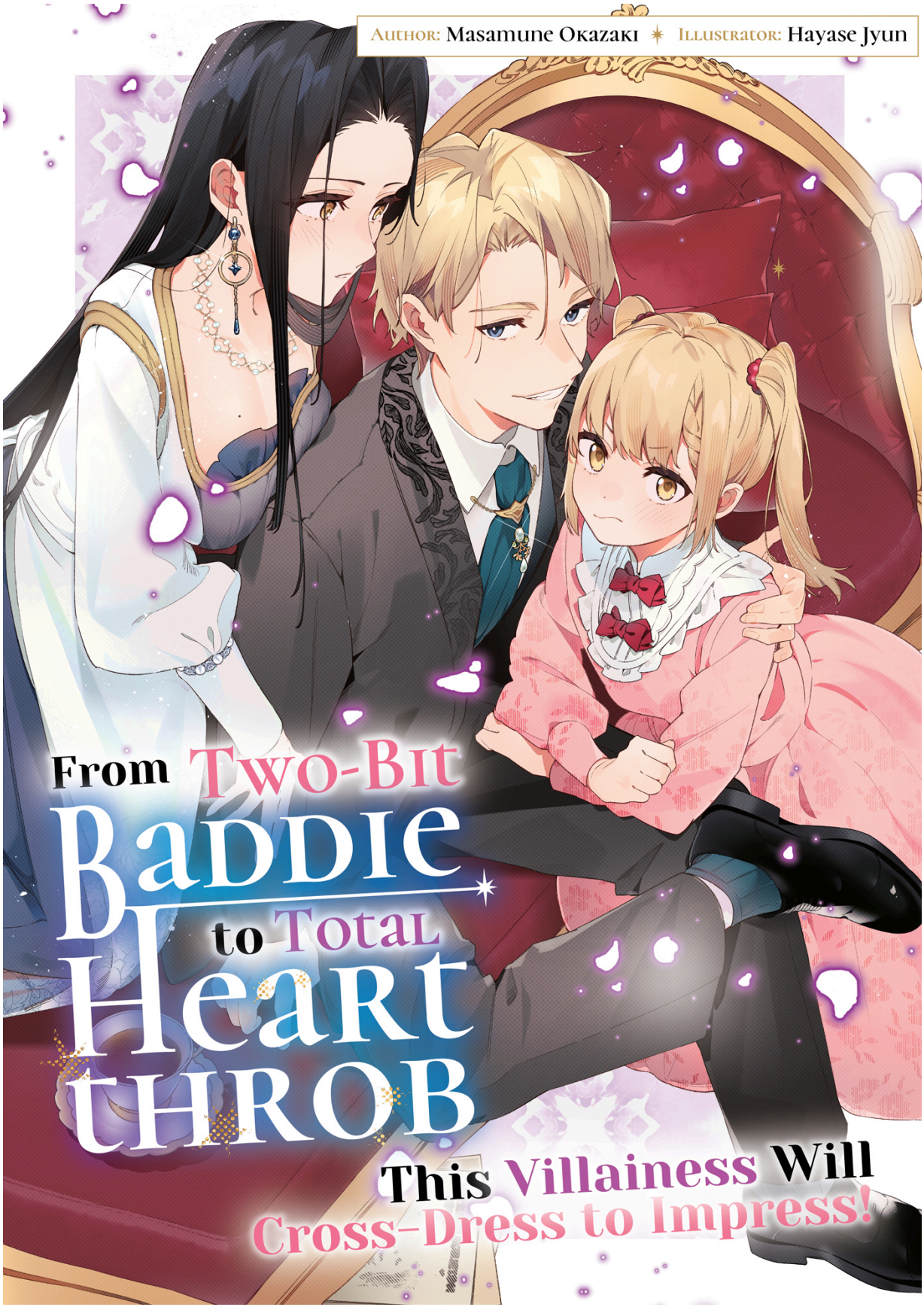
Author: Masamune Okazaki ✦ Illustrator: Hayase Jyun



From Two-Bit Baddie to Total Heartthrob

This Villainess Will Cross-Dress to Impress!

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CHARACTERS

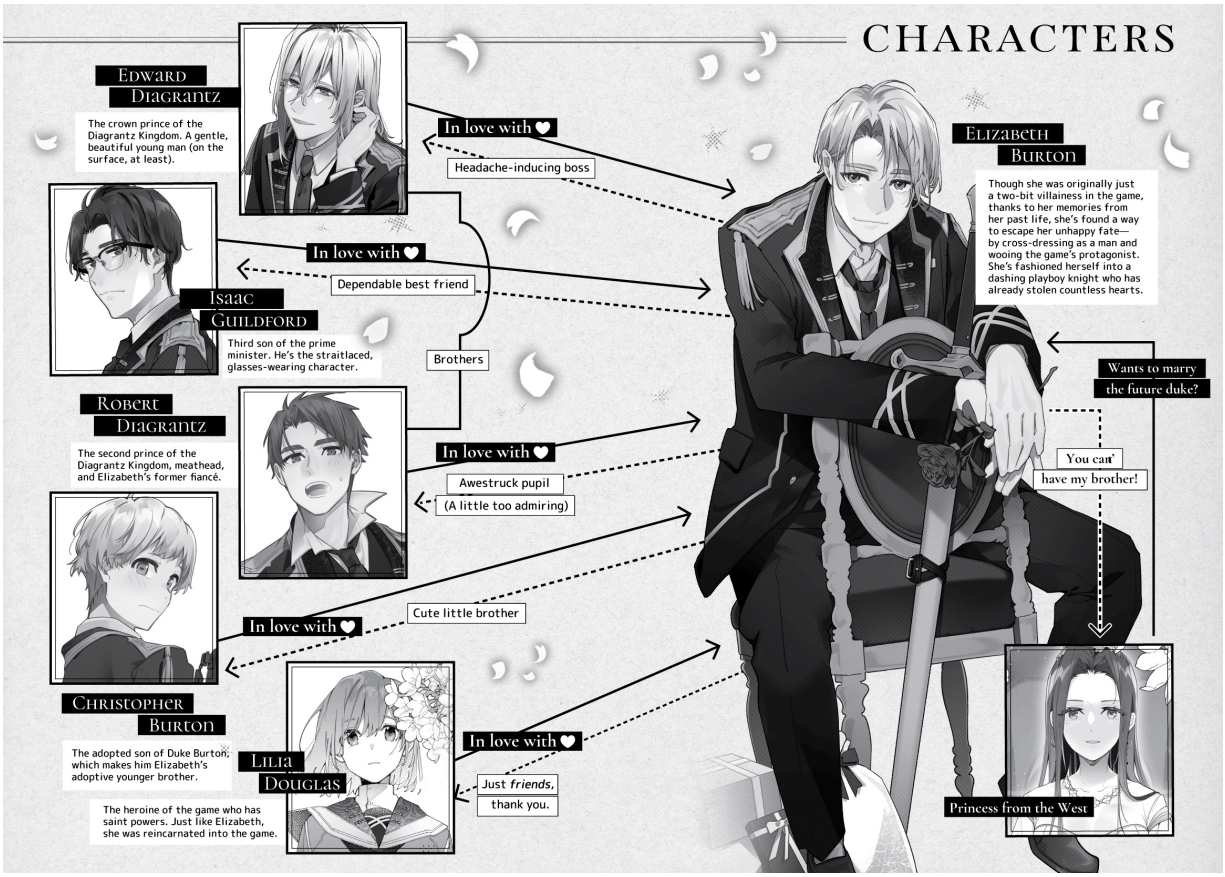

Edward Diagrantz
The crown prince of the Diagrantz Kingdom. A gentle, beautiful young man (on the surface, at least).
In love with ♥
Headache-inducing boss
Isaac Guildford
Third son of the prime minister. He's the straitlaced, glasses-wearing character.
In love with ♥
Dependable best friend
Brothers
Robert Diagrantz
The second prince of the Diagrantz Kingdom, 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.
Wants to marry the future duke?
You can't have my brother!
Princess from the West

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Prologue

I sat across from my older brother at the table as we shared a cup of tea together. It had been a long time since we'd last been able to actually spend some quality time together and chat, so our catch-up today left me feeling even more refreshed than usual.

The game's events had all come to an end now, and I'd begun my third year at school. Nothing much had really changed for me, and honestly, I was grateful for that. I was overjoyed just to be able to live out my life in peace.

There was just one little snag...the main character who had been pursuing me as a romantic interest wasn't too happy with the friendship ending she'd gotten. But hey, aside from that, my life was pretty uneventful.

I'd get up every morning, go for a run, and do some strength training. After that, I'd take a shower, put on my makeup, and head to school for a full day of learning. Once there, I'd chat up the ladies in my fan club and banter with my classmates. Then, if I felt like it, I'd stop by the training grounds—where I worked as an assistant instructor—after school.

After I got home, I'd go for another run, then I'd join my family for dinner. To top it all off, I'd do another round of strength training, take another shower, and head to bed.

On weekends, I'd either go to the training grounds or pick up some patrol work with the knights. Every once in a while, I'd grace one of the egocentric princes or the saint with my company, joining them for a day out.

And...that was pretty much my daily schedule. My life was completely run-of-the-mill. It was exactly how you'd expect an average high schooler to be spending their time.

But when I thought about how hard I'd had to fight to *earn* that peaceful, ordinary life... Well, it was pretty extraordinary, actually.

So, what I'm trying to say is, my peaceful, ordinary life was worth celebrating, and I was grateful every day for it.

"Oh, before I forget, I should let you know that I'll probably be away from home for a little while," my brother suddenly said.

Immediately, I stopped what I was doing—my hand frozen in the air, still holding a cookie—and bombarded him with questions.

"Are you going to the duchy?"

"No. I'll be going to the West."

"For...a diplomatic visit?"

"Well...actually, I've been told that the princess wants my hand in marriage."

The cookie I'd been holding fell right out of my hand.

"Of course, I'm the heir to the Burton house, so Ed and His Majesty have politely told her that that won't be possible, but...she's, um, quite stubborn, apparently. So, I'm going to visit her kingdom to officially decline her proposal in person."

"Don't go," I blurted out. I couldn't help myself. The words left my mouth before I could even think about them.

"L-Lizzie?"

"You *can't* go!" I exclaimed, digging my heels in. "I don't want you to!"

That was the first time in memory that my older brother and I had ever had a fight.



He Refuses to Apologize

Even if I tried to recall the time before I'd regained my memories of my past life, I *still* couldn't remember ever having a fight with my older brother.

We were so far apart in age that we didn't have much to fight about, and besides, I'd always been pretty easygoing and conflict averse when it came to him. We were close, and generally speaking, we'd always gotten along well.

If he ever did get upset with me, I usually deserved it. Pretty much ten times out of ten, I was in the wrong. So, every time that happened, there was only one obvious solution: apologize. My older brother knew that too, which was why any matter of conflict between us was less a "fight" and more a "scolding."

This time, though, it was different.

Maybe it was partially my fault for being so quick to get angry, but *he* had to bear the blame too.

I mean, why did he have to *personally* go all the way to another country just to turn down a proposal? It just didn't make any sense to me. If this princess wanted to marry him, then going there in person to refuse seemed like the worst idea imaginable. There was no way she was just going to let him go on his merry way back home.

My older brother had surely realized that too, and knowing that just made his willingness to go that much harder to stomach.

It was self-sacrificing to the extreme, and there was no honor or virtue in him making a martyr of himself like this. He might have thought that he was just sacrificing himself, but really, it was tantamount to sacrificing the people who cared about him too.

Honestly, it was downright insulting.

I loved my older brother. But my first priority would always be *me*, and I was prepared to fight tooth and nail to make sure that no

harm would come to me. If someone was threatening to do irreparable damage to my life—even if that person was my beloved older brother—then I wasn't about to lie down and take it.

Besides, my older brother was always fretting over Christopher and me. Wasn't it a little unfair to say *I* wasn't allowed to fret over *him*?

It reeked of a double standard, and if you asked me, it certainly wasn't befitting of the title he was to inherit. After all, the Honorable Duke had a reputation to uphold of always treating people equally and fairly, regardless of their station. He was also known to do what people asked of him and say exactly what they wanted to hear.

So much for that...

I was pissed. And, unlike my older brother, I'd been born with a short fuse. It wasn't just my older brother that I was pissed at either. I was pissed at my parents too, for failing to talk him out of this.

I even was pissed at the royal family for their ineptitude. Why hadn't *they* been able to sort this out? I mean, the king was basically the boss, right? And when problems arose, it was the boss's job to take accountability for them. If an apology needed to be issued, then it was on the boss to go and make it. No respectable company would ever put a lowly employee in the line of fire.

Honestly, royalty that couldn't sort shit out themselves had no right to complain about being labeled incompetent. I mean, what gave them the right to dress up in glamorous clothes and sit on some fancy-ass throne if they couldn't even do their jobs?

I couldn't for the life of me see why my older brother and my father were holding their tongues about this. Wasn't it their duty to call the royal family out when they screwed up and to set them on the right path?

If the royal family only existed to warm a fancy-shmancy throne with their lazy butts, then did we really even need them?

I couldn't speak for the rest of my family, but personally, I wasn't much of a patriot, and I wasn't especially loyal to the monarchy either. In my eyes, a nation was basically just a box for all the people who lived in it, and royalty was just a decorative flourish. Or, to try another metaphor, the royal family was like the pandas at the

zoo: They were just there to bring in the visitors.

If I was loyal to anything, then it was to my family and to the place I grew up. But it wasn't to the kingdom. As far as I was concerned, I just happened to live here.

And if I couldn't protect my brother, then there was no point in the box we called a kingdom, and no point in the pandas we called royalty. At least, not to *me*.

"Lady Elizabeth," the head maid said, snapping me back to reality. She was looking up at me with a concerned expression on her face.

"Oh. Sorry. Guess I spaced out for a second there."

"Please, don't do anything rash."

"Anything rash"? I repeated in my head, incredulous. *You think* I'm *the one being rash here?* She was clearly confused.

Was it reasonable for me to be so angry about this? Well...yes, actually. I kind of *needed* to act quickly, because my older brother was about to be kidnapped and locked away in some foreign country.

But the head maid could hardly call me "rash" when I was just standing around doing nothing. If anything, it was much more fair to say I was taking my time hashing everything out.

I grabbed my jacket, the gears in my head beginning to turn as I calmly planned out my next move.

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I hopped onto a familiar rooftop.

It was my first time entering the building from above, but I'd come through the front door several times, so I had a pretty good idea where to find the room I was looking for. I hopped down and crawled along the wall. Then I found a window and knocked on it.

After a few moments, the curtains opened and someone appeared at the window.

It was the dead of night, which meant that my knock wasn't going to be answered by any servants or family members.

Perfect. Just as planned.

But after I waited for a few minutes, the window still didn't open.

Maybe she doesn't realize I'm here? I thought. I was waiting a little bit above the window, so it might not have been obvious enough. *Well, looks like I've got no choice... Guess I'll have to do this the hard way.*

I grabbed the window and tore it off of the wall.

"Huh?" came a flustered voice, as if it were the background music accompanying my feat, as I slipped through the new hole in the wall.

The voice belonged to Lilia—whose bedroom I'd just broken into—and she'd fallen over backwards in shock. I plopped the window down onto the floor in her room and turned to face her, waving my hand in front of her wide-eyed face.

"Hey, Lilia. Come with me for a sec," I said.

"*Huuuuh?!*"

As she cried out in shock, she scooted backwards on her butt away from me.

Whoa, hey. Not so loud, I thought. It was going to be a real pain if the baron's servants came to investigate.

Lilia scooted all the way back to the wall behind her as her expression transformed from one of shock to one of pure terror. Her mouth flapped open and closed wordlessly.

For a while, the only sound in the room was of breathing. Then, finally, she let out another shrieking exclamation.

"I-I can't believe the girl I like just *climbed through my window*! Am I in a dating game, or a horror movie?!"

Seriously, not so loud! Besides, isn't this classic otome game fare? I feel like this happens in shojo manga all the time too. Can't you act like a normal protagonist and just let out a quiet, graceful squee or something?

She remained firmly seated on the floor, unmoving. I reached my hand out to her again.

"Come on, let's just go," I said.

"Hang on, um...what's going on?"

"Look... I've actually got a pretty short fuse, okay? And I haven't been *this close* to blowing up in a long time. But when I let my guard down, I lose my cool. So let's hurry up and get moving before

I start resorting to using force."

"Before you lose your cool?" Lilia repeated, on the verge of hysteria. "I think breaking into someone's house through their window is a pretty good indicator that you've already well and truly lost that, actually."

She was just getting started. A litany of grievances followed as she went on and on about little stuff that didn't even matter, like "Do you have any idea how high up we are?" and "You didn't have to break my window, you know!"

I mean, she *lived* here, so if anyone ought to know how high up we were, it was her, right? Dunno why she had to ask *me*, especially when we were kind of in a hurry.

"Lilia," I said, looking into her eyes.

She clammed up instantly, and instead of yet another complaint escaping her lips, she let out a swooning sigh.

"Come."

"Okee ♡" was her instantaneous reply. I swore I could see hearts swimming in her eyes. Then she muttered something that sounded like "I love it when you're forceful, Ellie...♡"

What happened to that terrified expression you were just wearing? I wondered. She seemed to be suffering from some *serious* mood swings.

Shaking that thought from my head, I picked Lilia up and stepped up onto the base of the hole in the wall where, up until just a few minutes ago, there had been a window.

"Hey, so..." I began, as I eyeballed the distance between us and the place I was aiming to land. "When we get to my place, can you use your 'Auto Revive' on my dad?"

"H-Huh?" Lilia replied, clearly only just rousing from her daze.

"Auto Revive" was the fancy, RPG-like name for Lilia's newfound skill. Although it wasn't exactly clear to me if the people she used it on were temporarily saved from their deaths or if they actually became *immortal*.

I'll cross that bridge when I get to it, I guess...

"I don't want to have his death on my conscience, y'know?"

"*E-Ellie!* That's barbaric!" Lilia screeched, turning up the volume

again *way* more than necessary.

I couldn't let her keep using her outdoor voice indoors like this—not unless I wanted everyone in the manor to come running up to her room to see what all the commotion was about. We needed to get out of here.

"What kind of mess are you dragging me into, exactly?! I'm scared!"

To the tune of Lilia's shrieking, I leaped into the night sky.

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Holding Lilia in the crook of my arm, I lifted my other arm to knock on my father's study door. Just as I did, though, it flew open.

"Father," I said.

"Elizabeth," he replied, wearing a sullen look on his face. "His Highness is here with me. Let's talk later."

I cocked my head.

When I scanned his study, sure enough, I spotted the beautiful, silver-haired young prince sitting on his sofa. He was wearing the public-facing smile he reserved for official business.

The last time I'd seen him had been on graduation day. Thinking back to that day immediately revived memories of the little "joke" he'd played on me. I shook my head lightly, willing the memories to go away.

I put Lilia down and gave the crown prince a chivalrous bow. I could hear the rustle of Lilia bending into ladylike curtsy behind me. Then, with Edward's permission, we both stood up straight again.

"Hello, Lizzie."

"Your Highness," I regarded him. "To what do we owe the honor? Has something happened?"

At this, he and my father exchanged meaningful looks.

The crown prince didn't exactly visit the home of palace advisors every day. What's more, the small coterie of his personal guard hovering in the corner of the room seemed to be even more on alert than usual—at least, that's how it seemed to me.

It felt only reasonable to conclude that *something* was afoot.

"Indeed it has. And if we don't move quickly, we may find ourselves in quite a situation," Edward said, in the most roundabout way possible, as he recrossed his legs. It was like he was trying to show off how long they were.

It all felt a bit silly, considering I was already well aware of how long his legs were—or rather, how *short* he looked when he was seated.

"I'm to visit the West on urgent business," he explained.

At the mention of the West, I raised an eyebrow. My father, who must have just explained the situation to Edward, was now quietly listening to the crown prince with rapt attention.

"I'll need an escort, of course... But since this visit is rather last minute, there hasn't been time to secure the numbers I need. So, you see, I was thinking it might work rather well if *you* were to accompany me. I came here today to meet with the duke and get his permission before asking you."

"An escort?" I repeated.

"Yes. Now, naturally, it would reflect quite poorly on the kingdom for me to have a woman in my escort. But here's a thought...perhaps you could pretend to be *Frederic*? I would very much appreciate it if you could accompany me in his stead," Edward replied, putting a special emphasis on my older brother's name as he shot me a meaningful look.

Aha... I see what's going on here now.

My older brother was the crown prince's right-hand man, and I knew the support he provided was invaluable. What's more, his training ensured that he would be prepared to continue providing that support, including after Edward acceded to the throne. Edward would have been every bit as reluctant to lose him as I was.

He'd probably surmised that I was also opposed to my brother's visit to the West, and he'd come to recruit me as an ally to his cause. On the surface, our kingdom would be complying with the West's request, but Edward and I would be coordinating an effort to ensure that they didn't kidnap my older brother.

As far as I could tell, that was probably the long and short of it.

Honestly, this was perfect. If I could disguise myself as my older

brother and infiltrate the enemy camp, that would give us ample opportunity to quash the princess's designs on him. I'd be able to nip her little romance in the bud well before it had the chance to blossom.

What's more, the request for my assistance came as a royal decree. As a lowly aristocrat, I had no choice but to comply—and that was also true of my father. I was accompanying Edward to the West, whether my father liked it or not.

I had a feeling he wouldn't be all that torn up about it, though. After all, he'd poured an awful lot of love and resources into raising my older brother as his heir. Surely he wouldn't be too keen to just hand him over to another country, right?

So, in that sense, we were probably all on the same page here.

I exchanged a momentary glance with my father. Then I turned to face Edward, and gave him a nod.

"Your wish is my command, Your Highness," I said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Lilia standing there looking like one of those space cat memes. She was the only one in the dark, completely oblivious to what was happening. But I just ignored her.

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"Your Highness!" I called, running over to Edward as he made his way back to his carriage.

A knight from his personal guard was hovering by the carriage's entrance. He regarded me with an annoyed expression, raising his eyebrow ever so slightly. I figured he was probably still nursing a grudge from the way I'd treated him the other day, when I'd roughed him up a bit to try to get out of one of the crown prince's summons.

"I just wanted to say thank you."

"Actually, I—"

"I'm genuinely so grateful that you're the future ruler of this kingdom," I interjected.

"What?"

I knelt down on one knee and took his hand in mine. Then I planted a soft kiss on the back of it.

Honestly, if he'd been anyone but the crown prince, I probably would have just hugged him or joyfully tossed him up into the air.

Thanks to his quick wit, I now had an opportunity to visit the West without having to leave a trail of destruction in my wake. And that wasn't all—he'd even thrown in a little bonus with his scheme to have me impersonate my brother. I knew that would give me just the opening I needed.

Worst-case scenario, I'd been fully prepared to use force, if necessary, to compel my father to let me travel to the West alone (a journey which might *also* have necessitated the use of force) to "negotiate." This was obviously a way, *way* better outcome, though.

Looks like all those brownie points I scored with him are finally paying off, I thought.

I knew he wasn't doing this because he felt like he owed me anything, though, and that this probably wasn't for *me*. I was fully aware that he was just using me to make sure that the West didn't get its hands on my older brother—and I was perfectly happy to let him use me for that.

No matter what his reasons were, this was a real godsend, as far as I was concerned. It was more than enough to make up for the shenanigans he'd pulled at the graduation ceremony, so I was happy to put that behind us now.

Edward opened and closed his mouth, looking like he wanted to say something. I just gave him a cheerful smile in return.

He didn't have to say anything. I knew just what he was thinking, because his face said it all. It was obvious that he wanted to put up a front of not giving anyone special treatment, but even the impartial crown prince couldn't help going the extra mile for my older brother. Honestly, I was a little impressed. It just went to show that the Honorable Duke was on a whole other level.

"Really, though... I never would have thought that you'd go *this* far for my older brother," I remarked.

"What? No, I—"

"I understand how essential he is to the future of the kingdom, of

course, and I'm sure his support is invaluable to you personally, as crown prince. But I never knew that your friendship for him ran this deep. I'll have to reassess my opinion of you."

Edward fell silent as he looked at me. I could feel that he was starting to shoot daggers at me with his eyes, but I figured it was probably just an attempt to cover up his embarrassment.

With a smile on my face, I continued. "You and I share the same goal right now: We don't want to let the West have my older brother. That makes us partners in crime. So, if there's anything you need, just say the word. I'm here to help."

"*You're* here to help?" he repeated, his tone incredulous.

Actually, it had gone beyond incredulity; it was almost like he suspected I had some kind of ulterior motive.

I couldn't help but feel offended. *Hello? I'm just trying to be nice here?*

Honestly, though, it was hard to blame him for his skepticism. I'd grudgingly agreed to run errands for him plenty of times, but I rarely ever *willingly* offered my help. No wonder he was so suspicious.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," he said, after a pause. "Because as it just so happens, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Anything you want, consider it done," I replied, laying it on thick.

He gave me the same placid, princely smile he always wore.

"The second princess is determined to marry me. Can I entrust you to deal with her for me?"

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"So, there you have it. That's why I need you to come with me," I said, giving Lilia a winning smile.

"'There I have it'? I don't think I've got *anything*, actually..." she replied, puffing her cheeks out in a pout and turning her head away from me.

As an apology for breaking into her bedroom in the dead of night last night, I'd invited her over for tea. On top of suddenly forcing her to come back to the Burton manor with me, I'd left her all alone while I'd run off to talk to Edward. Then, after not even making use

of her, I'd sent her off back home. Apparently, she'd been pretty ticked off.

She'd happily come over when I'd invited her today, though, so I figured she couldn't still be all *that* mad.

I didn't want to let the West have my older brother. That being said, I had to tread carefully. It wouldn't be wise to do anything while I was impersonating him that would unduly damage his or our family's reputation.

Best-case scenario, I'd somehow get this Western princess to say, "You know what, never mind..." without my brother's political reputation taking a hit. And there was only one idea I'd managed to come up with that seemed like a good way to accomplish that.

"Okay, here's my idea: When I'm impersonating my brother, I'll do everything I can to make him seem like a next-level Lothario."

"A what?"

"Just think about it for a second. What kind of princess would want to marry a guy who goes around with a smirk that says, 'Yeah, I've pretty much slept with every woman in the kingdom'?"

"It...*is* pretty hard to imagine anyone going for that..." Lilia agreed.

I nodded slowly, as if to say, *Right?*

Sure, there were countries out there that practiced polygamy, but pretty much *every* woman wanted to feel like she was the favorite. And there were plenty of women out there who hated nothing more than the kind of womanizer who had *several* favorites.

This princess had clearly realized what a catch my older brother was. It seemed reasonable to conclude that she had a better head on her shoulders than the women in this kingdom, who put looks above everything else. So, surely she was sensible enough to be put off when I made a show of his supposed womanizing ways?

Even if the West's women were unimpressed, though, a reputation like that would only be a badge of honor among the kingdom's men. My older brother would probably turn into the stuff of legends, and he'd likely earn his fair share of envy too. But, hey, that wasn't the end of the world.

Since our world was based on medieval Europe, only men were

allowed to inherit a duke's title, and, typically, only men were allowed to participate in the political sphere. As outrageous as a label like "next-level Lothario" was, I knew that it would probably have a much smaller impact on his future than you might have expected.

So, with that in mind, I decided to go full steam ahead. There would be no point if I half-assed it, after all.

"I'm fully prepared to seduce every single woman in the West—other than the princess, of course," I boldly declared.

"Um, Ellie? Remember how you went all out just to seduce me? And that was just *one* girl," Lilia said. "If you really commit to this, you're going to be in for a lot of trouble. You're practically asking for someone to stab you."

"I can't seduce all of them at once, obviously. So, in the meantime, I figure it'll make the worst first impression possible if I show up with a cute girl in tow. That's where you come in."

"So...you're sacrificing *me* up to get stabbed?"

"Shouldn't be a problem if you use your Auto Revive skill, right?"

"So you *are* sacrificing me!" she screeched.

I ignored her, bringing my cup of tea up to my lips for another sip.

I really didn't see what the big deal was. It wasn't like she was going to die if someone stabbed her, and besides, she could just heal herself right away, right?

"This is *completely* out of character! Ellie would *never* seduce anyone but me!" Lilia protested.

"Says the girl who *completely* misread my character..."

"Hey! That's not fair!"

"Come on, you totally set yourself up for that."

As Lilia banged on the table, I caught a glimpse of the head maid standing in wait in the corner of the room. There was a threatening spark in her eye.

Now you've done it. Not my fault if you get told off for that...

Typically, the apprentice butler would be the one to look after me in my day-to-day affairs. But Lilia's visits were...a *special* exception. Her charm had a bad habit of turning the apprentice butler into a

slobbering, smitten mess, so the head maid had slowly started taking over for him until she naturally became the servant in charge of attending to us.

The head maid, being who she was, couldn't help but speak up when Lilia was behaving in an especially unladylike way. She would step in to give Lilia a lecture or an etiquette lesson from time to time, prefacing it with a polite "Pardon me, but..." or "With all due respect, Miss Lilia..."

Funnily enough, Lilia didn't even really seem to mind, so I'd just watch the lectures and lessons unfold quietly. Besides, it wasn't like *I* had any room to weigh in. Among the Burtons, my opinion mattered about as much as that of the shrubbery in front of our house.

And if I butted in with an unhelpful comment, then it sure wasn't going to make any of the lectures stop. If anything, *I'd* probably find myself on their receiving end too.

No thanks...

As I was reflecting on that, it suddenly occurred to me that I could be putting Lilia's charm to use here.

"Hey, I know. I'll seduce the ladies, and you can take care of the men. I bet we could seduce the entire country between the two of us."

"Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?!"

"Don't worry. If anyone can do it, it's us. We can overcome any barriers."

"Under different circumstances, I would kill to hear those lines! But *this* isn't the time for them!" Lilia cried, banging on the table again. If she kept this up, I had a bad feeling that she might just break the table in two.

The head maid cleared her throat loudly. Catching her drift, Lilia immediately got up and sat back down in her chair again obediently.

Good call.

Then, as if she were speaking to herself, she said, "Sometimes I think, 'Why are you like this?' But I think I know why, actually. It's because no one ever tried to stop you, isn't it?"

"Sure they did. Plenty of people tried to stop me from dressing as a man."

Lilia's eyes grew unfocused, as if she were staring far into the distance. "Okay, let me amend that: No one ever *managed* to stop you."

Honestly, I almost never sat down with anyone and said, "Here's what I'm planning to do. What do you think?" So it wasn't really anyone's fault, per se, that they had never managed to stop me.

Of course, it wasn't *my* fault either.

I liked to act before thinking. It was kind of just the way I was. I'd gotten this far on that philosophy, and I'd probably keep it up until the day I died. I'd save the regrets for later.

"All jokes aside, just imagine what this kingdom would be like without my older brother. Everything would fall apart," I said.

"You sure you don't just mean that *you'd* fall apart?" Lilia retorted, giving me the stink eye.

I sighed, refusing to dignify her question with an answer either way.

Well... Can't hurt to just give this a try, right? I'll just think of it as a dry run, I thought, reaching across the table to put my hand over Lilia's.

"Hey, Lilia... Come with me."

"Nngh..."

"Come on, how often do you get to travel to another country? Besides...I'd have a lot more fun if you were there with me."

I looked deep into her eyes as I intertwined my fingers with hers and watched a deep blush spread across her face. She looked about ready to start venting some steam out of her cowlick.

I felt like I almost had this in the bag, so I doubled down. I put on my best superficial smile (the kind the ladies go crazy for) and gave her a pleading look, cocking my head a little bit.

"Leave the baron to me, okay? I'll talk him into letting you go. Just please, come with me."

"Those puppy dog eyes of yours...are *so* unfair..." Lilia muttered, with a long sigh.

She made it sound like I was cheating by leaning on my looks, and honestly, I resented the accusation. I'd *worked* for my muscles and handsome features. They were products of years' worth of time

and effort. What was so wrong about putting all that hard work to use?

"This is...so unfair...nnngh! How does she do that? It's...*so* unfair! Gaaah! Stupid, sexy Ellie..."

"You do realize that you're saying all of that out loud, right?"

I couldn't take it anymore; I burst out laughing. It was too funny hearing her vent like that. She had no right to bad-mouth Robert when she was more of a sucker than he could ever be.

"How 'bout this?" I tried. "If you come with me, I'll buy you anything you want."

"You...aren't going to offer to *do* anything I want?"

"Please. I know better than to say *that*," I said, shrugging.

"Tch!"

Honestly, I was too afraid to even ask what she had in mind.

After a bit of pouting, she finally muttered, "Fine... A dress, then."

"Come again?"

"I'll go with you if you buy me a dress."

"Is that...gonna fly with the baron? I don't want him coming after me," I said hesitantly.

"Please, Ellie! Gift me a dress that you'll want to rip off of me!"

"Okay, now you're just making this even harder."

Some things are best kept to yourself, Lilia...

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I'd successfully gotten Lilia's buy-in now, which was a real win. This way, if things *really* went south, at least I wouldn't have to worry about getting seriously injured. Of course, that didn't mean *other people* weren't at risk of getting injured. Anyway, once that was settled, I went over the plans for our assault on the West (or rather, our visit).

Our trip was coming up in a mere two weeks. We didn't really have time to be kicking back and taking it easy.

Since we had to work around Edward's tight schedule, we were set to visit the West not even a month after our latest little diplomatic "incident." It would have been plenty of time to prepare

for any normal trip, but considering that this was an official visit from the crown prince, it was all a bit rushed.

"Um, I'm not quite sure how to say this, but...are you getting...*bigger*, Ellie?"

"Sure am," I agreed.

Ever since the game's timeline had ended and I'd realized that I didn't need to impress the ladies anymore, well...I'd kind of let myself go, honestly.

It had all started when I lifted the restrictions on my strength training.

I'd had a lot of free time over spring break, so I'd been going up into the mountains and wrestling with bears. I was basically living the kind of lifestyle you'd read about in old-timey Japanese legends, and I'd bulked up pretty substantially from it.

I was no beefcake bodybuilder, but I was definitely a step up from the "toned but lean" archetype that I used to slot into.

"It's time to get back in my prime," I told her.

"In your prime?"

"Uh-huh. Back to the shape I was in when I seduced you."

If I was using my popularity with girls as a yardstick, then that was definitely my prime.

I didn't know how much progress I'd be able to make in under a month, but I had to try. So, I swallowed my tears and eased up on my daily strength training. I took it easy at the training grounds too, and I even cut back on the protein I'd been so diligent about eating every meal.

From what I'd heard, I could expect results within about three weeks—superficially, at least. Apparently, that was the span of time it took to lose the water weight and glycogen that gave weightlifters that signature beefy look.

All I could do was pray that I'd start to see those results in two weeks' time.

"I've even been toying with the idea of growing out a beard," I said. "I kinda doubt I'll make it in time for our trip, though."

"You know, Ellie...most people in your position would be growing their hair out, not thinking of growing a *beard*."

"Well, life's gotten a lot easier for me now that I don't have to worry about my character archetype overlapping with the other love interests," I mused, grabbing my bangs and holding them up to the light.

Ever since the game's timeline had ended, I'd found myself wanting to cut my hair a little bit shorter and shorter each time I got a haircut. At this point, it was back to the length I'd had it when I first started at the academy.

The best part about that was that it took no time at all to make it presentable now. And since it was so short, I didn't have to worry about anyone rebuking me for my "R-rated expression" whenever I didn't feel like combing it out.

Once I'd figured that out, there had been nothing stopping me from keeping it short anymore. And, if I might say so myself, I looked pretty good with short hair. Plus, it dried quickly, so washing it was no big deal. Really, there were pretty much no downsides.

If I *had* to pick one, I guess I'd have to admit that it bothered me a little to have the same hairstyle as Robert. Oh, all right... Honestly? It *really* bothered me. I was still in the process of trying to find one that didn't look exactly the same as his.

"Sis!" Christopher called, barging into the parlor room. He was out of breath, like he'd been running.

"Christopher? What's up?"

"I'm coming with you on your trip to the West!" he declared, taking ragged breaths through his nose.

I'd kind of figured that I'd be assigned a chaperone, but I'd expected the apprentice butler or someone like him. Worst-case scenario, I'd thought they might send my nemesis, the head maid, off with me. I certainly hadn't been expecting *Christopher*, especially considering that the trip would require him to take time away from school. I couldn't imagine my father being on board with that.

"There's no telling what could happen if you go there on your own, sis. Plus, father told me to keep an eye on you."

Busted...

It seemed my family was onto me. And, to be fair, the apprentice butler would have had a hell of a time trying to stop me.

My father and I might have been on the same page with our goals, but apparently he didn't trust me not to make a fool of myself.

Lilia watched in silence as Christopher and I spoke. Then she piped up and asked, "So... Does that mean your older brother will be staying home, then?"

"Well... Yeah, I guess so," I replied, rubbing the back of my neck.

Lilia must have noticed my slightly sheepish tone, because she peered up into my face probingly.

"Have you not made up yet?"

For a moment, I was silent. Averting my gaze, I conceded.

"No..." Then, in an almost-whisper, I added, "Actually, things between us have only gotten *worse* since I hatched this plan."

My older brother had been vigorously opposed to the whole idea of me going on the crown prince's visit to the West. He'd tried everything to convince our father not to let me go, telling him that he couldn't let me do this for him, that he ought to come along since it would be dangerous, and that I might have to repeat my last year at school if my grades took a hit.

For once, my father actually took *my* side. It was actually really, *really* weird. I mean, this was the kind of bizarre, cataclysmic twist that would only happen if hell froze over. I was grateful that my father was so dismissive of my brother's concerns, but hearing about the points my brother had made only pissed me off even more.

Give me a break, I'd wanted to say.

For starters, I wasn't doing this for *him*. I was doing it for *me*. And if it was so dangerous for me to visit the West, then wouldn't it be dangerous for him to visit too? When it came to dealing with physical threats, I was actually going to be way more effective than he was, anyway.

If risk management was the goal, then I was the obvious candidate for this trip.

As for his final concern, well...having to repeat a year wasn't going to kill me. If even Isaac gave up on me, then, worst-case scenario, at least I could graduate with Christopher.

Christopher gave Lilia a pained smile as he looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Sis always freaks out and folds whenever big brother gets angry, but I guess she's being stubborn this time," he explained to her.

"Can you blame me? He refuses to apologize."

"See what I mean?" he added, shrugging.

Christopher always seemed to treat me like I was a handful. I couldn't help but wonder if that was part of his attempt to imitate our older brother.

If he was accompanying me to the West, though, then that made him every bit as guilty as I was.

If our older brother thought he had his hands full before, they were *really* full now.

"You don't want him to get shipped off west either, do you?" I asked Christopher.

"Of course not," he replied, pulling out a chair so he could sit next to me.

As he sat down, he peered into my eyes.

"But I'm also worried about *you*, sis."

"Well, you don't need to worry about me. I plan to resolve all of this peacefully, honest."

"That's not what I'm worried about."

He kept staring into my eyes, his gaze boring into me.

Whenever he lowered his eyelids over his honey-colored eyes, his ridiculously long eyelashes looked extra pronounced. And it wasn't just that they were long; they all curled upwards too. His lashes were so beautiful, honestly, it was enough to make someone jealous.

"What if the princess takes an interest in *you*, sis? I'm worried she won't let you go home."

"No, that's not gonna happen—"

"I-I can picture that all too easily, actually..." Lilia interjected, agreeing.

"Hey, Lilia! Not helping!"

I sighed.

She'd never even *met* this princess, so how could she even picture that? Was she just envisioning some shadow woman? Honestly, that just made it sound like some kind of crime scene replay.

Jeez... Seriously, do you guys have that little faith in me?

"If she falls for me, she's falling for *our older brother*. I'm specifically making this trip to make sure that doesn't happen, remember?" I said.

At this, Christopher and Lilia just fell into a silence as they stared at me with blank looks.

Hey, come on. Why're you looking at me like that?

I glared back at them defiantly.

As I was looking at them, though, it dawned on me that even the vacant looks in their eyes couldn't undo just how *cute* they were. They were both so hopelessly adorable that it made you want to do anything you could to protect them. Even in an otome game chock-full of good-looking people, they easily took the top two spots at our school. There was honestly no contest.

I didn't know what kind of woman this Western princess was, but it seemed unlikely that she'd have any chance to play up her beauty when I had *them* in tow.

"Hey, I know," I said, clapping my hands as an idea came to me suddenly. "You know what would look *really* bad? If I showed up with a little sister and acted like I was obsessed with her."

"What?"

"How do you feel about the name 'Christine'? No... What about 'Christina'?"

Christopher regarded me with wide eyes. Then, after a beat, he seemed to finally catch my drift.

With a clatter, he shot up from his chair.

"No *way*! You can't make me do that!" he screeched.

My eyes grew wide in shock. I couldn't believe that my sweet-natured, quiet little brother was making such a scene.

Christopher shook his head vigorously.

"I'm *not* dressing up as a girl!"

"Don't worry, no one will ever figure out that you're a boy. Promise."

"That just makes it worse!"

"C'mon, I'll pick out a cute dress for you, okay?"

"Over. My. Dead. Body."

He was clearly not going to budge on this. His face was bright red, and his clenched fists were shaking at his sides.

Honestly, I hadn't expected him to be *this* against the idea. He'd seemed perfectly happy to wear a dress at last year's dance. Why the dramatic change of heart?

That's when it hit me: Maybe he was just embarrassed to agree to this in front of Lilia? She *was* his older sister's friend, and I knew that carried a special weight for adolescent boys. Plus, he was at that "special age" when nothing mattered more than girls' opinions of him.

I'd been pretty proud of my idea, but since Lilia was going to be coming with us on the trip, it seemed unlikely that I'd ever get him on board with it.

Anyway, worst-case scenario, I could always just pretend that he was my cross-dressing little sister. My older brother *did* in fact have a cross-dressing little sister (i.e., me), so that was actually a pretty realistic lie. Honestly, people were more likely to believe that *Christopher* was a cross-dressing girl than that I was.

"Sis... You're cooking up another scheme, aren't you?" he said, eyeing me warily.

I flashed him the most innocent-looking smile I could manage.

"Come on. Don't be so paranoid."

Just Doing My Job

The day of our departure had finally arrived.

The journey would take roughly a week to ten days, including rest stops at towns along the way, and we planned to spend up to two months at our destination.

Travel in this world was a much bigger deal than it had been in my previous life, largely owing to the fact that it was done by horse-drawn carriage. Plus, having a VIP like the crown prince in tow made our journey quite the to-do. Then there was the *weather* factor, which threatened to hold us up and delay us from arriving at our scheduled time. The whole thing made me yearn for the days that I could just jump on the Shinkansen and expect to arrive at my destination on the dot.

Just for your reference, it took about three days to send a package to our destination (although it could take longer for oversized packages). So, if we really committed to getting there as fast as we could, switching out our horses at stops along the way, we probably could've made it there in three days too.

We'd be missing school for the duration of our visit, obviously, but since the trip was classified as "official business," our absences were excused. We'd be required to take supplemental lessons to make up for what we missed, but it was honestly a pretty magnanimous arrangement. Apparently, attendance requirements didn't mean squat in the face of a royal decree.

As I gazed out the carriage window, Lilia cocked her head and looked at me.

"Are you pouting, Ellie?" she asked me. "You seem upset."

"Well, yeah. My brother didn't come to see us off today," I said, turning to look at her.

"Aww... It's sweet that you're sulking about that."

"I'm not sulking. I'm just pissed, okay?"

I whipped my head back to look out the window again.

The carriage had begun to move. Christopher sat beside me, and Lilia sat across from us. It was a hard-won seating arrangement.

After leaving the family manor, we'd come to the baron's to pick her up. Christopher had already been sitting next to me, but she'd wanted to sit next to me too and she'd demanded that we make room for her. So, much to my annoyance, the three of us had originally all wound up squished together on one side like sardines.

Is this really *necessary?* I'd wondered. Undertaking a long distance journey like this was going to be Hell, to say the least.

I hadn't had even an inch of room on either side of me, and Christopher had refused to budge just as much as Lilia. Finally, I'd resorted to a threat: "I get motion sickness if I'm facing backwards." Fortunately, that had been enough to make Lilia reluctantly agree to our current seating arrangement.

As I watched the scenery pass us by, I found myself lost in thought.

I can't believe big brother didn't even see us off. I never knew he could be so childish.

In most cases like this, whether both of us had some blame to bear, he would have been quick to apologize for his part. Why was he being so stubborn about this? The only reason I could come up with was that maybe he'd *wanted* to go to the West, but it felt unfair to suspect that of him.

If he married this princess, it would make him a king. That might've been a pretty appealing prospect, if he were the ambitious type, but surely a power grab like that would have been beneath the Honorable Duke.

It did cross my mind that this princess might be a real stunner, but they'd barely even met, and the few times they *had*, they would have only seen each other from a distance. But most importantly, my older brother didn't judge people based on their looks. And if they'd never spoken to each other, then how would he even know what the princess was like on the inside?

And the real mystery was why *the princess* had fallen in love with him at first sight. Surely my big brother must've wondered about

that too. I mean, what did he make of that?

Maybe if I had actually stopped to ask him that, none of this would have ever happened. Maybe we wouldn't have parted ways on such bad terms...

"Why do you love your older brother so much anyway, Ellie?"

"Huh?" I blurted out.

Lilia's question felt like it had come out of nowhere. What was I even supposed to say to that? I mean, who *wouldn't* love someone who was always nice to them? Was that even a real question?

My older brother always treated me with kindness, and it was obvious that he held me in high esteem. I knew he would do anything for me.

When I strayed from the path, he steered me back in the right direction. And when I did the right thing, he was happy for me.

With his love and support, I felt invincible.

So, it was very simple, really. "Because he loves me."

"You're *obsessed* with him," Lilia said, eyeing me warily.

"She really is," Christopher chimed in, looking exasperated.

Et tu, Christopher? Surely you love him just as much as I do.

The two of them seemed pretty intent on ganging up on me about this, though, so I rushed to defend myself.

"Don't let him pull the wool over your eyes, Lilia. Christopher's every bit as obsessed with him as I am. If anyone bad-mouthed our older brother, I wouldn't be the only one flying off the handle—Christopher would be right there with me."

"Oh, sis..." Christopher said, giving me a wry smile. "There's no one in the *whole world* who would ever bad-mouth our older brother."

"Well... Okay. You're not wrong."

"Honestly, you two are hopeless when it comes to him," Lilia said, sighing affectedly.

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We were making good headway in our journey. We'd been blessed with good weather and we'd managed to avoid running into

any serious trouble.

I'd been prepared to do some camping, but I should've known better than to think we'd actually be rolling out any sleeping bags. We were traveling the aristocratic way, which meant that accommodations in nearby towns had already been secured for us. Pretty *luxe* accommodations too, might I add.

Everything was going pretty smoothly—aside the crushing boredom of being in a carriage for days on end, that is.

And when I say "crushing," I mean *crushing*. I'm talking boredom of the soul-destroying sort.

I couldn't speak for how Lilia and Christopher were holding up, but only two days in, it was really starting to take a toll on me. I'd never been one for sitting in silence, and this was taking it to the next level.

Is there anything *I can do in here?* I found myself wondering, feeling despondent.

Under normal circumstances, I would've done some strength training to pass the time. Unfortunately, though, I'd imposed a strict limit on my strength training, so even that was out of the question.

I'd begged to at least borrow a horse to ride on, but I'd been given a firm "no"—which was fair enough, admittedly. Aside from my beloved family horse, Lady, every living creature seemed to regard me with fear and loathing. It was one thing to be separated by a carriage, but the moment I locked eyes with a horse with the intention of riding it, it would take off in a wild, whinnying gallop. Honestly, if you asked me, they really didn't have to be so *dramatic* about it.

Maybe a horse would have been more amenable to letting me on its back if I were accompanied by Lilia, but that wasn't really an option. Our journey was a long one, so we were told that it wouldn't be prudent for the two of us to ride one of the horses and wear it out prematurely.

So, that left me with only two options: I could kill time playing chess on the portable chessboard Christopher had brought along, or playing cards with the card set Lilia had thought to pack.

I was terrible at chess, so that was out of the question. Even

playing against Lilia, who claimed to have barely ever played, didn't end well for me. After our third match, I'd found myself on a losing streak.

I did enjoy the games of poker and President that we played. It was a lot harder to get bored of luck-based games, as it turned out.

By the third day, when I'd started seriously entertaining the idea of running alongside the carriage for fun, we'd caught up with Edward's party.

He'd had other business to attend to at a margravate, apparently, so he'd taken another route. But, ever the workaholic, he'd traveled nonstop from there and managed to meet up with us at a town along the way. Fortunately, his horses, at least, had been spared his brutal work ethic; he'd been diligent in swapping them out regularly along the way.

His driver, on the other hand, hadn't been so lucky. I only hoped that the poor man was getting fairly compensated for all those graveyard shifts.

Edward himself seemed fresh as a daisy. When we met up with him, he regarded us with his classic, princely smile. To be fair, though, he'd probably spent most of his journey sleeping. What else was there to do, when you were traveling alone?

After exchanging brief pleasantries, I returned to my carriage. He called out to me, stopping me in my tracks.

"It must be rather cramped in there with the three of you," he remarked. "How would you like to join me in my carriage, Lizzie?"

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine, thanks."

"Oh? And here I thought you were supposed to be my bodyguard," he replied with a smile. There was little room to argue with *that*.

We might have been united in our purpose, but the reality of the situation was that Edward was my official ticket to the West. When it came to him, I had little leverage.

So, left with no choice but to agree, I climbed into his carriage with him.

If he'd made such a point of asking me to join him, then I figured he must have had his reasons. Maybe he wanted to talk strategy. To

be fair, I knew that there was probably plenty that we should be discussing before we arrived at our destination.

The carriage started moving. As it picked up speed, I looked absentmindedly out the window, watching the scenery shoot by in a blur.

Finally, Edward opened his mouth to speak.

"Is this your first time traveling abroad?" he asked me.

"Uh-huh."

"Well, the West is lovely. It's remarkably verdant; even the royal capital is lush with greenery, and wide canals cut through the city. I'm told that its temperate climate makes it a popular destination for health retreats and honeymoons."

"Yeah?"

