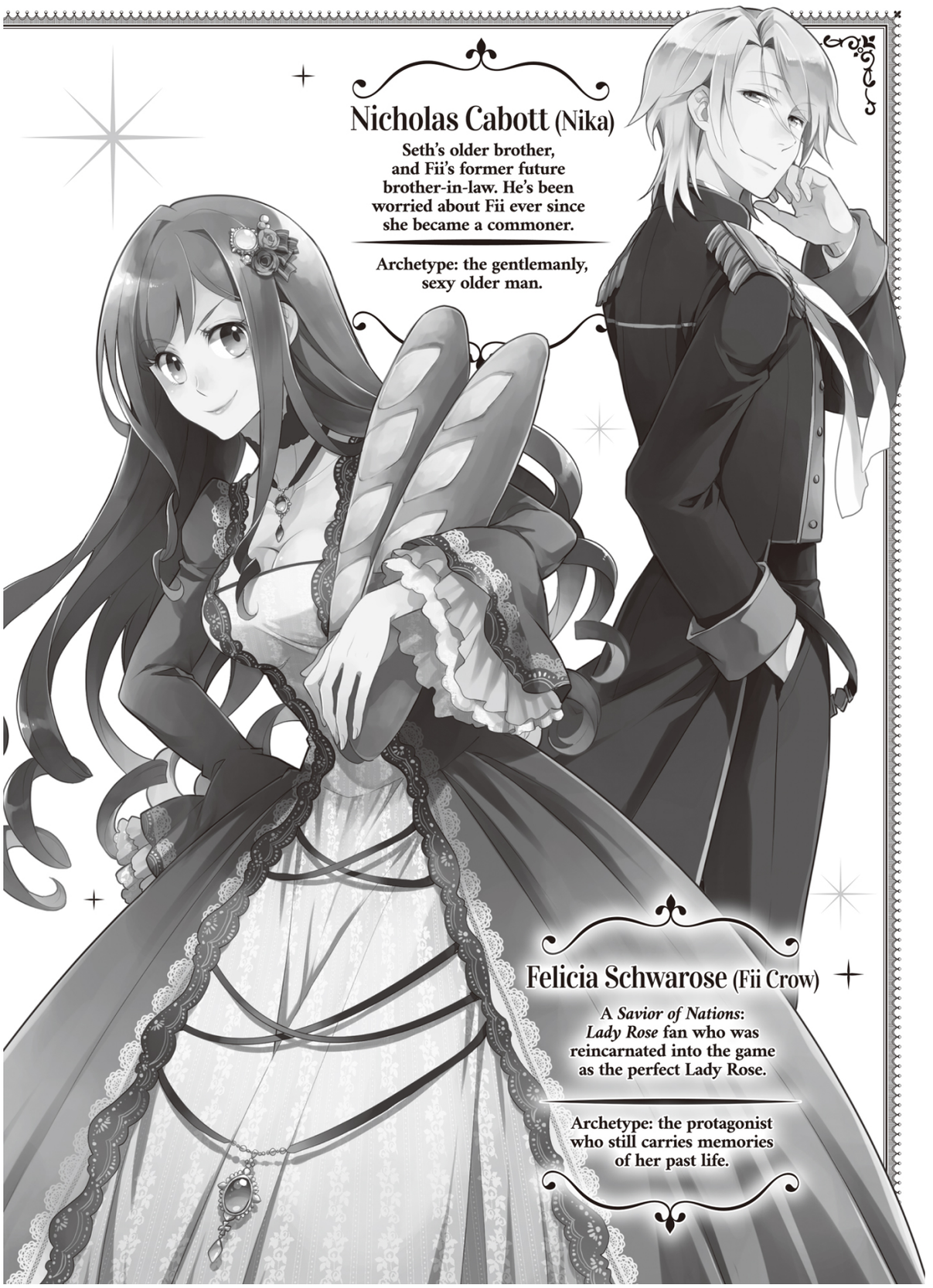

Kooriame
illustrator
Nami Hidaka
2
Lady Rose
Just Wants
to Be a
COMMONER!


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Nicholas Cabott (Nika)
Seth's older brother, and Fii's former future brother-in-law. He's been worried about Fii ever since she became a commoner.
Archetype: the gentlemanly, sexy older man.
Felicia Schwarose (Fii Crow)
A *Savior of Nations*: *Lady Rose* fan who was reincarnated into the game as the perfect Lady Rose.
Archetype: the protagonist who still carries memories of her past life.

Lady Rose Just Wants to be a Commoner Characters



Liliana Inoce

Fii's former classmate who ousted Fii from her position of future queen consort and became Seth's new fianceé.

Archetype: the villainess... or *is* she?



Nancy

A nun who works at the church in Fii's new neighborhood.

Archetype: the sweet, clumsy girl with braids.



Seth Cabott

Fii's former fiancé.

Archetype: the Pompous Prince and main love interest.

Savior of Nations: Lady Rose

KEY WORDS!

Also known as just *Lady Rose*.
An otome game; as the main character, Lady Rose, your goal is to rescue your country—and the world. In the good ending, she marries the Pompous Prince, Seth Cabott, and becomes his queen consort.



Shade Schwarose

Fii's adoptive younger brother. They're not very close, but he seems intent on changing that.

Archetype: [redacted]?!

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Characters
3. Chapter 1
4. Scene from a Mansion
5. Chapter 2
6. Chapter 3
7. Chapter 4
8. Chapter 5
9. Chapter 6
10. Afterword
11. Bonus High Resolution Cover
12. About J-Novel Club
13. Copyright

Chapter 1

“I thought you might be behind this. The flourishes in your handwriting felt vaguely familiar. But I really hoped it wasn’t you, Shade,” I said, glaring.

I recognized my adoptive younger brother’s face instantly—obviously, since we’d been living under the same roof until just a few months ago. I certainly hadn’t hoped to see him again *here*, and I’m sorry to say that our reunion was not at all a happy one.

Shade looked back at me, his face frozen into an affectless mask, but I could see a trace of delight in his eyes.

***

Let me give you a quick rundown of what’s happened so far.

A letter had been left on my doorstep early this morning, most likely by the ringleader of this whole mess, El. I remembered the address it’d invited me to as I was chasing after Lily’s kidnapper, which led me to this mansion. As soon as I set foot inside, I found myself face-to-face with Prince Seth again for the first time in a long time. And once we’d ascended the staircase, whom should I happen to find but my adoptive younger brother, Shade, sitting comfortably on a sofa?

It was still too early to say if this meant that Shade was El. But judging by how at ease he looked, it seemed pretty safe to assume that he had *something* to do with Lily’s kidnapping.

I’d really hoped that I wouldn’t see him here, though. I mean, Shade is an obsessive little creep with a canonical penchant for locking away the main character for good. The last thing I wanted to do was make an enemy of him.

“Shade Schwarose? I can’t possibly imagine what reason you would have to kidnap Liliana, much less to summon me here. But—”

“Ah… A moment please, Your Highness,” Shade interrupted, noticing that Seth was readying to unsheathe the sword at his waist. His tone was cool and composed.

“I won’t object to a verbal or physical joust—I’ll fight you to the death, if you like—but I only cooperated with Lady Liliana’s

kidnapper because I have business with my sister. Shouldn't your priority be to go after the mastermind or to track down Lady Liliana?"

Apparently, he really didn't have any business with Seth, because he pointed at the staircase and jerked his head in its direction as if to say, *Well? Hurry up and get going.* His black bangs fell over his eyes.

It made a lot more sense to me that someone else was behind all of this. It was hard to pinpoint why Shade would go to all this trouble to kidnap Lady Liliana and bait us out here. I was still pretty certain El was responsible, but I wasn't any closer to an actual idea of who they *were*.

"I'll get the whole story from you later, but know that cooperating with this 'mastermind' implicates you in their crimes. I hope you're prepared to accept the consequences," said Seth.

"I know what I'm getting into," replied Shade. "But don't you have something more important to be doing? You'd better get going. It seems to me that Lady Liliana lost her wits before I or my partner in crime even laid a finger on her."

What Shade was suggesting only made me even more worried for Lily, but I knew I couldn't just leave him here and go off looking for her. This was partly because I felt like I needed to keep him in line...but also I couldn't ascend to the next floor before I'd figured out why he'd done this. It didn't matter that he wasn't my brother by blood—in this life, he was still my little brother.

I was fully prepared to stay, but I knew that Seth probably wasn't. His priority was saving Lily, after all. This wasn't the time for him to be getting caught up in other affairs. And as much as his royal title necessitated his own protection, he was much more capable in combat than I was. The logical choice was for him to go ahead of me.

It seemed like we were on the same page, but I could tell that he was having some doubts about leaving me here alone. Frustration was written all over his face.

I looked him in the eye and gave him a meaningful nod, as if to say, *Go. I'll take care of Shade.* I was hoping it would be the push he needed. As much as I hated him, he *was* my former fiancé, and fortunately it seemed we could still communicate without words. He gave me a defeated look in return and

clucked his tongue.

"Yell if you need me. I'll come running," he said quietly.

Then he took off up the next staircase.

You know, if you weren't always lording it over people, you'd actually make a pretty dashing prince, I thought. *You've definitely got the face for it.*

The way his beautiful golden hair shone in the light as I watched him from behind, he looked just like a real hero. A knight in shining armor, one might even say.

And if I'm in the hero's party, then that kind of makes me a hero too, right? I'm not sure most people would buy that kind of thinking from a random commoner, but whatever...here we are.

Wait...hold up. Isn't this like one of those clichéd scenes where the weak sidekick tells the hero to go on without them? Where they're all "You go on ahead! Leave these guys to me!"? Why does it feel like I'm just foreshadowing my own death here?

"Well, then... Now that there's no one to get in our way..." Shade began ominously.

I was lost in my RPG fantasy world, but Shade didn't know that. He got up from the sofa and took several smooth steps toward me, looking as refined as ever.

"It's been a while, sister dearest."

The way he said that was so casual, it almost felt like it really was just a coincidence that we'd met here again. As usual, the boy was too stone-faced and monotone to read. It was exactly the same greeting he'd given me when he'd last paid me a visit.

I was a little pissed off that he was acting so casually, under the circumstances, but I put those feelings aside. I took in a deep breath, trying to keep my composure, and braced myself before giving Shade a stern look.

"I don't understand why you felt you had to go to these lengths just to talk to me," I said.

"Don't pretend that's the problem."

I was floored by his quick rebuttal—and confused. I had no idea what he meant by that.

I gave him a puzzled look. The look he gave in return made me feel like he could see right through me.

"It's not that you don't understand. The problem is simply that you don't even *try*. Even from the very beginning, you've always avoided me. You've never made any attempt to understand me. Isn't that right?"

After a long pause, I replied, “I don’t know what I could have done to give you that idea, but no, that isn’t right.”

“Ah ha ha!”

My eyes widened as Shade burst out laughing. I couldn’t believe my ears.

He’s laughing? Out loud*? That’s weird… Shade always smiles slightly in that classic way that creepy, obsessive characters do, but he never lets his inhibitions go enough to laugh or cry. The only time he does that is in his route’s good ending in the game. Basically, he has to resolve all his emotional hang-ups before he can actually express himself.*

So why is he able to laugh like this now*? Is it because of something El’s done?*

“You never change, do you?”

As the smile suddenly fell from his face, I found myself feeling a bit shaken. But I knew I couldn’t let him dictate where this conversation was going, so I steadied myself emotionally and refocused.

“Never mind *me*. Do you really understand the gravity of what you’ve done, Shade?”

“Are you upset?”

“Do you even have to ask? Of course I am.”

“Ah ha ha!”

Despite the serious nature of our conversation, Shade burst into a laugh again.

I felt another rush of anger swell up inside of me. This time I couldn’t just push it down. I kicked the floor with all the force I could muster. The sound echoed throughout the hall, as if piercing the air.

“Hey, do you think you could *not* laugh in my face? I’m on the verge of getting *seriously angry* here.”

“But that’s exactly why I’m doing this, sister dearest—to make you angry.”

“What?” I blurted out.

You’re trying to piss me off on purpose*?*

“Hold on. You’re not trying to tell me that you did all of this just to rile me up because you hate me, are you?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? I love you, sister dearest,” Shade replied, eyes wide with shock.

“You *what*?!”

I couldn’t help raising my voice, my tone betraying the anger

and confusion I felt at his response. I had absolutely no idea what was going on anymore.

Nothing about the way he'd been acting suggested that he loved me. How was I supposed to believe him? There had still been something redeemable about him back when I'd thrown that bread in his face and stopped his creepy behavior in its tracks, but he'd taken a dark turn since then.

When did he turn into such a twisted kid? Is it El's fault? Is this all *El's fault?!*

"Your bad habit of overthinking things has made you lose sight of the simple truths right in front of you. You don't even understand *yourself*, do you?" Shade said, his voice dripping with criticism.

Is it really my fault that I can't understand him? I wondered. *To be fair, he's not the only one who's told me I don't understand myself. Nika's said that to me several times too, so it's hard to argue with that. What "simple truths" have I not been seeing, though?*

No…it's pointless. I'm not going to figure this out. I feel bad giving up this quickly, but I really have no idea what he means.

Actually, I should probably have my guard up… This is pretty textbook coercion. There's no easier way to get someone to buy into a lie than to package it in truth. He might just be saying all of this to confuse me.

"In all fairness, I could probably afford to give things a little *more* thought," Shade added.

Even in my exhausted state, I felt a pang of recognition when he said that. But I was too distracted to really inspect that feeling. I was feeling increasingly uneasy about the strange silence from the upper floors. I'd been expecting some sort of clamor, but it was eerily absent. There *must* have been something up there. If there weren't, then Seth would've come back downstairs.

I want to hurry up and run up there too, I thought.

"No matter how 'simple' the truths I'm missing are, I'll never figure them out if I don't know how to see them. If you could *show* me, I'd really appreciate it," I tried, after cooling my head and reeling in the hostility for a moment.

Shade looked at me with an amused expression on his face.

"I was just thinking that I'd like to draw this out a bit, but…at this rate, I'm not sure you'll *ever* figure it out. So, how about you play a little game with me?"

A game? I don't know what the hell that's supposed to mean, but maybe he's going to spell things out for me a bit more?

I gave him a look that implored him to elaborate, and he obliged.

"I'll pose three questions to you. I'll even give the answer to one of them, but I won't let you continue upstairs until you understand *everything*. Once you do, I swear I won't interfere or try to stop you or anyone else. Well…physically, at least. That's the nature of the game. How about I start us off? First: *why did I agree to be an accomplice to Lady Liliana's kidnapping?* Second: *why am I so fixated on you?* Third: *why is it so impossible for you to escape from your fate, Felicia Schwarose?* There you have it. Will you play?"

I swallowed my spit—and, with it, my nerves.

The third question felt markedly more significant. Surely that was connected in some way to El?

"May I start by asking a question? You're not just going to try to close the book on that third question by saying that El is pulling strings from behind the scenes, are you?" I asked.

"No, that's not where I'm going with this. All I can speak to is you, me, and our relationship…so you won't get any answers like that."

It was hard to tell from his answer whether he meant that he'd been forbidden from talking about El or whether he was just as in the dark as I was. But one thing was clear: I wouldn't be able to catch up to Seth until I knew—and understood—the answer to each of his three questions.

Of course, Shade could stop me *handily* if he actually wanted to. As a nobleman's son, he would have had a fair amount of combat training—certainly more than enough to subdue me, considering that I had absolutely none. And from where I stood, there was no reason *not* to play along with his game. Even if all I had to go on was his word, he'd presented a pretty compelling offer. It'd be a weight off my shoulders not to have to worry about him interfering any further if I beat him. Besides, I had a feeling that I knew how to really make him *sweat* a bit once I'd answered all his questions.

All things considered, it seemed like playing along would be the right call here. If he was going to give me one answer as a freebie, I needed to think carefully about which one I wanted.

I knew the answer to his second question—the one about why

he was so fixated on me—from playing *Lady Rose* in my past life. The boy had a colossal inferiority complex; how could he measure up to "the perfect Lady Rose"? As an adoptive son of the Schwaroses, it was understandable that he might harbor those feelings toward their biological daughter. What's more, I'd been doing my best to play the part of the perfect protagonist I knew from the game. I could imagine that living under that huge of a shadow would drive him pretty nuts.

As for the third question about why I couldn't escape my fate…well, I'll admit that I was pretty eager to know that myself. But if it didn't have anything to do with El's influence, then all I had to do was psychologically profile Shade to find the answer. I had a feeling that'd be easier than trying to answer the first question.

"All right… I choose question one, then. Will you tell me why you agreed to be an accomplice to Lady Liliana's kidnapping?" I asked.

"I figured you'd choose that question. I'm happy to answer it for you, but just so you know, I've already told you the answer."

You're kidding… When?!

I narrowed my eyes, giving him a suspicious look. He gave me a sweet smile in return. He'd been smiling an awful lot at me today. It was almost like he'd forgotten that he was supposed to be the deadpan guy.

"It's because I've always wanted to make you angry," he said, still smiling, without any hesitation. There wasn't a trace of artifice in his tone.

Wait… What?

I racked my brains, desperately trying to process what he'd just said.

How does that have anything to do with Lily's kidnapping, though? Wait… Huh?

"So, you kidnapped her…because you wanted to make me angry? That's the *only* reason?"

"That's the only reason," he confirmed.

Oh, god… Does that mean poor Lily just got wrapped up in this all because of me?! Actually, wait… I feel like I tried to ask him about this before. But he told me he didn't do this all because he hated me. Is there some subtle distinction I'm missing here?

"You really did all of this just to upset me? But…I thought you said you didn't hate me?"

“I don’t hate you.”

“I don’t understand…”

Why would he go to such extreme lengths to make me angry if he didn’t hate me? Surely you’d have to despise someone from the bottom of your heart to be willing to commit a grave crime just to upset them?

I don’t understand you, Shade. I feel like that’s all I’ve been saying lately, but I honestly mean it. I don’t understand you at all. The more this conversation unfolds, the more mystified I become.

“Question one has now been answered. So, on to question two: Why am I so fixated on you?”

“Because I make you feel less than. You’re jealous of me because I know how to navigate the world of the upper crust and I’m a Schwarose by blood.”

“Hmm… So, you picked up on all of that, huh? There’s more to the answer than that, though. I want to hear the rest…from your own mouth.”

“There’s more to the answer than that”? I repeated his words in my head, puzzling over them. *So, he’s acknowledging that he does envy me and that he does feel overshadowed…but there’s something else? There’s a reason that gets even closer to the heart of it all?*

“Is it because I foisted all of the responsibility of taking on the Schwarose name onto you and became a commoner?” I guessed.

“It’s not about anything that recent,” he replied. “It’s about something that’s been playing out ever since we first met.”

When did we first meet again? Hmm… I’m pretty sure it was after I’d realized that I was living in the world of Lady Rose*. By then, I think I’d already made up my mind to avoid him. I don’t feel like I did anything that would have made him fixated on me, though. I mean, all I ever did since meeting him was make any excuse to avoid him.*

But from the way Shade is talking about this, I must have done something*, right? But* what*…?*

Our conversation ground to a halt. In the absence of our voices, I was keenly aware of the silence that filled the mansion. I still hadn’t heard a peep from upstairs. I’d figured eventually there’d be a scuffle, or at least a few heated words, but nah, nothing doing.

I really hope the Pompous Prince hasn’t passed out and lost all his strength or something… It’d be pretty embarrassing for him to just wind up adding to the hostage count.

