much older than her actual age. Over time, it had become harder and harder to check in on her.

I couldn't help wondering if something had happened...something she hadn't been able to tell even me or our parents about. Or maybe she'd felt no one would believe her, even if she tried to talk about it—something like a divine prophecy or a nightmare.

Why won't she just tell me? I'd wondered. *If she doesn't tell me what's going on, I'll probably never know.*

I hadn't known why my little sister was going through such dramatic changes. But there was one thing I *had* known, and that was that Lizzie would always be my precious little sister.

Just holding on to that was enough for me.

I'd given her encouragement when she was working hard and scolded her when she'd put herself in danger. I'd repeatedly told her how much she meant to me and how much I cared—not just through my words, but through my actions too. I'd be ready to give her a hand if she ever found herself in trouble. And if there was anywhere she wanted to go, I'd take her by the hand and lead her there.

That was all I had been able to do for her... But I had a feeling that I was the *only one* who could do that for her. And that would

never change, no matter how much *she* did.

I'd hoped that one day, if she found herself in a bind, she would remember that she had me on her side. I'd hoped that maybe I could be of some help to her, even if I couldn't offer much.

Lizzie had been working so hard and fighting a battle all by herself.

I'd watched her grow stronger. One day, she'd grown up enough to go anywhere she wanted. She didn't even need to hold my hand anymore. Just like our parents and I had protected, looked after, and taught her, she could now do the same for others.

No longer was she a little girl who just needed to be sheltered. But just because she'd gotten stronger—just because *she* was now protecting others—didn't mean that I couldn't do the same for *her*, as her older brother.

I'll take care of you, Lizzie. No matter how strong you get, or how much you fight this battle on your own, I'll still be here to watch over you. I'll do everything I can to protect you. I'm going to keep showing you that you're not alone, and that you mean the world to me. After all, we're family...and I'm your one and only older brother.

Lately, the little sister I'd watched fighting a battle all alone, always lost in her thoughts, seemed to be going through yet another change. It was almost like a weight had been lifted off of her shoulders...like she'd been freed of something. She'd started smiling and laughing like a normal teenager.

I'd been watching her for long enough to figure out why: I knew that whatever she'd been working so hard for, she'd accomplished. All her hard work had paid off. She'd achieved that freedom and joy herself. She'd worked hard for it, and she deserved to have it. Now she could wear her carefree smile, and no one had the right to take that away from her.

It was so frustrating to be unable to step in and do something. All I'd ever been able to do was sit back and watch when I wanted nothing more than to support her. I couldn't stand it.

But this time, I could *see* the forces she was fighting.

You've been fighting so hard, Lizzie. Let me have a turn now.

Never Keep a Lady Waiting

"There's something in the air," I mumbled. "I'm pretty sure we're being watched."

"Huh?"

Lilia and I were having a cup of tea in the viscount's garden.

"I have a feeling we're being tailed," I explained.

Lilia's eyes widened.

"D-Do you think it's one of your family servants...?" she suggested, a trace of fear in her voice.

"No. I'd be able to sense if it was, but it's not. Plus, my father would've told me if he'd sent someone to tail me. He would've warned me not to shake them loose."

"Uh-huh... I'm guessing you've got a history of doing that, huh?"

"Well, yeah. Obviously I'm gonna try to shake them, unless someone tells me not to."

Can you blame me? Nobody likes to be followed.

Even if I wasn't up to any trouble, I didn't appreciate the escort. It felt a lot like the discomfort I'd felt in my past life whenever I had a police car driving behind me.

"I dunno how to explain it, but...whoever it is, I get the sense they're a professional. Not even *I* can get a handle on them," I said.

"Not even you, huh...?"

I nodded. Lilia looked like she was taking this seriously too.

"This might have something to do with Yoh trying to get close to me. If it does, that means you're in danger too."

"Wh-What?! Why me?!"

"Because he's probably only going after me because I'm in the way of getting to *you*—a saint. That's the most likely explanation."

For whatever reason, the East wanted to get their hands on Lilia in the game. And since she'd chosen *me* as her love interest, it only made sense that they'd want to get me out of the picture. If they were starting to mobilize, then it wouldn't be surprising for them to make a move on their real target: Lilia.

"That's why I'm thinking you'll need some protection."

"W-Wait, does that mean you'll be with me morning till evening?

Guarding me twenty-four seven and never leaving my side…?" Lilia asked.

"No."

"No?!"

I'd never heard such a perfect setup for a slam-down. *What is this, a comedy routine?*

No matter how much she might've wanted it, it just wasn't realistic for me to keep watch over her twenty-four seven. If I wasn't home by dinner, my family was bound to send someone to track me down.

"I'll find someone to guard you—uh, watch over you—in my place. I mean, I don't really have the authority to make demands of the Burton staff…or the knights, or cadets…but I can borrow someone for a bit."

I snapped my fingers, and a hooded man in black attire jumped down next to me.

The viscount's butler, who had been hanging back in the gazebo, tensed up suddenly. I held up my hand to signal he didn't need to worry.

"Who… Who is *that*?"

"Just an assassin I borrowed from Gried. He tried to assassinate Robert, but now he's on our side and listens to anything Gried says. Think of him as a…useful pawn."

"Master, I am no pawn," the man said.

"All right. A gun for hire, then," I replied, giving him a little smirk.

He gave me a strained, unfriendly smile in return.

"Um… E-Ellie?" Lilia mumbled as she looked back and forth between us.

"Yeah?"

"D-Doesn't a main character usually have, you know…a hot guy or a cute little mascot?! Why do I have to be stuck with this creepy assassin?!"

"Hey, *you're* the one who chose the villainess route. You've got only yourself to blame for this."

"I'm having some *major* regrets right now…" Lilia said, slumping in her seat.

You're reaching for the moon here, Lilia. You know Royal LOVERS *doesn't have any hot side characters to give you the scoop on your*

affection points with the love interests. There are no cute little mascots either.

"Don't worry. I drilled it into his head not to show his face unless you're in danger."

"B-But…he's so *sketchy*. What if *he* tries to do something to me?" Lilia stuttered nervously.

"Oh, that's not a concern," I said, taking a sip of my tea. "He's been fixed."

"He's…he's been *what*?"

"You know: *fixed*. As in, he couldn't lay a hand on a woman if he wanted to."

Lilia cocked her head. Her face was growing paler and paler by the minute.

"You want the details? I can give it to you straight, if that's what you want," I offered.

"No thank you."

"Or…I can sugarcoat it even more? Put a cutesy spin on it?"

"That sounds even *less* appealing."

Guess that's a pretty firm "no." Well, can't say I didn't try.

To be honest, I didn't actually know the details. I was just gonna get the assassin to tell her himself if she wanted to know.

I motioned to him with my chin, and he disappeared again into the background. He was pretty good at blending in—although I wasn't all that surprised, considering that was kind of a key job criteria for an assassin. Still, he was no match for me—a mere sixteen-year-old—and I had a feeling he wouldn't be able to hold his own well in open combat. He was definitely less of a guard than a watchman.

Lilia looked on in shock as the assassin disappeared. Finally, she let out a quiet, resigned sigh and looked back at me.

"Um, Ellie?" she muttered, wringing her hands and looking at me. Her voice was so quiet, it was like she was talking to herself. "If I'm ever in trouble, will you…will you come running, like you've always done until now?"

"Dunno. I've already gotten you to commit to my route, so…no pointing baiting a landed fish, right?"

"You're the worst."

"Ha ha ha." I laughed off her reproach and took in a breath. Then I took a serious tone again. "Well, I'll just be relieved not to

have to fear for my life."

"You know...for some reason, that feels even more callous than when you told me you won't come to my aid..."

"What can I say? I've always been callous. If you thought I was the kind of person who'd stick their neck out for others, then that just means I'm a killer actor."

That's right. There's no one in this world I care about more than myself.

I'd do anything to secure my own happiness; anything else was secondary.

"Who in the world *are* you actually, deep down?" Lilia asked.

"Honestly? I don't even know. I don't really know what kind of person I am. All my likes and dislikes, my choices, and my behavior are all just part of this character I invented. The difference between that character and the 'real me' feels hazier by the day. Even *I* can't tell the difference now."

For the last ten years, I'd just been playing the part of a love interest. Chivalry was now second nature to me. I still opened doors and pulled out chairs for girls—even Lilia. Before I knew it, I'd find myself showering my fan club girls with flattery and compliments. It seemed like any chance of dropping my cool playboy act around girls was an *incredibly* distant possibility. I couldn't bring myself to quit my Demon Drill Sergeant persona at the training grounds either.

"But to flip the script, maybe *all of that* is actually me. Maybe that's the person I am," I said.

Lilia just stared at me, mouth agape. I picked up a cookie and tossed it in, making a mess of her cute face. It was so funny, I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"And you know what? I kinda like that person."

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"Master. Master."

"Mgh...?"

As I was brushing my teeth, I heard a knock at the window.

I opened it to see the man who was *supposed* to be keeping an eye on Lilia clinging expertly to the window frame instead.

"They've taken the girl."

“Well, that was *fast*,” I blurted out.

It had only been a little over a week since I’d assigned this guy to watch over her. It felt like things were moving a little too quickly. I mean, doesn’t it usually take a few months for things like this to unfold in otome games?

Could’ve at least tried to stretch this out for a month, I thought.

A major plot development like the main character being kidnapped was surely a little outside of the realm of friendship-ending content. Same with Yoh’s arrival, actually.

“So? You came running here instead of protecting her?” I asked the assassin.

“Of course I did. I wasn’t about to throw away my life.” He let out a little snort. For some reason, he sounded oddly proud of himself for this.

To be fair, I hadn’t expected him to be of any use in open combat. It was pretty awful timing, though. I’d already finished eating dinner and taking my shower, so I’d been hoping to finish off my night with my daily stretches before heading to bed.

“Think this can wait till tomorrow?” I tried.

“Probably. But I’d recommend you nip this in the bud today,” he said.

He removed an envelope from his pocket. I took it and flipped it over, but there wasn’t an address, sender’s name, or even a seal. I removed the letter and scanned it.

There were just a few short sentences, which were written in terrible handwriting.

The letter did actually address someone—me.

“If you want Lilia back, come alone to the deserted house in the outskirts of the capital at 9 p.m.”

Whoever had written the letter seemed to be under the impression that I was the kind of person who’d risk my life to save Lilia.

You’re giving me way too much credit here.

“I found it in her room,” the assassin explained.

“Right.”

I checked the time. It was already past 10 p.m.

I could only assume that the kidnapper had been in a rush to get out, so they’d probably forgotten to specify that I was to meet them at 9 p.m. *tomorrow*. They’d probably expected that one of the

viscount's servants would notice that Lilia was missing tomorrow morning and bring the letter to me then.

In fact, the kidnapper was probably busy preparing for tomorrow night. Rather than let them have ample time to set up, it seemed like a better call to get the jump on them and take advantage of the element of surprise.

I was surprised that the assassin had come here to warn me instead of turning tail. Guess he wasn't much of a threat to begin with.

"If they want to meet tomorrow…then I'd better head off as soon as possible," I said with a smirk.

The assassin was already gone, though—his work here was apparently finished.

One of the first rules of being a ladies' man: Never keep a lady waiting. Showing up early meant showing up right on time.

That made now the perfect time to leave.

I’m the Heroine of This Story —Lilia—

My eyes blinked open.

My vision was blurry, and the back of my head kind of hurt. As I took in my surroundings, I realized that I was in an unfamiliar room. It had an elegant, vintage feel to it, like it belonged in an old mansion with a storied history.

Bit by bit, my memories started coming back to me.

I’d been in my room when a stranger—then, *several* strangers—had appeared out of nowhere. Then I think…I’d been hit? Yeah, that’s probably what happened. Anyway, I must’ve lost consciousness.

“Are you awake now?” a gentle male voice—the kind that they only gave to important characters—asked.

It was a voice I was all too familiar with; when I turned to look, sure enough, it was Yoh. Thanks to his big, full-faced smirk, his already narrow eyes were barely visible.

Ellie was right, I thought. *He’s not the Yoh I know from the game… That’s a full-on bad-guy smirk!*

I tried to move, only to realize that my hands had been tied behind my back. Though, to be honest, I have no idea what I would’ve done even if they’d been free.

“Wh-Where am I?” I asked.

“Our base. As you can see, this mansion is not currently occupied, and it is far away from the town center. You can make all the noise you want, but help will not come.”

“Wh-Why take *me*?”

“To lure Elizabeth Burton,” he replied. As he looked down at me, I saw a sliver of his black eyes. They looked like deep, dark pools. “The Burton family has caused us much trouble. Our plan to persuade Earl Wilson to help us smuggle firearms was delayed because the future duke exposed his wrongdoings. And because of Elizabeth Burton and her adoptive brother’s meddling with the poachers, our revenue stream was throttled, and our secret base location was revealed. We even suffered a surprise attack. We were planning to convince you to join forces with us, but Elizabeth

Burton refused to ever leave your side. We had no opening."

I already kind of knew about the last two things he'd just mentioned, so they didn't come as much of a surprise to me. It was kind of funny that he blamed Ellie for "refusing to leave my side," though—*I* was the clingy one.

Ellie had made it sound like she'd just been dragged into my mess, but from what Yoh had just said, it seemed like she had it backwards. *She* was apparently the real target.

"The biggest nuisance in the Burton family is Elizabeth. She is strong enough to defeat an entire army division. We cannot lay a hand on the Burton family when they have a weapon such as *that*. To put it another way...if we could only eliminate the nuisance that is Elizabeth Burton, then our assault would be a simple matter."

Are you sure about that? I wondered. Sure, Ellie was super strong...but from what she'd told me, she had about as much authority to speak for the duke's family as one of the shrubs in the manor's garden.

I was on the lowest rung of the ladder as the baron's adopted daughter, and the only stories of the Honorable Duke's family that reached my ears had nothing to do with Ellie. Besides, I couldn't imagine that it would be "a simple matter" to launch an assault on *any* of the noble families in the kingdom.

"We will bring down the duke's house and claim the saint. Once we have made that foothold, we will invade the country. *I* will be the one to make that happen. I will show everyone who has looked down on me and treated me like a pawn how wrong they were. And I will show everyone who has looked down on my mother for her lowly status—"

"Uh-huh, there it is," I mumbled. "Sounds like exactly the same backstory he had in the game."

"What?"

"Oh, uh...nothing! Don't mind me. I was just talking to myself."

I see what's happening now. He's the same Yoh from the game—he's just turned into a bad guy.

He was the sixth prince of his kingdom. What's more, he was illegitimate. He'd never inherit the throne if he just sat around on his hands and waited quietly for it, and he knew that. He'd been manipulated into becoming a spy for his country with the promise that it would one day lead to the opportunity to rule.

In the game, his primary motivation was to protect himself and his sickly mother—which meant he'd basically had no choice but to be a spy. In this universe, though, his motivation had been twisted slightly: Now, he was driven by ambition. You could call it a script rewrite, I guess. Personally, I felt like it was a change for the worse.

I was glad that Yoh had still retained some of his purehearted nature, at least.

"Listen…I'm onto you," I said—not to Yoh, but to the elusive, omnipresent forces that were both everywhere and nowhere all at once.

"What are you saying?" You asked, looking at me with suspicion.

"Oh, I'm not talking to *you*," I said, smiling condescendingly. "You poor little puppet…they won't even tell you what they're after."

Wait… What am I even saying right now? I sound like a total villainess!

At some point—probably around when I'd locked into Ellie's route—I'd felt my "destiny-defying powers" begin to grow stronger. I knew, instinctively, that they were the foundation of my powers as a saint. Everything I was capable of was rooted in this ability to warp fate and defy destiny.

Let me illustrate with some examples. When someone was fated to die, I could bring them back to life. I could heal the injured and undo the damage. I could even make people fall in love with me, even when they never would've been attracted to me under normal circumstances.

The underlying mechanism of all my saint's powers, such as "charm" and "saint's prayer," was that I could take things that "were meant to happen" and bend them to my will. And lately, my powers had been growing stronger—so strong, in fact, that I was having a hard time keeping them in check.

At first, I'd just assumed that my powers were growing stronger simply because I was the main character. But now, I was starting to doubt that premise.

"You guys were afraid of Ellie's—I mean, Elizabeth Burton's—power to rewrite the script. You wanted to avoid that at all costs, which is why you kept giving me these 'destiny-defying powers'…even though it came at the cost of *your own* power," I

said.

I thought of Ellie and how she'd been reborn into this world by mistake. *How much blood, sweat, and tears has she spent just to remain standing now?* I wondered. *How many times did she have to defy her destiny and tear down the walls of fate?*

"I've figured out what's going on. I realized that my 'destiny-defying powers' don't come from the universe anymore—they come from *within*. Do you understand what I mean by that? My powers have *surpassed* yours, even though *you're* the ones who created this whole universe," I continued to address the powers that be—the very forces that kept this world turning—through Yoh. You might even say I was talking to the *gods*.

"You guys have powers too, so you get what I mean, right? Or maybe you've become so weak and powerless that you can't even see the vast difference between our powers anymore?"

I could hear the sound of sparks from somewhere in the distance.

What's going on? Is there some kind of festival happening?

It was way too late at night for a festival, though—at least, one that would have council (uh, *kingdom*) approval. That being said, we *were* apparently in the outskirts, so I guess there wasn't exactly any real concern about causing a public nuisance.

"You can't use me for your agenda anymore. *I'm* in charge of this universe now," I declared, looking down at the palm of my hand.

I certainly didn't feel like I'd mastered my powers yet. If Ellie were in my position, she probably would've mastered them by now.

That didn't matter, though—because as long as we fought with all our might, every one of us had the power to change our destinies. Things like "fate" and "the gods" didn't stand a chance against the power of *will*.

"At this point, no matter how much you try to interfere, you can't stop us. The most you managed to do was to slip in a transfer student."

I looked at Yoh. The powers that be had turned the poor guy into a villain, all in their futile attempt to correct the script. I didn't see him as an enemy—he wasn't even a romantic rival. Honestly, I just felt bad for him.

I'd loved the original Yoh. In fact, he'd actually been my second favorite love interest. The fact that the powers that be had corrupted the script *as much as they had* in an attempt to course-correct seemed crazy to me. It was clearly an act of desperation, and boy, had they mixed up their priorities.

"Your power isn't enough to defeat me. You'll never be able to override the destiny *I* want," I said, copying the same smirk I always saw on my beloved's face. It was a cheeky, audacious curl of the lips. "You birthed this monster. Now get ready for it to *devour* you."

"What in the world are you talking about?! Are you insane?!" Yoh exclaimed.

"I've never been more sane in my life," I replied.

Then I heard the ground rumble underneath us—almost like the earth was shaking in response to my anger.

"*You're* the ones who're insane," I said, still talking beyond him to the powers that be. I could hear my voice growing louder and louder, like I wasn't holding back anymore. "I didn't *ask* for any of this. I didn't ask to be born a saint or a main character. I didn't ever ask to be beautiful either. Do you have any idea how hard I've had it all because of you? I've finally found the person who can fill the hole in my heart, and now you want to take her away from me—all because she's not part of the original script?! How *dare* you try to lay a hand on Ellie! You've really pissed me off now!"

"Non! You *are* insane! You fear for your life, and it has made you lose your mind! But...if you cry and beg...maybe I will still consider making you my bride! You may be insane, but at least you are beautiful!" Yoh roared with laughter, like some small-time boss's minion.

"Heh..." I gave him another smirk. "Don't make me laugh. *I'm* the heroine of this story."

Suddenly, there was a loud crash, like something in the distance was breaking. I didn't know why, but in my gut, I knew exactly who was responsible for it.

"And everyone knows what happens when the heroine's in a bind: The *prince* comes riding in on a white horse to save her."

The crashing sound grew closer and closer. Yoh turned to look towards the source of the noise, turning to face the wall.

Seconds later, a thunderous roar sounded, and the whole wall

was blown away.

“Looks like she’s finally here,” I said.

Standing in the downpour of brick debris and dust was none other than my prince: Elizabeth Burton herself.