What's all this small talk for? I wondered. *Is he trying to break the ice or something?*

I decided to just let it all go in one ear and out the other until he was ready to get down to business.

A few "mm-hmms" and "uh-huhs" should do the trick.

"Lizzie? Are you listening?"

"Uh... Yeah?"

"Is there...something on your mind?" he asked hesitantly.

I could already picture how pissed he'd be if I said no, so I played it safe with an evasive sort-of-confirmation.

"I guess you could say that."

"Is this about Frederic?"

I blinked at the mention of my brother's name.

He wasn't wrong, though. Whenever I had too much time on my hands, my mind seemed to wander to thoughts of my older brother. I mean, the whole purpose of this trip was to stop the West from taking him. So, really, it would have been weird if I *wasn't* thinking about him.

Oh, boy. If Lilia could hear you now...

"Well... We didn't exactly leave on the best of terms, so..."

Edward's eyes widened as he looked at me.

As he turned his head, a single strand of silver hair fell over his forehead, serving only to highlight his beauty.

Must be nice to be that beautiful, huh?

"I've never seen this side of you before," he said.

"What side of me?"

"You look lost. Like a child."

What the hell does that mean? I wondered, touching my fingers to my face. From what I could glean by groping at my facial features, the expression I wore was certainly not a flattering one.

Edward leaned over and took my hand in his. His amethyst eyes bored into mine.

"Don't worry. I won't let them force him into marriage, I swear it. You have my word."

As I looked into Edward's earnest gaze, I felt keenly reminded of the effect that my older brother had on people. He'd certainly earned his title as the future Honorable Duke. It boded well for my family that he'd earned the trust and respect of the crown prince—that is to say, the future king. It seemed that Edward was willing to use any means necessary to put a stop to this engagement.

I composed myself, feeling newly resolved by this.

"Your Highness," I said, "if anything should happen to me, please take care of Christopher and Lilia."

"Beg pardon?"

"As long as they're with you, I'm sure they won't be treated unfairly."

"Hold on. What exactly are you planning to do once we get there?" Edward asked me.

I put on the most innocent expression I could manage.

"I'll try to resolve things peacefully, of course. That's plan A."

I'd tried to sneak that last part in there at the end, hoping it'd go right over his head, but it didn't seem to escape him.

He rubbed his forehead and sighed.

"Listen... You ought to know, the duke and your brother specifically asked me to look after you. I suppose I've agreed to be your guardian, so to speak."

"My *guardian*?"

"In fact, they begged me to keep you in check *multiple times*. And however many times you're imagining, I can assure you it isn't

even close to reality. So, go ahead and multiply it by five."

I went silent. Had they seriously begged him that much?

When he'd said "multiple times," I'd assumed a few—you know, maybe on three occasions, or something. But *five times* that many? So, what, they'd begged him on *fifteen* different occasions?

That seemed a little excessive, if you asked me. Surely by the fifth time, Edward should have cut in and reassured them, giving them a little "All right, all right, I get it already." If they'd felt the need to ask him about it fifteen times, that seemed like a *him* problem.

Edward was only a year older than me, so why was my family treating us like we were guardian and child, anyway? Was there really such a wide gulf in the trust they had in the two of us?

And what did that mean about how much faith they had in *me*? Was the bar on the floor?

"Don't do anything rash. If anything happens, your first course of action should be to consult with me," Edward said.

"'Kay."

"I'm going to need more than a `*'kay*.'"

"All *right*. I understand," I muttered reluctantly, still pissed about what he'd just said.

As far as I was concerned, though, the real takeaway was that I needed to make sure that I didn't do anything I'd have to consult with him about.

"And why's that?" you ask? Well, let me enlighten you. It was obvious what would happen if I tried to discuss any plans with him: He'd either shoot me down or get upset. Maybe even *both*. So the best course of action was to take care of everything without him ever catching a whiff of it.

Fortunately, I hadn't been stupid enough to tell him anything yet—including "Operation Next-Level Lothario," which I'd already filled Lilia and Christopher in on. He might send me straight back home if I bungled my explanation, and I couldn't let that happen. I could tell him all about it *after* we arrived.

"There's nothing to fear, Your Highness. As long as they listen to reason, no one will get hurt."

"Yes, well, my concern is what might happen if they *don't* listen to reason."

I said nothing in reply.

I didn't really have a plan for that eventuality, to be honest. My "plan," such that it was, was to play it by ear.

Apparently, silence hadn't been the answer that Edward had been looking for, because he let out a heavy sigh.

Then he turned to look out the window and said, "Perhaps I should put you on a leash."

Treating your vassals like dogs now, are you? Is this *what the kingdom can expect from its future king? And here I thought you were going to be a kind, capable ruler. For shame, Edward. For shame.*

He must've noticed the glare I was giving him, because he cleared his throat and said, "Well, don't look at *me*. That was your family's idea, actually. They begged me to drag you back home with a rope around your neck, if need be."

So my own *family* was treating me like a dog, then.

Honestly, I was starting to feel like a bull at the rodeo.

"Just don't do anything that would give me cause for concern," Edward said.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"No? Then what about when you told me you were fully prepared to go to the West by yourself?"

"Okay, I was...a little heated when I said that," I replied uncomfortably, averting my gaze.

I hadn't had any self-awareness of how fired up I'd been, but apparently, it had been obvious enough that the head maid had felt the need to point it out to me. I must've looked like I was on the verge of doing something *really* impulsive.

I didn't know for sure who'd snitched on me to Edward, but most likely it had been either my father or my brother.

I shrugged, trying to make it out like it had been no big deal.

Then I looked at him and said, "If you hadn't offered your assistance, I might've launched a coup or something."

"I'll do you a favor and pretend I didn't hear that," he replied. "So

don’t say it again.”

“Right. Roger that.”

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After we’d moved on from tactical discussions, Edward launched into a lecture about knitting, complete with a demonstration. As I was listening (well, “listening” might be putting it a bit generously—I was letting it go in one ear and out the other), I suddenly sensed a presence nearby.

I focused my attention, scanning my surroundings.

Thanks to my training in the mountains over spring break, I’d gotten better at it. I could now scan a wider range than ever before, picking up on a noise or presence in the distance. If there were no people in the vicinity, that range could extend even wider. I’d gotten especially skilled at differentiating whether I was picking up on an animal presence or a human one. Although, to be fair, that was probably just a process of elimination more than anything. I’d encountered several different kinds of animals in the mountains and familiarized myself with their patterns. I’d learned to compare what I picked up on to the mental compendium I’d created, and if a presence didn’t match an animal’s, I could determine that it was human.

Man, it was great being in the mountains... I reminisced.

The mountain air had been deliciously refreshing, and I’d had my pick of sparring partners. The bear I always wrestled with was apparently female, and recently she’d had a cub. With her permission, I’d even had the honor of being able to pet the little guy. It was chubby, fluffy, and cute enough to kill.

Animals didn’t usually take a liking to me, so I felt pretty lucky to have formed such a beautiful bond with one—especially one as ferocious as a bear.

Anyway, I didn’t have much faith that I could accurately judge the presence’s speed, since I was currently in a moving carriage...but it sure seemed to me that they were moving at roughly the same speed that we were. And what’s more, they seemed to be keeping a

deliberate distance. They weren't even traveling along the highway with us.

It would have been easy to assume that it was just a coincidence, but I hadn't sensed them at all yesterday—which is to say, they hadn't been there until I'd met up with the crown prince. It was all more than a little suspicious, if you asked me.

It seemed only prudent to go take a look...just in case.

"Your Highness, I'd like to speak with the knight from your personal guard. Where's Martin?"

"I left him behind."

"I beg your pardon?"

At this, all of the attention I'd been focusing on the presence outside the window suddenly came hurtling back to the conversation in the carriage.

He'd left Martin behind? *Martin*, the young ace of the Royal Guard? The crown prince's personal escort?

And he'd chosen to do this *now*, at the critical moment that we were about to march into enemy territory?

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I almost blurted out. I mean, could you blame me?

The division commander and his deputy were in a class of their own, but Martin was a tremendously capable knight. If I were to make a list ranking the Royal Guards that I'd tangoed with, he'd easily make one of the top spots. And when it came to stealth and reconnaissance, he was probably even more skilled than I was.

So why would Edward leave such a valuable asset behind? What exactly was he planning to *do* in the West?

I mean, obviously, he probably wasn't planning to seduce the kingdom like I was...but did this mean that, even in the worst-case scenario, he'd taken use of force off the menu?

"As I'm sure you can understand, I'd hardly be able to claim that I lacked the numbers for a proper escort if *he* had come along. I've assigned him on another mission."

"Which is...?"

"Guarding the Burton family."

Well, I couldn't argue with *that*.

I'd been hovering above my seat, prepared to let Edward really have it, but his explanation was more than enough to mollify me. I went from a hundred to zero, relaxing enough to sit back down fully into the cushions.

Without me around, there was no question about who would be most at risk: my family.

Even this proposal from the Western princess could easily have been part of some greater plan to harm the Burtons. After all, this was a prime time to strike, considering that we'd just been thrown off-balance by an attack from the East. And boy, what a mess *that* had been: a simmering grudge, a kidnapping, an abandoned house blowing up... (Okay, so maybe *I* was to blame for that last one, but my point still stands.)

I needed my older brother to stay safe until I could clean up this current mess and come home to an apology. And surely no one could cause *too* much trouble when Martin was standing guard.

As I rubbed my chin thoughtfully, Edward threw a suspicious glance my way.

"Why do you ask? Is being parted from Sir Rembrandt so unbearable?" he asked.

"Nothing like that. I just wanted to know what kind of numbers we had, in case push comes to shove."

For some reason, Edward seemed really pissed that I'd asked about Martin. The minute I'd mentioned him, his face had contorted into a strained frown. It was like he'd become a completely different person to the guy who'd just been babbling about crochet patterns and needle thickness just a moment ago. And in place of his placid, princely smile, he wore a ridiculously solemn expression.

Ah... The statesman's scowl, I thought. It made him look an awful lot like his father, the king.

I actually hadn't spoken closely with the king all that often, but I felt like I had a good enough picture of him. I was pretty sure I'd seen my father pull a face like that on occasion too.

"How many guards do we have in our envoy?" I asked Edward.

"Twelve."

"And how many of them are roughly on my level?"

"I think we both know that there's only a small handful of men in the entire Knights' Brigade who'd fit that description."

His answer sent my mind racing.

I'd brought two guards from home, but they weren't so much guards as they were chaperones. If the time came for combat, they probably wouldn't count among the men we could rely on to fight. Realistically, then, we had twelve men: all of whom were the guards that comprised the crown prince's escort.

So...that meant we had twelve guards for four carriages.

The four carriages traveled in a single line, starting with the carriage for the guards to rest in when they were on break (they took turns keeping watch). Then there was the carriage Edward and I were riding in, the carriage Christopher and Lilia were riding in, and finally, the carriage for the servants and luggage.

If I excluded the guards' carriage from the count, we had three carriages. In the event of an emergency like a surprise attack or a highway robbery, we had just barely enough guards to protect the civilians like the drivers and servants.

Honestly, that *really* didn't inspire confidence in the kingdom's defensive capabilities. Even for a stopgap measure, it was a pitiful show of force for an envoy that included the crown prince.

It occurred to me now that Edward's line about being short-staffed was more than just a convenient excuse; it was the reality of the situation. If I planned to continue living in the kingdom, then I'd need to find a way to help beef up its defense. I made a mental note to do everything I could to prepare the cadets at the training grounds for combat.

I knew, though, that it wasn't their skills that were the issue. The real issue was that I had no idea whether or not they would actually pursue careers as knights. Whatever skills they had would be useless if they just stayed at the training grounds forever.

"How long until our next rest stop?" I asked.

"We'll be crossing the border soon, so we'll stop for a rest before that," Edward replied. "Then we'll aim to arrive at the inn before the sun has fully set."

If the presence I'd picked up on was planning an attack, then

they'd probably make a move shortly after we made our stop at the next town. Twilight would provide them with a convenient cloak of darkness. Plus, as we got closer to the inn, it was only natural that we'd start to let our guards down. There would be no better time to strike.

Fortunately for us, though, just knowing the likely timing of their attack would provide us with ample opportunities to ready ourselves.

The standard strategy here would be to anticipate their surprise attack and turn the tables on them with a counterattack. But I wasn't confident that we had the numbers for that. So, the easiest option was probably just to strike *first*.

The only risk I could see was the possibility that this was all just a misunderstanding, in which case, well...things could get a little awkward. If that happened, then I'd just have to lean on Edward's influence as crown prince.

In any case, if we were going to make a move first, then it would have to be during the next rest stop. It would be easier to detect the enemy's presence when we both stopped, and there would be ample opportunity for the envoy to split up as needed.

If I could gather all of the civilians in our party in one place and assign all of the guards to protect them, then I felt confident I'd be able to take out the enemy alone.

"What are you planning, Lizzie?"

I felt the corner of my mouth turn up into a smirk.

This was perfect timing, actually. I'd had just about enough of being crammed in a carriage and listening to His Highness's high-minded knitting lectures.

I felt a little rusty, thanks to the restrictions I'd put on my strength training recently. But if danger was encroaching on our party, then what choice did I have but to protect them?

Yeah, that's it. I'm definitely *not just doing this because I want to get my blood pumping or anything.*

Despite my excuses, I had a little chuckle to myself as I gloated over finally finding a target for all my pent-up frustration.

"Oh, nothing. I'm just going to do my job."

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"Sis!"

We'd just arrived at our rest stop, and not a minute after I'd descended from the carriage, Christopher came running up to me in a panic.

"Are you okay? He didn't do anything to you, did he?"

"What do you mean, 'do anything'?"

"I'll never forgive him for what he did on graduation day, stealing a kiss from my sweet, innocent sister's l-lips!"

"Sweet, innocent sister...?" I repeated, still trying to process this bizarre turn of phrase. I was so stunned, I didn't even register the rest of the sentence.

Don't you think you're laying it on a little thick there, Christopher?

"Sweet." "Innocent." I couldn't even fathom how he'd come up with those words. You couldn't land on two more inappropriate adjectives to describe me if you tried. Even if he couldn't see that, surely even he had to realize that I had nothing on *him* when it came to being sweet and innocent.

I could tell that he was trying to mimic our older brother again, and I didn't appreciate it. Whenever he did that, he ended up treating me like a child.

Come to think of it, didn't he say something before about how I wasn't "ready for a relationship"?

Physically, I was the older of the two of us—and I looked it too. But more than that, my mental age was probably about twice his.

"Let's try not to bring that up too much, Chris," Lilia said gently, as she hopped out of the carriage after Christopher. "We don't want her reliving those memories."

Wait... Huh?

Something seemed a little off about this exchange, but I couldn't put my finger on what, exactly.

"It'd be better for everyone if we just let them fade into obscurity, don't you think?"

"Well, I guess so... Wait, didn't *you* do the same thing he did, Lilia?!"

"Tragically, I think those memories are well on their way to obscurity too..." she said, her shoulders slumping.

That's when I realized what it was that felt so off: Lilia and Christopher were actually...*getting along*.

Despite how painfully awkward and shy Lilia could be, she was having a normal, remarkably stammer-free conversation with Christopher. And, as soon as I realized that, it dawned on me that she was even calling him "Chris" now. It was a far cry from the formal "Lord Christopher" she'd always addressed him with before.

How'd that *happen...?* I wondered. I'd only switched carriages for the latter half of the day, but it seemed a lot had changed in my absence.

"What happened, Lilia?" I asked her. "Did you fall off your seat and hit your head during the carriage ride?"

"*Excuse* me! There's no need to be rude!" she huffed.

"Sorry, it's just...you two seem so friendly now, I couldn't help but wonder."

At this, Lilia whipped her head up to look at me. Her eyes were wide open, and there was a wild glint in them. Instinctively, I took a step back.

"Ellie... Are you *jealous*?"

"No."

"Aw, you don't have to be shy about it."

"I'm not."

As Lilia started to close in on me, I swiftly put some distance between us.

Come on, what do you take me for? I thought. *Any man who gets jealous over a girl befriending another man needs to do some serious work on himself.*

It almost seemed like Lilia was *enjoying* the thought of making me jealous, though. Judging from the strange glint in her eye, she looked downright ecstatic, actually.

You don't really want that, Lilia. Trust me.

Sure, jealousy could be fun during a honeymoon period, but it got

old fast. Theoretically, if someone was only a *touch* jealous, maybe that could be sustainable...but it was hard to imagine someone managing to strike that balance well. In the end, it just didn't seem conducive to happy, healthy relationships.

Seeing the unamused look on my face, Lilia only puffed her chest out proudly.

"You see, Ellie, nothing unites people like a shared adversary. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend,' after all."

"A shared adversary? And who, pray tell, might that be?" Edward interjected, descending from the carriage. In a complete one-eighty from the expression he'd been wearing before, he was wearing his usual calm, princely smile.

Lilia briefly made eye contact with him, but she didn't answer his question. Instead, she turned to exchange meaningful looks with Christopher, and they gave each other knowing smiles.

I felt reasonably satisfied with her explanation. She was right, after all. This journey had given all of us a shared adversary: the West (or, rather, the Western princess). Plus, she and Christopher were both missing school, so they probably wanted to wrap this up as quickly as possible.

Basically, we were all a united front now. And as far as I was concerned, that was a welcome development. So, if Lilia and Christopher wanted to keep getting closer, great. I had no complaints about that.

I'll admit that I didn't *love* the idea of Lilia being my future sister-in-law, but I'd much prefer she marry Christopher than my older brother. There was the little issue of Edward's apparent interest in her, but, well...she was an otome game protagonist, so she'd figure it out somehow.

Of course, I wouldn't have dreamed of saying any of that to her. She'd assume it was half in jest and flip her lid. And, to be fair, it *would* be half in jest...but only half. The rest would be entirely earnest, because I wanted her off my back as soon as possible.

"Well? What do you think, Lizzie?"

"I think my hunch was right. It seems like we *are* being followed. Whoever it is, it doesn't seem like they want to kill us...but they're

definitely hostile."

"Huh? Um, w-wait, what do you mean?" Lilia stammered, butting into my conversation with Edward.

I gave her and Christopher a quick rundown. Then I talked them through my plan.

"I'm going to scout ahead—alone. You all stay here by the carriages, just in case," I said.

"I-I'm coming with you, sis!"

"M-Me too!"

"As am I."

Guys... We can't all *go. What is this, Dachou Club? We're not a comedy quartet...*

Are the guards in the envoy going to jump in on this too? I wondered. Was someone going to pipe up and say, "I'll go too, then," setting someone up for the punch line "Please, be my guest"?!

For better or for worse, though, no one had the balls to piggyback off of the crown prince's bold declaration with a classic Japanese comedy joke. Instead, they were all looking at me pleadingly, begging me to do something.

I shook my head with a sigh.

"You're the whole reason we've got an escort in the first place, Your Highness. I'm afraid I can't let you join me," I said.

"I'll have you know that I'm reasonably competent in martial arts," he huffed.

"Yeah, well, 'reasonably competent' won't cut it. You'll just drag me down."

"Th-That's right! Exactly what she said!" Lilia chimed in.

"*You're* not coming either."

If you surveyed the nation's knights on who in the kingdom needed the most protection, I'd bet you anything that the crown prince and the saint would easily rank in the top five. I'd have to be insane to let them march into enemy territory with me.

Besides, what point was there in giving the enemy more targets? Why would I handicap myself like that? No matter how easily I could beat a game, it didn't make me want to ramp up the difficulty.

"There's no issue with me coming along, though, right?" asked

Christopher.

"It's too dangerous. You stay here with them."

"I promise I won't drag you down!"

He tugged on my sleeve as he looked up at me with pleading honey-colored eyes. The sight hit me harder than a blow to the head. His cuteness was a direct—and *lethal*—attack.

Of course, as the youngest, Christopher knew *exactly* how to weaponize the cute-little-brother angle.

I really should have pushed the cross-dressing thing, I thought ruefully. Christopher had a special way of looking up at you pitifully and stirring maternal (or paternal) instincts, and I felt confident that we could've used that to our advantage. At the very least, it would probably be more useful than Lilia's "Charm," since Lilia couldn't control its effects on people.

"Christopher," I said gently, as I placed my hands on his shoulders. "You're barely keeping up with the regimen at the training grounds. I can't bring you into actual combat."

"Is there anything I can do...to change your mind?"

"Nope. Sorry," I said bluntly.

At this, his shoulders slumped and he hung his head. He looked utterly dejected. I felt terrible for him, but I knew I had no choice but to harden my heart. If our parents or our older brother ever found out that I'd put Christopher in danger, they would be furious. Not at him, but at *me*.

"Okay. Well, I tried," he said.

I was relieved that he'd understood, and that he didn't seem to be upset about it. I wasn't surprised, though. Christopher could be pretty stubborn sometimes, but for the most part, he was a good kid who could listen to reason.

Just as I let out a sigh of relief, Christopher reached into his pocket and pulled something out.

"If you won't take me with you, then take *this*," he said, reaching out to offer it to me.

I looked at his hand. In it was a white envelope.

A letter...?

"What's that?" I asked him.

"A letter. From big brother. He told me to use it as a last resort if you got too out of control."

"Is he using a spell scroll on her? Is she some kind of evil spirit...?" Lilia muttered.

Christopher proceeded to open the envelope, completely ignoring her.

I watched with a wary expression as Christopher unfolded the stationery he was holding. I could already guess what was in my older brother's letter. No doubt it would be full of warnings like "Don't do anything reckless" and "Don't cause trouble for His Highness and Christopher."

Under normal circumstances, it would've been reasonably effective. I'd have probably thought, *If that's what he says, I guess I'd better rethink this.*

But as it just so happened, these were not normal circumstances; we were currently in the midst of a bitter standoff. If I was "out of control," so to speak, then his admonishments would only backfire. *Say whatever you want. See if I care.*

Honestly, it was a little weird that he'd even bothered to write me a letter, considering he was every bit as pissed at me as I was at him. I couldn't help but doubt its legitimacy. For all I knew, maybe Christopher had written it? My little brother had a penchant for covering up his craftiness with a sweet, innocent smile—which might have been a holdover from his in-game counterpart's mischievous characterization. I wouldn't have put it past him to fake a letter from our older brother.

But as soon as Christopher read the first line of the letter, all of my doubts dissipated into the wind.

"To my adorable little Lizzie," it said.

The only person in the world who would ever address a letter to me like that was my older brother. Christopher might've had him beat with "my sweet, innocent older sister," but "adorable little Lizzie" easily won second place for the "Most Outrageous Description of Me Ever" award.

I often read letters from the ladies which addressed me as "My lovely Sir Burton" or "My beloved Sir Burton," but personally, I

preferred the simple, classic "Dear Sir Burton." (If I had my choice, though, I would've loved a "To the famously chiseled Sir Burton" or a "To Sir Burton and her perfectly toned thighs." Pretty hard to beat an address like *that*.)

Christopher continued reading. "I entrusted Christopher with this letter, fearing that he might need it if you decided to cause trouble out there in the West. The thought of something happening to you or to Christopher because of me makes it hard for me to even eat. To be honest, it hurts me so much that I wish you would just turn back immediately and come home. At the very least, just please don't do anything dangerous."

As Christopher read the letter, I could practically hear it in my older brother's voice.

I let out a little snort. The contents had been exactly what I'd expected.

It was just like my older brother to tell me he was worried and insist on abstaining from anything dangerous.

See if I care, I thought defiantly.

"But I know you're angry with me, and that you probably won't listen to a word I say. So, as an insurance plan, I've decided to write about a cute memory of you that I know would embarrass you if read out to your friends," Christopher continued.

"Wait... What?"

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I entrusted Christopher with this letter, fearing that he might need it if you decided to cause trouble out there in the West. The thought of something happening to you or to Christopher because of me makes it hard for me to even eat. To be honest, it hurts me so much that I wish you would just turn back immediately and come home. At the very least, just please don't do anything dangerous.

But I know you're angry with me, and that you probably won't listen to a word I say. So, as an insurance plan, I've decided to write about a cute memory of you that I know would embarrass you if read out to your friends.

This is a story from when you were four years old. Do you remember when you came bursting into my room one day, sobbing?

"What's wrong?" I asked you.

You replied, "Is it true that I can't marry you?"

I didn't know what was going on, so I just told you that yes, it was true. And as soon as I said that, you burst into more tears.

Even the head maid was flustered, since you rarely ever cried. I asked her what had gotten into you, and she told me that you'd started crying after somehow learning that brothers and sisters can't get married.

Apparently, she had tried and failed to stop you from making a beeline to my room as soon as you found out.

I felt just as lost and flustered as the head maid, honestly. You just kept crying and crying, and I didn't know how to make you feel better.

Then you made a grand statement about how you were going to leave this family and get adopted by a new one so you could marry me. Looking back on it now, it was adorable. At the time, though, it really upset me. I couldn't bear the thought of you going to live with another family.

Fortunately, I ended up placating you when I reassured you that I'd always be with you, even if we couldn't get married.

You were so worn out from all that crying that you snuggled up to me and fell asleep. When I looked at your tear-streaked, sleeping face, I was struck with this indescribable feeling of gratitude that I was your older brother. I still remember the warm, fuzzy feeling it gave me.

Both then and now, you're my one and only adorable little sister. So, please—don't do anything reckless. Nothing would make me happier than for you to come home soon, safe and sound.

I'm sorry for telling that story. I know it will embarrass you terribly, so please believe me when I say I didn't want to. But, to be honest, I'm a little angry with you for leaving me behind.

I've left other letters for Christopher, and I've instructed him to open and read one each time that you act rashly. Please bear that in mind before you act.

Don’t do anything that will make our poor little brother have to fish around in his luggage for another of these letters, all right? I’m praying that this will be the first and last letter that he has to unseal.

Love,

Frederic

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Silence.

I frowned, pinching the bridge of my nose, and hung my head in shame as Christopher, Lilia, and Edward all stared at me wordlessly. I took several long, steadying breaths.

Boy, you sure do know how to hit me where it hurts, I thought.

I was at that tender age when a heartwarming tale of my childhood was nothing but ammo to be used to mortify me.

See, some people can pull off the whole "I want to marry my big brother when I get older!" schtick. Unfortunately, I wasn't one of them. This was going to seriously clash with my characterization.

Now, obviously, that was a story from before *I* had become Elizabeth Burton. But that didn't change the fact that it was still etched into my memory. Hence, it was humiliating.

"Sis..." Christopher began.

"Forget it," I interrupted. "We're done here."

Whatever consolation you're hoping to offer me, it's only going to embarrass me more. I'm begging you, just let this go. And if you can, then please, erase it from your memory completely.

I found myself wondering if a good hit to the head would make him forget what he'd just heard. Manga characters always seemed to be knocking each other out and erasing memories with a targeted hand chop to the back of the neck, but I had a feeling that was one of those things that only worked in fiction. I was painfully aware that it was probably a pretty tall order to make someone forget something in real life...but if I'd known of a pressure point that would specifically target this memory, you'd better believe I would've hit it. Still, I felt like I had to do *something*.

Anyway, I couldn't just let this drag on after declaring that we were, in my own words, "done here." If I wanted to bury this, then I knew I had to act like it didn't faze me at all.

Unfortunately, I had a feeling that I'd put on my poker face a little too late.

So, keeping my mask intact, I lifted my head and called out to him. "Let's go, Christopher."

"Huh?"

"I'm taking you with me, so get ready to go."

Immediately, he perked up. "Okay!" he said cheerfully. Then he ran over to the carriage to get his stuff.

Christopher might have been a cadet at the training grounds, but his martial arts skills were exceedingly average. In all honesty, he was completely unprepared for actual combat. He probably would've been more useful switching places with a knight from the Royal Guard and keeping watch over the carriages.

That being said, the bar was pretty low for aristocrats when it came to swordsmanship; Christopher was probably about as competent as any other young nobleman. Plus, at least there was just *one* of him. Worst-case scenario, I could just carry him on my back and make a run for it if his lack of combat skills became too much of a burden. And with Lilia waiting for us back at camp, we'd probably make do somehow.

"That was...remarkably effective," Edward whispered, in awe.

"Wow... Is he carrying a whole medicine box full of those letters?" Lilia added, referring to an old-timey, lighter-sized portable container with several compartments. As if anyone who hadn't spent a past life in Japan would have any idea what she was talking about...

I ignored them both.

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With Christopher in tow, I headed away from the main road. We were careful to stick to the thickets, avoiding any wide-open spaces.

I could sense human presences—it wasn't just one or two people that'd been following us, but *several*.

I couldn't entirely rule out the possibility that they were just locals from a nearby town, but...the way they seemed to cling to us like a shadow, they were clearly hostile. So, locals or not, we couldn't exactly leave them be.

As we got closer, I managed to get a better read on them. There

were probably about fifteen of them. Assuming that some of them were exceptionally stealthy, there might have even been closer to twenty.

I knew it. Whatever this is, it sure isn't nothing.

I looked back at Christopher, who was following behind me, and saw anxiety written on his face too. From this distance, even he could sense that there were people nearby.

I found a wide tree and signaled to him with my eyes, indicating that we should climb it and get a better look at who we were dealing with.

Through a gap in the trees, I caught a glimpse of someone hiding in the brush. Their gaze seemed to be fixed on the road as the sunlight reflected off of their armor. There was no doubt about it: They were clearly armed.

It struck me that it would be a real challenge for them to keep an eye out for any carriages on the road from that distance, though. It seemed likely that there were other scouts nearby.

We'd been fortunate that we'd avoided running into any of them thus far, but I knew that one wrong move could easily leave us surrounded.

I motioned to Christopher, directing him to wait in the treetop. He nodded meekly.

It was at times like this that I felt really grateful he trained with the cadets at the training grounds. Otherwise, he might've not understood my hand signals so easily. It would probably be time for him to quit the cadets soon, though. He wasn't exactly the battle-hungry type, so it wasn't like he was ever going to train in earnest for knighthood. Besides, he wouldn't have to take swordsmanship classes at school after his second year, anyway.

I kicked off of the branch I was standing on and jumped to a neighboring tree. Then, once I was in range of my targets, I leaped into the air, sweeping my still-sheathed sword in a giant arc as I landed.

All it took was the one hit to send them flying.

I felt the force of my sword colliding with several bodies, launching three people into the air.

I'd struck with the back of my sword. Wait, actually...scratch that. My sword was double-edged, so I guess it didn't have a "back," per se. Maybe it was more like striking with the *flat* of my sword.

Anyway...

I took a step towards my foes. Then I launched a firm punch right into the solar plexus of a man standing nearby, following the blow with a foot sweep. Using the momentum, I leaned over to strike the man next to him in the chin with the hilt of my sword. As I rotated, I aimed for a third man's head and swung my sheathed sword down over it.

And with that, the enemy was down six men.

"What the—?!" a man gasped as he spotted me.

Without a moment's hesitation, I launched into a flying kick and knocked the sword out of his hands, rendering him powerless. Then I landed with both hands on the ground and wrapped my legs around his neck, strangling him.

Drawing on my ab strength, I pulled my torso up so that I was sitting upright, crisscross-style around his shoulders. I stepped up onto his shoulders as he was falling and leaped right off of them.

I landed with a thump and surveyed my remaining opponents.

There were eight men left. They were all armed, but they didn't seem to be guarding any people or cargo.

Now, if you asked me, there was really no good explanation for a bunch of armed dudes hiding out in the bushes with no cargo to protect. It was all *highly* suspicious.

Looks like my hunch was right, I thought. *They were following us, lying in wait to launch an attack. I've got no clue whether they were after the crown prince or the saint, but that's okay. I can always beat that answer out of them later.*

"Who the hell are you?" one of the men grunted.

I didn't answer.

Since I was impersonating my older brother, I'd donned a casual outfit with a message today—and that message was "Yeah, my family's got a bit of money."

Without my usual knight's uniform on, these men would never have been able to tell at a glance that I was a knight. Fortunately,

that meant that I didn't have to reveal my hand if I didn't want to.

The remaining men stood at the ready, brandishing their weapons. My eyes fell onto a brawny man wielding a mace.

Hmm... Now that looks handy.

In one bound, I closed the distance between us. As soon as I landed next to him, I went full-on stealth mode and slipped behind him in the chaos.

I ran up a tree trunk and kicked off of it into a forceful backflip, track-and-field style, and swung my heel down over his head. The brawny man swayed violently from the hit. I caught the mace as it fell from his hand and swung it in a giant arc.

Bull's-eye.

I hadn't realized until it was in my hands, but the mace was a *lot* heavier than it looked. I'd assumed that the metal ball at the end was made of iron, but now I could see that it was clearly a slightly heavier metal.

Good, I thought. Heavy only meant one thing: strong.

Obviously, each strike would pack a punch, but it was more than just that. Once the mace had picked up some momentum with an initial swing, its heft meant that it would only keep accelerating at a rapid clip, adding a nice little damage multiplier.

One of those ancient scientists, like Aristotle or Newton, had theorized that heavier objects fall at greater velocities. That theory had turned out to be wrong, apparently, but it did seem to hold true in one case, at least—and that was when it came to *weapons*.

Thanks to the law of inertia or something, an object in motion remains in motion at constant speed.

When you're wielding a heavy weapon, the initial strike was pretty inefficient. It required a lot of force, much of which was lost in the process. But from the second strike onwards, that energy loss decreased dramatically. Basically, you had to judge from the second strike onwards if you wanted to determine a weapon's true worth, since that's the point at which you could see the *real* amount of force it could channel at an enemy.

By that metric, heavier weapons were stronger because they could accelerate at a greater rate. The catch was that heavier

weapons also tended to be bigger, which made them kind of a pain to lug around. They were also not great for fighting in cramped spaces. So they weren't *always* better—they had their pros and their cons.

You also had to consider what could happen if your opponent stole your weapon. Case in point: You and your buddies might find yourselves on its receiving end.

Using my body weight as a fulcrum, I swung the mace in another wide arc, taking out the last of my enemies in a refreshingly efficient clean sweep.

Nothing beats getting my blood pumping. I feel much better already. Not that I'm just doing this for fun, of course...

"Don't move," called a voice from behind me.

I whipped around to see a man I didn't recognize holding a knife to Christopher's throat. Christopher looked up at me with tears in his eyes, although his expression was more apologetic than afraid.

It wasn't hard to see why. After he'd forced me to bring him along with his whole song and dance about how he *definitely* wouldn't hold me back, here he was, being held hostage by the enemy. He was really eating crow now.

Still, as reluctant as I'd been to let him tag along, I was ultimately the one who'd let him come. I had *some* blame to bear—I'd gotten so distracted mowing down enemies that I'd neglected to keep an eye on him.

I dropped the mace I'd been holding and put both hands up into the air.

Based on his "don't move" command, it felt safe to assume that he wasn't going to hurt Christopher—not right away, at least.

As I kept an eye on the man holding Christopher hostage, I tried to sense if there were any more enemies in the area. It didn't seem like anyone was hiding nearby, but I did pick up on a presence just a short distance away.

I wasn't picking up on any hostile intent, though, so I decided to just ignore them for now.

I turned back to look at the man. Compared to his buddies that I'd just taken down, he was dressed in much lighter armor. I could

only assume that he was probably a scout who'd just returned.

All of the men were wearing loincloths that resembled skirts. When I stopped to think about it, it hit me that you didn't see people dressed like that all that often back in our kingdom.

I wonder if that's traditional attire in the West? Or maybe they're from some other country.

If anything, the men seemed a little bit Nordic, actually, so I could at least rule out the possibility that they were from the East. They weren't nearly Asian adjacent enough for that to make sense.

"Relinquish your sword too," the man growled in a low voice. "Hand over all of your weapons."

He clearly had his guard up against me. I watched as a drop of sweat slid down his cheek.

He looked more like a rogue than a knight or a soldier, but I figured he must've had a fair amount of practical combat experience if he knew better than to underestimate me.

"All right," I obliged, still holding both of my hands up.

I dropped one of my hands and unfastened my sword from its belt, dropping it on the ground in its sheath. Then I kicked it in his direction, and it slid over to his feet.

I kicked the mace over to him too.

He hadn't specified that I needed to hand over—or kick over, as the case may be—my weapons *gently*, so I kicked at full force straight at him.

"Gah?!"

The mace shot straight at his face. It was like I'd just fired a laser at him.

The man went flying, leaving Christopher standing there alone.

Nice shot, I congratulated myself, giving myself a little mental pat on the back.

Christopher looked at me with a stunned expression. Then he looked at the man, who'd been blown away, and back at me again.

That was when it suddenly hit me what I'd done.

Crap. I meant to leave one of them conscious enough to tell me what the hell they were doing here.

As I approached the man who'd been holding Christopher

hostage, though, it became immediately clear that that wasn't going to happen. His eyes were rolled back in his head, and foam was spilling out of his mouth.

"Sis!" Christopher cried, lunging at me for a hug.

I wrapped my arms around him and stroked his hair gently in an effort to calm him. He must've had pretty fine hair, because it felt soft and smooth under my fingers. It felt even fluffier than the bear cub's fur.

"I'm sorry. I... I know I promised I wouldn't be a burden," he said.

"It's okay. It was my fault too. I shouldn't have left you alone."

"But—"

"You must have been so scared. But don't worry—it's all over now."

Christopher looked up at me briefly with his tearful honey-colored eyes. Then, as if to hide his tears, he buried his face in my chest again.

I gave him a few pats on the back.

As I did my best to comfort him, I took a look around.

It looked like we were surrounded by corpses, but there was still a one-in-a-million chance that one of the men I'd taken down could wake up and attack us again. I couldn't just leave them like this.

I fished through their things, looking for something I could use to tie them up, and came upon just the thing for the job: a rope.

And just what were you thugs planning to do with this rope, huh? I thought, shaking my head. *Absolute savages.*

"Let's tie them up, just in case," I said.

"I-I'll help!"

As I picked up the rope, I turned around to see Christopher with his hands eagerly outstretched.

I accepted his offer, figuring that the risk wouldn't be too high now that I was right there to keep an eye on him—and that I'd already wiped out all of the enemy's forces.

Christopher made surprisingly quick work of tying up the men. Honestly, he probably did it faster than I could've.

I admired his dexterity, but...

"Christopher?"

"Yes?"

"No one said you had to tie them up tortoise-shell style..."

"It's a hands-and-arms binding," he corrected.

Look, I don't care what *you want to call it. That's not the issue here.*

Who the hell was teaching my little brother shibari techniques? They'd better have a damn good explanation, or they'd be lucky to get off with a lawsuit.

"The instructors said it's the most foundational binding."

What in God's name are they teaching you?! In what world is a shibari binding "foundational" for anything? I'm begging you, guys...stop teaching him freaky stuff. *This is so far outside the realm of a proper young man's education, I don't even know what to say.*

If anyone found out about this, they would seriously question my sanity. I couldn't have people thinking we were raising masochists at the training grounds.

Concerned about my little brother's future—and my own position within the family—I made a proposal to Christopher as I tied up the last of the thugs.

"Hey, Christopher? Don't you think you might be ready to move on from the knight cadets?"

"But I'm still not capable enough to fight on my own. You're always having to rescue me, like you just did."

"If anything happens, I'll be there to protect you. I know you don't like fighting, so I don't want you to force yourself," I said, surprising even myself with my earnestness.

Seriously, please just quit before they make you learn any more freaky stuff.

Thanks to the unconditional love of my parents and my older brother, Christopher had grown into a sweet, well-behaved young man. He'd been raised to stay on the straight and narrow, and I didn't want any outside influences coming in and ruining that. I wanted him to grow up into an adult without developing any weird...proclivities.

For a moment, Christopher paused. He looked up at me, eyes

wide with surprise. But then, as if coming back to his senses, he dropped his gaze again and went back to tying a man's arms tightly behind his back.

Seeing firsthand the number of shibari ties he seemed to know was *deeply* concerning.

Once we'd tied them all up, I stood up and clapped my hands.

"Well, think that's the last of 'em," I said.

"A-Actually," Christopher began, pointing over towards the thicket where we'd been hiding earlier. "There's...one more over there. His leg is injured, so I don't think he would have run away. He tried to attack me first. I managed to handle him on my own, but then...another man came up and grabbed me from behind."

Aha! I thought, snapping my fingers. *So* that's *the presence I was picking up on!*

I was impressed that Christopher had managed to take him down on his own. Just as I was about to give him a celebratory clap on the back, though, an image flashed in my head of the cadets booing me for "playing favorites" and going easy on him just because he was my little brother.

I retracted my hand, thinking better of it.

Christopher had come with me of his own accord, so the least he could do was defend himself. It was nothing to make a scene about.

Also, I would've felt really bad if I'd misjudged the force of my clap on the back and sent him flying.

"So, is he still conscious?" I asked.

"Um...I think so? He was moaning about being in pain, so..."

Nice. Now I won't have to get grilled about why I knocked them all unconscious and didn't leave anyone to question.

As Christopher led me to the last remaining scout, I felt my shoulders relax with relief.

◇◇◇

I left the interrogating to the Royal Guard.

To be totally honest, interrogation wasn't one of my specialties. It was one thing to punch a guy's lights out and be done with it, but

was another thing completely to have to be thinking constantly about keeping him conscious. What was worse, there was no undoing it if you overdid it.

Gried was apparently pretty good at interrogations, but even though we were all knights, we each had our strengths and weaknesses. "The right man for the right job," and all that.

Speaking of which, Christopher was certainly not the right man for the job when it came to sword fighting.

He must've been operating on full adrenaline, because it was clear that he'd put up a pretty impressive fight—and a dirty one, at that. The scout he'd left in the thicket had been in a real state. I'd actually felt worse for the poor guy than if he'd just been cleaved straight in two.

I'll spare you the gory details. Have a metaphor instead.

You know how it hurts worse if an amateur hacks away at you with a dull blade than if a seasoned swordsman cuts you down with a sharp one?

Yeah... You get the picture.

I'm never letting Christopher wield a blade again, I vowed privately.

The scout had still been conscious, but he hadn't been much use to us. He'd been too busy crying out in pain to answer any questions. I quickly gave up on questioning him, figuring that it could wait until later. I'd hoisted him over my shoulder and carried him back to our carriages.

Ultimately, I just left it to the Royal Guard anyway, so it was kind of a wash.

There was a town nearby, so I called over the soldiers who were stationed there and got them to cart the thugs off. The majority of the thugs were still unconscious, but I couldn't help but wonder how they'd react when they came to and saw the elaborate diamond-patterned bindings they'd been subjected to.

It was one of those funny things that you can't help but be curious about, but that you really don't want to think about too deeply.

Initially, the Royal Guard watched with solemn looks on their

faces as the thugs were hauled out, one after another, from the thicket. But gradually, they started to look dead inside.

They eyed me warily, like I was some kind of cryptid, and muttered under their breaths:

"Bear-killer..."

"A one-man army..."

"She's a loose cannon..."

"An absolute sadist..."

Um, rude.

Sure, I'd fought a bear before, but the rest of their accusations were entirely unfounded. And besides, that bear fight had ended in a *draw*. That story had been embellished so many times though that people now thought that I'd killed the thing.

Also, I had *zero* interest in shibari.

The next morning, I spoke to the guards who'd conducted the interrogation and learned that there'd been a spate of kidnappings lately in the West. Women in particular were being sold off for a pretty penny, so highway robbers and small-time thieves were apparently making career shifts to chase the bubble.

The West had a reputation for being a beautiful, touristy destination, but apparently it wasn't all that safe.

That being said, even developed countries in my previous life sometimes had a lot of instability at the borders. It was no surprise, then, that there'd be some instability in a country that was basically modeled off of medieval Europe.

Besides, I could hardly compare it to the Japan of my past life. After all, Japan had the advantage of being surrounded on all sides by water.

Once we'd crossed the Western border, we were met by the kingdom's guards, who joined our convoy. Apparently, this had been planned from the beginning...which did explain why we'd begun our journey with so few guards, I guess.

After we'd bolstered our numbers, we didn't run into too much more trouble. The only real issue was my absolutely *crushing* boredom. I ended up sparring with some of the guards from the West to pass the time, but they were about as much of a challenge

as the Royal Guard—which is to say, not much of one.

Eventually, we reached the Western palace, arriving right on schedule.

It was finally time to storm the enemy stronghold.

Before we were to meet with the princess at the center of it all, though, we were shown to the royal villa where we were to be staying.

It was a spacious estate located within the castle walls, roughly the same size as the duke's manor. It was clearly where the royal family put up its most esteemed visitors, which came as no surprise, considering that we had the crown prince in tow.

First, Edward was escorted to an extravagant suite. Then a maid came to show Lilia to her room.

Finally, a butler arrived to escort Christopher and me. He led us deeper inside the building, then opened the door to a room and invited us inside.

"Please, make yourselves at home," he said.

"Wait... What?"

"The royal family has heard that you and your brother are very close. They hoped you might feel more comfortable sharing a space together."

As the butler spoke, I took a look around the room.

It was a large room, about the size of a standard living room. There appeared to be one shared bathroom and two adjoining bedrooms. It was a spacious setup, clearly designed with two people in mind.

Honestly, I could hardly complain about our new suite. In addition to how much space there was, the furniture was clearly very nice, and from the window, there was an incredible view of the garden.

I assumed that this space was probably given to couples with small children when they visited, but that it had been given to us for our stay simply because it was one of the nicer rooms.

Of course, another consideration that had probably factored into it was that any other combination of people sharing a room might have been...combustible, to say the least.

The royal family had also been informed of the hostage situation

that Christopher had found himself in the other day, and it was likely that they were probably just trying to make him feel more comfortable.

As the butler prepared some tea for us, he began to regale us at length with an explanation of the palace's architecture, its gardens, and its history. When he'd ascertained that the tea was an appropriate temperature, he took his leave, shutting the door behind him.

Christopher waited only a couple moments for his footsteps to grow quieter before grabbing my arm and shaking it, looking absolutely panicked.

"S-Sis!" he cried. "What're we going to do now?!"

"What do you mean?"

I couldn't for the life of me figure out what had gotten into him. Maybe he was just surprised by the VIP treatment we were getting? No...that didn't seem right.

Christopher had accompanied our older brother on several visitations as his assistant, so he should've been well accustomed to that—well, more than I was, at least.

Still unsure what he was trying to ask me, I took a gander and guessed.

"Wanna choose our rooms with rock-paper-scissors? I don't really care which I get, though, honestly."

"It's not about which rooms we're getting!" he cried.

Okay... Guess I missed the mark. Welp, I'm out of guesses.

"U-Unmarried men and women can't share a private suite like this! The bedrooms don't even lock!"

He shook his head fiercely, his face growing beet red.

It was an understandable concern for a boy his age, but still...

Give me some credit here, I thought. *I'm not going to waltz into my little brother's room without knocking first.*

There was protocol to follow. Everyone knew you had to knock, wait for a response, and then give them a beat before opening the door. There was plenty of time during that beat for him to hide whatever it was he wouldn't want his older sister to see. (I don't think I need to extrapolate what that might be, so let's just leave it

at that.) If I heard flailing, I'd just wait patiently until there was silence. And, worst-case scenario, if I *did* see anything, I'd just pretend that I didn't.

I wanted to avoid any awkward situations just as much as he did, so of course I would afford him that common courtesy.

Besides, it wasn't like we had locks on our bedroom doors back at home. As far as I was concerned, we didn't really need them.

Plus, the doors were made of wood. Locks were pointless when your foot was a master key.

"Wh-What if I try to assault you?!" Christopher cried, sounding absolutely deranged.

"Turn the tables on you, I guess."

As I said that, something occurred to me: *Oh. If his bedroom is going to be right next to mine, that will give me the perfect opportunity to steal those letters from our older brother.*

I didn't know how many of those letters there were, but I had a pretty good idea what was going to be in them. If I didn't get my hands on them quickly, I was going to find myself at Christopher's mercy again.

My older brother had warned me not to go rifling through Christopher's things, but I didn't give a damn. I would do whatever it took to protect my dignity—even if that meant sneaking into my little brother's room and rummaging through his luggage. I wasn't going to pretend that was beneath me.

Sorry, Christopher. Looks like I'll be barging in without knocking after all.

As I did my best to calm my panicked little brother, I was already starting to plan out my break-in.

Ladies' Man

It was finally time to meet the princess.

The butler came to summon us from our rooms, and after a carriage ride across the castle grounds (why I had to take a carriage to somewhere *within the castle grounds* is beyond me—sure, there were some pretty big gardens to cross, but the walk would've been good for us), we arrived at the hall where we were to have an audience with the princess.

The three of us—Christopher, Lilia, and I—stood behind Edward, awaiting the princess's arrival.

The hall's extravagant doors opened with an impressively dramatic groan to reveal a woman with guards and maids in tow.

She couldn't have been much older than I was, but she had a mature, sophisticated air about her. She had long, straight black hair that looked smooth and silky, and her almond-shaped eyes were a dazzling golden color. Her eyelashes were long and beautiful, and her nose was perfectly straight. There was a mole under one of her eyes that was oddly alluring.

She was probably just a little taller than your average Japanese woman, with a slender waist and long limbs. She was more of a woman than a girl, and on the cute-to-beautiful spectrum, she was definitely on the beautiful end.

She was the kind of woman who wouldn't just be described as "stunning," but as "*absolutely* stunning."

Now, the straight, long black hair look had a reputation that's usually hard to live up to, but this *was* a princess, after all. And she was the very picture of purity.

Ahh... Nothing trumps the face card, does it? Here I'd thought that might've just been a philosophy unique to our kingdom, but apparently, a fondness for pretty faces was the lingua franca in this universe.

Her beautiful face was hardly the only thing bewitching about her, though. Her chest was...strikingly *ample*.

The plunging neckline of her dress revealed more than a glimpse of her cleavage, and your eyes couldn't help but zero in as her breasts swayed with every step. It was our natural hunting instinct to follow anything that moved with our eyes, but...honestly, I couldn't be sure if *that* was what was at play here.

I know it's rude not to look her in the eyes, but the whole point of me coming here was kind of to make her hate me, so... Maybe I should lean into it and use it to my advantage? I'll make her think I'm the kind of guy who only has eyes for impressive chest armor.

On second thought...maybe not. I feel like I'm gonna have hell to pay if I go down that route.

Just as I was thinking better of that idea, Lilia stomped on my foot. I glanced over at her, and she gave me a dirty look.