Okay, that's enough, Fii! Focus on the situation at hand!

"You can't figure it out by yourself, can you? I'd feared as much. You had some good guesses, at least," said Shade somewhat sadly.

He wasn't smiling anymore. It felt like he was talking to himself, giving voice to some truth that he'd resigned himself to acknowledging.

As I looked at him, it finally began to dawn on me that what he'd become was neither his fault nor El's—it was mine. He was acting like this because, unbeknownst to me, I'd been operating under some misunderstanding.

That didn't excuse him for what he'd done to Lily. But, while I didn't understand why he was looking at me so sadly, I knew that it had something to do with something I'd failed to recognize. That was the whole reason that he'd done what he had and why we were standing here right now.

It would have been great if that realization was enough to lead me to the answer...but unfortunately, it wasn't going to be that easy. The only reason that the detectives in mystery novels and the like could land on answers so quickly was because they were blessed with keen intellects and preternatural perception. As much as I tried to rack my brains in silence, not a single idea came to me.

"I just can't help but go easy on you. I guess I really do have a bit of a soft spot for you," Shade said with a smile. "Shall I give you a hint?"

I knew that if I refused out of pride, I would never get to the answer. So, I didn't hesitate to throw the small ounce of pride I had out the window and bow my head.

"I love you to the bitter end, sister dearest. No matter what I do, I can't help but adore you...and no matter what I do, you always remain out of my reach. So, give some thought to the answer to question one and what it was that struck you as strange. It's all related to the answer to question two."

I did exactly what he said. If there was one thing that struck me as strange, it had to be...the question of why he would try to upset me if he loved me.

Is there any circumstance where anyone would want to upset someone they love? I wondered. A few ideas came to mind: a grade school boy who teases his crush, a kid who acts out to get the attention of their busy parents, and someone trying to play a

little good-natured prank on their partner.

What do all of those have in common…?

"You wanted to upset me…because you wanted a reaction?" I tried. "You wanted me to notice you. You wanted me to *feel* something toward you. Is that it?"

"Yes. Well done. That's the answer to question number two."

"It is? That seems less like a cause than an effect, though. Surely that would be a reaction to being fixated on me rather than a *reason* for it?"

"Can you blame me? You've never even once looked my way."

"Can you blame me?" Seriously?

Well, to be fair…I guess he's right. I never did look his way, since I was trying so hard to avoid him. I can see how it might've come across like I didn't care about him.

I still don't understand, though. He'd have to be fixated on me to begin with to care about that, right? I mean, if I didn't matter to him, then why would he care that I was trying to avoid him?

I'm sure Shade feels like he's already given me more than enough information to go on, but it's just not clicking…

But Shade didn't seem to be impatient with how slowly I was putting things together. Instead, he opened his mouth again to tell me more.

Maybe he really does *have a soft spot for me?*

"I've looked at you feeling nearly every way a human being can, but you've never even so much as returned my gaze. Despite everything I've felt about you, you've never seemed to feel *anything* for me. That's why I've developed this painful, pitiful yearning for you. I became obsessed."

I could see the despair in his eyes.

Now that he'd told me everything, I finally felt like I understood. In essence, thanks to me ignoring him and pretending that I didn't feel a thing toward him, his once-small fixation on me had grown out of hand.

"So…this is all because I avoided you?"

"Is that your takeaway? No. It's not because you avoided me. You're still thinking too surface level."

Sorry, Shade. I guess I didn't put it all together after all…

Wait… Hang on, what now? He's given me this many hints, and I still haven't figured it out? Am I actually just a complete dunce?

What the heck were you on about when you said you could "afford to give things a little more thought," Shade? That's actually a

really rude thing to say to someone as stupid as me who can't even figure out answers she's basically been spoon-fed. So, knock it off with the modesty, will you? It makes the rest of us look bad…

"You should know what I'm talking about, sister dearest. Is there really nothing coming to you? Do you really think I'm such an idiot that I wouldn't put the pieces together after ten whole years of living under the same roof? I know I can't compare to the superior intellect of the perfect Lady Rose, but ouch… That hurts."

"Huh? No, I was just thinking that you're completely outwitting me. I can't keep up," I said, cocking my head as I made eye contact.

"Oh… So, you're just making another assumption about me? You sure do love to make assumptions, don't you, sister dearest?"

I was taken aback by how quickly he turned things around on me with a comeback. I'd forgotten what a sharp tongue he had. I already knew that side of him, though, so it wasn't a total surprise. Besides, he only lashed out like this from a place of brutal honesty—not to try to knock people down.

What did he mean about me loving to make assumptions? Well…I guess I'm not easily dissuaded once I've made up my mind about something. I do get pretty fixated on whatever explanation I've come up with, and it's hard to think of any alternative possibilities. I should probably try to fix that.

"I basically gave you the answer with my comment about you making assumptions, but it seems like you still don't get it, do you? I'd really like to help you figure this out, though," Shade said. "Hmm… Okay, how about this? The first time that you actually *saw* me was when you threw that baguette in my face, wasn't it? That was the only time that you've ever really looked at me. That's why I wanted to make you angry again."

My eyes went wide with shock as I looked at him.

"How could that have possibly been the first time I saw you…? At the very least, you can't say that I didn't see you when you came to the village to visit me after I'd been estranged from the family. I'd say I was *definitely* looking at you then."

"Are you sure? Was it really *me* you were seeing?"

Huh…?

I looked at Shade.

How could you say I haven't been seeing you this whole time? Are

you saying I haven't really been perceiving you? But…that makes no sense…

Does it?

The boy I was looking at was Shade Schwarose, my adoptive younger brother. Among fans, he was sometimes known as "the Trapper." His expressions never held a trace of emotion, and he always spoke in a completely flat yet casual tone. He fit neatly into the "obsessive stalker" archetype, and—

Wait…are these all just assumptions I've been making about him?

Oh. I think I get it now.

"I don't know why you're like this, but I wish you'd stop assuming you know everything about me without even *trying* to get to know me."

I bit my lip as I felt his criticism pierce straight through my heart.

I'd been living under the same roof with Shade for years. We were family…and yet, I'd only ever seen him as a character from a video game. I'd never seen him as a real person, just like myself. When I stopped to actually think about it, I realized for the first time that everything I felt I knew about him, I'd learned from the game.

"And now, my beloved sister is finally *seeing* me. I've never been happier," he said, smiling. He really *did* look happy.

I felt like I finally understood him. Shade had diverged so far from who he was in the game, doing things that his in-game character would have never been capable of. I had no choice but to see him as a completely distinct entity now.

It was all because he'd gone to such drastic lengths that I could see him now for who he was: a real person.

"I'm sorry…" I said. "I'm so sorry."



I could have given him an ornate, bespoke formal apology, but this seemed like the wrong time for that kind of response. Now that I'd realized what I'd been doing all this time, I felt an apology was the least I owed him. After all, it was my fault that it had come to this, right? If only he hadn't had to bear the pain of living with a sister who didn't even see him as a person, he never would've resorted to such damning measures to get my attention.

"You don't need to apologize to me. I don't feel sorry for myself, and none of this changes the fact that I love you. Besides, even I can recognize that I probably didn't need to stoop to assisting in Lady Liliana's kidnapping. I have only my stupidity and my recklessness to blame," Shade said. Then, after a pause, he added, "Hmm… I'd probably prefer for you to yell at me than to hear you apologize any more."

It hurt to hear him say that. His wish felt like a clear sign of the trauma I'd put him through. I felt a wave of remorse sweep over me, accompanied by the taste of blood. It seemed I'd bitten my lip a bit too forcefully.

Now that I'd resolved to try seeing Shade only for the boy I saw now in front of me, I realized for the first time just how talkative he was—how talkative he'd *always* been. I couldn't believe that I hadn't even been able to see something as obvious as that.

"From now on, I promise I'm going to see you for who you are, Shade. And I promise it won't just be when I'm angry either," I said.

"I'm pleased to hear that. But…let's save the promises until this is all over and I'm still alive, shall we? You've still got one more question to answer, sister dearest."

Right… This is no time to be wallowing in guilt and feeling disappointed in myself, I thought.

If I really wanted to make it up to Shade, then I couldn't expect a mere apology to suffice. I'd have to find some way to convince the bigwigs like Prince Seth and the king, upon whom the duty would fall to try Shade for his crimes, to spare his life. It seemed like a tall order for a commoner, but I'd do whatever it took.

And right now, the only thing I could do was to hurry up and answer all of Shade's questions as quickly as possible so that I could save Lily from El, whom I expected I'd find on the floor

above. I could save the moping for later.

"All right, here's your third and final question: Why is it so impossible for you to escape from your fate, Felicia Schwarose?"

Now that I knew the answers to the first two questions, it felt like I could finally see where Shade was going with this last one—at least, I had a vague idea of what he was insinuating.

It was just a simple shift in thinking. Rather than approaching the question head-on, in isolation, I just needed to think about it in the context of the other two questions. Basically, it was like I'd moved the starting point of my brainstorm…which meant that I had to get one thing clear before I could think about it any further.

"Does this have a connection to the other two questions you posed?" I asked.

"Yes. In particular, it has a lot to do with your tendency to make assumptions and your failure to see what's right in front of you."

Right…

It was tempting to feel discouraged under the weight of his harsh criticism, but I decided to save the depression for later. I could feel sorry for myself when this was all over.

When he'd first posed the three questions to me, Shade had clarified that they only pertained to our relationship. In which case…

"I take it that it's safe to assume the answer to this question has absolutely nothing to do with El, then?"

"Correct."

Thought so. That's definitely the sense I got from the answers to the last two questions.

I still thought it was probably El waiting for me upstairs, but it was certainly possible that I'd just convinced myself of that and was failing to see the myriad other possibilities.

"Do you know about the game, Shade?" I asked.

"Hmm? I'm not sure I understand the question."

"So…it doesn't ring any bells when I mention the game? You usually call me 'sister dearest,' but when you asked me this question, you called me 'Felicia Schwarose.' I thought that might be because you were referencing that I'm the protagonist from *Lady Rose*. Was there a different reason?"

"Huh… I'm guessing that this 'game' you're referring to isn't the one that you and I are playing right now, is it? I can't say for

certain, but if I had to guess, then I'd say it probably doesn't have anything to do with this answer to my question," Shade replied, shrugging.

So he doesn't *know about the game?* I thought. That just raised another question…

I'd been thinking of "escaping from my fate" as escaping from the game's canon storyline. My determination to change my destiny was, to me, one and the same as my determination to change the game's story.

But Shade didn't even know about the game, so that couldn't have been *his* definition. In which case…what did "fate" mean to him?

"This question pertains to you and me, right? So, I'm assuming that means that at least one of us would have to know the answer. And if *you* don't know the answer, then that means *I* do. The only one who knows my fate…no, the only one who *determines* my fate is *me*. And if I look at it from that lens, then I'm basically *willing* fate into existence by affirming the fact that it exists…which means that I'm inherently bound by it. So, that's why I can't escape it. Have I got that right?"

"Huh? Sorry, you lost me… 'Willing fate into existence'?" said Shade. "I'm not trying to have a philosophical discussion here."

Shoot… Well, looks like I've lost the plot again.

Ngh, I really thought I had it, though! I thought my whole problem was that I shouldn't even be entertaining the idea of "fate" in the first place, otherwise I'm just affirming that it's real…

I must've looked pretty frustrated, because Shade hurriedly tried to reassure me.

"Uh, I mean… Look, I'm sure you're onto something there. You probably hit the nail on the head. It's just that…your reasoning was a little beyond me, that's all. But I'd like to know why it is that you can't run from this fate that you've, um…willed into existence somehow?"

Oh god…

It was painfully obvious he was just trying to make me feel better. I could tell from the upward inflection at the end there that he had absolutely no idea what I was talking about.

He's probably totally done with me by now…

I took in a deep breath and tried to compose myself.

Okay, let's take several steps back and try again. Why don't we start with trying to figure out why he intentionally used my full name

when he asked this question?

If the reason has nothing to do with the game…then it must be because he's clarifying that he's talking about who I was before *my engagement was annulled and I was estranged from the Schwaroses. Either that, or he's trying to indicate that he's talking about me from an objective perspective rather than as his sister…?*

Wait… Actually, this is giving me déjà vu. I feel like Nika made a point of calling me "Felicia" too, just a few hours ago in his carriage when he was trying to convince me that I needed to meet up with Lily and talk to her. I'm pretty sure he said, "But before I tell you about that, I should tell you how she and I viewed you—back when you were Felicia. We—"

He was cut off before he could finish his sentence thanks to Lily's kidnapping, so I never heard the rest.

How did he and Lily see me back when I was Felicia—back when I was "Felicia Schwarose"? And how did Shade see me?

I felt like I was onto something. Surely this would lead me to some answers?

That's right… Nika mentioned something else interesting a while ago too, back when I'd only been a commoner for about a month.

If memory served, it had been in response to a remark I'd made about how my actual capabilities were only slightly above average (or at least, that's how I'd made it appear). He'd agreed without hesitation, but that wasn't what had really struck me. It was what he said next…

For some reason, Nika went on to say… Wait, what did he say again? Come on, Fii! Search your memories!

Um…okay. I think I've got it. It was something like "are you really that lacking in self-awareness?"

He hadn't really clarified what exactly he thought I wasn't aware of, but he had seemed awfully surprised by it. Then he had gone on to say something about how he'd been mistaken about something, and so had I…but again, he had never clarified what he'd meant by that.

It felt like there was a connection between what Shade had said about me loving to make assumptions and what Nika had said about me being mistaken. I mean, they were kind of similar accusations, right?

So…I'm lacking in self-awareness and prone to making assumptions, and there's something I've been misunderstanding?

Nika had been quick to agree with my self-assessment that

my talents were only slightly above average, and yet he had accused me of lacking self-awareness… How did *that* work?

How did everyone see me when I was Felicia Schwarose? What does the perfect noblewoman I pretended to be have to do with who I really am?

I felt pretty certain that the answer to this third question must have had some connection to my apparent cluelessness.

"I couldn't escape my fate…because I was 'the perfect Lady Rose,'" I finally said.

That's what I made people see in me. That's why they became so enchanted by me.

"I was the protagonist. So I acted like one."

Or, more precisely, I acted like a woman who would *become* the protagonist.

"I knew what I was doing, but it was all subconscious…because acting is second nature to me. So, eventually, I started to take my talents for granted."

No one had any idea that I had memories from my past life. My acting skills must have seemed every bit as extraordinary to the people in this universe as all of the other knowledge and skills I'd carried over from my past life, but I'd never realized that. Anyone who picked up on what I was doing would have thought that I was born with an incredible, innate talent. Or, alternatively, they might have thought it *couldn't* be an act, because they assumed that I couldn't possibly be such a talented actor at such a young age, with so little life experience.

Either way, everyone must have thought that I was extraordinarily talented. And so, how could they have possibly let that talent go to waste?

I'd tried so hard to make sure that I never excelled too much in my studies, but what I hadn't realized was that, most likely, nobody else was actually paying that much attention to my academic achievements. Thinking about it now, they had probably taken much more notice of how I excelled on a much more *fundamental* level.

"I think I probably took things too far, to the point that I became even *more* perfect than the game's protagonist. I stood out too much. I played the part *too* well. I… I *was* Lady Rose."

Sometimes the fake ends up outshining the real thing, after all.

I'd only known what the game had shown me. So, it wasn't

surprising that my version of “perfect” might have been even more perfect than the original “perfect Lady Rose.”

This wasn’t a game anymore—it was reality. And in reality, even little things can change a person’s perspective or their feelings.

“That’s why, even now that I’m a commoner, no one can leave me to live my life in peace. That’s the answer…isn’t it?”

In the end, what I couldn’t run away from was my exceptional talent and the way that I had put it on display without even realizing, as if it were nothing worth noting.

I wish I’d never had to open my eyes to this. I mean, there’s nothing I can do about it now*. I’ve already put my acting prowess on full display, and I can’t take that back or do it all over again.*

Shade stared at me with a smile that was at once gentle and yet slightly annoyed. I could feel the tenderness and sympathy in his eyes.

“You have the right of it. I don’t know what this ‘game’ you keep talking about is, but…I guess it’s just like you said, sister dearest. As ‘Felicia Schwarose,’ you cut the figure of a leading lady in all regards. You were too talented, too captivating. Your very existence caused a stir. How was anyone supposed to let all of that talent go to waste? How could they just let you escape from your calling and debase your gifts living as a peasant?”

I saw his point…but I didn’t appreciate it.

But I want *to be a peasant*, I thought. *Even if I’m the author of my fate, even if I can’t escape it…I want to tear it down and start over. Is that too much to ask?*



I felt like I bore a heavy weight on my shoulders now, but I knew I had to keep forging ahead. I turned around one-eighty degrees and looked straight ahead, toward the next staircase.

“All right. I’m going upstairs now,” I declared, with my back to Shade.

“Wait,” he said, stopping me just as I’d made to take a step forward.

I put my foot down and turned my head to look at him. He wore a pained expression.

“I know I said I wouldn’t intervene *physically*…but I did warn you that my promise wouldn’t stop me from intervening

verbally."

Oh. I guess he did say that.

Still…now that I've come to understand the way he thinks, I can't imagine that he'd want to intervene to put me at a disadvantage. If anything, he probably just wants to help. I'd really like to get a move on and go upstairs as soon as possible, but I should probably stay for another minute and hear him out.

"I wouldn't go upstairs if I were you. You'll only encounter more pain and regret if you do," Shade said.

I could tell that he meant it. Honestly, though, I couldn't even begin to imagine how I could go through any more psychological pain than I'd already endured. What could I possibly regret more than the fact that I had myself to blame for Shade's turn to treason?

Shade must have realized that his warning wasn't getting through to me, because he opened his mouth to continue.

"It's not really your role to save Lady Liliana, is it? I don't know much about your relationship, but in all honesty, I just don't think it makes any sense for you to put your life on the line to save her."

That's a very fair point…but only if you're just looking from the outside in and you don't know anything about my circumstances.

Until everything that had gone down with the bullying accusations and the engagement annulment, Lily and I had basically been strangers. Our relationship wasn't much deeper, even now that I was a victim and she was an aggressor; that was pretty much the extent of it. We'd never once had a real conversation. Honestly, I didn't even know the first thing about her.

It made sense that a third party might be baffled by my drive to help her.

"If anything were to happen to Lady Liliana—or even to Prince Seth, in his quest to save her—then rest assured the perpetrator will be brought to justice. There's no reason for you to put *yourself* at risk for them, sister dearest."

I knew that Lily would have probably agreed with that. Seth probably would have too, actually. At the very least, I knew it was unlikely that anyone was *expecting* me to run to their aid.

But my conscience wouldn't let me leave them alone.

I'd known everything that was going to happen from the beginning, but I hadn't taken these steps to ensure that my

engagement to Seth was annulled for *their* happiness. I'd done it all for my own selfish reasons—all because I wanted to be a commoner. I'd used them.

They could've fallen in love and gotten engaged legitimately, but instead I'd cast a dark shadow over their union. In the game, Seth takes the opportunity to move in on Lily if the main character doesn't choose his route. The relationship that results is, at the very least, a harmonious one.

Even though I knew all of that, I had intentionally let Lily frame me. I had deceived Seth and let him draw the wrong conclusions.

"The way I see it, Lily and Prince Seth are just victims who got dragged along for the ride with my selfish plans," I told Shade.