“Wh-Why is *she* here?!” Yoh cried, looking at Ellie with astonishment.

Ellie was just standing there like she didn’t have a care in the world, but a closer look revealed that she was probably injured. The right side of her face was caked in blood, and it looked like she couldn’t even open her right eye. Her clothes were a tattered mess, and for some reason, she was both soaked and covered in dirt.

The moment I saw her, my heart leaped.

I knew it. She made a big show of not wanting to risk her life for me, but I knew she’d come.

I turned to face Yoh, swelling with pride.

“Like, I said: *I’m* the heroine of this story. So, who says I can’t put a villainess or two under my spell?”

“Uh… Well, here I am. One villainess under your spell, at your service,” Ellie mumbled, looking completely lost.

Maybe It Wouldn’t Be So Bad to Make You My First

I’d just finished destroying every wall I came up against when I found Lilia and Yoh in what looked to be the initial stages of a negotiation. I must’ve gotten hit by something during the explosion, because the vision in my right eye was obscured by blood.

I was glad that they were hiding here, because it would’ve been a real pain if Yoh had hidden her somewhere more clever. I’d been bracing myself to tear down the whole building before I found them.

“Wh-What are you doing here?!”

“Well, don’t sound so *surprised*. You invited me, remember?”

Yoh and I made eye contact, and he gave me a stunned look.

I pulled the letter out of my back pocket and showed it to him. It had gotten pretty scorched in that explosion, but I figured he’d still recognize it.

“Sorry I’m here so early. I just couldn’t bear to wait,” I said.

“You are *much* too early!”

Figured he’d say that.

I’d encountered only a few people in the abandoned house—well, actually, it was more like an old mansion. Yoh had probably arranged for there to be a bigger crowd tomorrow, when I was *supposed* to have arrived. Honestly, though, I was a little disappointed. It had been pretty dissatisfying to mow down only a few mooks on the way here.

“Did you really come here alone?!” Yoh asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Surely you have figured out that *you* are the real target…yet you still came alone? Is this woman truly that special to you?!”

“Of course she is.”

Huh… Okay. Guess I’m *the one they were after.*

I’d been certain they were after Lilia, so this was news to me…but I decided to play it off like I’d known all along.

“Lilia is like a little sister to me.”

“Ugh, listen to you!” Lilia cried. “You get my hopes up, and then you have to go and dash them to the ground! Playboys like you are the worst!”

“Sorry…”

Wait, what’s with the reprimand? Something’s not right here… How’d I wind up apologizing when I came here to save your butt?

Lilia ran over to me and hid behind me. She looked down at the sword I held in one hand. Despite her complaining, she appeared relieved. I gave her a little pat on the head.

An explosion rang out, and both Lilia and Yoh whipped around to look at the source.

“There’s no time to talk. The gunpowder storehouse has just exploded, so pretty soon the whole place will be on fire. We need to run,” I said.

“Th-The *gunpowder storehouse*?!” Lilia repeated, incredulous.

“Let’s just say I had to sate my villainous curiosity. Guess that’s what happens when you set it on fire.”

“Can’t you be curious about something a little…*less* deadly, please?”

“Hey, it’s not like *I* set it on fire. It’s his buddies’ fault for shooting at it.”

I shrugged as I watched Yoh fall to his knees.

Gunpowder and firearms were incredibly valuable in this universe. It seemed like Yoh and his buddies had stockpiled an impressive arsenal, so the damage it’d cause when it all went up in flames was probably nothing to sneeze at.

“I kinda figured I’d be dead if I got caught in an explosion point-blank, but…here I am,” I said.

“Um, how *are* you still alive?” asked Lilia.

“Well, I didn’t have much to lose, so I stomped the ground as hard as I could. It caved under me and I dropped right into an underground water tank.”

Lilia looked floored. I couldn’t exactly blame her. The truth was, I’d just gotten lucky. If one little thing had gone wrong, I probably *would’ve* been dead.

Anyway…let’s just put that to the side for now.

“C’mon. Let’s get out of here,” I said.

“W-Wait!”

I turned around to see Yoh pointing a gun in our direction. He

wasn’t wearing his usual smile; instead, he was glaring at us. His hair was a disheveled mess.

“You think I would just let you run away?! How dare you ruin my plans?! At the very least…I will bring your heads back home as souvenirs!”

I closed the distance between us with a single leap and kicked the gun right out of his hand. He hadn’t even pulled the trigger. It went flying into the air and landed on the floor far away from us.

Yoh fell over backwards, straight onto his butt, and looked up at me with astonishment as I thrust the tip of my sword at his throat.

Funny… This feels a bit like déjà vu, I thought. The only difference was that, this time, there was a *real* sword in my hand. (Now, rest assured that I could’ve easily taken his head, even with a sparring sword. But *Yoh* didn’t know that, and so the stakes must’ve seemed much higher for him now.)

“E-Elizabeth…” he said, calling my name as he had so many times before.

He tried to smile, but it looked unmistakably strained. The corners of his lips were twitching awkwardly. I looked down at him and flashed him a smile of my own.

“I may look like a cold-blooded killer, but I’m just a two-bit villain. I’ve never taken a life before,” I explained. “See, there isn’t much murder and wanton cruelty in these parts. This kingdom and the world it exists in are too peaceful and forgiving for that.”

I looked into Yoh’s widened eyes and saw my own reflection. I wore a smirk, but my eyes weren’t smiling. Just like Yoh’s, they were the eyes of a liar.

We both wore the face of a villain.

“But I worry sometimes that when the moment I have to cross that line comes, my blade will have dulled. You hear about that all the time, right? The moment comes, and someone’s hands are shaking too much, or they just can’t bring themselves to pull the trigger.”

It was hard to say whether Yoh’s failure to pull the trigger had been because he hadn’t seen me coming, or because he just couldn’t take that decisive action.

“Can’t have *that*, right? So, I’ve been thinking I oughta give it a go—you know, at least once.”

I watched the color drain out of Yoh’s face as he shrank away

slowly towards the wall.

Honestly, I really thought I was going to die back in that explosion. This guy had tried to kill both Lilia and me, and now he wanted to get off scot-free? Talk about *selfish*. I wasn't forgiving enough to let someone who'd tried to *kill* me off the hook like that.

"Maybe it wouldn't be bad to make *you* my first," I said.

And with that, I swung my blade down.

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I withdrew my blade, which had pierced a spot just shy of Yoh's face.

I looked down at him as he lay there, unconscious on the floor, and let out a sigh. Unlike the rest of us plebs who'd pass out with our eyes wide open, Yoh's beautiful face was softened into what looked like a peaceful slumber. As always, apparently only love interests were afforded dignity in this world.

Lilia had covered her face with both her hands, but she spread her fingers a bit to look through them.

"You... You didn't actually kill him, right...?" she asked hesitantly.

"Even I have a right to choose who I tango with," I said flippantly, sheathing my sword.

"That's very...T-rated of you."

I bent down to pick Yoh up. Since he was unconscious, I figured he wouldn't object to being carried under my arm like a bag of rice.

After scooping him up, I headed over to Lilia and picked her up so that she was sitting in the crook of my arm. Flustered, she swung her arms around my neck and held on tightly.

The room was quickly starting to get hotter and hotter. I had a feeling that I'd start breaking into a sweat just standing here if we stuck around any longer. I could see flames licking the air beyond the wall that I'd destroyed earlier.

"Sheesh. Never would've come here if I'd known it'd be *this* dangerous."

"But...you *did* come," Lilia muttered. She squeezed her arms around my neck a little tighter and cast her eyes to the floor. Tears welled up in her eyes, only to get stuck on her long eyelashes. "And I'm really happy you did."

“You’re really trying to make me out to be a good guy, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah. You’re my prince, Ellie!” Lilia exclaimed, smiling through her tears.

“Aw, thanks. That’s the highest compliment a love interest can hope for.”

I gave her an uncomfortable smile. I never knew what to do with myself when someone cried—even if they were happy tears.

Determined to make a quick getaway, I kicked down the window. The fire seemed to be spreading rapidly, and even the old mansion’s grounds were aflame. Everywhere I looked, we were surrounded by a sea of fire.

“E-Ellie…” Lilia said nervously, drawing closer. “Th-This looks pretty bad. I’m not sure even *you* can make it through this…”

“Oh, Lilia. You worry too much.”

I looked into her amber eyes. It felt a little weird, when our faces were so much closer than usual. I broke into a laugh as Lilia stared at me, a flicker of emotion in her eyes.

Come on, Lilia. What kind of main character won’t put her faith in the love interest she chose?

“I’ve come up against all kinds of impossible challenges, and I’m still here, aren’t I?” I said.

Both my hands were full, so I opted to affectionately bump her forehead lightly with my own. Her whole face immediately turned red.



“Compared to what I’ve faced before, this is *nothing*.”

I stood up on the broken window frame and leaped, landing on a pillar that was on the verge of collapsing. From there, I picked several slightly elevated spots that hadn’t yet been engulfed in flames to jump to next.

“See?” I said.

I smiled down at Lilia, who was looking at me in astonishment as I cradled her in my arm.

“I’d never have come to your rescue if I thought I’d be putting my *own* life at risk. I would’ve just saved my own skin and gotten the hell out.”

“Yes… That is so true,” was her stilted reply.

Why’s she talking like that? I wondered. *Huh… Maybe Yoh rubbed off on her.*

Speaking of Yoh, he was a *lot* heavier than Lilia. I adjusted my arm to get a better hold of him, then leaped onto the next platform.

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“I think we’ve made it far enough away from the flames. We should be safe now,” I said.

We were a ways away from the mansion now, so I lowered Lilia and Yoh down onto the ground. My shoulders felt a bit stiff from carrying them. It felt like I’d been doing one of those tightrope walking acts where you carry two people, and every time I thought about how bad it would be if I dropped them, I’d felt a strange surge of anxiety. Honestly, it had felt like I was on one of those *Ninja Warrior* shows.

“You’re not…*immortal* by any chance, are you, Ellie?” Lilia asked, looking up at me suspiciously.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll die when my time comes.”

“And when will that be?”

“Uh…when I’m old and decrepit, I guess?”

“You’re really planning on making it to a ripe old age?”

And the zingers just keep coming… At least she’s holding up well enough to make them.

“Hey, any chance you’re able to stop bleeding with that ‘saint’s prayer’ of yours? The blood just keeps coming…and I know I’ll be

busted if I show up back home like this," I said.

"You're still bleeding?!"

"Yeah. It's been obstructing my vision pretty badly."

Lilia approached me with an incredulous look on her face. I bent down a bit to make it easier for her to lay her hands on my head.

In an instant, a light engulfed Lilia's entire body.

"Huh?" we both blurted out at the same time.

As soon as she'd placed her hands on my head, my fresh wounds had completely disappeared. They'd been pretty deep, but now it was like they'd never been there at all. Even the little cuts and bruises on my face and my lips had vanished.

"Lilia... Was that...?"

"I... I think those were my high saint's powers."

I remembered a CG of the main character engulfed in light like that from the game. You only got to see it if you got the Best Romance ending, where the main character awakens to her high saint's powers.

Lilia looked down at her hands. Then she opened and closed them repeatedly, as if checking that they still had feeling.

"I've...been getting the sense lately that my powers are getting stronger," she said. "But it's weird... Until now, I felt like I wasn't able to use them to their full potential. It's like I couldn't heal wounds that I felt like I *should* have been able to heal."

When we'd talked about her powers before, she'd told me that she could only heal minor scrapes and bumps. The injuries I'd sustained at the mansion were several steps above that in severity, so I hadn't even gotten my hopes up that she'd be able to stop the bleeding. And yet...

"But this time, it was like I just *knew* what to do," she said.

"Maybe it had to just come to you suddenly? 'True love' was the key ingredient in the game, but I guess it works differently in this universe."

"I...had full faith in you that you'd come to my rescue today, Ellie. I believed in you."

I clapped my hands together, as if to say, *Aha!* So the key ingredient here wasn't love, but *trust*. That made sense. We'd gotten a Friendship ending, after all, so trust felt like a pretty appropriate replacement mechanic for true love.

“My heart was true, because I had faith that my prince would come! If that isn’t love, I don’t know what is!” Lilia exclaimed.

“Pardon?”

“I didn’t believe in you because I wanted you to rescue me—it had nothing to do with that. I just believed in you because I *wanted to*. Remember how you protected me on the school trip from that bear? I didn’t want that to be a lie, so I chose to believe in you. Don’t you see? I didn’t love you because I wanted *you* to *reciprocate*. No… I wanted to love you, so I did. I wanted to believe in you, so I did. My feelings for you are pushy and unrequited, but they don’t ask for anything in return. *That’s* what true love is!”

I was stunned into silence.

Uh… I don’t think that’s how that works. Like, at all. Even I know better than that. How can feelings that try to force themselves on someone be “true love”? Unrequited love is just infatuation, isn’t it?

“Ellie…I’ve found it! I’ve found true love!”

I frowned as she clasped my hands in hers, trying to figure out how I was going to set her straight on all of this. But, just then, a blast sounded from behind her. It was such a forceful explosion that the sparks flew all the way over to us, and what had been left of the mansion was now entirely swallowed by the fire.

Watching from a safe distance, it kind of felt like I was just looking at something play out on a television screen. I suddenly felt a strong pang of nostalgia hit me.

“Oh… That’s right. The New Year’s coming up soon, huh?” I said.

“What?”

“Doesn’t watching the explosion make you think of New Year’s Eve?”

“*Huh?*”

“Huh?” I repeated, surprised by her surprise.

I thought for a moment that she must be pulling my leg, but then I realized that she seriously had no clue what I was talking about. She looked back and forth between me and the flames, her mouth agape. She was the perfect embodiment of that space cat meme.

“Huh? What do explosions have to do with New Year’s Eve?” she asked.

“Oh… I think I see the problem. We must’ve watched different channels,” I replied.

It finally made sense why she was so confused. Lilia had probably watched the pop music program on New Year's Eve instead of the countdown.

Lilia's suspicion hadn't abated, though.

"Are you *sure* this has to do with which channels we watched? Um… Are you sure you lived in modern Japan in your past life and not…a conflict zone or something?"

"Don't be rude. I just have an *appreciation* for explosions, that's all."

"You say that like it's something to be proud of!" she shrieked, aghast.

But just as she said that, a familiar voice spoke over her. "Lady Elizabeth!" it cried.

I turned around to see where it had come from, and sure enough, it was accompanied by a familiar face. Just as I'd expected, there was a man wearing the Royal Guard uniform.

"Marty? What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"I've been following you…on His Highness's orders."

"I *thought* I felt a strange presence nearby! So that was you, huh?"

It finally made sense now. Martin was an up-and-coming star in the Royal Guard, so it wasn't unusual that he had been put in charge of tailing me. I was amazed by his growth, though. We could usually sense that the other was nearby, but I hadn't realized that *he* was the one following me around. He must've worked hard on blending into the background if he'd managed to elude even me.

Martin furrowed his brow, oblivious to how impressed I was.

"You managed to shake me at the most critical juncture, though," he said.

"Well, if you'd just told me you were here, then I wouldn't have," I shot back.

"What, like I was supposed to just tap you on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, I'm secretly following you'?"

"E-Ellie?" Lilia interrupted, tugging on my sleeve. "Who's this?"

Oh, right. He and Lilia have never met.

"This is Martin, a knight from the Royal Guard. He's a friend of mine," I explained.

"Th-The Royal Guard?!"

“Yup. He looks after Prince Edward. Sometimes he comes to fetch me for His Highness when he needs me.”

“When he…needs you…?” Lilia whispered, clutching my arm even harder.

Could you please stop pressing your chest against me?

“Martin, this is Lilia, the saint. She’s a friend from school, and…well, she’s kind of like a little sister to me, I guess.”

“Stop saying that!” Lilia protested with a pout.

I just gave a little shrug. I couldn’t help the way I saw her. She had kind of a baby face, and taking into account the years we’d probably lived in our past life, I had a feeling that she’d been younger than I had been.

Lilia looked up at me and took in a sudden breath. Then her lips slowly spread into a smile.

“I just came up with a great idea,” she said.

Something about the impish look on her face told me I wasn’t going to like this idea very much.

“I’ve thought of a way to make sure you never say I’m ‘like a little sister’ again,” she said.

“Lilia…?”

I was starting to get a really bad feeling about this.

She laughed. Her usual sweet smile was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she wore a bewitching smile, beautiful enough to take your breath away.

“I just have to become your older sister-in-law,” she replied.

“What?!”

Immediately, I felt all the color drain from my face. Her suggestion was horrifying.

“Everyone always says how amazing Earl Burton is—especially *you*, Ellie—and I’ve always had a soft spot for chubby guys. But, best of all, he’s your older brother. I’m sure I’ll be able to fall in love with him.”

“D-Don’t you dare! Don’t you lay a hand on him!”

“Oh, stop. You’re making me sound like some kind of *predator*.”

“I’m begging you, please… I just want him to have a happy marriage,” I pleaded.

“Well, surely he’d have a happy marriage with me? I *am* the main character, after all.”

That shut me up. Just like she’d said, Lilia was the main

character. Anyone she wound up with was bound to have a happy ending. That was just the world we lived in. I'd been operating under that assumption for my whole life, so I could hardly debate that *now*.

"I've got a better hold on my past life memories than you do, Ellie. I even know how to make things that don't exist in this world. I've never had the skills or the money to actually put that into practice, but…if I became the duke's wife, I could make all kinds of things. I'm sure it'd be a profitable venture for your whole family."

Lilia gave me a satisfied smile. There wasn't a trace of her typical childlike innocence behind it.

I felt a cold sweat drip down my back again. Something told me I was in grave, *grave* danger—the kind that made explosions look *quaint*.

The woman standing before me wasn't a saint, but a villainess.

"And if you never end up getting married, then we'll be together forever, Ellie," Lilia added.

"There it is! That's what you're *really* after, isn't it?!"

"We'll be family. Isn't that basically the same as getting married?"

"Oh my God… You sound like such a crazy fangirl right now!" I yelled—no, I practically shrieked.

"Basically married" was *not* the same thing as "married," just like "basically free" wasn't the same thing as "free."

"Wow, Ellie…" Lilia muttered, sounding surprised. "You really do love your older brother, don't you? I've never seen you this worked up before."

"Of course I love him. He's the only older brother I've got," I replied. "The only woman who gets to marry him is the kind of woman who cares for him—not for selfish reasons or political gain, but because she *genuinely* loves him. The kind of woman who can see and appreciate him for all that he is—who sees him for who he is on the *inside*, instead of just his physical appearance and his status, and in fact, she has to appreciate that he's perfect just the way he is. She needs to be an excellent judge of character—someone wise and soft-spoken—and she needs to be of proper social standing, like, maybe the second or third daughter of a marquis or a well-established earl. She should support my sweet, thoughtful brother from the sidelines…but if push comes to shove,

she should have the strength of character to step up and protect the family. She ought to be somewhere between eighteen and twenty-five years old, healthy, and more active than my brother so she can outlive him. He needs the kind of woman who's *serious*, who would care about the duchy and our family as if they were her own. She needs to be just the right height too. She shouldn't be taller than my brother, even when she's in heels. And she needs to be cute—the kind of woman who cracks a girlish smile now and then—and she ought to be pure and chaste; also, she should have a natural, elegant beauty like a flower—nothing garish—and take care of herself. She has to be the kind of woman who'd never dream of boasting about her status; instead, she needs to love everyone in her domain and treat them all with respect, including her servants. She ought to get along with our *entire* family, and even if I try to flirt with her, she shouldn't so much as bat an eye. She should be good at dancing and look great in a dress. Yes, and she should be sociable too—skilled at the art of conversation, but never one to say an unkind word about others. She should have good table manners and a bit of a sweet tooth. She ought to drink a little too—but only a little—and be able to crack a joke or two. But, at her core, she ought to be a logical, intellectual sort of woman who can see the big picture. She should be independent—someone who can make her own decisions, drawing on a wealth of knowledge and experience."