I sensed someone else's eyes on me too. I looked up to see Edward, who'd turned around to shoot daggers at me with his eyes. The glare he gave me was so icy, it was a miracle I didn't freeze.

Owing to Lilia's and Edward's preternatural beauty, the fury on their faces was somehow so much more terrifying than any normal person's angry expression.

I thought about saying, "Look at how in sync you two are! Why don't you just get together?" But I knew that it would earn me another heel-stab from Lilia, so I kept quiet.

Please, God... Anything but that.

"*Ellie!*" Lilia rebuked me.

"Hey, don't blame me. Even a woman can't help but stare," I whispered, trying to explain.

Lilia was having none of it.

"Cheater!"

Okay, come on, I don't deserve that. That hardly counts as cheating, considering that I'm not actually dating anyone.

After laying into me, Lilia turned her sharp gaze to the princess.

"She's just a little...well, maybe *very*..." she began. "Wow. Look at them *sway*..."

There was more than a hint of awe in her voice. Gone was the

frown she'd been wearing just moments before. Now, her eyes were wide and her mouth was slack as she gawked.

"See?"

If anything, I felt like the sight was even *more* impressive to a woman. You couldn't help but compare her assets to your own, and realizing how much more substantial hers were was nothing if not awe-inspiring. My chest was actually a pretty average size, if you took away all of the muscle that I'd built over it. But the princess's chest was just in a completely different league.

"Fine. But *you're* not allowed to look," Lilia huffed.

There she goes again with her censorship, I thought, remembering all the times she'd chided me for my "R-rated expression." Honestly, I'd never understand it.

"Prince Edward, what a pleasure to receive another visit from you," the princess said.

"The pleasure is all mine. My recovery prohibited me from seeing much of the country during my last visit, so I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn more during this one."

After they'd finished exchanging their high society pleasantries, Edward and the princess smiled as they began a friendly conversation. Between the two's radiant royal smiles, they threatened to blind us all.

As I was watching them, squinting, Edward looked over and motioned me with a glance. It seemed I was being summoned.

I approached the princess and gave her a chivalrous bow. It felt like the polite thing to do, considering that I was (technically) here as an escort.

"Allow me to introduce Frederic Burton, son of Duke Burton. He'll be escorting me as my bodyguard for the duration of my visit."

"Duke Burton's son..." the princess repeated.

I could sense her stirring slightly. When she gave me permission to rise, I looked up at her face and made eye contact.

There was a trace of what looked like confusion in her eyes, but I didn't sense that she was shocked or suspicious.

My brother and I shared the same eye and hair color, but aside from that, we looked nothing alike. The princess didn't seem to have

caught on to the fact that I was pretending to be him, though.

I'd heard that she and my brother had hardly ever met, but...it was a little astonishing that she wouldn't even recognize the face or physique of the man she'd specifically requested a personal visit from.

"My name is Frederic Burton. It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness."

"It's nice to meet you too. My name is Diana Normandius."

I took her hand and placed a kiss on the back of it, as was customary.

Presumably, the princess was used to this, because she didn't seem at all surprised by the gesture. She regarded me with an elegant, easy smile.

"This is just how you greet a lady in high society," I tried to communicate telepathically to Lilia, who I could sense was freaking out behind me.

"Please," I said, putting on my famous lady-killer smile. "Call me Eric."

"Eric?"

"That's what all my friends call me."

The nickname was one of the strategies that we'd all come up with during the carriage ride over. Well, to be specific, it was a strategy for *Lilia's* benefit.

No matter how many times we practiced, Lilia just couldn't call me "Frederic."

Even if she'd manage to do it once—with a lot of concentrated effort—it had all fallen apart a moment later, when she'd follow it up by calling me "Ellie" again.

Christopher, for his part, actually managed to start calling me "big brother" without any slipups at all. Honestly, though, he wasn't the one I was worried about anyway. If a "sis" slipped out, he could pretend he was just hissing through his teeth after stubbing a toe or something.

I'd floated the idea of Lilia calling me "Sir Burton" again, like she used to, but she'd rejected it immediately. Apparently, it would have been "weird and embarrassing to start doing that again *now*."

I'd had no idea what she'd been on about, but I'd let it go.

Anyway, in the end, we came up with a strategy to have me go by a nickname that was close enough to "Ellie" for any missteps to be easily smoothed over.

I remembered from my previous life that Westerners weren't fussy with their nicknames. As long as they bore even a *slight* resemblance to the full name, that was all that mattered. That was how you wound up with "Dick" as a nickname for "Richard" and "Bill" as a nickname for "William."

It was hard for me to wrap my brain around, given I was a Japanese person in my past life, but apparently "Eric" was a perfectly acceptable nickname for "Frederic." So, as far as I was concerned, "Ellie" could be a perfectly acceptable *nick*-nickname for Eric. We just had to play it off like it made sense, and everyone would follow along.

Still...you'd think that "Freddy" would have been the go-to nickname for Frederic.

Anyway, now that the nickname problem had been accounted for, I moved on to the next strategy.

"Your Highness, this is Lilia," I said, gently turning my body and wrapping my arm around Lilia to bring her close to me. "She's a friend from school."

As I pulled Lilia towards me, she lost her balance and leaned into my chest for support.

Her eyes flew wide open in surprise, and seconds later, a blush crept across her face. She looked up at me with dewy eyes.



That's the ticket, Lilia.

We were pulling off the "obviously not just *any* old friend from school" performance flawlessly.

Well...there *was* the issue that it might not have been just an act for Lilia. But I digress.

"She gets lonely without me, so I've started bringing her everywhere I go lately," I explained, stroking Lilia's soft hair lovingly. A subtle floral scent wafted from her head.

We'd stayed at the exact same inns and washed our hair with the exact same shampoo, but I can assure you *my* hair sure didn't smell like a bouquet of flowers. But hey, she *was* an otome game protagonist. This was just par for the course, apparently.

As I pretended to plant a kiss on Lilia's head, I sneaked a glance at the princess.

Can you believe the nerve? You've only just met me, and here I am doting on some random girl I've brought with me. You must think I'm a total cad.

Surely I was dashing all her hopes for me.

"My goodness, how heartwarming! You must be quite close!" the princess exclaimed with a sweet smile.

I couldn't have imagined more of a letdown than her lavish approval.

I was hoping for a little twitch in her smile, at the very least...but both corners of her mouth remained firmly fixed. It was a picture-perfect smile.

Then I glanced over at Edward to see the same picture-perfect smile on his face.

In his case, though, I could feel the fury oozing from his teeth. He always seethed like this whenever I got close to Lilia.

Chill, Edward. I'm not gonna steal your girl. Then I realized that I had, in fact, spent most of my life trying to steal his girl. *Okay, well, maybe I* did *try to steal her once...and maybe I kind of succeeded too...but you can have her back now. I'll even gift wrap her for you and everything.*

If he was so jealous, though, then why wasn't he being more assertive?

Oh well. Not my problem.

Anyway, I wasn't sure if the princess really *didn't* feel anything, or if it was just that she was better than Edward at faking it. Alternatively, maybe I just knew Edward well enough by now that I could see through his fake smile.

It was hard to say, really.

Once Christopher had finished introducing himself too, the princess looked back at me and said, "Lord Frederic, if I may be so bold...could I perhaps interest you in a chat tomorrow, just the two of us?"

"I'd be happy to have a chat," I replied, watching her carefully as I spoke.

She was wearing a pleasant smile, much the same as the one she'd been wearing this whole time. I tried to get a sense for what she was after with this "chat," but her expression was completely unreadable.

There was just one thing that I was certain of, though: The look she gave me didn't have any of the passion or attraction that I was used to seeing from the ladies.

Maybe a handsome young man just doesn't capture her interest? I thought. *Guess that tracks, if she fell in love at first sight with my older brother.*

Actually, no. I bet it's just that she's so used to being surrounded by attractive people—and being so attractive herself—that her standards are just too high to be impressed by an average heartthrob.

I still hadn't found a chink in her armor, so I decided to give it one more push.

I turned to Lilia and gave her the most adoring expression I could muster.

"But perhaps my friend could join us? 'The more, the merrier,' as they say."

"Well, um..."

For the first time, the princess's smile wavered. Her brow furrowed in a look of discomfort.

I privately pumped my fist.

That's it, Princess. Hurry up and lose interest in me—um, my brother—already.

There weren't many men out there bold enough to invite another woman to a date with the woman who wanted to marry him. And any man who *was* bold enough to do that should have been kicked to the curb—stat.

I thought through my next moves carefully.

What would the most loathsome man I can imagine do in this situation? I considered. That was going to be my reference point.

It was basically the polar opposite of the approach I'd been taking all of my life, which was "What would make me popular with the ladies?" That question had driven all of my decisions to the point that it was basically ingrained in me now. This made taking the opposite approach mentally exhausting. I could tell I was using up a bunch of calories just doing these mental gymnastics.

Let's just get this over with. I'll do us both a favor and deliver the final blow.

"You know what? Actually..." I began, squinting at her like I was eyeing my prey. Immediately, I regretted not licking my lips at her instead, but I forged on ahead. "Maybe there's some merit to a more *intimate* get-together. I'm sure we'd have *all sorts of fun* together, just the two of us."

I flashed her a suggestive smile.

How's that *for loathsome? Just when you think I'm smitten with the girl I've brought along with me, I start hitting on you right in front of her. There's nothing women hate more than a ladies' man, am I right?*

Behind my suggestive smile, I was wearing the most shit-eating grin imaginable. I stole a glance at the princess to see her looking up at me blankly.

That's weird...

My final blow didn't seem to have had any effect on her.

I felt like I'd just tried to wrestle with a curtain. It was like I'd come running at a shoji screen with a knife, at full force, only to stagger out the other side without having met any resistance. No...it was worse than that, actually. It was like I'd tried to shred seaweed

that was already shredded.

Still reeling from her complete lack of reaction, I moved in to lay it on thicker. But just as I was inching closer to the princess to take her chin in my head, Edward sidled up to me to intervene.

"*Eric*," he said, pinching me by the ear.

Um, ow? That really *hurts, you know.*

Why did he have to go and grab me by one of the least fleshy or muscular parts of my body with his full force like that? I wished he'd at least done me the favor of grabbing me somewhere with a little more meat on the bone.

As Edward dragged me away from the princess by the ear, he let out an aggrieved sigh.

"My apologies, Your Highness. I'm afraid he's like this with everyone."

"Excuse me, I'm not being rude. What's *rude* is to waste an opportunity to talk to a beautiful woman," I shot back.

"Yes, you've just proven my point splendidly, thank you," Edward snorted.

The princess let out a little chuckle as she looked at Edward, covering her mouth daintily.

"You two really are such good friends, aren't you? It's exactly as you said, Prince Edward."

I glanced over at Edward.

He feigned ignorance, but I caught his eyes darting around in discomfort.

Well, well, well. Going around bragging to people who've barely ever met my brother about how close you are, huh?

Maybe the princess had fallen for my brother because Edward had talked him up so much? If that was the root of it, then Edward was to blame for this whole debacle. If only he'd take responsibility for his mess and clean it up.

I didn't know what Edward had said to the princess about my brother, so I knew I had to tread carefully. If he'd talked up our friendship, then the best strategy was to play along.

I shrugged dramatically.

"Oh, Ed. What have you been saying about me?" I said, choosing

a response that seemed like it could have come straight out of my brother's mouth.

I thought for sure that this would get a rise out of Edward, but I got nothing. That placid, princely smile of his didn't even bunch an inch.

Hey, don't ignore me. You started this.

◇◇◇

"Thanks. Sorry for the late-night request," I said, opening the door for the maid and walking her out.

"Oh, no... That's quite all right," she replied.

Lilia and I were doing a bit of scheming in her room, so I'd ordered some tea for us. It was pretty late, so I had a feeling we'd be asleep in three minutes flat without some caffeine.

"You're almost done with work for the night, though, right?" I asked.

"N-No, sir! There's still some time before I'm relieved of my shift."

"Well, how about we spend a little time together once your shift is over?"

"Huh?"

"Your beautiful jade green eyes bewitched me the moment we met," I said with a smile.

The maid's face grew beet red, and she tried to turn away out of embarrassment. I held her chin to stop her.

"But I... I'm just a lowly maid, and...I-I'd feel awful for your companion," she stammered, still blushing furiously.

My mouth twisted into a seductive smirk, as if of its own accord. I hoped this maid had loose lips, because this would be the perfect way to start building my reputation as a lady-killer. I'd seduce every last woman in this kingdom—every woman but the princess, that is, who would be horrified by my shenanigans.

"You wouldn't object to keeping me company when she's gone, then?" I pushed.

"What?!"

"I'll try again another time. Until then...think about it."

I gave her a playboy smile and a wink, waving at her as she practically ran out of the room. Then I closed the door behind her.

"You know, I've been thinking a nice stab to the back might do you some good, actually," Lilia said when I returned. She took a bite of her cookie as she tempted fate with her cavalier remark.

Who the hell would benefit from being stabbed? I'm pretty sure a knife wound doesn't do anyone *any good.*

I actually happened to know this firsthand, since I *had* been stabbed once—a long time ago, mind you. Fortunately, my ripped abs had saved me from any serious damage. If this was my personality after getting stabbed once, then I didn't think any subsequent stabbings would change me much.

I settled down onto the sofa and brought a cookie to my mouth.

"So? What do you think?" I asked Lilia.

"About what?"

"The princess." I rested my arm on the armrest and stroked my chin. "I was trying to act like a real sleazebag back there, but I'm not sure it was enough."

"Oh, don't worry. You were a bona fide, grade A sleazebag."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

Compliment or not, that *was* what I'd been going for. I wanted the princess to think I was a serious ladies' man—and not in a good way. I mean, what kind of man shows up to meet his future fiancée with another woman in tow? And to make matters worse, I'd made it clear that I wasn't even devoted to my lady friend.

There were some people out there who got a kick out of homewrecking, so I'd developed precautionary measures in case the princess was one of those people. It was weird, though... I didn't sense *anything* from the princess. Not even disgust.

"You did a great job back there too. You were the very picture of a lovesick heroine," I said.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

I gave her a noncommittal affirmation, something like "Naturally" or "Of course." (I don't remember what I said specifically.)

As she swallowed a bite of her cookie, Lilia leaned forwards with an eager look on her face.

"We're meeting with the princess for a chat tomorrow, right? Should I keep playing up the 'lovesick heroine' angle? Of course, I'm not just some moon-eyed, lovesick girl with a crush, Ellie. You know I'm legitimately crazy about you, right?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll be meeting with her alone tomorrow."

"Huh?!"

The teacup fell right out of Lilia's hand, but I caught it just before it hit the floor, and placed it gently back on the table.

For several moments, Lilia just sat there dumbfounded. Then, out of nowhere, she grabbed my arm and shook it.

"D-Don't be like that, Ellie! Come on, let's keep playing lovey-dovey!" she cried.

So that's *what you're really after...*

"It's weird, though. The princess specifically called my brother here after falling in love with him at first sight, but she doesn't seem to have any interest in me whatsoever."

I thought back to the way she'd responded to me earlier.

Both the maid from before and the lusty saint sitting across from me looked at me with a fire in their eyes that signaled intense attraction. But there hadn't even been a flicker of that attraction in the princess's gaze.

If she'd really fallen in love with my brother at first sight, then she should've at least realized I was an impostor. And if she'd just fallen for him from all of Edward's flattering stories, then surely she would've been disappointed by the show I'd put on today.

Neither my appearance nor my behavior seemed to have had any effect on her, though.

"I guess it's plausible that she could have been interested in my brother for his reputation as the next Honorable Duke, but she doesn't really seem like she's in need of a boost to her reputation. I feel like there's something else going on here."

If I could just get her to tell me why she was so interested in my brother, then I felt like we could resolve this pretty quickly. Of course, that was just my hypothesis.

Nothing was more important to me than wrapping this up and heading back home as soon as possible, so I'd do anything to make

that happen.

"Um, Ellie?" Lilia said, nervously raising her hand to ask a question. "So...you don't think she likes you?"

"Nope."

"And you'd *know* if she did?"

"Oh, I'd know."

Lilia looked at me like I was some kind of alien that had just dropped in from outer space. At the look on her face, I broke into a wry smile.

Is it really so hard to believe? I wondered. Surely even she'd picked up on my affection for her back when I'd been trying to seduce her.

Maybe people weren't usually that obvious about it, but I felt like pretty much everyone had at least a vague sense of how other people felt about them.

"I mentioned before that I'm pretty attuned to people's feelings, haven't I? Figuring out whether someone likes me or not is pretty simple."

"You have no idea how ridiculous that sounds, coming from *you* of all people."

"That's why I need to get her alone and find out what she's *really* after," I said, ignoring her skepticism.

Lilia puffed her cheeks out as a pouty look crossed her face.

"Uh-*huh*! I'm onto you, perv! You only want to talk to her alone because she's gorgeous and she's got a nice rack!" she said, sulking.

"I don't even know where to *begin* with that..."

"This is so unfair! You're *my* Ellie!"

"What, and does that make you 'my Lilia'?"

I sighed, taking another sip of tea. This was beyond annoying.

Lilia kept grumbling for a while as she nibbled on her cookie. Then she spoke up, as if suddenly remembering something.

"Hey...doesn't the princess remind you of someone?"

"Who?"

"Did you ever read the *Royal LOVERS* manga?"

"Oh...*that*. I dropped it halfway."

"Oh my God, stop! You're making it sound like it's some girl you

dumped!”

What? I’m only stating the facts here...

I’d played through the game plenty, but I wasn’t enough of a hardcore fan to have bought all the merch and the manga, so I clearly wasn’t as in the know as Lilia. Even though I’d dropped the manga halfway, I still knew how it ended thanks to a post I’d seen on social media. Apparently, it was one of those “the battle has only just begun!” kind of endings.

Kinda makes you stop and ask yourself, *Wait, this is an otome game, right?*

“It was a strategic retreat, okay?”

“Uh-huh...”

Since it was based on the game, the manga was apparently pretty much just fan service for people who were already familiar with the IP. I don’t think they were trying to attract any new fans through it or anything. I’m pretty sure it even ran in a gaming magazine.

“Well, halfway through the manga, they introduce some new characters: two sisters who are princesses of a foreign country. They’re the new rivals.”

“Huh, really? I only read three chapters, so I didn’t get to that point.”

“I don’t remember them being so...*busty*, though.”

That didn’t surprise me, honestly. The manga was targeted at a female demographic, so giving its female characters a nice rack was probably not a priority.

Plus, introducing original new characters into the manga or anime adaptation of an existing IP was already a risky move. I could imagine that would’ve been at the forefront of the manga author’s mind. They probably hadn’t wanted to add fuel to the fire by giving the new characters nice “assets.”

Honestly, it was kind of baffling that new original characters were still even a thing, considering all of the backlash they always got.

I guess creators must have had some very compelling reasons if they were willing to brave that backlash, though. I could see the need for it arising when an anime caught up to the manga and

needed to pad out the episodes until the manga's story gave it more material to work with.

Actually, now that I've said that, I think that precedent might have been the *root* of the backlash. Things never worked out well when anime did that, so that's probably what turned people off of original new characters. Even if there's nothing inherently controversial about them, fans have been burned before.

"I remember that the younger sister was crazy about Prince Edward. She came on to him *really* hard," said Lilia.

"Sounds like a perfect match to the real princess, from what I've heard."

I hadn't met the younger princess yet, but Edward had told me all about how she'd been "coming on to him really hard." I mean, he didn't use those words *specifically*, but that was pretty much the gist.

It seemed pretty clear at this point that Diana and her sister must have been the real-life counterparts of the sisters in the manga.

"What about the older sister?" I asked.

"She seems to take an interest in Prince Edward too, but in her case, it's more implied. The manga adaptation is based on his route, so..."

I nodded.

Whenever an otome game gets a manga or anime adaptation, it usually starts off as a blend of every love interest's routes. Then, about halfway through, it pivots to focus on just one route. The other love interests' events are still peppered throughout the story, but they're just a bonus. Apparently, the *Royal LOVERS* manga had picked Edward's route as the focus.

Now, you might be wondering why it didn't pick Robert as the focus, considering that his route is the one that people play through (read: are subjected to) the most, whether they like it or not. But some questions are best left unanswered.

"Unlike Robert's route, Edward's route doesn't really have any characters that get in the way of his romance, right? I guess the manga author figured that the story would be more exciting with a little romantic rivalry."

Fair enough, I thought.

For the record, the romantic rival in Robert's story was none other than yours truly, Elizabeth Burton. So, I had a special place in my heart for side characters that get used and abused for plot reasons. If you asked me, they deserved a lot better than getting shunted to an unhappy ending.

"Of course, Edward is happily in love with the main character, so he ends up turning down the princesses."

Hmm...

I thought back to our meeting with the princess before, trying to remember how she'd acted around Edward. They'd seemed to be reasonably close, which made sense considering that they'd probably met several times before... But I hadn't sensed any attraction in her eyes when she'd looked at him either.

"The older princess only seems to have a *tiny* crush on him in the manga," Lilia explained. "She winds up with a random servant or something at the end. It kind of comes out of nowhere."

"So it's a 'pair the spares' kind of ending, huh?"

Endings like that are pretty common, both in shojo *and* shonen manga. Couples always seem to suddenly materialize in the final few chapters, and most of them are obviously just smooshed together at random from the handful of leftover characters. Apparently, it's just conventional wisdom that *everyone* has to be paired off by the end.

Personally, I don't see the point in making the world unnecessarily small like that. I'm not saying they need to pick from a pool of 3.5 billion or anything, but surely there are plenty of other fish in the sea beyond just the main characters.

And besides, there are plenty of people out there who are perfectly content being single. It seems to me that we aren't doing anyone any favors by forcing people into romances. I mean, who's it all for, anyway? It's not like these stories are supposed to function like dating apps.

"I guess it just makes it feel more like a happy ending for everyone, you know?" Lilia offered.

"I highly doubt the spares are happy to be paired off at random like that just to give the *appearance* of a happy ending."

A thought suddenly occurred to me: Why would Diana want to marry my older brother if she harbored any feelings for Edward?

I had a hunch that my main task for tomorrow would be finding out the answer.

◇◇◇

I awoke suddenly, sensing a presence nearby.

After finishing up my strategy meeting with Lilia, I'd returned to my room for some shut-eye. I could've sworn I'd been out cold for a while, but when I looked at the clock, it was still the middle of the night.

It was unusual for me to wake up at this hour. Typically, I slept soundly through the night, not waking up until morning. It didn't matter where I was either—home, the castle, the guard station nap room, even the classroom—I could always fall into a deep sleep. It was an important skill if you wanted to be a knight. You had to be able to sleep through anything—even someone switching out your pillow. And tonight, as usual, I'd fallen asleep in the blink of an eye.

Usually, the presence of a maid or servant passing my bedroom door wasn't nearly enough to wake me. But something was different tonight: The presence was much closer than that.

I turned to look at the source of the presence and saw a man climbing up onto my bed.

Even in the darkness, he was close enough for me to get a look at his face. I was stunned that I hadn't sensed him until he'd already gotten so close to me. He was clearly extremely stealthy.

He must've been startled by me opening my eyes, because I saw his eyes fly open in shock too. I spotted a large knife holstered at his side, but he didn't make any move to wield it against me. At the moment, at least, I wasn't picking up on any murderous intent from him.

While he stood frozen, I took a moment to get a read on him.

He had dark dirty-blond hair and golden eyes that pierced the twilit darkness. *Come to think of it, the princess has golden eyes too. Maybe that's a common eye color for the people here?* He was

wearing the same military uniform that I'd spotted on one of the guards who'd stood in wait behind the princess. *That must be the Royal Guard uniform.*

He didn't have Edward's and Christopher's long lashes or pretty face, but he was still a pretty good-looking guy. I mean, he was a character in a manga adaptation of an otome game, so you get the picture. Obviously, he was gonna be reasonably handsome.

Wonder if they only recruit eights and above to be knights in the Royal Guard?

That seemed like a lawsuit waiting to happen, if you asked me.

Seeing that the man wasn't moving, I sat up in bed.

"Well, this is a first. Never had a *guy* try to climb in bed with me before," I remarked, combing my hair out of my face with my fingers. I was careful not to take my eyes off of him for even a minute.



You might be wondering, from the way I said that, if I've ever had a *woman* try to climb into my bed—and the answer is yes.

When a certain man-eating saint (who will go unnamed) came over to spend the night, I specifically prepared the guest room for her, but I still had to stop her from trying to sneak into my bedroom and climb into bed with me. She was unsuccessful, of course. The moment she'd entered my bedroom, I'd grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and deposited her right back in the guest room. The offender even had the nerve to make some excuse about "just wanting to have a slumber party." But no matter how much you dressed it up, a nonconsensual slumber party is just trespassing, plain and simple.

"Who are you?" the man asked me quietly as he backed away.

Good call, I thought. He evidently had some experience in practical combat.

"No ordinary nobleman would be able to sense my presence. Who are you?" he repeated.

"I'm Frederic, the eldest son of Duke Burton," I answered. "Did you sneak in here without anyone seeing you?"

"Why are you impersonating the future Honorable Duke?"

He'd apparently picked up on the fact that I wasn't who I said I was, but he seemed to be only half right in his conjecture. Obviously, I wasn't the next Honorable Duke, but I *did* hail from a respectable noble family.

"I think *I'm* the one who ought to be asking questions here," I shot back with a shrug. "I'm guessing from your uniform that you're one of the princess's guards, right? So what are you doing here acting like an assassin?"

"I didn't come here to kill you," he replied in a deep voice.

I believed him. He wasn't wielding his knife, and didn't seem to be preparing to attack me.

Still. It was a pretty bold move to sneak into a foreign dignitary's room—even if you *weren't* intending to kill them in their sleep.

"You know, this could blow up into a diplomatic crisis if you're here on your princess's orders," I warned.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm here of my own accord."

He gave me a little shrug, then he looked probingly into my eyes.

Hey, save the staring for when I've got a full face of makeup, won't you?

"I've sworn my loyalty to the princess, see. So I just wanted to see who this guy was that she's supposed to marry."

Something about the way he said that struck me as unusual. That wasn't the way people usually spoke about someone who was just their master. There was something *more* in his words.

I thought back to what Lilia had said before. She'd mentioned something about how the older princess had ended up with her servant or something in the manga.

That's when it hit me.

"You're in love with Princess Diana, aren't you?"

"What?!"

"You don't have to hide it. Not to toot my own horn here, but I'm pretty perceptive when it comes to stuff like this."

"Wait! You've got this all wrong!"

The man waved his hands frantically in a show of denial, but I just gave him a confident smile in return.

Easy, pal. You just came here to threaten me a bit and tell me to keep my hands off of the princess, right? I've already read you like a book.

"Hey, relax. I don't want anything with Princess Diana. I'm actually here to dissolve the engagement amicably."

"Really...?" the man asked, eyeing me warily. He seemed to relax his guard just a little bit, though.

Hah, called it. That basically confirms you've got a thing for the princess, I thought, smiling.

I pounded my chest with my fist and nodded.

"Really."

I wasn't lying. If I could dissolve the engagement peacefully, that would be ideal.

I decided not to add that I was still willing to use whatever means necessary to make that happen, even if they *weren't* peaceful.

With a carefree smile, I reached out and offered my hand to the

man for a handshake.

"I think this could be the start of a beautiful friendship, uh...?" I began, prompting him for his name.

"Richard," he said, reaching out to grasp my hand.

Richard, huh? I thought. *Guess that makes him a "Dick."*

The End

The next day...

As I was heading out for my daily run, I bumped into Richard, who was standing in front of the villa.

Must've just finished the night shift, since he's still in the uniform he was wearing last night, I thought to myself. *Wait, no. He said he was acting on his own, so I guess he's probably just starting a typical day shift.*

I was impressed by his dedication, honestly. Only someone who *really* cared about their job woke up early for their shift after they'd put in free overtime during the graveyard shift.

He frowned at me. I gave him a little wave.

"Hey. Morning," I greeted him.

"Huh? Are you going out for a walk?"

"Thought I'd go for a run, actually," I replied, bending into a warm-up stretch.

You should never skip stretching, even if you're just going for a little jog. If you slack off on it, no amount of training will save you from pulling or tearing a muscle. You're just exposing yourself to God-only-knows what kind of injuries, really.

And just for reference, we're not talking about the static, gentle stretches that you're probably envisioning right now. Dynamic stretches—the kind where you're doing little jumps and actually moving your body—are a lot more effective.

Believe it or not, one of the best stretching routines you can do before a workout is Radio Exercises No. 2. You'll look a little weird doing them, but those stretches really do the job.

Old myths like "no pain, no gain" that emphasize a strict training regimen without any regard for the importance of essentials like warm-ups, hydration, and rest are a bodybuilder's worst enemy. If you want to get the most out of your training, you need to be

diligent about meeting your macros and making sure you're properly warming up and cooling down. Nothing will slow you down more than an injury.

As Richard watched me, the expression on his face quickly soured. Finally, he let out a loud sigh.

"Okay, come on. You're *obviously* not the future Honorable Duke," he said.

"What makes you say that?"

"No nobleman would ever wake up this early, much less for a run. And especially not without a bodyguard."

"I could say the same for you, you know."

I'd looked for signs that anyone else might be nearby, but it seemed he was here alone. He'd also said that he was acting on his own last night. He was entrusted with guarding the royal family, though, so he must've come from a fairly high-ranking family. If it was weird for me to be out here alone, then it was weird for him too.

He looked to be in his early twenties, so he was probably a full-grown man...but that didn't really make it any less weird. Knights worked as a team, so it wouldn't be looked upon too kindly if one of their members was up late at night and early in the morning wandering around by themselves.

"Well... I've got my reasons. Don't lump me in with you."

"Sure," I said, letting it slide. I had absolutely no interest in probing into these "reasons" of his.

I did a few jumps in place. Then I did some wrist and ankle stretches.

"Well, see ya 'round."

"Huh?"

With a light kick to the ground, I set off.

I paced myself to begin, ramping up as I ran until I'd met my target speed.

I knew it was probably a little weird to be running around a foreign country's palace, but hey—the butler who'd shown me around had even *suggested* a walk around the gardens, so...this wasn't all that different, right? Besides, as long as I stayed within

the castle grounds and didn't enter any buildings, I could always play it off like I was just lost. I'd probably get a slap on the wrist at worst.

So, why not make the rounds and take in the scenery?

"Hey! Wait!" a voice called from somewhere behind me.

It was Richard. Apparently, he'd decided to give chase. Now he was running alongside me. But after only a couple of seconds, he'd started wheezing.

"What? You wanna join me on my run?"

"No!"

"Aren't you gonna wear yourself out at this pace, though?"

"Shut up!" he snarled, but his form was quickly deteriorating.

It's important to have correct form when you run, because otherwise you'll get tired much more quickly and you'll be injury-prone.

Richard was clearly skilled at being stealthy, but stamina didn't seem to be one of his strong suits. He wasn't all that buff either, so I figured he was probably a scout like Martin.

"That reminds me. I didn't get the chance yesterday...to correct your misunderstanding!"

"My misunderstanding?" I replied.

"Listen...I'm not in love...with the princess or anything...okay?!"

"Oh, right. Sure."

Sounds like someone's *just embarrassed. The lady doth protest too much, methinks.*

Usually, whenever someone was this adamant about denying something, it was basically an admission of guilt.

"Seriously, listen to me!"

"I'm listening."

"Y... *You*...!"

Richard suddenly plopped down on the ground in a squat.

I slowed my pace and started jogging in place, figuring I'd better stick around to see what the heck had happened to him. I couldn't stop moving, though—didn't want my muscles to cool down too much.

See, you have to be kind to your muscles. That's the first rule of

bodybuilding: You have to always prioritize your muscles.

"What's wrong with you?! How can you...go that fast...and not be out of breath?!"

"That fast"? I was going at a completely normal pace, thank you. Robert and the other cadets can keep up with me just fine at this speed.

Actually, wait... Now that I think about it, I guess half of the cadets did *get left behind. And, to be fair, probably even the instructors run out of breath at this pace.*

Maybe there was something wrong with both Robert and me, then?

"Hey, the world's a big place, right? Plenty of room for a nobleman with an interest in fitness."

"That's...putting it pretty mildly!"

"And plenty of room for a guard who's got a thing for his boss. Nothing wrong with either of those, if you ask me."

"I told you...I'm not in love with her!"

Since Richard showed no signs of perking up and being ready to resume our run, I reluctantly stopped jogging in place.

While I had him here, I figured I might as well try asking him the question that I hadn't gotten to ask last night.

"Anyway, if you're her guard, then surely you know something, right?"

"What do you mean, 'know something'?"

"Like, did she say anything about why she wants to marry me?"

He blinked.

Then, with a pouty look on his face, he tore his gaze away from me. "How the hell would I know?"

"Uh, 'cause you're in love with her?"

"Seriously, do you ever listen?"

Unfortunately, it looked like I wasn't going to get any more out of this than what I knew already—which was that this guy was obviously head over heels in love with the princess.

Knitting his brow into a frown, Richard looked up at me.

"And why is it that you *don't* want to marry her?" he asked me. "Is our princess not good enough for you?"

Bingo, Richard. Couldn't have said it better myself.

I looked up at the graying sky. The only thing I really needed to do before my date with the princess was shower, so I wasn't exactly pressed for time. I figured I might as well stay and chat with him for a little bit longer.

"Well, she's a lovely lady, don't get me wrong," I began, twisting my mouth into a smirk. I gave him a little wink. "But I'm not really a *one-woman* kind of guy, if you catch my drift. So, I'm not sure I'm the right guy for Her Highness."

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"Lord Frederic, I... I truly must apologize!"

I'd strutted into my date with the princess in fine form, freshly showered and with a full face of makeup. Shortly into our date over tea, the princess had dismissed all of the servants and bowed her head in sudden apology.

"Truthfully, I don't really wish to marry you!"

I wasn't all that surprised to hear her say that. I'd kind of gotten the feeling she wasn't really interested.

I mean, she and my brother had barely ever met, and it was pretty hard to believe that she'd fallen in love with him at first sight from the few glimpses she'd seen of him. I'd pretty much expected a declaration like this at some point.

"Words cannot convey how sorry I am about this. I feel just terrible about making you come all this way..."

"Don't trouble yourself over this, Your Highness. I'll admit I *did* wonder, considering we've barely ever met," I replied with a smile.

"I truly am so sorry," she whispered again.

It wasn't really appropriate for members of the royal family to go around bowing their heads in contrition, but she hardly needed *me* to tell her that. Maybe she was just so earnest and upstanding that she couldn't help herself, or maybe she just felt that the gravity of what she'd done warranted an apology.

And she was right, really. She'd inconvenienced not only my older brother and me—his family—but also the crown prince himself. That

was a *pretty big* faux pas.

"But... Why did you propose to me, then?" I asked.

For a moment, the princess just kept staring at the ground silently. Then, as if steeling her resolve, she whipped her head up forcefully to look at me.

She clenched a fist and held it up in front of her chest (well, maybe it would be more accurate to say "between her breasts") and leaned forwards as she spoke.

"Well, you see, I... I've never been in love before," she said.

"*Love?*" I repeated, incredulous.

I was ten out of ten bewildered by this, and I couldn't hide it.

Now, you might remember that despite this world's uncanny resemblance to historical Europe, everyone spoke Japanese. And it just so happens that one of the Japanese words for "love" is a homonym for "koi fish." So, I'm sure you can understand why I did a bit of a double take here. I was so thrown for a loop by this that I momentarily wondered if we'd suddenly started talking about a certain freshwater fish for some reason.

But obviously this was no time to be talking about fish.

So there is where love comes into play, huh? I thought. I could already see where this was going.

"I suppose I should say that I don't even truly know what love *is*," the princess explained.

Everyone knows what a princess who's never experienced love before wants. It's a tale as old as time.

"I-I understand, of course, that it is my duty to the kingdom to marry. I am to love the man that my father...that is to say, *His Majesty, the king*...chooses for me as my husband, and I am to love him with all my heart."

As I half listened to the princess speak, my brow furrowed. The other half of my attention was devoted to figuring out what my next moves should be.

"But I simply can't bear the thought of marrying before I've even had the chance to learn what love is!"

As I came upon my conclusion, I found myself tempted to look up at the ceiling dramatically. It felt like the credits were about to roll. I

could almost see the words "*The End*" flash across the screen.

"My father was pressuring me into marrying a man I'd never met, and that's when...well, that's when I decided to put forth *your name*. I lied to him and told him that I wanted to marry the next duke of Diagrantz."

"But *why* me?"

"Prince Edward has told me so much about you. He's always saying what a kind soul you are. I suppose I assumed that the Diagrantz family would be reluctant to relinquish their next Honorable Duke, especially to a foreign kingdom. I also assumed that my father wouldn't pressure you to come here in person. Apparently, I was...mistaken. But at the time, your name seemed like a safe choice."

I'd heard that King Normandius could be pretty high-handed, but I hadn't really had a sense of what that entailed. This certainly painted a pretty clear picture for me.

Basically, the king had picked someone for the princess to marry, and she'd thrown a wrench into his plans by saying that she wanted to marry someone else. He'd probably been furious that some random foreign duke had seduced his daughter, and demanded that the scoundrel present himself immediately...or something like that, anyway.

So, my family was just caught in the cross fire of your domestic squabble, huh? I thought. It was honestly the worst-case scenario. *Seriously, couldn't you have sorted this out* without *dragging us into it?*

As I listened to the princess's tale of woe, I found myself thinking that my older brother would have been far better suited to offering her empathy.

If that was the reason that the princess had named him as her chosen fiancé, then I guess all my fretting had probably been for nothing. My older brother could've come to the West and left without incident.

In fact, everything probably would've gone a whole lot smoother if I *hadn't* come—or rather, if my brother had come as planned.

If the princess had told him the whole truth, like she'd just told

me, then my older brother probably would have said something like "I'll help you find someone to fall in love with." Then one thing would have led to another, and she'd have fallen for her guard.

The End

The epilogue, of course, would have been my older brother coming home with an armful of snacks and an apology for me.

It was exceedingly easy to see how it would have all played out.

Anyway, the point was... Well, the point was that there *was* no point in me coming here.

In saying that, though, I'd probably still do exactly the same thing in a similar situation. I'd tie my older brother up to restrain him if I had to, and I'd go in his place even if it meant a fight.

Hindsight's twenty-twenty, I guess.

"But I must admit, while I've only caught brief glimpses of you, I was under the impression that you were, well...a bit more full-fleshed," the princess said.

"I've lost some weight," I replied immediately, flashing her an over-the-top smile. "This actually works out perfectly, though. The truth is, I never had any intention of marrying you."

"What?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. You're a very captivating young woman, Your Highness. And you've got a lot going for you...if you know what I mean."

I gave her a mischievous smile, coupled with a little wink. She just stared at me blankly, blinking.

"But I've got a title to inherit and a family to look after. They're waiting for me to come back home. Also, I love my country. So, I came here hoping to talk you out of this engagement somehow."

"I... I had no idea. I'm so sorry..."

The princess's shoulders slumped. She looked genuinely apologetic, as if she meant that from the bottom of her heart. If it was an act, then it was a pretty damn good one.

That made me a little concerned actually, even though she wasn't *my* kingdom's princess. I'd pictured someone who was essentially the female version of Edward: the kind of blue blood that always wore a graceful smile to cover up God-knows-what she was thinking

on the inside. Could someone this easy to read survive as a princess?

The West was the Diagrantz Kingdom's biggest trading partner, so its stability had a major impact on us—which is to say, it directly impacted the stability of *my* life.

I just hope some cad doesn't come along and take advantage of her, I thought.

"Don't be. I'm just glad that you told me the truth," I said, gently placing my hand over hers. "It sounds like our goals are aligned."

"They...are?"

"We both want to put an end to this as amicably as possible. Right?"

At this, she looked up at me.

But she didn't agree right away. Instead, she tore her golden eyes away from me.

Her hesitation was easy to understand. After all, if I returned home to Diagrantz now, she would be left to marry the man her father had chosen for her. She'd never get the chance to have a taste of love.

In all likelihood, she was conflicted between following her dream of finding love and her guilt over roping me into her mess.

I gave her a gentle smile, hoping to reassure her.

"I came here with the intention of staying for roughly a month. I'd be happy to help you find your first love as long as I'm here."

"What?"

"We'll put on a show for the king so he thinks that everything's going well between us. And while I'm here, I'll look for someone you can fall in love with. How does that sound?"

She let out a little gasp.

I swore I could see a flicker of hope in her wide-open eyes, but then she shook her head as if to banish the thought.

"B-But I couldn't possibly inconvenience you any further!" she protested. "Especially when you've no reason to help me."

"No reason?" I repeated, stroking my chin. I cocked my head affectedly.

I'd admit that my plan was partly motivated by self-interest, but

mostly, I was just doing this because it was what my older brother would have done. I wasn't exactly doing anything worth being proud of.

There was no reason to come out and *say* that, though.

So, instead, I gave the princess a smile and said something that my brother would never have dreamed of saying.

"I may not be the Honorable Duke just yet, Your Highness, but I *am* next in line for the title. I could hardly abandon someone in their time of need. It's just not in my nature."

"Lord Frederic..."

Her eyes glistened. A faint blush spread across her cheeks.

It was like she was finally seeing me for the first time.

It dawned on me now that she'd probably been so preoccupied with her guilt over dragging us into this mess that she hadn't even had the capacity to really *look* at me. No wonder nothing I'd done had seemed to have any effect on her.

"We're partners in crime now, so you can call me 'Eric.'"

"In that case, please call me 'Dee.' You don't need to address me so formally."

"'Dee' it is, then," I said, taking her up on her offer.

My older brother called the crown prince of his own kingdom by a nickname, so I figured it was only natural that he'd take up a foreign princess's request to do the same with her.

As I looked at her, I found myself breaking into a smile.

"I hope we can find you the perfect first love," I said.

◇◇◇

That night...

After dinner, Lilia and I sat in the drawing room to resume our strategizing.

"If real life is mirroring the manga's plot, then our best bet is probably to set the princess up with Richard."

"Wait, what? Come on, let's just forget about this and go home already!" Lilia whined.

"Lilia, we *just* got here," I replied, giving her a wry smile.

Baron Douglas's condition for letting Lilia come on this trip was that she had to "volunteer her services as a saint"—which is to say, she had to do missionary work. It wasn't my fault she wasn't enjoying it.

The saint looked positively gobsmacked.

"Look, I don't want to hurt my brother's reputation. I've gotta hang around for a little bit, at least."

"Uh-huh. And what're you *really* after?"

"I'm not gonna be satisfied until I've gotten him just a little more worked up."

At this, Lilia sighed deeply.

I knew it must have been unbearably annoying to have been roped into our sibling spat, but ultimately, she was the one who'd chosen to be here.

If you're gonna blame anyone, blame yourself.

"Well, speak of the devil..."

"Huh?"

Lilia turned to look at the door to the drawing room. In seconds, Richard walked in, escorted by a maid.

"Are you psychic...?" Lilia muttered under her breath.

I wasn't, of course. I'd just sensed his presence nearby.

As Richard approached, Lilia practically jumped in her seat. Apparently, her fear of strangers was still going strong.

Richard walked up next to me and took something out of his pocket, which he then brusquely thrust at me. It was a letter adorned with an ostentatious seal.

"A letter from our princess," he explained.

"Thanks."

Just as I was about to open it, he spoke up to stop me.

"Wait till you're alone to read it."

Aha, I thought. *Must be related to that little issue I agreed to help her with.*

I noticed Lilia glaring at me. I quickly put the letter in my pocket before she had the chance to cause any trouble.

Richard seemed even crabbier than usual this evening. I couldn't help but notice the barbs in his voice when he'd said "*our* princess."

It really couldn't have been any more obvious that he didn't just see her as his employer, though.

I figured this was the perfect chance to prod him about that a bit more.

"Hey, Richard," I said.

Nothing.

"Richard?"

Again, there was no reply.

I looked up at him, baffled as to why he'd ignore me. What had I done to deserve that? But then I noticed his fixed gaze and his slack-jawed mouth.

He was looking intently at the spot on the couch where Lilia was sitting...and there were hearts in his eyes.

Oh, for God's sake. Again? I thought. It seemed Lilia's Charm had claimed yet another victim.

Lilia gulped down a little shriek when she noticed, sinking into the couch as if she were trying to disappear.

In the manga, Richard was just "some servant or something," so he was basically just as much of a side character as I was—if not more so. Lilia's Charm was especially effective on nobodies like him, so it wasn't all that surprising that he was under her spell.

Wait...

Just as I was grabbing him by the collar and tossing him out the window into the garden, I was suddenly seized by a sense of foreboding.

I thought Lilia's Charm wasn't supposed to work on anyone whose heart was already taken by another?

Richard was, as far as I was aware, clearly smitten with the princess. Surely it shouldn't have worked on him? But here he was, hearts in his eyes and everything.

There was only one explanation for this: Richard hadn't realized that he was in love with the princess yet.

And there was only one way to feel about this reveal: annoyed.

I seriously can't with this guy.

You kind of assume that someone who's oblivious to their feelings is just dense beyond belief, but the truth is that they're *willfully*

ignorant. They don't *want* to acknowledge that they're in love.

And because of their deep-seated, self-inflicted delusion, they find themselves in the awkward position of being the only one in the room who's blind to their feelings—even when literally everyone else can tell that they're in love.

Basically, they're just plain dishonest.

There are plenty of guys like that in fiction, who just can't bring themselves to be honest. In *Royal LOVERS*, for instance, you've got the hot-and-cold Robert—not that there's any trace of that left in *this* version of him. If you met one of those guys in reality, though, they'd be nothing but a pain in the butt.

You can't even shake them and say, "Just spit it out already!" because unfortunately, that tends to make things worse. They'll just dig their heels in and protest like "What?! Sh-Shut up, stupid! You've got me all wrong!" They'll never be honest about their feelings unless they're in mortal danger. *That's* how bad it is.

Theoretically, I *could* find a way to put dear old Dick here in mortal danger, but there was a real chance that that could land me in the slammer. I'd consider it as a last resort, but...I needed to have a plan B, just in case he never came around. I'd have to look for backup options for the princess while I tried to push him towards admitting his feelings.

Word of advice: No matter what the situation, always have a backup plan in your pocket.

As I pictured the princess in my head, I brainstormed some eligible bachelors I could introduce her to.

The first person who came to mind was Edward's personal guard, Martin.

He was pretty close in age to the princess, and he was the second son of a marquis—that rank was certainly nothing to sneeze at. But most of all, her generous assets made her *just* his type.

There is the risk that he won't have eyes for anything but *her assets, though.*

Unfortunately, Martin was also a complete blockhead when it came to women, and I sincerely doubted that he had any intentions of changing that. There'd been a period during which he'd been

bombarded with matchmaking meetings, but none of those had ever worked out for him. So, I had some serious misgivings about setting him up with the love-hungry princess.

Even if I did want to set them up together, Martin was back in Diagrantz, so it'd take at least a week to summon him here. It seemed more sensible to consider the princess's options out of the pool of men who were already here in the palace.

"Sis? There's a strange man wandering around outside..."

Just on time, Christopher entered the drawing room, fresh from his stroll around the garden.

Richard's still loitering around outside, huh? Well, I'm sure he'll come to his senses again before too long. I'll just leave him be.

Putting Richard out of my mind, I turned to stare intently at Christopher.

He might have been my younger brother, but he was also a love interest; even I had the sense to know that he was a real catch.

He was sociable and polite, earnest and hardworking, and he was the second son of a duke. Sure, he wasn't from here, but even abroad, the duke of Diagrantz and his family still carried a fair deal of influence.

Honestly, as far as eligible bachelors went, Christopher was the perfect specimen.

There was just one little problem: If the princess actually did fall in love with him, and they wound up engaged, then I'd wind up in almost exactly the same place that I'd started.

If my family thought I'd just given up Christopher instead of my older brother, they'd never forgive me. And trust me, they had so little faith in me that that's *exactly* what they'd think.

Plus, unlike me, Christopher was a sweet kid. He'd probably object to my plan from the start, on the grounds that he wouldn't want to toy with the princess's feelings. And even if he did agree to play along, he'd probably feel crushed by the weight of lying to her. I couldn't count on him to play his part convincingly.

Also, if my family ever found out what I'd tried to make him do, I'd be disowned.

Guess I've got no choice, then.

I Want to Get to Know You

"What do you think, Your Highness? Dee's a sweetheart, right?"

"Why is this happening to me?" he grumbled.

"'Cause it seemed like you'd be the best match."

The next day, Edward had decided that I'd be accompanying him on an official visit (unlike me, he apparently had real work to do, and it was pretty hard to decline his request for my company when he pulled out the "Aren't you supposed to be my bodyguard?" line). So, I told him the whole tale of what had unfolded yesterday during our carriage ride.

"Unlike in our kingdom, princesses in Normandius have a claim to the throne. It would hardly be sensible for the first princess to marry a crown prince," Edward said.

"I'm not telling you to *marry* her. I'm sure the king will pick a suitable husband for her. I'm just thinking that you could, you know, give her a little taste of romance. If you can sate her thirst for love, I'll be free to go." For several moments, Edward glared at me silently. Then, finally, he broke his silence with a dramatic sigh. "I refuse."

"Come on, don't be like that."

"I suppose I could *consider* it...if you promise to do anything I ask."

"I don't know about that..."

"Then I refuse."

Not gonna budge, huh?

Edward was royalty—and not just any royalty, but the crown prince. He'd well and truly joined the ranks of adulthood once he'd graduated from the academy, so he'd been living in the cesspool of the aristocracy full-time now. And besides, he'd always been the kind of slippery schemer to hide his true intentions behind a smile. Surely seducing some sweet young ingenue would be child's play for him?

With a beautiful face like his, he'd probably have her eating out of his hand after just giving her a smile.

But since he seemed so unwilling to help, I figured I needed to sweeten the deal a bit.

"If you take Dee off my hands, I'll take her little sister off yours," I offered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"She's been giving you a headache, hasn't she? Come on. It's a pretty good deal for you, if you ask me."

The carriage door opened.

I stepped out first, then I offered my hand to Edward. He took it and alighted after me.

He gave me an appraising look, as if weighing up my terms. Then he lowered his voice and said, "Don't tell me you intend to seduce her?"