"Huh... I can't say I understand, but I will say this: I'm pretty sure you're the only one who sees things that way, sister dearest."

"Maybe you're right, but I'm still going upstairs. I'm going to go save her."

"Do you want to be a hero or something? No one would blame you if you didn't go, you know."

Yeah, you're probably right. I'm sure they wouldn't. But I don't want to have any more regrets. I can't take back the things I've done, but I can make sure I don't give myself anything else to regret.

And I know I'd regret it from the bottom of my heart if I didn't go after them.

"*I'd* blame myself. It's all thanks to Lily that I could live happily as a commoner, and I owe this much to her. I'm going because I *want* to."

If Lily died because I didn't come to her rescue, I'd be crushed under the weight of my guilt. In a very real sense, it could kill me.

Even if Lily never had any intention of helping me achieve my dream of living as a commoner, I felt eternally grateful to her. I'd always seen her as something akin to an angel or a goddess. I *still* saw her that way.

So, part of it was that I felt I *had* to save her, and part of it was simply that I *wanted* to. The people who lived in this world—who knew nothing about my past life—would probably never understand my reasons, but that wasn't going to stop me. I wasn't going to let Shade stop me either, even if I knew he was only trying to look out for me. There was no fiber of my being that didn't want to follow through. I was doing this, and I was

doing it for *me*.

Shade must have realized that I wasn't going to budge, because his shoulders slumped.

"I feel like you've already suffered enough—and I'm sure I don't even know the half of it. But what worries me more is that I feel like someone is playing a bigger part in all of this than I thought. I can't explain it, but…something about this all feels off."

I was struck by how vague he was being, in contrast to the bold declarations he'd been making earlier.

"It feels like we're all standing on a stage that's been prepared for us. I don't care what the director has in store for *me*. I've already done what I set out to do, so he can make me dance to whatever tune he wants now for all I care. But…" Shade said. Then he looked at me with determination in his eyes and continued, "I feel like I can't let *you* do whatever it is he's planned for you."

Even if this "director" that Shade was talking about was El, and even if he was suggesting that we were all just doing exactly what El wanted us to do, I didn't care.

"I'm sorry, but I'm still going," I told him.

My sweet little brother let out a sigh. He must have realized that no amount of persuasion would pull me out of this now that I'd made up my mind. He knew I was determined to see this through.

"You can be so stubborn," he said. "Do you have a plan, at least?"

"Nope."

"All right. I'm coming with you, then."

"Thank you," I said, smiling at him.

A flurry of emotions played across Shade's face as he quickly walked ahead, racing up the stairs before me. Flustered, I ran after him.

I was feeling a little nervous as we reached the top of the stairs and noticed that the hall at the landing looked a bit different from the first- and second-floor halls. A single hallway led from the top of the stairs to a wall with a door at the center. It looked sturdy and imposing.

I've got a bad feeling about this, I thought, grabbing Shade's arm as I felt cold sweat drip down my spine.

"Hey… Is it just me, or does that room look…" I began.

“Soundproof?” Shade offered. “It is.”

Oh… Well, that explains why it was so eerily silent all this time!

I wasn’t surprised that Shade hadn’t told me about this sooner. He’d never had any intention of letting me go anywhere, so no matter how curious I might have been about the third floor, there had been no reason for him to give me that information.

I opened my shoulder bag, hoping I might be able to push down the sense of unease that welled up inside of me and was growing stronger by the minute.

“You’re not going to open the door?” Shade asked me.

“Oh, no. I am. But first…”

I pulled something out of my bag. It was only about fifteen centimeters in diameter, which made it very portable. It was also the perfect width to brandish one-handed. It was a lovely shade of golden brown, solidly made, and obviously—

“Is that…bread?” Shade asked, incredulous.

“Do you even have to ask? It’s a baguette. Obviously.”

“Don’t act like *I’m* the one being ridiculous! I have no idea what goes through your head sometimes, sister dearest. What are you thinking, pulling out a baguette at a time like this?”

“We’re lucky that I happened to bring a baguette, specifically. I thought it was a poor choice for food on the go, since it’s a bit awkward to carry and unpleasantly dry without anything to drink, but this actually worked out perfectly. This baguette is hard enough to make an excellent weapon.”

“You’re going to fight with a *baguette*? Are you insane?!”

Shade looked legitimately worried for me—and my sanity. But he didn’t need to be worried. I still had all of my marbles.

“Don’t worry. Bread has the power to change fate. It’s a good thing to have on hand just in case everything goes south. I’ve actually got an extra on me. Do you want it, Shade?”

“Uh…no thanks,” he said. “How in the world did it come to this?”

Shade looked like he was seriously at his wits’ end. I couldn’t blame him, though. He’d yet to see the miraculous, fate-defying power that bread held in this world.

Armed with a baguette in my right hand, I placed my left hand on the door.

“We’re going in now,” I said, a serious expression on my face.

“Oh. Right.”

As I wondered why Shade didn’t seem even the least bit nervous, I flung the heavy doors open.

Scene from a Mansion

Little did Fii Crow know that, just as she had finished answering her estranged younger brother's three questions, a whole cast of characters who carried the future of the kingdom on their backs (each with their own connection to her) had sneaked in.

Yes, you heard that right.

Unlike Fii, who had entered the mansion head-on from the entrance hallway, they had opted to take a hidden back door. And presently, they were rushing through the mansion's labyrinthine secret passages.

Now, I'm sure you have some questions. Perhaps you're wondering how a group of people who had presumably never before set foot here could possibly know of its hidden back door.

The leader of the pack, a peasant nun named Nancy, held the key to all such mysteries—which is to say, a *literal* key. She'd known where to look for key and door alike.

Naturally, this aroused a fair amount of suspicion. Nancy, however, had nothing to say for herself.

"I just *know*, okay?!" she declared forcefully when asked about her unusual knowledge of the grounds. "Forget about that! Saving the saint is our priority right now!"

It was hard to argue with that. The others who accompanied her had decided to put aside their suspicions—for the time being, at least.

Melvin Crabitt found himself smiling at the girl's outlandish behavior.

He knew exactly who owned the mansion. After all, he knew everything about everyone who was anyone in the kingdom. But even *he* didn't grasp why Nancy had so much insider information. He racked his brain, but he could think of no possible explanation.

Nancy had been working as a nun in the same local church ever since she'd been a child. As far as Melvin could ascertain from the intel he'd gathered, Nancy should have been completely in the dark about any connection she had to this mansion. There would have been no way for her to have learned

about it.

Melvin couldn't help but smile. Nothing brought him greater joy than unraveling the mysteries of baffling human behavior.

Let's shift our attention to a different character now, shall we?

Perhaps feeling that the burden of suspicion had eased (thanks, no doubt, to Nancy taking it on herself), one of Nicholas's guards approached the other casually.

"Hey," he said.

"In case you've forgotten, we're *on the clock*. Let's save the private chatter for later, please."

Despite advancing as quietly as possible, so that no one in the mansion would be alerted to their presence, the guards were also running at a much faster pace than the rest of the group. And yet, they didn't seem the least bit out of breath.

If you were to guess what they were doing from their voices alone, you would probably assume that they were having a leisurely conversation as they sat down for tea. They spoke so softly that an average person standing next to them would struggle to catch all of it. Only the guards' keenly trained hearing made such subtle conversation feasible in such extreme conditions.

Despite the formal guard's blunt refusal to engage with him, the casual guard continued, completely undeterred.

"Well, if you ask me, I reckon this is a li'l above our pay grade. I mean, we're *guards*, y'know?"

"Yes, indeed we are. Very astute of you," said the formal guard. Then, after a moment of silence, he seemed to relent. "Oh, fine. *What*?"

The formal guard picked up on the hidden meaning in the casual guard's words. With an irritated expression on his face, he prompted the casual guard to continue. He knew he had no choice but to hear him out.

"I'm just wonderin', y'know...what are we s'posed to be doin' right now?" the casual guard mused cheerfully.

The formal guard let out a sigh. *Is he really this clueless?* he wondered.

"As long as it doesn't interfere with anything, we guard. That *is* our job, in case you forgot."

"Guard *whom*, though?"

"The two of them. The others, too, I suppose...if we have the capacity," replied the formal guard. "I'm sure this goes without

saying, but that doesn't include Prince Nicholas. You must understand why."

"Yeah. Don't need to, right? Hold on, though. I know who one of the people we need to guard is, but who's the other?"

"Someone we'll find at our destination. You could say that we'll have paid off our final debts once they're safe. Does that ring a bell?"

"Yup. I'm hearin' it crystal clear now."

He figured that out pretty quickly, thought the formal guard. It was a low bar, but he was impressed. Of course, he forgot all about that in a matter of mere seconds.

Once their conversation had ended, the formal guard tore his gaze from the casual one to look at his master, Nicholas.

His master had been quiet for some time now. It was dawning on the formal guard that he must have realized there was likely something more than met the eye to the future queen's kidnapping.

Nicholas had figured it out sooner than he'd expected, but the formal guard wasn't at all troubled—nor did he feel the need to say anything to him about it.

That said, he did feel just the slightest pang of sympathy toward the prince. It seemed that the advice his meddling partner had given him—to profess his feelings sooner rather than later—would go to waste after all.

The two guards had begun working for Nicholas right around the time that Felicia Schwarose had been cast away to live as a peasant. The only reason that they had become *his* guards, instead of anyone else's, was because his status and his movements made him the most convenient candidate. There was nothing more to it than that. The two guards felt almost no attachment toward the man whatsoever.

No matter what anyone does, the ending won't change. Lady Rose probably has no idea what's in store for her, nor does she know just how carefully the traps have been laid. In some form or another, El's prophecy will come to fruition...and when it does, there will be no way to undo the consequences.

The formal guard felt confident in this. To him, it felt exactly the same as the inevitable epidemic that had wiped out the village he'd grown up in with the other guard.

After all, that was just the nature of fate.

"You think Lady Rose is winning?" the casual guard asked out

of nowhere.

"What?" the formal guard blurted out, surprised more by the content of the other guard's question than anything else. The monosyllabic question, and the threatening low tone he used, came out almost out of habit. "What the hell are you talking about? Of course she isn't. She'd better *not* be, or something's gone very wrong."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because she has no clue what's going on. Not only does she not understand the situation at hand, she doesn't even understand *herself*. And until that changes, she has absolutely no chance of facing things head-on and claiming a victory."

As soon as the words left his mouth, however, the formal guard felt himself privately arguing with what he'd just said.

But if she did *get a grasp of the whole situation, then maybe she could reverse her fortune.*

Even as he thought so, though, the formal guard didn't really believe that she could—and it didn't change the fact that, as he'd said before, it would mean that something had gone very wrong.

"Well, *I* think she's got it in her."

"Huh? On what grounds?"

"I dunno."

The formal guard stared at the casual guard with utter astonishment in his eyes. Naturally, the casual guard paid him no mind.

"Look, I'll admit it: I don't have any reason for believin' in her. But wouldn't it be cool if she *could* change fate? I've been hopin' she'll find a way to screw it all up. Of course, I say that as a loyal servant of El, yeah?"

"So your reasoning is purely emotional?" retorted the formal guard. "Well, I suppose you're right, though. Maybe that *could* have some merit. I say that as a loyal servant of El, of course."

The two guards bumped fists, laughing. Naturally, no one had heard a word they'd said. They were so quiet, it would have been impossible to tell that they were even talking.

"So…this is fate, is it? I suppose there's no fighting it after all," muttered Nicholas, in a self-deprecating tone so quiet, no one heard him either.

Chapter 2

Okay, I'll be honest: I know it was kind of weird to brandish a baguette as a weapon, and I didn't exactly expect it to be especially useful. Mostly, I was just hoping it could calm my nerves.

But soon as I flung the doors open, I was grateful that I had it. Because immediately, I felt myself falling into confusion and panic over the scene that lay before me.

"With this, I'll return everything to the way it was supposed to be. I loved you, Seth," a sweet, familiar voice said. I would have called it "translucent," if voices could actually *be* that way. She muttered something, but from where I was standing, I couldn't make it out.

Slumped on the floor and looking depleted of all energy was Lily, whom I hadn't seen in a long time (at least, not while she was conscious). She was smiling through her tears.

With a steady grip, she was pointing a sharp knife straight at her neck.

I had absolutely no idea what was going on, but fortunately, my body moved on its own. Without a moment's hesitation, I flung the baguette I'd been wielding straight at Lily's slender arm.

Baguettes could be pretty hard, but I figured that it wouldn't do any serious damage even if it hit her. I'd like to say I thought about that *before* I threw it at her, but truth be told, I honestly didn't have the time to think until the deed had already been done. The only thing I'd been thinking about when I threw it was how to make her drop the knife before it plunged into her throat.

Fortunately, my plan worked. The baguette hit her straight in the arm, forcing her to drop the knife. It fell to the ground with a metallic *clang* and slid across the floor. I couldn't believe how perfectly I'd pulled that off.

"What? *Bread...*? No... It can't be! Lady Rose?"

Lily, who was probably not expecting to have her suicide attempt thwarted by an errant breadstick (to be fair, I doubt *anyone* in this world would), spent a good several seconds just

blinking at the interloper in shock. Then, she turned to scan the room for me. When she found me, her face contorted into a look of distress that shook me where I stood.

I was still frozen in the pose I'd struck hurling the baguette; I stared back at her, feeling about as awkward as any woman could, with my right arm and left leg thrust out in front of me.

I had absolutely no idea why Lily would have wanted to kill herself. But before I asked any questions about that, there was something else I needed to know…

Where the hell is that Pompous Prince?! What's he doing, asleep at the wheel at a time like this?!

I briefly broke eye contact with Lily to look around the room angrily in search of him. That's when I spotted his dazzling golden hair. He was sitting on the floor, hanging his head. He was closer to me than to Lily, basically right by the doors.

This is no time to be loafing around! I wanted to yell at him. But after pausing for a second and putting aside my anger, I realized that something was wrong. Never mind his love for Lily—Seth's pride would never permit him to chill out on the floor like that. After all, he was supposed to storm in here and let the kidnapper know that they'd never get away with this. At a glance, it didn't seem like he had any injuries. So what in the world had happened?

"Your Highness…?" I tried.

"What?"

"Wait, seriously? That's all you have to say?"

Seth's head was hanging so low, I couldn't see his face. His voice sounded the same as always, but there was no way that he'd just sit around and do nothing while his fiancée tried to commit suicide if he were conscious.

"I have no right to stop her," said Seth plainly, as if offering an answer to the questions that were swimming in my head.

Huh? Wait… What the hell is he talking about? If someone is trying to commit suicide right in front of you, that's not really the time to be thinking about anything but stopping them!

"Liliana and I…have nothing to say for ourselves," Seth said. He shifted, and I saw that he was wearing a self-deprecating look on his face that didn't suit him at all.

I was utterly mystified, but a tap on the back of my shoulder interrupted my confusion.

"Sister dearest, if I may? Even I didn't expect Lady Liliana to try

to take her life as soon as we walked through the door, so I can understand what you must be feeling. But before you get distracted in your confusion, shouldn't you at least confirm who's behind all this? Don't you suppose there's someone else in this room with us? A fifth person, perhaps?"

Shade's composure knocked some sense back into me.

That's right…the mastermind must be in this room with us. They'd know why Lily tried to kill herself and why Seth has given into despair and given up too. They're the one who's responsible for Lily's kidnapping: El.

I might as well just ask someone to take me outside and shoot me if I couldn't take the opportunity to pull back the curtain on the final boss when it was offered. I mean, who does that?

In the midst of all the craziness that had just played out, I'd gotten a bit of tunnel vision. Now that I'd hardened my resolve, I gave the room a good long once-over. That's when I saw the fifth person.

"*Huh?*"

I was so floored by seeing them here that all I could do was let out a doltish expression of surprise. But no matter how many times I rubbed my eyes, I still saw the same person standing there.

Hold on… How in the world could he *be El, though?*

"Evan…?"

The fifth person in the room was none other than the brunet puppy dog love interest, Evan Douglas.

N-No way. This can't be happening.

We'd only met *once* since the engagement had been annulled, and that was only the morning after it had all gone down. We hadn't even talked about anything important. He'd been his usual, sweet puppy dog self, and I'd responded the way I always did: by putting on an innocent act. It wasn't exactly memorable, but I was pretty sure we'd just had a meaningless conversation.

It seemed a little hackneyed for him to appear out of nowhere as the final boss. It just didn't really feel *real*, I guess. I mean, was it even possible for someone of his social standing to be El? Sure, he was a noble, but his status didn't exactly afford him any special privileges. Besides, we'd barely had anything to do with each other. He'd just had an unrequited crush on me, that's all.

"Evan… Why? What reason could you possibly have to kidnap

Lil—I mean, the future queen consort? I don't—"

I'd love to know, because I can't think of a single one…

My voice shook as I spoke, making it abundantly clear how rattled I was. I'd barely begun another sentence when suddenly, I became too shocked to even speak. The warmth and tenderness with which Evan smiled at me felt completely at odds with the situation we found ourselves in, and the sight of it had rendered me speechless.

What? Why are you smiling? Was this all just an act, Evan? Including your love for me? Is that why you're taking such delight in tormenting me right now?

No… I knew his smile wasn't sadistic. Just like Shade's, it was a smile of real, genuine love for me.

"I have my reasons—reasons compelling enough to risk even the death penalty for my actions. I'd *gladly* die for the cause," Evan said.

His gaze was determined. That smile he wore, along with his kindness and conviction, made him seem more like a protagonist than a final boss. In fact, he seemed like a *hero*.

How can you look so full of righteous conviction when you've just kidnapped poor innocent Lily? I wondered.

"Your virtuous and noble spirit constrains you, Lady Felicia. That's why—"

"Wait!" cried a soprano voice, interrupting Evan.

I turned my head to see Lily, who'd managed to get back onto her feet at some point. She was pointing the knife at her neck again. My eyes went wide with shock.

Crap! I was so fixated on Evan that I stopped paying attention to Lily!

Evan seemed like he was about to say something, but the priority now was knocking that knife out of Lily's hands again. I knew I couldn't just rush over and take it from her, though—it was too reckless.

Wh-What if I just slowly reached into my bag again for the other baguette? I wondered. *No… She'd definitely notice that!*

Baguettes may be somewhat discreet in their unremarkable brown color, but it certainly wasn't going to look so discreet if I pulled one out in the middle of all *this*!

"Lady Rose need not know anything. It would be better if she lived her life in ignorance. I'm sure you must agree with that, Evan Douglas. I wish for her to return to her position as future

queen consort completely oblivious. That's your wish too, is it not?"

"Yes... Yes, that's exactly right."

I'd come here to save Lily and to find out the truth. And yet, Lily seemed to be denying me on *both fronts*.

She and Evan both want me back as queen consort? But...why would they want that?

Hmm...maybe I should think about this from a different angle. What if Evan isn't El? What if El is manipulating him and Lily, completely unbeknownst to them?

As I was lost in my consternation at their exchange, Lily turned to face me with a pleasant smile on her face. But even as she smiled, she took her knife in both hands and steadied its deadly angle. I knew that if I made one wrong move, she might just plunge it straight through her flesh. But I felt my breath catch in my throat at the realization that it would probably end that way even if I did nothing.

"Oh, Lady Rose, your beauty and kindness cannot compare. I beg of you, please don't try to stop me again. This was my fate from the very beginning. Let me give my life to correct the distorted future that lies ahead of us."