"You know...I think I'm starting to see why the earl isn't married yet," Lilia whispered, taking a step back as if she'd just solved one of the great mysteries of aristocratic society.

I took a look back at Martin. The fire had gotten so big that it was just a matter of time now before other knights came running to the scene.

Lilia's presence was one thing, but I absolutely couldn't be seen here. If anyone found out that I'd been sticking my neck out like this, they'd be angry enough to kill me.

Fortunately, my injuries had been healed, at least. As long as I dumped my dirty clothes somewhere discreet and took a shower, I figured I could still cover up my involvement.

"Hey, Marty. This guy here's the ringleader behind everything. Think you can take him back to the Knights' Brigade for me? I'm gonna head straight home, so don't tell anyone I was here," I said.

Martin was silent.

"Uh... Marty?" I tried again.

Then I followed his line of sight and realized why he was being so quiet: He was staring straight at Lilia with hearts in his eyes.

Ah...right. This guy's just a side character, so of course he'd fall under Lilia's spell.

It was easy to imagine him crying, "Lilia, baby, I love you!"

I couldn't help feeling a bit bad for the guy—first, he'd lost the person he was supposed to be tailing, then he neglected his duty and made a disgrace of himself by drooling over a girl. *That* wasn't a good look. If he wasn't lucky, he could get fired. I'd certainly consider docking his pay, at the very least, if I were his boss. And if I were Martin, I'd probably be mortified enough to bite my tongue so I bled to death. (I mean...not *literally*. Just, you know...metaphorically.)

Lilia shrank away, a fearful expression on her face. She must've seen the way he was looking at her. Martin was a tall, beefy guy, so it made sense that Lilia's fear of men would kick into high gear at the sight of him.

Before Martin could lay a hand on her, I knocked him out from behind. It was pretty easy when Lilia already had him fully distracted.

Martin hit the ground with a *thunk*.

You oughta thank me later for protecting your dignity, I thought. *I'm counting on a free lunch sometime in the near future, thanks.*

I looked down at Marty, then at Yoh, who was also still lying unconscious on the ground. I shrugged and let out a sigh.

Looks like I've got no choice but to carry them both back with me.

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After that little fiasco, I found myself in the throne room, bowing my head before the man who held the kingdom's highest office.

"You have done a great service to this kingdom in saving the saint, who is, in many ways, a symbol of our faith. The courage it took to risk your very life and infiltrate the enemy's base to rescue her is exactly the sort they write about in legends."

"Your praise is more than I deserve, Your Majesty."

“And thanks to you, the Eastern kingdom’s plot has been revealed, allowing us to enact sanctions against them publicly. What’s more, we’ve been able to take the sixth prince prisoner, unharmed and in one piece. You’ve done well.”

“You give me far too much credit, Your Majesty.”

Since I’d knocked Martin out, I’d ended up turning myself in to the Knights’ Brigade (not that I’d done anything wrong, mind you, but it had just felt like the right thing to do) and I’d ultimately wound up here.

The abandoned mansion that Yoh had been using as his base was kind of out in the sticks, so fortunately there weren’t many other houses in the vicinity that suffered collateral damage from the explosion. It was still a pretty big freakin’ deal, though.

I bore about 0.01 percent responsibility for the whole thing, on account of marching into the explosion by myself, so I figured I’d get a real earful. Fortunately for me, it seemed the king had a different perspective. In his eyes, I was a hero who’d rushed in to rescue the saint overnight, and I’d even managed to stop a war before it could begin.

My family, on the other hand, was pretty pissed. I’ll spare you the details, but I’ll just say this: As you might expect, the Burton family had a *sliiightly* different set of values than the masses. I would’ve expected at least a *little* praise for my good deeds, but no. When I thought about my older brother’s tearful expression as he said, “I’m just so glad you’re okay,” it was pretty hard to hold it together. Seeing him cry always hit me right in the gut.

Since the king wanted to meet with me directly to relay his personal thanks for my “heroic actions,” my family reluctantly allowed me to go to the castle…but I was treading on thin ice. I knew they were *this close* to putting me under house arrest again if I made one wrong move—just like they did after I fought that bear.

“You deserve to be decorated for your service as a knight. However…” the king began.

“I am undeserving of such an honor, Your Majesty.”

“You are not yet officially an official knight of the chivalric order, and you are still a child under the care of the duke. Therefore, I would like to bestow a favor on you instead. Tell me what you wish for.”

“Your Majesty, this is more than I deserve,” I repeated, still in a knightly bow.

The king went silent. Then, in an irritated tone, he replied, “Yes, so you’ve said… And I suppose that’s the line the duke told you to stick to?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I answered after an awkward pause.

Well, he doesn’t get to sit on that throne for nothing, I thought, impressed but not surprised that he was perceptive enough to sense that my family might’ve given me a little “instruction” before they dispatched me.

(Honestly, though, I had no idea how to talk to a king, so I was more than happy to just do as I was told.)

“Put yourself at ease. You may speak freely. I won’t speak a word of our meeting to the duke,” the king assured me.

“I’m afraid I cannot, Your Majesty. I cherish my life too much.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. More than anything.”

Why does he sound so skeptical? Who doesn’t *cherish their life?*

“Well, that certainly isn’t what *I’ve* heard.”

“Is that so, Your Majesty?”

“I’ve heard all sorts of tales about you, you know—like how you’ve cleaved steel in two, and how you risked your life to protect my son. They say you once lifted a carriage into the sky, and that you fought a bear…with your bare hands. As far as I know, these could all just be spurious rumors. But they’ve certainly left me with the impression that you’re a strong, plucky young warrior who’s prone to a good deal of daredevilry.”

“I’m afraid there’s barely a grain of truth to those rumors. A puny high schooler like me would hardly be capable of those feats.”

“Very well. I’ll take your word for it, then,” the king said with a laugh.

I glanced up at his face to see what kind of expression he was wearing. He stroked his regal beard as he looked down at me, a genuine smile playing across his face. He’d told me to put myself at ease, so I figured I could at least look up at him without getting shouted down for being insolent. Besides, I’d been looking down for so long now that the blood was starting to pool in my head.

“How would you like to join the royal family?” he asked.

“I am undeserving of such an honor.”

“Are my sons not up to your standards? You could marry whichever you wished, you know.”

“Surely you jest, Your Majesty.”

The royal family enjoyed their jokes a little *too* much, if you asked me.

Am I supposed to laugh at that? He must know that my engagement to Robert was literally just broken off last year…right?

“Is it wealth that you desire? You may choose whatever you wish from the treasure house. There’s a sword there that’s been passed down through the royal family for generations that you might take a shine to.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. Riches would ruin me,” I replied.

“Power, then? I would be more than happy to appoint you as a knight of the Royal Guard. I’m sure you would rise through the ranks quickly.”

“I’m afraid that a position in the Royal Guard is beyond my capabilities.”

“Only name your desire, then. Whatever you want is yours,” the king said, finally, with an aggrieved sigh. His eyebrows settled into a deep frown over his purple eyes.

Purple…just like Edward’s. And his auburn hair is the same color as Robert’s, I thought.

“If I may, Your Highness, I’d like any reward you bestow upon me to go instead to my older brother.”

“What?”

“He would put it to use for the kingdom’s sake much better than I could.”

The king let out another sigh. Then he leaned back in his chair. “You Burtons are hopeless. None of you seem to have *anything* you desire.”

Well…that may be true of my father and my older brother, but not me. Sure, I’m a Burton, but I’m not like them. I’m as greedy as they get.

I would do anything to live a nice, peaceful life. It’s just that I knew myself and my limits better than anyone—riches and power really would ruin me. I probably would’ve been grateful for a pair of nice leather shoes or something, though. And I would’ve leaped for joy at the opportunity to skip out on a month’s worth of homework without getting yelled at.

Something like that felt like a much more appropriate level of reward.

"Put yourself in my shoes. How would *you* feel if you owed someone such a debt?"

"Then I wouldn't be worthy of being the head of the Burton household. Only those who would never consider such a thing a debt are worthy of that honor."

"You seem to be suggesting you *aren't* one of those people."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I'm simply not shameless enough to accept a reward for something that was hardly worthy of it, that's all."

At this, the king's eyebrows shot up. He gave me a look that said *Go on*, so I gave him my thoughts.

"There was hardly anyone at that abandoned house, especially compared to the number of firearms and the amount of gunpowder. There should have been more men stationed there, so it only stands to reason that most of them were somewhere else. The fact that they left so few to guard the base where they were keeping the saint, well…it just doesn't make sense to me. Unless, that is, there was a *reason* their numbers were so low."

The king was silent.

"So, I asked myself: Why *is* it that there are hardly any men here? It seemed to me that the most logical conclusion was that their numbers had dwindled from attacks on their other bases. In fact, that had probably left them with no *choice* but to rush the kidnapping. They were getting desperate; they *needed* a hostage—not just some random commoner, but someone that would be a perfect bargaining chip to use with the kingdom and the Knights' Brigade."

The king continued to listen silently. He didn't affirm anything I said, but he didn't deny it either. That was pretty much all the confirmation I needed.

"Of course, this is all just the conjecture of a greenhorn with no tactical experience, so please feel free to laugh. But that's how I've made sense of it all. Because otherwise, I don't see any way that a single person could have toppled a grand invasion scheme led by an Eastern prince. Sure, he may only be the *sixth* prince, but he's still royalty. I can only imagine that larger forces beyond my comprehension are at work behind the scenes. It seems to me that someone just handed me the spotlight on a silver platter."

The king's eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at me. He looked calm and collected as he slowly stroked his beard.

I figured he must've been about the same age as my father. He had visible crow's-feet around the corners of his eyes, but he was pretty handsome—for an older guy. You could easily tell that he was Robert and Edward's father. The royal family had some impressively good genes.

"Again, this is just my guess as a layperson. I'm sure someone more discerning than I would be able to see the whole picture easily. But the small part I played is being treated as a heroic deed that saved the kingdom, and I can't help but think that's because it's *convenient* to paint the picture that way. I'm being used as a cover to hide something that people don't want on display. Why should I accept a reward for that?"

I had no clue what it was exactly that they didn't want on display, but I figured that it probably had something to do with the top secret first division of the Knights' Brigade...or maybe even the king's Secret Service.

I also didn't know if my brother—or my family in general—was involved somehow. From the way Yoh had been talking, though, it seemed like he'd been after *me*, not the saint. Then there were Lilia's comments, which suggested he bore some sort of grudge against my family. And if anyone posed a threat to the Burtons or showed us hostility, then I couldn't imagine that my father and my brother wouldn't take swift action.

The Burtons were friends to the benevolent, and (oddly enough) also to the malevolent. Evil or good, anyone who dared to make an enemy of one Burton would find an enemy in all of us. That was the word on the street, and it had become something of a legend over the years.

But it wasn't just a legend—it had real power. If the Burtons declared anyone an enemy, then every noble house in the nation would lend their might to annihilate them. That's the kind of influence my family held.

But I didn't know whether we'd naturally accrued that influence thanks to our decades-long history as honorable people, or whether others had expressly granted us that privilege because they placed their trust in us.

When it came to legends, though, some things were best left to

the imagination.

"I'm just a humble nobleman's daughter, so if Your Majesty feels it's best for me to play the part of the hero, I'll happily play along. But Lilia is my friend, so it was only natural that I'd go rescue her, even if she *wasn't* the saint. I didn't save her for anyone's benefit but my own. So, it would feel pretty presumptuous for me to accept a reward for that. But if you insist, then please bestow the reward upon my older brother. Everyone knows how much I idolize him, so no one would bat an eye if I requested that." I gave the king a sweet smile. It was the aristocratic smile I used whenever I was addressing anyone of influence. "So, please, bestow your reward upon *him*. I humbly request that you give him whatever you deem is appropriate."

The king stared at me. Then he burst into laughter.

Okay... I wasn't trying *to be funny, but hey, I'll take it.*

"You really are exactly as my sons described," the king said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Just like they said, you're strong, and you've got no patience for nonsense. Yes... You're a crafty one, all right."

"You overestimate me, Your Majesty."

Funny, I can guess exactly which of those adjectives came from Robert and which of those came from Edward. If they're talking about me *with the king, they must talk about* everything*. It's nice how close-knit they are.*

"There are few knights of your caliber. I know the Knights' Brigade would benefit tremendously if you joined."

"You give me too much credit, Your Majesty."

"Well, if you ever change your mind...you know where to sign up."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

I could tell from the look in the king's eyes that he was ready for me to leave now. Privately, I was relieved to go. It felt like I'd finally resolved the matter.

It was crazy enough to have had a kidnapping event that could've triggered a war with the East, but then I had to deal with an audience with the king too? Honestly, it all felt a bit *intense* for a friendship ending.

Then again, maybe I was just paying the price for Lilia awakening to her high saint's powers.

I bowed my head once last time and left the throne room.

Graduation

It was that time of year again: graduation day. I decided to attend the ceremony, since several of the girls from my fan club were among the graduating students, along with some cadets and plenty of people I'd seen around.

For reference, graduation doesn't get much screen time in the game unless you do Edward's route (since he's graduating) or Robert's (since Edward plays a big part in his route). Isaac's and Christopher's routes feature only a brief scene that's the same in both, since the game is mostly finished by then in their routes anyway. As for my route, well...I figured the whole kidnapping debacle was probably the last event. The game was over now—both literally and figuratively.

After all, Lilia and I had become good friends—we could even talk about our past lives together. We'd resolved the whole crisis with the Eastern kingdom, and Lilia had even awakened to her high saint's powers. Honestly, all things considered, it was a pretty climactic ending by friendship ending standards.

There was just one problem: She still hadn't given up on me.

Lilia and I attended the graduation ceremony together this year, but she got a little sulky and wandered off when a group of girls from my fan club surrounded me and asked for "something to remember me by"—which meant, of course, tearing buttons off my blazer for them and doling out some hugs.

She was currently crouching under the shade of a tree and glaring at us, and I couldn't help but laugh awkwardly at the sight of her extremely un-main-character-like behavior.

I spotted someone walking over to me amid a flurry of petals that looked just like cherry blossoms. All of the fangirls who had gathered around me stepped aside, clearing a path for him.

His silver hair fluttered gently in the wind as he approached, stopping right in front of me. On his uniform breast, he wore a flower—the symbol of a graduating student. As he stood amid the not-cherry-blossom petals, he looked even more ephemeral than usual. I felt like I finally understood the boy-so-beautiful-he-could-

be-spirited-away-by-cherry-blossoms trope.

As I stared at him, I realized that he wasn't missing even a single button from his blazer. Not that that was all that surprising; there wasn't a single girl who would *dare* request a button from the crown prince, after all.

"Happy graduation day, Your Highness," I said.

"Lizzie..."

Suddenly, he spread both his arms wide. As I watched them close in on me and try to restrain me, I instinctively squatted down to avoid him. Caught up in the moment, I kicked my leg out to knock him down with a foot sweep.

Wait... What am I doing? Why am I foot sweeping the crown prince?

My body had moved on its own, primed from all the times I'd had to move quickly to avoid Yoh's advances. Fortunately, I realized my mistake the moment I made it and caught Edward in my arms as he tripped forwards.

"Close one," I said.

For me, that is.

"Huh? Um... Thanks?" Edward replied, looking up at me with a suspicious look on his face despite his thanks.

Whew. Looks like he doesn't know what just happened, I thought, as all of the girls gathered around us started shrieking.

I righted Edward and took a step back. He stared at my blazer and all its missing buttons.

"Looks like you've been giving the graduates something to remember you by, hmm?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Would you mind giving me something too?" Edward asked, looking up at me pleadingly. His amethyst eyes were even mistier than usual, and his cheeks were tinged with pink.

I wasn't surprised that he might be feeling a bit emotional. After all, today was the day that Edward would bid the academy farewell.

"You don't need anything like that, do you? I'm sure you'll still call on me to run your errands for you even after you graduate," I said.

"Yes... I suppose I will."

I wish you wouldn't, though.

Edward had bossed me around like I was his errand boy even

before I'd started attending the academy, so I'd kind of given up hope that anything would change just because he was graduating. And sure enough, it seemed like I'd be right. Internally, I let out a little sigh.

"But surely I could have a little memento to commemorate today?" Edward tried again, looking up at me.

His eyelashes were freakishly long. Each blink had the power to scatter stars.

"Well…sure. I'll give you what I can, I guess."

Good grief. What does he want to ask for, anyway?

Honestly, I didn't really see the point of all this. I pretty much had to do whatever he wanted on a normal day, so what made *this* day any different?

I shrugged my shoulders, feeling somewhat resigned, and turned to face him again.

"So? What do you want?" I asked him. "A hug? A game? Maybe you want me to throw you up into the air like a baby? Guys usually ask me to hurl them in a one-armed shoulder throw, if that's what you're into…"

Edward gave me his classic, princely smile. Without saying a word, he took a step towards me, then another.

When he was finally so close that he could reach out and touch me, he took both of my hands in his.

Oh, you just wanted a handshake? I thought. But my relief only lasted for a fleeting moment, because then, he stood up on his toes…and something *soft* touched my lips. Whatever it was, it stole my breath for a second before drawing back again.



I saw his eyelids open, his long eyelashes just a hair's breadth away. The world reflected in his amethyst eyes grew wider and wider as he backed away. Then, the lips that had just been on mine spread into a smile.

I could hear the girls shrieking behind him.

"Huh?"

"Noooooo!"

Then Lilia slammed into me with a loud *thud*, immediately bringing me back to my senses. I wiped my lips with the back of my hand.

What the hell is his deal?

I couldn't believe Edward had dared to do the one thing that all the girls would've never even *dreamed* to ask for.

"Ellie!" Lilia cried, grabbing my arm.

I turned, following the sound of her voice, and saw *her* face just a hair's breadth away.

Huh. This kinda feels like déjà vu, I thought, and no sooner had the thought formed in my head than she was kissing me.

It wasn't a cleverly stolen peck like Edward's—instead, it was a forceful, passionate *smooch*.

"?!"

"There. Memory overwritten," Lilia declared proudly as she staggered back and looked up at me. Her mouth was twisted into a smirk.

In fact, in that moment...she looked just like a villainess.

Wh-What's with these two? Don't they know you can't just go around kissing people all willy-nilly like that?

I wiped my mouth again—this time with my sleeve. Not that I was particularly invested in making it a good one, but wasn't that my first kiss?

"You can try all you like to overwrite it, but that doesn't change the fact that *I* was the one who did it first," Edward said.

"I get it. You men save each new relationship to a new file, right? But too bad for you, 'cause *girls* just overwrite their past relationships with new ones!" Lilia retorted.

"Lizzie, I have no idea what your friend is going on about. Would you mind translating for me?"

"Ellie! Back me up here! Tell him girls overwrite their past relationships!"

Hey, don't come crying to me *for help after stealing a kiss. You've got some nerve, you know that?*

I was so lost that it started to feel like the whole scene was becoming more and more distant, as if I was floating away from it. And the farther it got, the less it felt like it had anything to do with me.

Then, suddenly, it was like someone had muted Edward and Lilia, and the commotion of the girls in the distance was crystal clear.

"Huh?"

"Wait, so we *can* ask for that?"

"Really?"

"Well, it *is* graduation."

"Yes, that's right. It's something to *remember* her by!"

"If Prince Edward and Miss Douglas are allowed to ask for one, then surely we can get one too…?"

The girls all looked at me with hunger in their eyes, as if they were hunters stalking their prey.

Crap. This is bad. Really *bad.*

I felt a cold sweat drip down my back.

Thanks to Edward's little "joke," I now ran the risk of every nobleman with a daughter at the academy absolutely hating my guts. There was no way in hell I was going to let this go.

This feels off. I dressed as a boy and did everything I could to improve myself, all to romance the main character. And I did*. I even got the friendship ending I was hoping for. Surely I should be happy now…right?*

And yet, this didn't feel at *all* like the mundane, happy life I'd imagined for myself.

How in the world did it come to this? Maybe I picked the wrong choice somewhere along the way? I'd have no way of knowing and no way of fixing it even if I did. After all, I'm just a two-bit baddie. I don't have the luxury of making and reloading save files.