"What? Is that not allowed?"

"If that's what you've got in mind, the deal is off."

I couldn't believe he was actually taking my joking around seriously.

And why did he care if I seduced her anyway? I was starting to think that maybe he had a bit of a thing for her after all.

There's a certain type of guy who hates it when a girl chases him, but hates it even more when another guy moves in on her. I couldn't help but get the feeling that maybe Edward was one of those guys.

I found that kind of annoying, actually. If anything, it just made me want to root for the second princess.

"It really wouldn't bother you?" Edward asked me.

"What do you mean, 'it'?"

"If I seduced Princess Diana."

I cocked my head, confused by where he was going with this.

Maybe he meant that it'd be kind of awkward to watch someone you know make a pass at a woman? I'd completely leaned into my playboy archetype, though, so I was generally pretty numb to that.

That being said...it probably *would* be a little weird to watch Edward pursue someone. I was so used to seeing his princely smile now that it might feel awkward to see him put on the sickeningly

sweet one that he always flashed at the main character in the game—especially if I had to see it over and over again.

Now that the thought had occurred to me, I figured I'd better make a disclaimer.

"Don't worry, Your Highness. Peeping isn't really my thing."

"That's not what I meant."

No? Well, now I'm out of ideas. I give up.

Sometimes, I had absolutely no idea what was going on in his head.

"Put that face of yours to good use, and you could probably have any woman you wanted," I said.

"What?"

"I'm saying, you've got a beautiful face. You—"

"N-Now hold on a minute!" Edward cried, cutting me off.

I cocked my head even further. Why in the world was he so worked up?

Was it something I said?

He flapped his mouth open and closed. Then, in a strained voice, he managed, "D-Did you just call me...*beautiful*?"

"Hmm? Yeah, why?"

His eyes were wide in shock, but I had no idea why. With a face as beautiful as his, there was no way that this was the first time he'd heard someone call him that.

Or, wait... Maybe I had that backwards?

Maybe it was just too obvious to even be worth stating? I mean, no one looks up at a waterfall and declares, "The water is falling from above."

Maybe only a tactless boor like me with no understanding of taste would blurt something like that out?

No...that can't be right, I thought. But I tried to play it off with a half-joking follow-up.

"Hmm? Surely you *know* how beautiful you are, Your Highness?"

"I am aware, yes. It's just..."

I couldn't help but feel a little jealous that he could agree so quickly. But hey, maybe life was just different when you were a love interest and everyone was *at least* a seven. And when you looked as

beautiful as Edward, there's no way you wouldn't know it.

"I wasn't aware that *you* took any notice," he mumbled, so quietly that I could barely catch what he was saying.

Well, sure. Enough notice to be jealous, I guess, I thought.

I took pride in my appearance. After all, I'd worked pretty hard for these results. But whenever I was face-to-face with Lilia or one of the love interests, sometimes I found myself having to admit that they were on a whole other level.

Nothing trumps good genes, I guess.

Edward just stared at the ground for a while, thinking God-only-knows-what, until eventually he lifted his head.

"All right. I'll do it," he said.

Oh? That was a quick change of heart, I thought. *Maybe my compliment rallied him to the cause?*

If that was all it took, then maybe the importance that everyone in this world placed on looks ran even deeper than I thought.

"On one condition: I don't want you to take your eyes off of me."

His face was an inscrutable mix of emotions as he added his demand.

What, so I'll keep paying you compliments? I wondered.

Well, that was fine by me. I put on an obliging expression and gave him a nod.

◇◇◇

When we exited the carriage, we were greeted by a large plaza that resembled a town square.

Statues of accomplished-looking figures stood tall, surrounded by gorgeous, blooming flower beds. Canals sliced through the landscape every which way, flaunting the kingdom's abundance of water. It reminded me of something Edward had told me about traversing the kingdom by boat.

At the heart of the plaza were several magnificent buildings: a cathedral, a theater, a clocktower, a stadium, and a dance hall. Since arriving in the West, I hadn't really seen anything of the kingdom except for the castle, so all of these sights were new to me.

The architecture and general vibe of the place were distinctly foreign, and there was something just...really strange about it all. Couldn't tell you what, specifically, though.

Unlike my usual forays into town with Edward, we hadn't sneaked out this time. We were here on an official visit, so Edward was acting accordingly unabashed. The plaza was apparently only accessible to nobles, and we'd been escorted here by Normandius guards.

If even the aristocrats-only section of town feels this foreign, then I wonder what it's like downtown?

I still had to buy some souvenirs, so I figured I could sneak off at some point to take care of that.

There's nothing more exciting, when you're traveling abroad, then stopping by a market downtown and buying all kinds of food with indecipherable labels. And since they still spoke Japanese in the West, I didn't even have to worry about the language barrier.

"That building over there is the library," Edward explained, upon seeing that I was looking in its direction. "It used to be a palace, but it's been remodeled for its current purpose."

He'd be pissed beyond belief if he knew I was daydreaming about those weird, rubbery black snacks I had tried once that tasted like tires. So, I just nodded along and pretended to be interested as I asked about another building.

After a while, Edward finally gave his mouth a rest. Apparently he'd had his fill of fun playing tour guide.

"Really feels like the tables have turned now, doesn't it?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"The first time I ventured out into town... I was completely dependent upon you to show me around."

"Oh. Right."

It felt like a bit of an exaggeration to say that I'd "shown him around" when all I'd really done was just give him some cursory tips. "That's the bakery, that's the craft store, and don't stick around too long there or the old man will start talking your ear off" was pretty much the long and short of it.

I was impressed that he still remembered that, honestly. Stuff like that usually went in one ear and out the other for me.

"Lizzie, there's something I want to tell you. Ever since then, I—"

"Eddie!" a voice cried out, interrupting him.

I whipped around, shielding Edward with my back as I did.

A blonde, pigtailed girl—to whom the voice must have belonged—came running over towards us.

Her golden eyes were turned slightly upwards, but they were big and round, framed by long, voluminous eyelashes. She was the kind of beautiful girl who'd snap you right back to your senses.

She wore a white-and-peach-pink knee-length dress that suited her perfectly, and two blindingly white calves peaked out from underneath it.

It was obvious at a glance that she was a young noblewoman. Or, rather...I guess it was obvious from the fact that she was here at the plaza to begin with.

A man was chasing after her—probably her personal guard. I recognized his uniform. It was the same one that the princess's guards wore.

Once I'd checked that there wasn't any hostile intent from her or her guard, I relaxed a bit.

The girl didn't even look at me. Instead, she looked intently straight past me at Edward, who was standing behind me, as she ran over to him.

"You wound me, Eddie, you really do! I can't believe you'd come to Normandius and not even bother to pay me a visit!"

"Hello, Princess Marie," Edward replied reluctantly. "I can assure you that I was planning to come and see you at some point during my trip."



I looked meaningfully at Edward, and, without moving his lips, he explained, "She's the second princess I was telling you about."

Actually, I was hoping you'd tell me more about that hilarious nickname of yours, I thought. *Maybe I've actually been reincarnated into the world of* Coming to America *all along?*

In all fairness, though, Eddie Murphy's character was Prince Akeem, not Prince Eddie.

The girl—Princess Marie, apparently—blushed furiously as she looked up at Edward with sparkling eyes. She was the very picture of a blushing maiden.

Or rather, she was the very picture of a girl in love.

If Lilia's archetype was the girl who made you want to protect her, then Princess Marie was the "stubborn as nails" archetype. And if she was the second princess, then that made her Princess Diana's little sister.

They didn't really look much alike (the blonde hair and obvious lack of "assets" set Princess Marie apart), but they were both very clearly royalty. Only princesses could be *that* beautiful.

"Well, isn't she cute?" I said.

"*Do* something!" Edward hissed through his princely smile.

Sheesh. Demanding as always, I see.

I took in a breath and knelt gracefully before the princess.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Princess Marie. I'm Eric Burton, son of Duke Burton from Diagrantz."

"Burton...? Oh. You're my sister's fiancé."

Princess Marie turned to look at me, blinking. Then she regarded me with a little satisfied snort and turned away, having lost all interest.

"That's nice, but I need you to get lost now. I've got something to discuss with Eddie!" she said.

"As you wish."

I took a step back, making way for the princess.

I could practically feel Edward's death glare boring into the back of my head, but I ignored it. There was no point rushing things. Whether I was going to get the princess out of Edward's hair by making her fall in love with me or through some other means, I

needed to first formulate a plan. And to do that, I needed to gather some intel on her.

It was one thing when I was trying to dazzle your everyday noblewoman, but Princess Marie was certainly not that. It was obvious just from looking at her that she was a major character with several *distinctive* personality traits. I might not have been able to win her over with my playboy act alone. I'd need to think of a good backup plan.

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." That's what Sun Tzu said, anyway, so I'd heed his advice and start there.

Also, if it turned out that it would be in the kingdom's best interest for Edward to marry the princess, then I'd have to take that into consideration. Not that I'd say anything about that to Edward, of course. He'd flip his lid.

"I want to see your kingdom too, Eddie! Take me home with you!"

"Another time, perhaps. When the opportunity arises."

"Another time? When will *that* be?"

"I'll have to speak with King Normandius about it," he said, which in aristocratic lingo basically translated to "Never."

I figured that this would probably keep going unless I intervened, so I butted in and said, "Please excuse us, Your Highness. Prince Edward has an official visit to make, so I'm afraid we're running a bit short on time."

"I'll come with you, then," she said.

"But—"

"I'm going to be Eddie's bride one day, so it's only sensible that I should accompany him!"

She didn't even look behind her to her guard—who was turning blue in the face, by the way—for permission. She just looked up at Edward imploringly, as if to say, *Don't you think?*

Anyone who looked into those perfectly persuasive puppy-dog eyes would have agreed immediately. She was so adorable, it made you want to eat her right up. It was hard to imagine anyone being unkind to her when she looked so sweet and so pleading.

Just do what she says! I wanted to tell Edward.

It was only appropriate for a cute girl to *act* cute. *It's such a shame when girls let their innate cuteness go to waste,* I thought. Not naming any names, but I'd admit a certain saint came to mind.

Without thinking, I blurted out, "You really love Prince Edward, don't you?"

"I—!"

The princess's face immediately turned beet red.

Aww. Too cute.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but it kind of felt like all of her reactions were a little *too* perfect. They somehow seemed to always have maximum impact. I didn't know why, but it gave me a strange sense of déjà vu.

"N-No, I don't! Eddie's the one who said he wanted to marry me! He didn't seem particularly objectionable, so I kindly decided to oblige him. That's all!"

I felt a shock run through me as the princess turned her head away with a huff.

What is *this?* I wondered. But deep down, I knew.

She was a tsundere.

It felt weird to use that word. It was so dated now, it was almost obsolete. But there was just no other word for what she was.

Suddenly, it dawned on me why I was feeling such strong déjà vu.

A stubborn blonde in pigtails...who's also a tsundere. It's so classic*.*

She was such a perfect embodiment of the tried-and-true archetype that I wanted to give her a standing ovation. In a shonen manga, she'd be the main heroine, and in a shojo, she'd be the main character's rival.

If anything, though, it felt like that archetype was almost a relic of the past now. Did that make her an endangered species?

And now that I thought about it, why did blonde pigtails seem so inseparable from the tsundere archetype, anyway? Where did the idea that they were one and the same even come from?

There were plenty of pigtailed tsundere characters, sure, but

there were also plenty of pigtailed characters who *weren't* tsunderes, and vice versa. So why was the idea that they had to go hand in hand so deeply ingrained in me?

"Right, well... Anything to say to that, Your Highness?" I asked Edward.

"I most certainly did *not* say that," he replied, in a tone so low that it sounded like it was crawling up from the depths of Hell. "She challenged me to a duel and demanded that I marry her if she won. When she *lost*, she demanded that I 'take responsibility' and make her my bride. That's what she's referring to."

So, his only options had been 1) to marry her, and 2) to marry her.

Huh. Sounds like her route was pretty fixed.

"I'd never lost a duel before I met Eddie! Not even to one of the knights!" Princess Marie declared. "That just goes to show how strong and dashing he is!"

"Is that right?" I said, glancing over at the knight who was escorting her.

He was making some sort of gesture that I interpreted to mean "I let her win." Of course, I was operating under the assumption that people gestured the same way in the West that we did.

Logically speaking, though, there was no way that a knight would duel a member of the royal family with everything he had—especially not if he were dueling a lady. That being said, I could tell from the princess's speediness when she'd run over to us earlier that she wasn't just your typical young noblewoman. She was clearly pretty athletic.

"Princess Marie, could you spare a moment of your time for me?" I asked her.

"Huh?"

"I'm rather skilled with a sword myself, actually. I was hoping I could trouble you for a duel."

"Why do *I* have to duel *you*?" she grumbled, frowning.

It seemed Dee wasn't the only woman who didn't want me. I seemed to be encountering all kinds of women in the West who wouldn't even give me the time of day.

Honestly, it was kind of refreshing. Women weren't usually this cold to me.

If I took this to its natural conclusion, I'd probably turn into the kind of guy who said shit like "Huh. Never met a woman who didn't fall madly in love with me before. You know... I think I *like* her."

I leaned forwards, making eye contact with the princess. Then I gave her a mischievous wink.

"If I win, then you'll have to entertain yourself today. But if you win, then you can accompany us on our tour."

"Really?!"

At this, her eyes sparkled.

Her guard had gone even more blue in the face, but I sent a look his way that said, *Don't worry. I've got this.*

I felt a light tug on my sleeve. But before I could turn around, Edward spoke up in a sharp tone.

"Don't you dare go easy on her," he warned me.

What kind of an order is that? I thought. *If I didn't go easy on my opponents, they'd be dead. Are you trying to start a diplomatic crisis here?*

The guards ran around in a frenzied panic, and ultimately, we managed to secure a spot in the area for Princess Marie and me to duel.

Only a princess and a crown prince from a neighboring kingdom could pull off a last-minute reservation like this, I thought. What's more, it wasn't just any arena—it seemed like a state-owned one. *Better make the most of this while we've got it.*

I decided to pretend I didn't notice how exhausted the guards looked. We all stood to benefit from this, though. Hopefully they'd consider the little hoops they'd just jumped through worth it when they realized I was saving them—they wouldn't have to be at Princess Marie's mercy all day as she followed us around.

The space we'd booked was an indoor section of the arena that was dedicated to sports like fencing. Honestly, though, I didn't need a lot of space to carry out my plans. I would have been perfectly content to just duel outside.

Princess Marie reappeared in a change of clothes, looking ready

for some exercise. She held a spear in her hand.

A spear, huh? Nice choice.

A little lady like her could use all the help she could get to extend her reach.

It called to mind a piece of Japanese history, actually. Samurai wives had a penchant for using naginatas, which had a similarly long range. Despite the seeming similarity, though, the origins of spears and naginatas were apparently pretty distinct, so maybe I shouldn't have been lumping them together.

Most people associated samurai with katanas, but there were actually a lot of foot soldiers in the Warring States period that used spears. And apparently, in the early modern period of Japan, spear techniques were used as a foundation for fighting with bayonets. It made an ideal weapon for unskilled infantrymen, since it was easy to wield and a powerful all-rounder.

But setting that aside, there was also just something kind of aesthetic about a petite girl wielding a giant weapon.

I, on the other hand, was unarmed. I did some light stretching and turned to face the princess.

She stood with her feet a half step apart, spear at the ready.

Interesting. Looks like she knows what she's doing.

"I'm ready to begin whenever you are!" she declared.

"How about we set some rules first?"

"Rules?"

"I won't use a weapon, but please feel free to use whatever weapon you like," I said. "I don't care if you come at me with a spear, a sword, or a firm kick."

As I spoke, Princess Marie lowered her spear.

Despite her willful posturing, she apparently had the decency to at least listen properly when someone was speaking. That was a real relief, because listening to instructions was a pretty vital skill in martial arts. If you didn't, people could wind up seriously injured.

I was pleasantly surprised by how seriously she seemed to take her spear fighting. She must have really dedicated herself to learning the martial art—which explained why she seemed so confident.

Well, being confident is a good thing. It's even better if you've

actually got the skills to back it up, but hey, disproportionate confidence is what being a kid is all about.

I faced the princess and made a show of lifting my hands in the air.

"But if either of us raises our hands like this for ten seconds, we forfeit the duel," I said.

"Well, *I* certainly don't need a silly precautionary measure like that," the princess replied with a fearless laugh. "But I suppose it would be good for *you* to have an out."

Princess Marie seemed like a pretty competent fighter, but apparently not enough to notice the vast difference in our capabilities.

It felt like the right thing to do was to open her eyes to reality before she *really* got hurt. If she was going to resent anyone, it ought to be the guards and knights who'd sheltered her and let her win.

I smiled, giving her a little nod. Then I called out to Edward.

"All right, Your Highness. On your signal."

He eyed me warily, but he took a step forwards, sighing in resignation. Then he thrust his right arm in front of him and vigorously lifted it straight above his head.

"Begin!"

As soon as I heard his signal, I entered stealth mode and cut around behind the princess. She didn't even react.

Seems like you've still got a lot to learn, Princess.

Before she even had the chance to register what I was doing, I'd lifted both of her arms above her head in a celebratory "hooray!" pose. Her spear fell to the ground with a *clack*.

"Huh?! What?!"

"One...two..." I counted slowly.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Three...four..."

"How *dare* you! U-Unhand me at once!"

Princess Marie flailed against me, but I had more than enough core strength to restrain her. I didn't even budge an inch.

I would've preferred that she left my shins off-limits, though. Her

kicks hurt like hell.

"Five...six..."

"What's...going on?! I can't...move at all!"

"Seven...eight..."

"Stop! Let me go! *Let me go*, I said!"

"Nine...ten."

And just like that, I released her hands. Suddenly released from her restraints, the full force of her flailing sent her suddenly tumbling to the ground.

"Well, that's it then. Both of us held our hands in the air for ten seconds, so we both forfeit," I said. "Our duel's ended in a draw."

"Th-That doesn't count! That wasn't a real duel!"

"We both agreed to the rules beforehand, though, didn't we?"

Princess Marie was glaring daggers at me. I could see tears welling up in her eyes.

Hey, come on, why're you making me out to be some vicious scoundrel? I thought I handled this all remarkably peacefully, if I do say so myself.

"You couldn't beat me, Princess Marie," I said. "So? Have I enchanted you?"

"As *if*! I hate boys like you!"

As you should, I thought. I had everyone fooled by my looks, but deep down, I was a real villain. Her response was only appropriate.

Unlike the love interests, whose whole schtick was being likable, my selling point was how loathsome I was.

I couldn't help but feel a little concerned by how predictable the princess was, though. She and her older sister really seemed to wear their hearts on their sleeves.

I also found myself deeply amused by how easy it was to toy with her.

See, if there's one ironclad rule for tsundere routes, it's that they always start off hating your guts. So, her declaration that she "hated boys like me" was actually a win. There was also the whole "the lady doth protest too much" angle—for all their bluster, tsunderes obviously *like* the main character. Plus, hatred is easier than apathy to transform into fondness. That's true of everyone, but *especially* of

tsundere girls.

"This was no different to choosing your fiancé based on who wins a duel. You have to admit, it's a bit silly, isn't it?"

At this, Princess Marie clammed up.

I smiled, preparing to deliver the final blow.

"Admit it, Princess. Your crush on Prince Edward has nothing to do with the outcome of your duel with him."

"I... *I...*!"

Her mouth flapped open and closed repeatedly. In seconds, her face had turned beet red.

Aww. She really is so predictable.

"E-Enough! I'm leaving!" she declared.

"Okay. Get home safely, now."

"I hate you, Eric!"

I waved her off as I watched her go. Her guard briefly turned around to give me a bow before he escorted her off.

Well, I think that'll do for now.

At least she remembered my name. I'd clearly been promoted in her eyes from Edward's accessory to a vile, loathsome man. Now *that* was progress.

All that was left was to find an opportunity to put my life on the line to save her, or to be a shoulder to cry on when Edward was cold to her. From there, the pieces were bound to fall into place.

"Lizzie...?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do I feel like that just made things *worse*?"

"Worse?" I cocked my head, chuckling amicably at the suggestion. "I wouldn't say that."

Relax, Edward. Maybe it looks that way to you, but that's only because you don't understand tsunderes.

My pursuit of Princess Marie was all going just as planned.

Trust me, I've got this.

◇◇◇

"I met Princess Marie, but I have a feeling she's not too fond of

me."

"Oh, dear."

Princess Diana and I were enjoying some tea together at a café in the capital. She'd sent me a letter saying that she wanted to have a strategy meeting, so after some brainstorming, we'd decided to sneak out of the castle and meet in town.

Obviously, I couldn't just carry her in my arms and jump out of the window like I had with Edward. We would've been caught immediately, and it easily could've turned into a diplomatic scandal. Worst-case scenario, I might've even been arrested and deported.

So, instead, we decided to rope Richard into our scheme—or rather, *the princess* decided to rope him into it. He was a little reluctant at first, what with the recent spate of kidnappings, but he eventually relented. Just as I thought, he couldn't say no to her. Ultimately, he ended up escorting her on what was (basically) an officially authorized incognito visit into town.

According to Dee, Richard used to take her into town pretty often back in the day. It sounded like he'd been by her side ever since they were kids.

So, childhood friends, huh? That's not a bad place to start.

Richard might not have been honest about his feelings, but at least he was still doing all the right things.

Anyway, the princess had apparently picked the café after questioning some maids she was close to about the latest trendy spots for young noblewomen to visit. I had to hand it to her—she was certainly skilled at gathering intel. I figured it would also be a good opportunity to stop by some shops for souvenirs on the way back.

I'd ordered tea, and Dee coffee.

Coffee was apparently all the rage right now in the West, but despite Dee's encouragement to give it a try, I just couldn't do it. Seeing someone at a nearby table sip the bitter-looking substance from a tiny espresso cup really put me off of the idea. So, I made up some excuse and politely declined.

I mean, what was the point of a drink if it was over in one sip anyway? It wasn't like someone would come running over to refill

my cup before I'd even had the chance to finish it. This was a café, not a ramen joint. And drinks, unlike noodles, were meant to be relished slowly.

Honestly, if coffee was going to be trendy, I didn't get why it had to be espresso. Why couldn't it have been big cups of café au lait instead?

"I'm sorry if she was rude to you. She can be a little self-indulgent sometimes, but she's a sweet girl, really. She cares deeply about her family," the princess said with a pained smile.

Suddenly, an image of my older brother flashed in my eyes.

"You don't have to apologize for her, Dee."

Do all older siblings come equipped with this apologizing-for-younger-siblings feature? I wondered.

Something about the way she glossed over her sister's tsundere-like behavior with the phrase "a little self-indulgent" also sounded a whole lot like my older brother's description of me as "a bit of a tomboy." Honestly, they were tied for the understatement of the year award.

Growing a bit agitated over being reminded of my brother, I quickly switched conversational topics.

"Princess Marie sure does seem fond of *Ed*, though," I mused.

"Oh, yes. She's always been a bit of a romantic."

"And what about you, Dee?"

"Huh?"

A blank look crossed her golden eyes as she blinked repeatedly.

"Even if you've never been in love before, maybe you've experienced attraction? Say, for example, finding someone handsome or charming?"

"I...can't say I've ever thought about that," she said, her voice practically a whisper. It sounded like she meant it.

I'd always thought royalty's primary job was to just sit there and look pretty for the crowd, but maybe there were drawbacks that a have-not like me couldn't even fathom.

Come to think of it, I'd never really heard Edward talk much about his type either. That was true of Robert too, but...in his case, there were probably other reasons for that. In any case, though,

they were both love interests. No doubt their type was the main character. And, extrapolating a bit, that meant that they had a thing for pretty girls.

Well, that's not news. I'm pretty sure everyone's *got a thing for pretty girls.*

"They say not to judge a book by its cover, but sometimes that's all you have time for, right? That's why it's important to have a physical type," I explained.

"Y...Yes. Yes, of course!" the princess replied, nodding enthusiastically as she clenched her hands into fists.

"Take height, for example. Do you prefer someone tall, or short?"

"Um..."

Her eyes darted around the room as she considered this. Strands of luscious black hair spilled over her shoulder as she cocked her head thoughtfully.

Smitten customers stopped in their tracks to gawk as they passed behind her, creating a traffic jam. She was so bewitching, she could probably even give Lilia a run for her money.

They'd probably never guess that the princess had stopped by a local café for coffee, so they must have thought that she was just a young noblewoman from a well-to-do family.

I discreetly waved the crowd away with a shooing motion when she wasn't looking.

"That's a good question. If they're too tall, then I might struggle to hear them... But my royal duties often require me to dance, and if they're too short, then that could pose quite a challenge."

"How about hair and eye color?"

"Blond hair and golden eyes are prerequisites for inheriting the throne. I don't have the right hair color, so I suppose I'd prefer someone who does."

"And would you prefer someone smart, or someone skilled with a sword?"

"For a leader to the kingdom's people, intelligence and wisdom are probably paramount. As for their swordsmanship... Well, as long as they aren't the type to go *looking* for a fight, I wouldn't mind either w—"

"Dee," I interrupted her, sighing.

These were the most unhelpful answers I had ever heard. It had never even occurred to me that someone could describe their type in a more useless way than "I like pretty girls," but here we were...

I was beginning to question whether she really wanted to fall in love at all.

I mean, love wasn't some conclusion you came to in your head. It was something you *fell into*—that's why it was called "falling in love." (At least, that's what they used to say in my past life.)

If the princess wanted to *think* her way into romance, then a fiancé picked by her father was probably the most reasonable option. But if it was *love* that she wanted, then I needed to get her out of her head for a minute.

"I'd like to hear about what kind of person *you're* drawn to," I clarified. "Not as a princess, but as an individual."

"As...an individual?"

"That's right. I want to get to know *you*," I said, looking straight into her eyes.

For a moment, I felt a flash of déjà vu. I could've sworn I'd heard that phrase—or at least, that same sentiment—somewhere before.

Huh... Where did I hear that, though? I feel like I'm forgetting something...

I tried to conjure the memory, but nothing came to mind.

Well, whatever. If I can't remember it, then I guess it probably wasn't that important to begin with.

Dee was still looking at me blankly, so I decided to move on and compose myself to ask her some more questions.

"What do you like? What do you enjoy doing? What do you find beautiful?" I prompted.

"I... I..."

For a while, Dee went silent. There was a vacant, distant look in her eyes. But then, finally, a pink tinge colored her cheeks.

In a quiet voice, she answered, "I... I like sweets."

I was so surprised by the girlishness of this admission that I couldn't help but laugh.

It still wasn't much to go on, but it was a whole lot better than

the answers she'd been giving me before. I had a feeling that it might take some time to get anything I could use out of her, but at least my prospects were looking brighter now.

Sweets, huh? I thought, as my eyes were drawn to the cake that a table near us had ordered. Dee must have been thinking the same thing I was, because our eyes suddenly met.

I laughed again, and she sank a little bit into her seat.

"Why don't we think this over a bit more over something sweet, then?" I suggested.

I raised my hand to call over the waiter. Then I ordered us two slices of the cake he recommended.

Points for Intrigue

One day, roughly ten days after our arrival in the West...

I sat in the courtyard of Normandius Castle, groaning. I was at my wit's end.

Dee wasn't the cause of my anguish, nor was Princess Marie. In fact, everything with the princesses was progressing exactly as planned, so they were hardly a cause for concern.

What *did* concern me was my schoolwork—more specifically, the insane amount of it.

Since I was taking a leave of absence, I wasn't just subjected to the usual homework assignments. Isaac had been sending me notebooks full of bullet point notes from the textbook along with booklets full of practice questions and armfuls of letters. They'd been arriving in the mail nonstop ever since I'd arrived here.

Isaac, buddy... I know it takes three days for the mail to arrive here, but don't you think this is just a little excessive?

The letters were mostly just daily updates, but the play-by-play quickly became tiring. It was honestly just too much. My eyes were glazing over.

You don't have to send me daily reports, you know. What am I, your manager?

I will say, though, that I appreciated Isaac's conventional approach to addressing letters. All of his letters to me began (as they should) with a "Dear Burton."

Take notes, big brother. That's *how you address a letter.*

I had my hands full, so I didn't have time to respond to each and every letter. I figured I'd just put most of them to the side and respond to anything urgent.

That was easy enough. My schoolwork, on the other hand, was a much more daunting problem.

I'd reluctantly answer all of the questions in the booklets and

return them to Isaac, only to get them back with a bunch of thorough explanatory comments and corrections.

What is this, a mail-in tutoring service?

And so here I was again today, tackling the questions in the June issue of Professor Isaac's Home School Crash Course.

Honestly, it felt a little unfair that *I* was the only one subjected to this mountain of work. I mean, Christopher and Lilia were taking leaves of absence too.

Anyway, it was kind of depressing to hole myself up in my room to do homework, so I'd gone out to work in the courtyard gazebo for a change of pace. Just as I was sitting there groaning and feeling sorry for myself, I sensed a presence nearby.

When I turned around, I saw the crown prince walking over.

I stood up and gave him a bow. He raised his hand, signaling for me to sit back down, and took a seat across from me at the table.

"Doing some schoolwork?" he asked.

"Well... Trying to, at least."

"Let me take a look."

"Beg your pardon?"

"You'll have remedial lessons when you return, won't you? I bear some responsibility for bringing you to Normandius with me, so let me at least ensure that this doesn't end in you being held back a year."

"Okay..." I replied.

Whoops. Didn't mean for that to sound so skeptical.

I probably shouldn't say this, but I just don't think that a naturally gifted academic makes for a very good tutor. I couldn't help but picture Edward sneering and jeering with taunts like "You can't even understand something *this* elementary?" or "I just don't understand what it is that you're not getting here."

Unfortunately, I didn't really have much room to turn down his offer. Not only was he the crown prince, but he was also the entire reason I'd been able to go on this trip.

But misery loves company. If I had to be subjected to this torture, then at the very least, I didn't want to be alone.

"I'll grab Lilia and Christopher, then," I said, trying to drag them

down with me. They were missing school too, after all.

"I've heard they're model students. I suspect they don't need the help."

"Ngh..."

Okay... He's got me there.

Christopher's grades were exactly on par with what you might have expected of the second son of Duke Burton, and Lilia made full use of her protagonist powers to excel academically. She'd gotten some of the highest grades in the class on the last round of exams.

As for me, well...I was probably doing better academically than Robert, at least. Let's just leave it there.

I *really* didn't want to be subjected to any of Edward's scorn and mockery, though. I was desperate to find a way out of this.

"You don't need to worry about me, Your Highness. Isaac's been sending me his notes, so I should be just fine," I tried.

"He has?"

"Yep. Constantly, actually... I guess he's pretty worried about my grades suffering."

I showed him the June issue of Professor Isaac's Home School Crash Course.

Edward took the booklet and flipped through it. Then his gaze moved to the stack of daily update letters. He let out a little snort.

"You've been exchanging letters?"

"That's one way to put it, I guess... If I don't send back my completed booklets by the deadlines, I wind up with even *more* assignments."

"Hmm. I see," Edward replied, disinterested, as he rested his chin in his hands.

If you don't care, then don't ask.

"You're awfully close, aren't you?" he asked.

"Well, yeah. We're friends."

After a long pause, Edward said, "Robert's sent you a letter too, actually."

"Huh?"

I cocked my head as an image of Robert flashed in my mind.

I never would've thought of him as the type to write letters. To be

fair, though, he *was* a member of high society—a prince, as a matter of fact—so I guess it should've come as no surprise that he'd be able to write a letter or two.

Still—even though we'd been in the same class for more than a year now, I couldn't for the life of me remember ever seeing him at his desk. The only things I could picture him holding in his hand were a sword or a fork.

"I didn't feel that I had any particular obligation to give this to you, but... I suppose I may as well," Edward said, pulling an envelope out of his pocket and handing it over to me. "Here."

"Uh... Thanks?"

It seemed a little weird to carry around a letter in your pocket if you never intended to hand it over, but I decided to keep that to myself.

The Diagrantz brothers could have just as easily been thick as thieves or estranged, for all I knew. It was impossible to tell what their deal was. If one thing was for sure, though, it was that Edward couldn't be honest about his feelings to save his life.

According to my older brother, he and Robert seemed to be "really close these days." But then, you had to consider the source of that information. My older brother saw everything through his rose-tinted glasses, so his reports of their closeness might've been grossly exaggerated.

I opened the envelope that Edward had handed to me and found several pages of stationery inside.

Huh, I thought, *this is actually some pretty nice handwriting. Did he get someone else to write this for him?*

Unlike Isaac's letters, Robert's was straightforward and to the point.

Apparently, he had plans to hijack the swordsmanship tournament this year, just like we did last year, and wanted my thoughts on his plan of attack.

Guess it's my turn to play mail-in tutor.

I must have broken into a wry smile without even realizing it, because Edward glanced at me with a suspicious look on his face.

"And what did my brother have to say?" he asked.

"Sounds like he's got some big plans for the swordsmanship tournament."

I handed him the letter.

He read over it and sighed deeply, rubbing his forehead as if to stave off a headache.

"Unbelievable. Must he always insist on making a nuisance of himself?"

"Come on, let him have his fun. It's not like he's hurting anyone."

"Don't play innocent. Your bad influence is at least partly to blame here," he said, glaring at me.

I just shrugged it off, cocking my head in a show of confusion. "I have no idea what you mean, Your Highness."

Just as I was starting to hope this had distracted him from helping me with my schoolwork, though, he piped up, "Let's have a look at those problems Guildford sent you then, shall we?"

I winced.

I'd racked my brains desperately for some excuse to turn down his offer of help, but I'd come up empty. I had no choice now but to accept.

"Please go easy on me," I said, my shoulders slumping.

"Only if you put in the work."

So I'm in for an earful if I don't, I guess.

Dejected, I did my best to tackle the questions in front of me, but my hand froze midair and refused to move when I came to my worst subject.

No matter what I did, I couldn't stop my eyes from glazing over when I was looking down at a bunch of numbers. Actually, if it were *just* numbers, that would have been fine; the real problem was all the indecipherable symbols thrown into the mix. I was starting to feel dizzy just looking at them.

How the hell does this count as "numeracy"? I thought numeracy was supposed to be about numbers! I thought indignantly.

Edward, apparently unable to sit idly by while I stalled, stepped in to explain the problems to me. To his credit, he was actually a much better tutor than I'd expected. He didn't even throw a single sneer my way.

I'd heard that smart people could dumb things down and explain things well enough that even an idiot could understand. Apparently, whoever had said that had been right.

I was relieved that he didn't shame me at all. Every time I got stuck on something, he stepped in to offer a helping hand. Thanks to his assistance, I actually got through everything a lot more quickly than I would have by myself.

What had once felt like an endless pile of drudgery was starting to feel manageable. I breathed a sigh of relief as the end came into sight.

"Hey... Lizzie?"

Just as I was starting to feel good about my progress, Edward addressed me.

I looked up at him to see him sitting with his chin in his hands, staring at me.

"Do you think we might have spent time like this together at school too, if we'd been in the same grade?"

"Hmm... I dunno..." I replied, cocking my head. I wasn't really sure where he was going with this.

If I took his question at face value and assumed that he was just genuinely curious, then the answer would have probably been no. Even if we'd been in the same grade, we probably wouldn't have been friends. I guess you could say we ran in different circles.

That being said, my circle did include Robert and Isaac—or at least, that's probably how it looked from the outside, even if I hadn't intended for us to be a posse. But that was kind of an anomaly. A playboy knight character like me wasn't really supposed to be hanging out with guys like them.

But maybe Edward had asked that because he was jealous of the friends I had in my grade?

Surely he's not the type to be jealous over something like that? I thought. To be fair, though, he'd only *just* graduated high school. He was still technically a teenager, so it wasn't completely out of the question for him to entertain childish ideas like that.

"I'm glad you're older than me."

"What?"

"Otherwise, *Robert* might be the crown prince," I explained, sharing my thoughts completely unfiltered.

"That's..." he began to reply, but then he quickly clammed up. His dark purple eyes darted around. Then he looked down at the ground, lowering his gaze and his long eyelashes. "A truly terrifying thought," he concluded.

"Right?"

Just then, I felt someone approaching at rapid speed. Before I had time to process what was happening, Princess Marie hopped out of a nearby tree.

"*There* you are, Eddie!" she exclaimed.

So, the second princess even indulges in a little tree climbing? I thought, my curiosity piqued. She was quickly racking up points for intrigue—not that I had any idea where those points would get her. A free plate at the conveyor belt sushi joint, maybe?

Edward didn't seem particularly surprised to see her. He deftly moved behind me, positioning me as a shield between himself and the princess. This was clearly an everyday occurrence for him.

Suddenly, I was reminded of Richard's criticisms.

Look, how 'bout you discipline your own princess before you go criticizing people from other countries? I thought.

"Eddie! Let's have a sparring match!"

"Sorry, Princess, but His Highness has a diplomatic meeting to attend," I interjected, lying through my teeth.

"I'll come too, then!" she replied, refusing to be shaken off so easily.

If anything, she'd just upped the ante and tried to squeeze herself into Edward's plans even more. To me, her assertiveness really drove home the sheltered environment she must have grown up in. This was a girl who was used to getting her way, no matter what.

I could see where she was coming from, though. Everything about her appearance screamed "spoiled rotten," so really, it was only appropriate that her behavior should match. Honestly, I was tempted to give her kudos for how much she committed to the bit.

"It's an adults-only meeting," I said.

"I'm an adult too, you know!"

"Oh? I'm not sure I know any adult ladies who wear leaves in their hair like that."

I reached over to pluck the leaf out for her. As she watched me, her face turned bright red. Then she puffed her cheeks out in a pout.

"I hate you, Eric!"

I laughed. "You wound me, Princess."

"You don't *look* very wounded!"

"What can I say? I'm a stoic," I quipped.

And with that, Princess Marie stormed off in a huff. Just as I watched her disappear, I noticed that Edward had turned away, and that his shoulders were trembling.

Apparently, he was having a laughing fit.

Must be nice to just sit on the sidelines and yuk it up.

"I'm doing this for *you*, you know," I said.

"Oh, I know. And I appreciate it, believe me."

"You're an awfully skilled liar," I snorted.

Seriously, you have no idea how good you've got this. I mean, you've got a cute girl who's head over heels for you and doing everything she can to get your attention. How're you not even the least bit interested?

I didn't get it. If I looked at this through the lens of what was best for the kingdom, he really couldn't have asked for a better potential wife. And did I mention how cute she was?

I guess it just goes to show how crazy he is about Lilia... I wish he'd just hurry up and give up on that man-eating saint, though.

"Come on, don't you want to at least give her a chance?" I tried. "You have to admit, she's pretty cute. Tenacious too."

"She's *fifteen*. I can't see her as anything but a child."

"So? That's only three years younger than you."

"Three years is a substantial difference," he said, his voice pained.

His laughing fit had apparently come to an abrupt end.

I could see where he was coming from. At his age, three years *did* feel like a pretty big difference. Once you were in your mid-twenties, though, three years was nothing. He'd change his tune

once he hit that age anyway, so I figured I'd just let time run its course.

"And here I thought you had a thing for younger women," I teased.

For several moments, he was silent.

"You...say that like you *know* something..." he finally said.

"Hmm? And what do you think I know, exactly?"

As you know, Lilia was a year younger than him. So, obviously he'd consider dating a younger woman.

I knew it would just cause problems if I admitted that I knew about his crush on her, though, so I just shrugged and played dumb.

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"How long are you gonna sit there kissing the ground, maggots?! You some kind of perverts or something?! You got a fetish for inanimate objects?! *Huh?!*"

"Sir, no, sir!"

"I can't heeeear youuuu!"

"SIR! NO! SIR!"

"Whoa, whoa, *whoa*! What the hell is going on here?"

Richard came running up, face white as a ghost, just as I was doing my Demon Drill Sergeant bit with the Normandius knights.

"What does it look like? Training, obviously."

"Training?!" he repeated, incredulous.

Now that I didn't have to worry about the princess's affections, I'd figured I'd ask the knights to let me join in on their training so I could finally get my blood pumping again. They'd probably heard about how I'd foiled the bandits' attempts to jump our convoy on the way here, though, because they'd immediately asked me to show them my stuff.

I took their whole squad out in one fell swoop. I'd just wanted to join their training, but after that little display, they begged me to teach them my ways. And so, here we were...

I might have exaggerated a bit when I said that this was how we always trained knights back in my kingdom, but hey, this was

basically the way every knight brigade or military unit trained...more or less. So, it wasn't a *total* lie.

At least, that was my story...and I was sticking to it.

As I was kindly explaining all of this to Richard, though, his brow seemed to be furrowing deeper and deeper. Once I was done, he did a face palm.

"You've completely given up all pretenses now, haven't you?" he accused.

"What pretenses?"

"Oh, don't give me that! *All* of them! First you ask to train with the knights, then you take out the entire squad, and now you're hurling outrageous insults at them! It's absurd no matter how you spin it! There isn't a nobleman in the world who would *ever* behave like that!"

"Uh, yeah there is. He's standing right here."

"That's not what I meant!"

I knew that wasn't what he meant. That's why I'd said it.

Richard's shoulders slumped. He let out a dejected sigh. "Seriously, what are you thinking? This is no way for the future Honorable Duke to be acting."

"My honor is reserved exclusively for the ladies."

"Good grief, listen to you! Again, no Honorable Duke would *ever* say that!"

"S-Sir Richard?" one of the knights who'd been training with me interjected. "It's all right, really. We specifically asked him not to go easy on us."

See? What he said.

I was only putting on the Demon Drill Sergeant bit because they'd *asked* for it. It wasn't like I'd just sprung it on them out of nowhere.

If anything, I was just giving the people what they wanted. And wasn't that *exactly* the sort of thing that an Honorable Duke would do?

Of course, I'd never speak a word of this to my father or my older brother. They would've been furious.

"I really can't believe how strong you are, though," one of the knights said.

"You must be a member of the Royal Guard if you're here escorting the crown prince, right?" another replied.

As the knights all gathered around, asking me question after question, I found myself momentarily at a loss for words.

I *was* here as Edward's personal guard, but I wasn't actually a member of the Royal Guard. In fact, I wasn't even officially a knight at all.

After dithering a bit on how to answer them, I decided to just tell the truth.

"It's actually just a one-off gig," I said.

"What?"

"I have to inherit my father's title, so I can't become a knight on any permanent basis. It's just a short stint."

If I *were* actually my older brother, then that would have been true, actually. Richard seemed suspicious of me for some reason, so I felt like I'd better give a believable answer.

As pleased I was with my answer, though, a strange silence had suddenly fallen over the knights.

What's with this awkward tension? I wondered.

The way they were acting, they seemed to think they'd crossed a line with that question.

The knights' morale had dropped so dramatically that I knew it would be weird for me to get back into my Demon Drill Sergeant persona. They'd wonder what the hell was wrong with me. So, I decided to call it a day.

As I sat down and took a swig from my water bottle, Richard sat down next to me.

For a while, we just sat there in silence. Then, finally, he spoke up.

"Nothing like the fetters of family, huh?" he muttered sympathetically.

I was so surprised by his sudden change of tone that I whipped around to look at him. He was facing forwards, looking off into the distance somewhere.

A sense of foreboding came over me.

I'd seen this movie before. He was preparing to launch into one

of those "It's tough, huh? I get it. You know, I've actually been dealing with something similar..." soliloquies. I could see it in his eyes: He was the kind of guy who would seize any opportunity to talk about himself. Trust me, I could smell the type a mile away.

"Hmm? Nah, I wouldn't say that," I replied.

The last thing I wanted was to launch into some long conversation with him. Besides, I had no intention of butting into the family affairs of some foreign nobleman.

He turned to look at me, eyes wide. I gave him a smile for added impact, hoping to steer this conversation away from any woe-is-me monologues.

"I'm so grateful that I was born a Burton. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart."

I really did.

I had absolutely no complaints whatsoever about being a Burton. The only thing I *did* have complaints about was being born into a world where heartthrobs were always getting preferential treatment. But that had nothing to do with my family.

"How can I complain when my parents and my siblings let me have free rein?"

"I still can't tell if you're real or fake. But on the one-in-a-million chance that you are who you say you are, then I think they could really afford to tighten those reins," Richard said.

I laughed his comment off.

Real... Fake... If we used his definitions of those words, then honestly, it was hard to say which category I fell into.

A Scene Straight out of a BL

As part of our official tour of Normandius, it was decided that we ought to take a roughly two-hour carriage ride from the castle to do some sightseeing at the lake.

The river that flowed into the capital's canals connected to said lake, which in turn got its water from the towering mountains above. It seemed like a fitting choice for sightseeing, considering that the West was well-known for its abundance of water. Apparently, it was a popular tourist destination during the busy season—thanks also in part to the tour boats.

We had received strict orders from the top that we (by which I mean Edward, Dee, Princess Marie, and I) were to all ride there in the same carriage. As if it were only the natural seating arrangement, Edward sat next to Dee, and Princess Marie took a seat on his other side.

I was ostensibly Edward's bodyguard, yet I had an entire row to myself while the three royals squished into the row across me. *Is this really appropriate?* I wondered. Not that I was complaining.

From where I was seated, it was like I was looking at a beautiful illustration of the *Royal LOVERS* manga adaptation, with three of the main characters all lined up next to each other. It was quite the sight to see Edward flanked on each side by two English roses.

Actually, Edward kind of fit that description too (or his face did, at least). It was like I was looking straight at a wall of roses. Or, wait...maybe lilies?

"Are you sure it was all right for us not to prepare the larger tour boat? It may not be tourist season at the moment, but we do have some on standby."

"The tour boats are lovely, but I think there's something to be said for taking a rowboat out every once in a while. They have a certain charm about them."

“Great idea, Eddie! Hey, let’s have a rowing competition!” Princess Marie exclaimed, cutting into Dee and Edward’s pleasant conversation with an outburst of her own.

“Perhaps another time,” Edward replied gently, subduing her, before he returned to his conversation with Dee.

There was a softness in Edward’s face as he spoke to her. It was so sweet that it made me a little embarrassed to watch. Even his eyes were smiling.

I’d seen him make that expression countless times in the game (when speaking to the main character, of course), but it was the first time I’d seen it in 3D—at least, it was the first time that I’d been able to pay full attention to it without the stress of competing for Lilia’s affection.

It hit me then that a look like that only worked in the safe confines of a video game. In real life, his sweet smile was so powerful that he might as well have been shooting laser beams from his face. Unable to bear it, I turned to look out the window.

It wasn’t enough, though. Just overhearing their conversation made me feel like I was going to start barfing up sugary sparkles like I was in some kind of anime. I knew I’d brought this upon myself, but I couldn’t help worrying that I’d wind up with diabetes by the end of this trip. A cup of black-as-night coffee was starting to sound awfully appealing right about now.

Speaking of coffee, I’d actually managed to glean a fair amount about Dee’s preferences by the end of our date at the café. I learned that her type was someone calm, kind, and wise—the kind of guy she could enjoy sweets with while smiling together and saying, “Isn’t this delicious?”

Yeah, look... I know what you’re thinking. *Trust me*, you don’t have to say it. I’d know better than anyone the exact man she was talking about. But there was no way in hell that I was about to pipe up and say to her, “Huh, you know what? That sounds *exactly* like my older brother!”

So, yes, Christopher and I (and probably Edward too) had been buying a whole bunch of souvenir sweets for him, and admittedly there was no one who would look happier eating them than he

would, and yeah, it made you happy just to watch him enjoy them... But so what? That had nothing to do with this.

I looked back at Dee and Edward.

Edward really did seem to be trying his best to seduce her, so I'd just have to suck it up and endure the sugary taste in my mouth for a while.

Plus, once Richard realized he had competition, he was bound to step up his game and be at least a *little* more honest about his feelings. He'd probably start thinking, "Wait... Why am I feeling so worked up about this?" Eventually, he'd wake up to the full extent of his feelings and realize he was in love with Dee.

Two birds, one stone.

Then I looked over at Princess Marie, who was absolutely desperate for Edward's attention. She was clinging to his arm like her life depended on it.

I admired her commitment to her characterization, and honestly, I really wanted to root for her...but she was interfering with our plans. So, reluctantly, I peeled her off of him.

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When we got out of the carriage, I was greeted by the sight of a vast lake that filled my entire field of vision.

The lake was surrounded by meadowland; only short trees dotted the shore, providing an almost completely unobstructed view of the water. The entire lake was visible with one sweep of the eye, but it was still so large that the land on the other side seemed to fade into the distance. You could practically *see* the Earth's roundness from the way the horizon seemed to buckle into a curve.

If not for the sight of servants loading our luggage onto small gondolas (which probably couldn't carry more than a few people at a time), I could've easily mistaken the lake for the ocean.

A little in the distance was a row of extravagant-looking "lodges" (if you could really call them that). I could easily imagine this being a very popular spot for lake homes.

My family had a nice pond in our verdant duchy, but it was

nothing compared to *this*. Honestly, it was such a magnificent body of water that the word "lake" didn't really do it justice.

As I took it in, the name "Lake Biwa" flashed in my mind.

Hold on. This place is too European for that. Surely "Loch Ness" would be closer?

It was such an impressive lake that I really wouldn't have been surprised if it were home to the Loch Ness monster. In fact, it was big enough to be home to a giant squid—if only it were full of salt water, instead of fresh.

What's the difference between a pond and a lake, anyway? I found myself wondering. I was pretty sure that lakes were bigger, but did they have a specific cut-off for how many kilometers the radius had to be?

As I pondered this, staring at the lake, Lilia tugged on my sleeve.

"I hope you're not thinking of trying to *swim* across," she said.

"Hey, give me some credit. I'm not sizing it up for its swimming potential, okay?"

Honestly, what does she take me for?

Now, if we were visiting the lake during a warmer time of year, I probably *would* have considered going for a long-distance swim...but we were still in the first days of June.

Whether it was due to the West's unique climate or simply the altitude, I couldn't say, but it was chilly enough that if you were just standing around, even a small breeze was enough to make you cold. I had no doubt that my lips were probably starting to turn blue.

"I really think we should take a boat," Lilia said, as if trying to convince me. "Let's ride in one together, Ellie."

"Sorry, but this is a one-person boat."

"Ugh, don't say it like that! You sound like some snooty rich character!"