She's giving up her life for something like fate*?* I thought. *She'd throw it all away...all to fix it? That's the only reason?*

I was so confused now, and infuriated by how helpless I felt to stop her. Hearing her say that only compounded things. I felt tears of frustration welling up in my eyes at her baffling reasoning.

"But I don't—" I began.



I was about to finish the sentence with “want to be queen!”, but she didn’t let me. Before I could get the words out, she brought the knife forcefully home.

It was obvious just from a visual assessment that the distance was too great to close, even if I ran. Even if I wanted to throw another baguette at her, I didn’t have enough time to reach into my bag for it either. Shade, Evan, and Seth were also too far to help—even if they wanted to.

All I could do was watch, helpless, as Lily took her own life.

Blood spattered all across the room.

And yet…the knife was no longer in Lily’s feeble hands. She didn’t even have a scratch on her.

How? It was such a brutal cut. I swear I saw her blood spatter!

It was physically impossible for anyone to reach her in time…at least, for *anyone in the room that I was aware of* to reach her.

“Whew! You sure didn’t hold back, did you, Miss Saint? Let’s work on that survival instinct, okay?” said Nana in a joking manner.

The knife had pierced her hand, but she pulled it out without a moment’s hesitation. Without anything to stop the blood, it fountained from her hand as Lily watched on in a daze.

“Nana…?” The nun’s name spilled out of Lily’s mouth. It was clearly more a question for herself than for Nana.

There was no way that Nana could have been in the room. Until just moments ago, all I could see was a wall where she stood now. And yet…here she was. She must have suddenly pushed through a hidden door and intervened just in time, making a spur-of-the-moment decision to sacrifice her hand to stop Lily from taking her own life. It was clear that she hadn’t hesitated—nor had she stopped to consider the damage she might do to herself in the process.

“Yep, it’s me, Nana! Please don’t ask me why I intervened, okay? I’m *really* mad at you right now.”

As soon as she said that, Nana’s smile suddenly vanished.

“I wish you wouldn’t run off and try to off yourself like this. You have no idea how much trouble you’ve caused me,” she said.

Her voice was frigid. Listening felt like being pierced by icicles, and it was clear from the way she’d spoken that her intervention had nothing to do with concern for Lily’s life and well-being.

The genuinely irritated, aggrieved tone she took was nothing

like I'd ever heard come out of her mouth the many times that I'd spoken with her. But sure enough, I'd heard it. Unable to make sense of it all or accept it, I just watched Nana's every move in disbelief.

Then, out of nowhere, Nana's expression contorted into one of fear and contrition.

"Oh, n-no! That's not what I meant to say! Please, I didn't mean any of that! I only blurted that out because I was upset! I take it back! I-I swore I'd save her no matter what, didn't I?! Um, so, that's why I was so mad that she was trying to die!"

Her strange slip of the tongue *was* pretty egregious, so I could certainly understand why she'd be flipping out a little and fumbling over her words as she tried to smooth things over. But the weird thing was…she didn't seem to be saying any of this to Lily. She wasn't even *looking* at Lily. Instead, she looked up as she spoke, as if she were apologizing to someone we couldn't even see. If it hadn't been for that, the trust in Nana I'd developed over time might've been enough to hold on to.

No…this isn't the time to be pondering Nana's real intentions.

The fact of the matter was that Nana had interrupted Lily's suicide attempt, and now she was saddled with a pretty serious wound for her trouble. The blood spattered across the room was pretty horrific on its own, but even more dreadful was the steadily progressing stream of red pouring from her hand onto the ground.

"Nana, you're hurt! We need to get you help!" I said.

"That doesn't matter right now!" she protested.

"Yes, it does!" I yelled, not really thinking.

I hadn't meant to yell, but I was worried about her. I didn't know if she was just too occupied with everything that was going on or in too much pain, but she didn't seem to be paying any mind to her injury.

Then an emotionless look swept across her face again.

"It doesn't," she repeated.

There was a genuine apathy in her eyes and her tone that stunned me into silence.

"Anyway, I'll be confiscating this now," Nana said, turning away from me and practically toying with the bloodied knife in her hand as she turned to face Lily.

Lily must have been as confused and overwhelmed as I was, because she didn't say anything to Nana in response.

Just then, I heard noises coming from the hidden door that Nana had emerged from, which was still open. As I turned to look at the source, a throng of familiar faces spilled into the room like an avalanche.

"Stupid Nana! What were you thinking, running off ahead at full speed?! Did you forget that the rest of us don't know the way or something?! Wait...what's going on here?"

"Fii! Oh, thank god you're safe!"

"Hey, cool! Looks like a party in here!"

"I doubt anyone else is feeling as festive as you are about this, Prince Nolan. It seems we've stumbled across a bloody royal dispute."

The vibe in the room took a sharp turn for the wacky.

Mel, Nika, Nolls, Zero... I can't believe all of the love interests are gathered here in one place. I think I feel a headache coming on...

Nika's two madcap guards and another guard who I assumed was Mel's had accompanied the pack of love interests, but they stood by silently.

"Hey, how did you find that passageway? I thought my parents and I were the only ones who knew about it."

To my surprise, it was Shade, who was standing next to me, that brought us back to reality. His tone was icy as he spoke.

Without a word, all of the newcomers turned to look at Nana. The meaning of their look was unmistakable: "Ask *her.*" Assuming they hadn't all coordinated this response beforehand, it seemed that she had somehow been the one in the know.

Why in the world would a commoner like Nana know about a secret passageway in a noble's mansion?

Going off of what Shade had just said, it seemed likely that this was the house where he'd lived with his biological family until the Schwaroses had adopted him—which meant that only they should have known about the passageway. It was beyond weird that Nana would be in on it too.

"I know you... You're that nun from the church, aren't you? What are you doing here? How did you even *get* here?"

"Well, look who it is: the young master. See? That's why I said it doesn't matter. None of this matters to Nana!" exclaimed Nana, refusing to answer any questions. I was struck by how self-centered and enigmatic she was being.

Hmm? Wait... Does that mean Nana and Shade know each other? But how could they? There's no reason Shade would have ever gone

to her church on the outskirts of town, right?

Actually, that's not the only thing weird about this… Did she just call herself "Nana"? But Nana never talks in the third person like that… And I thought "Nana" was just a nickname I gave her? Her real name is "Nancy," isn't it? But now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure Mel and Lily called her "Nana" too. Maybe I'm overthinking this. Maybe she just let slip her old nickname and I picked it up inadvertently?

"It's gonna be okay, Miss Saint. Nana's here to help," Nana said to Lily, smiling sweetly as I tried to make sense of everything.

Lily let out a quiet scream in response. It seemed like she was more scared of Nana than anyone else in the room. *What in the world is their relationship?* I wondered.

From the way Nana called her "Miss Saint," I could only assume that Lily was the "saint" she was always going on about. But something didn't add up. Why would Lily leave the comfort of her home to make regular visits to a church in a provincial town? Nana had made it sound like she had visited on a monthly basis since she was very young.

Then there was the way Nana spoke to her. How could Nana tell her beloved saint not to "off herself" and reprimand her for "causing her trouble"? It was all just too weird. Weirder still was the fear of god she put in Lily. I was at a complete loss trying to make sense of it.

"Fii," said Nana.

"Y-Yes?!" I replied. My surprise made the word come out a little too forcefully.

Nana didn't seem fazed by that, though. She just gave me the sweet, innocent smile I was always used to seeing on her—or at least, that's what it looked like on the surface.

"Nana's going to take Lily outside for a little 'counseling.' I'll let you take care of everything going on here, okay?" Nana said.

Is she putting on a show? I wondered. *Can a sixteen-year-old girl really act this well?*

I felt nothing but suspicion toward her now. I wondered if she was like my older brother from my past life: perfect on the surface, but deep down, it was all just a front. But when I tried to see past Nana's sweet, cheerful exterior for something more sinister that might be lurking, I couldn't find *anything*. It was the first time I'd ever experienced something like this.

No matter how hard I looked, all I could see in her was a pure heart. Even if I put the fact of her age aside, I knew from experience that I wasn't looking at the face of a scheming adult. And yet it was clear as day that she was no innocent child either.

Who in the world is *she?*

"All right. I'll take care of the situation here," I agreed, despite the internal conflict raging within me.

I didn't exactly feel comfortable letting Nana go off somewhere alone with Lily when she was acting this weird, given how liable Lily was to make another attempt on her own life. Honestly, though, my brain was feeling a little too overloaded to think about it any harder. I'd hit my limit.

In any case, I didn't feel like I was going to be able to have a discussion with Evan if I was distracted by my worry for Lily. I couldn't exactly just grab Lily's hand and try to make a run for it with her either—she'd probably protest bitterly. And despite how afraid of Nana Lily was, Nana clearly cared for her. At the very least, I figured Nana would be able to keep Lily from hurting herself while I was talking with Evan.

If anything, I felt like what I ought to be worried about the most was the possibility that Nana might try to brainwash Lily when I wasn't around to stop her. Nana *was* acting a lot like El right now. But I couldn't exactly handle Lily in her current state. If I wanted to talk to both of them alone at some point, then it felt like a good idea to go along with Nana's plan.

As I watched Nana and Lily leave the room, I saw Nika's two guards follow after them. *Did Nika tell them to do that? Or are they following Nana because she's El?* I wondered.

I didn't have two bodies, mouths, or brains, though...so, as worried as I was about Lily, I knew I'd have to stay here and focus my attention on dealing with Evan.

Fortunately, I knew I wouldn't have to worry about Evan overpowering me; if things turned violent, it'd be a whole bunch of us against just him. Even if not *everyone* here took my side, I knew I could count on Nolls, at least. He'd probably never even met Evan before, so it didn't seem likely that he'd take his side.

"Thank you for your patience" was all I said to Evan as I turned to face him again.

"Hey, Fii," Nolls interrupted. "Is that your baguette over there on the ground? 'Cause I'm dyin' to know: How the hell did that wind up over there?"

“Why don’t we save that for later?”

C’mon, Nolls, read the room. Yes, obviously, that bread is mine. But can’t you see I’m trying to have a serious conversation with Evan here?

I pulled myself together and faced Evan again.

“I have a lot of questions,” I said to him, not even trying to hide the fact that I had absolutely no idea what was going on.

Evan gave me a gentle smile in response.

“Anything you don’t already know, Felicia, you don’t need to know.”

Okaaay… So much for getting any answers from him.

You know, I’d be perfectly happy living in blissful ignorance if it meant that I was at no risk of being sucked back into the role of future queen consort and that Lily would live to take that role instead. Oh—and if all this ominous foreshadowing turned out to be a bunch of bunk. But that’s just not reality now, is it? And there’s no way in hell I’m gonna stand around and just let some tragic fate befall me and everyone I care about!

I needed to know why Evan was doing all of this, why Lily was so eager to kill herself, and why Seth seemed so defeated. I also needed to know why Shade had said that this would all come back to hurt *me* somehow.

Hold on… I just remembered something. Before we entered this room, Shade said I was better off not knowing anything too. That must mean that he knows whatever it is that he doesn’t think I should know.

“Shade, please tell me what’s going on. You must know whatever it is that he knows, right?” I tried.

“If Evan’s decided not to tell you, then I’m sure it must be in your best interests not to know. I respect his decision. Lady Liliana would probably prefer you didn’t know anything too.”

Why won’t anyone tell me anything?!

“Fii… Is this the villain who tried to kidnap Lady Liliana? We should apprehend him immediately,” said Nika, stepping forward.

He made an excellent point. Honestly, for a guy who bought out a peasant bakery every time he visited and foisted groceries on people, he was surprisingly levelheaded.

But as sensible as it sounded, was it really the right call to just arrest Evan here and now?

Does that sit right with me? I wondered. *No. No, I don’t think it*

does.

Shade had warned me that I'd regret learning the truth, which meant that Evan must have gone to these drastic lengths for my sake or something like it somehow. In all likelihood, it was probably my fault that he was doing all of this. Just like how I'd pushed Shade to the brink, I must have done the same to Evan. I felt like I'd learned enough to safely make that assumption, at least.

"We're discussing your arrest, and yet you're not making moves to run or resist," I said to Evan, my face grim.

"I told you, didn't I? I have no objections to facing the death penalty," Evan replied, as if it were plain as day. He gave me a calm, confident smile.

"Are you doing all of this…to make me queen?" I asked.

"No, although surely you will be, after the harebrained stunt I've pulled today. But that's simply an unintended consequence. Once the villainous Liliana Inoce is dead, you'll be back in the arms of your one true love, Seth Cabott. If that isn't poetic justice, I don't know what is."

He didn't seem willing to admit that he was doing this to make me queen consort. But despite calling it an "unintended" consequence, I couldn't help but think it was his real goal. Whether or not I believed what Lily had said before, it was easy to imagine that *he* must have *sorely* wanted me reinstalled.

But…why would he want that so badly?

"I'm sorry, Nika. I know this is a selfish request I'm making, but please wait to apprehend him. There's something I'd like to ask Evan about while we're here now on equal terms."

"…"

Nika said nothing in reply. I wasn't necessarily surprised that he didn't readily agree to that. After all, it probably wasn't a good look to delay in arresting the man who'd kidnapped the future queen consort.

I glanced over at him, trying to figure out what he was thinking. He didn't open his mouth or make any noticeable movements with his hands. Instead, he just crossed his arms and watched. It seemed he was giving his silent assent.

I had no doubt that Evan's mild manner and lack of resistance had something to do with that, but maybe it was also because he had faith in me that I could handle this? I appreciated the vote of confidence.

From my perspective, I couldn't possibly see Evan as a bad guy.

"Shade… Can I ask you something?"

"I can't promise you I'll have the answers, but go ahead."

"Is this like when I was trying to find the answers to your questions? Do I already have all the information I need, and I just need to look back on my memories of Evan through a different lens?"

"Yes," Shade answered, after a long pause. He looked troubled.

I gave him a smile in return.

Right. I only found the answers to Shade's questions after he'd given me a million hints. But even if I don't get any direct hints this time with Evan, I've got the experience and knowledge I've gained from that exchange with Shade now, so I should still be able to figure this out. If I want clues, I just need to think back to any conversations I've had with Evan.

"Give me a moment, please, everyone. I'd appreciate it if no one did anything rash or unsavory. That goes for *you* especially, Mr. Foreign Prince."

"Huh? Hey! I have a name, you know!"

"I *know*, Nolls! Now just sit down and be quiet!"

I knew it wasn't great to treat a prince like an unruly dog—especially in front of a bunch of other people—but it was kind of *his* fault for picking up that baguette and gnawing on it like one. He had only himself to blame for looking foolish, as evidenced by the warm look of gratitude that his aide—or should I say chaperone?—was giving me.

Despite the way I'd snapped at him, it was actually kind of endearing. At the very least, him behaving like a dunce was far preferable to his other default behaviors in a tense and uncertain situation, like flying off the handle and foaming at the mouth.

In stark contrast to that incorrigible problem child, Mel had retreated obediently to the corner of the room to wait patiently in silence.

He's so sweet. He's just like a baby rabbit, I thought. *Poor thing. He must be hopelessly confused by all of this. I'll have to fill him in on everything once we've gotten out of all this mess.*

Anyway, back to the matter at hand…

Let's assume that something I've said or done drove Evan to

kidnap Lily. If that's true, then I should be able to find the root of all this if I just reflect back on all of our interactions.

Honestly, though…we'd barely had anything to do with each other. He'd probably fallen in love with me at first sight when he saw me at school, just like he did in the game *Lady Rose*. That would have been obvious enough to anyone who would've seen us talking at school, even if we were just discussing formalities. But…we'd never had any particularly meaningful conversations.

The only thing I could think of was the talk we'd had right after my engagement had been annulled and I'd been estranged from my family. I remembered that I'd run into him as I was leaving and we'd talked briefly, but for some reason, my memories of that conversation were pretty hazy. That felt significant too, but I couldn't put my finger on why.

Oh! I know! It was probably because I was so exhilarated that I was finally free of the Pompous Prince and my family—not to mention my role as future queen consort! Yes, that's got to be it… Of course *my memories would be hazy if I was that excited. Come to think of it, I was on the verge of breaking into a Cossack dance.*

God…that's actually really embarrassing. I can't believe I just dredged up that memory. I think I'm on the right track here, though.

"This will all be over as soon as you apprehend me, Prince Nicholas Cabott," said Evan.

"I'm aware. But Fii has every right to spend some time with her thoughts. I want to let her bring this all to a conclusion she's satisfied with."

"You're putting her wishes above the safety of your own brother and his bride?"

As I racked my brains for answers, Evan and Nika seemed to be having a disquieting conversation in the background.

It was a perfectly *reasonable* conversation to be having, and it certainly didn't count as "rash" or "unsavory"…but still! I was just getting somewhere good!

Knock it off, will you?!

"All I'm doing is putting *my* wishes above all else," Nika shot back.

So…your wish is the same as mine? You want my freedom? I thought. But just as I was about to start dissecting this in my head, I decided I'd better stop. It was a surefire way to derail my thought process about what was going on with Evan, so I pretended not to have heard anything.

Right. Back to thinking about Evan. I'd just been estranged and my engagement had been annulled, and I'd been so high on life that I must've seemed like I was drunk. That's when Evan suddenly appeared in front of me, blocking my way…

…

Wait…huh? I was "high on life" when I ran into him? I've never given that much thought before, but maybe that *was the reason everything turned south? I mean, I wasn't acting normal. I probably seemed like I'd lost my mind…*

Hold on. Just hold on a sec here! No one's rushing you, Fii. You're *the only one who's trying to rush things, and you know that. So let's just slow down here a bit.*

I wasn't in my right mind. So, it wouldn't have been the least bit surprising if I'd really screwed something up and blown my cover somehow. But if I'd said anything weird, then surely I would've realized later. I'm pretty sure I managed to keep my facade up perfectly during that conversation, despite my excitement. So, I…

…

Oh… I think I get it now.

When I met Evan that day, I was playing my part even more *convincingly than usual, and certainly more convincingly than I'd needed to. I was chewing the scenery.*

"Oh… Oh god. I…said Prince Seth was the love of my life, didn't I? I even shed a tear or two. I overplayed the scene and acted the part of a tragic heroine…" I muttered, my voice shaking, as I collapsed onto the floor.

I curled up into a ball and hugged my head in my hands. I knew that if I didn't, I'd run right out of the room in shame.

That's right… I was too out of my mind to think straight when I talked to him then. I handled that conversation all wrong. He took me at my word, and my melodramatics inspired him to take these tragic, desperate measures. I knew *how good an actress I was, but I didn't realize until Shade pointed it out that my persona could be perfect enough to work* against *me. Evan probably bought my act hook, line, and sinker, and I'd never bothered to get to the "release" part of catch and release.*

I lifted up my head a bit and glanced around the room. Everyone was staring straight at me with a worried look on their face.

It was understandable they'd be concerned. Anyone would take notice of someone suddenly slumping to the floor. I *was*

kind of on the brink here. I mean, I was mortified enough to want to crawl into a hole and die over the memory of almost breaking into a Cossack dance, which I knew wasn't actually *that* embarrassing. That wasn't what I was *really* ashamed of, though.

What was actually weighing on me right now was that I was face-to-face with a man who'd committed treason all because of my stupidity.

I stood up again, my legs shaking.