I wanted to just cradle my head in my hands and give up, but I knew I had to deal with the problem at hand first.

My life would continue tomorrow. I couldn't let it all end here just because of this. It wasn't like me to look back on the past with regret or to fail to act in the moment. So, in a matter of seconds, I made a decision: I was going to run away.

I’m pretty sure I ran so fast, I set a new world record that day.

Epilogue

I ran all the way home from school, barely managing to escape with my life. I shut the front door behind me, but then I opened it slightly and peeked through the crack to make sure that no one had followed me.

Whew. Looks like the coast is clear, I thought as I shut the door again.

Now I could finally breathe easy.

It was one thing to outrun *one* young lady, but outrunning a whole horde of them was no small feat. To make things worse, I had had to take extra care to prevent injuring any of them as I tried to escape their clutches, because on the off chance that I did, I knew I'd have to take responsibility for it.

And, as if that wasn't enough, the glint in their eyes as they'd stared at me earlier had taken a real toll on me. I was exhausted, both mentally *and* physically.

Edward and Lilia were entirely to blame for it all, as far as I was concerned: Edward for his little prank, and Lilia for jumping on the bandwagon. If the girls and their parents were going to point fingers at anyone, it really ought to have been *them*.

"Lizzie?" my older brother called out.

I turned around and saw him looking at me with a stunned expression. He wore a light coat, and the head maid was standing behind him, looking ready to see him off. *Ah, he's probably about to head out*, I thought. It was a real relief to see him.

Maybe I was a little *too* relieved, actually, because I could feel that I was about to plop right down on the floor. My brother looked at me quizzically, cocking his head.

"Did something happen?" he asked me.

"Nothing serious... Just a little scare."

"Huh?"

My older brother blinked at me, looking plainly confused.

"By the way," the head maid chimed in, looking out the window, "I just saw some young ladies who seemed to be looking for you, Lady Elizabeth. Care to explain?"

“Urk…”

So…they *had* followed me home. And here I thought that the fan club girls made it a point of pride to always respect my boundaries. Unfortunately, though, those two *scoundrels* had apparently been a bad influence on them.

I just hope things settle down by the time I have to go to school again…

“Did you dole out your blazer buttons again?” the head maid asked.

“I just gave the girls some farewell gifts, that’s all,” I said, shrugging my shoulders and avoiding her gaze.

She made it sound like I was running a charity or something. Little did she know that I’d basically been a victim of highway robbery.

Where in the world did those girls get the energy to chase after me like that? I wish they’d just give up after struggling to find me.

Just then, a frightening possibility occurred to me.

“Don’t tell me…they’re waiting here in the *manor*?”

“I told them you were still at the academy and turned them away, so they left to go look for you there.”

“You’re an angel.”

I knew I could count on the head maid to deal with my unwanted guests. No matter how much she complained about my behavior, when push came to shove, she’d always be on my side. I was forever indebted to her for that.

“Lizzie…” my older brother said, staring at me intently. He let out a loud sigh. “The head maid and I are very concerned. We always knew your lady-killer ways would catch up with you…”

“Why don’t you worry about your *own* luck with the ladies?” I shot back.

“Ngh…” At this, he winced and got a little choked up. I took that as a promising sign that I’d successfully evaded that line of conversation. He scratched his cheek uncomfortably, an awkward look on his face. “Touché… I guess I just don’t have all that much going for me, though.”

“Whatever do you mean, my lord?”

“That’s not true.”

The head maid and I both cut in at the same time.

Anyone who talked to my older brother for more than a few

minutes would see how patently untrue his self-deprecating comment was.

I walked over to my brother and gently placed my hands on his shoulders.

"I *know* there's someone out there who will see how amazing you are," I told him.

"Yes. It's exactly as Lady Elizabeth says," the head maid chimed in.

My brother's eyes opened wide. Then he laughed, a bit bashful.

"Well… I guess I'll just have to give these arranged marriage meetings my best shot, then. I wouldn't want to worry you, Lizzie," he said, clenching his pudgy, cream-puff-like fist with determination. He must've noticed my warm, protective gaze, because then he jokingly added, "I know I'd better hurry up and get married soon so you and Christopher can have your turns."

"Oh, don't worry about *me*," I replied.

"Lady Elizabeth…" the head maid warned, clearing her throat with a little *ahem* and glaring at me.

She could glare all she wanted, but it wouldn't change anything. Even if my older brother got married, I wasn't necessarily going to follow suit. I knew there was a real stigma attached to being a spinster, but…I just didn't see an early marriage in the cards for me. Besides, I just wanted to forget about all the romance nonsense and live my life peacefully for a while.

"Maybe I should just let you and Chris be in charge of the family home and go live with my future wife?" my older brother said.

It was so out of left field, I just blinked.

"I— *What?*"

My older brother was going to leave?

Never in a million years would I have expected to hear *that*. I was too shocked to speak.

If he did that… I started to think about it, but something blocked me from finishing the thought. My brain was refusing to even entertain the idea as a hypothetical.

After a long, awkward silence, my older brother gave me a weak smile.

"I'm just teasing," he said, chuckling.

His smile filled me with relief.

That's right… He's the heir to the family title. He wouldn't just leave.

But sheesh—he really had me worried there for a minute. I know he was just joking, but it's not really a laughing matter.

I waved him off as he left, then took in another deep breath.

The otome game had ended now. And yet, tomorrow, my life would go on.

I'd keep living the same I'd always had, here in the duke's manor, exchanging hellos and goodbyes with my older brother. And honestly? That kind of everyday life sounded perfect to me.

I only hoped that having to outrun hordes of girls like I did today was just an anomaly, because that was definitely *not* part of the life I pictured for myself. Praying that things would return to peace and normalcy when school started up again after spring break, I retreated to my room.

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In the throne room of the neighboring kingdom in the west known as the "Western Superpower"…

"Father… Forgive me, but I'm afraid I cannot meet with the man you've chosen for me," the crown princess said to her father, the king, as she shook her head.

Her lustrous black hair swayed gracefully with her every movement, as if it were a dark curtain cloaking the princess alone in the tranquility of night. The king, whose gaze had been fixed on the letter in her hand, looked up ever so slightly to glance at his daughter's face.

"My heart already belongs to another," she declared.

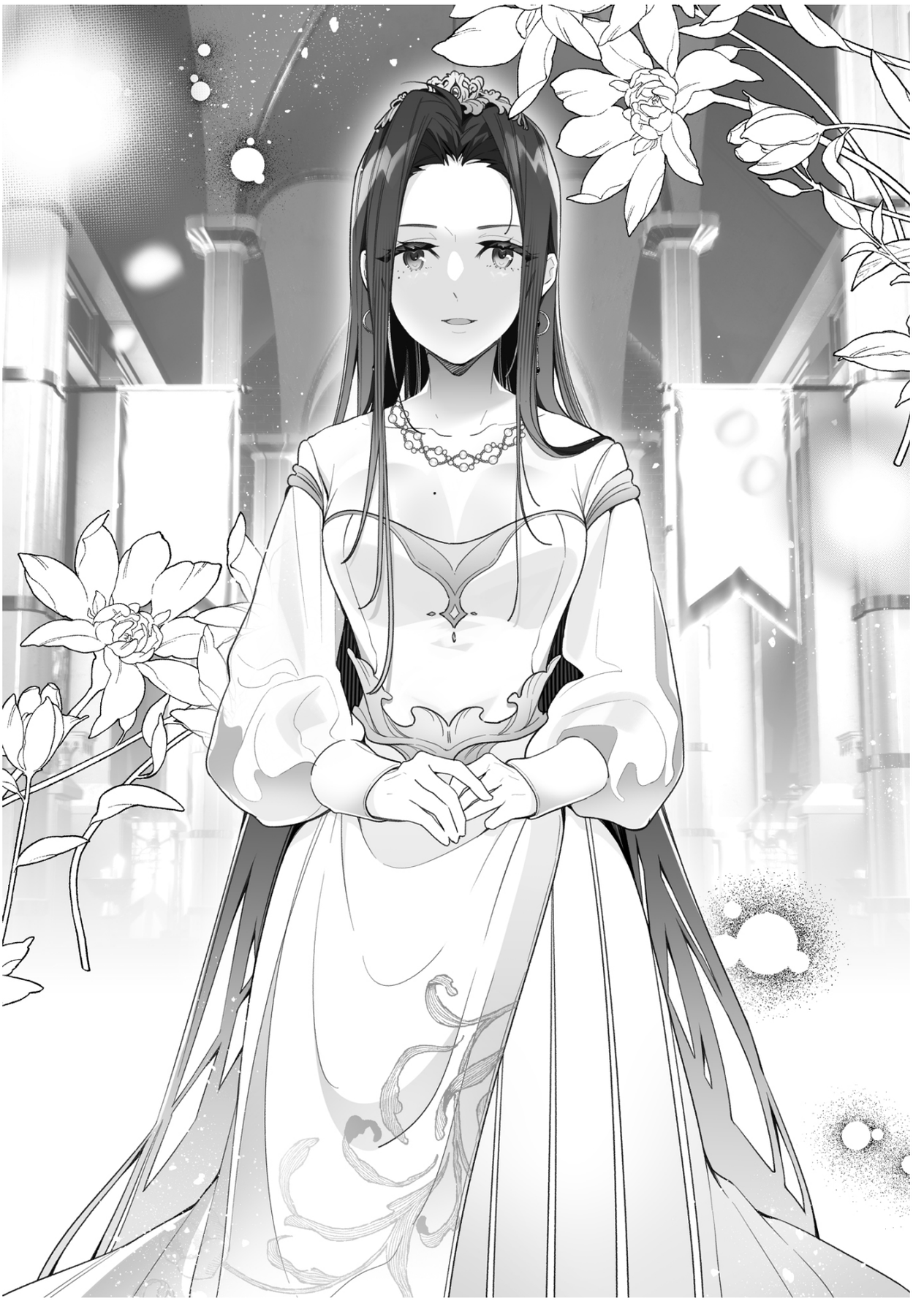
At this, the king furrowed his brow in a show of displeasure. He let out a frustrated sigh. "And who might that be? Tell me his name."

"He hails from the kingdom of Diagrantz," she began.

The king's gaze grew ice-cold, as if all of the warmth in his golden eyes had vanished.

The princess was a little shaken, but she didn't back down. She had resolved to face him and had come here prepared for his frigid reception.

She straightened her spine and continued, "Perhaps you've heard of the Honorable Duke Burton. I'm in love with his son, the future duke."



Side Stories: The Victims of Elizabeth Burton Support Group III

The Trials and Tribulations of Martin Rembrant — Martin—

I felt a presence nearby, and I immediately threw my arm up to cover my face. Simultaneously, I kicked off the ground with a little hop.

Not a second later, I felt like something small and hard hit my arm, and a foot sweep just barely missed my legs. I fell forwards from my jump and launched into a backwards kick, supported by my arms. I felt something graze my toes, but it didn't exactly feel like a *hit*.

Before my opponent could close the distance, I sprang back up using my arms, and as I righted my positioning, I jumped backwards.

Naturally, my opponent cut across to try to attack from behind, so the moment I turned around, I unleashed a backhand chop.

I felt the wind bend around me, so I used its momentum to spin around and crouch. This time, I gave my opponent a taste of their own medicine with a foot sweep of my own.

They leaped up and evaded it, then got into a position to come down at me with a dropkick.

I shifted my upper body slightly to evade a direct hit, grabbing their foot and attempting to throw them.

My opponent must have predicted my move, because they used their abs to bend forwards and lunged for my neck with their arms, ready to grab it in a stranglehold. Seeing what was coming, I released their foot and moved both my arms into a defensive stance.

Then, my opponent reversed course and landed instead...but only briefly before they leaped back again to put some distance between us.

"That was a close one. Pretty sure I almost had you there."

"No, you didn't. I predicted your every move."

“Yeah?”

My opponent, who wore a navy uniform, was none other than Elizabeth Burton. She flashed a mischievous smile, as if I’d said something amusing.

We’d known each other for a few years now, on account of my employer, the crown prince, dispatching me to call her to his office now and again. She hadn’t seemed to notice my presence at first, but by now, it had become routine for us to spar like this, trying to predict the other’s moves.

Only at the beginning had I been able to easily sidestep her attacks. Ever since she’d started at the academy, she’d completely surpassed me. The accelerated speed at which she improved—a feat only a child could manage—was frankly frightening. Her stamina, sheer power, and decisive combat senses probably put her in a league above any of the members of the Knights’ Brigade. I’d even heard that she’d challenged the commander of the Royal Guard (of which I was a member) and she’d *won*.

To be fair, all our sneaking up on each other and sparring *was* pretty good training…but I would have preferred that she just hurry up and accept the crown prince’s summons.

“Prince Edward would—” I began, before she cut me off.

“Just hold your horses for a minute. You’re always in such a rush, aren’t you?” she said. “May as well go another round while we’re here, right?”

“I hear the division commander is more your speed. You beat him, didn’t you?”

“Nah, that was only ’cause I took him by surprise, so it was basically just a freebie. A win’s a win, but that’s not a totally accurate representation of my capabilities. Didn’t he tell you what happened?” she asked, cocking her head.

The truth was, the commander and everyone who’d witnessed their duel always clammed up the moment it came up in conversation. All they would ever say was “A loss is a loss.”

I could only assume that she’d resorted to some *very* underhanded tactics.

“It’s always best to spar with someone on your level. That makes you the perfect partner,” she said.

Internally, I let out a little self-deprecating laugh at that. How could she think we were on the same level? It was preposterous. I

was a scout; my specialty was *speed*. She far surpassed me when it came to stamina and raw power. If she didn't hold back, she'd probably trounce me in seconds flat. I knew that must be why she only tried to best me in my specialties: speed and covert operations. In short, she was going easy on me…as much as it hurt to admit. It felt pretty hard to ignore at this point.

But without even thinking, I replied honestly, "I don't have much time to spare."

She clapped her hands. "Hey, I know. Someone gave me some juice yesterday while I was on patrol. It's nice and cool, so why don't we share it?"

"Is that a bribe?"

My question had a snide edge to it, but she answered good-naturedly.

"You bet it is. If you don't want to spar with me, then spare me the summons—'cause I'm only going to meet with the crown prince once every three times you agree to spar with me."

"I can't abide by that."

"I know. That's why I sweetened the deal with a bribe."

"The most I can offer is my silence regarding a certain *broken doorknob*."

She laughed. "Oh, please. Pretty sure the statute of limitations has already expired on that one."

Then she pulled a bucket up from the well. Inside the bucket was a chilled bottle of what I could only assume was grape juice—and that wasn't just a euphemism. From the looks of it, it was just pure, unadulterated grape juice. There didn't seem to be any alcohol in it whatsoever.

She looked up at me and gave me a mischievous grin.

"How childish," I scoffed.

"I *am* a child. I'm allowed to be childish," she shot back.

She opened the lid of the bottle with her bare hands and stretched her arm out, offering it to me. It felt silly to refuse, so I accepted it and immediately took a sip. The cold liquid ran down my dry throat. It was bittersweet and refreshing. I could almost feel the aftertaste in my nose as I exhaled.

She watched me drink, then took the bottle from my hand and put it to her own lips. All I could do was look on in stunned silence as she tipped it back and took several swigs. There was an audible

glug glug glug as she gulped the juice down.

"Hm? What's up, Marty?" she asked, as if sensing my astonishment. She cocked her head. "You one of those germophobes who doesn't like to share drinks?"

It's not about germs. *It's about propriety!*

Nobles didn't share drinks, not even among men… And *certainly* not between men and women.

"Huh. Well, guess I should've let you have your fill first, 'cause it doesn't bother *me* to share. I don't let a few germs get to me," she said, with a laugh.

Again, it's not about germs!

It was becoming increasingly clear to me that her carefree behavior wasn't a mark of naivete, but of unapologetically bad manners. This was raffish impropriety, pure and simple.

"Don't you dare make any dumb, childish comments about this being an 'indirect kiss.' Got it?"

"I thought you were 'allowed to be childish'?"

"Yeah. *I* am. But *you're* an adult."

For several moments, I was silent.

"Make it two bottles next time, please," I finally said with a sigh.

She let out another laugh and gave me a noncommittal reply.

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Noncommittal, ill-mannered, and brash—that was Elizabeth Burton. Her loud laugh, arrogance, and devil-may-care attitude really got on my nerves. She was roughly three years my junior, but she comported herself like an adult—though there *was* something strangely, yet unmistakably, childish about her.

She could beat a man easily in combat if she fought fair and square, yet she'd resort to foot sweeps and rock throwing. What's more, she hadn't been afraid to use underhanded tactics—ones that surely didn't fit within the purview of the Code of Chivalry—to beat the Royal Guard commander. She'd bribed me with a bottle of juice, of all things, and tried to find any excuse she could to avoid seeing the crown prince. She could quibble over nothing, and she'd do it with a straight face too.

What in the world does the crown prince see in a punk like that? I wondered. But no matter how I tried to understand, I just couldn't.

I let out a sigh and smelled the scent of grapes on my breath.

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It was a summer day. By now, sparring with her had become part of my daily routine.

The crown prince had ordered me to summon the cross-dressing young noblewoman again, so I set off for the training grounds. When I got there, I closed my eyes, trying to sense her presence.

I'd done this countless times. I was always able to immediately locate my target. She must have noticed that I was searching for her, though, because I lost her scent the moment I picked it up. In a matter of minutes, she was springing at me from the treetops and wrangling me into another sparring match.

"Match" might have been overselling it—my wins had been dwindling lately, and this round marked yet another loss.

I'd been on a horse when she'd attacked, but I was on the ground now. She stood up and stretched her hand out to me. I took her hand and stood up too.

"Hey, Marty."

"Lady Elizabeth."

"This again? I told you, you don't need to be so formal with me. Just forget about my title," she said with a shrug. She let out an exaggerated sigh as she watched me dust the dirt off my back.

"You know I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. Take a page from Isaac's book."

"Things don't work the same way at the castle as they do at the academy."

"You know, I bet we would've been friends if we'd been classmates," she said, chuckling a little as if somehow pleased or amused by this.

Not a chance in hell, I thought. *I'd never give a brash, ill-mannered punk like you the time of day if it weren't part of my job.*

"Please don't act like we're friends," I protested.

"Why not? If I say we're friends, then we're friends," she replied haughtily, puffing out her chest.

What kind of ridiculous logic is that? I can give you plenty *of reasons we're not*, I thought.

But I didn't say any of that. Instead, I simply said, "Prince Edward wishes to see you."

"Tell him you couldn't find me."

"Lady Elizabeth…"

"I don't feel like dealing with him today."

She "didn't feel like it"? I couldn't believe how insane that sounded. You didn't reject a summons from the crown prince because you *didn't feel like it*.

She really is insane.

I turned to look at her from the side, ready to give her a word of warning, but something stopped me. A sudden feeling of unease came over me.

I could've sworn I saw the faintest shadow cross her devil-may-care, arrogant expression.

"He's always calling for me on a whim, like the world runs entirely on his schedule. Well, *I've* got stuff going on too. If I heed his summons when I'm not in the right headspace to deal with him, I might end up punching his lights out."

"You're out of line."

"Yeah. I *know*. That's why I'm not going to see him today."

Her tone was as casual as always, and her reluctance to see the crown prince was certainly nothing new. But there was something deeply out of character about a carefree punk like her talking about having "stuff going on" and needing to be "in the right headspace."

I watched her with a careful eye towards that dissonance and noticed that her gaze was cast downwards. She didn't seem as energetic as usual either, or maybe she appeared to lack her usual *drive*. Whatever it was, she seemed…down.

"Come on, do me a solid here," she said.

"I'm just doing my job."

"Okay, how 'bout this, then? We'll play a game of hide-and-seek."

"What?"

"I'm gonna find the best hiding spot I can, and you come look for me. If you find me, then I'll give up and accompany you to the castle. And if you *can't* find me, then at least it won't be a lie when you report that back to the crown prince."