"You *do* realize that you're talking to a villainous noblewoman, right?"

A villainous noblewoman was basically the epitome of the "snooty rich character." I knew what Lilia had meant, though. She'd probably been envisioning a certain snot-nosed little brat from that cat-robot anime. You know, the kid who says stuff like "This game is for three

players only!”

Now that I thought about it, though, what kind of game was only for three players? Four, I could understand, but *three*? The only thing I could come up with was Chinese checkers.

No, why am I trying to make sense of this? He just wants to exclude people, so it doesn’t really matter if it’s actually for four or even five players. He’d say it was for three anyway.

As Lilia and I argued back and forth, Edward offered his hand to help Princess Diana into a boat.

Nicely done, Edward, I thought. You could always count on a love interest to move in on a girl quickly.

Honestly, though, his speed was a little terrifying. If it had been anyone but me, he probably would have gotten her into a boat before they’d even had the chance to notice.

From the outside, he and Dee really did look like the perfect couple. Dee looked a little embarrassed by his attention, but it didn’t seem to be unwanted.

That’s it... Just push her a little further, I thought, trying to reach Edward telepathically.

Just then, I saw a flash of blonde hair in my peripheral vision, traveling at what looked like warp speed.

I whipped my hand out and grabbed the princess by her collar.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!” she protested.

“You could hurt yourself running around the lake like that.”

“But! But *I* wanna ride with Eddie!”

“Well, I’m afraid you’re out of luck. That boat can only carry two passengers.”

Okay, now I really *was* starting to sound like that rich kid from the cat-robot anime.

Princess Marie looked up at me with daggers in her eyes, furious that I’d detained her en route to her beloved Eddie.

I gave her a little shrug and averted my eyes. Then I let her go.

“That means you ’n’ me are going to have to—” I began.

“I’d rather die than ride with you!” she interrupted.

“Who said anything about riding together?”

“Huh?”

Two empty boats were lined up on the shoreline. Unlike the rowboat that Edward and Dee had taken, these boats were gondolas—the kind meant for carrying luggage that you paddled while standing.

I pointed at a rock sticking up out of the water in the distance. It was so far away from us, it was almost at the horizon.

"Want to see who can make it to that rock and back the fastest?" I suggested.

"Are you proposing a competition?" she asked excitedly. "Very well, then! I accept!"

In an instant, her eyes lit up with a sparkle, and she made her way to the gondolas.

She really was one of the most predictable meatheads I'd ever met. Honestly, she might have been a good match for Robert.

I really hope that Dee's the one who accedes to the throne...for both Normandius's sake and my own. It's going to be a lot easier to live an uneventful, peaceful life if the neighboring kingdoms have the wisest person possible at the helm.

When Lilia—who had reluctantly agreed to be our umpire—gave us the signal, Princess Marie and I paddled out into the lake.

Boy, it's not easy to keep my balance standing up like this, I thought. *Come to think of it, this may actually be my first time paddling a boat other than a rowboat.*

I had a feeling that I'd probably never done this in my previous life. At best, I might've gone on one of those duck-shaped paddleboats that worked like a bicycle.

As I watched the gondoliers in the distance who were escorting our luggage, I tried to imitate them by alternating my paddle strokes on the left and right. From what I could tell, it wasn't arm strength that mattered so much as it was being able to read the flow of the water.

Princess Marie looked just a touch awkward on the gondola, but she was progressing across the water more smoothly than I was, at least. Not surprising, considering that she was born and raised here in the West.

That was just fine by me, though. While we might have been

competing, my primary goal was just to get her out of Edward's and Dee's hair—and it was working.

Besides, I had nothing to lose if I lost to her.

As I paddled the gondola, I let myself enjoy the refreshing breeze. I was starting to see why the Venetian gondoliers liked to sing as they paddled. I was surrounded by gorgeous scenery, and it was a beautiful, sunny day. The cool air kept me sweat-free even as I exerted myself a bit. In short, everything was perfect.

I spotted Edward's boat while I was basking in my good mood. I couldn't hear his conversation with Dee, but I could tell that they were having a nice chat. All I could see was the back of Edward's head, but I could tell from the way that Dee's smile reached her golden eyes that they were having a genuinely good time. A slight blush had even crept across her face.

Any man who wasn't immune to her charms would've instantly collapsed from high blood pressure at the sight of an expression like that.

To be fair, Edward certainly gave her a run for her money in the looks department. It was honestly impressive that the two of them had managed to behold the sight of each other's gorgeous faces at point-blank range for that long. They clearly had some sort of tolerance for beauty—otherwise, they would have collapsed a long time ago.

In any case, Edward seemed to be doing his best to turn up the charm. If he saw me indulging my travelogue fantasies over here, paddling around without a care in the world on my gondola, he probably would've been pretty miffed.

But, more importantly, one thing was for sure—it always felt better to win than to lose. So, I turned to face ahead again. I saw Princess Marie's back ahead of me in the distance, looking much smaller than she had before, and tried to figure out how far ahead of me she was.

If you timed your paddle strokes with the water's currents, you could propel yourself forwards pretty quickly with only minimal effort. Prioritizing efficiency would only get you so far, though—it didn't mean that you wouldn't get results by just focusing on brute

forcing it.

I pulled my oar out of the water. Then, after regaining my balance, I walked up towards the bow of the boat.

I'd been imitating the gondoliers that drove tourists and carried luggage. They always stood at the back, but it occurred to me suddenly that I didn't actually *have* to.

Though as far as gondolas went, mine was on the tinier side, but it was by no means small. The vessel was about five meters from stern to bow.

It was important to keep in mind that I was steering a boat, rather than my body. If the wind or the water's currents shook the bow, it took time and energy to try to right the boat again. It was all highly inefficient.

You steered cars and bicycles from the front, so it seemed obvious that it would be easiest to steer a boat from the front too.

Relying on my arm strength, I paddled with all the force I could muster. Now that I was really applying myself, I was getting somewhere. Just one vigorous paddle stroke had gotten me way farther than all of the splashing around I'd been doing before.

And what's more, I was traveling in a nice, straight line. No swaying or shaking.

If a professional saw me paddling like this, they probably would have shrieked in righteous indignation at my sloppy steering. Fortunately, I wasn't personally acquainted with any gondoliers.

I was rapidly closing in on Princess Marie. She must've realized, because she turned around to look at me, and her wide eyes grew even wider.

I let out a daring laugh, to which she responded by huffily trying to paddle even harder, making a frantic effort to speed up.

We were almost neck and neck now, swiftly approaching the rock we'd designated as our landmark.

I was carrying a lot of speed, so I decided to make a wide turn around it. Princess Marie, however, seemed to be taking a very different approach. I watched as she attempted to make a sharp turn around the rock, coming almost right up to it.

Maybe she was flustered from me catching up to her, or maybe it

was because she'd cut it too close. Whatever the cause was, her attempt at turning failed miserably, and the bottom of her gondola slid slightly up the rock.

Oh, crap, I thought. But by then, it was already too late.

"Eeeeek!"

Princess Marie's gondola capsized, plunging her into the lake as she screamed.

Unfortunately, the gondola's extremely narrow width made capsizing very easy. As soon as you lost your balance, it was all over.

"Marie!" I yelled.

Without wasting a minute, I jumped off of my gondola and into the water.

Fortunately, lakes didn't have waves or strong currents like oceans or rivers did, so it didn't take me much time at all to swim over to her.

I made it just time. By the time I got to her, she was already starting to sink.

The dress she wore was a lot more lightweight and easy to move around in than a typical one, but its frills and voluminous skirt destroyed any possibility of her floating.

I took in a big breath before plunging my whole body into the water. Then I grabbed onto the sinking princess.

Just then, a realization hit: It wasn't the distance of the water's radius that determined whether it was a lake or a pond; it was the water's *depth*.

Princess Marie felt as heavy as a sandbag as I lugged her up to the surface with me. As I popped my head up out of the water, I took in a big breath of air, trying to supply the muscles in my arms with as much oxygen as possible. Then I lifted Princess Marie out of the water by her shoulders.

"Haaaaaah!" Marie gasped, before descending into a desperate coughing fit.

As I rubbed her back gently, I guided her arms around my neck.

"It's okay, Princess Marie," I said. "You're safe now."

"Oh..."

She blinked, still in a daze. Naturally, since she'd just been

completely immersed in water, her wet hair was stubbornly sticking to her face.

Don't want that to get in the way of her vision, I thought, sweeping it out of her eyes.



"Just hang onto me and take some deep breaths, okay?"

She coughed again. "Y... You..."

"Lizzie!" Edward cried.

He and Dee were swiftly approaching in their rowboat.

With Princess Marie's arms wrapped around my neck, I trod water as I raised a hand to signal that we were okay.

Dee looked absolutely pale as a ghost, which was understandable. She was probably worried sick about her sister. Weirdly enough, though, Edward also looked panicked.

"We're okay," I said. "Can I grab onto your boat? It'd be a huge help if you could take us back to the shore."

"Climb in," Edward ordered as I grabbed onto the side of their boat.

Obviously, I would have done that if I were alone, but that wasn't going to work with Princess Marie in tow. She was so waterlogged that I wasn't sure I could soften our landing enough.

Besides, there was no downside to just hanging onto the side of the boat like this until we reached land. Better safe than sorry.

"If we rock the boat getting in, you might capsize too," I explained. "And I'd rather not carry *three* people to land if I can help it."

"All right. Hold on tight, then," Edward agreed, still looking anxious.

After checking that the oars wouldn't hit me, we made our way back towards land.

Since Princess Marie's arms were wrapped tightly around my neck, I just focused all my energy on holding on to the side of the boat.

I thought about doing a flutter kick to help propel us forwards, but I decided not to. It'd be a real pain if I screwed up and we capsized.

"It's all right. We're almost there," Dee kept calling out to Marie, desperate to comfort her. Her face was almost as pale as her waterlogged, freezing little sister's.

It was sweet how much they cared about each other.

Once we reached the shore, I gently placed Princess Marie onto

the ground.

She looked up at me like she wanted to say something. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as I stood up and tore off my drenched blazer.

I'd been submerged in the water up to my head, so it was hardly a surprise that even my underwear was completely soaked...but it still sucked. I hadn't thought to bring a change of clothes with me, but hopefully I could borrow something from someone.

One thing was for sure, though: I wasn't going back in the carriage like this. I wasn't going to be happy about that, and the driver sure as hell wouldn't be either.

I sensed someone approaching, so I turned around. Edward had jumped out of the boat and broken into a run towards us. The moment he caught up to us, he threw his jacket over my shoulders.

Princess Marie had plopped down on the grass, and Princess Diana was still back in the rowboat. I couldn't believe that he hadn't offered his hand to help her get out.

And you call yourself a gentleman! I thought. It was truly one of the dumbest things I'd ever seen him do. He'd just flushed all of the heartthrob points he'd been racking up with her down the toilet.

"Your Highness," I said, "I think you're forgetting something."

"Quiet," he shot back, apparently irritated that I'd pointed it out.

Then, without warning, he wrapped his arms around me in a hug. *I* was the one who was dripping wet, but for some reason, Edward was shaking.



"You're going to get your clothes wet."

"Would you *please* just be quiet for a moment?" he snapped again.

There didn't seem to be any winning here, so I closed my mouth.

What's all this about, anyway? I wondered. *You know, I can't help but feel that this must look like a scene straight out of a BL to any onlookers... Is this gonna hurt our image?*

Whatever affection the princesses had for us, I felt like it was about to take a real hit.

I looked over Edward's head at Dee and the others.

Princess Marie's wet hair was wrapped up in a towel turban around her head. Richard, who'd accompanied us as the princesses' bodyguard, had picked her up in his arms and was walking over towards us.

He was wearing a surprisingly solemn expression too. He walked straight past us without so much as looking in our direction. I figured he was probably looking for a spot for Princess Marie to rest and change out of her wet clothes.

Dee followed shortly behind them, her worried gaze set firmly on Princess Marie. As she walked past, she briefly glanced at us.

Hmm?

There was an unusual flicker in her eyes.

I felt something in her gaze that I'd never felt from her before: lust. It was the exact same lust that I saw in Lilia and countless noblewomen whenever they looked at me.

I looked back at Edward. I could only say this now with hindsight, but it seemed he'd actually done something right.

I'd heard that the sight of a man falling apart over a friend (which, as far as Dee was concerned, was what I was to Edward) in danger really got the ladies going. Or maybe it wasn't that at all? Maybe her lust had actually been directed at *me*, for putting my life on the line for her sister? I'd have to investigate this further...

There was an important takeaway here, though, which was that I clearly had to brush up on my knowledge of female psychology. I'd been completely wrong in my assumption that our little BL scene would be a turn-off.

In any case, the ladies love a little male friendship. I figured I'd just chalk it up to that.

And besides, Edward and my older brother *were* actually friends—so it wasn't like this was all a lie.

Just then, something occurred to me.

What if Edward was cozying up to my brother like this on a daily basis? Repeatedly being exposed to an up-close view of Edward's transcendently beautiful face (which was beautiful enough to put most of the world's women to shame), combined with bodily contact, well...that was enough to *instill* something in a person. Something I absolutely did not want instilled in my older brother.

We're going to have to have a chat about this, I thought.

Just as I was about to interrogate him, though, Edward beat me to the chase.

"I have a duty to look out for you," he said, "For your *brother*."

He seemed to be choosing each word carefully, enunciating them one by one as if he were making a concerted effort to help me understand.

"I can't let anything happen to you. Don't scare me like that," he continued, taking a step back from me and grabbing me forcefully by the shoulders.

"Right. Okay," I said.

He looked dead serious. A frown was forming between his amethyst eyes as he stared straight into mine.

He looked genuinely worried.

I sometimes swam fully clothed at the training grounds, so it didn't really seem like a big deal to me. But maybe they didn't do that at the Eastern one, where Edward had trained?

"Sorry. I really didn't think it would scare anyone this much," I explained.

For several moments, Edward was silent.

Then he said, "In moments like these...I really feel for your older brother."

"Sis!"

Christopher came running over and threw a towel over my head. I tried to turn around to look at him, but everything just looked

white under the cover of the towel.

Since the towel was there, I figured I'd go ahead and wipe my hair dry with it. I moved it out of my eyes. As I did, my vision returned, and I saw Christopher looking up at me with tears in his eyes.

The shock of such an adorable sight taking up my entire field of vision momentarily blinded me.

"Thank God you're okay!" he murmured, his voice wobbly as he clasped my hands tightly in his.

"Of course I am. I was never in any danger."

His palms felt pleasantly warm as they covered my hands, probably because kids tended to run warmer.

"You're so cold..." he said, apparently not having heard a word I'd just said.

His face grew pale. He looked like he was on the verge of tears again as he looked up at me, pursing his lips. Then he began walking, pulling me along with him.

"Mr. Richard's rented a lodge for us, and they've already got a fire going. Come on. Let's get you warmed up," he said.

"Right. Thanks."

I followed Christopher as he led me by the hand.

Watching him from behind as he fought back tears, it suddenly hit me just how much he'd grown.

It seemed like he and Edward had been genuinely really worried about me.

Look, I don't want to bring this up again, but...have you all forgotten that I went toe-to-toe with a bear?

I'm not about to drown in some little lake, okay?

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"*E-l-l-i-e...*"

I didn't reply.

"I was sooo *woooorried* about you!"

"Lilia, please..."

In a moment, everything had come crashing back to normal.

Unfortunately, I could've never predicted that Lilia would be waiting to ambush me at the lodge. She clung to me as big, angry tears rolled down her cheeks.

I never knew what to do with myself when people cried, but this was on a whole other level. *Anyone* would have struggled to deal with this.

Worst of all, she ended her little sobfest by blowing her nose into my towel.

Seriously, stop that. No matter how upset you are, it doesn't excuse you from behaving like an uncivilized boor.

I looked over at Christopher for help, but he seemed to be making a point of ignoring me.

Come on... Don't abandon your sister like this.

"It's a serious trigger for me when you put yourself in danger for someone other than me!" Lilia huffed.

"That's an awfully specific trigger..."

"And it's not fair how sexy you look with your hair down!"

"You couldn't have saved that comment for later?"

As Lilia continued wailing, I dragged her over to the couch by the fireplace with me and sat down.

I guess I must have gotten a real chill, because the warmth of the fire felt amazing.

Princess Marie sat in front of the couch. She looked up at Lilia like she was some kind of exotic beast.

As I looked at her quivering blue lips, it hit me that my lips were probably blue too. *Huh. Guess that explains why everyone was so worried about me,* I thought. I was honestly totally fine, though.

The princess must have noticed me looking at her, because our eyes met.

She just sat there staring at me for a while. Then, so quietly I could barely hear her, she said, "Um... Eric?"

"Yes?"

"Th-Thank you for...um...saving me."

Her voice trailed off into a whisper as she turned her head, averting my gaze. A deep crimson blush colored her cheeks.

It was such a perfect tsundere reaction that I wanted to give her

a standing ovation.

Excellent performance, I thought. *Full points, no notes.*

I could feel a smirk forming at the corners of my lips, so I replaced it with a flirtatious smile.

"No need to thank me, Princess," I said magnanimously. "All that matters is that you're safe."

Now that I'd saved her from a dangerous situation, I felt pretty confident that I'd earned a promotion. I'd probably gone from being a vile, loathsome man to someone who'd caught her attention...if only a little bit.

It felt like validation—not that I needed it. It wasn't like I could tarnish my older brother's reputation by letting a foreign princess drown on my (his) watch. That was hardly an "honorable" thing to do.

Princess Marie scooted closer to me. Then she rested her head on my shoulder.

"I... I'm tired!" she declared. "Lend me your shoulder so I can take a little nap."

"Hmm? Oh, sure. I don't mind."

I'd be sitting by the fireplace for a while anyway, so it wasn't an imposition. But as I agreed, I felt weird, bad vibes coming from Lilia, who was sitting opposite us.

"Cheat-er!" she mouthed accusingly when we made eye contact.

Come on, I thought, *don't be ridiculous. There's no way I've reeled the princess in this easily.*

But when I stole a glance at the princess, I saw a fearsome blush had spread all the way up to her ears, and her eyes were wide open. She wasn't sleeping at all.

The sound of her pounding heart seemed to radiate from her petite frame, reverberating through my shoulder where she was resting her head.

Oh...

Putting aside the unfairness of Lilia's accusation for a moment...it *did* seem like the princess was falling for me.

It had all been part of the plan: jump into the water without a moment's hesitation, act like I was at my wit's end to save her, and

then tell her, with a flirtatious smile that suggested a whiff of real affection, that I was just glad she was okay.

I had been sure that it was just the thing that would work on a tsundere like Princess Marie...and I had been right.

But maybe it had worked a little *too* well?

Maybe I was just a little too fit? Or maybe it was my ripped abs showing through my wet shirt?

Either way, I could hardly complain.

In any case, it looked like I'd be making good on my promise to Edward sooner than I'd expected.

I’m Really Good at Pretending, But...

Just as I was training with the Normandius guards again, Richard showed up. He regarded me with a deep frown.

Apparently, he didn’t love that I was wiping off my sweat with my shirt sleeve.

“Were you raised in a barn or something?” he asked. “Use a towel, for God’s sake.”

“The ladies *love* it when I do this,” I explained, with a wink just for him, before turning back around.

The palace maids were watching me from the windows of the imperial villa’s upper floor. I gave them a little smile and a wave, and they panicked, retreating from the window.

Wiping my sweat away with my sleeve was the perfect excuse to show off my ripped abs, and there wasn’t a woman in the world who didn’t appreciate the view.

“Is that all you ever think about?” Richard asked me.

“Hmm? Yeah.”

“Doesn’t it, you know...wear on you?”

“Not really. It’s just a part of life for me now.”

Richard snorted. “Well, isn’t that just *great*?” he muttered, under his breath.

No need to be jealous. If you want the ladies’ attention, all you have to do is earn it.

Richard was a member of Normandius’s Royal Guard, which meant that he must have been at least a reasonably high-ranking noble. Sure, he wasn’t much of a looker—but he was roughly on par with how I looked without any makeup. There were plenty of ways he could leverage that, if he wanted to.

Seemingly content to return to his work now that he’d said his

piece, he looked ready to head off. Suddenly, though, he stopped.

I looked over at him, trying to figure out if he needed something. He just stood there scratching his head awkwardly for a while, but finally he spoke up.

"Thanks... For what you did the other day, I mean."

"Hmm?"

"You saved our little princess."

"Ohh," I said, clapping my hands together.

Right. He's talking about saving Princess Marie from her little splash in the pond.

Honestly, it had been the most calculated, self-interested good deed imaginable. So, it legitimately hadn't even occurred to me that anyone would be grateful for it. That being said, I'd take any tokens of gratitude (figurative or literal) that I could get.

But, without missing a beat, I gave him the most Future-Honorable-Duke-Who's-Just-Saved-a-Princess reply I could muster:

"Well, any knight would have done the same."

"But because *you* did it, our little princess is now absolutely obsessed with you," Richard replied.

I laughed. "It's an honor, truly."

"And I'll have you know," Richard continued, "that I'm working *around the clock* to keep her in check."

His wording was vague, but I had a pretty good idea what he was talking about.

Why, just yesterday, when Edward had been about to drag me along on another one of his tours, Princess Marie had tried to tag along.

"I'll let you be my bodyguard!" she'd said to me. "I hope you realize what an honor that is!"

It had been such a masterful display of the haughty tsundere archetype that I had been tempted, yet again, to give her a standing ovation.

For your reference, I did end up letting her tag along. She was so cute, how could I say no?

"Leaving the lovestruck little princess aside, you'd better not try anything funny with Her Highness Princess Diana. I don't want any

scandals," Richard said.

"I'm being the perfect gentleman, thank you," I retorted, shrugging off his probing gaze.

Look, pal. You're welcome to share your gratitude, but that doesn't give you a license to nag.

Besides, two sisters lusting after the same man was the most daytime drama plot point ever. I wasn't about to get embroiled in some schlocky soap opera.

See, blood and hair are actually pretty similar, when you get right down to it, because the same principle applies to both: the smoother, the better.

Anyway, it was interesting to note that Princess Marie was apparently "the little princess" to Richard, while Diana was "Her Highness Princess Diana."

Honestly, I could see where he was coming from with that. Princess Marie *did* give off little princess vibes. That felt a lot more natural than calling her "Her Highness Princess Marie."

To be fair, though, I had absolutely no idea where you'd draw the line with a distinction like that.

"You know, if you keep this up, you're going to wind up with a knife through your back one day," Richard said, sighing deeply.

Huh. Lilia said the same thing, I thought. I wasn't all that worried, though. If anyone was going to manage to get a knife through these rippled muscles, it sure as hell wasn't going to be some run-of-the-mill noblewoman. *Give me some credit here,* I wanted to protest.

Instead, I just laughed it off like any respectable playboy knight would.

"I can't be anyone else but me," I said simply.

"Can't" might have been overstating it, but honestly, not by much. I'd drilled my playboy ways into myself since I was seven years old, so changing them now would be as painful as breaking bones. Again, maybe I'm being a little dramatic there...but that's basically the long and short of it.

Richard regarded with me a strange expression on his face.

I cocked my head as he flapped his mouth open and closed, as if

he wanted to say something.

"Hey, are you..." he began to say.

But he was quickly cut short by the sound of swift little footsteps and a girl's voice.

"Eric!" Princess Marie cried as she ran over to us.

Richard's brows knit into a deep frown.

In seconds, the princess had made her way right to us. She grabbed onto my arm forcefully. I couldn't help but marvel at how quickly she moved—literally and figuratively.

"Eric!" she cried again. "I want to go out into town!"

"Is that right?"

"I'll even let you accompany me, so you'd better be grateful!"

"It pains me to say this, but I'm afraid I have some business to attend to this afternoon," I said.

I actually didn't have a single thing on the agenda—well, aside from the training I was doing with the Normandius knights as we spoke—but I gave her a big smile as I lied right through my teeth.

"Surely it can wait!" she protested.

"Princess Marie..."

Upon hearing Richard's tone, I felt myself straighten my posture.

Wow... I can't believe I'm *straightening up like this. I'm just an innocent bystander!* I thought. It was hard not to, though. There was a clear edge to his voice—the unmistakable echo of a *scolding*. It was the default tone of every mother in the world.

"Have you forgotten that you have a violin lesson today?" he continued.

"Ngh!"

"You didn't *skip* it again, did you?"

"W-Well...! Okay, *yes*, but...!"

"I don't want to hear any 'ifs,' 'ands,' or 'buts,' young lady."

And with that, Richard grabbed her by the collar and dragged her back towards the palace's main hall as I watched on in silence.

Princess Marie might have been a mischievous little princess, but she was still royalty. *How in the world does he get away with that?* I

wondered.

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"Sis!"

As I was doing some post-training tidying up with the Normandius knights, Christopher came running up to me.

Sheesh, what's with all the interruptions today?

He grabbed my arm, absolutely frantic. Then, without him moving his head, his eyes darted up to look at me.

I could tell he was trying to be menacing, but he was just too cute to pull that off. If anything, it only made him look all the more adorable.

"D-Did you enter my room without my permission?!"

"Hmm? I have no idea what you're talking about," I replied evasively, cocking my head.

I picked up my stuff and gave the knights a little wave goodbye. Then I made a swift retreat, briskly walking away from the scene. Christopher came running after me, unwilling to let me get away.

"The letters from big bro are all missing! And no one would steal something like that except for *you*!" he cried.

"You wound me, Christopher. I've done nothing to deserve this suspicion," I said calmly, knowing full well that his suspicion was entirely justified.

Obviously, I was the letter thief. Who else would it have been?

I'd found an opening to sneak into his room and collect the letters. To my surprise, there were still two more letters he'd been keeping in his arsenal. It was a good thing I'd found them, because if I had to be subjected to that mortifying letter-reading episode two more times, I'd probably end up biting my tongue and dying.

I mean, not *literally*. But I'd sure feel like I was dying on the inside.

Fortunately, the remaining letters had been unopened, so I just had to take them back with me and find a way to get rid of them. And don't worry—I had every intention of disposing of them responsibly. Namely, by shoving them back in my older brother's

face.

In case you're wondering, I didn't mess with Christopher's stuff other than that. I put everything I'd rifled through back the way it was, and it didn't look like there was anything in that he would've freaked out over me seeing.

There really wasn't anything unusual, but if I had to think of something, then I guess it would've been the drawing he had of himself with me and our older brother. I know I'm not really one to talk, but boy, he sure was obsessed with our older brother.

Sometimes I worried a bit for his future. I hoped that he'd grow into a healthy, red-blooded young man one day, but I honestly had my doubts about whether he'd ever even be interested in a relationship.

I could only hope that having me for an older sister hadn't completely destroyed his faith in women. I was fully aware that I was an edge case, so I hoped he'd hold off judgment until he'd met some more conventional women.

"An unmarried woman shouldn't enter a man's room like that! It isn't proper!" Christopher cried, raising his voice.

"A man's room?" I repeated. "Christopher, you're my *little brother*."

I shrugged.

Christopher seemed a little confused about which part he was supposed to be upset about. If anything, it was the fact that I'd stolen his stuff that deserved his outrage. But I chalked it up to a lack of experience, since he so rarely got angry like this.

"Y-You don't get it, sis!" he yelled.

I was so shocked by this sudden outburst that all I could do was stare at him, eyes wide.

A few angry teardrops were clinging for dear life onto his bottom eyelashes as he looked up at me. I could tell he was ready to burst into a sob at any moment.

"You're so tactless and insensitive! You're always treating me like I'm just a kid!"

I felt like I was being absolutely roasted. Honestly, it was pretty hard to take.

I let out an aggrieved sigh.

Sure, it was wrong for me to have stolen those letters from his room, but who was *really* to blame here? If you asked me, it was both of my brothers. Our older brother was at fault for writing those letters and telling Christopher to use them against me, and Christopher was at fault for agreeing to his scheme.

I patted Christopher on the back as I looked down at him.

"Listen to me, Christopher. I think this is as good an opportunity as any to tell you that I'm quite your average young noblewoman. So, maybe I'm tactless and insensitive, but that's just part of who I am. And no matter how much you or anyone else in our family asks me to change that, I won't."

A bitter silence followed as Christopher seemed to be reflecting on this.

"If you keep scolding me like this, you'll end up with wrinkles like the head maid."

He swatted away my hand as I tried to poke the burgeoning wrinkles on his forehead. "If... If I'm your little brother..." Christopher began.

For a moment, I was too stunned to react. He'd never rebuffed me like that before.

Lips quivering, Christopher finally managed to force out the rest of his sentence in a strained shriek:

"If I'm your little brother, then you ought to at least understand how I feel!"

After leaving me with that tearful plea, Christopher turned around and ran off.

I caught a glimpse of his profile as he left and saw tears rolling down his cheek. I always felt so at a loss whenever people cried, so I couldn't even bring myself to chase after him. All I could do was stand there and watch as he ran away.

Despite his plea for my understanding, I had no idea what it was that he wanted from me. The only thing I knew was that I must have messed something up big time.

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"I think I've really upset Christopher," I told Lilia.

"Whatever happened, I'm sure it was one hundred percent your fault."

"That was fast..."

I haven't even told you what happened yet!

I'd invited Lilia to join me for tea once she'd finished her work at the church, and she'd happily accepted.

After the confrontation with Christopher yesterday, he hadn't even shown up for dinner. He had joined us for breakfast this morning, but he'd ignored me every time I'd tried to talk to him.

Not only had he ignored me, but he'd spoken to literally every other person. And on top of that, he'd even insisted that he was going to join Edward for his meeting with a Western diplomat at the castle—which was clearly just his way of trying to spite me.

I wasn't going to claim that I didn't do *anything* wrong, but I just couldn't understand why he was *this* upset.

If he'd been a young noblewoman, I could've come up with any number of ways to smooth things over with him. But no, Christopher was my younger brother. And worse yet, he was going through puberty. Doting on him would only infuriate him. I had no idea how I was supposed to treat him now.

"Honestly, I'm kind of at a loss here," I muttered, half to Lilia and half to myself.

The rest of the trip was going to be pretty awkward if Christopher's foul mood didn't abate. There was even the distinct possibility that he'd keep acting like this even once we got home to Diagrantz.

And if that happened, well...our family would obviously point the finger at *me*.

No matter how much I would try to argue that it was my brothers' fault for concocting this whole blackmail scheme, I was the one who'd get the blame. After all, I was the only one who'd sneaked into someone's room and stolen something.

I had to find a way to put an end to this before it got to that point.

"I feel totally clueless," I confessed. "I'm really good at

pretending I understand what people are feeling, but...empathy doesn't come as easily to me as it does to my older brother."

That's it—what would my older brother do in this situation? I wondered. No matter how much I racked my brains, though, nothing came to me. After all, my older brother would never have managed to upset Christopher like this in the first place.

"I'm just trying to treat him like he's my real younger brother—in my own way. It's harder than I thought, though. Stealing girls' hearts is way easier than *this*."

"Ellie..."

Lilia looked at me with an indecipherable expression on her face.

As awkward as Lilia was, she was admittedly more attuned to people's feelings than I was. Hoping she might give me some words of wisdom, I waited for her to continue.

"I can't believe I'm the only girl who gets to see this pitiful side of you! Am I lucky, or what?! What're you going to do if you make me even crazier about you than I already am, though?!"

"You know what? I was an idiot for trying to get your advice on this."

"Hey! Don't be mean!"

"You brought that upon yourself. It's *your* fault for not taking me seriously," I said, flicking a sugar cube right at Lilia's forehead. It bounced right off into her teacup.

"Wh-Why *did* you come to me for advice, then?!" Lilia asked. "Tell me the truth—you *do* trust me, don't you?! Sounds to me like you might be a little bit in love with me after all!"

"I'm only talking to you about this because I can't talk to my older brother. I figured it'd be better than talking to a tree."

"You don't have to be so mean, you know."

Lilia practically deflated as she sat back down, all of the emotion on her face swiftly disappearing.

She swirled her spoon around in her teacup daintily, then she picked it up and took a sip. Lilia's manners had improved leaps and bounds—probably thanks to the head maid's etiquette lessons.

"I don't think you have to handle this the same way your older brother would. I mean, *you're* the one Christopher's fighting with—

not him," Lilia said.

"I guess you've got a point there."

"You're always saying that you're 'not a good person like your brother is' and that you've 'got no honor.' I don't think that's true at all, though."

"That's only because you *want* me to be a good person."

At this, Lilia wagged her finger dramatically, as if to say, *Oh, no, no!*

For some reason, it kind of pissed me off.

"You feel like you can't ever live up to your amazing older brother, right? I feel like this actually stems from some kind of inferiority complex. It's probably not that different to the dynamic between Prince Edward and Prince Robert. You've got some other stuff thrown in the mix there, though..."

Well, excuse me for being so obsessed with my brother, I thought. I didn't actually feel the least bit contrite about that, though.

I took a minute to reflect on her words.

Robert had a hang-up about his brilliant older brother, the crown prince. He wasn't the only one with a hang-up, though. Isaac had one too—although for him, it was about his father and his brothers. Then there was Christopher, who had a dark family history. Even Edward probably had his own hang-up about Robert.

Looking at it with a bird's eye view, it didn't feel like an exaggeration to say that having family drama was just part and parcel of being a love interest.

At least, that seemed to be true of every *Royal LOVERS* love interest.

Maybe that's why I'd been saddled with family drama too? After all, I was the love interest that Lilia had ultimately ended up picking, so I had to have drama of my own.

"I have noticed some similarities between the way you idolize your older brother and the way Prince Robert idolizes *you*, actually," Lilia said.

"Wait... Are you serious?"

"I'm serious."

"You really mean that?"

"I really do."

Her words hit me like a truck.

"Maybe it's 'cause you're, like, master and pupil?" Lilia mused with a completely unconcerned look on her face.

I was too shocked for her blasé attitude to soothe me, though.

I can't believe this, I thought. *This is so messed up.*

An image of the Pea-Brained Prince following me around like a big, dumb dog came to me unbidden. I could practically hear him calling out, "Commander! Commander!"

I couldn't take it.

Surely I wasn't *that* obnoxious...right? And there was no way I was that blindly trusting.

If I told Robert that polar bears were all black, he'd probably go around parroting that to everyone with cast-iron certainty. But if my older brother tried to tell me that pandas were all black, there's no way I'd believe him. A panda's a panda.

"You can keep obsessing over big brother if you want, but I think it's about time you were freed from his curse," Lilia said.

"*Lilia*," I said sternly, interrupting her lecture before she could pick up any steam. I didn't really know why, but I felt absolutely compelled to correct her. "He's *my* big brother. Not yours."

"Wh-What's with the jealousy...?"

What's so hard to understand? I thought. *I'm just pointing out the obvious here.*

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"Christopher, can we talk for a minute?"

It was the day after my conversation with Lilia. I'd followed after Christopher after we'd finished breakfast, and I'd managed to stop him just before he entered his bedroom.

I'd been trying to be stealthy, so he probably hadn't even noticed I was there until I'd called out to him.

I grabbed his wrist before he could make a getaway.

To my surprise, his wrist was thin enough that my thumb and

pointer finger made contact as my hand wrapped around it. If we were in a shojo manga, I probably would have asked him, "Are you getting enough to eat?"

I'd figured that the morning was a better time to apologize than the evening. They say that you're more clearheaded in the morning, or that it's easier to keep your emotions in check...or something. No idea how much truth there was to that, but I felt like I might as well seize the opportunity. Better than sitting around and doing nothing, right?

I didn't really have a plan, so that vague truism was kind of all I had to rely on.

"Sorry. I just...wanted to apologize for the other day," I said.

Christopher was silent.

Then he pursed his lips and looked up at me with a wary expression.

I rubbed the back of my neck with my free hand. He could clearly see right through me, so I decided to just be honest.

"I mean, I *do* want to apologize... But I'm still not sure why you're upset with me."

"What?"

I thought back to my conversation with Lilia.

She'd made a point of highlighting that *I* was the one fighting with Christopher, not my older brother. And, that being the case, there was nothing else to do but try to sort this out with Christopher as best I could. I had to do this Elizabeth Burton style.

"I don't know how you're feeling. I *can't* know unless you tell me," I said. "I'm not good at reading people like big brother is."

"Sis... You..." Christopher said haltingly, so quietly that I almost didn't hear him.

I leaned in closer and looked straight into his face so I wouldn't miss anything he said.

"Even *you* have things...you don't know?" he whispered, almost as if he hadn't meant to.

"Of course I do."

I gave him a wry smile.

It felt like the ultimate reward for all the hard work I'd put into

crafting my identity as a knight for Christopher to see me as his cool older sister who knew everything...but the truth was, I *wasn't*.

"There's all kinds of stuff I don't know," I said. Then, after a pause, I continued, "So...can you help me understand?"

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry for breaking into your room, and I'm sorry for stealing those letters. But it sounds like maybe there's something else I should apologize for. Could you tell me what that is?"

"S-Sis?"

"Tell me, Christopher... How can I earn your forgiveness?"

I clasped Christopher's hand in both of mine, peered into his eyes, and tilted my head. Our faces were just inches away. It was the earnest version of the pleading look I'd give to the ladies to make them throw their hands in the air and say, "Oh, I'd forgive those puppy eyes for *anything*!"

Christopher must have been embarrassed, because his face went beet red, and his lips started quivering. It made me feel like I really was talking to a girl.



"S...Sis..."

"Yes?"

"Y-You're too close!"

"Am I?"

He tried to back away, but I held his hand in mine tightly to prevent him from doing so. The difference in our strength was like night and day. He wasn't going anywhere.

This had turned into a war of attrition. All I had to do was hold on to his hand until he forgave me. My victory was all but guaranteed.

Lilia had reassured me that I didn't have to handle this just like my older brother would, but realistically, I only had four commands in my arsenal: "seduce," "use force," "threaten," and "flee."

"I'll do anything to earn your forgiveness," I said.

"S..."

"Please?"

I inched closer and closer towards him. Finally, he folded.

Squeezing his eyes shut tightly, he squeaked out, "*F-Fine!*"

"You mean it?"

"Yes!"

"You really forgive me?"

"*Yes*, I forgive you!"

"Good."

And with that, I let go of his hand and released him.

As he leaned back a bit to get some space, Christopher lost his balance and stumbled a few steps backwards.

I'd gotten what I'd come for. I'd secured his forgiveness—even if he had only given it to me out of desperation, it was mine now, and he couldn't take it back. After all, Christopher was a member of the Honorable Duke's family. Once he'd given his word, he would honor it.

For a while, Christopher just stood there with a red face, trying to quell his pounding heart. Finally, he spoke up again.

"Sis," he said with a sigh.

"Mm-hmm?"

"First of all, you shouldn't just go around saying that you'll do 'anything' for something. That's what I was upset with you for."

At this, I cocked my head.

Now that I stopped to think about it, love interests in otome games were always warning heroines of the dangers of that. I was hardly an otome game heroine, though...

I mean, not to toot my own horn here, but I *was* the danger.

And besides, it wasn't like I went around saying that to *everyone*.

"You'd never ask me to do anything crazy, though, would you?"

After a long pause, Christopher conceded, "No..."

"See?" I said, proud to have proven my point. "I wasn't just blurting that out without thinking, you know. I said it to you because I know I can trust you."

I'm not trying to brag when I say this, but I'm always looking out for number one. I'd sooner die than say something like that to anyone who would seriously hurt me.

For instance, I'd probably never offer to do "anything" if I were talking to Lilia or Edward. God only knows what they would do with that.

For a while, Christopher just stared at me, looking completely stunned. Then sighed quietly.

"I...care about you so much, sis. You're the most important person in the world to me. And I'm saying this *because* I care about you."

"Christopher..."

"I don't want to hurt you. I just want to see you smile. I wish you knew how much I cared about you."

He was speaking so earnestly that I started to feel a little uncomfortable.

It kind of made me feel like a jerk for relying on some of my seduction tactics to win him over—like I wasn't taking this seriously. Honestly, if anyone were watching this play out from the outside, they'd probably have a hard time telling which of us was the older one.

I finally understood now: My parents and my older brother had raised Christopher to always be thinking of others. He'd been angry with me because he was *worried*.

I thought back to what my older brother always said to me: that

no matter how much I grew or how strong I became, I'd always be his adorable little sister, and that he'd always love and fret over me.

Christopher had grown up hearing our older brother say that time and time again. I guess it was no wonder that he'd worry about me too, even if I was the most unconventional big sister imaginable.

If I thought about it that way, his tears after the lake incident made a lot more sense now.

"I'm sorry about the other day," Christopher said.

His long eyelashes hung over his downcast eyes, and his shoulders slumped. He had such a small frame already, but this only made him look even smaller.

"I should have known better. There was no point in saying something so hurtful," he said.

"Christopher..." I reached out and placed my hand on his head. This time, he didn't try to brush it away. "Thank you for worrying about me."

As soon as the words left my mouth, he whipped his head up to look at me.

His eyes were glistening...almost as if they were brimming with tears.

That response told me all I needed to know: I had finally said the right thing.

I let the relief of this realization wash over me as I cracked a joke, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

"I can't promise that I'll always listen to what you say, but I can put up with your nagging now that I know it's coming from a place of love."

"L-Love?"

"Isn't it?"

"W-Well, yes, but..."

"I love you every bit as much as our older brother and parents love you," I said, smiling as I patted him on the head.

His cheeks burned red. Then he looked up at me with a mysterious expression on his face. I couldn't tell whether I was seeing embarrassment, joy, or consternation in his eyes.

"And it makes me feel like the luckiest person in the world to hear

you say that you love me too," I added.

"Sis..."

After he straightened up out of his weirdly strained posture, Christopher's shoulders seemed to relax.

He turned to face me with an exasperated look on his face.

"You shouldn't throw around a word like 'love' lightly, you know," he said.

"I'm not. I'm saying it specifically to *you*."

At this, Christopher sighed deeply for some reason.

Whoops. Too cheesy?

He was probably at that tender age when expressing familial love felt cringeworthy and embarrassing. Honestly, even *I* felt a little embarrassed expressing it.

As I ruffled his hair a bit to hide my embarrassment, he suddenly piped up again.

"Um..." he began hesitantly. "You... You said you'd do *anything*, right?"

"Yep. You name it, I'll do it," I replied, smacking my chest with my fist.

I knew that Christopher would never ask for something unreasonable, so I felt no hesitation in saying that.

It was tempting to add that I'd prefer a request I could accomplish quickly instead of something that might drag out, but...I knew I wasn't in a position to be greedy like that.

After a few moments of hesitation, Christopher finally made his request.

"Then...let me use your lap as a pillow."

"As a pillow?" I repeated without thinking. Out of all the requests I could have imagined him making, *that* definitely hadn't been one of them.

He wanted to use my lap as a pillow? As in...my *thighs*? Was he expecting to lie down and just plop his head on them?

Shouldn't it have been the other way around, though—with *me* resting my head in *his* lap? You know, aesthetically?

No... That doesn't seem right either.

I couldn't help but wonder how someone had even come up with

the term "use your lap as a pillow," anyway. It was kind of a bizarre turn of phrase, considering that there was nothing pillow-like at all about a lap. And besides, wouldn't it have been more accurate to say "use your *thighs* as a pillow"?

His request wasn't necessarily unreasonable, but no matter how many times I tried to picture it, I just couldn't wrap my head around it. So, I decided to try to talk him out of it.

"Christopher... I've never told you this, but I'm not quite your average young noblewoman," I began.

"Yeah... I know."

"What I mean is..." I continued, completely earnest, "I have a strong suspicion that my lap may be *rock-hard*."

At this, Christopher burst out laughing.

Hey, this is no laughing matter. You're the one who's gonna suffer if my jacked quads make for a hard pillow, you know.

"That's okay. I don't care if your lap is hard or uncomfortable to sleep on. I'm mostly just doing this to punish you, anyway," he said.

"You sure you're not punishing *yourself*...?"

Christopher seemed to be *really* enjoying this for some reason. All I could do was cock my head in confusion.

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As per Christopher's request, I sat down at a bench in the castle courtyard's gazebo and let him rest his head on my lap.

I knew my quads must have felt rock-hard under his head, but he just happily lay on them anyway. *Why's he getting such a kick out of this?* I wondered. Even though we'd just peacefully resolved our fight about me not understanding him, here I was again, completely at a loss as to what was going on in his head.

His strawberry blond hair fluttered gently as a breeze passed through.

It was the perfect weather for a nice nap.

His head was so small, though, that I doubted I'd be able to lay mine on top of it.

"Could you stroke my hair, please?" he asked, looking up at me

imploringly.

I could hardly say no. With a look back that said, *Oh, you*, I began to stroke his hair.

Well, as long as he's enjoying this, I thought.

It probably looked a little weird, but maybe that was part of the "punishment."

Christopher's hair was fine and soft, yet it didn't get tangled in my fingers as I stroked it. The strands felt surprisingly nice to comb my fingers through, so I found myself playing with his hair a bit as I stared idly up at the sky.

As I stroked his hair, Christopher rolled his head to the side and looked down at the ground. His eyelashes looked even longer than usual when his eyes were closed, and they curled gently upwards.

A soft pink blush colored his round cheeks, and his head seemed to bob up and down slightly with each gentle breath.

If I'd told any passerby that he was actually my little *sister*, they would almost certainly have believed me.

I'd brought him several dresses to wear, actually, to account for how often I seemed to make him cross-dress...but I had a feeling he'd probably be even more upset than usual if I tried to make him do that on this trip. So, I'd probably just end up taking them back home with me without ever pulling them out.

Actually, maybe I should just give them to Lilia? I thought. She *had* said something about wanting a dress... Plus, it would lessen my luggage load.

I looked around the courtyard as I thought this over, not really fixing my gaze anywhere in particular. Everything about this moment —right down to the nice weather—was so peaceful.

I'd come to the West to call off my older brother's engagement, but I'd wound up going on sightseeing tours through town, boating on the lake, and lazing around in the palace courtyard's gazebo. It actually felt like a real vacation.

Plus, it turned out that Princess Diana's *real* motivation for proposing was just to buy time to experience a taste of love. So, even if we were to go back to Diagrantz today, I wouldn't have to worry about my brother being proposed to again.

I'd seen the passion in her eyes when she'd walked past me at the lake. Surely that had been a fun little love sampler, right?

All that was left was to give Richard a good kick in the butt. She was *his* princess, after all, so surely he'd put in more of an effort to win her heart than outsiders like us.

I'd also made good on my promise to Edward by getting Princess Marie out of his way. And if I were to come clean and spoil it all for her by revealing my intentions, she'd probably give up on me. It was probably about time to pull the plug. After all, according to Dee, she was the kind of girl who'd fall in love at the drop of a hat.

The downside was that going home meant a mind-numbingly boring, weeklong carriage ride. I'd have to find something to kill the time while I was out shopping for souvenirs—maybe some books on military strategy or some weightlifting gear.

"Lizzie!"

Just as I was starting to nod off, I noticed Edward walking over to me. I didn't want him to wake Christopher up, so I put my finger to my lips in a "shh" gesture.

For a moment, Edward looked puzzled. Then, as he got closer, he seemed to notice that Christopher was lying in my lap.

He approached us slowly, softening his footsteps, and then sat down next to me.

For a while, he just stared at Christopher.

Then, in a quiet voice, he asked, "Do you ever think you and your brother may be a little *too* close?"

"Better than hating each other's guts, right?" I replied, stroking Christopher's hair.

I didn't love Christopher's nagging, but I had no complaints about how attached he was to me. Maybe it was different in the world of love interests, but most people would have considered close family ties to be a *good* thing.

"Little brothers sure are cute, huh?" I mused.

"Rather bold of you to say that when you know exactly who *my* little brother is."

"Hey, even he's got his charms."

"When he's in *your* company, perhaps," Edward snorted, turning

his head away.

You'll never be honest about how much you really care about him, will you? I thought. To be fair, being honest about his feelings had never really been one of Edward's strong suits to begin with.

He and Robert did seem to be getting along better lately, though—even without looking at their relationship through my older brother's rose-tinted glasses.

"I think he's pretty attached to you too, you know. I'll bet if you threw a stick for him, he'd happily bring it right back."

"You really shouldn't talk about people's family members like they're *dogs*."

"See? You *do* care."

Edward glared at me, apparently not appreciating that I had the gall to point out he was rushing to his brother's defense.

"You really are devious, you know that?" he said.

"What can I say? I've got a rotten personality."

"You do indeed."

At this, the crown prince's frown relaxed.

Come to think of it, I haven't seen that trademark princely smile of his for a while, I thought. *Did his characterization change after the end of the game? Or maybe now that we've switched universes into the manga adaptation, he's got a slightly different characterization to match?*

I stole a glance at him as I pondered this.

"Mmngh..."

Christopher stirred slightly as he changed his sleeping position on my thighs. He didn't seem to be getting a very good nap in.

I was hardly surprised. My lap was too hard to be a very good pillow, so it was no wonder he was sleeping poorly. I was amazed he'd even managed to fall asleep at all.

Back in the Edo era, everyone's pillows were really firm and high, so I imagined they made your neck hurt like hell. Honestly, they were probably so bad that you'd have been better with *no* pillow. I guess even my lap would be lusciously soft compared to one of those.

"It seems to me that your little brother is awake."

"Hmm?"

"Mm...hmmm..."

I looked down at Christopher as he grumbled, just as he was wrapping his arms around my waist.

Siblings or not, Christopher had caused such a stink about me sneaking into "a man's bedroom" that I couldn't imagine him acting like this if he were awake. He had to have been asleep.

"Nah. He's asleep," I said.

Edward seemed unconvinced. He eyes Christopher warily. "Well, I wouldn't be so sure..."

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"I'm all stiff after being your pillow for the whole morning," I complained.

"You should have woken me up!" Christopher pouted.

"How could I ruin your slumber like that?"

I tried my best to stifle a yawn.

In the end, Christopher had only woken up once the maid had come by to tell us that lunch was ready.

Despite the fact that Edward had been busy running around making visits the whole trip, he apparently hadn't had any plans this morning, because he'd spent it all with us. I'd been stuck talking to him the whole time that Christopher was asleep.

I knew Christopher was right. I *should* have woken him up, but it had just gotten harder and harder to bring myself to when his arms had relaxed around my waist and he'd started snoring softly. Whenever I'd looked at his sleeping face, I'd just felt too guilty about the thought of waking him. Also, we hadn't determined when his "pillow time" would end, so I hadn't wanted to wake him at the wrong moment and risk him sulking for the rest of the day over it.