"Hey…Evan? If I'm wrong, then I can accept that. But if I'm right, I'd appreciate it if you could tell me," I began. "I know I left in a somewhat dramatic fashion when we last met, after declaring my love for Prince Seth and refusing to take your hand. After that conversation, did you…go on to look into the truth behind Lady Liliana's accusations that I'd bullied her?"

My legs, hands, and voice trembled as I spoke. Evan neither confirmed nor denied my theory. *Okay*, I thought, *that's fine.* I knew what he wanted: for me to keep talking until I'd reached the truth that lay at the bottom of everything.

The lie Lily had told about me "bullying" her had, of course, been nothing more than a little twist on the truth: that she'd been bullying *me*. A little digging probably wouldn't have been enough to turn up anything to prove that, but if Evan had done some *extensive* digging…well, truthfully, I didn't know what he'd find. I mean, Lily had gone to great lengths to fabricate her false narrative, so maybe she'd been thorough enough to ensure that she hadn't left any evidence?

I had no idea whether or not Evan could have found any, but if he had, that would certainly explain Seth's fatalistic declaration earlier. If he'd learned that Lily alone had been responsible for the annulment of our engagement, it might just have been enough to tear him apart.

The depth of Evan's love for me was, quite frankly, kind of astonishing. I mean, the man was ready to put his faith in me and drop everything to run away with me, all because I was his first love. If he was *that* obsessed with me, then I could see how it would send him over the edge.

"After uncovering the truth, you confronted Lady Liliana and Prince Seth here with the evidence. You wanted to make Lady Liliana confess to her wrongdoings and to make Prince Seth admit that he'd made a mistake. You were hoping Prince Seth and I would get back together, and that I'd return to my role as

future queen consort. You kidnapped Lady Liliana and set this whole thing into motion all just to make me happy. Have I got that right?"

This was all for me…which meant it was all my fault. I was sure I'd found the answer now. Why else would Shade, who knew the truth, be squeezing my hand tightly in a show of sympathy and support like this? I knew that my sweet little brother was trying to tell me that he was on my side, even if I was responsible for all of this mess.

Evan looked at me with a gentle smile—the gentlest smile I'd ever seen.

"No," he said.

He couldn't have been clearer in his denial. Its decisiveness was almost enough to bring me to tears.

It was obvious to me that he must have been covering for me. He wanted to make it out like I was an uninvolved third party, and to grant my deepest wish (or at least, what he assumed to be my deepest wish) while I lived my life in blissful ignorance.

Oh, Evan…you sweet, naive little puppy dog. You really think you can sell me on a lie like that? You've probably never told a lie before in your life. Do you have any idea how many lies I've *told throughout my life? I practically live off of them. And thanks to a whole other lifetime spent in Mr. Seemingly Perfect's shadow, I'm a pro at seeing through them.*

His "no" sounded unmistakably like a "yes."

"Don't… Don't give me that, Evan. I know that's a lie," I said, letting my emotions get the best of me and failing to make clear what, exactly, I was disputing.

Evan gave me a concerned look.

I knew now why Shade had said that no one would blame me if I didn't try to go save Lily. He hadn't been suggesting that I was blameless; on the contrary, he'd probably said that because he knew I *did* bear some blame for what I'd said to Evan, and that this fact would come to light if I confronted him. If Evan had told Shade about our encounter, then Shade would probably have realized there was something amiss with the "tragic heroine" act I'd put on—especially after he'd seen how happily I was living as a commoner.

Shade had probably realized that I'd lied to Evan. But he hadn't revealed the truth—not to Evan or to anyone else—because he wanted to protect me.

I also realized now what he meant when he'd said that I'd regret finding the truth. Still, I couldn't just turn a blind eye to it…even if I felt so crushed under the weight of my guilt now that I struggled to even breathe.

There was no undoing all the harm that had been done, all thanks to my thoughtless lie. I felt like I was at a complete loss. *What am I supposed to do now?* I wondered. I had no idea, but I knew I had to do *something*…even if it meant I might lose something because of it.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and looked at Shade, giving him a forced smile as if to say, *it'll all be okay*, and releasing my hand from his. Then I took several steps toward Evan. I could feel how pale my face was. A cold sensation ran through my whole body, all the way down to my toes. My steps were shaky, and my body didn't feel like it was really mine. It felt more like a corpse or a marionette.

"This is entirely my fault," I said. "You haven't done anything wrong, Evan. The only reason any of this happened is because I deceived you."

"I'm not sure I understand. Are you trying to protect me? I did all of this of my own volition, because I *wanted* to. You have nothing to anguish over, Feli—"

"That's not true!"

I walked up to him and fell straight to my knees in front of him. I bowed so low that my forehead touched the floor. It was the deepest kowtow I could muster. I wanted to show him just how sorry I was.

"I'm so sorry!" I cried, from the bottom of my heart.

Everyone in the room began to murmur apprehensively. They probably still had no idea what I was apologizing for.

But I didn't try to tune in to their murmurs. Instead, I focused solely on Evan.

"Wh-What in the world are you doing? P-Please! Lift your head!" Evan begged me, flustered.

But I didn't listen. I stayed right where I was, kowtowing with my forehead on the floor, and continued.

"It's all a lie. I *lied* to you, Evan. I know you did all of this for me, but it was for nothing."

"Um…I'm not sure what lie you told me, but please, Felicia. Please…just lift your head."

From the distant sound of his voice, I could tell that he'd

squatted down on the ground. He reached out to touch my shoulder with his hand, but I didn't lift my head.

"I never wanted to be queen," I cried.

Evan's hand stopped suddenly in midair, before it could reach my shoulder.

"All I've ever cared about was securing happiness for myself," I continued. "I've never had any desire to carry the weight of the kingdom on my shoulders, or to marry Prince Seth. I hated my family, and I hated being a noble. I wasn't a helpless victim—I just ran away, all because of my own selfishness!"

I'd been so used to brushing off people's questions about what I wanted, but now the dam had burst.

"I wasn't upset by what Lady Liliana did. I was *grateful*, because she indirectly helped me to get exactly what I wanted. I felt like things worked out perfectly for both of us, so I always privately thought of us as coconspirators, not enemies."

I couldn't say Lily was *blameless*, per se; even if she hadn't wronged me, that didn't mean she hadn't wronged anyone else. But the fact that I'd never fought her accusations or denied her lies made me every bit as culpable as she was.

If anything, my sins had actually been *greater* than hers. I'd never told her how I really felt about everything. Instead, I'd just let her carry out her plan, and I'd let anyone who caught on to her lies think that I really *was* a tragic heroine. My lies had led Evan to commit treason, and I'd put Lily straight in his crosshairs.

I'd told a careless lie to Evan, who loved me so deeply, and then I'd carried on in blissful ignorance of its consequences. I hadn't given a single thought as to what ideas it might give him or what action it might spur him to. If only I'd stopped to think about that sooner, I might've been able to prevent all of this.

That's right... It's not just Shade that I've failed to see as a real person. I never saw Evan or anyone else as a real person either. I've only ever regarded them as characters from a game. That's how I've treated everyone who made an appearance in the game: as a mere character. All this time, I've been treating this whole world as a game. I've never given anyone the respect they deserved.

If I'd ever once thought of Evan as a real person, instead of just a character from a game, I would've immediately realized the potential consequences of telling him a lie like that.

Thinking about it now, I'd had plenty of chances to reorient my thinking. I'd been assuming this whole time that all of the

love interests would act just like they did in the game—and on several occasions, they'd proven me wrong. But each time they did, I had chalked up their unexpected behavior to a "glitch" or assumed that it must have been El's doing. Subconsciously, I'd been rejecting that these people were all living, breathing human beings.

I live here in this world. It's not a game—it's real*. And* they're *all real too.*

I felt disgusted with myself. How could I treat them all like this, when I knew from my experiences in my past life how horrible it felt to be treated like a toy instead of a human? I'd made a point of never being anything like my older brother...but apparently, I'd failed miserably.

Unlike my older brother, I hadn't demanded anything of anyone—but that's about where the differences ended. Just like my older brother, I'd regarded the people around me as if they weren't even human. It pained me to admit how similar I was to the brother I despised so much, my hatred transcended lifetimes.

I was so tormented by my own self-hatred now that I just kept pressing my forehead to the floor. Evan attempted to pull me up gently by the shoulders, but when that didn't work, he tried a bit more forcefully to get me to lift up my head. He wasn't smiling anymore. Instead, he stared straight into my eyes with a deadly serious look on his face. I could tell he must have been angry.

Of course he is. I told him that stupid lie all to make him go away. I didn't even take his feelings for me seriously. Evan was just trying to do the right thing, but I made a villain of him.

Then Evan suddenly tore his gaze away. He cast his eyes downward, and with a grim expression on his face, he seemed to become lost in thought. Then he looked back at me again, straight into my eyes.

"Are you telling me...you never loved Prince Seth Cabott?" he asked me.

"That's right. If anything, I actually hated him."

"And...you weren't just being self-sacrificing when you accepted your fate? You weren't just trying to make everyone else happy at your own expense?"

"No. On the contrary, I was only thinking about *my own* happiness."

"Then...that means everything had gone exactly the way you

wanted? You were *happy*?"

I found myself unable to get the words out. This was the hardest question of all for me to answer, but I knew I couldn't just *not* answer it. I gasped in a breath of air and, after a moment's pause, I croaked out my honest reply.

"Yes. For the most part, everything went exactly as I'd hoped. I had no idea how many people I'd hurt and used along the way, but I was happy here. I can say that honestly, from the bottom of my heart…as much as it pains me to."

I'd managed to get it all out, as hard as it had been to say. It was hard to admit the awful truth that I'd been happy, now that I knew what it had cost.

I couldn't even begin to imagine how Evan was feeling right now. It must have been unbearable to learn that falling in love at first sight with a wretch of a woman like me had caused him to ruin his life.

"Good," he said calmly.

And yet…with that one word, he'd shattered all of my expectations.

"Then that means you didn't have to suffer and that you're living a life that makes you happy. Nothing could possibly make me happier than that," he continued, smiling.

I was good at seeing through people's lies, and I could tell that Evan wasn't lying. He meant exactly what he'd said. There wasn't even a trace of anger in his words. No matter how hard I strained to see it, it just wasn't there.

"Why aren't you angry?!" I cried.

I knew I was being unreasonable for snapping at him like that, but I couldn't stand to let my sins go unpunished like this. I needed him to yell at me and tell me how horrible I'd been. It was unbearable for him to still bear nothing but goodwill toward me, without holding my actions against me at all. I felt like I might be crushed under the weight of my guilt.

"I *tricked* you! You committed treason and kidnapped the future queen consort all because of me—because I made you believe that you'd be doing the right thing! And it was all for nothing! You wasted your *life* for me, all because I told you some stupid, careless lie!" I yelled, hysterical.

"Felicia, if I may? None of that changes the fact that I was just doing what *I* wanted to do. My choices were my own," Evan replied softly, as if trying to soothe an out-of-control child. "I

committed these crimes out of the arrogant belief that I could make you happy. I never once felt that you'd pushed me to do any of it. I'm the one who jumped to conclusions and acted in haste. I was trying to make you happy, but I ended up roping you into all my wrongdoings instead. You're simply another one of my victims now."

Okay, look: If you'd agreed with me earlier and said that, yes, it was all my fault and you bore no blame in the matter...well, I would have objected. I would've argued back that you did *have some blame to bear, even if it was mostly my fault.*

But hearing you *insist you bear some blame is different. I just can't accept it. I'm not going to let you let me off the hook like this. Whatever blame you might share, it doesn't absolve me of my sins or lessen them.*

"You've done no wrong," he said.

Your refusal to admit that is kind and pure, Evan...but misguided.

I could tell that he really believed that, though. From the bottom of his heart, he believed that I was blameless. Even after I'd admitted the whole truth, he was still smiling as he insisted on taking the blame for me.

No...I can't let this happen!

"If I were ruthless enough to live my life using people, without ever feeling an ounce of guilt, then I never would've saved the kingdom," I said.

I'd resolved never to reveal that I'd made up that prophecy to save the kingdom, but the words left my mouth now all too easily.

"I don't have the heart to turn my back on people I care about, not when they're being charged with crimes they committed because of *me*! If you and Shade were sentenced to death, I couldn't just keep living like it had nothing to do with me. Even if that's what you both wanted for me, I don't have the strength to endure that!"

Evan looked at me with a troubled expression on his face, as if I were a petulant child. Shade, who had taken a spot at his side before I'd even noticed, was looking at me with a similar expression on his face.

"You're far too kind, Felicia."

"Oh, sister dearest... If I knew you'd take it *this* hard, I would've just kept you in the dark."

"Well...I suppose our time is up, isn't it?"

“I certainly hope so. I think it’s time to close the book on this.”

The two of them spoke as if none of this had been a big deal at all—as if it were already over. They completely ignored my protests.

I’d been fully prepared to accept any blame. This was the first time I’d ever experienced how painful it was *not* to be chastised or condemned. I wasn’t kind at all. The only reason they thought that was because *they* were kind. If I were what they thought I was, then I never would have let everyone around me down and lied to get what I wanted. I never would have been able to keep smiling and living my life, never once regretting the damage I’d caused.

I have to do something. Even if nothing I can do will change their fate, I have to try.

I’d resolved, during my conversation with Shade, to make the effort to intervene. That determination hadn’t changed. If anything, it felt even *more* urgent now.

I have to be positive about this and keep moving forward. I can’t keep staring a hole in the ground and feeling despondent. I don’t have time to be negative about this. How am I supposed to secure a bright future when I’m wearing such a gloomy expression?

I stood up and looked straight into the eyes of the one person I felt could help.

“Nika,” I said, as firmly as I could manage.

He looked back at me, saying nothing.

Nika had always told me to come to him whenever I needed help. I knew that the situation I found myself in right now was different, though. This wasn’t just about *me*. The whole kingdom was involved. Right now, though, he was in the best position to help. He was the only one I could count on.

“Please let me speak to His Majesty. As a commoner, I know I’m in no position to ask for their sentences to be reduced…but I can’t just leave them to their fates without trying.”

I knew I’d never get anywhere petitioning the king to meet with me on my own. For the first time, I felt frustrated by the limitations of my status as a commoner.

“I have to save them, no matter what it takes. Not just for their sake but for *my* sake too.”

Nika had told Evan earlier that he wanted to help me reach a conclusion I could be satisfied with. I couldn’t help hoping that he might help me.

I couldn't just let their lives come to an end just because I'd gotten sucked up into the role of a tragic heroine.

"I understand I'm making an impossible request right now. I know full well that I can't expect an audience with the king, especially not one this last minute. But please, Nika… I beg you!"

I bowed my head deeply, entreating him to consider my request.

God isn't real, so the only one I can pray to is you, Nika.

"How could I possibly refuse a request from the one and only Fii?" he replied. "I'll make it happen, I swear to you."

I was so touched by his kindness and relieved that he'd been willing to entertain my request that I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I quickly tamped them down, raising my head once to get in one more good genuflection.

But as I did, I felt a faint unease wash over me at his ready and all-too-willing reply. I chalked it up to my own bad habit of leaping to paranoid conclusions. Honestly, though, I just couldn't help but feel that his eager assent felt like a foregone conclusion—almost like a line from *Lady Rose*.

I guess I still haven't stopped thinking like I'm in a game…

Just as I was reflecting on that, some things Shade had said echoed in the back of my mind. He'd said that he felt like there was someone playing a bigger part in this whole scheme than he'd thought—like we were all standing on a stage that had been set up for us from the start.

Come to think of it, I still don't even know who El is. But I wonder if that's just because everything I've said and done up until this point went exactly the way they planned…

As this vague, baseless fear flickered in the back of my mind, I put on a smile and did my best to ignore it. It felt better to smile—even if it was forced—than to look all worried. I wanted to stay positive, no matter how empty my optimism was.

"You've always had a soft spot for Felicia, haven't you, Prince Nicholas?" said Shade.

"You think so?"

"I do. I'm not complaining, of course. That's a good thing, as far as I'm concerned. I've resigned myself to whatever punishment is handed to me—even if it means my death. But this feels like the right time to say this, so…if I die, I hope I can trust you to look after Felicia."

"I'd rather not make promises predicated on your assumed

demise."

Here I was, trying to think positive, and my younger brother just had to step in and drop his last wishes like that.

I don't know what's going through your head right now, Shade, but I'm determined to save you no matter what it takes. The least you could do is save these morbid conversations for when I'm not around! It's kinda hard to look on the bright side when you're filling the horizon with dark clouds like this.

That said, I did understand that the differences in where we stood at the moment made it only natural for Shade to have this conversation with Nika in plain view, particularly after the conversation Nika and I had just had. None of us knew if he was going to get another chance to get a word in.

"Whatever punishment we may receive, it would probably be prudent to restrain us somehow for the moment—at least for appearances' sake," Evan said, breaking his long silence.

It was kind of surreal to hear *him* make this suggestion, but he had a point. Even if he was unlikely to run away, even without restraints, it would probably be a bad look if we just left a criminal unfettered to wreak whatever havoc he wanted in the presence of nobles and royals.

There was just one problem: Pretty much everyone here was a high-ranking blue blood whose safety could plausibly be at risk. Who here was going to restrain him? The obvious answer seemed to be *me*, but even putting aside how painful that would be emotionally for me, it seemed a little pointless. It would have been such an obviously simple matter for him to break free that it didn't seem worth it even for the sake of appearances.

As I was fretting over the logistics, someone raised their hand to volunteer. It was Mel, who had until now been standing quietly in the corner.

"My guards and I will restrain him. This is a man's job, and of the men in the room, I'd say my status makes me most fit for it—especially now that Prince Nicholas's guards have run off," he said.

Oh, Mel, you're an angel! I thought. I knew I could count on him not just to keep quiet and not disturb my conversation with Evan but also to speak up now that we needed him.

I hadn't even thought about Mel's position. I guess if you exclude me from the list of candidates—on account of my being less physically capable as a woman—then Mel would be the lowest-

ranking person here, huh? It's crazy to think that the son of a high-ranking duke with the whole financial world at his fingertips would be the lowest-ranking person here. This lineup is way too rich for my blood…

"So? What's the story with that baguette, huh?" asked Nolls again, now that things had settled down.

You heard the entire conversation *between Evan and me, and* that's *what you're concerned about? Must be nice not having a care in the world…*

I looked over at him, wondering if I should tell him the truth: that I'd used it to disarm Lily from halfway across the room. It was so absurd, I worried that saying it aloud would absolutely shatter the atmosphere.

Then I noticed that he was holding only half a baguette in his hand…which meant that he'd already eaten the other half.

Ugh… Nolls!

"If you wanted a baguette so badly, I could've given you the one in my bag. You didn't have to eat that off the floor…"

"You've got *more*? Amazing!"

"What's *amazing* is how you managed to just casually eat half a baguette while we were having such a high-stakes conversation," I shot back.

I saw Zero nodding emphatically behind him.

Poor guy. He's got a tough job…

How the heck did Nolls manage to eat all of that without anything to drink, though? He must be parched, I thought. But as soon as the thought crossed my mind, I realized that Nolls *did* in fact have a drink. He'd surreptitiously produced a bottle of something in his hand.

It pays to be prepared for anything, but what exactly were you preparing for? A picnic?

"So?" he prompted again. "Why the baguette?"

"I threw it at Lily to interrupt her suicide attempt."

"Now *that's* wild! I love it!"

I had no idea why he was so taken with that, but at least my explanation seemed to have satisfied him—not that satisfying him was my goal.