Okay… I rescinded everything I said earlier about her seeming

uncharacteristically gloomy. She was the same as always, and this scheme she'd hatched was classic Elizabeth: reckless, sloppy, and rushed. She was basically just throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping it stuck.

Apparently, I'd been reading *far* too much into her expression earlier. I should've known. It was hard to imagine her being sensitive enough to actually get down in the dumps about something. Well, it was my mistake for worrying about her. *That's what you get, Martin…*

"I don't have time to play games with you," I said.

"Are you *sure*?" she asked me. "Because if you force me to meet with the crown prince against my will, bones *will* break, and you and I both will have to pay for it."

I was speechless. I hadn't expected her to lob such a high-handed threat at me like that.

I tried to picture what she would be like when she went on a serious rampage. It was a pretty horrific image. Whatever havoc she wrought, I knew that being fired would be the *least* of my concerns.

"Okay?" she said. "Now count to ten."

After a long, pained pause, I relented.

"Fine. Ten… Nine…"

She smirked as I began counting, then she vanished.

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After I'd finished counting, I looked everywhere inside the castle walls for her, but she was nowhere to be found.

It was baffling. I'd searched inside the buildings, outside the buildings, and in every nook and cranny I could think of, but I couldn't even sense her presence. Where the hell could she have been hiding?

As I looked for her, I began to feel increasingly ill at ease with the implications of this. It was becoming clearer and clearer that if she really wanted to disappear, I'd probably never find her again.

When had the gap between our capabilities widened so dramatically?

"Lady Elizabeth, I concede! I won't make you accompany me to Prince Edward's office, so please come out now!" I yelled.

But there was no sign of her.

In the end, I had no choice but to report back to Prince Edward that I hadn't been able to find her.

"Mm. I see," the crown prince replied, simply. "You're not looking well, Sir Rembrandt. Perhaps you should call it a day and head home for some rest?"

I'd been fully expecting a reprimand, but instead Prince Edward had offered me concern. *Just when I thought I couldn't get any more pathetic...*

I left the castle, shoulders slumped.

Hey, isn't this back gate the one that she always takes to get home to the duke's mansion? I thought. I was suddenly curious, so I asked the guard who was manning it.

"Looking for Lady Elizabeth? She's already gone home. Pretty sure she left more than three hours ago."

"She *what*?" I blurted.

"Huh?" the guard asked back.

Three hours ago...that was when we'd begun our game of hide-and-seek.

You're kidding me...

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"Lady Elizabeth..."

"Oh. Hey, Marty."

Today marked the first time in a while that I'd successfully managed to sneak up on her. Admittedly, it had been a cheap move to wait until she was distracted talking to a guard. No knight worth his salt would ever resort to underhanded tactics like that. It wasn't like we'd ever set any rules, though.

A win is a win, as they say.

She looked up at me as I sat on my horse and gave me her usual casual greeting. The guard ran over to see what was going on, but she dismissed him.

"I'm all good," she said, as she sat in the dirt where she'd fallen. "We're just messing around."

The guard cocked his head in confusion, but he returned to his post without interrogating the matter further.

"Messing around"? Who would ever willingly mess around with you?

I thought.

"You just up and left last time, didn't you?!" I confronted her. The shrillness in my voice surprised me.

"Sure did," she admitted, like it was nothing. "I was hiding, though, just like I said I'd be… In my bedroom, that is. I never said anything about hiding within the castle walls, did I?"

I was stunned. I couldn't believe she'd pull such a bad faith stunt like that when *she* was the one who'd suggested the game in the first place. Seriously, who did that?

You've got some nerve, little lady…

"I *did* wonder if you'd be pissed that I left, though."

"Of course I was."

"Thought so."

I stepped out of her way. She got up off the ground, dusted the dirt off of her uniform, and gave me a deeply satisfied smile as she met my indignant gaze.

"To tell you the truth, I've been kinda down lately. I guess I was just lashing out. Or maybe looking for a distraction. Sorry for teasing you like that," she said, but she didn't look the least bit sorry at all. Instead, she was grinning mischievously like a snot-nosed little boy. "I'm feeling a little better now that I've gotten to see how pissed off you are."

"Delightful sadistic streak you've got there. Very classy," I retorted with a snort, unable to restrain my sarcasm.

"Haven't you heard? I'm *nothing* if not classy. And everyone I know says I'm a delight."

She shrugged, giving me a devilish smirk that betrayed her deviousness.

She's trouble, all right. No one in their right mind would cheer up seeing someone look pissed off.

She was heartless; that was the only conclusion I could come to.

"So? You here to summon me to Prince Edward's office again? Was he pissed off too?" she asked in a tone that was equal parts irritated and resigned.

That's when it suddenly dawned on me: The crown prince hadn't actually given me *any* instructions to summon her today. I'd just up and abandoned my post keeping watch over the castle the moment I'd sensed her presence nearby, as if by instinct.

"Marty?" she prompted.

“I…mistook you for someone else,” I tried.

Unfortunately, she was having none of it.

“What? No, you didn’t.”

I couldn’t argue with her. Even I knew how ridiculous that excuse had sounded.

“If you’ve got time to spare, then spar with me. It’s been a while since I lost to you, so I’m feeling all fired up now.”

“I can’t. I’m on the clock right now.”

“So, do you make a habit of sneak attacking people for no reason while you’re on the clock, or…?”

“Fine,” I relented. “I’ll spar with you.”

She flashed a smile, as if to say, *Thought you’d say that.*

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“Sir Rembrandt,” Prince Edward said.

I’d just bowed to him as I prepared to take my leave from his office when he called out to me and stopped me.

“I’ve received some witness reports that attest to a man pinning down a certain young lady yesterday within the castle walls. Apparently, this man bore a rather remarkable resemblance to you,” the crown prince continued. “What do you make of that?”

For a moment, I had no idea what he was talking about. But the moment it clicked, I felt myself suddenly breaking out into a cold sweat.

It was alarming just how quickly word could spread within the castle.

Even I had to admit how bizarre that must have looked. Bizarre…and frankly, idiotic. I also regretted that I’d abandoned my post.

That being said, if anyone ought to have been reprimanded, it seemed to me that it should have been *her*. After all, her behavior was far more bizarre and idiotic than mine—and unlike mine, that wasn’t just a onetime offense.

Maybe the crown prince—and everyone else—had just grown desensitized to her antics? If that was true, though, then that made chastising *me* seem all the more pointless, especially when I had a reputation for taking my job seriously.

Besides, did Elizabeth even qualify as a “young lady”? I couldn’t

help but think that the crown prince was using the term a little loosely. It felt downright disrespectful to other young ladies to lump a punk like her in with them.

I gulped—quietly, so that Prince Edward wouldn't hear—and tried to respond as calmly as possible. "I'm embarrassed to say that I mistook her for someone else."

"Let me ask you a different question, then," he replied, smiling. I was struck by how unnaturally beautiful he was. "What is your relationship with Lizzie?"

I could feel his amethyst eyes appraising me, his gaze icy. He was practically staring daggers at me.

As a matter of fact, I wanted to ask him exactly the same question. *What's* your *relationship with her, Your Highness?* He seemed unusually interested in her. Of course, whatever their relationship might have been, I could only offer him one comment: "Stay away. She's trouble."

I certainly couldn't just come out and say that, though. Any respectable member of the aristocracy knows better than to express their feelings openly. Many aristocrats were perfectly capable of hiding their nerves, and they could break out into a cold sweat without anyone around them ever noticing. Unfortunately, I wasn't blessed with those talents; that was why I'd chosen the path of a knight. I certainly wasn't going to be able to cover up my nerves *now*—not in the presence of a prince whose social graces surpassed those of any noble.

Both my arsenal of believable excuses and my vocabulary were sorely lacking. I knew I didn't have the requisite eloquence to come out on top.

My gut told me that giving him a poorly chosen excuse or telling an obvious lie would only be shooting myself in the foot. I would have rather died than admit the truth, but he had left me no choice. I couldn't think of any other way out of this. And so, I yielded.

"We're...friends."

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"I've got a matchmaking meeting coming up."

"You do?"

We'd just finished sparring, and for some reason, I'd blurted out my weekend plans.

I'd figured that she wouldn't care, but she actually looked intensely interested. She frowned, scrutinizing me up and down as she stroked her chin. Then she cocked her head.

"You gonna survive that, Marty?" she asked. "Think you can turn up the charm and be sociable?"

"Please. I don't need your concern."

"Hey, come on. We're friends, remember? I can't help worrying about you, especially when I know how brusque you can be."

I'd given up on denying that we were friends, but I didn't appreciate her comment about my temperament. I'd never been particularly sociable, but that had never seemed to *bother* anyone.

Just leave me alone…

"I'm not expecting anything to come of it," I bristled. "I'm not especially interested in marriage, anyway. I wouldn't even know what to talk about with some young noblewoman."

"*You're* a noble too, aren't you? The second son of a marquis can hardly expect to avoid matchmaking and marriage."

"I have siblings: an older brother, an older sister, and a younger brother. *They* can take on that mantle. I've already chosen my path as a knight."

"Come on, you know it's not that simple," she said. There was an edge of admonishment in her voice.

You're one to talk, I wanted to say. I knew her engagement had been annulled, but she was the duke's eldest daughter, for God's sake. It wasn't like she could avoid all this marriage stuff forever either.

"Ah, hell… All right. I'll do you a favor and give you some pointers."

"What?"

"You know, just a few simple techniques to hit it big with the ladies," she said with a devious smirk on her face, wagging her index finger at me smugly. "Look, you don't have to have a silver tongue or anything. Just smile and answer anything you're asked. Oh, and ask *her* some questions too."

"Right…"

"Parrot back a few phrases here and there. It'll make her think you're interested in what she's saying, so she'll elaborate. Just

smile and listen. Then do it over and over again until she seems satisfied. You'll make her think you're *riveted*."

"Sounds more like the tactics of a con man than a ladies' man," I snarked back, but it seemed to go right over her head.

She continued, undeterred.

"If she doesn't say anything, then just do all of that to her dad. Try to keep the conversation focused on her as much as possible, and be careful what you parrot back. Then, when you're alone, just smile at her and ask her about the stuff her dad told you about her. If she *still* won't talk, then compliment her on something she's wearing—like, an accessory or something. And make sure you keep smiling at her."

I looked at her face. Her expression was unmistakably more of a smirk than a smile. She clearly knew that—and she also clearly knew that women would fall for it anyway.

Her facial features made her look like one of those stage actors that women swooned over. She had a perfect nose, attractively long and slender eyes, and a sharp, chiseled jawline. With a face like that, it was no wonder that a smile was all it took to make women fall in love.

"I don't have the looks to pull that off," I said.

"What are you talking about? You've got nice, delicate features. With a little makeup, you could be a knockout. My face looks a lot like yours when I'm not wearing makeup, so trust me, I'd know."

"What?!" I blurted out, shocked. I peered at her face to try to verify this for myself. "Y-You wear makeup?!"

"Yeah. Wait, you didn't realize? Huh... I'm pretty aggressive with my contouring, so I kind of thought it was obvious."

"I...don't know much about makeup."

"Huh," she said again, peering at my shocked face intently. Then, she clapped her hands together. "How 'bout I come over to your place before your matchmaking meeting and help you with your makeup?" she said.

"What?"

"Not to toot my own horn, but I think it's a great idea."

"Wait..."

"Where's your family's manor again? In the eastern quarter, right? Actually, I can probably just ask someone in the Knights' Brigade..."

She stood up. Then, before I could stop her, she climbed up onto a nearby tree branch.

"Catch ya later, Marty!" she yelled. In seconds, she was gone. The only trace of her was the shaking tree branch.

I massaged my forehead as I frowned. Times like these, I hated being a noble, because even if I refused to tell her where I lived, she could easily learn my address. I found myself wishing that I'd just decided to live at the barracks, but I knew it was too late now for regret.

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"Your friend is here," the maid, who was unusually excited, announced.

I headed over to the parlor room. Sure enough, there was Elizabeth Burton. Her legs were crossed elegantly, and she was sipping tea with a smug expression on her face that seemed to suggest she owned the place.

I couldn't believe she'd actually come over.

Several maids were hovering in the door's shadow, and I could tell they were desperate for a peek at her. They let out dreamy sighs.

"I wonder if Master Martin's friend is a knight?" one of them mused.

"I've never seen someone so...so *captivating*..." said another.

"Such long legs, and he's so tall too..."

"When I showed him around the manor, he thanked me with a smile."

"Oh, what a perfect gentleman!"

More dreamy sighs emanated from the doorway as the maids whispered excitedly. They seemed completely oblivious to the fact that I was standing right behind them.

I couldn't take it anymore. I cleared my throat, and the maids scattered like a bunch of baby spiders.

Good riddance...

Elizabeth must have also realized that I was standing in the doorway, because she looked over and waved.

It was my first time seeing her in casual attire, rather than her knight's or school uniform. She wore a simple getup—a shirt and

vest with a slender pair of pants. *I bet she always dresses like this*, I thought.

It was hard to imagine a woman ever dressing like that, though.

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"Okay... All done!"

At her signal, I looked in the mirror.

The man in the reflection was obviously me...but it was almost like I was looking at a completely different face. Every angle looked perfectly chiseled, and my weirdly bony jawline had been smoothed out. My nose looked nice and long. My eyes looked somehow sharper, and the skin around them tauter.

I couldn't help but think that I looked just a little bit like *her*.

"It's like..." I started. "It's like I'm looking at a completely different person."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, laughing.

It really did shake me, though. I'd never dreamed that my face could go through such a dramatic transformation. It might have sounded weird, but I felt certain that I would be much more attractive to women this way.

"You're a little lacking in pizzazz, so you'll need to accessorize to compensate. You should go with a bright color for your tie. It'll make the colors in your face pop," she said. "There you have it. Much better, right?"

She gave the maid—who was hovering in the background in case she was needed—a little wink as she packed up her makeup kit. The maid nodded stupidly.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," Elizabeth said, making for the doorway.

"Did you...really just come here to help me with my makeup?" I asked, stopping her.

She cocked her head as if to say, *What are you on about?*

"Yeah?" she replied. "Why?"

"Well, what's in it for *you*?"

She gave me her trademark, devious smirk—the one that made her look like a mischievous little boy—and said, "I just thought it would be entertaining."

That's all? I thought. I would have been willing to bet money

that she was going to try to use this as leverage to get me to help her turn down the crown prince's summons.

"Good luck, Marty. The rest is up to you," she said.

"Pfft…"

I couldn't help breaking into a laugh at that. She was three years my junior, but she sounded like she was imparting some worldly wisdom upon me.

You really are a wild card, Elizabeth Burton.

"I know," I replied.

At that, her eyes widened.

"Wow, it's not often I get you to agree with me," she said.

She stared at me with a look of surprise on her face. Just as I was wondering what was going through her head, she gently clapped both of her hands over my cheeks.

"Yes! That's it!" she exclaimed, suddenly. "That's the expression! Keep your facial muscles just like that!"

"Huh? What?"

"Aww, you ruined it. It's gone now. Guess you just don't have the willpower or the muscles to keep it up…"

"Right…"

She let go of my cheeks and shook her head in a show of disappointment. I had no idea what was going on.

"You can play up the 'cool and aloof' angle, but be prepared to be judged more for your looks if you do that. Being friendly and charming is always the safest bet, but… Hmm… With the makeup, I think you can make it work."

"I can't do 'friendly and charming.'"

"Well, you know what they say: Sometimes you've gotta fake it till you make it," she replied, flashing me her classic devil-may-care smile as she offered her hand for a fist bump. "I'll be praying for your victory."

You make it sound like I'm heading into battle, I thought, but I knew I had no right to be snide. I was indebted to her for her help today. So, with a sigh, I curled my hand and gave her a fist bump.

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Immediately after Elizabeth Burton's whirlwind of an exit, my older sister came bursting into the parlor room.

“S-Sis...?”

“Who *was* that?!” she demanded.

“My friend just left, if that’s who you’re asking about.”

“What?! Ugh, stupid Marty! You couldn’t at least stall for a bit?!”

“Stupid Marty”? Excuse me. I did nothing to deserve that.

My older sister was as exuberant—and willful—as ever, traits which I remembered my father lamenting as the reason she was still unmarried.

Why did I have to stall and keep her here? It’s not like you two know each other, I thought, bitterly.

“I wanted to introduce myself and get to know him! Wait, he’s your friend, right?! Who’s his father? Does he have a girlfriend?”

“Huh? Wait, what?”

“Ugh, you *know*! The man who lent you his makeup kit! It’s not every day I come across a man who’s taller than me that isn’t a total oaf, you know! And he was soooo handsome! I can’t let a catch like *that* get away!”

My sister kept yelling at me to introduce her. Finally, I interrupted and told her that I had a matchmaking meeting to make and gathered my things in a real hurry, hopping on my horse.

I had a feeling that the situation with my sister would spiral out of control no matter what I said. At this point, I was at my wit’s end.

I should probably move in to the barracks as soon as possible, I thought.

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My matchmaking partner actually seemed pretty interested in me. Apparently, her father had relayed to mine that she wanted to meet me again. And when it came to matchmaking, a second meeting was tantamount to an engagement.

The woman I’d met with was one of few words. She was the second daughter of an earl, which meant that neither of us would be taking on the heavy mantle of inheriting our family’s titles. Our respective statuses and birth orders made the meeting much more comfortable than I’d anticipated.

We didn’t talk much, but I saw her blush at times while her

father and I were talking, and her little smile was admittedly pretty cute. She'd left a positive impression on me.

She was petite, and her every movement was graceful. Her facial features were pleasantly girlish. Honestly, I couldn't help but feel that she was out of my league. I was surprised that she'd been as taken with me as I was with her.

Still, the prospect of marriage still felt completely alien to me, as if it were something that had absolutely no bearing on my life whatsoever. I'd devoted my life to the sword. Besides, I had no concept of what it meant to be responsible for another person's life. Surely it would be outrageously irresponsible to get married without that understanding or resolve?

I couldn't imagine that it would end well for either me *or* my future wife. And so, I fretted over whether to meet with the woman from the matchmaking meeting a second time.

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"Yo, Marty! How'd the matchmaking meeting go?"

I'd just been heading out of the castle on orders from the crown prince, but it seemed I wouldn't have to look very far for my target; in fact, she was already heading my way.

She must have been *really* interested in how things had gone if she was skipping right over our usual routine of trying to sneak up on each other to ask about it.

She had a carefree smile on her face as always, but something told me she was in an unusually good mood today. She looked like she was getting a real kick out of this.

"Prince Edward wishes to see you," I told her, ignoring her question.

"Yep, I figured he would. Now put that aside for a sec and tell me how it went."

"I'll tell you *after* you meet with him."

"Those are your terms, huh? All right." To my surprise, she agreed readily. "Well, guess I've got no choice. Better go see what the crown prince wants, then. Let's go, Marty!"

Her willingness to accompany me into the castle was nothing short of shocking. She was even ready to *lead the way*. Anyone who'd overheard our exchange would never have believed me if I'd

told them how much she typically dragged her feet about this.

I wish she'd always be this cooperative, I thought. *But if providing her with entertainment is the price, then maybe it's not worth it…*

She walked briskly in front of me, which gave me a slight glimpse of her profile. I had a feeling that she was going to cause a real fuss once she found out that I hadn't replied to my potential match about that second meeting yet. Still, what was I supposed to say?

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"Hey, Marty! I'm done!"

"That was quick."

"I just told him what he wanted to hear and hightailed it out."

"You can't talk that way about a prince," I reprimanded.

"I was so cooperative, even His Highness was surprised," she said, ignoring me.

That's not something to be proud of.

"So? Let's pick up where we left off."

Before I could reply, though, the door to Prince Edward's office swung open.

"Sir Rembrandt…?" he said, peering out.

I frantically dropped to one knee and bowed my head. Whether it was out of genuine respect or simply because we were within the castle walls and she thought someone might be watching, Elizabeth followed suit with a knightly bow of her own. It was such a perfect, beautiful bow that it was hard to imagine this was the same person who had gloated just moments before about telling the crown prince what he wanted to hear and "hightailing it out."