Unfortunately, though, I seemed to have done that anyway.

I felt another yawn coming on, but this time, I couldn't hold it back.

Crap. I'm really sleepy now.

I didn't usually eat many carbs, but my diet had gone in some

interesting directions in the West. There were just so many unusual dishes that I found myself regularly overeating.

I was probably working out enough to burn the calories, but that didn't do much to help the spike in my blood sugar levels after meals.

I followed Christopher down the hall towards his bedroom and went in after him.

If I fell asleep in my own room, I knew I'd sleep right through the night and wake up sometime the next morning. I didn't really have anything I needed to take care of, but I still wanted to avoid that if possible. It just felt massively self-indulgent.

Giving into my sleepiness, I dove straight into Christopher's bed.

"Wake me up in thirty minutes, okay?" I said.

"Huh?"

Christopher turned to look at me, finally realizing that I was here. I thought he'd learned how to sense people's presence from his training at the training grounds, but apparently he still had a long way to go.

"H-Hey! *Sis!* That's *my* bed!"

"I'll sleep way longer than I want to if I fall asleep in my room," I explained. "Just wake me up in thirty, okay?"

"Ugh! You didn't learn *anything* from our fight!" he yelled.

I didn't even register his words. Once my head hit the pillow, I was out like a light.

Ahh... Beds are such a luxury.

Sometimes “Sorry” Doesn’t Cut It

“Eric!”

I was training with the Normandius knights yet again today. While I was taking a break, I heard Dee call out to me. I looked over to see her swiftly approaching. She wore a determined look on her face.

A palpable excitement buzzed among the knights at the princess’s entrance. The atmosphere was completely different to when Princess Marie had barged in before. To be fair, though, I was sure the knights weren’t used to royalty just stopping by like this in the middle of their training.

I’d never seen Dee in such a hurry before. She was practically *jogging* over to me as her maids tried to keep up, looking flustered beyond belief.

Wait a second...

I blinked. I recognized a face among the maids.

Why is Lilia tagging along with Princess Diana’s maids?

While I was distracted by Lilia, the princess made her way right up to me and stopped, clasping my hands in hers.

“Eric! I’m going to change the law!” she declared.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m going to make it legal in our kingdom for men to marry other men!”

A million question marks popped up in my head. I turned to look at Lilia, who expertly avoided my gaze.

I didn’t know the full story behind this whodunnit, but one thing was clear: Whatever had happened, Lilia was to blame.

“You and Prince Edward could be free here! Flee your kingdom, and I’ll ensure that Normandius can be your safe harbor!”

“Lilia...” I said slowly, glaring at her.

“Sorry...” she whispered.

An apology was an acknowledgment of wrongdoing—in essence, a *confession*.

Seriously, I take my eyes off of you for one minute and you wreak absolute havoc...

The thing is, there are some actions that can't just be glossed over with an apology. Sometimes sorry doesn't cut it. Like, just as an example, when you turn a foreign princess into a yaoi fangirl.

"But of course, you're also free to choose partners *other* than Prince Edward! Lady Lilia has told me that you share close bonds with several other young gentlemen as well," Dee continued brightly, completely oblivious to what was unfolding beneath the surface between Lilia and me. "You've helped me so much. I would love the opportunity to return the favor, so please let me help *you*!"

Dee looked up at me eagerly, an uncontrollable passion in her sparkling eyes. A deep blush colored her cheeks.

I don't know how to put this exactly, but she looked...shiny. *Really* shiny, and really fired up too.

"You see, I've realized something recently. Love isn't something you can obtain by simply putting your mind to it. In fact...not everyone even *needs* to experience love."

"Well, yeah. That's probably true."

"Everyone has different strengths and capabilities. I enjoy listening to musical performances, for example, but I don't have much talent for playing an instrument myself."

As she said this, her gaze dropped.

There was a hint of shyness in the gesture. It was so charming, especially seen from above at such a close distance, that I couldn't help but think that any man who wasn't already immune to her charms would fall for her in two seconds flat. She would've been absolutely bewitching...if it hadn't been for the absolutely baffling words coming out of her mouth.

"There are two types of people: those who enjoy playing an instrument, and those who enjoy listening. Surely it must be the same in matters of love?"

The princess wore an animated expression as she put forth her pet theory, but I could feel that my own smile was swiftly crumbling.

And as it did, the look I was throwing Lilia grew increasingly hostile.

"I feel that I'll be happiest supporting someone else's love. Perhaps...the love between gentlemen."

Lilia hadn't even so much as glanced in my direction for the entirety of the conversation. Instead, her gaze was fixed squarely at a forty-five-degree angle towards the ground to the right of her.

It was a guilty look if ever I'd seen one. And she had every reason to be guilty. It was insane to think that our kingdom's high saint had turned the crown princess of a foreign nation into a crazed yaoi fangirl whose deepest desire was to be a fly on the wall.

And they call you a "saint"... "Hell-raiser" is more like it, if you ask me.

"Uh, Dee? I think there's been some sort of misunderstanding here..." I began.

"Yes, I know what you're about to say," she said, nodding solemnly. "I understand your plight."

All that told me was that she had absolutely *no* understanding of "my plight."

"You're the heir to Duke Burton's land and title. Any romance that you pursue with a man will be nothing more than an illicit affair. Yes...your love is but a fleeting dream. But that's exactly what makes it so pure and beautiful," she rhapsodized.

The moment she dropped the word "pure," I knew it was all over.

Internally, I looked up to the skies.

Why are all of the women in my life like this? They look so sweet and cute on the outside, but they're deadly *on the inside. Just once, I'd love to have a female friend who doesn't make me fear my life.*

"Please allow me to express my gratitude, Lord Eric. You humored my selfish desire to experience the thrill of romance, and in the end... I discovered the joy of supporting another's love. I know how presumptuous this may sound, but I would love nothing more than to have a front row seat to your romantic entanglements, cheering you on and watching over you."

"I appreciate that, but—"

"I didn't know what to call this feeling, but Lady Lilia gave me a name for it," Dee said, breaking into a gentle smile.

In that moment, she looked so beautiful and pure that I could practically see a halo forming behind her head. Her smile was so joyful that it could have tempted a dozen roses into blossoming in the background behind her, despite being out of season.

"She said that this is what it means to be a 'shipper.'"

Whoa.

"And that I'm an 'Eric fangirl.'"

Hold the phone.

"Excuse me. I'm just going to borrow Lilia for a moment here..."

I gripped her by the shoulders before she could run off and dragged her away from Dee.

Lilia was determined not to make eye contact, so I grabbed her by the cheeks and turned her head to make her face me.

"Just what kind of wild ideas have you been putting into her head?"

"Um, well..."

Lilia pressed her index fingers together, flapping her mouth open and shut. Finally, she resigned herself to her fate and fessed up.

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Hey, everyone. It's me again: Lilia Douglas.

Let's rewind the clock a bit, shall we?

Things had been going very poorly since we'd arrived in the West. There'd been no progress at all—no developments of any sort whatsoever—and I was at my wit's end.

Well, technically speaking, progress *was* being made. Just not the good kind. I really didn't like where things had been heading lately.

As usual, Edward had whisked Ellie off somewhere again today. I heard that Princess Marie had tagged along again too.

You lied to me, Ellie! When you said we were going on a trip together, I got all excited. But you've barely even given me the time of day since we've been here!

If anything, I'd found myself with even *more* romantic rivals than before.

Here I'd been thinking it was the love interests I needed to worry

about, but I'd forgotten one crucial thing: the effect that Ellie had on *girls*. She was always nice to girls, so even the cute tsundere girl had fallen for her; it was obvious that Ellie didn't mind the attention—in fact, she was probably even *encouraging* it with her flirting.

Knowing Ellie, I bet she'll start patting that little princess on the head soon. She'll probably stroke her hair and everything. Mark my words, she'll do it!

And was there a girl in the world who wouldn't fall head over heels for her after being treated like that? I mean, how could Ellie not realize the effect she had?

Actually...scratch that. I'm sure she does *know, and she's just taking full advantage of it. Classic playboy behavior!*

Then there was the other princess: Princess Diana. After our recent trip to the lake, we arrived back at the palace and exited the carriage. That's when I spotted a look on her face that I won't soon forget. She was looking at Ellie with fiery *passion* in her eyes.

It was weird, actually, 'cause I sure didn't notice her making eyes at Ellie like that when we were at the lake together. I really wasn't picking up on *any* sparks between them. If anything, Princess Diana had seemed pretty taken with Edward. They were giving off serious lovey-dovey vibes in that rowboat together.

So, what the heck had Ellie done to change that?

God... I take my eyes off of you for one second, and this is what happens?

Seriously, she was like a magician pulling a dove out of a hat.

Ellie had told me that she was letting Edward handle the older princess, but it sure didn't look that way to me.

Look, Ellie. I'm sorry to break this to you, but you're letting your guard down way too much around that princess.

Maybe it was because Ellie didn't have to worry about her brother being whisked away to the West anymore, or maybe it was because she didn't feel any pressure to win the princess over. Whatever the reason was, she was just...being herself around her. Which, for Ellie, was *weird*.

I mean, she'd even started calling the princess "Dee." It was like they'd suddenly dropped all formalities.

I don't know if it's, like, a European thing, or what...but if you ask me, they seem a little too *close. It's like Ellie's glitching out or something.*

Wait... Huh? Why is Ellie being so cold to me*?*

Isn't she always nice to girls?

M-Maybe that's just a glitch too?

"Excuse me, Lady Lilia?" a voice called out to me, just as my eyes were practically spinning in circles.

I turned around to see Princess Diana gracefully making her way over to me, her silky black hair swaying gently as she walked. It was a stark contrast to her beautiful, almost translucent pale skin. If "radiance" was a stat, she would have absolutely maxed it out.

Even the way she walked was the very picture of feminine grace. She was beautiful, and she carried herself like a mature adult. With each step she took, those gorgeous melons of hers swayed gently back and forth.

I reflexively looked down at my own chest.

For the record, it's not like there's *nothing* there, okay? I'll have you know that I have two perfectly nice apples.

There was honestly no explanation that would make my behavior any less weird or inappropriate, but Princess Diana just smiled brightly at me, showing no indication that she was put off by me staring at my own chest.

Oh, wow... She's not just beautiful on the outside, but on the inside too, I thought. *She shines so brightly, her radiance is practically blinding.*

Her social graces and warmth made her the Platonic ideal of a "golden girl." In fact, she was probably *such* a golden girl that she didn't even distinguish between golden girls (or boys) and wallflowers. I'd bet she didn't even know there *was* a distinction.

Her whole existence was all just a bit much for a little wallflower like me, to be honest with you. Also, there was the issue of her big, honking melons.

Ahem!

Look, I could see how this woman had won Ellie over, all right?!

And yeah, it made me pretty depressed that I'd tried to think

about how to one-up her and come up empty!

But I wasn't about to give up on my love!

As I was biting my lip, Princess Diana took a seat.

Her attendants had pulled a seat out for her, of course. Even just that detail felt pretty posh.

"C-Can I help you with something?" I asked.

"Lady Lilia, you and Lord Eric are quite close, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes! *Very* close!" I replied immediately, not waiting for her to continue.

Intimately close, actually! We've even crossed the sleepover party threshold!

"W-We're always together at school, and I practically have an open invitation to the Burton manor. We do everything together. Ellie's always there for me."

"Goodness! Is that so?"

"Yes! We're *very* close. Bosom friends, you might even say! I mean, there's *nothing* I don't know about Ellie!"

I puffed out my chest with pride as I spoke, and Princess Diana's eyes suddenly wandered.

It seemed she was finally getting it through her head that Ellie and I shared something special.

"There's, um... There's something I'd like to ask you, then."

She continued with a litany of disclaimers like "I realize this is rather bold of me" and "Perhaps you'll think me a brazen woman for asking, but..."

"Well, hurry up and spit it out already!" I wanted to say. But it was pretty hard to imagine anything more brazen than openly staring at someone's cleavage (much less your *own*), so I stayed quiet and waited for her to continue.

After much hesitation and fidgeting, Princess Diana finally seemed to shore up the resolve to ask her question.

She opened her mouth and said, "What kind of relationship does he have with Prince Edward?!"

Wait... What?

I could feel my pupils turning into little dots. It took everything I had not to blurt out, "Come again?"

"When I saw Prince Edward embracing him the other day, I just couldn't help but wonder."

I felt like that space cat meme, but Princess Diana didn't seem to take any notice of how perplexed I was. Despite her embarrassment, she continued.

"Lord Eric is a wonderful person. I called him to Normandius for utterly selfish reasons, and yet he's been so kind to me. I could hardly believe it when he said he wanted to get to know me for *me*, as an individual. No one had ever said that to me before."

Princess Diana blushed as she spoke. I, on the other hand, felt like I was being stabbed in the heart.

Um, Ellie? That was so not *the strategy we agreed upon! Didn't you bring me here to the West specifically to make the princess sour on you? What the heck are you doing maxing out her affection meter like this?!*

After all those otome games you've played, you've got no excuse for bungling your affection point management so badly. For God's sake, woman, get it together!

"And Prince Edward has been acting so differently lately. It's as if he's...*softened*, somehow. He's started wearing such a sweet, gentle smile," Princess Diana said. Then, after a pause, she added, "I know my sister has feelings for him, but my heart seems to pound uncontrollably when I'm near him."

The princess sighed deeply. I felt a pang of jealousy at how seductive it sounded. I knew I could never pull that off.

But so what?! I'm not going to lose to her! I thought defiantly.

"I found myself wondering, 'Is this what love is?' I felt I was finally beginning to understand. But..." Diana cut herself off suddenly, as if struggling to continue her thought.

Suddenly, I was overcome with a deep sense of dread.

Oh, God... I think I know where this is going.

"After the incident at the lake, when I saw Prince Edward run over to Lord Eric without even so much as glancing at Marie or me...I felt a sensation in my breast—like a constriction—stronger than anything I've ever felt before."

"Your *breast*?"

"Prince Edward is always so calm and relaxed, but he looked so panicked, like he was at his wit's end. And Lord Eric... Lord Eric looked surprised and a little embarrassed, but he accepted Prince Edward's care."

I thought back to the scene Princess Diana was referring to, conjuring a mental image of Ellie's face.

Honestly, I had been pretty panicked at the time too, so it was kind of hard to trust my memory. As far as I remembered, though, Ellie's expression hadn't left much room for doubt. It had clearly had "What the hell is he doing?" written all over it.

It seemed to me that Princess Diana had been filtering the scene through a *special lens*.

I'd seen this happen to people before. Once you started looking at the world through that lens, even interactions that would have previously seemed innocuous suddenly felt, well...how should I put this? Imbued with a *certain significance*.

It was a disease, really.

"I don't know what came over me, but I found myself wanting to give them a standing ovation. Their friendship is just so...so *pure* and beautiful... I was so moved by the sight of it."

Yup. There it is, I thought. The moment she uttered the word "pure," I knew it was her death knell.

I was ninety-nine percent sure—no, *ninety-nine million percent* sure—that I knew what was going on here. It was the kind of terminology that transcended all time and culture.

"And then, when I saw them having such an intimate conversation during the carriage ride home, I thought: 'I hope they can enjoy each other's company like this forever.'"

The more she spoke, the more I felt my thousand-yard stare growing ever more distant.

Okay, this is downright bizarre, I thought. *We're supposed to be in the world of an otome game's manga adaptation.*

But I knew it was naive to think that it was a world free of *you-know-what*. After all, the phenomenon was notorious for rearing its head in every story, regardless of genre...and spreading like wildfire.

No source was needed for the infection to take hold. As long as

there was someone with the right disposition and knowledge, they would become patient zero. Honestly, it kind of felt like I was bearing witness to the origin of life itself.

I mean, obviously that wasn't what was happening here...but you know what I mean!

"It's such a strange feeling... I never knew that simply bearing witness to the bond between two people could make my heart pound like this. I had no idea...that a joy like this could be so *satisfying*."

Princess Diana let out an enraptured sigh as a crimson tinge crept up her cheeks again. She was the very picture of a blushing maiden in love, and the faraway look in her eyes held an unmistakable passion.

"It's difficult to put this feeling into words...but I can't help but feel as though it's the very same ingredient that I needed all along to experience the 'love' I've been looking for."

When you got right down to it, what I was witnessing wasn't the origin of life.

"Reflecting on that made me realize something: It isn't so much that I want to fall in love with Lord Eric or Prince Edward... More than anything, I just want to watch their beautiful bond unfold."

No, I was witnessing an entirely different origin story: the origin of a yaoi fangirl.

"D-Dear me! I'm so sorry for going on like that!" the princess suddenly exclaimed, as if coming to her senses. "I hope I haven't upset you with these musings. Please, forget I said anything!"

She waved her hands, flustered. But it was too late.

I couldn't unhear what she'd told me. The cat was out of the bag now, and there was no putting it back. Once you went and dropped a buzzword like "pure," it was all over.

Still, it would have been all too easy to laugh it off and put it behind us. All I had to say was something like "Different strokes for different folks, right? Tee-hee! Anyway, lovely weather we're having today, isn't it?"

Hold it, Lilia. Let's pause a moment and think through what would happen if you did that.

If Princess Diana became an Ellie x Prince Edward shipper, she'd probably turn into the kind of fangirl who would go absolutely rabid from just seeing them in the same frame together.

So, it stood to reason that there was a good chance—an eighty to ninety percent chance, if I had to ballpark it—that she'd do everything in her power to push them together. And, being the perfect golden girl she was, she'd probably do it without a trace of ill will or hesitation. Her intentions would be a million percent pure. Then, once she'd set everything up just so, she'd take her place as a fly on the wall and watch.

That was the kind of fangirl she was. In short, she was the polar opposite of a self-insert fangirl like me. I had a feeling we would never be able to see eye to eye, so it was probably best for us to just live our separate lives and never cross paths. We could maintain peace so long as I stayed in Irontown and she stayed in the forest.

I didn't have a sense for what specific measures she might resort to, but I knew that they wouldn't be good for *me*. Honestly, the only winner in this scenario would probably be Prince Edward.

What can I do to put a stop to this, though? I wondered.

In Princess Diana's world, it was like a piece of hot new content had just dropped—and that content just so happened to be Ellie. Everything was new and exciting to Princess Diana. She was champing at the bit for more, and she was ready to soak up every new development like a sponge.

From what I'd heard, it was tradition for a yaoi fangirl's first OTP to feature two characters who already seemed pretty close.

(To be clear, I got that straight from the horse's mouth. That's what yaoi fangirls *themselves* used to say in my past life, not just some assumption I'm making. What I'm saying is, it's a self-proclaimed trend. I've got no clue how much truth there is to it, though.)

Anyway, if there was anything I could do about this...then it was probably to get Princess Diana to pick a *different* OTP.

Ellie x Prince Edward was probably her OTP right now because it was right there in front of her. But what if I threw in a different interpretation for her to consider?

After all, Princess Diana was still a newcomer to Ellie's world. Me, on the other hand? I was a veteran. It was time for me to hand down everything that I'd learned from my PhD in Elliology.

"Princess Diana," I began, steeling my resolve. "There's something I'd like to show you. Would you mind coming with me for a bit?"

Sorry, Ellie...but I'm about to sell my soul to the yaoi fangirls.

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"May I ask what it is you wish to show me, Lady Lilia?" Diana asked as I invited her into my room.

I peered at the maid who'd accompanied us. If she'd been a butler, I would've firmly demanded that she leave, but it would probably be okay for her to accompany us. She just barely made the cut, though.

The conversation that was about to take place was going to be an unusually delicate one. The terrifying thing about triggers wasn't so much their explosive capabilities as it was the unpredictability of not knowing *when* someone might be triggered. And what I was about to tell the princess, well...it wasn't exactly everyone's cup of tea.

"Your Highness," I began, "before I show you, there's something you should know."

"Oh? What might that be?" she replied, cocking her head. Her glossy black hair swayed gently as she moved.

I was pretty used to seeing black hair in my past life, obviously, but for some reason, her hair was so extraordinarily glossy and lustrous that I was struck by its beauty.

It was kind of remarkable, actually, considering that all the cool kids at school always seemed to unanimously bleach their hair. But maybe that was the whole point? It was like it drove home the point that she was *so* beautiful, she didn't even have to change anything.

That someone so beautiful could exist felt somehow cruel—even more cruel than the existence of a school pecking order.

Lowering my voice, I leaned in to whisper into the princess's ear.

"From what I hear, Prince Edward isn't the *only* one Ellie shares a

‘close bond’ with. Apparently, several other gentlemen share that honor.”

“*O-Other gentlemen?!*”

“As you’ve probably noticed, Ellie doesn’t discriminate,” I continued. “Young, old, man, woman... As a philanthropist, Ellie wants to give everyone a piece of the ‘love pie,’ but would never let anyone claim it *all* for themselves. Some might even call Ellie a *love guru*.”

“A... A love guru...?!”

Ellie was actually less a philanthropist than a philan*derer*. But in spite of her cold treatment, she somehow managed to attract hordes of needy admirers...so, functionally, at least, there wasn’t much of a difference.

If I thought about it now, Ellie was actually the personification of the “That would never happen.” / “Well, it did!” scene from that whacky anime with the short girl and the tall one.

Anyway, everything I ended up telling Princess Diana next was straight out of some fan fiction. Not *mine*, mind you, but some yaoi fangirl’s. In short: It was the stuff of delusions and bore absolutely no resemblance to Ellie’s actual life.

I took in a deep breath and prepared myself.

“For starters, there’s Prince Edward’s younger brother, Prince Robert!”

“Prince Robert?! Goodness me, this is a surprise!”

“Prince Robert is a cadet at the training grounds, and Ellie is one of his instructors. So, they have kind of a student-teacher relationship going on! According to the rumors, Prince Robert is a *very* devoted pupil. He’d probably lick Ellie’s boots at the drop of a hat. And I hear Ellie is quite the *attentive* teacher...if you know what I mean.”

“A-Attentive, you say...?” repeated the princess, her golden eyes sparkling with excitement. “But dearie me... To think that two brothers could fall in love with the same person! What a cruel twist of fate!”

I knew that would get her going. Yaoi fangirls eat that “forbidden love” stuff up. I mean, us self-insert fangirls are into that too...so I

guess *everyone* likes it.

Funny how two people can enjoy the same thing like that, yet still be on completely different wavelengths.

"Next, there's the count's third son, Lord Isaac! He's a real loud-mouth, and everyone says he's going to be the next prime minister. He and Ellie are inseparable. They've been in the same class since they were first-years, and their classmates are *obsessed* with their close friendship!"

"Oooh, best friends!" Princess Diana exclaimed. "They are supposed to be 'just friends,' but at some point, they can't contain their love for each other anymore... What a heart-pounding development!"

As she spoke, she put her hand to her cheek absentmindedly, as if lost in her daydreams.

I called this one too. Yaoi fangirls loved the "But We Were Supposed to Be Just Friends" trope.

Not that I had any room to talk, considering how much *I* loved childhood friend stories...

"Then there's Ellie's little brother, Lord Christopher, who's accompanied us on this trip! Ellie's usually pretty brusque and businesslike with the male sex, but not with him! Ellie's actually a bit obsessed with Lord Christopher. No matter how strongly he comes on, Ellie doesn't have the heart to push him away. Kind of surprising, right?"

"L-Lord Christopher too?! I *have* noticed the warmth in their eyes when they look at each other...but I had no idea there was a forbidden brotherly love blossoming between them!"

I was worried I might've been overdoing it with the whole "forbidden love" thing, but the princess was obviously eating it up. She'd started breathing heavily through her nose, and she looked just seconds away from drooling.

I kinda felt like I was seeing something I wasn't supposed to. Just like when Ellie would let her hair down, it was shockingly *hot* when someone as beautiful as Princess Diana got a little sloppy like this. I felt like I was gonna die of a heart attack from the hotness overload.

I don't want any dizzying dalliances with anyone but Ellie,

though. So let's keep this PG, please!

Channeling the inner yaoi fangirl I'd sealed away, I delivered one final blow.

"I should also mention Instructor Gried, who's made rapid gains in popularity recently! He's a senior instructor at the training grounds where Ellie coaches the cadets. Once, he came to school to drop off something Ellie had left behind at the training grounds, and apparently everyone went crazy over his ruggedly handsome good looks. Just picture it: a mild-mannered playboy knight, and the tough, ultra-masculine older coworker. Everyone loses their minds over the sexy age difference between them!"

"S-Sexy... Age difference..." the princess repeated, as a rush of blood pooled in her head.

She rocked back and forth like she was right on the verge of a KO. I knew I had to finish the job with a solid right hook.

"And it's all right here, in a fanbook published by the Sir Burton Fan Club! Voilà: the *Ellie Multiship Anthology*!"

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"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

I had to press the stop button, because this was getting out of hand—and I meant *way* out of hand. I didn't know how the hell I was supposed to process this.

All of the sarcastic comments that were forming in my head were piling up faster than I could keep up, creating a massive traffic jam. It felt like I'd already been lapped, and yet the insanity was only accelerating.

A love guru? A multiship anthology?

My head hurt. I was so done, I just wanted to forget about all of this and take off for Hawaii. Some garlic shrimp and scuba diving sounded *really* good right now.

"You. Can't. Make. Up. Ships. Like. That," I seethed.

"W-Well, what else was I supposed to do?! The princess has turned into one of those yaoi fangirls!" Lilia protested, flailing about with her hands rolled into fists.

Yeah, no doubt because you *awoke the beast.*

"I had a feeling she was going to try to push you and Prince Edward closer, so I tried everything I could think of to stop her," Lilia explained. "And I figured that the best way to do that was to turn her into a laid-back multishipper. I used every last ounce of the little familiarity I have with the BL world to save you!"

"Then why does it feel like you've only made things *worse*?" I shot back, my shoulders slumping.

If anything, what I really wanted to know was how the hell any of this had been believable.

"I haven't made things worse! If I'd left her to her own devices, she probably would have turned into a crazy Ellie x Prince Edward fangirl, okay?! What would you have done if she started demanding that you get it on every time you were in the same room together?! *Huh?!*"

"You could have just told her I'm a woman. Don't you think *that* would have done the trick?"

For several moments, Lilia was silent.

"Oh..." she finally said.

Her eyes were as wide as saucers as she blinked vacantly.

For God's sake...

I stopped squishing her cheeks and let go with a big sigh.

Honestly, it wouldn't have made much of a difference at this point if Dee were to have found out that I was just a decoy for my older brother. Princess Marie and Richard would probably have had some gripes about it, but I'm sure Dee would have kept my identity quiet if I asked.

"You're the main character," I said. "Aren't you supposed to have OP intelligence? How could something so basic elude you?"

"W-Well... Look, I don't even *think* of you as a woman, Ellie. Your gender is just 'Ellie' to me, so..."

I had absolutely no idea what she was going on about.

As I massaged my brow, I shot a glance out of the side of my eye at Lilia, glaring at her.

"Anyway, you said you weren't a yaoi fangirl, so what are you doing with that weird book?"

"It's not what you think! I... I just like looking at the beautiful pictures, that's all! I'm appreciating it from an *artistic* perspective!"

It was exactly the sort of response you might expect from a middle school boy whose parents had just discovered the stash of bikini model magazines under his bed.

"And you bring it with you everywhere? Even on vacation? I find that odd, considering how light you tend to travel."

"Well...I'd die if the baron found it..."

Jeez, really? Is it that bad? I thought. *Do I even want to know...?*

As I regarded Lilia with a look of complete exasperation, she suddenly gasped, like she'd just realized something. Flustered, she shook both of her hands in front of her.

"Oh, d-don't worry! I only let the princess see the wholesome stuff!"

"And what's your point?"

Seriously, though, what was she trying to get at here?

That was when it hit me.

"Hold on. You 'only' let her see the wholesome stuff?"

At this, Lilia suddenly broke eye contact and averted her gaze.

"There are some things in this world that you're probably better off not knowing about," she said evasively.

"Okay, stop! You're freaking me out here!"

I couldn't help but raise my voice at her. She really *was* freaking me out.

Honestly, I didn't even want to know that there *was* anything out there I was better off not knowing about.

I'd appreciate you keeping anything like this to yourself next time, thanks. Also, remind me who it was that once delivered an impassioned speech on the evils of RPF?

Did this world even have manga, though? I mean, weren't we supposed to be in a medieval Europeanesque universe?

The more I heard, the more questions I had. I felt like I was growing further and further away from any sort of understanding.

"There are also individual volumes dedicated to each ship, of course, but I get the sense that people in this universe haven't quite figured out what 'triggers' are yet. 'Content warnings' aren't really a

thing, if you know what I mean."

And what gives you the right to get on your soapbox about that?

"I'm not quite sure what 'triggers' are, but...um...I must admit I'm finding this 'genderswap' thing a little difficult to wrap my head around," Dee—who'd shown up out of nowhere to join our conversation—said. She cocked her head in confusion.

Seriously, what in the world is this hell-raiser making the princess read? I wondered.

And wait, is it really a "genderswap" if I'm actually *a woman? No, hang on... Apparently, I'm the seme in these ships, so I guess there's a good possibility that these authors are genderswapping the guys?*

If that's what was happening, then these fan club girls had really taken things to the next level.

Although, really, the love interests were to blame for putting weird ideas into the purehearted fan club girls' heads with their bizarrely high-quality cross-dressing. If you asked me, they ought to have been making the rounds and personally apologizing to all of the girls' parents.

I hadn't actually looked at these anthologies, though, so I had no idea what was in them. I needed to remedy that, because my imagination was getting the best of me.

Guess I'll just have to brace myself and crack one open someday...

"Please know that you're free to immigrate here with whoever you please, Lord Eric. Normandius will welcome you with open arms."

"Uh... Look, Dee, I really appreciate the thought, but—"

"Y-Yeah! I'd *love* to see a gay wedding!" Lilia said, butting in before I could finish.

My eyes widened in shock.

Where the hell did that come from? I thought. *Aren't you supposed to be in love with me?*

Don't get me wrong—I'd have been thrilled if she were giving up on me. But if it meant that she was just going to try to pair me off with someone else, then that was a much less thrilling prospect.

Lilia ignored me as I tried to suss out her intentions. She waved her hand in the air excitedly, as if to say, *Oh, me! Call on me!*

"By the way, Your Highness! If you're going to legalize marriage between two men, does that mean you'll be legalizing marriage between two women too?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, of course! It wouldn't be fair not to."

"Yes!" Lilia exclaimed, pumping her fist.

So that's *what you were after!*

It was all becoming clear now. First, she'd gotten Dee to tell me I was welcome to immigrate to her kingdom with a lover of my choice...and then she'd gotten her to agree to legalize marriage between two women. It wasn't hard to see where she was going with *that*.

I couldn't help but feel amazed at her foresight. Deranged as she might have been, she *was* the main character, and she was every bit as quick-witted as you'd expect one to be. She claimed she wasn't "crazy like those yaoi fangirls," but if you asked me, the proof was in the pudding.

I only wished that she'd stop using her OP intelligence for evil like this. *Can't you just use it to help people?* I thought.

The princess looked back and forth between Lilia and me as I deflated. She put her hand to her cheek and cocked her head.

"Um... Is something the matter?" she asked.

"N-No, nothing at all!" Lilia immediately replied. "If you ask me, men ought to marry men, and women ought to marry women! Wouldn't you agree?"

Now she *really* sounded like a crazed fangirl.

But I guess that's nothing new.

Lilia was always a lost cause, but my real concern right now was Dee. I couldn't help but worry about the diplomatic tensions that might arise if anyone were to ever find out that a saint from Diagrantz had ruined the Normandius princess. And what if this caused problems when it came time for her to marry? I could see a real crisis on the horizon...

If anyone came knocking on doors and asking for answers, I'd have no choice but to point them to Lilia. Still, I had no idea how

anyone could possibly explain this situation.

As I was racking my brains trying to figure out how to help Dee recover from the hell-raiser's bad influence, though, Dee suddenly grabbed Lilia by the hand.

Her eyes sparkled as she looked Lilia in the eyes. Their faces were only inches away.

Even Lilia couldn't help but get flustered in the face of such beauty. Actually...maybe it was the fact that Dee was holding her hand to her ample bosom that was causing her to lose her mind.

It was such a lovely scene that I couldn't have faulted anyone for thinking it was straight out of a yuri manga. I wouldn't have been at all surprised if a whole bunch of lilies had started blooming in the background.

Unfortunately(?), though, this was no yuri. It was simply a missionary and her latest convert.

"But, Lady Lilia, you mentioned that there are anthologies for each ship?! I haven't had the chance to see them yet!"

"Um, well... *Tee-hee!*"

Lilia gave Dee a strained smile, making a poor attempt at deterring her from pushing the topic. It was completely ineffective.

Dee (politely) demanded to see the rest of the books and pulled Lilia back to her room with great enthusiasm. All I could do was watch in stunned silence as they left.

Seeing this forceful side of Dee really drove home the fact that she and Princess Marie were related by blood after all. And the king, for his part, had forcefully summoned my older brother to his court. The Western royal family seemed to operate on a strict "my way or the highway" MO, and apparently, that stubbornness of theirs was genetic.

Anyway, after causing me untold mental damage, Lilia and Dee had left in a whirlwind.

Now how am I going to clean up this mess...?

A Yaoi Fangirl's Self-Indulgence

"I'll be conducting another visitation."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I trust you'll accompany me as my bodyguard."

"Yes, Your Highness."

We'd just finished eating breakfast, and Edward had wasted no time stopping by my room and demanding my company for the day. I just gave him a lifeless "Yes, Your Highness" on repeat as I gaped at him.

I'd been hoping to join in on the Normandius knights' training session again today, but my boss seemed to have other plans—and there was no room to reject an order from the crown prince. I felt like a company man being dragged off to the golf course even though it was the weekend. But in my case, I *did* kind of owe Edward for taking me on this trip with him, so I guess I couldn't complain.

"Okay, but why were you *gaping*?" you ask? It's pretty simple, really—I was stunned because he was wearing a dress. And no, not a dress *suit*. Just a dress. A white one.

Yep, you guessed it. My boss, the crown prince of Diagrantz, had decided to cross-dress today.

He must've been wearing a hairpiece too, because his silver hair was loosely tied up on his head in a look that bore a striking resemblance to his in-game hairstyle. He was also wearing the kind of broad-brimmed hat that only an actress or a model could get away with, as well as some high heels to emphasize his beautifully slender long legs. It wasn't just his dress that was white, but the entire ensemble.

I hope you're not planning on ordering any spaghetti bolognese today...

His all-white ensemble, combined with his almost translucent

porcelain skin, made him look otherworldly. It was as if he were a beautiful woman from some distant, blurry memory.

Imagine the kind of beautiful older woman who was distantly related to you, that you only ever saw during summer breaks when you visited your grandpa's house. You'd tell your friends about her later, back at school, and they'd say, "Yeah, right!"

But just when you'd start to think that maybe you'd just hallucinated her in the summer heat, your grandpa would warn you, "Now listen here, kid. No more going up into the mountains, or that siren will have you in her thrall."

He was *that* kind of beautiful—the bewitching, inhuman kind.

Seeing him head-on like this in heels, I was amazed by just how tall they made him.

Hey, would you mind standing a couple meters away? You're kind of overshadowing me here, I thought.

"So, uh... Is there a costume parade today, or...?"

"I heard there's been a spate of kidnappings lately, so I'm simply exercising an abundance of caution," Edward replied with a smile.

I couldn't help but feel that dressing up as a *woman* was only going to put a bigger target on his back. It was kind of common knowledge women were both easier and more valuable victims.

Edward's ephemeral beauty might've given the impression that he would fade into mist if you dared to reach out and touch him, but unfortunately, he was in fact a normal, solid human.

If you're going to ask for an escort, can't you at least try to make my job easier instead of harder? You know, maybe rub some dirt on your face or wear something heavy?

I tried to think of something I could ask him to change into, but I quickly realized what a fool's errand that was. This was a man who, for some reason, had every confidence in his ability to pull off cross-dressing. There was no talking him out of this.

Okay, to be fair, it wasn't like his confidence was unwarranted. He *did* look gorgeous.

Resigned to my fate, I put on a coat and followed after him.

Wonder where he's going to drag me off to today?

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As we headed towards the entry hall, we came across Lilia standing in front of the door with her arms crossed, as if to say, *You shall not pass.*

She was throwing a glare Edward's way (someone seriously needed to tell her off for this kind of behavior, because the way she acted around the crown prince was wildly inappropriate for her station) and looked ready to hiss menacingly at him at a moment's notice.

"Stop right there, Ellie! Where do you think you're going?!" she screeched.

"Good question. Where *are* we going?" I asked, turning to Edward. I actually had no idea.

Edward didn't even turn to look at me. Instead, looking straight at Lilia, he answered, "I don't see how that's any of your business, actually."

"Well, it *is* my business! I'll have you know that anything and everything to do with Ellie is my business! So, please be sure to contact my office with any reports!"

Office? What office?

I grabbed Lilia by the collar and dragged her away from the door.

"Down, girl. I'll hang out with you later, so just be patient."

"No! You've barely spent *any* time with me since we got here! What do you care about more: me or your work?"

"Honestly? I don't really care about either."

Lilia snorted with rage and stomped her feet.

It was *quite* a sight to see a beautiful girl like Lilia throwing a fit like this. I was impressed that Edward managed to keep that placid smile on his face. This was exactly the sort of thing that could make a decades-long romance wither in an instant, but he didn't seem bothered at all.

That's some next level open-mindedness, I thought. *Although, come to think of it, I guess this is just what he signed up for as a*

love interest.

"What happened to the promise you made me?! You told me you were going to buy me a dress, remember?!" Lilia continued.

Crap. You remembered that?

I clucked my tongue internally. I'd never had any intention of following through with that, so I'd hoped that she'd soon forget all about it.

"Lizzie? What's this about a dress?" Edward asked.

His placid smile was suddenly nowhere to be seen. Instead, it had been replaced with an icy glare he was shooting straight in my direction.

Hey, don't look at me. I don't know what she's going on about.

I had no interest whatsoever in interfering with the crown prince's romantic pursuits, so I didn't appreciate his unwarranted ire.

Sheesh. So, Lilia gets a pass for throwing a tantrum, but I get in trouble for being accused of offering to buy her a dress? Talk about a double standard.

I shook my head, trying to signal to him that I wasn't actually going to be buying her any dresses.

For a while, Edward just kept glaring at me. Finally, though, he walked up to me and hooked his arm under mine.

"I suppose you can pick out a dress for me while you're at it, then," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Or would you prefer that I gift *you* a dress, *just like before*?"

He flashed me a suggestive smile.

Why're you saying that like it ought to mean something to me? I wondered.

He'd randomly put an emphasis on "just like before," making it sound like I'd gotten one from him in the past. It was an absolutely groundless insinuation. Maybe he was just trying to make Lilia jealous or something, but I didn't appreciate him spouting outrageous lies about me like that.

Lilia just stood there grinding her teeth as she watched us, until suddenly, she let out a sigh. Then she declared, in a loud voice, "I'm going to throw a tantrum."

"What?"

"You heard me! A cute girl on the precipice of adulthood is about to start rolling on the floor, pound her fists, and break into a fit of sobbing! It's going to be a real, all-out tantrum! So take a good look, ladies and gentlemen!"

"Whoa, hold on!" I said, stopping her without thinking.

I'd never heard such a terrible, ominous announcement before in all my life. Even as a threat, it was beyond the pale.

Jeez, Lilia. Have a little self-respect.

The most terrifying part of this was the deadly serious look on her face. The determination welling up in her eyes was palpable.

You don't have to do this, Lilia. I have complete faith that you'd follow through on your threat, so please believe me when I say that you really, really *don't have to prove it.*

I sighed and looked down at Edward, who was still making a show of clinging to my arm.

"Can she come with us?" I asked him.

"No."

"I promise I'll keep an eye on her."

"*No.*"

"Your Highness..."

I peered into his face as he turned his head away from me, refusing to engage.

Yeah, yeah. I'm onto you. You can pretend all you like that you don't want her to come, but I know that you secretly do.

Well, guess I've got no choice. I'll just have to be the adult here and bring you two together, like the villainess I am.

I flashed the crown prince my winning smile (the one that had all the ladies eating out of the palm of my hand) and gave him a wink.

"Please? C'mon, I'll be good, I swear."

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I was having some serious regrets.

"This store has the cutest accessories, Ellie! Let's buy some matching ones!"

I didn't answer.

"Come over here, Lizzie. I want you to take a look at these fabrics. They've got some that I think would be just your color."

Again, silence.

It felt like I was being subjected to the most obnoxious announcements in surround-sound stereo.

It was bad enough having to listen to either of them in mono, but being sandwiched between them like this was enough to do me in. *Can't you guys just do this without me?*

I was starting to seriously contemplate entering stealth mode and making a run for it, but I knew I couldn't just drop my guard duties like that. When I pictured the trouble I'd be in if anything were to happen to the kingdom's biggest VIPs after I left them to fend for themselves, my feet suddenly felt as heavy as lead.

"I think Lizzie would prefer something a little simpler."

"So? That just makes it all the better! The thought of her wearing something that's not her style just so we can match drives me *wild*! Besides, this way, she can demonstrate to the world that she's taken. Get it?"

For the last several minutes, Lilia and Edward had been embroiled in a serious war of words. They both seemed to be picking apart every little thing the other said.

Edward must've been peeved that Lilia was sticking to me like glue, so he'd taken on a nasty tone with her. This had only riled Lilia up more, though. And so, round and round they went, caught up in a vicious cycle. It was like they were running around on a high-speed hamster wheel.

"Don't you think what *you've* picked for her is a little plain for her tastes?" Lilia continued. "Oh, waaaait... I see what's happening here. You just don't want other guys noticing how hot she is, do you? You're dressing her down so you can keep her all to yourself, is that it?"

"I just thought Lizzie might prefer to wear something a little more refined than that gaudy thing you've picked out for her, that's all. *Some of us* actually care about dressing in good taste."

You know, I once heard that the reason hamsters run around on

wheels like that is because they used to cover several kilometers of distance per day back when they were roaming around in the wild. For a tiny creature like that, covering several kilometers a day is probably about the equivalent of a human running for several *hundreds* of kilometers. They're cute little things, but they're also remarkably disciplined, huh? Us humans could probably learn a lot from them.

I was pretty done after running just ten or fifteen kilometers every day, so I probably had a long way to go.

"Lord Eric!"

Just as I was retreating to Hamsterland in my head, trying my best to let the surround-sound stereo go in one ear and out the other, a refined voice rang out like a bell.

I turned around to see Princess Diana walking over to us. Richard was behind her, but I didn't see any other guards in the vicinity. Like Edward, she was probably trying to travel incognito and keep a low profile.

And, as part of her incognito look, she was wearing a ponytail. It was the perfect choice for a woman on the hunt. And by that, I mean "on the hunt for a boyfriend" (obviously).

Thanks to our innate hunting instincts, our eyes are naturally drawn to anything that moves. A ponytail takes full advantage of those instincts. There wasn't a man in the world who'd say he didn't like a woman in a ponytail.

Her choice of hairstyle practically guaranteed that any man—including, for example, a certain knight with a fixation on "his princess"—would keep his eyes glued to her as they followed her from behind.

Without thinking, I threw a smirk Richard's way. He immediately averted his eyes.

He was obviously just embarrassed. *Looks like your plan's working, Dee.*

"Lord Eric, Lady Lilia," she greeted us. "And who might this be...?"

As she approached us, she stared straight into Edward's face. As she studied him, her eyes grew wider and wider. Then she gasped, covering her mouth with her hand.

"*Oh!* Oh...my!" she exclaimed.

It was an understandable reaction. Cross-dressing had been experiencing a huge boom lately back in Diagrantz, so it hardly fazed me now. Most people probably didn't have very many opportunities to see a man in a dress, though.

What's more, it wasn't just a man she knew, but the crown prince of a friendly neighboring country. And to top it all off, he looked damn *good* in a dress.

Dee was probably so surprised by it all that she was at a loss for words.

She just stood there for several moments, with her hand over her mouth. Then her hand began to shake, and she looked from me to Edward, then back to me again.

"Yes... Yes, I see! You're doing a 'genderbend'!" she exclaimed, her voice strained.

Uh... No.

Now, some people are very particular about the language around this. So, let me be clear, lest anyone get all worked about it: There wasn't any genderbending going on here. It was *cross-dressing*.

Dee was turning bright red as she looked at Edward. There was a wellspring of emotion in her eyes.

At a glance, you might have assumed that she was just blushing because she was shy, and that it was an overwhelming sensation of love that had overcome her and brought tears to her eyes. Unlike her usual gentle demeanor, this side of her had a powerful potential to evoke in any onlookers a strong desire to protect her...and to hurtle them into the abyss of love.

But I knew better.

She wasn't overcome with love—she was overcome with fangirl fanaticism.

"Lady Lilia! I've seen the light! I understand the appeal of genderbending now!" she exclaimed, grabbing Lilia's hands and waving them around excitedly.

"I'm so happy for you," Lilia replied in a voice that made her sound like a broken robot.

"I feel like I've just opened the door and stepped into exciting

new territory!”

“Close the door right now,” Lilia said, again in her broken robot voice. “With both hands.”

Nothing good could come of this.

Richard, who had presumably never seen Dee like this, stared at her with wide eyes.

Edward stared at her too, looking absolutely mystified.

Can’t blame you for being confused. Direct all your complaints to the hell-raiser, please. This’s got nothing to do with me.

“Prince Edward! You’re truly an inspiration!” Dee exclaimed, clasping her hands in front of her chest and looking up at Edward with twinkling eyes.

Dee was pretty tall for a woman, but she couldn’t compare to Edward in heels.

Edward stumbled backwards a bit, as if overpowered by the princess’s zealous display of emotion.

“To think that you would put in so much effort, all to feel a little more confident standing by Lord Eric’s side as his partner! Oh, it’s so *touching*!”

“No—”

“You must be so jealous of Lady Lilia, getting to go out in public with Lord Eric and hold his hand or link arms with him... Yes, no one blinks an eye when it’s a man and a woman, but that’s something you could never dare to dream of doing! Yet, you want it desperately...more than *anyone*... And that’s how you came up with this plan!”

“I—”

“You envy Lady Lilia for how close she is with Lord Eric! You must have burned with jealousy! Isn’t that right, Prince Edward?!” Dee continued loudly, as if she were singing at the top of her voice. She said it all in one breath, not even giving Edward a moment to interject.

It was such a classic yaoi fangirl move that, if we’d been in a manga, there would have been a caption above her head that read: “Fangirl special ability: motormouth attack.”

I looked over at Edward, expecting to see a look of absolute

consternation on his face. Instead, he was beet red all the way to his ears.

Huh?

I'd have understood if he were wearing a pained smile or a look of bemusement, but why was he *blushing*? Maybe he was just mortified that this was how the woman he was trying to seduce saw him?

Yeah...fair enough. I guess that'd make any guy tear up a bit.

I was baffled, but Dee seemed to pay it no mind. She just kept moving in even more aggressively, amping up the pressure.

"But, Prince Edward, you don't need these dresses and heels. You're *perfect*...just the way you are! You and Lord Eric look great together! Please, have confidence in yourself!"

It was a nakedly self-indulgent sentiment.

As a BL lover, of course Dee would think that we looked better together as two men, but what about how *we* felt? Worst of all was that she was saying this all in front of Lilia.

Poor Edward...

Suddenly, Dee gasped.

She looked hesitantly back and forth between us. Then, as a fearsome blush crossed her cheeks, she hung her head to the ground.

"Oh, goodness me! I... I didn't mean to get carried away like that... Please, forget everything you just heard!"

I was floored by how sweet she seemed when she was embarrassed. It was shocking to realize how much damage a beautiful woman's bashful, blushing face could do.

Beauty was a powerful weapon, regardless of gender. It was so effective that I almost forgot all about her crazy fangirl outburst. I almost thought to myself, "So what if she's a yaoi fangirl? That doesn't matter to me one bit."

Actually, yes it does. Pull yourself together, Elizabeth.

"O-Oh, I just remembered something I wanted to ask you, Prince Edward!" Dee said, as if hoping to clear the air. "We spoke about this the other day, but I wanted to check in with you again. Can I count on your support?"

"My support?"

"Yes." Dee nodded enthusiastically, still blushing. "Seeing the two of you today reaffirmed my conviction. I would love to extend the invitation to you both."

I don't know why, but I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this...

"The kingdom of Normandius will be hosting a masquerade ball, and I would love to see the two of you there," she said.

I sneaked a peek at Edward.