Seriously, though, this tangent was beyond unimportant. I didn't appreciate that we were losing momentum over it. I was also starting to worry about Lily and Nana, who still hadn't returned.

Maybe I ought to go check on them…

I turned to leave through the same big doors I'd come in through—the same ones they'd used—but someone who'd apparently been right behind me the whole time stopped me in my tracks. I took a step back, surprised, and then blinked with confusion as I realized who it was.

"Fii."

It was Seth, and he was wearing a deadly serious expression on his face. Until just moments ago, he'd been slumped on the floor looking desolate, but it seemed he'd bounced back.

That's when I finally realized why he'd been so dejected: Evan must have presented evidence to prove that he'd been lied to with the whole bullying scandal, and he'd had no choice but to confront that he'd made a mistake in the way he'd treated me.

He may be self-centered and arrogant, but deep down, he's not a bad person. This must've hit him pretty hard.

In the game, he believes the protagonist when she denies the bullying accusations lobbied against her. "I thought you might say that," he says. "I believe you, then." It was impossible to say what he'd privately believed in this universe, but in the game, he'd never once truly doubted the protagonist.

He probably would have been happier if I hadn't affirmed the bullying charges and accepted the annulment of our engagement.

"I know this probably isn't the time to be asking this, but…you *didn't* ever love me, did you? All of that stuff about me being 'the love of your life'… That was just a misunderstanding, wasn't it?"

Huh? Wait… That's *what you wanted to ask me about?!*



I was stunned, but Seth just stared at me with a sullen expression on his face as he waited for my answer.

Jeez… Here I was, all worried about you beating yourself up, but I guess I was giving you too much credit! Seriously, though? It's my feelings for you *that you want to talk about?!*

"Um, yes… That's right…" I said, with an interrogative lilt.

There was no point in lying about my feelings for him now. Besides, I didn't want to double down on my lies here… I'd just admitted to Evan that I'd never meant anything I'd said to Seth—I couldn't walk that back now. I had nothing left to do but tell the truth.

"I see," replied Seth, nodding solemnly.

Wait…huh? Why's he acting like this is such a huge deal? Would it change anything if I did *love him?*

"Right… If anything, you hated me, right? That's what you said earlier," Seth said.

"*Uh*…!" I sputtered. "Um, that was…just a figure of speech…"

I'd been so wrapped up in my conversation with Evan that I hadn't even been thinking about Seth. But when I thought back on it, that *was* a pretty awful thing to say.

Seth and I just weren't compatible. There was a fundamental mismatch in our personalities, but it wasn't that he was a bad *person*. I felt horrible that I might've hurt him with my words. To be fair, though, he *had* roped me into a bunch of crap when we were kids thanks to his self-centeredness. So, in my defense, it was kind of understandable that I hated him.

Still…emotionally, I'd always been more mature than him, and I knew from my playthroughs of *Lady Rose* what had led him to act like that. So, it felt a bit childish to say I *hated* him. Besides, it wasn't really Seth himself that I had beef with. It was the fact that he reminded me so much of my older brother from my past life and also how he had the perfect older brother that I'd always wanted.

"You don't need to placate me. What I wanted to say was…" Seth began, just as I was starting to wallow in my guilt again. He looked down at the ground, as if lost in thought, before locking eyes with me. His stare was full of resolve. "Now that I know I was wrong about you, I can't live with myself unless I make an apology."

Uh…isn't that kind of an apology in and of itself? I thought, but I knew he was talking about a *formal* one. Still, even if it was the

least public apology ever, it would be a serious blow to a future king's dignity to apologize to a peasant. And for my part, I really didn't want any kind of official apology from him. It would just feel too weird.

Besides, *I* wasn't his fiancée now—Lily was. If Seth were to make a formal apology to me, it would be tantamount to him acknowledging Lily's wrongdoings. He'd be forced to mete out some kind of punishment. I didn't know how things had unfolded between him and Lily ever since I'd become a commoner, but if he wanted to skirt around a formal apology to avoid making her take the fall, then I'd happily play along.

As far as I was concerned, this was the best he could do without torching his whole life. I figured I ought to accept it. After all, deep down, I didn't really hate him, and I knew I bore some blame for his behavior as a child too. Since I'd always planned on leaving him one day, I'd never made any attempt whatsoever to point him in a less dire direction, and admittedly, that was kind of cold. So, I figured we could just call it even.

"There's no apology necessary, Your Highness. You're going to be king—it wouldn't do to have you tarnish your reputation," I said with a smile.

I know I'm denying that you just apologized, but please know that I forgive you, I thought, hoping my smile could convey the sentiment.

Seth gave me a slight smile in return. He looked much more mature than I'd ever seen him look.

You know, I have a feeling he's going to be able to keep moving forward too.

Chapter 3

Just after Seth and I had made up, and the tense atmosphere seemed to have dissipated, the doors suddenly flung open.

“Hey, Fii. Can I borrow you for a sec?” said Nana, looking over at me with her big, round eyes. Her braids bounced as she tilted her head.

Yeah…there’s no way her sweet personality could be an act. That looks way too genuine to me.

“Sure. We’ve mostly just wrapped up here, so I’m all yours,” I said.

Nana broke into a grin and ran up to me.

“Really? That’s great! So, okay, let’s talk about the saint. She’s being *super* stubborn. Like, she won’t stop going on about how she wants to die. Think *you* could try having a little heart-to-heart with her?” Nana whined, as if she were complaining about a hangnail.

I wasn’t surprised she wasn’t having any luck talking Lily down. They were on such separate wavelengths that it would take millions of dollars in radio equipment to pick them both up on the same machine.

Lily trudged into the room behind Nana, her face every bit as grim as it had been when I last saw her. Just like Nana had said, it seemed she was still just as locked in about dying. I glanced over at Nika’s two guards who’d followed them back into the room too, just to see if I could glean anything from them, but they looked the same as always.

“And…you think talking to *me* will change her mind?” I asked Nana.

“Yeah! Remember what I told you before? You and her are really alike. I think you could really understand each other if you open up and talk about how you really feel,” she replied, as if telling me the answer to a simple math problem.

I had no idea what I was supposed to say to Lily, though. I mean, if I told her I didn’t *want* to be the future queen consort, what was she going to say? Actually, I had a pretty good sense of what she’d say: “*And*? It hardly matters to me what you want. *I* want you to be queen consort.”

I'd really only interacted with Lily when I was on the receiving end of her bullying, so the image I had of her was a little harsh. Still, regardless of my personal biases, the reality of the situation was that my wishes were pretty much irrelevant. I mean, how would me not wanting to be queen change anything? I knew I had to think of something else—something that *would* get through to her.

"The way she thinks is just so *saintly*, you know? We keep talking right past each other," Nana said.

"And the way *you* think is altogether too *spiritual*," Lily chastised her. Her tone was gentle, but it was obvious she'd taken offense. "How am I supposed to have a conversation with you when everything keeps coming back to Heaven and Hell?"

Honestly, I had no idea what either of them was getting at. What the heck did it mean to have a "saintly" way of thinking? And how did their conversation manage to keep coming back to Heaven and Hell?

"And I'm sorry to disappoint you, Nana, but I have nothing to say to Lady Rose," spat Lily, not even looking at me.

Right…of course. With everything going on, I'd conveniently forgotten the small little detail that Lily hates my guts.

Back when Lily had been bullying me, I'd just pretended to be afraid of her, but the jealousy and the hatred that she felt for me had seemed pretty real. Maybe she thought I'd be out for revenge now and try to threaten her position?

Wait… But she says she wants to make me *queen consort again, so…that doesn't make any sense. Actually, there's something that's seemed off about all of this from the get-go. Lily got everything she wanted and is on track to be the future queen consort, so why does she suddenly seem so desperately hopeless that she wants to die? I… I don't get it.*

There was still so much I didn't understand. But if there was any chance that I could talk Lily away from the brink—even just a few steps—then I knew I ought to take it. I'd *force* her to talk to me, if I had to.

Yeah. I know what I have to do. It's time to screw the formalities and just go for it!

"Liliana."

But just as I was about to try opening a channel of communication, a calm, clear voice called out her name instead, and immediately, its commanding tone captured the attention of

everyone in the room. It was Nika who'd spoken up.

Instinctively, I held my tongue and waited watchfully. Lily looked nervous too as she looked over at him.

"I'd been hoping for an opportunity for the two of you to talk, which was why I tried to arrange a meeting today. I trust you will honor the promise you made to me when you agreed to that," he said.

I wasn't used to hearing him take such a forceful tone, and it set my nerves on edge a bit. But until he'd mentioned it just now, I'd completely forgotten that I'd been in a carriage with him only hours earlier on my way to meet Lily.

Lily regarded him silently. Then, out of nowhere, she let out a chuckle.

It was an empty sound, as if she was just trying to put on a strong front. It was as if she were laughing at herself.

"You're always so strict with me, brother-in-law," she said. Then, after a pause, she continued, "Very well. I understand. I'll play my part, just as you wished."

"Good."

"Play my part"? "Just as you wished"? I feel like there's a lot going on here...

Nika looked at Lily with worry in his eyes, but Lily just flashed him a pasted-on smile in return. It didn't look like a self-deprecating expression anymore, but it was clearly a fake one. Nika clucked his tongue at her—a gesture that felt wholly out of character for him.

"Fii," he said.

"Huh? Uh...yes?"

I was surprised that he'd called my name, but it wasn't exactly like it'd come out of nowhere. After all, he'd just been talking about how he wanted Lily and me to talk.

Why did it feel *so abrupt and unexpected, then?* I wondered. When I looked at his face, it hit me: It was because he was still looking at Lily. Whenever Nika talked to me, he always looked me in the eyes. If anyone was prone to avoiding eye contact, it was *me*, not him. But something was different now.

"I'm trusting you," he said to me, still not making eye contact. As much as he seemed to hate Lily, he didn't once tear his gaze from her.

Come to think of it, ever since the engagement was annulled, Nika and I have only ever talked about Lily. Every time he's visited

me, that's pretty much always been the center of our conversations, I thought. Only now did it strike me as strange.

No, what am I saying? It's only natural that he'd be watching her with concern right now. Who wouldn't *be worried when the well-being of the future queen consort—and their future sister-in-law—is at stake? It's obvious he'd be more concerned about her than me, considering that she's mentally unstable enough right now to try to take her own life…right?*

…

Wait…why am I trying to explain his behavior like this?

All I'd wanted was to become a commoner and claim my victory over fate, but the priority now was saving Shade and Evan, and Nika had told me that he was willing to help. What the hell did it matter where he was looking?

That's right. It doesn't matter who's got his attention. That's what I should keep telling myself if—

I felt something snap.

It was almost like I'd flipped a switch. My thoughts were forcefully redirected.

"All righty! Off you go, you two! Have a nice chat, okay? I thought of some stuff I wanna take care of while you're gone, so I'm just gonna stay here and…take care of it!" said Nana, smiling as she waved us off.

I was just about to let her words wash over me with a smile, but the last thing she said left me feeling oddly unsettled. I felt the muscles in my face tense up.

What kind of "stuff" do you want to take care of, exactly? And why'd you only think of it now? I thought. Something about what she'd said felt extremely suspicious.

As concerning as it was, though, my priority right now was getting Lily's suicidal impulses under control. I decided to let Nana's weird statement slide for now and come back to it later…even if that meant I was playing into Nana's hands and doing exactly what she hoped I'd do.

Lily left the room with a blank expression on her face, and I followed. We made our way into the hallway and walked only ten steps from the door to a staircase that descended to the second level. We stopped there and faced each other.

It was just a hallway, so it wasn't exactly the best place to talk. There weren't any conveniently placed chairs facing each other. To be fair, though, the kind of conversation we were about to

have wasn't exactly of the sit-down variety.

I was exceedingly nervous, but Lily seemed perfectly at peace as she regarded me with a gentle smile. There was something vacant about the look in her eyes, though. Even though I could see my reflection in them, it was like she was looking right through me.

Lily opened her mouth before I could get a word in edgewise.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about this sort of thing, but I assume from the lack of gaps around the door that it's soundproof?" she asked, pointing at the door we'd just walked through.

"Huh? Oh…yes. Shade did say something about that."

It felt like we were just making small talk, so I answered her automatically. Only after I thought about it for a moment did I realize what a strange question it was. *Is she going to do something out here that she doesn't want anyone to hear?* I worried. *No, but Nana still has her knife, so…*

As I was thinking over all of this, Lily began to speak again.

"I presume that you noticed I reentered the room a little later than Nana?" she asked me.

"Yes. Why?"

"I was delayed by the thought of flinging myself over the bannister."

"…"

I found myself at a loss for words.

She was just about to try to kill herself again, and none of us had a clue?

Of course… If she'd tried to use the knife again, we would have been on high alert, but she could've easily managed to jump to her death.

Nika's two guards should have been with her then, but I didn't have much faith that they would've stopped her. I didn't even know if they would have *wanted* to.

"I'm so glad that you're still here," I said. "But may I ask what made you change your mind?"

"It wouldn't do to have my suicide mistaken for murder, and a fall from the staircase could look rather damning, wouldn't you agree?" she explained sweetly.

Her line of reasoning caught me completely off guard.

So, it isn't that she just wants to die… She wants it to be by her own hand specifically? I thought. *Is she saying her death would be*

pointless if it wasn't clear from the outside that it was her own doing? But why in the world would that matter?

"I *must* die by my own hand. It's my last resort…the only measure I can take that will make all of us happy."

She smiled warmly as she spoke, but I sensed a loneliness behind it. I was struck by how fantastically beautiful she was—so beautiful, it was almost unreal. She was somehow at once fiercely determined and terribly fragile. Looking at her, I couldn't help but let out a gulp.

I understood now why Nana had described her way of thinking as "saintly." Lily's reasoning was self-sacrificing to the point of martyrdom, and it was clear that she only had everyone else's best interests at heart.

Maybe everyone else can live with your sacrifice, but not me. I'll never find happiness like that.

"You don't need to do that! I've got a way to make everyone even happier *without* you having to die, so please don't take your life!" I blurted out, impassioned.

I didn't care if it was tactless or if I didn't have a specific plan to give her. I could think of that later. So, ultimately, I just yelled out the first words that came to mind like an idiot.

Lily's eyes widened in shock at my outburst. Then she started laughing. It was the same self-deprecating laugh as before. I knew before she opened her mouth to respond that I'd said the wrong thing.

"You really *are* a strange one," she said. "Although, I suppose that's *exactly* the sort of thing you would say. But whatever your wishes may be, right now, dying is my clearest path to happiness."

"But…why? You're engaged to Prince Seth now. You're set to be the future queen consort. How can living be such a burden when you have exactly what you've always wanted?"

Lily went silent, seemingly struggling to give me an answer. As I watched her face contort into a look of anguish, I got the sense that I'd said the wrong thing again.

I couldn't for the life of me understand why she was making that expression, though. It was like the answer to how to save her was completely eluding me.

"Yes, I… I suppose that's how it must look to you. But in fact, things haven't gone at all the way I would have wanted," Lily replied, again with a self-deprecating smile. "Not *one thing* has

gone the way I wanted. That's why I'm in this position now."

Her purple eyes flickered, tears brimming at their edges. It was clear to me now that I must have misunderstood her in some fundamental way.

I just can't make sense of this, though. Just like Liliana does in Lady Rose*, Lily wanted to marry Seth and become the future queen, right? Isn't that why she framed me? I mean, I can't think of any other reason she'd lie and say that* I *bullied* her*. But here she is, saying everything's gone wrong for her. So…that must mean that her goal* wasn't *to marry Prince Seth or become queen.*

Wait…but does that mean that she wanted to be a commoner, just like I did? She wouldn't know that getting caught in her lies would mean being stripped of her noble status and sent off to live as a commoner unless she'd played the game, though. And I distinctly recall that the expression she put on whenever she bullied me was plainly, earnestly jealous*. It was the same expression that Liliana Inoce wears in the game. If she'd wanted to become a commoner, then she'd have no reason to be jealous of me, right?*

Then why would she go to those lengths…? I must be overlooking something. But what?

"What do you—"

"Why must I graciously answer each and every one of your questions? I despise you," she said.

This time, I was the one left at a loss for words. I had nothing to say to that. Lily wasn't Shade—she didn't have a soft spot for me, so why *would* she answer my questions?

Lily said that killing herself was her best chance at finding happiness. How could I stop her from doing that, even temporarily, if I had no idea what was causing her suffering, and no hope that she might deign to tell me? Was I just prolonging her misery by trying? Was I being selfish for not letting her die? Would it be kinder to see her off to the next life?

But…I don't want to. I don't want to let her die.

I wasn't as selfless as her. On the contrary, I thought of nothing *but* myself—and, selfishly, I didn't want her to die.

Please don't make me live with any more regrets.

I knew that if I had only chosen a different path, she wouldn't have been this miserable. It was clear just from looking at her. I had no idea if El was involved in all this somehow, but I knew *I* was. Even if I hadn't yet pieced together how, there was no mistaking that I had a key part to play in Lily's wish to die.

From my *Lady Rose* playthroughs, I knew that Lily wasn't really a bad person. And yet, I'd used her to secure my happiness as a commoner. I wouldn't be able to bear it if she ended up killing herself because of that decision.

I can't be happy with any happy ending that doesn't end with you smiling.

"Why do you look like you're about to cry? You really are far too kind. As if I didn't already know that," said Lily.

No… No, no, no! No!

I wished that everyone would stop calling me "kind." Every time someone who was *actually* kind called me that, I felt like my heart was shattering into little pieces.

I wasn't willing to sacrifice my life for anyone the way that Shade, Evan, and Lily were. I was self-centered to the extreme. The only person I'd ever thought about, all this time, was me.

"This puts me in a difficult position… No, but I suppose this was inevitable. After all, I never had any hope of influencing you to act as I'd hoped you would."

Lily sighed. She wore an expression of sorrowful resignation, which turned to something akin to pity as she gave me the faintest of smiles. Then she looked away.

"Why don't we close the book on this story, Lady Rose? Please don't mourn for me when I die."

"Wait! Wait…" I cried desperately.

Lily ignored me and began to walk toward the door.

My gut was telling me that if I didn't stop her now, she really would kill herself. I was desperate to stop her—I *had* to—but as I watched her walk away from me, I had no idea what to say, and I knew I couldn't just stop her through brute force.

My face began to crumble; I felt like I was on the verge of tears—as if *I* were the victim in all of this. Lily must have somehow sensed my despair, because at the very last moment, she turned around for a brief second and frowned.

"You'll be all right, Lady Rose. You're the protagonist, after all. The death of a single villain is simply one plot point of many, all in service of your story. I hope we can both find happiness in that."

"Protagonist"? "Villain"? All in service…of my "story"?

Something was very wrong here.

A strange doubt crept in—one that I would have never had about Lily if not for what she'd just said. But maybe there was a

sliver of hope in that parting shot. Maybe she'd given me exactly what I needed to save her.

As Lily took hold of the doorknob, I found myself saying words I'd never uttered since I was reborn in this world. At this point, I was clinging to the last string of hope I had left.

"Hey, Lily...have you heard of *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*?"

Lily's hand froze, still touching the door. It was like time itself had stopped. I stood still too, as if one movement might break the spell, and only took in shallow breaths.

Just as I'd taken in my seventh breath since she'd petrified, she finally began to move again. She turned to me, slowly. Her eyes were wide with disbelief. I might have dropped the bomb, but I was no less shell-shocked than her. I'd uttered the game's name in a moment of desperation, with no forethought whatsoever. For several moments, the two of us just stood looking at each other in a stunned silence.