Once we'd both received permission, we stood up again.

Prince Edward was smiling, but there was a cold gleam in his eyes. If he so much as wished it, all he had to do was say one word and he'd have my head. The thought made me straighten my spine.

"Well, this is quite the surprise," Prince Edward said. "I remember you telling me that you were friends, but I hadn't realized you were so…*close*."

"I wouldn't say we're *especially* close," I protested.

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Elizabeth cut in, but we

ignored her.

"And you, Lizzie… I'm surprised you'd speak so casually with a senior knight."

"Well, how should I put this? He doesn't really *seem* older than me."

Excuse me? What are you implying? I'm a lot more mature than a mischievous little brat like you, at least.

"So? What is this about 'picking up where you left off'?" Prince Edward asked.

"Huh?"

"What were you so eager to hear talk about that you rushed through *our* chat?"

We both went silent. Without thinking, I looked over at Elizabeth, but she avoided my gaze. Resigned, I realized I'd have to be on the one to break the silence.

"My…matchmaking meeting," I said.

"Matchmaking meeting? Oh. Yes, I heard about that from the marquis. If memory serves, you met with the earl's daughter. Is that right?"

I was floored. How in the world had word already gotten to the crown prince about my meeting? Suddenly, the prospect of marriage was starting to feel very real—*uncomfortably* so. The weight of its responsibilities seemed to bear down on me anew.

"I've been rooting for him and trying to help set him up for success," Elizabeth explained. "So I was just pestering him to tell me how it went."

"I see. Well, in that case, perhaps I could put in a good word for you? I'd be so pleased if you were to find a wife and start a family, Sir Rembrandt—in more ways than one," Prince Edward said.

You two have no right to butt into my affairs like this, I thought. More than anything, though, I was astounded by the complete one-eighty Prince Edward had made once he'd realized that Elizabeth was supporting my matchmaking ventures. His icy demeanor had instantly softened. *Love really does make people crazy.*

The crown prince was always so calm and amicable that his barbed words earlier had felt wholly out of character. I could sense that he'd meant it when he'd said he'd be pleased if I found a wife, as though he had a lot riding on that—"in more ways than one," in

his words.

I'd only ever been dimly aware of his feelings, but now that I'd seen firsthand how head over heels the prince seemed to have fallen for my scoundrel of a friend, I felt another headache coming on. There were plenty of other suitable young ladies out there—*much* more suitable than Elizabeth Burton—and the crown prince could have had any of them that he wanted. So why, of all people, did he want *her*?

I had a feeling that if my new match progressed any further, there wouldn't be any way to wiggle out of it. If the crown prince were to put in a good word for me, then the woman I was courting would have no choice but to marry me.

There was just one problem: I wasn't prepared to marry *her*.

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary," I finally said, barely managing to choke out the words. "I was actually just thinking that I won't be pursuing this match."

"And why is that?" Prince Edward asked, his gaze growing cold again.

I felt a cold sweat drip down my back.

I wasn't going to give up here, though. I'd resolved to stand my ground and take desperate measures now. There was nothing left to do except play my card...even if that card was a joker.

"I prefer women with ample bosoms," I said.

Elizabeth and the crown prince both looked at me with stunned expressions on their faces.

I knew it was a wildly inappropriate comment to make in front of a woman, but my gut was also telling me that treating Elizabeth like a woman would only stoke Prince Edward's ire. I also knew that I wouldn't be able to pull off a lie. So, instead, I played it off as a matter of sexual preference.

And in fact, the reality *was* that my matchmaking partner had a rather *modest* bosom.

"Sir Rembrandt..."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Perhaps it's a little too soon for you to start a family," Prince Edward said with exasperation in his voice.

I heard Elizabeth, who was standing next to me, burst out laughing.

"Pfft!"

I glanced over at her and saw that her laughter had devolved into a loud cackle.

"Hah hah hah! You don't mince words, do you?! God, you're a lout!" she exclaimed.

You're one to talk. You're every bit as much of a lout as I am. I mean, what kind of lady would crack up at such a base comment? I thought.

"In all seriousness, Marty, chests do *grow*, you know. If you like everything else about her, then why not wait it out and see if hers gets any bigger?"

I take it back. You're even more *of a lout than I am.*

"Lizzie..." Prince Edward said, a hint of warning in his voice.

"Oh, whoops. Do excuse me, Your Highness. I shouldn't talk about such crass matters in front of royalty."

"You shouldn't talk about such crass matters in front of *anyone*."

"I'll work on that."

The crown prince cast a withering glance in her directions, but she just shrugged it off. I was astounded by her nerve.

At least I'd managed to avoid incurring Prince Edward's wrath, though. I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd made it out alive, somehow.

At least...I think I did.

Just as His Highness had pointed out, it was still too early for me to settle down and start a family. Even the eldest Burton son was still unmarried, and he was two years my senior. If the heir to the duke's title could stay a bachelor, then surely a mere second son like I am could afford to take my time too?

I only hoped that I'd somehow be able to go my whole life without ever thinking about marriage again.

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"So then I was like, 'I'd want to be with someone like my older brother.'"

"Right..."

I'd lent Elizabeth my formal knight's uniform, so she'd invited me out to lunch as thanks. Somehow I found myself having to listen to her vent, though. Apparently, the dance that she'd worn it to had unraveled at the end of the night into quite the kerfuffle.

When she'd asked to borrow my uniform for her school dance,

I'd lent it to her on the condition that she couldn't get it dirty. I realized later that, other than that, I hadn't thought twice about the request. She was rubbing off on me.

"Everyone was really weird about it. I mean, look, I get it… Even I realize that I could've come up with something better than *that*, but you know how it goes."

I didn't reply.

She poked at her salad as she spoke. *That* didn't bother me, but I had some words about what she did next.

"Don't fob your bell peppers off on me, please," I said.

"What do you mean? Those bell peppers have been on your plate this whole time," she argued.

"Why would you tell such an obvious lie?"

"Oh, come on. What else am I supposed to do? I *hate* bell peppers."

Don't say that like you haven't got a choice. At the very least, you could just leave them untouched on your own plate. Why do I *have to polish them off for you?*

"They're just so bitter," she added.

"Don't be childish."

"I'm allowed to be, remember? I *am* a child."

She snorted out a laugh and turned away, acting even more childish.

"Anyway, I've thought of the perfect answer for the next time someone asks me my type. I'm prepared now," she said.

"And what's that?" I asked.

"I'll say, 'Someone who likes me for me.'"

I spat out the wine I'd just taken a sip of.

"Whoa! Gross, Marty! What gives?!"

I had to admit it had been a pretty impressive spew, but as far as I was concerned, she had only herself to blame for it. No matter how she might try to spin it, that was a wholly inappropriate answer to give a throng of boys who were head over heels for her, much less the woman she'd just turned down. If anything, the in-love-with-my-brother angle was actually a much softer letdown. There was no need to add fuel to the fire.

As someone who'd just been through the matchmaking wringer, thrust into the harsh realities of navigating potential marriages, I couldn't help but envy her happy-go-lucky student life. Still, I'd

expected some boastful answer about her lady-killer ways. Not…whatever *that* was.

Seriously, what was she thinking, turning down a beautiful girl like that?

I'd only gotten a glimpse of the girl she'd turned down during the whole incident with the East, and I couldn't even remember her face clearly. Whenever I tried, my head just felt fuzzy…pleasantly so. I couldn't even remember what had transpired to end in me being hauled over Elizabeth's shoulder back to the Knights' Brigade headquarters.

One thing was for sure, though: Elizabeth didn't exactly have a talent for picking up on people's feelings. She even seemed oblivious to the crown prince's affections for her, and he *certainly* didn't make it a secret. What's more, she always seemed to be cheerfully rubbing people the wrong way, as if she didn't have a clue that she might be upsetting them.

Sometimes, though, she *did* seem to know—and that just spoke to how vicious she could be.

"What about you, Sir Breast-a-Lot?" she asked.

"Don't call me that."

"What would you say if someone asked what your type was? Surely you wouldn't just come out and tell them you're a boob man, right?"

"I…"

No one had ever asked me what my type was. I'd actually never thought about it before, so I stopped to consider my answer.

If I was just talking among the other knights, it would be perfectly acceptable to just say I was a "boob man." But when I thought about what I might say in the presence of ladies, I suddenly came up empty.

"See? It's a surprisingly tricky question to answer, isn't it?"

After a pause, I replied, "Your food's getting cold."

"You coward. Don't try to dodge the question."

"Hurry up and finish eating, please," I said, shoving a piece of chicken into her mouth.

"Mmgh!"

Her eyes went wide in shock, but she obediently began to chew.

Her silence was a nice change of pace. *Maybe I should try this more often*, I thought.

She swallowed the bite of chicken, then clapped her hands together loudly.

"I get it. You just want a bite of *my* food, don't you?"

"What?"

"Here. Don't be shy," she said, pointing her fork at me. There was a piece of shrimp on the end of it—one of the main ingredients of the lunch set she'd chosen today.

"What are you doing?!"

"What do you mean? You wanted to trade, right?" she asked, cocking her head. She looked genuinely puzzled.

That was when the implications of what I'd done finally dawned on me. Without thinking, I'd shoved food into her mouth the way I might to a younger brother, niece, or nephew...but now I realized, with a sinking feeling, that feeding someone wasn't always limited to a familial context—*lovers* did it too. It certainly wasn't appropriate for a man and a woman our age to be doing.

Crap. If the crown prince finds out about this, he'll have my head.

"Marty?"

She was probably used to trading food like this with her brothers too. She didn't seem the least bit bothered by it.

When I stopped to think about how our behavior might look to any onlookers, I felt a momentary pang of fear. But then I remembered that we'd just look like a pair of men horsing around, and relief set in.

Well, what's the harm, then? I thought. *No... I feel like that's not the only issue here. But it'd probably be weirder to kick up a fuss about this being inappropriate than to just take the damn shrimp.*

And honestly, at this point, I was too exhausted from all the pressure of that matchmaking crap to care about how we looked. I didn't even want to think about romance and marriage anymore.

"What? You don't want it?" she asked.

"No... I'll take it."

After hesitating briefly, I finally bit the shrimp off of her fork. It irritated me a bit to think that *I* was the only one feeling self-conscious about it all.

The taste of olive oil and garlic spread across my tongue. I was astonished that she'd eat something with garlic in it for *lunch*.

Don't you know better? I thought. *Everyone knows to avoid garlic for lunch.*

I watched her resume her meal happily, and my eyes were suddenly drawn to the fork she was bringing to her mouth.

Wait, what am I thinking? I'm not a child*. I don't care about nonsense like "indirect kisses."*

Then I remembered the comment she'd made about that before, back when we'd shared the grape juice. She was the one who'd planted the idea in my head in the first place.

Goddammit. She really is rubbing off on me. I need to be careful not to take anything that little punk says seriously.

I resumed my meal too, dropping my gaze to my own fork.

Don't think about it, Martin. The moment you act weird about this, you've already lost.

I looked up quickly and found my gaze wandering to her thin lips.

No… No! I'm not thinking about it!

"What's up, Sir Breast-a-Lot? Something the matter?"

"Yes, that's me: Sir Breast-a-Lot, Martin Rembrandt."

She burst out laughing. "You're insane. I can't believe you're calling *yourself* that."

I felt myself grow even more dejected at her laughter. I let out a sigh.

As we continued eating, she moved from topic to topic.

"So, apparently, the fourth division is short on men. They got me to take on several graveyard shifts in a row recently to help out, and I kept falling asleep at my desk the next day."

"Sounds like that's the situation everywhere these days."

"Is the Royal Guard short-staffed too?"

"Well, filling positions in the Royal Guard takes precedence, so we're not as short-staffed as other divisions."

"Must be nice. I know the Royal Guard and the thirteenth division are kind of special, but…when I think about how we're always recruiting cadets at the training grounds to fill positions, it really feels like we're just manufacturing a problem to resolve," she said, resting her chin on the table as she complained.

"You're getting hair in your food," I cut in, sweeping her hair out of the way.

Instantly, I felt a sense of unease wash over me. Her hair was so soft, I could feel how different it was to my own just from the briefest of touches.

Yes, almost like it was…a *woman's* hair.

She lifted her head up and rested her chin in her hands. Then she gave me a toothy smile and laughed bashfully.

"Thanks," she said.

Out of nowhere, I stabbed my thigh with my fork under the table. I had a sense that something extremely wrong had just flashed through my head. I couldn't put into words what it was specifically, but even having the thought in my head for a moment offended me.

What the hell am I thinking? I wondered.

The person across the table from me was a woman, but her appearance and behavior screamed "man." Noncommittal, ill-mannered, and brash—that was Elizabeth Burton. Her loud laugh, her arrogance, and her devil-may-care attitude really got on my nerves. She was roughly three years my junior, but she comported herself like an adult—though there *was* something strangely, yet unmistakably, childish about her.

She'd tried to bribe me with a bottle of juice, and she'd proposed a game of hide-and-seek only to leave in the middle of it. Just when I was worried she was down in the dumps about something, she'd tick me off to blow off stress.

Every time we crossed paths, she'd try to get the jump on me, and she was always asking if I was free to spar. She didn't seem to care at all that I was blunt and surly. She'd talk to me about the knights and about her family. Before I even realized it, I'd get drawn in and start talking too.

That was just the kind of person she was. It was easier to count her flaws than her virtues. Only someone like her would go around deciding someone was her friend and butting her nose into their matchmaking meetings. And only someone like her would offer to treat someone to a meal and invite them out for a one-on-one lunch.

It seemed she'd finished her lunch already. She was a quick eater. *Don't you want to savor it?* I wanted to say.

She stared at me, looking bored. Our eyes met. For some reason, I couldn't look away. So, for a few brief moments, I gazed right back at her.

"Hm? What's up?" she asked, cocking her head.

I tore my gaze away from her and resumed eating, shoveling

the rest of my plate down my throat.

My Beloved Little Sister —Big Brother—

"Let's take a quick break, Ed. I think the tea is ready now," I said.

"Yes… Let's."

Edward put the documents he'd been holding down on the desk and stood up. The two of us sat down across from each other at the table and sipped the tea that the maid had prepared for us. I was impressed—but not surprised, considering that she worked for the royal family—that she always prepared it for me just the way I liked, with a healthy dose of sugar.

It smelled lovely. As the sweetness coated my tongue, I found myself letting out an involuntary sigh. And, of course, I couldn't help but grin when she brought out a cake. It had a rich, buttery smell, and it looked full of autumn fruit. Sweets really did taste like happiness.

As I devoured the cake, Edward stared at me.

"I've been thinking your sister may be a little too enamored with you," he said suddenly, his tone serious.

"Huh?"

"Are you truly just siblings?" he pressed, suspicion in his voice.

"Close siblings," I replied.

All I could do was give him an awkward smile. What else would we be, if not "just siblings"?

He studied me for a while. Finally, he let out a sigh.

"I asked her what kind of lover she was looking for, and she answered that she wanted 'someone like her older brother.' For a girl of seventeen, that's quite a statement… I can't help but wonder if the two of you may just be a little *too* close?"

I chuckled. "Lizzie really said that?"

I'd always felt close to her, but hearing that the feeling was mutual from a secondhand source was somehow a little embarrassing.

Out of the blue, memories of her at a young age came flooding back.

"You know, that reminds me—she used to say she wanted to marry me," I said.

"Your own little sister said that?"

“Lizzie was a kid once too, you know. She used to be such a tiny little thing, always following me around wherever I went. She’s changed as she’s grown older, but I’ll always see her as sweet, little Lizzie.”

I dropped my gaze to the fruit cake in my hand. Whenever I ate tasty treats like this, I always thought of my younger siblings. No matter how many years passed, that never changed.

“You probably get that too, right, Ed? No matter how much he grows, your little brother will always be your little brother, won’t he?”

For a moment, Edward was silent. Then he said, “He…might have grown a little *too* much.”

“But he’s still your sweet little brother, isn’t he?”

“No comment.”

I looked at Edward as he averted his gaze, then I burst out laughing.

Despite his bluffing, I knew how much he cared about his brother. They hadn’t gotten along very well when they were younger, but recently, it seemed like they’d developed a brotherly bond of some sort.

Why, just recently, Prince Robert had even come bursting into Edward’s office to talk to him. Despite his annoyance, Edward had put aside what he was doing to give his brother his attention.

Prince Robert has grown up a lot too, I thought.

I could never have even imagined that the little boy who’d just gotten engaged to my sister would grow into the broad-shouldered, strong young man that he was now. Of course, that went for my little sister too. I could never have imagined that she’d grow up into such a dashing young woman.

“Come to think of it, Lizzie’s never been much of a crier, even when she was a kid. Her hatred of bell peppers hasn’t changed at all either,” I mused.

“Bell peppers?”

“Mm-hmm. We were actually having breakfast one day when she tasted some minced bell peppers in her omelet. It was such a shock to her system that she fell back in her chair. The whole manor was in an uproar over it. I can’t remember exactly how long ago that was, but it must have been about ten years ago now. Time sure does pass by quickly, doesn’t it?”

“Every time I hear you talk about her, I can’t help but suspect that you’re talking about a completely different person.”

“That’s just because she puts on a bit of a front in public sometimes. She’s just trying to look cool, I guess,” I said. Then I looked straight straight into the eyes of the crown prince sitting in front of me and added, “You could say she’s a bit like you in that way, Ed.”

For a moment, his eyes grew wide. Then he let out an awkward laugh.

“And nothing like *you*, apparently,” he replied.

I chuckled. “Touché.”

When did Lizzie become such a popular topic of conversation for us during our little breaks? I found myself wondering. *And when had Edward become so…expressive?*

We could be talking about the most trivial, random things, and he’d break into a carefree laugh, or widen his eyes in surprise. Sometimes, he’d even turn sulky. But what had inspired him to free himself of the mantle of his perfect prince act? I had a hunch that it wasn’t just that he felt more comfortable around me.

I thought about my sister. Not even a full year had passed since her engagement to Prince Robert had been annulled.

The official reason for the annulment glossed over the reality. Our father had concluded that Lizzie wouldn’t be able to handle the responsibilities of being a princess—a premise that the royal family ultimately agreed with. Hypothetically, even if Edward hoped to marry her, it was hard to imagine that he could quickly overturn that ruling. The royal family, in particular, was unlikely to be persuaded to change their minds.

As Lizzie’s older brother, and as Edward’s friend, I felt I could probably entrust her to him… But Lizzie’s feelings came first. The most important factor was that Lizzie didn’t seem to have much interest in him at all—and not just him, but *anyone*.

If she wasn’t interested, then it was my duty to be supportive of that. It did make things difficult, though, when I *also* wanted to support my friend and my younger brother.

As I ruminated on it all, my sister’s face suddenly flashed in my mind.

I had a funny feeling that I knew just what she’d say in this situation: “Why don’t you worry about *yourself*?”

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“Earl Burton!”

I had just finished my business in the castle and was walking down the halls when I heard a voice call out to me.

I hesitantly turned around to see who it belonged to. Lo and behold, it was Prince Robert. He was running over to me at breakneck speed. I watched him cut through the courtyard and climb through the window into the hall, stopping in front of me and, to my utter surprise, bowing his head.

“Please let me be your apprentice!” he pleaded.

“M-My *apprentice*...?”

I was gobsmacked.

“Apprentice”? What does that mean? Are we talking...a martial arts apprentice? A cooking apprentice?

I had no idea how to respond. I briefly tried to ponder why Prince Robert, of all people, might want to be my apprentice. I drew a blank, so I decided I would just ask him directly.

“Um... P-Prince Robert?” I began.

“Yes, sir?!”

“What kind of apprentice do you mean?”

“I don’t know! I just want to be your apprentice!”

“Well, um...”

Now I was *really* at a loss. Even Prince Robert *himself* didn’t seem to know what he was looking for, so how was I to know?

Suddenly, I realized how bad it must look for a prince to be bowing his head to me. Any passersby who saw us would be in for a shock.

“I’m happy to discuss that with you, but could you please just lift your head?” I asked him.