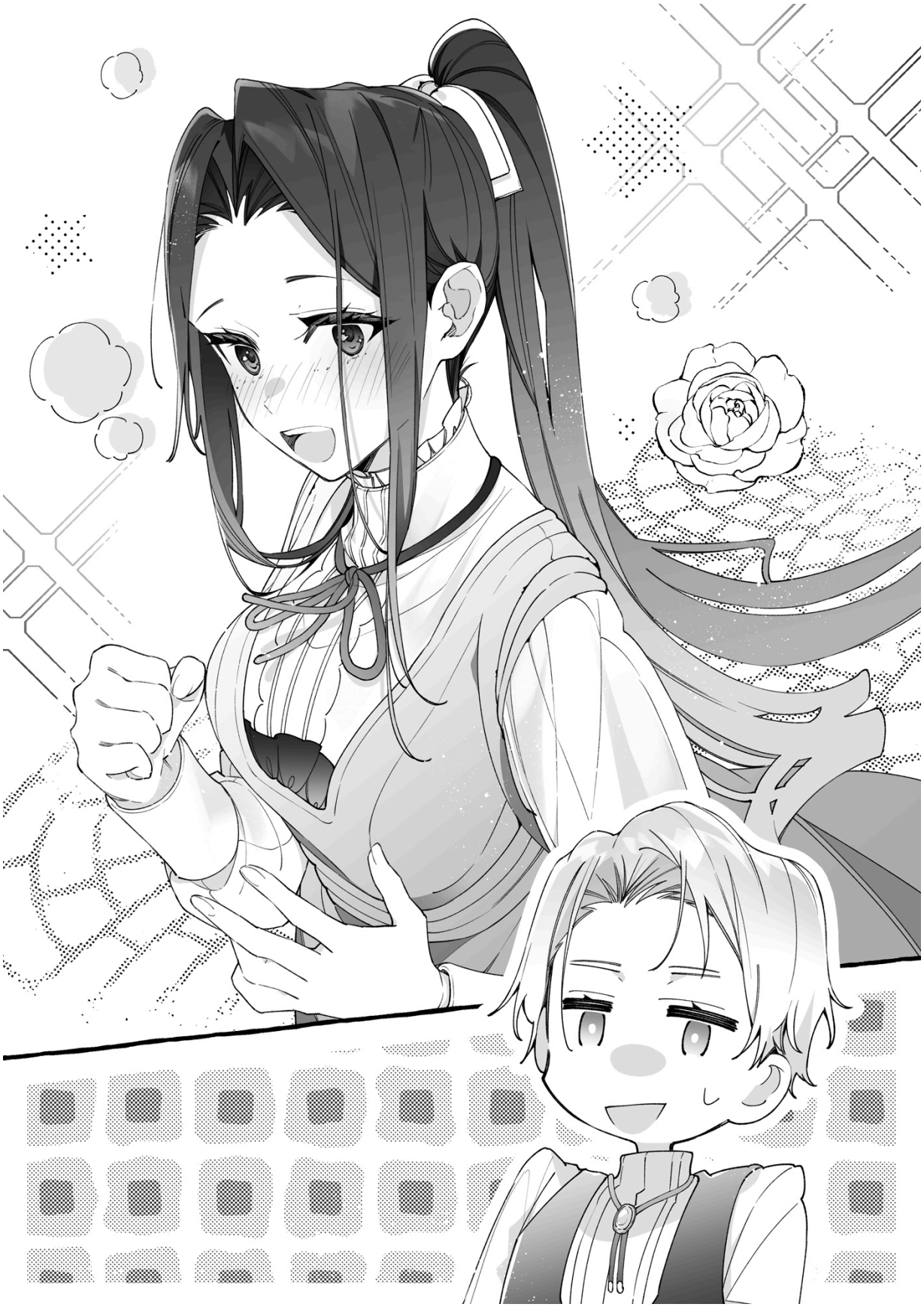
He seemed to have some idea of what she was talking about...but for some reason, I could've sworn I saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

A masquerade ball? I thought. Typical balls featured male-female pairs. But judging by Edward's current getup and the way that Dee had brought the idea up *now*, I felt like I could see where she was going with this.

"I'm inviting you as a couple, of course!" she said.

As I looked into Dee's eyes, ablaze with passion, I felt my soul begin to leave my body.

I've never heard a more self-indulgent fangirl idea in my life.



Epilogue

"So, you're inviting us to a masquerade ball?"

"Yes. It's a wonderful opportunity for all of the nobles to free themselves of the fetters of day-to-day affairs. Everyone hides their true faces, so they can mingle without having to worry about keeping up appearances."

At dinner that night, Dee elaborated on the details of the request she'd made earlier at the shop.

Princess Diana, Edward, Christopher, Lilia, and I all sat at the table together. In spite of the fact that she'd been following me everywhere lately, Princess Marie was nowhere to be seen. We were having a late dinner (thanks to Dee's and Edward's busy schedules), so I guess a healthy girl like her just hadn't been able to wait that long.

"It's a long-held tradition in the West, harkening back to the old days. From what I hear, it's an important part of their culture," Edward added, a know-it-all look on his face.

"And why do you want *us* to attend?" I asked Dee.

"Well... This is a bit of a sensitive topic, you see, but there have been reports of young ladies being kidnapped at recent masquerade balls. The next upcoming ball is scheduled for next week, so I'm afraid this poses a bit of a challenge."

I was so startled by this ominous news that my fork-holding hand froze in the air for a moment.

Surely it was a *pretty big deal* if young noblewomen were being kidnapped?

It hardly seemed like an appropriate dinner table topic to bring up with guests, and it certainly wasn't the kind of trivial nuisance that could be glossed over as "a bit of a challenge."

"With all due respect, are you sure you can afford to be so cavalier about this? Shouldn't the ball be canceled?"

"I truly wish we could...but I'm afraid it isn't all that simple. The masquerade ball is a cherished national custom. It wouldn't be right to disappoint all of the people who are so looking forward to it. And..." Dee said, before trailing off uncomfortably.

"To say that the young ladies are being 'kidnapped' is perhaps a bit of an overstatement," she continued. "You see, they only go missing for the duration of the ball. They're always returned before it ends."

"What?" I said, no less mystified than I was before.

Dee looked pretty mystified herself, actually. She clapped her hands over her cheeks and cocked her head, looking as if she was struggling to wrap her head around it all—much less to explain it to me.

"They never suffer injuries or find that their jewelry has gone missing. In fact, nothing of note really seems to happen to them *at all*. Apparently, the victims just fall asleep for a short spell. When this first started happening, everyone just assumed that they'd either passed out from exhaustion or a few too many drinks. The kidnappings are so uneventful that it took quite some time before anyone even realized that the young ladies *were* being kidnapped."

Huh... Well, that's interesting, I thought, as I mulled it all over. *So, these young noblewomen are being put to sleep with something —drugs, maybe—and briefly abducted from the ball. But if the kidnapper isn't after their money or their bodies, then what* are *they after?*

If this mystery had been unfolding in the modern world, I might've assumed that the kidnapper wanted to copy their fingerprints or their retinas in order to bypass some security measures, but...

Okay, Elizabeth. I think you've seen a few too many spy movies.

There wasn't enough time for the kidnapper to whisk young ladies off somewhere far away and get them back before the ball was over. Realistically, they could probably only carry them as far as the neighboring buildings. They might have even just taken them somewhere else within the ball's venue.

Even if the kidnapper somehow managed to get a young lady

alone and drug her, it wasn't as though there was much else they could get away with. Their face might have been hidden behind a mask, but they were still taking a pretty big risk.

Honestly, it was just a really bizarre thing to do if they weren't even getting some expensive jewelry or something out of it. There was simply no point in going to all that effort, as far as I could tell.

That felt like the pivotal question: What were they *getting* out of it all?

The best I could come up with was that this was all some elaborate excuse that young noblewomen had concocted to cover things up when they went a little too ham at the ball...

"It was only after we received reports from several young women about their 'strange sleeping spells' that we began to put the pieces together. In truth, we've only *just* come to the conclusion that there must be something unusual going on," Dee continued.

"But... What could the kidnapper want from them?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I haven't the slightest inkling."

Dee shook her head gently. Her eyelashes fell over her golden eyes as she looked down at the floor. There was a trace of worry in her gaze.

"Some are suggesting that there's no need to make a big deal of the kidnappings, since no one has suffered any real harm. But the victims are all young noblewomen. We can't be sure that *nothing* happened to them, even if they were only gone for a few hours. Several noble families are naturally concerned about the harm it could do to these young ladies' reputations. And, with all of the recent rumors swirling about kidnappings in town, there's been a swell of voices calling for the ball to be canceled. The royal family has a duty to both them *and* those who wish for the ball to go ahead. So you see, we're a bit at a loss."

Right... I think I've got the full picture now.

From what I'd gathered, the masquerade ball was a deeply rooted Normandius tradition, so the royal family was hesitant to call it off over kidnappings that might or might not have actually occurred. That being said, they couldn't just go ahead with the ball without putting *any* preventative measures in place.

I figured it was probably pretty similar to how people felt about the coming-of-age ceremonies in my past life. They were a long-held tradition, and the vast majority of people participated in them without any issues. There would always be some idiots who took it as an opportunity to cause a scene, but we weren't about to let that ruin it for the rest of us. Even if some hooligans tipped over a cop car, the ceremonies would still continue year after year. That's how strong a cultural institution it was.

"When I heard about the situation, I offered to help however I could. The Normandius royal family was incredibly supportive of my recovery while I was here in their kingdom, so I was hoping it could be an opportunity to return the favor," Edward explained. In a whisper, he added, "I never expected that I would be asked to lend my aid in a *dress*, mind you."

Uh-huh... So that's *why you've been smiling like a know-it-all,* I thought.

It all made sense now—well, as much sense as any of this *could* make. What had started out as Dee asking Edward for advice had somehow morphed once she'd encountered us in town earlier today. Now, it was a request for the two of us to attend the ball together as a couple (with Edward in a dress). She'd let her fangirl self-interest get the best of her.

For the record, I had no qualms whatsoever about infiltrating the ball and lending my man power to help get to the bottom of any suspicious activity.

Now that I didn't have to worry about anyone wanting to marry my older brother, I had been just on the cusp of suggesting that it might be time for us to start making our way back home. But I was a guest on this journey, and if the boss ordered me to take on another job before leaving, then I'd be perfectly happy to stick around and hunt down a kidnapper or two.

It'd probably lend a nice boost to my older brother's reputation if I succeeded, and if I didn't, then it was no skin off my back. I'd just say, "Well, better luck next time I guess," and head on home.

The one and only issue was that I had to go to this ball with *Edward*.

Edward himself had said that he hadn't been planning on going in a dress, and I did believe him. With that piece of the puzzle, all of the other pieces fell into place.

I see what's going on here. Edward must've been planning to attend the ball with Lilia. It's a smart choice, actually, since her saint's powers make her immune to poison.

And if that was his goal all along, then I'd only be doing him a favor by pushing for him to go with her instead of me. Edward will be happy to get the girl, and I'll be happy to make it through the night without a certain fanatical fangirl princess ogling me through her yaoi goggles. Two birds, one stone.

If the situation called for tactical support, then surely the royal family could enlist some knights to attend the ball. Plus, I could always just accompany either Dee or Princess Marie as their partner. No matter how you tried to slice it, that just seemed like a much better way to handle this kidnapping threat.

Surely the crown prince, of all people, wasn't just on board with the princess's ridiculous idea for diplomatic reasons?

This is no time to show weakness, Your Highness. If we want our nations to stand on equal ground as partners, then you can't set a precedent like this.

I shot Edward a meaningful look that said, *You don't* really *need to do this cross-dressing thing, do you?*

He nodded, as if to convey that he understood me perfectly. Then he said, in a dead-serious tone, "I'll go undercover and act as the bait."

"What?"

"After discussing our options at length, we've determined that this will be the most effective approach."

"*What?*" I repeated, without thinking.

Seriously, what in the world is he thinking? "Most effective approach"? For what, making a shipper's dreams come true? Or for getting murdered?

It was absurd for a crown prince to act as bait. If anyone was cooking up some nasty scheme, then Edward was bound to be their *actual* target anyway.

You're insane if you think you're an appropriate decoy, Your Highness. You may as well just tape a piece of paper to your back that says, "Kill me. I'm a crown prince."

"Your Highness? What exactly do you mean by 'bait'?" I asked him.

"I'm going to disguise myself as a noblewoman to lure out the kidnapper," he explained.

Yeah, so, I don't need you to spell that out for me. That was just an aristocratic euphemism for "Have you lost your goddamn mind?"

Edward, of all people, should have known exactly what I meant by that. And yet...

"This is too dangerous. There's a high chance the kidnapper will drug you," I said.

"No matter. Toxins have no effect on me."

"What?"

"I'm a *prince*, remember? All royals build up a resistance."

I glanced over at Dee.

She just sat there, wearing a strange smile on her face. There was nothing about her demeanor that made me think she was detecting any bullshit.

Okay... Guess he's not making that up then, at least.

I'd had no idea that Edward was immune to poison. I honestly wasn't sure whether or not I *wanted* to know how one could even become immune without being blessed with OP abilities like Lilia.

Practically speaking, though, even if I had the knowledge, I wouldn't necessarily want to put it into practice. It was kind of my policy to avoid painful and unpleasant experiences as much as possible.

"Even if the kidnapper tried to give me sleeping drugs, I would be perfectly fine. I would simply give you a signal as soon as I determined what he was after, and you could come to my rescue," Edward said.

"As your bodyguard, I can't let you do this."

"And since when have you been in a position to 'let' me do anything?"

I shrugged off Edward's snide remark.

As much as he might have disliked it, I *was* here as his bodyguard—and what's more, I was here in place of my older brother. With that in mind, it was pretty much inconceivable that I'd allow him to put himself in such danger.

After all, if anything were to happen to him, the blame would fall on me. Edward probably thought that he was only risking his own life, but there was a very real possibility that my entire family and I could wind up on the chopping block.

The peaceful life I enjoyed now had been hard-won, and I wasn't about to give it up over something like this.

"I'm simply speaking from a place of concern for you as your loyal subject, Your Highness," I said.

"Mm. Nice try."

"Ed, please," I tried again, channeling my older brother. "As your friend, I can't agree to this."

Edward's expression remained unchanged. He just let out a snort, utterly ignoring me.

Oh, so you're ignoring me now? Well, that's just rude.

"If all royals are resistant to poison, then surely Dee could be the decoy?"

"I...!" Dee sputtered, suddenly coming out of her slack-jawed stupor.

She snapped her enraptured gaze away from us and wiped the drool off her mouth.

"I...um...well, I'm a Normandius princess, so...I think someone else might be better suited for the task. Someone who isn't as well-known to the kingdom's people, like, um, Prince Edward. Because, I mean, they probably wouldn't recognize him, right? But they would recognize *me*, so..." Dee stammered, trying to dispel my idea as quickly as possible. She looked incredibly frazzled.

Seriously, though: It was genuinely shocking how flustered she was. If you looked up the word in the dictionary, you'd probably see a photo of her face. It was one thing to be a bad liar, but this was really taking it to the next level.

Is she really a member of the royal family? I wondered. Even *Lilia* was a better liar (if only slightly). Actually, come to think of it, Lilia

seemed to be getting better and better at lying by the day. Recently, it felt like it was pretty easy for her to pull one over on people with a straight face.

I sure hope that isn't thanks to my influence...

Just as I'd suspected from her fangirl ramblings the other day, Dee seemed pretty dead set on pushing Edward and me together. It was impossible for her to hide her intentions.

I'm begging you, Dee. Please stop shipping us.

I kept trying every angle I could think of to avoid having to go to this masquerade ball with Edward, but I wasn't getting anywhere. Edward didn't listen to a word I said, and Dee seemed to have his back completely.

Dammit. I'm outnumbered here.

I had a feeling that my best shot, at this point, was to end this little strategy meeting as quickly as possible so I could get Dee out of the picture.

Fortunately, that ended up being pretty easy to accomplish. It was late, so all I had to say was that we all ought to get some sleep.

Once Edward and I got back to the guest villa, I cornered him with an interrogation, but it didn't lead anywhere. Something about the way he responded to my questions was awfully suspicious, though. If there was one thing that was clear, it was that he was obviously up to something.

Suddenly, I realized that something *else* was off.

Lilia had been eerily quiet this entire time.

Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have been able to help herself from jumping in and protesting. The fact that she wasn't doing that now told me that something *very strange* was afoot.

Sure, she had a bad case of social anxiety, not to mention a habit of blending into the background in a crowd, but in classic main character style, Lilia could pluck up extraordinary courage when it really mattered.

With her high saint's powers and her insanely OP Auto Revive skill, drugs and poison would be no problem for her. But, more than anything, she'd *never* relinquish the opportunity to play my damsel in distress so easily.

If there was any concern about what she'd wear, I'd brought plenty of dresses for Christopher that I could lend her.

Even taking status into account, it was obvious that someone of low-ranking nobility would be a better decoy than a *crown prince*.

All in all, there were dozens of arguments that she could have made for why she'd be a better bet. It was just plain weird that she hadn't opened her mouth to make a single one.

I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this...

When I looked over at her, she just sipped her tea like nothing was the matter...but her hand was visibly shaking. She was obviously up to something.

Worst-case scenario, she might be in cahoots with Dee and Edward. I sure hope she hasn't sold her soul to the devil...

I kept an eye on her as I continued pressing Edward, but to no avail. He seemed completely unmoved by everything I said. Finally, he sighed and shook his head.

"You leave me no choice," he said.

Oh, thank God. I've finally gotten through to him, I thought. But then something caught my eye. He had reached into his pocket and was pulling out a white envelope. He opened it to reveal...

A letter? What in the world is he doing with that?

I was dumbfounded. As far as I was aware, there had been two more letters after the one that Christopher had read to everyone, and I'd safely retrieved them from his room.

I whipped around to look at Christopher, but he swiftly averted eye contact.

That told me everything I needed to know.

Christopher must've told Edward that I'd stolen the letters. No doubt Edward had then kept an eye out for an opening when I'd be out of my room and had ordered someone—maybe a maid—to sneak in and steal the letters back.

If I had to guess, they'd probably done it while I'd had Christopher lying on my lap. Looking back on that now, the whole situation *had* felt a bit off. Now, the pieces were starting to come together. It probably had been the perfect way for Christopher to keep me in one place for a while, and Edward's strange insistence on

keeping me company had probably been just a cover to keep an eye on me while my room was being searched.

All of it had been an elaborate ruse to ensure that I stayed put for a while. And I had to admit, they'd gotten me good.

So, Lilia's not the only traitor, huh? Looks like they've bought out Christopher too.

I was surrounded by schemers and villains.

Just as that realization was starting to hit me, Edward opened the letter and began to read it.

◇◇◇

Do you remember the day you first declared that you wanted to marry someone other than father and me when you grew up, Lizzie?

Father and I took that pretty hard. We both cried through the night envisioning you leaving us one day to become some man's bride. But the next day, when I asked you if you didn't love me anymore, you said, "I love you more than anyone in the world, big brother!"

When father heard that, he asked, "What about me?" and you said, "I love you more than anyone in the world too, father!"

I remember how we laughed and laughed about that. "Well, nothing wrong with having multiple favorites!" father had said. Mother certainly didn't appreciate that.

You really were as cute as a cherub back then. (Oh, don't get me wrong—you're *still* adorable.) Both our family and the servants were crazy about you.

But you weren't just cute. You were thoughtful and clever too. I learned so much from the earnest way that you saw the world.

You were always thinking of how others felt when you spoke and doing your best to help people. I couldn't let you out of my sight...and I still can't. You haven't changed a bit.

Not long after that, your engagement to Prince Robert was finalized. Father and I secretly cried over that too...but you probably had no idea, did you? Heh heh.

Now that I'm older, I think I understand *why* father had cried

over that. You never asked for anything, and so I think it must have pained him deeply that, the one time you did, he couldn't give it to you. He was devastated that he couldn't let you marry the man you'd told us you wanted to marry.

After writing this all out, I'm realizing that it probably isn't so much a story about you as it is a story about father and me.

If you ever end up getting married one day, I'm sure father and I will shed even more tears. If you find someone who makes you happy, then of course I'd be happy to give you my blessing...but I can't help but hope that you'll hold out for a little bit longer.

Oh, but please don't worry about waiting for me to get married first. It's a lot of pressure to feel like I need to hurry up and get married so that you and Christopher can have your turns, you know?

Your happiness is more important to me than anything, and I know I speak for father and mother too when I say that. So, please hurry home, okay? And if you find someone who captures your heart in the West...then I hope you'll tell me when you get home.

◇◇◇

Riiiiip.

Without warning, Edward suddenly ripped up the letter in his hands.

I felt my eyes grow wide in shock. If *anyone* wanted to rip that letter up into a million pieces, surely it was *me*?

In all honesty, though, I'm not sure I could've brought myself to rip up a letter written in my brother's handwriting. So, I guess Edward had just done me a favor? It was just so out of character for him, though. I was floored.

The thought did cross my mind that it might be a threat—something like "I'll rip you to shreds just like this letter!" But that seemed pretty unlikely. Watching him tear up the letter into a thousand little pieces with those delicate fingers of his did make me marvel at the artfulness of it all, though.

"Your Highness...?"

"Yes?" he replied with a smile.

“Nothing...”

There was something ominous in his smile that made me slam on the brakes. As tempted as I was to ask, “Why are you tearing the letter apart?” I decided I’d better just keep the question to myself.

Sometimes the smartest thing you can do is to keep your mouth firmly shut. If you want to live a long life, silence is golden.

It seemed like a safe assumption that my older brother must’ve written something that the crown prince found disagreeable for some reason. Who knew, though.

In any case, my fate was sealed. Just like the office worker forced to sacrifice his weekends to go golfing with the boss, this noble (me) was left with no choice but to attend the masquerade ball.

Side Stories: The Victims of Elizabeth Burton Support Group IV

Maybe the Little Brother Treatment Isn't So Bad for Now —Christopher—

This trip to the West had me a little worried.

I was relieved that I didn't have to agree to cross-dress to come along, but...the whole thing had started off on a really bad foot. It was the first time I'd ever seen sis and big brother have a real fight, and it was the first time I'd seen sis refuse to listen to him.

It made me realize how much I'd always relied on big brother to make sure everything went smoothly. As long as he was around, I always trusted that everything would be fine.

Now that he wouldn't be going on the trip with us, it felt like sis was even more at risk than usual of acting on her unpredictable whims.

Big brother and our parents had entrusted me to keep a close eye on sis, and I'd even been given a secret weapon to use if things got *really* out of hand. Still...I couldn't help but worry.

As soon as we took off in the carriage, my worries proved to be fully warranted.

When sis tried to go off on her own to deal with the bandits that were targeting our carriage, I ended up having to put my secret weapon to use before we'd even arrived in the West. I doubted that even big brother could have foreseen *that*.

I took my secret weapon (a letter from big brother) out of my pocket and began to read aloud. I was surprised by how effective it was. Sis immediately caved and let me come with her.

As far as I could tell, it was just a heartwarming memory from

when she was little, but sis seemed really mortified when I shared it with everyone.

I couldn't imagine that sis would have any qualms about proclaiming that she wanted to marry our big brother, so it was hard to understand why she was so embarrassed. That seemed like something she might say in the present day, so it wasn't a stretch at all to picture her saying that as a kid.

But...no matter how many times I tried to picture her crying face, I just couldn't.

From my perspective, *that* was the part that felt the most out of character for her. The sis I knew was always so cool and strong. She always had a sage smile on her face like she knew everything there was to know about the world.

For some reason, it made me really jealous to think that our parents and big brother knew a side of her that I didn't.

Thanks to big brother's letter, sis had reluctantly agreed to let her accompany me, but once we got closer to the group of bandits, she instructed me to wait in the tree branches for her.

My whole reason for coming along was to stop sis from getting herself hurt, but there were more bandits than I'd expected. I had a feeling that following her any farther would only slow her down significantly, so I obeyed her instructions.

I held my breath as I hid in the treetop and listened in on some bandits' conversation.

"That carriage seems like a bust to me. Barely any women in there."

"But they're *noble*women. Those blue bloods fetch a handsome price compared to the commoners. We'd be fools not to snatch them up."

The mention of women made my ears perk up. *Is that what they're after?* I wondered.

When I thought about them catching sis and discovering she was a woman, my heart suddenly started pounding like crazy.

"Pretty sure I saw one or two of 'em headed over this way."

"Let's take a look for them, but hopefully that was just in your head. We can't waste any time stopping that carriage."

"Right."

One of the men broke away from the group, heading in the direction that sis had run off to. The other stayed in the area, searching the brush like he was looking for anyone who might have been hiding nearby.

If these bandits do anything to sis...I'll never forgive them, I thought. But it wasn't just the bandits that I'd never forgive; if I let any harm come to her on my watch, I'd never forgive myself either.

It doesn't matter how strong sis is. Right, big brother?

I had to protect her—just like she protected me.

I quietly lowered myself from the tree branches and sneaked up behind the bandit. Then I picked up a rock from the ground and, wielding it with both hands, I smashed it over his head.

"Huh? Where the hell did you come from?!" the bandit cried.

I smashed the rock over his head again.

Thud! Smack!

"Whoa, hey!"

Oh, that's right... I've got a sword too, don't I?

"Ngh... *Guh!*"

Ah, man... My swordsmanship doesn't even come close to sis's or the instructors', I thought, resigning myself to making sloppy gashes. *I just can't make clean cuts the way they do.*

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"Stop right there, boy!" a voice called, snapping me out of my reverie.

I don't know when he'd managed to sneak up on me, but a bandit was now standing behind me—and he had something *cold* pressed to my neck. It felt metal...like a blade.

I froze and dropped my own blade—which was now covered in bloodstains—onto the ground. I'd heard this man's voice before. He must have been the man who'd run off. Now he was back.

"You kidding me? This *kid's* giving you trouble?"

"Ow... Nnngh... It hurts...!"

"Yeah... I can see that."

The man standing behind me sighed as he looked down at the man at our feet. He'd been beaten to a pulp.

Then, applying extra pressure to my neck with his blade, he spoke to me in a deep, gruff voice. "You're coming with me. There's no way I can take on that monster without a little leverage."

I knew that this bandit was obviously not trustworthy enough to take orders from, but I didn't have a choice.

He dragged me back to where sis was, just as I'd expected he would. It was a horrific scene. It was hard to imagine that just one person could create so much carnage...but then, this *was* sis we were talking about.

Holding me hostage, the bandit ordered sis to drop her weapons.

"Relinquish your sword too," the man growled. "Hand over all of your weapons."

"All right," she obliged, holding both her hands in the air.

She looked completely unfazed. The expression she wore was more serious than any expression she typically wore...yet she still looked every bit as composed as she always did.

That didn't quell my anxiety, though.

What if something happens to her...because of me*?*

The thought terrified me to my core.

I couldn't ever imagine sis losing to anyone. But the thought did occur to me that, if there was ever a time to step in and protect her, it was *now*.

Before I could fully entertain that thought, though, sis took care of the bandit.

That's my sister, I thought. *She's so strong and cool...*

But my worries hadn't completely melted away.

"Sis!" I cried, lunging at her. Suddenly, it was like all of the strength left my body.

Obviously, part of my relief was thanks to the fact that we were safe now. But I was also just so relieved that she hadn't been hurt because of me.

Thank goodness, I thought.

"I'm sorry. I... I know I promised I wouldn't be a burden," I said.

"It's okay. It was my fault too. I shouldn't have left you alone."

"But—"

"You must have been so scared. But don't worry—it's all over now."

I couldn't hold back my tears as she patted me on the back. I knew she probably thought that I was crying because I'd been so scared when the bandit was holding me hostage...but that wasn't it.

The thing that had scared me most of all...was the thought that she would be hurt because of me.

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After the incident at the lake, I felt like all of my fears were coming true.

Sis put her life on the line for others *way* too often, as far as I was concerned. If she kept this up, she was going to reach the point of no return one day. As dashing as she was when she was protecting people, and as much as I admired that tender side of her...I worried that it meant she was putting herself in danger, and I wanted her to understand how much that ate me up inside.

I couldn't ever imagine her losing a fight...but it was different when she jumped into a *lake* for someone. What if she had never come back up to the water's surface again?

I wanted to make her promise me not to put herself in danger like that again, so I searched for another of big brother's letters to use as leverage. That's when I realized something—the letters were gone.

I searched the place that I'd hidden in them again and again. I was *sure* that I'd put them there, but they were nowhere to be found. I even turned all of my luggage inside out in search of them, but they didn't show up.

As far as I could tell, the letters had been stolen. But nothing *else* was missing.

There's only one person who would have done this...

A disturbing picture emerged—sis breaking into my room and fishing through my things. I felt the blood rush to my head as I imagined it.

I-I mean, can you blame me? She might've had to look through my...my *underwear*! A-And what if she'd seen the book I brought with me that had a protagonist on the cover that looked like her?! Plus, there was the portrait I'd painted of us with big brother! But more than anything...the *real* issue was...

"An unmarried woman shouldn't enter a man's room like that! It isn't proper!" I protested, furious.

But sis just shrugged it off.

"A man's room? Christopher, you're my *little brother*."

She basically went on to tell me that she didn't really care, making it clear to me that she didn't see anything even the slightest bit concerning about her behavior.

I'd always known that she only saw me as a little brother, and that she didn't see me as a *man*. That wasn't news to me, but...

It *stung* to hear her say that out loud.

And besides, it wasn't just *me* that I was worried about. I couldn't help but worry about what might happen to her if she barged into *other men's* rooms like that, completely defenseless.

I felt myself getting angrier and angrier the more I thought about it.

She had absolutely no regard for her own safety. And she had absolutely no regard for how *worried* that made me either.

"Y-You don't get it, sis!" I yelled. "You're so tactless and insensitive! You're always treating me like I'm just a kid!"

I couldn't hold back anymore. I couldn't control my own emotions, so I just let her have it.

I was so frustrated, so angry, so *sad*...and so worried.

I felt a big lump stuck in the back of my throat. Each breath I took felt more and more strained, and my vision was getting blurry.

I could feel tears coming on, but I did everything I could to hold them back. If I started crying now, she'd only treat me like a kid even *more*.

Maybe if I were big brother, I could get my feelings across to her more eloquently, I thought.

Sis patted me on the back, as if to say, *There, there.*

"Listen to me, Christopher. I think this is as good an opportunity

as any to tell you that I'm not quite your average young noblewoman. So, maybe I'm tactless and insensitive, but that's just part of who I am. And no matter how much you or anyone else in our family asks me to change that, I won't," she said, looking down at me.

I said nothing in reply.

"If you keep scolding me like this, you'll end up with wrinkles like the head maid."

"If... If I'm your little brother..." I began.

Sis reached out to me with her hand, but I swatted it away.

She was trying to smooth things over by treating me like a kid again. But she had no idea how worried I was about her.

"If I'm your little brother, then you ought to at least understand how I feel!" I cried, just before the tears spilled out of my eyes.

Then I turned on my heel and ran.

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The day after our fight, I approached Prince Edward about getting big brother's letters back.

Most of the maids in the guest villa were enamored with sis, so the only one we could trust was the prince's personal maid.

He and I made a deal: In exchange for him helping me retrieve the letters, he wanted to keep one of them for himself.

I was suspicious of what exactly he wanted to do with it, but when he told me that he planned to use it to "persuade" sis to go to the masquerade ball as his partner, I reluctantly agreed.

He *was* the crown prince, after all, so I knew that he could probably convince her to do that even without a letter. And if he joined forces with the princess to talk her into it, then I knew sis would absolutely *certainly* agree. So, it didn't really make a difference whether or not I gave him a letter.

My role in the heist was to keep sis distracted while the prince's maid combed her room. Fortunately, sis had perfect timing.

"Sorry. I just...wanted to apologize for the other day," she said, grabbing me by the wrist in the hallway.

I gave her the silent treatment.

At this point in time, I had absolutely no intention of forgiving her.

She was always messing around with me, so today it was *my* turn. I was really upset with her, and I wanted her to know it.

But...

"I mean, I *do* want to apologize... But I'm still not sure why you're upset with me."

"What?"

"I don't know how you're feeling. I *can't* know unless you tell me," she said. "I'm not good at reading people like big brother is."

Sis was acting so differently than usual, I found myself at a loss.

"There's all kinds of stuff I don't know. So...can you help me understand?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry for breaking into your room, and I'm sorry for stealing those letters. But it sounds like maybe there's something else I should apologize for. Could you tell me what that is?"

"S-Sis?"

"Tell me, Christopher... How can I earn your forgiveness?"

She took my hand in hers and squeezed it tight. She leaned in, looked straight into my eyes, and cocked her head. Even though she stood taller than me, it was almost like she was looking *up* at me with puppy dog eyes.

Ba-dump...

My heart skipped a beat.

It was almost the same move she used when she was trying to seduce girls...but there was something different about it this time. There was a trace of uncertainty in her eyes that made my heart start to beat faster.

So, even sis has things she doesn't understand, I thought. *I guess even she gets anxious sometimes.*

As I thought about that, I could feel my anger dying down.

Sis is so strong and cool and nice... She's a real troublemaker too, but...she's amazing.

I'd always known that about her, though.

What I was seeing now for the first time...was that she was also

adorable.

I felt like I finally understood what big brother meant when he always said that she was the "cutest little sister in the whole world."

"I'll do anything to earn your forgiveness," she said.

"S..."

"Please?"

It was my first time experiencing the thrall of her cuteness...and I was powerless to fight it.

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I was about to lie on sis's lap.

I'd been the one to specifically request it, and yet...for some reason, I felt really nervous.

After checking that sis wouldn't notice, I let out a little sigh.

My job was to keep her occupied for a while and make sure that she didn't go back into her room while Prince Edward's maid was in there. As long as I achieved that, it didn't matter what methods I resorted to.

I *swear* I wasn't just trying to one-up Prince Edward. I really was just trying to think of the most effective method possible to keep sis from going anywhere.

So, um... What I mean is...

That just *happened* to also overlap with something I wanted.

My heart was pounding so loudly that I felt like it might explode out of my chest. As I desperately tried to quell it, I took the plunge and laid my head down on sis's lap.

Just as she'd warned me, it wasn't exactly *soft*...but that didn't really matter. I was hardly going to get any sleep when my heart was racing like this anyway.

What mattered more than the softness or hardness of her lap was that she was gently stroking my hair as I lay on it. I was in heaven.

I glanced up at her, and she met my eyes with her steel-blue gaze. Then she gave me a warm smile.

I felt like my heart was going to leap out of my chest again.

After that, I did my absolute best to pretend I was asleep. But then I heard the crown prince approaching.

I desperately wished that he would just go away, but no such luck. Instead, he sat down right next to sis and started talking to her.

Surely we don't need two *pairs of eyes on her,* I thought. *She's not going to go anywhere while I'm on her lap.*

But I knew that his real motivation was probably to keep an eye on *me*.

"Mmngh..." I grumbled quietly, acting like their talking had woken me up.

I could practically feel the prince's glare boring into my profile.

"It seems to me that your little brother is awake."

"Hm?"

"Mm...hmmm..."

Could you please knock that off, Your Highness? I thought irritably.

I wrapped my arms around sis's waist to *really* make it look like I was asleep. And also, admittedly, I kind of wanted to tick off Prince Edward by doing something he could never dream of doing.

"Nah. He's asleep," she concluded.

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure..."

Sis combed through my hair with her fingers. It felt so nice...especially when coupled with the perfectly pleasant weather we were enjoying. I basked in the sensation and felt my anxiety gradually wash away.

"I love you every bit as much as our older brother and parents love you."

I replayed sis's words again and again in my head. Even if she didn't mean it in quite the same way I did...she loved me.

Here she was, stroking my hair and letting me lie on her lap.

And best yet, I knew *I* was the only one who was allowed to cozy up to her like this.

If that was a privilege that being her little brother afforded

me...then maybe it wasn't so bad to get the little brother treatment for just a little while longer.

I Wish We Never Had to Go Home —Edward—

After graduation day, Lizzie started avoiding me.

She always seemed to find some reason or another to turn down my summons. Eventually, I started to drop by Burton manor in hopes of catching her at home, but she was somehow always out.

I missed her, but I had to admit...it was strangely satisfying to know I'd gotten under her skin. My stolen kiss had changed everything; even she couldn't act like nothing had happened. That she could no longer carry on as usual with me was proof that she saw me now as a man. When I thought of it that way, I felt like I could tolerate her avoiding me.

What do you think of me, Lizzie?

I could only hope that recent events had changed her answer, even if only a little bit.

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Upon my hearing of the princess from the West's intention to marry Lizzie's brother, my first thought was, *This isn't going to end well.*

I was concerned about the effect that the loss of such talent would have on the kingdom, of course, and there was simply no chance that I would ever relinquish the next Honorable Duke to a foreign country...but more than anything, it was the impact that it would have on Lizzie that concerned me. When I imagined her reaction to the news, I just knew that there would be no hope of the situation being resolved peacefully.

I was well aware of the...*intensity* of her feelings towards her older brother. While the thought of her marching into the West and demanding to enter into direct negotiation with the princess might have been a horrifying possibility, it paled in comparison to the more

likely possibility of her launching an attack or kidnapping her brother and vanishing into the void with him.

When my father and I failed to persuade the West to call off the engagement, I knew that Lizzie would probably write us off as being incompetent. There was a real danger that she might even decide that we were "unnecessary."

Even putting aside my personal aversion to earning her contempt, this posed practical concerns as well. What might she do if she found herself dissatisfied by the royal family's attempts at diplomacy? There was no telling—and that was *precisely* the problem. If I wanted to avoid any unpredictable developments, then it was abundantly clear to me that I needed to take preemptive measures.

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I came up with a plan as quickly as I could and, after a little forceful persuasion, I managed to get my father and the palace staff on board with it.

Late that night, I took a carriage to Burton manor to speak with the duke. Just as I arrived, Lizzie barged into the room with the saint under her arm, clearly prepared to wreak havoc. If I had come even a moment later, I might have been too late.

Thank heavens I made it in time, I thought. I had a feeling I wasn't the only one who was privately relieved.

On the carriage ride to the West, I recalled how grateful she'd been.

"I'm genuinely so grateful that you're the future ruler of this kingdom," she had said to me after we'd sorted everything out.

I conjured a mental image of her planting a kiss on my fingers as she knelt, and I broke into an involuntary smile that I had to hide behind my hand. I felt a bit guilty for letting my guard down and getting carried away with my memories. It didn't seem right by either Lizzie or her older brother.

It was just the two of us in the carriage. She sat straight across from me, looking out the window with a bored expression on her

face.

We'd never spent so much time alone together before. It had been an awful pain to arrange this trip, but the opportunity to spend this time with her made it well worth the effort.

I'd barely gotten any sleep recently due to having to squeeze all of my affairs into an impossibly short three-day schedule. But I was determined to join her for the remainder of her journey west, so I didn't regret making that choice in the least.

As tired as I was, I didn't want to waste even a minute of this time with her. Reminding myself of that was all it took to dispel the wave of lethargy that threatened to overcome me.

"Is this your first time traveling abroad?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, the West is lovely. It's remarkably verdant; even the royal capital is lush with greenery, and wide canals cut through the city. I'm told that its temperate climate makes it a popular destination for health retreats and honeymoons."

"Yeah?"

It felt like we were heading off on a vacation together, and I wanted her to revel in that with me. Perhaps it sounded like I was merely making small talk, though, because she hardly even seemed to be listening.

In fact, she didn't even bother to *pretend* to be listening. In light of recent events with her older brother, it seemed that my bold bid for her attention on graduation day was all but forgotten now.

It's no small feat to steal a kiss from someone, mind you. I'd had to draw on every last reserve of my courage to pull that off...and yet now it all seemed to have been for nothing.

I found myself getting a bit cross as I considered this, staring at her profile as she gazed out the window. Suddenly, it occurred to me that there was something...*different* about her.

Why does she look so sad?

"Is there...something on your mind?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Is this about Frederic?" I tried, peering into her face.

She laughed uncomfortably as she nodded.

The sad, lonely look on her face made her look...almost like a lost little girl. I was suddenly reminded that she was a full year younger than me.

I'd always hoped that she would show me something *real*—not that fake smile she liked to wear. But this...this felt different.

I would never want to make you look this heavyhearted, I thought to myself.

Suddenly, I leaned forwards and took her hand.

"Don't worry. I won't let them force him into marriage, I swear it," I told her. "You have my word."

At this, her lips relaxed into a smile.

A small spark of envy seized hold of me. Only her older brother could stir such powerful emotions in her, and I couldn't help but feel jealous of him for that.

That being said...I had no intention of competing with Frederic for the role of older brother. That wasn't what I wanted to be to her.

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We arrived in the West, and I introduced Lizzie to Princess Diana —the princess who hoped to marry her older brother.

To be perfectly candid, I had no expectations whatsoever that Lizzie would behave herself during this meeting. After all, the whole reason she was there was to put a stop to this engagement between the princess and her older brother. She'd even gone so far as to impersonate him for the length of the trip.

So, it *had* occurred to me that she might put on a little performance. I knew she wanted to throw cold water on the princess's passions, and what better way to do that than to make her think that her brother was an absolute scoundrel of a man?

And yet...

"She gets lonely without me, so I've started bringing her everywhere I go lately," Lizzie explained as she hugged Lady Lilia close to her and stroked her hair tenderly. Then, to top it all off, she even kissed the top of her head.

As a blush crept across Lady Lilia's cheeks, she cozied up to Lizzie

with a dreamy look in her eyes.

You've never done that to me *before.*

But then...

"You know what? Actually... Maybe there's some merit to a more *intimate* get-together. I'm sure we'd have *all sorts of fun* together, just the two of us," Lizzie said.

The look she gave Princess Diana brimmed with lust of ferocious proportions, like she was a predator eyeing its prey. It was so intense that I felt a shudder run through me just from bearing witness to it.

You've never looked at me *that way before.*

I could feel the bitter taste of jealousy coating my tongue.

I knew, of course, that it was all an act. Obviously, this was all part of Lizzie's grand scheme—which, apparently, involved pretending to be some two-timing playboy. *Anything to ruin the engagement between the princess and her older brother, I suppose.*

I knew all of that, and yet...it had no bearing on present matters, as far as I was concerned.

I couldn't bear it any longer. I had to intervene.

"*Eric*," I said, pinching her ear as I called her by her stage name.

She shot me an irritated look that told me to get out of her way. I let out an affected sigh and made a show of shrugging my shoulders, as if to convey to the princess, *He's incorrigible.*

"My apologies, Your Highness," I said. "I'm afraid he's like this with everyone."

"Excuse me, I'm not being rude. What's *rude* is to waste an opportunity to talk to a beautiful woman."

"Yes, you've just proven my point splendidly, thank you."

The princess chuckled, covering her mouth daintily.

"You two really are such good friends, aren't you? It's exactly as you said, Prince Edward."

At this, I could feel Lizzie glance over at me.

Panic swelled inside of me, but I studiously feigned ignorance.

The truth was, I'd told Princess Diana and her little sister plenty of stories about Lizzie's older brother while I'd been in the West for my recent medical treatment. I also told her a story or two about

Lizzie herself, but I'd kept them to a minimum. There were too many secrets between the two of us to ever explain the exact nature of our relationship.

Lizzie let out an aggrieved sigh.

"Oh, Ed. What have you been saying about me?" she said.

It felt like a surprise attack. Immediately, my mind went completely blank. After a beat, I felt my heart clench in my chest.

Long had I dreamed of the day when she might one day call me that. But never, even in my wildest dreams, had I expected her to say it so sweetly.

I knew, of course, that she was only pretending to be her older brother. I knew it didn't *mean* anything.

And I knew that, no matter how much effort I put into getting her to notice me, she never showed the slightest interest in me.

Even so...I was so elated to hear her call me by my nickname that I felt like I could have walked on air. It took everything I had not to let it show on my face how much it impacted me. To be perfectly honest, I can barely remember how the rest of the meeting with the princess even played out.

That night, just as I was climbing into bed, I thought back to her loving yet put-upon smile, and that sweet voice that had said my nickname.

"Ed."

As I replayed the memory, I felt my cheeks grow hot.

I buried my face in my pillow and sighed.

Oh, Lizzie... How do you plan to take responsibility for this sleepless night ahead of me?

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"What do you think, Your Highness? Dee's a sweetheart, right?"

Just as I'd been thinking how happy I was that we'd come to the West on this trip, she had to go and burst my bubble with something like *that*.

If I'd been standing—rather than sitting in this bumpy carriage—I would have almost certainly doubled over in shock.

"Why is this happening to me?" I asked myself.

"'Cause it seemed like you'd be the best match."

Lizzie was completely, *utterly* unabashed about this idea to put me on the sacrificial fire in place of her older brother. I suddenly felt like a fool for ever having thought that she might have been starting to see me as a man.

If anyone was a good match for the princess, though, then surely it was Christopher?

Seeing that I was unwilling to entertain her idea (and, truly, it was rather tragic that she had ever thought I might), she offered another one.

"If you take Dee off my hands, I'll take her little sister off yours."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She's been giving you a headache, hasn't she? Come on. It's a pretty good deal for you, if you ask me."

The carriage door opened.

Lizzie got out first and offered her hand to me. I took it and stepped out of the carriage after her.

I tried to guess what she was thinking from the look on her face, but it was impossible. As always, she was wearing the most carefree expression in the world.

"Don't tell me you intend to seduce her?"

"What? Is that not allowed?"

"If that's what you've got in mind, the deal is off."

I hated that I couldn't tell if she was being serious.

I had only told her about the second princess in hopes that it would make her a little jealous. Never had I imagined that it would backfire on me so spectacularly.

It wasn't difficult to imagine Lizzie wooing the pushy Princess Marie; vivid images came to me almost unbidden.

Lizzie always treated girls with a special tenderness. I had no doubts that she'd likely give Princess Marie her winning (womanizing) smile—the one that would make anyone melt on the spot.

I hadn't been pleased to see how intimate she'd been with Lady Lilia earlier, but the thought of having even *more* rivals to contend

with was simply unbearable. Just imagining her chasing after Princess Marie was enough to make my heart rend, yet Lizzie seemed completely unfazed by the thought of me wooing Princess Diana.

Do you really not feel a thing? Not even when you picture me lavishing my attention on another woman?

Without thinking, I voiced my fears aloud.

"It really wouldn't bother you?"

"What do you mean, 'it'?"

"If I seduced Princess Diana."

She cocked her head, looking confused.

That one gesture told me everything I needed to know. Suddenly, I felt a wave of irritation swelling within me.

Oh, for God's sake!

Why did this conversation only leave *me* a desperate mess?

Then Lizzie said, "Put that face of yours to good use, and you could probably have any woman you wanted."

Her tone was so nonchalant, it was as if she thought she were just stating the obvious.

"What?"

"I'm saying, you've got a beautiful face. You—"

"N-Now hold on a minute!" I interrupted, unable to help myself.

She looked at me with her eyes wide, waiting for me to continue, but I couldn't muster any words. After several false starts of opening and closing my mouth, I finally managed to speak up again.

"D-Did you just call me...*beautiful*?"

"Hm? Yeah, why?"

She looked mystified as she blinked at me. From the rest of our conversation, it became clear she was under the impression that I might not *know* I was beautiful. She couldn't have been further from the point.

Here I'd been thinking that she barely even noticed me, and now she was calling me "beautiful"?

I desperately tried to banish the heat that threatened to color my cheeks.

Contain yourself, Edward. This is what she always does,

remember?

It was an all-too-familiar pattern. She'd lead me on and say something to get my hopes up, only to dash them moments later. I knew that letting my high spirits take over every time would only lead to disappointment.

And yet...hearing her say that sparked such joy in my heart.

At the very least, she seemed to think highly of my appearance. She thought I was *beautiful*. Surely that was worth something? Maybe I did have a chance, after all—even if it was only a tiny one?

"All right. I'll do it," I said. "On one condition: I don't want you to take your eyes off of me."

In the end, I acquiesced to her scheming. My reason for this was simple: I bore a sliver of hope that seeing me lavish attention on another woman might stir *some* kind of feeling inside of her.

It certainly wasn't just because I was still riding high on her compliment.

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The two of us strolled around town together.

Naturally, we were accompanied by some other guards, but...as far as I was concerned, it was just the two of us.

Yes, just the two of us...touring the town together, taking in the sights. Despite my best efforts to contain my excitement, I was euphoric.

We'd even ridden over to the West together alone in the carriage, and since we'd gotten here, I'd been seeing her regularly every day. We traded "good mornings" over breakfast each day, and whenever we encountered each other in the evening, we always bade each other "good night."

"Good night"...

No matter how many times I heard her say that, it still felt unreal. My heart raced whenever I thought about how I could hear that from her every night if we were married. I'd entertained that daydream so many times that I was beginning to worry about going into cardiac arrest. Then, when we'd reconvene the next morning to

have breakfast together, I couldn't help but think to myself yet again, *This would be an everyday affair if we were married.* My mind seemed determined not to give my heart even a moment's rest.

To top it all off, I even had an excuse to wander the town with her now. All I had to say was that I was there on "official business" and required her presence as my bodyguard.

Believe me when I say that I'm fully aware of how inappropriate this is to admit as the crown prince of my kingdom—and that, cognitively, I know it would never be possible—but I couldn't help but think to myself, *I wish we never had to go home.*

After all...I was painfully aware that all of this would be gone once we returned.

Now that we no longer crossed each other's paths in the academy halls, there was nothing to bind us together. All that remained between us were the secrets that we shared, and they were all I could rely on as an excuse to keep summoning her to my office.

No longer would we have such opportunities to see each other daily and to spend time together freely. I knew that the unusual circumstances of our visit were precisely what allowed for this freedom, and yet...

I couldn't stop wishing that the time we had here together would stretch on forever.

We walked around a large plaza, surrounded on all sides by statues and tall buildings.

This was actually my first time in town too, but I'd taken the time to learn all about the sights before we came, so giving a tour came easily to me.

As I watched Lizzie look around at all of the architecture with awe in her eyes, I felt my lips soften into a smile.

We really must come here on our honeymoon, I thought.

"Really feels like the tables have turned now, doesn't it?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"The first time I ventured out into town... I was completely dependent upon you to show me around."

"Oh. Right," she replied, as if I'd just made a casual observation.

She had no idea how extraordinary that experience had been for

me.

As I looked up at her profile, vivid memories of that outing came flooding back to me: how she'd seated me on her horse and shown me around the town. How it had challenged my notion of life as an utterly pointless venture when she opened the door to a whole new world for me.

Everything we'd done—every moment of that day we'd spent together—were precious, unforgettable memories to me.

My chest tightened as I thought back that day out into town with her. Impulsively, I spoke up and said, "Lizzie, there's something I want to tell you. Ever since then, I—"

"Eddie!"

Before I could get to the point, I was rudely interrupted.

The source of that interruption was none other than that feisty girl who had been determined to marry me ever since I'd come to the West for my medical treatment: Princess Marie.

You really couldn't have picked a worse time to interrupt, could you? I thought bitterly.

But in all honesty... I couldn't say for certain how it would have gone if I had seen that impulse to its natural conclusion. If I had told Lizzie how I really felt about her, how might she have responded?

When I really stopped to think about that, I realized that it was probably for the best that we'd been interrupted.

As I was trying to deal with the princess and her willful demands to join us, Lizzie gently intervened.

"Please excuse us, Your Highness. Prince Edward has an official visit to make, so I'm afraid we're running a bit short on time."

"I'll come with you, then."

"But—"

Lizzie wore a sweet smile, but it was plain as day that what she really meant was "Leave him alone."

At my behest, she was doing her best to make the princess go away. Watching her attempt this was oddly gratifying. I felt myself break into a smile.

Of course, I knew that Lizzie was only trying to get rid of Princess Marie because I'd asked her to, but seeing her fend off a clingy

admirer like this... It almost looked like she was doing it because she had feelings for me.