It was Lily who finally broke it.

"No... No way. You... You of *all people*... There's no way you'd..." she began, in a flustered, shaky voice, before breaking off. She'd dropped all her affectations of aristocracy and ladylike composure.

All this time, I'd thought Lily was the last person who could possibly have reincarnated. And all this time, she'd apparently thought the same thing about *me*.

"Before I was reborn as Felicia Schwarose, I played a video game in my past life called *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*—the game this world is based on. Is that...the same situation you're in, Lily?"

"What? I... This can't be happening. It's impossible! There's *no way* you were reincarnated!" she cried.

There was a look of desperation on her face as she spoke.

She's probably too overwhelmed to answer my question right now, I thought.

If anything, that was actually kind of a relief. Lily had been so determined to die that it had seemed *nothing* would sway her. If my words had shaken her this much, then it meant they had reached her.

I walked up right next to her and, in a slow, gentle voice, I said, "Why not? I've done everything I could to stray from the game's script, haven't I? If *you're* reincarnated, shouldn't you see how suspicious that is?"

"…"

I thought I'd offered a pretty reasonable, compelling case, but Lily just fell silent.

Why is she being so stubborn about this? I wondered. *It's like she can't bring herself to acknowledge that she wasn't the only one. Would it pose a problem for her somehow?*

No… I don't think that's it. I don't think she'd be all that concerned with any disadvantages that would pose to her. I mean, she is *a saint…*

So, what is it, then? Why is she acting so bewildered?

"Lady Rose… Are you suggesting that you had some personal reason not to refute my accusations that you'd bullied me?" Lily asked hesitantly.

I stared at her blankly, thinking back to the moments just before Seth had annulled our engagement.

Even if Lily hadn't realized the truth that I'd reincarnated, she would have concluded that I'd had a *reason* to affirm her lies. She would have assumed that I'd either done so of my own volition or that I'd had no other choice. Just as Nolls and Zero had assumed that I'd lied as part of a scheme to incite a rebellion, Lily must have come to her own conclusions about why I'd made that decision.

But what if I was wrong? What if Lily had been assuming that I stood nothing to gain from corroborating her lie but I was simply bound by fate? Judging from the way she was acting now, that seemed to be the most likely conclusion she'd come to.

"Yes. I wanted to become a commoner," I answered.

I didn't really understand what Lily was thinking, but I decided to answer her honestly. After all, Nana had suggested that we'd understand each other if we could just talk openly—although I still wasn't sure how much to *trust* Nana.

Come to think of it, maybe this was what Nana meant when she said that Lily and I were alike? Maybe she meant that we'd both lived in the same world in our past lives?

I'd gotten the impression that Nana had gleaned that sort of intuitively, though, so asking her about it probably wouldn't yield any answers.

"A…commoner? Why?" Lily replied. "But… But that means…you *wanted* that to happen? You threw away everything…just to be a commoner?"

"Yep."

Lily looked completely incredulous. Honestly, though, her disbelief surprised *me*. It would have been one thing if she was just your average noblewoman, with no memories of her past life…but she *did* have memories of her past life, in which she was probably just an average middle-class citizen like I was. If anyone could understand my desire to be a commoner, surely it would have been *her*?

At the very least, though, she seemed to accept what I was saying as the truth…even if she still didn't totally believe it. She looked at me searchingly as we locked gazes.

"So you… You really *wanted* that? It… It wasn't my fault? You, *Lady Rose*, are just like me?"

"Yeah. I don't know what you thought was your fault, Lily, but I doubt it was. I've just been living my life doing pretty much whatever I want."

If anything, I'd just learned that *I* was to blame for a lot of things that had happened. I knew now that pretty much everything bad that had happened to me in this universe was kind of my own fault, and now all my chickens were coming home to roost when I hadn't even realized I'd been raising any.

But, hey…on the bright side, that just meant that I could avoid any *future* tragedy as long as I actually thought things through before acting.

So, what was the deal with El, then? Did I just think they had something to do with this because their name happened to come up coincidentally and I thought there was some deeper connection? I mean, it doesn't seem *like they had any hand in Lily's kidnapping.*

Wait… Does El even exist? What if "El" was actually just a metaphor or some abstract concept?

As I looked blankly into the distance, Lily suddenly crumpled to the floor.

My eyes shot wide open, and I ran over to her. I squatted down right next to her, but just as I was about to call out to her, I thought better of it.

"Am I just…having a wonderful dream right now? One where everything goes right?" Lily said.

It was like she'd been held aloft on the tight string of her anxiety—and the string had just snapped. Her face crumpled, and fat tears slid down her cheeks.

I reached into my bag to hunt around for a handkerchief, but I didn't have one on me. *Jeez, what kind of woman doesn't carry*

around a handkerchief? I thought, privately cursing my uselessness and brazen lack of femininity. *Probably should've done something about that a long time ago…*

I let out a sigh of disappointment at myself as I pulled something else out of my bag.

"This is all I've got, but…you're welcome to have it," I said.

"Why…did you have a baguette in there?"

She looked at me with bewilderment in her teary amethyst eyes.

She's so cute… I can understand why she's confused, though. It'd be one thing to give a nice, soft loaf of bread to a girl in tears, but a baguette? Out of the question. Baguettes are too hard and troublesome to eat.

"It's magic bread. All you have to do is eat it, and you can change your fate," I explained.

"Oh, listen to you," she said, chuckling. "You sound like a snake oil salesman."

This time, her laugh wasn't a self-deprecating one. She sounded genuinely joyful, and I was touched to see that the sweet, refined smile she wore was genuine too. She took the baguette from my hand and tore off a piece of the hard bread, then brought it to her mouth hesitantly.

Come to think of it, I've never heard of "snake oil salesmen" since I was reborn into this world. I'm pretty sure the term (never mind the actual profession, if you can call it that) doesn't even exist here.

It was starting to sink in that she and I had come from the same place.

"This is delicious," Lily muttered, her tone reflective and full of emotion.

Then she handed the baguette straight back to me.

I gave her a look that said wordlessly, *If it's so delicious, then why are you handing it back to me?*

She let out an awkward laugh.

"It's very powerful bread, so I think one bite is plenty," she said. "Besides, I have a feeling its fate-defying properties work best when *you're* holding on to it."

I was worried at first that she was just trying to tactfully turn down my baguette and tell me to read the room, but I got the sense that she meant what she'd said.

Is it possible for bread magic to be that strong, though? I wondered. *That's news to me.*

Suddenly, Lily looked straight into my eyes. This time, I could tell her earnest gaze was actually fixed *on* me, not looking straight through me. This time, I could tell she could *see* me.

"Shall we talk for a bit? I've been so overwhelmed by everything, I wasn't able to answer any of your questions earlier. Besides..." Lily began, before cutting off suddenly. Then she let out a bashful laugh. "You should know I don't *really* hate you, Felicia."



When we realized that we were probably going to be here for a while talking, we ended up sitting on the first step of the staircase that descended below us. I sat down first, and Lily sat next to me without a second thought. If she'd been an ordinary noblewoman without any memories of her middle-class past life, she never would've *dared* to do that—especially not in her nice dress, which, while far too plain for public outings, was still probably quite expensive.

"So, where should we begin?" Lily asked. "I assume you're already acquainted with the character 'Liliana Inoce'?"

"Yeah. I think I've got that part covered."

As a character from the game, I knew all about Liliana. But I'll give you a quick refresher, just to get my thoughts in order.

Liliana Inoce is the most prominently featured female character in the otome game *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* aside from the protagonist herself. In fact, she's the only other female character to get an in-game portrait. She even claims a spot in a CG at one point.

In Seth's route, her role is to play the villainess who bullies the protagonist. In anyone else's route, though, she serves as a convenient alternative love interest for Seth when the protagonist falls in love with someone else. Thanks to her, the protagonist's engagement to Seth is annulled peacefully. She and Seth watch on supportively from the sidelines as the protagonist follows her heart, guilt-free.

Although her characterization (particularly the way she treats the protagonist) differs dramatically depending on the route, in many ways, I'd argue that she's actually more consistent than the protagonist herself.

No matter the circumstances, Liliana loves Seth with her

whole heart. She loves him so much that she would do anything to have him—even if that means bullying the protagonist. She can't bear his arranged marriage to the protagonist, particularly when its sole purpose is to unite their families. Unable to keep her emotions in check, she resorts to underhanded methods to try to dissolve it.

It's obvious that she's named after a lily flower, but the roots of her last name require closer inspection. "Inoce" comes from the Japanese word "inoshishi"—"boar" in English. Just like a boar, she's actually innocent and pure of heart, even if no one around her can see that. Her one downfall is that she has fallen too hard in love.

"When I first realized that I'd been reborn as Liliana, I was actually thrilled. I thought I might finally be able to realize the dream I'd never been able to make a reality in my past life," Lily said happily, as if reliving that moment now.

It had never even occurred to me to feel happy about being reincarnated, but it made sense to me that *she* would feel that way. While my driving force had been trauma, it seemed hers had been a dream.

"After I had that realization, I started doing everything I could to see it through. It was all I could think about. But then..." Lily trailed off, her face darkening.

Yeah... I can imagine things went downhill from there. If she'd just earnestly tried to follow her dreams, then things probably wouldn't have come to a head like they did here today. She must have realized that she'd never get what she wanted if she just stayed on the straight and narrow.

"The moment I first saw you, I knew deep down that it was hopeless. I simply couldn't compete with you. You were the center of the universe...a more perfect 'Lady Rose' than I could have ever envisioned. I had to come to terms with the fact that *you* were the protagonist of this story and that nothing I did could ever change that."

I'd gotten a little lost in my thoughts, so her explanation took me completely by surprise. It was like a record suddenly scratched in my head.

Huh? Wait... What?! You saw me *and thought I was the unshakable center of the universe?* Me*?!*

Oh... Oh*! She must be talking about the* act *I was putting on. My acting was too good, so she couldn't see me as anything but my*

character. Ugh! I wish my acting skills wouldn't wreak such havoc on me and everyone around me!

"That's just because I was putting on an *act*," I explained, trying frantically to clear up this misunderstanding. "I was trying my hardest to *look* like the perfect Lady Rose, but I'm nothing of the sort!"

But she flatly refused to accept my explanation.

"Yes, you are," she said.

I felt my eyes grow so wide, my pupils might as well have just been two little dots in a sea of white. But Lily just continued, undeterred.

"You're the protagonist of this story. Even now that I know you were reincarnated into this world, just like me, that fact still stands."

What...?

I was honestly baffled. I'd told her everything; I'd already stepped down from the game's stage. I was a *commoner* now. Lily probably didn't know this, but I wasn't even going by the name of the game's protagonist anymore. There was no "Felicia Schwarose."

What basis did she have to think that I was still the center of the universe?

"You're under the impression that I haven't deviated from the game's canon storylines in any way, aren't you, Felicia?" she asked me, smiling faintly.

Her question took me by surprise. *Of course* I thought that. I'd long carried the assumption that she hadn't taken even a single step off of the path that the game's story had set out for her. But...now that I thought about it...maybe that was just because nothing in the story's script had *changed* until I'd made my move and corroborated her lie?

"But that's only because I was so ineffective. I'm a *failure*. I tried time and time again to change the script. I made countless attempts and suffered countless setbacks. I did everything I could; I picked myself up and tried again over, and over, and over...until finally, I gave up. Can you blame me? Once I realized I couldn't change my fate, I felt there was no point even trying."

Oh...

I finally understood now why she'd made such a pained expression when I'd said she'd gotten everything she wanted. Until I'd become a commoner, it must have looked to her like *I'd*

stolen everything she wanted out from under her. No wonder it would have stung to hear me say that. It wasn't an appropriate comment to make to someone who'd done everything in her power to make her dreams come true only to have to acknowledge that it was all for naught.

Honestly, thanks to my experiences in my past life, I understood her feelings so well it hurt. No matter how much I'd tried, I was never able to beat my older brother. But Lily wouldn't have known that; she wouldn't have known a thing about my past life.

I didn't know the specifics of what Lily had done, what she'd felt, or what she'd endured, but I had a feeling I'd been through much the same. After I'd run away from my life as Lady Rose, I'd experienced the fear and the dread that came with the prospect of not being able to change my fate each time that the love interests paid me a visit. It felt like I was living an unbearable nightmare, having to wonder if no amount of work could ever change things for me.

If I thought about what it would be like to be forced back into marrying Seth and taking on the role of queen consort by the powers that be, in spite of having accepted the annulment, I could easily imagine the kind of despair Lily was talking about.

But I *had* been able to change my fate. I was able to rewrite the script that Lily had tried so desperately—and failed—to rewrite herself. So, no wonder I must have seemed like the protagonist to her. I'd overcome barriers she'd thought unconquerable.

"By the time we'd started our first year at the academy, and the story of *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* had begun, I'd already accepted that I didn't have the power to change my fate. So, I… I made what I felt was the best decision I could make, considering the circumstances," Lily said.

I could only imagine what must have been just the tip of the iceberg of Lily's pain, but that was enough to make my heart ache.

But Lily's story wasn't over yet. There was more to it—and more to her suffering.

"And that decision was to play the part of the character Liliana Inoce from the game as best as I could. After all, if things progressed the way they did in the game's good ending, then everyone would be happy. That hope was all I had left… I clung

to it as my raison d'être, even though I knew it meant that I would have to sink to villainous depths."

So, the only choice she was left with in the end was to follow the game's script? Since she couldn't break free of it, all she could do was force herself to accept it and play along, even if it meant damning herself to a future where her misdeeds would be exposed and punished.

Wow... I don't think I could ever make that choice.

The moment I realized I couldn't be happy, my choice was always to run away. I didn't care if everyone else would be happy if *I* couldn't be.

In my past life, I'd thrown away everything to get away from my brother. Whenever he or my family or my friends tried to track me down, I'd just throw it all away again and start over. That's how I'd learned just how big the world was and that I could find or create a reason to live *anywhere*.

When Lily had been playing her part and bullying me, just like the script called for, I'd thought that she really was jealous of me. Now I realized that I was right—just not for the reasons that I'd thought. She was probably jealous of me because, as the protagonist, I had the room to choose my fate for *myself*. But I had a feeling that wasn't all there was to it.

"I understand that you gave up and chose to sacrifice yourself for everyone's happiness, but you never wondered about how I'd managed to escape my fate? And what about Prince Seth? Even once you were engaged to him, you still didn't think you'd find happiness?"

"No...because I was convinced that I'd ruined *your* happiness. Thinking about it now, knowing what I know, that wouldn't even make sense, considering that I *can't* change fate. But at the time, I thought I'd ruined everything by acting more jealous than the script called for and that I'd broken you down."

Oh... I get it now. So that's *what she thought happened. Right... I can see why she'd think that. Who could blame her for seeing it that way?*

After all, until the moment I'd deviated from the script, I'd been following it just as perfectly. I'd played the part of Lady Rose flawlessly. It made sense that Lily would blame herself for the deviation, since all she knew was that *she* was an outsider in this world. I could understand that. Until I'd learned about El—who was obviously suspicious—I'd been blaming myself.

Actually…that's not totally true. Since the universe was based on a video game, I'd kind of been assuming that it was just glitching out. So, I guess I had really been blaming the universe—which was ironic, because in my case, I actually *was* to blame for a lot of what had gone wrong.

"I thought I was just following the game's script. While I was prepared to be condemned for my misdeeds, I wasn't at all prepared to live with the guilt. I couldn't bear it. And what's worse, I *wasn't* ever condemned for them. In a sense, that meant I could never be forgiven for them," Lily continued.

I'd been overjoyed that Lily was following the script, but what I hadn't appreciated was that she was only doing so to ensure everyone *else's* happiness. She knew what it would cost her, and that she'd never get it back, but she'd forged ahead regardless.

She wasn't the kind of girl who'd *ever* be a bully, but she'd become one for the sake of everyone else's happiness. Even though I hadn't meant to throw her under the bus, I had—and I'd done it 'til the very end.

If Lily had been cold and heartless, then it wouldn't have been a problem. But she wasn't. No doubt it was her very kindness that made the weight of her guilt so crushing.

"But I have no right to make excuses for myself. I could have told the truth at the annulment or even later on…but I didn't. No matter how much I dirtied my hands or how wretched I became, I was still desperate for my dreams to come true. But in the end, it never happened. My heart broke first," Lily said blithely, shrugging her shoulders.

So, she did all of that just to realize her desires…

I couldn't help but think that that wish must've kept her alive. And once she'd given up on her dreams as hopeless, she'd probably felt there was only one other answer…

"I thought that I could make everything right if I killed myself. I left a note in my desk drawer that exposed all of my misdeeds. I was hoping that it would restore you to your position as the duke's daughter and that you could get engaged again to Prince Seth. I thought that would make you happy, but…" Lily trailed off feebly.

She gave me a pained smile.

"I suppose that wouldn't have made you happy at all if what you really wanted was to be a commoner," she said.

"Yeah. I don't want to be a noble, much less a queen."

“Ah ha ha…”

Lily’s laugh was empty. Soon, even her feeble smile disappeared.

“Go figure…”

I felt kind of bad for ruining her plans. I mean, I obviously didn’t *want* her to kill herself, but I could see how it must have looked like the perfect answer to her when she’d given everything she’d had to protect everyone else’s happiness.

“You haven’t done anything to me that you need to feel guilty for,” I told her. “So, why not just accept your position as future queen consort?”

“Because…that won’t make my dream come true. There would be no point.”

Lily hadn’t ever made it clear what, exactly, these dreams were…but I felt like I could guess. If I were her, I probably wouldn’t have wanted to come out and name them explicitly either.

If becoming queen consort or marrying Seth wasn’t what she wanted, then what she really wants must be—

Ahh, I feel for her. It’s hard to know where to go when your first relationship gets messy.

But it’s probably only been about, what, three months since my engagement to Seth was called off, right? It feels a little early to throw in the towel.

“You ate some of that baguette before, right? That means you’re under its spell now. So, don’t worry. I know your dream will come true,” I said, trying to cheer her up in a roundabout way without revealing that I knew what her dream was.

I wasn’t necessarily trying to give her a push to do anything specific—I just wanted to give her a little encouragement to keep on going and trying her best.

It seemed to me, though, that Seth had been able to put our relationship behind him. I was pretty sure he’d completely moved on by now. I felt that Lily had every reason to be hopeful.

“That’s easy for *you* to say,” Lily said, laughing.

I gave her a bright smile back. She might have just been joking around, but it felt like a confirmation that she was ready to keep living.

I really wanted her to be happy. After all, she’d been a goddess in my eyes from the jump.

It felt like now that the important stuff was all out there, we’d

cleared the air between us.

"I guess that means all the anguish and guilt I felt was for nothing, then, doesn't it?" she said.

"I... I guess it does," I conceded. "I'm sorry. It's my fault for abusing Seth's route for my own selfish aims."

"No, *I'm* the one who should be apologizing. I'm sorry for bullying you just because I felt obliged to cover all the plot beats from the game."

We both hung our heads in shame as we apologized to each other. That being said, it didn't feel like the most formal, appropriate apology, considering we were both sitting next to each other on a stairstep instead of standing up and bowing to each other. But maybe that was a good thing? This way, it felt like a casual apology between two friends.

The only thing messing with the vibe was Lily's stiff, formal tone, which made the whole thing feel like it was supposed to be a *proper* apology. I even found myself going along with it, putting a little more starch into my own apology.