“Does that mean you’ll take me as an apprentice?!”

“Let’s just talk this over first.”

Robert must have sensed the desperation in my voice, because he reluctantly lifted his head.

Now that we were in such close proximity, seeing him standing up straight made me realize just how unusually *tall* he was. He had to look pretty far down to make eye contact with me, but the reverential sparkle in his eyes almost made it seem like he was somehow looking *up* at me.

“Why do you want to be my apprentice?” I asked him.

“Because the woman I admire—no, the woman I *love*—said that she wants to be with someone like *you*,” he answered.

What? Wait… Is it just my imagination, or did I hear something about this before?

“That’s why I came running, Earl Burton! To ask if I could stay by your side and learn how to mold myself into your image!” Prince Robert explained.

“Um… Prince Robert?”

“Please, feel free to just call me ‘Robert’!”

“Well… I’m afraid I can’t forgo formalities with a member of the royal family.”

“But I heard that you don’t address my brother with his title,” he challenged.

He had a fair point. Now that he’d pointed that out, I couldn’t help but see the injustice of that. It wasn’t right to discriminate or show favor.

“Besides, Commander doesn’t use my title either,” he said.

“‘Commander’?” I repeated.

“Your sister!”

Now I was confused. I knew that Lizzie worked as an instructor at the training grounds, and I’d heard that Robert was one of her pupils. I’d also heard from Christopher that the cadets had given Lizzie a strange nickname, for some reason. Is this what he’d been talking about? Was her nickname “Commander”?

Commander of what*, though?* I wondered. If she held some sort of leadership position among the knights, then surely she would be a *captain*…right?

“I’m just not sure what you’re hoping to learn from me, exactly…”

“I’ll just watch you from the shadows! You can think of me as your bodyguard. You won’t even notice I’m here!”

I almost doubled over in shock. “You’re the second prince! I can’t treat you like a *bodyguard*!”

Prince Robert certainly didn’t strike me as having much of an ego, but I was floored to hear him suggest that he could be a bodyguard.

I thought about the expression Edward wore whenever he talked about Prince Robert. It felt like every time his brother’s

name passed his lips, he frowned. I'd always assumed that he was just being bashful and trying to hide his affection, but…maybe Prince Robert was actually a bit of a rascal?

"I know I don't look like much, but I'm pretty capable. I think I'd be able to protect the both of us pretty well," he said.

"That isn't the issue here…"

"*Please!* I just want to become a man who's worthy of Commander!"

He reached out and clasped my hands in his, overcome with emotion.

He keeps talking about this "Commander" he loves. Which is, um…my sister? So, that means he's in love with her? Wait, are both *brothers in love with her? But didn't Prince Robert want to break off the engagement too? So…surely he can't be in love with her?*

As much as I struggled to understand it, that was the only conclusion I could come to when he was shaking my hands so vigorously and looking at me with those sparkling eyes.

Lizzie, please don't tell me you've been stirring up trouble behind my back. I'm just overthinking things…right?

As I was hesitating to formulate a response to Prince Robert, one of his guards came running over. He apologized to me profusely and whisked the prince away. It all happened so quickly. Robert kept calling after me, but his voice grew more and more distant.

I could have sworn I felt a pang in my stomach, like an ulcer coming on. I placed my hand over it and let out a pained sigh, resolving to abstain from seconds at dinner that night.

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"Hey, Isaac."

"Earl Burton…?"

I'd spotted my little sister's friend at the Royal Library, and without thinking, I'd called out to him. As soon as his name left my mouth, though, I realized with some regret that I might have sounded a little too friendly. Lizzie had made more than a few comments about how ill-tempered he could be.

"Oh… S-Sorry. My sister must have rubbed off on me. I'm just so used to hearing her use your first name when she talks about

you," I explained.

"That's all right. I don't mind," he replied, seeming genuinely unfazed.

Lizzie often talked about Isaac as if he was cold and brusque, but I didn't really get that sense from him. He'd been courteous enough to give me his attention when I'd called to him, and he seemed like an earnest boy.

We'd actually crossed paths several times before. He was on course to become the next prime minister, so he sometimes accompanied his father to meetings and social events as his assistant.

We weren't really close enough to stop and chat whenever we saw each other, though. The only reason I'd called out to him like this today was because I wanted to ask him about my sister.

After realizing that Prince Robert had some pretty strong feelings for her, I was curious to learn more about her life at school. Since she and the princes went to the same school, I couldn't help but worry about what might happen if things grew awkward between them.

"Thank you as always for the gifts you send. It's a treat to try the local specialties of your earldom—especially the jam. I just can't get enough of that."

"I'm pleased to hear you've been enjoying them."

"Enjoying" was an understatement. Just remembering the taste of that jam brought a wide grin to my face. The strawberry one was my favorite—I could probably eat that every day for the rest of my life.

"And thank you for the kindness and the friendship you always show to my sister," I added. "I hear she's constantly indebting herself to you."

"Burton said that?"

"That's right. She's always saying she'd be a mess without you."

"Oh..." he replied after a pause.

"Speaking of which, I was hoping I might be able to ask you some questions about what she's like at school?"

Just as I'd broached the topic I was actually hoping to discuss with him, I caught a glimpse of his expression. What I saw made me gulp.

Isaac looked absolutely delighted. He broke into a smile; it was

like watching a flower bloom. It was a completely unrestrained smile—the kind that stemmed from thinking of something—or someone—dearly beloved. I would have never imagined, in all the times I'd seen him accompany his father, that he was even *capable* of making an expression like that.

In that moment, something dawned on me. No…that sounded far too gentle. It didn't "dawn" on me; it smacked me right in the face. I was floored.

"Earl Burton?" Isaac asked, cocking his head. He looked confused.

Oh, shoot. I didn't mean to look so gobsmacked.

Isaac probably had no idea how lovelorn he looked when I'd mentioned Lizzie.

"Oh, um…" I stammered, trying to recover. "I was just wondering if Lizzie was doing well in school."

"I see. Well…" he began, slowly, as if struggling to choose his words. "I think she's enjoying it." His hesitation and evasive response gave me pause. I was starting to get a little worried.

Now that I'd gotten Isaac thinking about Lizzie's behavior at school, he seemed to have a question of his own for me.

"I hope this isn't too forward of me, Earl Burton…but how would you feel about joining me for dinner sometime?" he asked.

"Hm? Oh, well, sure! I'd love to."

At the word "dinner," I automatically accepted.

It seemed perfectly appropriate, though, considering that he was my sister's friend. Not to mention, he would almost certainly be the next prime minister. It seemed only prudent to forge a deeper connection with him. Besides…I was curious about what kind of food they served at his house.

"I have some questions I'd like to ask too. Like how Burton is at home," Isaac added with the same delighted smile from before.

Lizzie… You told me you two were good friends, but this is a little beyond *that. Do you really not pick up on his feelings when he looks at you with that expression?* I wondered.

I knew she wasn't the type to knowingly take advantage of someone else's feelings for her, though. And if it bothered her, she'd probably talk to me about it. Still, something didn't sit quite right with me.

"I'd also like to learn more about *you*," Isaac added.

“Me?”

“Yes, well, she’s always going on and on about her brilliant big brother. How could I not be intrigued?”

“R-Really?” I asked, laughing awkwardly. “Heh heh… Well, now I’m all embarrassed.”

Apparently, Edward hadn’t been lying when he’d said that she talked a lot about me to her friends. I couldn’t help but feel a little happy to hear Isaac confirm that.

“There’s a lot I’d love to learn from you,” Isaac added.

Suddenly, I thought back to what Prince Robert had said the other day. Hadn’t he said something about wanting to learn from me too?

So, I wasn’t imagining things, was I? Isaac is also in love with her…

I looked at Isaac. I’d come here to ask him about Robert’s feelings for Lizzie, but now that I knew he also had feelings for her, I couldn’t bring myself to broach the question.

Oh, Lizzie… What are you doing? How in the world have these boys found themselves so smitten with you? As your older brother, I’m really starting to worry…

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While Christopher and I were enjoying some tea together, I decided to see if what Lizzie had told everyone was true or not.

“So, Lizzie really said that she wants to be with someone like me?” I asked.

“Yep,” Christopher replied.

Lizzie would probably pout when she found out that Christopher and I were having tea without her. I felt kind of bad about that, but I knew this would be my only chance to ask such questions.

Christopher broke eye contact and looked away, letting out a weary sigh.

“‘Someone like my big brother’… How ridiculous is that? She should know better than to hope she’ll ever find someone like you.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“I *know* so!”

Christopher puffed out his cheeks in a pout, looking just like a

baby squirrel. It was so adorable, I could feel my mouth relaxing into a smile against my will. I desperately fought it, straining to keep my lips a taut line.

Whoa, now. Don't laugh at him when he's being serious.

"Your kindness, your sincerity, your loyalty…they all come from the heart. That's what makes those traits so special. Even if someone *tried* to emulate you, they couldn't. It'd just be a shallow imitation, not the real thing," Christopher said.

"Well, I don't know about that… I'm not sure there's anything all *that* special about me," I demurred, embarrassed.

In the end, I couldn't help laughing. Both of my younger siblings really seemed to put me on a pedestal. But, to be honest, nothing in the world made me happier than to hear that they thought so highly of me.

I looked at Christopher's pouting face. I really hoped that both he and Lizzie would find happiness, whatever that looked like for each of them. They were probably the only ones who knew what would make them happy, but as their older brother, I wanted to support them in that however I could.

That's why I couldn't *just* be on Christopher's side…but I figured I could at least give him a hand.

I swirled my spoon around in my teacup, stirring up the sugar that had settled to the bottom.

"I have a feeling that all Lizzie meant by that was that she wants someone who will love and care for her," I said.

"Huh?"

"Maybe she probably just didn't know how to put that into words? That's probably why she thought of me, though. After all, she means the world to me. She's my beloved little sister, and I'd do anything for her."

An image of her face came to mind.

No matter how old she got, how dashing she became, or how strong she grew, she would always be my little sister. That was why I always did everything I could to let her know how much she meant to me and how much I cared about her. I'd keep doing that, no matter what.

"If Lizzie is singling me out for some reason as special…then that's the only reason I can think of. That's the only thing that I have absolute faith in, and the only thing about me that I can

claim as a point of pride," I said.

I stroked Christopher's head as he looked up at me, my fingers sinking into his strawberry blond hair.

"The same goes for you, of course, Christopher," I told him. "You mean the world to me too. You're my beloved little brother."

"Big brother..."

"That's why I want to do everything I can to support you. But...I'm Lizzie's older brother too."

"No, I appreciate the sentiment," he replied, smiling. "But I know I have to fight my own fight."

As he looked up at me, I swore I could see a flicker of determination in his eyes. *They grow up so fast*, I thought. It was a strange, bittersweet feeling.

I'd had no idea that Prince Robert and Isaac had such strong feelings for Lizzie. As I wondered why Lizzie had never talked to me about that, I felt a pang of sadness; the "bitter" part of the "bittersweet" seemed to have won out.

But I also had a feeling that the reason she'd never talked to me was probably that she hadn't even *realized* their feelings. That was just the vague sense I'd gotten from the way everyone had been talking about her, but it seemed like a reasonable assumption.

"There's just one thing I think you should know. If you were ever to suggest that sis marry someone in particular, she would probably marry them in an instant. So...just please be careful with what you say around her."

"There's no way she would do that..." I said, trying to defend her.

But Christopher just shook his head weakly.

From his reaction, I could tell that Lizzie must have been getting up to all kinds of trouble I wasn't even aware of.

"Don't underestimate how much faith she places in you. I can practically hear her saying, 'If that's what big brother thinks is best, then I'll do it.'"

Christopher had a distant look in his eyes as he spoke, and I could tell that he meant what he said. Maybe *I* couldn't hear her saying that, but it was clear to me that *he* could.

Lizzie didn't seem to listen much to what I or my parents had to say, though. No matter how many times we told her to stay out of danger, she never seemed to heed our warnings. If there was a single warning she *had*, it was probably the warning not to get

into any more tussles with bears.

Apparently, though, Christopher thought she was much more impressionable.

“You know how sis can be when she doesn’t have any vested interest in something. She can get a little…” Christopher began, uncomfortably, before trailing off.

“Yeah… She sure can, can’t she?”

I felt bad agreeing with him, but I had to admit that I knew exactly what he meant.

Sometimes Lizzie could be oddly motivated…but picking presents for Prince Robert had certainly not been one of those times. I still remembered how she’d left it all to our mother and the head maid. “Just give him whatever. I’ll leave it to your judgment,” she’d said.

I really wished she’d take a little more interest in her marriage prospects, but if anything, she seemed more concerned about *mine*. Next time she told me to worry about myself, though, maybe I’d try throwing the sentiment back at her?

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One day, as I was walking around the manor, Lizzie called out to me.

“Hey, big brother.”

She strode over to me from the other end of the hallway in seconds, and before I knew it, she was standing directly in front of me with a grin on her face.

“I was hoping to introduce you to a friend of mine sometime in the near future,” she said. “Is there a time you’ll be free?”

“A friend of yours?” I repeated, without thinking.

I’d been crossing paths with a lot of her friends lately, so I wondered which of them she might be referring to. “Introduce” seemed like an unusual choice of words, though.

Could this be what I think it is…?

“Let’s see…how can I describe her? She’s a classmate of mine, and I’ve invited her over several times. I’d really like you to meet her.”

“Oh, yes, I think I know who you mean. Lilia, was it?” I said, clapping my hands together.

Thank goodness. Of course I want my little sister to find happiness, but it does feel a little soon for her to be getting married, I thought. I didn't want to be separated from my younger siblings just yet, so I wasn't prepared to attend one of their weddings.

"I've heard a bit about her from Christopher and the head maid. She's a close friend, right?" I asked. Then, chuckling, I said, "I'd love for you to introduce us. I figured we'd meet at some point."

"Well, there's just one thing you should know, though," Lizzie said, eyes darting as she quickly looked around the hall. Then she dropped her voice and whispered, right into my ear, "Lilia's, um…a bit *special*. See, she shoots these beams of light out of her eyes."

"Beams of light?"

"Yeah. And if you look straight at her…worst-case scenario, your retinas might burn."

"What?!"

I looked at Lizzie in astonishment.

She wore a pained expression, her brow furrowed, as she gave me a meek nod.

"I don't think I've ever heard of anyone who could shoot beams of light from their eyes. Wait, that *can't* be real…can it?"

"It sure is. That's just how cute she is," Lizzie replied, her tone deadly serious.

Everything she was telling me was so unbelievable, I couldn't contain my bewilderment.

"The second you take so much as a peek at her, you'll hear wedding bells. And I don't know how I'm going to deal with that," she said.

"Um… Isn't she your classmate, though? That would make her a good five years younger than me, and I'm certainly not going to marry someone who's still in school."

"I believe you, it's just…her cuteness goes a little *beyond* the realm of human comprehension."

"But…what does that mean?"

I was a little confused by how someone's cuteness could "go beyond the realm of human understanding," but I felt like I understood the gist: According to my sister, this girl was *exceptionally* cute.

"She's a little *different* too. I mean, she's a sweet girl. Well, she *can* be…inasmuch as anyone who's my friend can be sweet. I know

I have no right to comment on your romantic affairs, but…please don't make me be her sister-in-law."

"B-Because…she's your friend?" I asked, without thinking.

"Exactly," she said, as if it were only obvious.

I felt a question mark pop up in my head, but she kept talking.

"Also, she gets kind of uncomfortable around men. So, if things get weird, I don't want you to feel caught off guard," she said.

"I wish you'd told me that first."

Honestly, that felt like the most important part of this all. It seemed she was trying to tell me, "She's really cute, but I don't want you to scare her, so try not to get too close to her."

Christopher had once worried that Lizzie didn't seem to have any friends, but it was starting to hit me how off base that fear had been. Not only did she have plenty of friends, but they also adored her. It made me really happy to see that.

I chuckled. "I'm glad that I've been getting so many opportunities lately to meet your friends."

"Huh?"

"I've started talking with Prince Robert a lot lately whenever I bump into him in the castle, and Isaac actually invited me over to his house for dinner recently."

"How…did *that* happen?" she asked, cocking her head quizzically.

But just as I tried to explain, I found myself at a loss for words.

Shoot… I won't be able to explain this all without revealing that they're in love with her. It wouldn't be right to tell her that. That's something for them *to tell her, if they want to.*

"Does this…have something to do with my comments about how amazing you are…?" she muttered, as I was carefully trying to choose my words.

"Huh?"

Reflexively, I looked into her face.

Wait, I thought she didn't know how they felt about her, but maybe I was wrong? But if she does know, then why…?

"Big brother…"

"Yes?"

Lizzie placed her hands on my shoulders, looking me straight in the eyes with an earnest gaze that threatened to bore right through me.

“I’m extremely, extremely grateful for all that you do. I have nothing but respect for you. The whole reason that I’ve been able to live my life to the fullest, without being held back by my gender, is because you’ve always been here to accept me as your little sister. I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have you as my older brother always supporting me and standing by my side. From the bottom of my heart, I’m so grateful that I was born into this world as your little sister.”

“Huh? Wait, where did *this* come from, all of a sudden?”

“So, in the unlikely event that you decide to go down that path…I’ll be here by your side, even if the whole world turns against you. If you love someone, then I fully intend to support your relationship. I really mean that, but…please just let me say one thing first. I know this must sound really cowardly to walk back on what I just said earlier, and I’m ashamed to eat my words like this, but…”

Then she squeezed my shoulders tightly.

Yeowch! Lizzie!

“If you’re going to choose any of them, Lilia is the best contender!” she exclaimed loudly.

“Lizzie?! What in the world are you talking about?” I cried back just as loudly.

She was always saying things that were completely incomprehensible, but every single time, it still astonished me. *No matter how many years I’ve been her older brother, I never seem to get used to it*, I thought.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to lose my composure like that,” she said.

“Um, that’s all right, but…”

Lizzie cleared her throat, looking at me with sweet adoration in her eyes. Then she gave me a slow nod, with a look on her face that seemed to say, *Yes… I understand perfectly now.*

I knew better, though. Whenever she made that understanding expression, what it *really* meant was that she didn’t understand anything at all.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m prepared now to accept it.”

“Lizzie? Um, can we just pause for a moment?”

“If there’s ever anything on your mind, please come and talk to me about it. I’ll always be here for you, big brother, no matter what.”

“Huh? Um, th-thanks. That makes me really happy to hear, but…”

She’d been saying a lot of really sweet things…but I couldn’t help feeling like something just wasn’t meshing. I was also beginning to get the nagging feeling that there was some sort of misunderstanding here—the kind that would doom any chance of getting married in the near future. I could feel my prospects getting more and more distant.

“Well, I’m gonna head off now,” Lizzie said, taking long, dashing strides back down the hallway.

Flustered, I tried to chase after her.

“Wait! Hold on a second, Lizzie! I think there’s been some sort of misunderstanding here?! Please, wait!”

Extra Story: A Day in the Life of Elizabeth Burton

Now that it was winter, the sun was late to rise. At four in the morning, it was still pitch black outside.

Either the head maid or the butler-in-training had thoughtfully lit the furnace for me in advance of my early wake up, but its heat had yet to make its way through the whole manor. The moment I put my feet down on the floor, a cold chill penetrated up through my toes and all the way to the top of my head. I briefly considered climbing back into bed and trying to fall asleep again, but I managed to overcome the urge.

I took off my nightgown and washed my face. After combing the tangles out of my hair and quickly making it look somewhat presentable, I put on my workout clothes. I always warmed up quickly during my runs, so while I couldn't exactly go out in shorts and a T-shirt in this weather, I made sure to pick something light and thin.

I made my way down to the entrance hall, where a maid was exchanging the flowers in a vase for some fresh ones. I was impressed by her diligence, especially at such an ungodly hour of the morning. I gave her a little "hello" and headed out the front door, closing it behind me. A gust of wind swept my bangs back, and I felt a sharp chill hit the tip of my nose.