Perhaps because she was *jealous*.

It was a much too tempting delusion. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't seem to shake it off.

But more than that, it was what Lizzie said to Princess Marie that I couldn't get out of my head.

"You really love Prince Edward, don't you?"

"Admit it, Princess. Your crush on Prince Edward has nothing to do with the outcome of your duel with him."

Lizzie almost always called me "Your Highness" when we were back home; rarely did she call me by my name. If you had told me, before all of this, that she would ever use it in the same breath as a word like "love"...well, I would have never believed you.

I found myself wanting to clip these phrases into a convenient narrative that I could replay again and again in my memory. As I watched her send Princess Marie on her way, I realized that I would likely be facing another sleepless night.

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I spotted Lizzie sitting under a gazebo in the palace courtyard and approached her.

Before I could call out to her, though, she turned to look at me. She always had a knack for noticing people's presence.

She looked ready to stand up and bow, but I stopped her with a wave of my hand and sat down across from her at the table.

"Doing some schoolwork?" I asked.

"Well... Trying to, at least."

"Let me take a look."

She gave me a half-hearted reply and averted her eyes, but I just ignored her and picked up the schoolwork she had in front of her.

I'd expected her to be looking over a textbook, but that wasn't the case. In fact, it wasn't printed at all. It was a collection of handwritten notes that looked to be some sort of supplemental teaching materials.

"You don't need to worry about me, Your Highness. Isaac's been sending me his notes, so I should be just fine."

"He has?"

"Yep. Constantly, actually... I guess he's pretty worried about my grades suffering."

She handed me one of the notebooks she was working through. I took it and flipped through it, examining its pages. It was quite a thorough review of the fundamental points from the textbook, including every key point that was likely to show up on a test. I was impressed by its impeccable organization and the care that had clearly been taken in its creation.

Now that Lizzie had told me who she'd gotten this from, the pieces clicked into place. That was Guildford's handwriting, all right. I'd seen it countless times when reviewing student council documentation.

I turned my attention to the other sheafs of paper on the table, resting my eyes on a bundle of what looked to be letters. Again, I spotted Guildford's methodical handwriting.

Has Lizzie been exchanging letters with him? I wondered. *But she never sent me a single letter while I was here for my medical treatment...*

I snorted with disdain.

"You've been exchanging letters?"

"That's one way to put it, I guess... If I don't send back my completed booklets by the deadline, I wind up with even *more* assignments."

"Hm. I see."

I rested my chin in my hands as I gazed at her, trying to put on the most disinterested expression I could manage.

If these letters hold no special meaning to Lizzie, then they don't matter at all, I thought, trying to reassure myself.

Satisfied with this, I pulled a letter from Robert out of my coat pocket and handed it over to her. If she didn't think anything of Guildford's letters, then surely Robert's wouldn't mean anything to her either.

But watching her break into a smile as she read it, I couldn't help

but feel a little jealous after all.

I wondered what might have happened if *I* had sent her a letter during my visit here. Would she have smiled when she read it? Would she have sent me a reply?

"Let's have a look at those problems Guildford sent you then, shall we?"

"Please go easy on me."

"Only if you put in the work."

She looked like she was considering making a run for it, but ultimately, she conceded. Her shoulders slumped as she resigned herself to her fate.

It seemed that numeracy and physics were her weakest subjects, because her hand completely stopped moving when she got to those questions. I couldn't bear to watch her struggle like that, so I gave her a few hints. It turned out that was all she needed to glide through the rest of the problems.

I knew she wasn't a dimwit. She just doesn't like to study, I thought.

As we looked over Guildford's notes together, the distance between us naturally began to close. When I stole a glance at her profile, I was surprised to see just how serious she looked.

Her steel-blue eyes were intently focused on the notes in front of her. With each subtle hand movement, strands of blonde hair gently brushed against her face. From this distance, I could pick up on the subtle scent of her cologne. It was the one she always wore: a sweet, heady cologne for men.

Suddenly, I was seized by a vision of something that I knew could never be.

What if...she and I had been the same age? What if we had been classmates?

I pictured studying together like this every day, as if it were only normal.

Would things have been different between us?

Would she...have sent me a letter?

"Hey... Lizzie?"

When I called her name, she looked up from her work to look at

me. I regarded her with my chin resting in my hands, and she wore a vacant expression as she met my eyes.

"Do you think we might have spent time like this together at school too, if we'd been in the same grade?"

"Hmm... I dunno..."

She cocked her head with a look on her face that said: "Why are you asking me this?"

For several moments, she just stared at me.

Finally, she broke into a grin and said, "I'm glad you're older than me."

"What?"

"Otherwise, *Robert* might be the crown prince."

"That's..." I began, but the rest of the sentence refused to follow.

I could hear my heart pounding in my chest as Lizzie smiled at me mischievously. I couldn't look her in the eyes, so I tore my gaze away and let it roam. Eventually, I let out a sigh.

It was unbelievably vexing how even the subtlest change in her expression was enough to make my heart pound and get my hopes up.

Why do I have to love her so?

"A truly terrifying thought," I said finally, finishing my sentence.

"Right?"

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I kept my promise to try to woo Princess Diana, but my romantic overtures seemed to have no effect whatsoever.

And by that I mean: Neither Princess Diana *nor* Lizzie seemed the least bit fazed.

My confidence was really beginning to suffer. I'd always assumed that it would be a simple matter for me to make women fall for me, but apparently, I was sorely mistaken.

In fact, Lizzie seemed to be completely preoccupied with Princess Marie. I saw her giving the young princess disturbingly tender looks on more than one occasion.

Now, Lizzie had always had a habit of treating women with

special tenderness, and I'd heard from her older brother that she had a particular fondness for cute animals. So, I suppose it wasn't necessarily a surprise that she might be taken with Princess Marie, who resembled a small creature.

Oddly enough, it also went a long way towards explaining the special treatment she gave Lady Lilia and Christopher. Putting aside who they were on the inside for a moment, I had to admit that the two of them *did* bear an uncanny resemblance to cute little animals.

Actually... Now that I think about it, perhaps the same could be said for her older brother? Frederic certainly has a creaturelike charm about him... I suppose his round stature might even inspire someone to call him "cute"...

Could it be...that her type is anyone who falls into that "cute" category?

As I privately entertained this thought in the corner of my brain, I paddled the rowboat with a serene smile on my face. Suddenly, a splash echoed across the lake.

I whipped my head around to look in the direction of its source.

There, in the distance, I saw a capsized gondola, along with an image that would be forever burned into my retinas: Lizzie, diving straight into the lake.

My memories of what happened next are a little fuzzy, but there's one thing I can be sure of: It was at that point that I completely lost all my composure.

Looking back on it now with a clear head, I should have known that Lizzie's exceptional athleticism would preclude any real possibility of her drowning. But as obvious as that was to me now, that fact had completely escaped me in the heat of the moment.

By the time I had regained my wits, my arms were wrapped around her in a tight hug.

She was dripping wet...and *freezing*. I knew I had to do everything I could to warm her up as quickly as possible.

Once I was finally able to think things through a little better, I told her, in the calmest voice I could muster, "I have a duty to look out for you. For your *brother*. I can't let anything happen to you. Don't scare me like that."

"Right. Okay," she said. It was obvious that I hadn't gotten through to her at all.

When I heard her half-hearted reply, I felt the last of my strength leave me.

You're incorrigible, Lizzie...

It was a painful reminder to me of just how much danger she could find herself in without her older brother to keep her in check.

On our way back to the palace, I noticed Princess Marie and Princess Diana looking at Lizzie with a strange intensity in their eyes, and I was seized with an equally intense pang of jealousy.

But that was a conversation for another time.

Then, just as I was falling asleep that night, my heart began to race as I realized that I had *hugged* her by the lake. But that, too, was a conversation for another time.

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I found Lizzie at the gazebo again, just like I had when I'd ended up helping her with her studies.

"Lizzie!" I called.

She whipped around and put her finger to her lips as she looked at me, as if to say, *Shh!*

That's strange, I thought as I approached her.

Then I noticed Christopher with his head on her lap.

What is the meaning of this? I wondered, momentarily paralyzed with shock. *How in the world has Christopher wound up using her lap as a pillow?*

Christopher had approached me the other day with a request for my help. Apparently, Lizzie had sneaked into his room to steal the letters entrusted to him by their older brother, and he wanted to get them back.

I'd instructed one of my maids to sneak into Lizzie's room today and find them; I'd told Christopher to keep Lizzie occupied in the meantime.

But *this* was certainly not what I'd had in mind.

"Do you ever think you and your brother may be a little *too*

close?”

“Better than hating each other’s guts, right?”

Christopher hadn’t said a word to me about lying on Lizzie’s lap. Had I known of his plans, I would have done everything in my power to prevent them.

Lizzie seemed completely unbothered, but as far as I was concerned, this was wildly inappropriate. Not only were they not lovers, they were *siblings*. A young man had no business laying his head in the lap of his older sister, especially not when they were in the prime of their adolescence.

Frankly, I was still reeling from the shock of what Christopher had told me the other day about them sharing an en suite.

Was Lizzie suffering from some delusion that him being her little brother made that okay? Surely anyone with eyes could see that the boy was infatuated with her?

In any case, one thing was clear: Lizzie had *no* regard for her own safety.

But again, just to be clear here: I had no intention of competing with Christopher to be Lizzie’s little brother.

I found myself glaring at Christopher as he slept on her lap. I could have sworn that I saw his eyebrows twitch.

He’s awake, I thought. *There’s no mistake: He’s only pretending to be asleep!*

I had a bad feeling that he might try something sneaky if I didn’t keep an eye on him, so I decided to stay put here with Lizzie until he “woke up.”

I made pleasant small talk with Lizzie as I watched him out of the corner of my eye, and I was relieved to notice that she didn’t seem to view him as a man. I had no idea how Christopher felt about her, but at the very least, Lizzie didn’t seem to see him as anything other than a little brother.

Just as I was forgetting that Christopher was there, though, he suddenly groaned affectedly, as if making a show of being in a deep slumber.

“Mmngh...”

He wrapped his arms around Lizzie’s waist and clung to her

tightly.

I knew it! He is *awake!* I thought. *And he's rubbing this in my face, isn't he?*

"It seems to me that your little brother is awake," I said.

"Hm?"

"Mm...hmmm..." Christopher mumbled again.

His "sleep talk" was so fake I couldn't believe anyone would buy it. But, just as expected, Lizzie didn't seem to mind. She just kept stroking his hair gently.

"Nah. He's asleep," she said.

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure..."

As Christopher kept pretending to be asleep, it looked to me like he was wearing a smug, victorious expression.

For a moment, I felt overcome with a wave of jealousy, but I quickly dispelled it.

I didn't want to be Lizzie's younger brother, nor did I want to be her older brother. So, this little display didn't bother me.

No, it didn't bother me in the *slightest*.

Meanwhile, Back in Diagrantz Kingdom — Isaac, Robert, and Martin—

"Lord Isaac! Why didn't you follow after Sir Burton?!"

It was the day that Burton had set off for the West. Micheli and her posse were closing in on me and demanding answers as we gathered in the classroom.

"I have no reason to go to the West," I explained.

"Don't you see?! Love doesn't *need* a reason!"

"What are you going to do if Miss Lilia or Prince Edward swoops in and steals her heart while they're away?!"

"Need I remind you—this is a business trip. It isn't as if they're off having a vacation. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"But you can't claim with certainty that nothing will happen!"

Every time I tried to argue, they immediately shot me down. At this point, they were *quite* worked up—as evidenced by their heavy

breathing.

"You call her your 'best friend,' but let's not forget how Miss Lilia almost snatched her away from right under your nose! You can't let your guard down again!"

A boy spoke up then, clearly unable to watch all of this unfold any further.

"All right, ladies. I think that's enough," he said.

I was reasonably confident that I recognized him as one of the cadets at the training grounds Burton worked at.

After his interruption, the girls settled down enough to sit back down in their seats, but they still spoke in commanding, excited tones.

"You really ought to be more assertive, Lord Isaac!"

"She's right! Gone are the days when women were expected to be meek and subservient! A modern woman ought to take the initiative!"

"Uh, aren't you forgetting something?" The cadet spoke up again. "Like, the fact that Guildford is a *man*?"

In a matter of minutes, I was surrounded by a large crowd of classmates, both male and female, who were eager to badger me with their advice.

If I were to be perfectly frank, I'd have to admit that their fears weren't entirely baseless. Ostensibly, the trip to the West was a diplomatic visit, but I knew that its real purpose was to cancel Burton's older brother's engagement. Knowing Burton, it wasn't difficult to imagine the trouble she might stir up.

So I'll concede that I was, actually, pretty worried about her. And yes, I was concerned about what her *fellow travelers* might do as well. But the fact remained that I'd never really had the option to accompany her in the first place anyway.

"Burton left me with some parting words: 'Help me catch up on schoolwork when I get back, okay?'"

"Huh?"

"What?"

"She said, 'You're the only one I can rely on for this.' And... 'I'm counting on you.'"

As the words practically tumbled out of my mouth, my classmates all stared at me with eyes wide.

"So... I have to make sure that I have everything ready for her when she returns," I finished.

"Lord Isaac..."

"Guildford... I never knew you were such an upstanding guy..."

"How could Sir Burton be so cruel...?"

I'd been thinking they'd all roll their eyes and say, "What? That's it?" but the response I got was entirely unexpected. Instead, they all collectively sighed with a strange earnestness.

A mysteriously solemn air swept over the classroom.

"Okay, but come *on*! Don't you think a real man would have chased after her?! You should've hopped on a horse and announced yourself with the thunderous '*clack clack clack*' of racing hooves!"

"Y-Yes, exactly! Nothing says 'I'm not letting you go!' like a good '*clack clack clack*'!"

"Can we please stop with the onomatopoeia?" I cut in.

The solemn air had dissipated just as quickly as it had arrived, replaced entirely by another round of clownish hounding. This time, it was my turn to sigh.

I had absolutely no clue why my classmates were so keen to opine on this.

"Oh! Why don't you send her a letter, then?!" one of the girls spoke up again. "Girls love exchanging letters!"

"What a splendid idea! Why, *we're* always writing to her, so I can't see any reason you couldn't. After all, you're her dear friend!"

A letter...

The suggestion stuck with me. I could feel my resolve wavering.

I'd given the idea some consideration before, actually. A long leave of absence from school would make it difficult for her to catch up; whatever instruction materials she'd receive from the academy would hardly be sufficient. No doubt she'd struggle to keep up in class once she returned.

Yes, I suppose I could at least send her some supplementary notes to help her stay afloat, I thought. *And surely it wouldn't be out of the question for me, as her friend, to tack on an accompanying*

message or two?

She had specifically *asked* me to help her with her studies, after all.

But the prospect of unintentionally overstepping my bounds as a friend gave me pause, especially when it was so difficult to delineate where those boundaries were.

So, as much as I wanted to leap at the idea, I resisted the urge and willed myself to remain calm while I gathered more information.

"It's one thing for two women to exchange letters, but surely it's a different matter for *us* to exchange them?" I probed.

My classmates were quick to rebut me.

"Is it?"

"I don't see how it's different at all."

"If anything, I'd say it's even *more* natural."

"Are you sure you're not just saying that because of how she dresses?" I challenged them, narrowing my eyes in suspicion.

One of the cadets shrugged, giving me a wry smile.

"Man, woman... Who cares? Nothing weird about exchanging letters with a friend, right?" he said.

"Hmm... I suppose you're right..."

I felt reassured to hear that the male students saw it that way.

He's right. Why overthink this? What's so weird about me sending her a letter?

"Well, now that that's settled, you've got to think about your opening!" one of the girls said. "Make sure you start strong!"

"Huh?"

"Yes, let's see... How about 'To my beloved Elizabeth'?"

"*I beg your pardon?!*"

"No, no, no! Surely 'To my darling Elizabeth' would be preferable?"

"I'm sorry, *what*?!" I bellowed without thinking.

Just imagining penning a greeting like that made all of the blood rush to my head. Anyone in their right mind could discern that addressing her with either of those would be well and truly crossing the boundaries of a friendship.

In my shock, my glasses had slipped down my nose. As I pushed

them back up, I made my objection clear.

"Surely something a little more *conventional* would be far more appropriate!"

"Yes, that's true. A simple 'Dear' is always a safe choice."

"Dear?!"

That seemed a little...*intimate* to me. "Dear" was a term of affection for a spouse or a child, not a friend.

"I-I don't think we're on 'dear' terms yet."

"What do you mean? That's the first address they teach you when you're learning how to write a letter, isn't it?"

"Look, I'm not sure how I feel about everyone discussing the contents of my letter like this. This feels like an invasion of privacy."

"But, Lord Isaac... If we leave you to your own devices, I fear your 'letter' will become a news report."

Micheli and the others were clearly reluctant to let it go, but the phrase "invasion of privacy" must have struck a nerve, because they dropped it after that.

Later that day, once I got home, I wrote and discarded several drafts beginning with "Dear" until I made up my mind to commit to it.

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Thunk.

Instinctively, I whipped around to look at the door to the instructors' quarters. As I waited, I heard footsteps approaching.

Oh... I thought. *No. It isn't Commander.*

"Robert..."

"Sir!"

"Knock it off already, will you?" Gried sighed heavily as he watched my shoulders slump at the sight of him. "Seeing the disappointment on your face every time I walk through that door is starting to get to me."

"I'm sorry..."

"Sheesh. You've got a bad case of Commander Deficiency Disorder, huh?"

He gave me a wry smile as he teased me, but he clearly knew I couldn't help myself.

This kept happening—both at the training grounds and in the classroom. Every time I sensed that someone was approaching, I couldn't help running over to the door to greet them, hoping that it might be Commander returning from her trip.

It was the first time that I'd gone this long without seeing her. What's more, it was the first time that she was so far away that I couldn't go see her even if I wanted to. I'd had no idea how painful this was going to be.

"It's only been a month since she took off west, you know? It's not realistic to think she'd be back so soon when it takes a whole week just to get there."

"I know... Well, I know that *logically*, at least..."

But I still couldn't help myself from hoping that *she* might be the one to walk through the door, greeting me with an exclamation of "I'm back!"

Whenever I imagined that, I just couldn't restrain myself from waiting in front of the door with my hopes up.

That being said, it was getting harder and harder to keep waiting for her like this. Running after her to the West was starting to seem like a better and better idea by the day.

I knew Commander would be disappointed with me if she ever found out I was thinking that, though. She'd probably scold me for being impatient.

Still...honestly, I would do anything if it meant I could see her right now. I didn't even care if it meant she'd be angry or disappointed with me.

"I know it would have been an unreasonable request, but I really wish I'd pushed for them to take me with them..."

"To go bride shopping?"

"What?"

One of the other instructors elbowed Instructor Gried.

"*Oh.* Uh..." he said awkwardly, scratching his head. From the way he was acting, I could tell that he hadn't meant to let that slip. "Well, it's just a rumor, but I heard that His Highness is going to the

West to find a wife."

I was pretty sure that my older brother was in love with Commander too, so I couldn't imagine that he would have gone to the West to look for a wife. But now that I stopped to think about it, I realized that I had no idea why he'd taken Commander with him on his trip.

Supposedly, she was accompanying him as his bodyguard, but that didn't really hold up to scrutiny. Commander wasn't officially a knight, so it wasn't like she could be a member of the Royal Guard.

My brother had official business in the West, so I could understand why *he* was going, but why Commander? What business did *she* have there?

Could it have been...that Commander had run out of worthy opponents here in our kingdom? Was she branching out to the West in search of a fearsome fighter who could be her match? That would explain a lot, actually.

What if she finds a partner stronger than me over there? I wondered. *What would Commander do then...?*

When I pictured her snuggling up to some jacked, burly giant, I suddenly felt my face grow pale.

Oh, God... If she finds some tough guy stud over there a-and...marries him, then...what if that means she won't ever come back?!

What would I even do if that happened? Would I challenge him to a duel so I could show her that I was stronger than him?

But wait...if she found someone even stronger than *her*, then surely I wouldn't even stand a chance of beating him, would I?

Still...if it really came to that, then there was no way I'd be able to take it lying down. I'd *have* to challenge him to a duel. And even if I couldn't beat him...even if my love never came to fruition...I'd still want to find a way to stay by her side.

As all of these thoughts tumbled around in my head, jerking me this way and that, a guard entered the instructors' quarters without me even realizing.

"Prince Robert!" he called.

That finally grabbed my attention. I whipped my head up. The

guard, who looked like he'd rushed over here, approached me.

He handed over a plain white envelope. It looked like...a letter.

"Lady Elizabeth has sent a letter in reply!" the guard announced.

A jolt of emotion hit me. My grip on the letter tightened.

On the front of the envelope was my name, and on the back...was Commander's signature. I hadn't seen much of her handwriting, but I would've recognized that signature anywhere—it was unmistakably in Commander's hand.

"Huh? Commander...wrote me a letter?"

"I know it's hard to believe, but apparently she's perfectly capable of writing," one of the instructors said.

"I hear she gets letters all the time from girls," another chimed in.

They peered at the letter in my hands, looking intrigued.

Trying to contain my excitement, I carefully, slowly opened the envelope. The moment I unsealed the flap, a sweet, gentle scent wafted out of it.

It was the scent of Commander's cologne.

I was so overcome with joy that, for a moment, I was tempted to just close the envelope again so that I could preserve her scent for as long as possible. I hesitated to take the letter out.

My desire to see what she'd said ultimately got the better of me, though, so I reached inside the envelope as carefully as I could and removed the letter.

One page was a summary I had written to her of my plan for the upcoming swordsmanship tournament. She'd sent it back to me with red ink scrawled in the margins highlighting potential problem areas and points that she was suggesting I rethink. She'd even given me a score: fifty-five points.

I'd just barely missed the thresholding for a passing mark.

Her handwriting looks so nice, I thought. Each letter was as beautiful and straightforward as her swordsmanship.

The other page was a letter from her. I was immediately struck by the way she opened it:

"To my number one pupil."

I could feel my heart leap in my chest.

I was pretty sure I'd addressed my letter to "Our Commander," so

it made sense that she would have addressed me as her pupil in return. But...

The way she'd written that made me feel as though I belonged to her. Even though I knew that hadn't been what she'd meant, I felt giddy at the thought of her saying that.

What's more, I wasn't just any pupil. She'd called me her *number one* pupil.

I hadn't even gotten past the letter's address, and already I knew that I would treasure this letter forever. *Maybe I'll even turn it into a family heirloom...*

I couldn't help but marvel at how Commander always seemed to say exactly what I wanted to hear.

Then again, she was always keeping a close eye on me and the other cadets, as well as the instructors. So, I guess it was no surprise that she'd know exactly what was in our hearts. Once again, I found myself deeply moved by her thoughtfulness.

The contents of her letter were straight to the point.

She didn't stop at telling me how she was doing, but included updates on my older brother, Christopher, and Lady Lilia too. She told me about how she'd been passing time training with the West's knights. She gave me her blessing to take over the swordsmanship tournament, but she cautioned me to make sure that there were no casualties.

She ended the letter with a promise: "I'll fill you in on all of the details when I get home."

That final sentence was all the motivation I needed to wait for her return, no matter how long it took.

Commander was a woman of her word. If she told me that she'd give me the whole story when she returned, then I could trust with the utmost confidence that she would be coming home.

Until then, I'd have to think of what I could do in the meantime.

For starters, I'd need to make sure I pulled off my takeover of the swordsmanship tournament. Then I'd need to fit in plenty of training while Commander was gone so that I could grow even stronger. I wanted to become powerful enough to surprise her with how much progress I'd made once she got back.

If I could manage that...then I was sure she'd shower me with encouragement. "You've been working hard, huh?" she'd say.

I couldn't stand it anymore. Now that I was riding high on motivation, I had to get moving. As I dashed out of the instructors' quarters, I heard them laughing among themselves.

"There he goes..." they said.

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As I was standing guard in front of the duke's manor gates, a voice called out to me.

"Rembrandt?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a rotund, hefty—no, a *slightly pudgy* figure walking over to me. I recognized him from his almost translucent blond hair and his limp, exhausted smile. It was the future Honorable Duke: Earl Frederic Burton.

He doesn't look a thing like his little sister, I thought to myself.

While they might have shared the same hair color, that was where the family resemblance stopped. From their facial structure to the way they carried themselves, they might as well have been entirely different species.

This young man looks like he wouldn't hurt a fly. How in the world did his younger sister wind up becoming such a diabolical rogue?

I couldn't for the life of me understand it.

"Earl Burton. Is something the matter?" I asked him.

"Actually, I was just wondering if you might like to join me inside for a cup of tea?" he replied, looking up at me.

I'd never really noticed his eyes before because of the way his smile obscured them (and even when he wasn't smiling, his pillowy cheeks seemed to always hide them anyway), but I could see now that they were a radiant blue—the color of a clear sky.

It astonished me that they could give such a starkly different impression to his sister's, despite the fact that they were basically the same color. Her eyes felt almost...*dull* in comparison.

"No, I—"

"I've come all the way back from the duchy, and yet neither Lizzie nor Christopher is here to spend time with me. It's a little lonely here without them," he interrupted, giving me a pained smile.

His words and facial expressions actually seemed to be an accurate reflection of how he was really feeling—which was unusual for an aristocrat. It was a striking contrast to the crown prince, who regarded everyone with a subtle, mocking disdain and had a habit of silently seething behind his pleasant smile.

"And the sweets I ordered have just come in."

"Right..."

"Personally, I think sweets are best enjoyed with some company," he said, smiling so innocently that I was completely caught off guard.

In the end, I wound up following him inside the manor as he beckoned me.

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"Thank you for always being such a good friend to Lizzie," he said.

I don't know if I would describe us as "friends."

I didn't really appreciate the comment. I could feel my brow knitting unconsciously in response; unfortunately, it seemed that I was letting my displeasure show on my face.

But the earl seemed to pay this no mind. He just kept smiling pleasantly.

Maybe you and your sister aren't so unalike after all...

"Lizzie tells me that you play together often."

In no world are we "playing together."

If any playing around was happening, it was entirely one-sided—meaning, she was making me her plaything.

As I watched the earl happily munch on the sweets he'd ordered, I reached for my teacup and took stock of him. Among my master's associates, he was easily in the running to be considered his closest aid. I often saw them together in the crown prince's study. This was the first time the two of us had spoken for any length of time,

however.

I understood that he must have been quite capable. He would have to have been, to work so closely with the crown prince. But was he really extraordinary enough to warrant everyone singing his praises?

His sister was especially guilty of that. I'd had more than enough of her bragging about him for a lifetime. That being said...she would be the first to admit that she was obsessed with him, so there was every chance that she might have been overselling his virtues.

"I know Lizzie's a bit of a tomboy, but deep down, she's a good kid. She's always putting her family first."

A "bit of a tomboy"? You must be joking.

For a second, my mind completely refused to process those words. I could only assume that the earl's definition of "tomboy" must have been wildly different to mine.

"So... Thank you. I really appreciate you agreeing to stand guard at our manor."

"Pardon?"

"Well... I'm sure you would have preferred to go with Ed on his journey, right?" the earl said, looking up at me timidly.

I *was* the crown prince's personal guard. Under normal circumstances, naturally I'd want to accompany him wherever he went...but the circumstances of this trip were anything but normal.

I could hardly tell him that it had been a blessing to be spared the sorry fate of being wedged between his sister and the crown prince, though, so I stayed silent. Internally, I felt like I was breaking out in a cold sweat. I have no idea what he made of my silence, but suddenly, his gaze turned serious.

"Lizzie can be a real worrywart. If you hadn't agreed to protect our family...then she probably wouldn't have felt comfortable enough to leave the country."

"Right..."

"My father and I actually rely on her quite a bit, I'll admit. Our swordsmanship capabilities pale in comparison to hers."

Everyone's swordsmanship capabilities pale in comparison to hers. That's hardly a fair standard to hold yourself to.

Most noble families hired guards to protect them. That was simply the norm. If anything, taking the self-defense approach was highly unusual.

"One day, though, Lizzie will probably leave us. We can't keep relying on her for everything."

The earl's gaze fell as he spoke.

You say that, but I'm pretty sure she has no intention of ever leaving.

I remembered her saying something a while ago about wanting to get a job at the training grounds after graduating from the academy since it was so close to home. So, as far as I could tell, the earl had no reason to worry. After all, the only reason anyone would ever leave home—if not for work—was marriage. And aside from my master, I couldn't imagine that there'd be any man out there crazy enough to want to take her as his wife.

"Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to prattle on like that," said the earl.

"Not at all."

"You know, you're a good listener, Rembrandt."

At this, my eyes shot wide open in shock. No one had ever said that to me before.

"It makes me want to tell you all kinds of things. I can see why Lizzie's so fond of you," he continued, in a tone that made it sound like he was only stating the obvious.

"I—" When he broke into a grin, I couldn't help myself from speaking up to protest. "Everyone always tells me I'm...boring."

"What?" He blinked repeatedly, looking confused.

Then his eyebrows furrowed, and he peered into my face with a deep sadness in his eyes. It was a genuine sadness, as if he were feeling my pain for himself.

"That's *awful*!" he cried, leaning forwards in his chair. He even stood up a little. "Who would say something like that?"

"Um... The young noblewoman I was paired with for a potential arranged marriage?" I answered, bewildered by his concern.

"Hmm... I have a feeling that it was just a mismatch of personalities."

At this, he settled down a bit and sat back down into his chair.

He cocked his head, as if he were thinking deeply, and stroked his chin. Something about his mannerisms reminded me of a *certain someone...*but when he did it, it didn't seem like he was just putting on a show.

"I just can't imagine anyone saying that otherwise. You may be *quiet*, but I can tell you're listening. And it's obvious that you're thinking deeply."

"Huh?"

"I've got it," he said, clapping his hands. "That young lady you met must have simply been nervous. She was probably too caught up in her own head to really see you for who you are."

This time, it was my turn to blink in surprise.

Hold on a second here...

He was making it sound like I was a perfectly respectable, dignified man—which, I can assure you, I wasn't. He was severely overestimating me.

You wouldn't be saying any of that if you knew how much I was enjoying having this break from your sister, I thought.

Something about this all was starting to make me feel restless and uneasy.

"If that's what was happening, then that's a real shame. I'm sure you both would have seen the good in each other if you'd had the chance to talk without anxiety getting in the way," the earl continued, smiling.

He spoke as if he were certain that there *was* good to be found in me.

His smile was so warm and gentle that it made me feel oddly relieved every time I looked at him—and there wasn't a trace of ill will in it.

I wasn't great at reading people's true intentions, but even I could tell that he meant what he was saying from the bottom of his heart.

Is he...actually a good person?! I thought, astonished. I felt rattled to my core. *But...he's the future duke! He's that brute's brother! How is that even possible?!*

The crown prince and all of the nobles who came and went to visit him in his office were all the same: They were always playing a game of cat and mouse, hiding behind their aristocratic euphemisms and trying to sound out the other's true intentions. Given how I'd seen nothing but schemers day in and day out, Earl Burton seemed like a rare gem.

For some reason, I felt a protective instinct swelling inside of me. Suddenly, I was overcome by a fierce desire for him to always remain this upstanding and virtuous.

That being said, he was the heir of the kingdom's highest-ranking noble family. Was it really tenable for him to remain so principled?

No... Actually, I can't imagine anyone better to fill the role of the crown prince's right-hand man.

I felt like I'd caught a glimpse of what it was that made Prince Edward put his trust in the earl. It was a real relief to realize that the respect he held for the earl was clearly genuine, and that he hadn't put him in a position of power as his right-hand man for some unhinged reason—like the fact that he was his crush's older brother.

"Maybe that's a bit rich coming from me, though...considering my *own* poor track record at arranged marriage meetings," the earl said, scratching his cheek sheepishly.

All I could do in response was shake my head vigorously.

I genuinely had no idea what the kingdom's women were thinking, overlooking a fine specimen like the earl.

Apparently, he wasn't what they were in the market for. After all, they seemed to flock to a certain cross-dressing young noblewoman, despite the fact that she was five gazillion times more devious and vicious than he could ever be.

Well... Five gazillion times zero was still zero, so maybe that was a poor illustration. But you get my point.

It was so depressing, I almost let out a sigh.

These women were clearly terrible judges of character. Maybe it really *didn't* matter what someone was like on the inside, as long as they were good-looking on the outside...

"Goodness, listen to me! There I go again, talking your ear off. Sorry about that."

"No, I—"

"Oh, I have an idea! Since you're here, would you like to see a portrait of Lizzie from when she was little?"

"Huh?"

"Wait here just a minute, okay?"

Before I could stop him, Earl Burton called out to a butler who was waiting nearby.

Honestly, I really wasn't interested. I mean, she couldn't have been all *that* different as a child. Besides, she'd still been a child when I'd first met her. She couldn't have been older than, what, twelve or thirteen? That certainly counted as being "little"—though I had a feeling that it wasn't quite the age range the earl was referring to.

But when the butler brought over the portrait, all of my assumptions were shattered.

The little girl depicted in the portrait was just that: a normal little girl.

It was a portrait of the whole Burton family, with the duke and his wife in the back, a chubby little boy (who I assumed was the earl) in front, and, next to him, a little girl who was unmistakably Elizabeth Burton.

"This was painted when Lizzie was six years old, and I was ten," the earl said. Then he chuckled. "Pretty cute, huh?"

I nodded.

The little girl had blonde hair and blue eyes. As with any portrait, she had probably been gussied up a bit, but she was clearly a genuinely adorable (if slightly strong-willed) little girl. I could see *this* little girl being deserving of a label like "a bit of a tomboy."

It was hard to imagine this little princess turning into the piece of work I was acquainted with now, though.

"She always used to go around saying, 'I want to marry big brother!' She's still adorable, of course...but she was just too cute for words back then," the earl said, relaxing into a happy smile.

I could see her talking about wanting to marry her older brother even now, actually.

There's no denying it... I guess they really are one and the same.

"And this portrait was painted after Christopher joined our family. I think Lizzie would have been about ten at the time," the earl said, showing me another portrait.

This portrait was yet another shock.

The girl depicted in it looked just like the Elizabeth Burton I knew...if she were a slightly younger little boy. Standing next to her was a boy with strawberry blond hair, who I assumed was Christopher Burton. She'd mentioned an adopted younger brother to me before, but...seeing the two of them standing side by side like in the portrait, *he* looked much more like a girl than she did.

Earl Burton stood next to Christopher, looking soft and doughy as usual. *The years haven't changed you a bit,* I thought. In his case, that might have actually been for the worse.

His sister, on the other hand, had undergone a truly radical transformation in the four-year span between the two portraits. I couldn't even fathom how it was possible.

The earl smiled at me as I stared at the portrait in amazement.

"She really turned into a tomboy in earnest around then, so she could be a bit of a handful sometimes. But she was still adorable, don't you think?"

I couldn't bring myself to agree...but the earl was smiling with such joy on his face that, in spite of myself, I found myself nodding.

I remembered Elizabeth saying that she had a soft spot for her brother, and now I understood why. It really *was* hard to say "no" to him.

The earl continued to brag about his little sister plenty after that. But to my surprise, when it was all over, I found that I hadn't actually minded.

I guess that's what it means to be so beloved by all that you earn a nickname like "the future Honorable Duke," I mused as I returned to my post.

Extra Story: The Joyous Life of Diana Normandius

I'd never realized before just how beautiful the world could be.

I woke up to a beautiful, sunny morning.

After getting out of bed and washing my face, I walked up to the window that my maid had opened, and breathed in as much of the outside air as I could. I soaked up the warm, refreshing sunlight and admired how it glistened on the morning dew. The verdant trees in the garden were a feast for my eyes.

It was a beautiful, perfect morning—the kind that made you want to greet the little birds who flew to the windowsill with a cheerful "Good morning."

How funny to think that, until just recently, I had regarded mornings as the despairing start to yet another day. I'd wake up with a sigh, counting down the days until I had to marry a man I'd never even met.

And now... Now, I couldn't even contain my joy at the start of a new day. Every night when I lay in bed, I couldn't wait to fall asleep and greet the next morning.

After all, with each morning came new opportunities for heart-pounding, tender moments. Love stories were unfolding before my eyes, and I couldn't wait to bear witness.

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Before my official duties for the day began, I took some time to enjoy tea on the castle balcony and compose myself.

Bracing myself for impact, I brought my binoculars to my eyes.

I lowered my gaze to the large courtyard garden between the

guest villa and the castle. I felt like a Peeping Tom with my binoculars, which made me feel a little guilty, but it wasn't as though I was peering into anyone's *bedroom*. Besides, I did occasionally look over at the garden to enjoy the seasonal flowers and trees.

This is basically the same thing, I reassured myself, even as I swept over the garden with my binoculars in search of people.

In the garden's gazebo, I spotted Lord Eric. Then I spotted someone walking over to him. It was his little brother, Lord Christopher.

Lord Christopher had a sweet face to begin with, but the expression he wore whenever he was with Lord Eric was even sweeter than usual. I'd heard that the brothers were quite close, so I imagined that this was probably due to Lord Christopher letting down his guard around Lord Eric. He likely only wore that expression when he was completely comfortable—around someone he trusted.

Lord Eric smiled as they spoke. He wore a different expression when he was with Lord Christopher too. When he looked at his brother, his gaze was full of tenderness.

Family bonds truly are one of a kind, I thought to myself.

It was wonderful how close the brothers were. With a bond like theirs, I had no doubt that they knew each other completely. They could probably communicate even without words. And surely, they were always on each other's minds.

They must have been used to spending lots of time together back at home, and I'd heard that they spent plenty of time together in their suite in the guest villa as well.

Oh, that's right... They're sharing a suite, I thought, suddenly seeing their guest accommodations in a completely new light. *Why, isn't that just wonderful?!*

I'd heard that Christopher had almost been accosted by bandits on their journey to Normandius. Surely that must have been a terrifying experience for him?

Yes... Yes, what if...

"Brother, can I sleep with you tonight?"

"What's gotten into you today, Chris? You're not usually this

needy."

"I... I'm scared!"

"Oh, Chris... All right. Come on in."

Those last few words snapped me out of my reverie.

"C-Come on in"...?! G-Goodness, me! Maybe I've taken that daydream a bit too far?!

I knew I was getting carried away, but when I imagined a night like that playing out, I couldn't stop my flights of fancy. Scenario after scenario came bursting out of my imagination unbidden, and I was powerless to slow my racing heart.

I gasped.

N-No, Diana! You mustn't get carried away again with your daydreams!

When I brought the binoculars to my eyes again, I saw Lord Eric gently stroking Lord Christopher's head. The shock of the scene unfolding before me sent me staggering backwards.

I stopped to reflect on what I'd seen, realizing that the reality of their bond was so much sweeter and purer than anything I could have ever dreamed of.

Ahh... What a beautiful world!

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As I was walking through the castle in the early afternoon, I spotted Prince Edward and Lord Eric talking in the hallway.

I knew that there was no need for me to sneak around, but instinctively, I stopped in my tracks and hid in the shadows so I could watch them.

They seemed to be poring over some documents together. Both of them wore serious looks on their faces.

I knew, of course, that Lord Eric was Prince Edward's close aid, but I'd heard that they were close friends too. Whenever they spoke in an informal setting, Lord Eric called Prince Edward "Ed." And when Prince Edward had been in Normandius for his medical treatment, he'd told me many stories about Lord Eric and his little sister. It

seemed that he was close with his whole family.

When they were standing together like that and talking, I couldn't help but think that they seemed to be a lot *closer* (physically, that is) than I would have expected, based on when I'd seen my father talk to his own aids.

Just watching them standing so close together like that made my heart pound...but I knew that it must have been an everyday occurrence for the two of them.

Yes... You could tell just from looking at them that being together was as natural to them as breathing. That's how close they were. They started off as good friends, but before they even realized what was happening, their relationship had blossomed into something...more.

Alas, Prince Edward was the crown prince of Diagrantz, and Lord Eric was the duke's heir. They could never be together. And yet, despite being destined to be apart, they couldn't help but be drawn to each other. Now *that* was true love.

It was clear to see from the start. The whole reason for Lord Eric's visit was to break off our engagement, and yet Prince Edward had accompanied him. No matter how beloved the duke might have been to the future of his kingdom, it was unusual that Prince Edward would go to such lengths.

Perhaps they had a poignant conversation that compelled him to come? Yes, perhaps something like...

"Don't go, Eric."
"Don't worry. I'll come home, I swear it. I'll come back to you."
"I can't live without you... I love you!"
"Ed... I love you too."

I could see it now! And then the two of them would...would...!

"P-Princess Diana?" my maid called, with concern in her voice.

Suddenly, I returned to my senses.

Flustered, I looked back down the hallway, but Prince Edward and Lord Eric were gone.

I couldn't decide whether I was relieved that they hadn't

discovered me hiding in the shadows or disappointed that I couldn't watch them for longer. Regardless, my imagination had gotten the better of me, which had left me frozen in the corner of the hallway.

I let the maid know that I was all right and continued on my way.

Ahh... But what if they really did have a heart-to-heart like that? I wondered. The thought alone was enough to make me feel as though I were walking on a cloud.

As I took in a breath, I couldn't help but think to myself that the air had never tasted so good as it did now.

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As I was enjoying some tea after dinner, I heard voices outside.

I went to open the window and, in the dim light, I saw Lord Eric walking with Richard.

Oh, my... Oh, my indeed! What a find!

My ears perked up instinctively. I couldn't help but feel intrigued by this strange new pairing.

"I'm serious. You've got to stop making a pass at the palace maids. The butlers in the guest villa have been lodging complaints, you know."

"I'm not making a pass at anyone. I just treat everyone with respect, that's all."

"Oh, come on. You *know* what you're doing."

"Well, if the ladies enjoy the attention, then it's no skin off my back if they want to think of it that way."

Oh, my...

Lord Eric and Richard seemed to have become quite close before I'd even noticed.

Lord Eric always seemed so clever and carefree...but there was something about him that made me want to keep a close eye on him. There was something almost fragile about him—not quite *delicate*, per se, but something like that, perhaps. Whatever it was, I felt hesitant to let him out of my sight.

It almost felt like he was stirring some sort of maternal feelings inside of me.

I was surprised by that, considering that he was a few years older than me, but it made it easy for me to understand why Richard might feel the same way about him. And, after all, Richard was protective by nature.

"Don't you see that you're putting yourself at risk?"
"No one's shown concern for me like this before..."
"You don't need to force yourself. At least with me...you can just be yourself."
"Richard..."

Could something like that...play out between them?! Yes... Yes, I think the two of them could work together nicely.

In Lady Lilia's words: "It could definitely work." There was *plenty* of potential there.

I kept watching the two of them through my window, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

Richard had been by my side ever since I was a little girl. He'd always put Marie and me first, and his own needs second. He'd been there this whole time, protecting us and supporting us.

That's why I felt compelled to fervently pray for his happiness.

I'd never been in love before. I suspected that the same was true of Richard. And now, I'd found my own form of happiness: the happiness of supporting *others* to find their happy endings.

But what was Richard's happy ending?

If finding love was what brought him happiness, then I wanted to support him fully in that endeavor. And if just spending time with someone he cared about brought him happiness, then I would support him in that.

Perhaps that would mean that he'd no longer be able to stay at Marie's and my side... I'll admit that the thought made me a little sad.

But nonetheless, I was determined. If his happy ending took him away from us, then I would see him off with a smile.

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In the castle's great hall, the court painter stood with his head bowed as he shrank into himself.

It was the first time that the princess had ever personally summoned him.

Had he done something wrong? Had the stench of his paints offended her? Or perhaps she'd grown dissatisfied with an old portrait he'd painted of her?

He gulped as he conjured endless terrifying possibilities in his head.

Finally, the sound of a door closing broke the silence, and he heard several pairs of footsteps fading into the distance. The princess must have cleared the room.

A cold sweat began to pour down the painter's back. Things were looking worse and worse by the minute.

"Um, hello..." the princess said.

Her beautiful voice was clear and resonant, just like a bell. It didn't *seem* like she was upset...but her quiet tone and inscrutable expression made it difficult to be certain.

"I'd like to make a request," she continued.

At this, the painter relaxed. It was like all of the tension immediately left his shoulders.

Oh, thank God, he thought. *It doesn't seem like she summoned me here for a scolding, at least.*

If she had a request to make of him, then surely there was only one thing she could possibly be after: a painting.

He'd heard rumors flying lately that she was engaged, so perhaps she wanted to commission a new portrait of herself to give to her fiancé? The painter hoped that was the case. There would have been no greater honor than to paint that for her.

But when the princess opened her mouth again to make her request, all of his expectations flew out the window.

"I'd like to commission a portrait of our guests of honor, Prince Edward of Diagrantz Kingdom and his aid, Lord Frederic," she said.

The painter recognized the names. Immediately, he called to mind an image of the guests of honor that had caused such a stir among the palace lately.

Prince Edward had visited the palace once before, when he was in the country for a medical treatment. His return had prompted speculation that he might be likely to make Princess Marie his bride. Then there was Lord Frederic Burton, the future duke, who was rumored to be Princess Diana's potential future husband.

But why would the princess want to commission a portrait of just the *two* of them? That was what the painter couldn't understand.

Did she want to gift the portrait as some sort of evidence of their engagements?

No... That didn't make any sense. If that were her intention, then surely she would be commissioning a portrait of the four of them, with her and Princess Marie included? It was more than a little strange to commission a portrait of two men who weren't even family...

"I'd like you to position them as closely as possible, with Lord Eric standing closely behind Prince Edward, ready to serve him. He ought to be in his knight's uniform. The background should be a throne room. I'll leave the details of that to you, but the standard sort for a group portrait will work just fine. Prince Edward should be looking up at Lord Eric with trust in his eyes—but not *just* the kind of trust that he might feel towards his aid. I want you to depict something deeper than that, as if he's looking at someone very dear to him. Oh, but you ought to make it clear that Prince Edward doesn't want Lord Eric to notice the depth of his feelings, even though Lord Eric *does* have an idea of how Prince Edward feels. As his loyal vassal, though, he would pretend not to know. But deep down, Lord Eric shares his feelings. Prince Edward is special to him, but he knows that he must suppress and suffocate his affections. That's the sort of scene I'd like you to convey."

"Huh?"

"Next, I'd like to commission a portrait of Lord Christopher and Lord Eric."

"*Huh?*"

"I'd like you to pose them so that Lord Eric is stroking Lord Christopher's hair. I think a waist-up portrait would be best, so that you can really capture their facial expressions. The palace rose

garden ought to work well for the background, I think. I'd like you to capture them in an intimate moment, frolicking around in the soft afternoon sunlight. Lord Eric's gaze should be gentle and loving as he looks at Lord Christopher. Lord Christopher should wear an innocent expression befitting of a younger brother, but I think it might be nice if there was also a trace of bashfulness in his smile. Oh, actually, hold that thought... No, I've got a better idea! Wouldn't it be just divine if you captured Lord Eric wiping a little bit of chocolate off of Lord Christopher's mouth?! Oh... But on second thought, maybe that would be a bit on the nose? Hmm... I can't bring myself to choose! Could I ask for a quick sketch of both?"

"I beg your *pardon*?"

"I'd like to commission a portrait of Richard and Lord Eric as well, but I haven't decided what I'd like them to wear or how I'd like them to pose yet, so perhaps I can give you the details another time. For now, I'd like you to just draft some rough sketches so we can decide on the details and discuss some more ideas. Would that be all right? Oh, and I would be happy to extend the deadlines accordingly, of course!"

The painter was stunned. No words left his mouth, but a cascade of giant question marks was bursting out of him internally.

After the princess had so eloquently espoused the specifics of her request, it was a stark contrast to be faced with a speechless painter. This seemed to suddenly jolt her back to her senses.

Her cheeks turned bright red in embarrassment, and in a soft voice, she said, "Please excuse me. I really didn't mean to go on like that. Will you, um... Will you accept my commissions?"

It was as if her loquacity just moments before had been merely an illusion.

She cast her gaze downwards and twisted a strand of her black hair around her finger, looking up at the painter pleadingly.

Confronted with a sweet sight like that, the painter was left with no choice but to oblige with a "As you wish, Your Highness."

Afterword

Every day of my life, I think to myself, "I wish I could be funnier."

I'm painfully aware that the kind of people who say that are generally *not* all that funny, and I'm unusually self-aware, so I have no delusions that I'm not one of them. Still, I can't help but wish that people would think I was funny.

I want people to like me. That's all I want. I want to make a big splash.

The biggest compliment in the world to me would be if someone said, "Wow, you're really funny." That's just the kind of person I am.

Lots of people are just born funny. The kind of people who are legitimately humorous go their whole lives without even really having to try, so I know an unfunny person like me really can't even compete.

Honestly, the vast gulf between us astonishes me. I often wonder what the heck they're eating to be able to come up with all the hilarious thoughts they think of.

But I want people to like me—I can't help it. I want everyone to think I'm funny. What I lack in ability, I make up for in determination. That's pretty much all I have, actually. But believe me when I say I'm more determined than *anyone* to be funny.

I know that just *wanting* it isn't enough. I'll never be able to hit a home run. But by hitting the ball enough times and perfecting my finger techniques, I've managed to improve my bunting skills, at least. I figure I can be proud of that.

So, I hope you're ready for some acknowledgments packed with bunts.

Hopefully at least one of these slow-rolling ground balls will tickle your fancy.

Thanks again to Hayase Jyun, who knocked it out of the park

once again with this volume's beautiful illustrations. Thanks also to the pitcher, Gucce, and the catcher, Era, who expertly controlled this screwball story and turned it into a manga version. Finally, I want to extend my thanks to the 3-4-5 hitters at the editorial department, and to all you fans who have been cheering for us from the bleachers. It's thanks to you that even the players on the benches get a chance to shine.

Thank you so much for all your support. If I ever win the championship one day, maybe the department stores will mark down the home appliances, just like they do when the local team wins?

Well... I tried to be funny with this afterword, but I have a feeling I might've just fallen flat on my face. How'd I do? My gratitude was meant in earnest, though, so I'd appreciate it if you could just let any slipups slide.

Hopefully I can bunt for a base hit one day, but until then, I'll leave you with that.







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From Two-Bit Baddie to Total Heartthrob: This Villainess Will Cross-Dress to Impress! Volume 4
by Masamune Okazaki

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