Whenever I ran in the winter, my nose and ears really suffered for it. I'd thought about wearing some earmuffs before, but I knew I would die of embarrassment if anyone saw me in something like that, so I always ended up forgoing them.

I started off with a few quick jumps in place. Then I stretched my wrists, ankles, and shoulders. Finally, I kicked off the ground and broke into a run.

The cold air felt like it might cut right through me, but I continued regardless. I pounded the dark pavement as I watched the sky grow lighter and lighter. I could see lights starting to come on in the town's houses in the distance.

In the silence, all I could hear was the sound of my footsteps

and my breathing. It felt fantastic to have the morning sun, which was only just crowning over the horizon, all to myself like this. There was no school today, but I still had remedial lessons. They finished in the morning, though, so I started contemplating a possible stop somewhere on the way home.

Come to think of it, I left Isaac's notes at the fourth division's station the other day...

I had a feeling there was a deadline coming up soon, so I figured I'd better stop by and pick them up.

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Remedial classes were over by lunchtime, so I headed over to the fourth division station to pick up Isaac's notes. As I walked through town, I noticed a group of girls who always stopped to say hi. They spotted me too. Their eyes went wide with surprise, and they waved at me enthusiastically. I wandered over to them, and they immediately surrounded me, looking keen to talk.

"Sir Knight, why are you dressed like that?" one asked.

"I'm on my way back from school," I answered.

Their eyes widened even more, if that were possible.

"Whaaat?!" they cried. It was so loud, I found myself recoiling reflexively. "You're kidding! Sir knight, are you *younger* than us?!"

I just watched as they squealed loudly and talked among themselves, and it occurred to me that the local peasant girls were nothing like the young noblewomen I interacted with at school. If I had to make a comparison, the peasant girls reacted more like the high school girls I'd known in my past life.

I watched on, a smile on my face, until the clamor had died down.

"Would you say 'no' to a younger partner?" I asked, making a lighthearted joke.

"Of course not! It's just...so *unexpected*!"

"You look so dashing in your school uniform!"

I laughed. "Thanks, ladies."

I took in all the praise they heaped upon me, giving them a carefree wink in return. As I let another round of shrill squeals of delight wash over me, I bade them goodbye and continued on my way to the fourth division's station with a spring in my step.

When I entered the station, one of the knights turned to look at me and raised his hand as a greeting. The division commander and vice division commander were also in the station, poring over some documents farther in the back.

"What're you doing here? You're off duty today, aren't you?"

"I just came to collect something I forgot," I explained, giving a nod as I looked over at the table. Isaac's notes were exactly where I'd left them.

Thank God... I'm sure Isaac would never let me hear the end of it if I ever lost his notes.

The knight who'd greeted me watched with a smirk as I picked up the notes.

"You gonna be able to pass all your classes?" he teased.

"Hah hah hah!"

"Hey, it's not something you can just laugh off..." he said with a sigh, looking absolutely done with me.

"He's right, you know. It's no laughing matter for a duke's daughter to go failing her classes and getting held back," added the vice division commander, who'd been watching our exchange. He walked over to us and gave me a light thwack on the head with some rolled-up documents he was holding.

Hey, take it up with Isaac. He's *the one my passing grades are riding on.*

As I shoved the notes into my bag, the older knight opened his mouth to speak.

"Have you eaten yet? You oughta let your senior knights treat you to a meal every once in a while," he said, as if the idea had just come to him.

"Okay, sure. I'll take you up on that."

"I'm coming too," the vice division commander announced as he put on his coat. Then he grabbed his overcoat.

The older knight fished around in his wallet—probably to check that he had enough money to treat us—and called out to the commander, who was now sitting alone at his desk.

"You comin' too, Commander?"

"Well, actually... I'm all set! My lovely wife made me a beautiful lunch!" he replied.

"Yeah, yeah. You enjoy that, then."

"Oh, I will!"

We all ignored the commander's boast (let's just say it wasn't the first time we'd heard it), and left the station.

As we made our way to lunch, I started getting the feeling that someone was watching me. I looked around, and sure enough, the older knight was staring right into my face.

"What's up?" I asked him.

"It just doesn't sit right with me somehow that you're still in school," he said.

"Yeah?"

"I'll bet you look mature for your age."

"Well, I guess you could say that."

Actually, everyone had assumed I was in high school by the time I was twelve years old. Part of that was probably thanks to my height (and my jacked muscles), but I couldn't deny that most people thought I looked older than I really was.

This guy looks pretty young for his age, actually, I thought. But it wasn't so much his physical appearance as it was his sloppy, immature behavior and his unreliable nature.

Just as I was wondering if it was worth saying any of that aloud, the vice division commander gave me a hearty slap on the back.

"Don't you worry. The years'll catch up with you before you know it," he said.

"I believe it, coming from *you*, Vice Commander," said the older knight.

"And don't you worry either, boy. Once the years catch up with you, you'll look *younger* than your age."

"I don't buy that, coming from— Hey, ow?!" the older spat out as the vice division commander lightly jabbed him with the hilt of his sword. I burst out laughing.

"I'm doing just fine for myself, thank you," retorted the vice division commander.

The vice division commander's resting bitch face was the kind of expression that would bring a child to tears. His impressive beard didn't do him any favors in helping him look younger either.

If I was being generous about it, I'd say that he looked "dignified." A less generous interpretation was that it just made him look old. It wasn't really a bad thing, though. Unlike most women, who would prefer to look younger than they really were, it was considered a plus among noblemen to look a bit long in the

tooth.

As we were walking, a child's voice called out, "Mister Knight!"

I turned to see a little girl bounding over to me. I caught her little body in my arms just as she was about to run right into me, held her up, and did a full 360-degree spin.

"Hi there, Ray. It's been a while, huh?" I said, remembering the girl from her familiar hair decoration. I'd helped her back to her mom once when she'd gotten lost, so she'd taken a bit of a shine to me.

Ray's face lit up, and she turned her head to look at a woman running over—probably her mother.

"See? I *told* you it was Mister Knight!" Ray said smugly.

"I'm so sorry for her behavior," her mother said to me.

I held up my hand to stop her. My training had prepared me for plenty, and dealing with a little girl lunging at me was well within my area of competence.

I gently placed Ray back on the ground. She tugged on my sleeve and peered up at me with a quizzical look on her face.

"Hey... Why aren't you wearing your usual clothes?" she asked me.

"'Cause I'm on my way home from school today."

"School?"

"Uh-huh. It's, uh...a place where children of noblemen all go to study," I explained.

I wasn't really sure how much peasant children knew about school in this world, but I hoped that explanation would suffice. Ray just stared at me. Her wide eyes grew even wider, and I saw them sparkle.

"Woooow! You're so cool, Mister Knight!"

I chuckled. "Why, thank you."

"I wanna go to school too when I'm older!" she exclaimed, holding my arm in her hands and swinging it.

I wasn't sure how to respond to that, so I looked to her mother for guidance. She looked a bit troubled too. She wore a smile that held a hint of sadness behind it. We both knew that, since Ray was a peasant, she probably wouldn't have the same privileges I did.

But Ray, who had no idea what was going through the heads of the adults around her, just smiled innocently and said, "Then I can be with you forever and ever, Mister Knight!"

“Now, now, Ray. You don’t wanna get caught up with a cad like Burton,” interjected the older knight, who until now had been taking everything in silently. It was hard to tell if he was trying to help, or if he’d just completely failed to read the room.

Ray looked up at him with a shocked expression. He put up his hands and wiggled his fingers at her, the way he often did when he was trying to scare some sense into a kid.

“You don’t wanna have to compete with the throngs of girls this skirt-chaser goes after, do you? That’s a pretty tough life to choose,” he warned.

What the hell are you saying? Have you forgotten you’re talking to a kid *right now?*

All of us adults broke into an awkward laugh, but Ray just grinned and wrapped her arms around my back.

“I’m your number one, though, right?” she asked.

“Uh-huh?”

“You promised to marry me once I grow up! Remember that, Mister Knight?”

I did no such thing, I thought. *At least…I don’t* think *I did.*

I *did* remember her saying something about wanting to marry me when she grew up, but I didn’t remember how I’d responded. I couldn’t imagine that I’d have said anything that might burden me with some undue responsibility down the line like that, though.

Well, I’m sure I just laughed it off somehow…and I’ll do that again this time too.

“Look, Ray,” I said, “Your mommy’s waiting for you.”

“I don’t wanna go! I wanna stay with *you*, Mister Knight!”

“Well, well… You still haven’t lost that willful streak, have you, Ray?”

I took both her hands in mine and removed them from my back. Then I squatted down so I could look her in the eyes.

“Seems you’ve got a long way to go until you’re a proper grown-up lady,” I said, looking into her silver eyes.

“Huh?”

“But I can’t wait to meet the lovely young lady you turn into.”

I gave her a wink, and she blinked back at me. Then, a deep blush spread across her cheeks. All at once, I was struck by how much she’d grown already. A wink certainly wouldn’t have made her blush before.

“I-I’ll be a good girl!” Ray said.

“Yeah?” I replied, gently stroking her black hair.

“Yeah! See you later, Mister Knight!”

Ray gave me a happy, bashful look before running back to her mother. Her mother gave me a little bow in thanks, and I waved as the two of them went on their way.

I could practically *feel* the older knight’s and the vice division commander’s eyes sticking to me like glue as they watched the whole thing play out.

“You just stole that little girl’s first love,” the vice division commander muttered disapprovingly.

“We’ll have to warn the division commander not to bring his daughter down to the station,” the older knight added.

“Hey, I was just being a gentleman.”

I shrugged my shoulders as if to say, *What’s the big deal?* but the older knight just kept grumbling behind my back.

“You know, you act like a completely different person in front of women,” he said. “Sheesh… What the hell do girls see in a scoundrel like you, anyway?”

“You can take a page from my book, if you want. Can’t promise you’ll win any girls with my techniques, though.”

“You really know how to piss me off…”

“Hey, Burton,” the vice division commander interrupted. “Leave the poor guy alone. I’m starting to feel bad for him.”

“Not you too, Vice Commander!” the older knight cried, stomping in frustration.

Hey, man, we’re just calling it like we see it. You can’t get mad at us for that.

I spotted a diner sign—one that I’d seen before in a game background—and smacked the grumbling knight on the back to get his attention.

“Hey. I’m gonna pick this for our lunch spot,” I said.

“You still think I’m gonna treat you to lunch after everything you just said? You’ve got some nerve…”

“Thanks for your generosity. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too,” the vice division commander chimed in.

“Not you too!”

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“I’m home,” I announced as I returned to the manor.

“Welcome back, Lady Elizabeth,” the head maid replied.

As she took my coat, she began her barrage of questions. “Have you had lunch yet?”

“Yep.”

“And what are your plans for dinner?”

“I’ll be eating at home.”

“Will you be leaving the house again today?”

“Probably just for my evening run.”

Generally, nobles’ servants had their schedules memorized. In my case, though, I often made plans on the fly. The head maid used to chew me out for not “having the decency to at least let her know where.” (I *thought* I had, mind you, but apparently announcing “I’m heading out for a bit” didn’t count.) The solution she’d landed on was to ask me specifically several times a day what my plans were. It was basically part of our routine now.

I headed to my room and changed into some casual attire that would be easy to move around in. Well, I say “casual,” but even an aristocrat’s casual attire is still pretty nice.

It was just after 3 p.m. I had some time to spare and no particular plans, so I decided to head over to the stable and ask the butler-in-training to bring Lady out for me.

I took her over to a corner of the garden and started brushing her hair. The stable hand always took good care of her, so it wasn’t strictly necessary, but I felt it was only proper to look after her myself a bit too—I was the one who rode her, after all.

“You’re looking as beautiful as ever today,” I told her, patting her on the head.

The black mare snorted smugly in response, as if to say, *I know.*

I started off with a hard bristle brush, removing all the dirt; it had the bonus effect of giving her a little massage too. I also picked up her hooves and turned them over to inspect them, even though I already knew they would be nice and clean—I hadn’t taken her out to ride today, so it was only natural.

Then I took the soft bristle brush and followed the direction of her coat. It always looked extra lustrous when I took the time to groom her like this. I laid my head against her soft hair and listened to her heartbeat. There was something oddly soothing about hearing the heartbeat of another creature.

I'd lived here at the manor for as long as I could remember, and even when I'd been just a kid, Lady had already been well along in years. I hadn't yet met any other horse who would let me ride them. *If anything happens to Lady, I might have to resort to riding a bear*, I thought. But I knew only the mythological Kintarou could get away with that.

As I patted her around the neck, I leaned in to tell her, "I need you to live a nice, long life, okay?"

At that, Lady let out a happy whinny.

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After I returned Lady to the stable, I began my daily training. I started off with some light stretches, then I did some box jumps and Bulgarian squats. After that, I grabbed a barbell from the garden shed and did some barbell curls, bent over rows, deadlifts, barbell squats, and dumbbell crunches.

Once I'd finished my regular weightlifting routine, I put the barbell away and took out a wooden sword to do some sword training. The garden had been neatly pruned, so there wasn't much greenery that I could practice my strikes on.

I swung my sword straight down, focusing on my stance and my technique. Even if there was nothing in front of me and I was only using a wooden sword, I liked to imagine that I was cleaving something in two as I swung down again and again.

It was the perfect mental exercise. I just emptied my head and focused on moving my body as efficiently as possible. While I was single-mindedly swinging my sword, I noticed that the sun had suddenly started to set. Night came early in the winter.

Maybe I'll cool down with a light jog to finish for the night? I thought.

I put the wooden sword away and broke into a run, taking the same route I'd taken this morning. I'd never properly measured the distance, but I'd guess that it was about ten kilometers. It definitely didn't seem like a long enough route to be fifteen kilometers, at least. Anyway, my routine was to run the length in roughly thirty minutes at a regular pace.

I watched the evening sun sink below the horizon in the direction of the town as I passed by. This was the perfect time of

year for running. I didn't sweat buckets like I did in the summer, and even though my body was still burning up, the cold air was a nice reprieve.

Naturally, though, I didn't want to catch a chill. So, after I finished my run, I knew I'd need to be careful to wipe off all the sweat. Still, it was better than running in the summer, when the sun's rays beat down on me and the heat made me sluggish. It was a godsend to be spared that.

During times like these, I felt a little envious of everything my past life had had to offer. It would've been nice to be able to run after dark in the summer—the temperature would be cool, and I'd have streetlights illuminating my path.

I returned to the manor still thinking about the luxuries of my past life. The butler-in-training noticed I'd returned and brought me a towel to wipe myself off with.

I carefully wiped off all of the sweat and began to cool down with some postworkout stretches. There was still some time to kill until dinner, so I headed for the bathroom to take a shower.

The servants always made sure to get hot water ready for me so I could enjoy a nice, hot shower whenever I wanted. Whatever luxuries I might've had in my previous life, it was little things like this that made me eternally grateful that I was an aristocrat living in the world of an otome game—even if I had no idea how the hot water situation even worked.

I removed my makeup and washed my hair, letting the hot water run over my body. I got out of the shower feeling refreshed. After toweling my hair dry, I left the bathroom. Next, I put on some lotion, skin serum, and body milk to moisturize. I had to take care of my skin each night if I wanted my makeup to look good the next day.

I must've taken longer than I'd thought, because dinnertime was swiftly approaching. To save time, I cut my stretching and body care down to the bare minimum and headed for the dining room.

My older brother and my parents were out today, so it was just Christopher and me. Our older brother had been pretty busy lately traveling between the duchy and the castle, so he'd been joining us less and less for dinner lately.

Christopher and I talked about all sorts of trivial things as we

ate. Generally, I didn't eat carbs at night, so my dinner consisted mostly of vegetables and protein-heavy foods. It was no exaggeration to say that I had the head chef to thank for keeping me in prime form, since he'd always humored my picky dietary requests.

After Christopher and I enjoyed a postmeal cup of tea together, I headed back to my room, where I resumed the rest of the body care I hadn't had the time to do before dinner. The ladies love a man who takes care of himself, after all. But more than anything, I loved to take the time admiring all the work I'd put into my physique. It also allowed me to check that I hadn't incurred any injuries or fatigue. In a way, it was kind of like grooming a horse.

Once I'd checked that half an hour had passed since dinner had ended, I did my nightly before-bed stretches. I liked to do a lot of dynamic stretches before a workout, but at this hour, gentle, static stretches were more appropriate. Loosening up my body like this helped to take the pressure off my joints and build mobility. It also helped prevent injuries, so it was kind of like killing two birds with one stone.

The Royal Guard knight that I often sparred with was pretty flexible. So much so, in fact, that I couldn't help but think that he'd make a better ninja than a knight. Whenever I thought I'd hit him, he'd managed to dodge me. Conversely, whenever I thought *I'd* managed to dodge him, he'd somehow managed to hit me even harder. Thanks to him, I'd seen the benefits of flexibility firsthand, so I had no excuse to shirk on my own.

Once I'd finished my stretches, I began my meditation. ("Meditation" might give you the wrong idea, though, so let me be more specific: It was more like...image training.) I'd picture a round of combat in as much detail as possible and imagine how I'd fight. It was my way of building a mind-body connection so that I could move before I even had time to think.

As I wondered who I would mentally duel today, I considered all my options. It was kind of like looking at the character selection screen of a fighting game. Yoh had been pissing me off a lot lately, so I figured he'd be a good pick...but he didn't seem all that strong.

I finished my meditation, changed into my pajamas, and climbed into bed. I could never sleep with my socks on, so I took them off and placed them on the bedside table.

I hadn’t been sleeping well lately. I kept waking up in the middle of the night.

I hope I get a good night’s sleep, I thought as I closed my eyes.

It took me only three seconds to fall asleep.

Afterword

The time to say goodbye always comes eventually. Even though I know that's unavoidable, I can't help but feel a bit sad about it.

Even when you think something will never come to an end, it eventually will—whether you're ready for it to or not. When I think about how the time to say goodbye will one day sneak up on me too, it makes me want to live each and every day without regrets.

So, that's why I'd like to wrap things up on a positive note—so I can look back and say, "Well, that was fun!" I don't want to reminisce on my precious memories and have any regrets like "If only I'd done something different" or "Why did things have to turn out like this?" or "What went wrong?"

That's why I always try to make decisions based on this question: "Will I have any regrets if this is where things end?"

I know you're probably wondering why I'm talking about things like endings and regrets right now. Partly, it's because I've had the opportunity to reflect on the topic lately, but that's not the only reason. Bear with me for a bit while I explain.

Back when I was working on volume 2, the editorial department suggested that I end it on a cliff-hanger. You see, volume 3 was still up in the air at the time; we couldn't justify publishing it unless volume 2 sold well enough.

So, how did I respond? I stubbornly insisted I didn't want to do that. After all, volume 2 might very well have been the end of the story. It didn't feel right to tack on a "find out what happens next in volume 3!" at the end when I didn't know if it was even coming.

Thanks to the kindness of the editorial department, who took my selfish request on board, I was able to bring you the version of volume 2 that you now have (and, to anyone who doesn't have it yet, please make sure you get your hands on it!). I do feel bad for Yoh, who wound up being depicted with a generic pictogram in the preview for the third volume thanks to my willfulness. Not that it's any excuse, but I did make sure to give him plenty of screen time in this volume to make up for it.

A big thank you to the illustrator, Hayase Jyun, who more than

made up for Yoh’s plight with the beautiful artwork in this volume. Thank you also to Gucche and Era Ichi, who brought the characters to life in a new world in the manga adaptation. I’d also like to thank the editorial department at TO Books for always standing by my side and putting up with my selfishness. Finally, I’d like to thank you, my readers, for sticking with me all the way until volume 3. I can’t express my gratitude enough. Your support is what’s made this whole series possible.

Now then, if you’re reading this after reading the rest of the book, you’re probably wondering what’s going on. Those of you with a sharp intuition have probably figured it out already.

Since we’ll have to bid each other goodbye for good one day, let’s savor the moments we can still say, “See you next time!”

Until then!







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From Two-Bit Baddie to Total Heartthrob: This Villainess Will Cross-Dress to Impress! Volume 3
by Masamune Okazaki

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