"Just out of curiosity, why are you still speaking to me so formally?" I asked her. "I dropped the formalities a long time ago, and I've been pretty blunt."

"I suppose it just feels right, since I've always looked up to you. And... Um, do you remember when you died in your past life, Felicia?"

"Hmm? Yeah. I kind of lost my mind and went running head-on into traffic without realizing what I was doing. Then I got hit by a car. I realize how dumb that sounds, but...that's what happened."

"Mm-hmm... I thought so."

"You thought so?" I repeated, confused.

Immediately, Lily covered her mouth as if she'd blurted out something she shouldn't have. I'd never seen her so unfiltered before.

"N-No, it's nothing! I just meant that I thought you might have been older in your past life than I was, that's all! So, um...that's why I've been speaking so formally!"

"You thought I was older? Why?"

"Um...just a gut feeling! You just seemed so much wiser."

Lily's eyes were darting around the room. It was pretty obvious she was lying, and her panicked stammer certainly didn't help her case.

She probably can't tell a lie to save her life, I thought. Honestly, that just made it all the more impressive that she'd managed to convincingly frame me.

"A-Anyway, I was a high schooler in my past life!" she said.

"I was a university student, so I guess you were right. But we're the same age now, so you don't have to speak to me so—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Lily clapped her hands together loudly. Without thinking, I stopped talking. Lily didn't hesitate to fill the silence.

"More importantly," she said, "you must've solved the problem with the neighboring country with your knowledge from your past life, right? At first, I thought they were just doing a really good job of hiding the fact that they were suffering from destitution and famine. But when I met Nolls and Zero, I probed them and realized that those problems had already been solved."

Oh! Come to think of it, didn't Zero say something about how it was thanks to Lily that he'd figured out I was the one behind the prophecy that had saved their country?

Once I'd left the political stage, Lily must have thought that it was up to her to save their country. She must have invited Nolls and Zero to speak with her so she could help them, and I guess they both walked away suspecting that I'd had something to do with that prophecy.

It was a little weird that Lily had interrupted me to talk about *this*, though. It felt pretty clear to me that she'd just been desperate to change the topic. But if she didn't want to talk about her past life, I'd respect that. Even if Lily had somehow known me in her past life and, for some reason, didn't want me to know that, I couldn't imagine a scenario where that would make her an enemy. Besides, I didn't even remember knowing any high school girls in my past life.

I didn't exactly delight in revisiting those memories either, so I could understand her not wanting to talk about hers. I just wished that she'd talk to me *normally*.

"I just wish we could have talked openly about this a long time ago and avoided all these unnecessary misunderstandings," I said.

"I do too. It feels like we took a pretty roundabout journey to get here."

We laughed, trying to make light of a situation that wasn't

really a laughing matter.

Come to think of it, there's something I've been wondering about. Maybe this is my chance to finally ask about it?

"By the way, why did you sneak off to visit a church so far away from your home?"

"Oh... I tried going to my local church at first, but I developed a bit of a reputation. Everyone started calling me a saint. At the time, I thought conforming to the game's script would result in a happy ending, so I didn't want to make any waves. I decided to just take my business where no one knew who I was."

"But why were you so determined to go to church?" I pressed.

If Lily had been Japanese in her past life, like I had been, then it seemed pretty out of the question that she'd have been religious. And if she *had* been, then that made everything make even less sense. Why would a religious person become a devout member of another world's religion and start worshipping another god?

Lily broke into a big smile.

"I was so grateful to God that I was reborn into the same world as my beloved. A single glance from him, and I was in Heaven. Even if he only ever looked my way once, I felt that I ought to give my thanks to God."

I was blown away by her piety.

She was in such despair that she wanted to kill herself, and yet she can still think about giving thanks to God?

She really *did* seem like a saint. Even after I'd become a commoner, I'd never once gone to the church to give thanks to God—although that was probably at least partly because I'd been growing increasingly mistrustful of him.

Putting together what Lily had said, it was becoming increasingly clear to me why she'd wanted to be reborn in this world. Surely, it was directly related to her dream.

"Hey... Why Seth?" I asked her, genuinely mystified.

Objectively, I could appreciate Seth had a certain appeal in the game. It was just that I tried to keep arrogant types like him at arm's length. He *was* the main love interest, and his story was fittingly robust.

That being said, I found it hard to imagine falling in love with *him* of all characters. It was even harder to imagine interacting with him in real life and not immediately falling out of love. I couldn't for the life of me understand how a girl like Lily could be

so in love with him that she would fall into the depths of despair over the possibility that she'd never have him.

I'm not here to dunk on people who crush on fictional characters, but a big part of the appeal is precisely *because* they're not real. You won't ever be able to actually meet or touch them, sure, but for the most part, you *also* never get to see the worst parts of them, and they never have the opportunity to decide they don't like you.

"It was love at first sight," Lily said boldly, puffing her chest out proudly. Her eyes sparkled.

"Oh. So, it's his good looks, huh? I get it. Prince Seth definitely has that 'Prince Charming' look about him."

"…"

Uh… What's that look for? I wondered, startled by Lily's reproachful gaze. I thought I'd just demonstrated that I got it, but she was looking at me like I didn't understand anything.

"I've been wondering for a while now, but…are you not a Prince Seth fan?" she asked me. "You… You *did* play the game, didn't you? Did you skip his route?"

"No, I played it… I'm just not a big fan of arrogant types, I guess," I answered honestly.

Lily looked at me, speechless, like she couldn't believe her ears. In fact, she was looking at me like she doubted I was even *human*. It was apparently unfathomable to her that I could have played the game without falling in love with Seth. If that was how she thought, then she must have thought the same about the roughly fifty percent or more of *Lady Rose* fans who preferred the other love interests.

I guess it's true what they say… Love really is *blind*, I found myself thinking.

Lily took in a deep breath. Then she closed her eyes, as if she were processing some daunting mental task.

Finally, she opened her mouth again to speak.

"I could talk for hours about all there is to love about him, but I suppose it's in *both* of our best interests if I spare you. It might complicate things if I managed to convince you," she said.

"T-True!" I agreed emphatically.

I was a little terrified by the deadly serious expression on her face, and honestly, I was relieved that she wasn't enough of a crazy fangirl to try to force her love for him on me.

Lily cocked her head at me, looking a little confused.

Y-Yeah, you're a sweet girl, Lily! I thought, still terrified. *I know you wouldn't do that to me!*

"Well... Should we go head back inside? Everyone might start getting worried if we spend too long out here. I'm also a little concerned about Nana..." said Lily, standing up from her seat on the stairs.

I agreed and stood up with her.

Just as we were about to start heading back, though, I remembered one more thing that I had to ask Lily about. Flustered, I reached out and grabbed the bottom of her dress to stop her.

"Wait. There's just one last thing I wanted to ask: What were you and Nika talking about earlier?"

"What was I talking about with my brother-in-law? Oh... You mean, when I told him that I would 'play my part'? That was—" she said, suddenly cutting herself off.

She'd been so quick to reply that the impromptu pause took me by surprise. It took a full five seconds before she broke into a smug smile and continued.



“Well, to put it *very* succinctly, we were talking about how he’s in love with you.”

“Come on, don’t make things up. That conversation was *way* too tense for me to buy an explanation like that,” I protested.

“I may be sugarcoating it a bit, but I’m not making anything up. I wouldn’t do that to you after we’ve bared our souls to each other, Felicia.”

Wow. Okay, I saw *how incapable she was of lying when she was trying to switch topics after her past life came up… There’s no way she’d be able to trot out a line like that if she didn’t mean it.*

Still, I didn’t quite buy it, and I knew my doubt was written all over my face. Lily gave me an exasperated look before she went on.

“I’m not lying to you, I promise. The entire gist of our conversation was that he loved you and despised me. There really wasn’t anything more to it.”

I looked Lily straight in the eyes, and she looked straight back at me, uncowed. It seemed she really *wasn’t* lying.

But…

“I thought he was in love with *you*,” I said.

“*Excuse* me?” she replied, sounding almost hysterical. With a faint smile, she clapped both of her hands on my shoulders. “I don’t know *what* kind of mental gymnastics you had to do to come to *that* conclusion, but if you’ll pardon my candor, it’s a little concerning.”

“But… I mean… I feel like all we ever talked about was *you*, Lily.”

“Do you think that might have anything to do with the fact that you kept bringing me up? I’ll have you know that he always complained about that bitterly to me later.”

“B-But he only ever looks at *you*! He’s never looked my way!”

“Is that the best you’ve got?! What kind of twisted logic is that?! You sound like a sheltered, blushing maiden! That’s only because he was trying to do right by you, just like—” she began, before cutting herself off. “Anyway, it’s insane to think that he has any feelings for me! I wish you knew how many days I spent with a pit in my stomach all because of how much he loathed me!”

Hearing her protest with all her heart and soul, I graciously decided to concede that I must have been mistaken.

Right… Okay. I guess he wasn’t in love with her. He’s too graceful

to express his feelings in a way that would make the person he loves misconstrue affection as contempt.

"I'd rather not involve myself in your romantic entanglements, so let's leave that there, shall we?" Lily said.

"S-Sure. Sorry…you're right. Nika sees me as a little sister. I like to think we're friends now too. He probably *does* give me special treatment sometimes."

"You… You can't possibly mean that, can you?"

I'd been trying to apologize, but somehow I'd only made her mood worse. I tried to take a step back, surprised, but Lily just tightened her grip on my shoulders. I had no choice but to confront what she'd say next head-on.

"You must know that's not how he sees you, don't you? No matter how much you may undervalue yourself, you're not *oblivious*, are you? Surely you've realized his feelings for you? He's always treated you the same way that his character treats the protagonist in the game when she's maxed out his affection meter. If you've played the game, then you couldn't possibly have missed that. Just so you know, the only time I've *ever* seen him smile was when we were talking about *you*."

She's right. There's…no way I could have missed that. I was an avid Lady Rose *fangirl, not some casual.*

But…Lily hasn't come right out and spelled anything out for me yet, so I can still stay in the dark. Yeah, that's what I'm going to do. When it comes to wishful thinking and self-delusion, I'm basically a professional.

"You aren't trying to pretend we never had this conversation, by chance, are you?" Lily asked. I gave her a wordless smile in response.

She took her hands off my shoulders. After a brief pause, she gave me a perplexed look.

"Felicia… Aren't you in love with him too?"

"I…"

He was a character from the game. If I said I was in love with him, wouldn't I just be yielding to fate?

No… I made up my mind never to look at the people of this world as video game characters again. This never had anything to do with that, anyway. I mean, I… I can't *fall in love with him…*

No. That's not the problem. I'm not in love with him. I mean, I can't be. I…

Argh, I don't want to think about this. Yeah. That's it. I'm just not

going to think about it.

"Oh… I'm sorry! I'm not sure I understand, but I can tell I shouldn't have asked you that! P-Please don't make that face! Th-This is all my fault!" Lily said, panicked.

She shook my shoulders.

What kind of overreaction did I have to make her panic like this? I wondered, a little alarmed.

There was no need for Lily to apologize. It wasn't *her* fault that I had a tendency to disregard anything that I didn't want to know and feign ignorance.

That defense mechanism was what had protected me my whole life, though. I felt like I wouldn't be able to get through life if I couldn't turn a blind eye to the things I didn't want to see. That's why I couldn't even remember the name of our own kingdom—much less our neighbors'—ever since the day I'd been disowned by my family.

I couldn't remember the names of my parents in this life, nor could I remember the names or faces of anyone in my past life. My brother's face was the only exception. It kept popping up in my head no matter how desperate I was to forget it.

My mental defenses were ironclad. Despite Lily's concern, there was no need to worry.

I thought I'd have a little fun at her expense for it, though, so I put on a mysterious expression and said, "I'll forgive you…*if* you stop calling me 'Felicia.'"

"Huh?! U-Um… Shall I call you Fii, then?!"

"Yes! Now consider yourself forgiven!"

"*Huh*?!"

"Well, now that that's all settled, shall we head back?"

"Fii?!"

Lily's eyes were wide with shock as I reached out my hand to her. She hesitated for a moment, but then she took it in hers and gripped it tightly.

Jeez, when was the last time I held hands with another girl? I wondered. *I don't think I've ever even done it once in this life. I'm not even sure if I did it in my past life.*

I decided not to worry about my personal business. I cared way more about Lily and how *she* was doing. And if she thought I couldn't see right through the strong front she was putting on to notice how anxious she was about seeing Seth again, then she was dead wrong.

Of course, I had my own hurdles ahead of me. It was going to be a pretty tall order to petition the king to be lenient with Evan's and Shade's sentencing, but I was determined to give it everything I had. I'd extended my hand to Lily in hopes that it would give her some moral support, but if anything, it was probably more for my sake than hers.

I'm too full of myself to notice Nika's feelings.

Yeah, that's right... I haven't even noticed a thing.

Chapter 4

Lily and I returned to the room, holding hands. Immediately, I noticed that a vague, uncomfortable tension had fallen over everyone we'd left there. *What's gotten into everyone?* I wondered, but before I could ask what had happened, I noticed something obviously amiss: Nana wasn't wearing any clothes.

Well…except for her underwear.

She'd plopped down on the floor, and scattered about next to her was her nun's attire. I should clarify—underthings in this world aren't remotely like what people wear back in contemporary Japan. She wasn't wearing a bra and panties or anything; there was a whole lot more coverage than that, so it wasn't a brazen skin show. That said, only Lily and I would be able to make that favorable comparison…

What's going on here, though? What in the world could have compelled Nana to strip*?*

Then I noticed that Nolls, who was standing right in front of her, was the only person not averting their eyes.

There's no way he assaulted her, though…r-right? I know he's a warhound, but he's not the kind of guy who'd ever violate a woman, is he?!

"Nana… What happened to your clothes?"

"I took them off. I don't need them anymore," she replied.

The grin on her face was so sweet, earnest, and gleefully radiant that it called to mind a wildflower glistening in the sun after a long rain. For a brief moment, I found myself thinking, *Oh, that's all? Okay, then.*

But then I came back to my senses.

There's nothing "okay" about that! I'm glad there's no nefarious reason that you're stripped down to your skivvies, Nana…but what are you thinking, parading around like that in front of a bunch of men?!

I mean, I can tell from that big ol' grin that there must be something deeply meaningful about this for you. Maybe it would be misguided to put the habit back on if you removed it for symbolic reasons. But you can't just stay half naked like that!

"Right. Okay," I said. "I'll take my clothes off and you can wear

those instead, okay?"

Just as I'd started to tug at my clothes, though, Lily interrupted.

"Fii, please don't. You're making this more complicated than it needs to be," she chided.

I reluctantly obeyed.

"This poses quite the problem, though, I'm afraid. I would trade clothes with you, Nana, but I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to wear my dress. I'm traveling incognito today, but it's still a signifier of my noble background. Fii's clothing would probably be more appropriate, but I doubt she'd fit into *your* clothes," Lily said.

"Huh? Why? We're roughly the same height. Surely our sizes aren't *that* different?" I protested.

"Please don't weigh in like that before taking into consideration your *bust* size. You won't fit, Fii."

"Oh. Right. Sorry..."

I felt bad for not thinking about that. Most commoner attire was one-size-fits-all and easy to adjust, so I hadn't thought about my sizing in a while. Even when I was a noblewoman, all of my clothes had been custom-made, so I'd never had to think about that.

Now that Lily had shot down that idea, everyone fell into a contemplative silence. We were all wondering what the heck to do now.

Then Shade spoke up.

"I'm sure you could find some clothes in my birth mother's room. If you look around, you'll probably find at least a couple items that aren't blatantly aristocratic."

"Will it really be all right for us to take her clothes without her permission?" Lily asked. "Actually, that brings me to another question: Why are you treating this manor as if it's your home, Lord Shade? Surely you don't even live here anymore."

Pretty reasonable questions...

"Oh, that? I just fed my birth parents a line about how the future of the Schwarose family was at stake and that as their heir, I could promise them untold fortunes if they vacated the premises for a day," Shade replied, with a look on his face that suggested it was no big deal. "They're not very bright, but they're willing to use their son as a bargaining chip for power. It was pretty simple, really. My birth mother has more clothes than she

knows what to do with, in part because her vanity will never allow her to wear anything more than once. She won't even notice if something goes missing."

Shade, you little rascal! I thought. But upon further reflection, it occurred to me that maybe I should have been impressed that he was able to turn the tables on his deadbeat folks.

In any case, I figured following Shade's suggestion was probably our best bet. I made eye contact with Lily, and we nodded at the same time.

"Okay, um... Can you show us to her room th—"

"The hell are you guys yappin' on about?" interrupted Nolls, who apparently had been completely oblivious about what we'd been talking about this whole time. Or maybe he just hadn't even *cared* enough to try to follow along.

He took off his coat and, with an exasperated expression on his face, threw it straight over Nana's head so that it covered her whole body. It did the job of covering her up perfectly, although I was almost one hundred percent certain that was just sheer dumb luck. He'd probably just thrown it at her without even thinking.

Huh? What the heck is he doing? I wondered.

"There. That'll fix her up," he said.

I could feel everyone in the room thinking the same thing: *Like hell it will!* Anyone who knew what to look for would notice the high-end fabric of his coat and peg her for a noble immediately. At that point, she might as well have just taken Lily's dress. Besides, if she was going to borrow clothes from a *prince*, then she at least ought to borrow them from the prince of *our* kingdom—not a foreign one. And, wait...didn't we *just* decide that she could borrow something from Shade's birth mother?

But in classic Nolls fashion, the foreign prince had no interest whatsoever in reading the room. He looked completely unbothered by everyone's shocked expression as he sat on the floor, biting into the baguette he'd picked up. He patted Nana on the head over the coat he'd flung over it.

"Yo, Nana. That'll do, right?" he asked her.

"Yep!" she chirped, popping her head out of the coat's collar. Thanks to the difference in their sizes, the coat was so big that it hid her entire body.

Oh, come on. That won't "do." Or...w-will it? If they're all right with it, I guess it's okay...?

I looked to Lily for answers. She seemed thoroughly displeased by this too, but she relented.

"Well… I suppose it will suffice for now, as long as she only wears it until we get her home. I simply lack the confidence that I'd be able to persuade her or Prince Nolan to rethink this," she said.

"What a coincidence. I was thinking exactly the same thing," I replied.

We both let out a sigh, then made eye contact and let out a chuckle.

"I've got no clue what's goin' on, but it looks like they sorted their shit out too," Nolls said.

"Mm. So it would seem," replied Zero. "Quite fortunate, considering that you're falling behind schedule."

"Huh? I am?"

"Yes. You are."

Poor Zero. It must be tough corralling such a wild prince, I thought. *Hey, come to think of it, how are they getting back to their kingdom? They're way out here in the boonies.*

I frowned as I contemplated the issue. They'd told me in a previous conversation that they always arrived at the kingdom via carriage and had their driver meet them at a predetermined location to pick them up again. They'd probably just hitch a ride from someone back to wherever they'd told him to meet them this time. That seemed reasonable enough, considering they'd probably hitched a ride from someone to *get* here.

As I ruminated on this, Nika suddenly approached me. For a moment, I felt a strange nervousness well up inside of me, but then I realized that he wasn't looking at *me*—he was looking at the person next to me.

Lily was the first to speak.

"I'm afraid I was unable to fulfill my mission, and I suspect I'll struggle to make it to Heaven now. Please accept my apologies," she said.

She bent into a deep bow, dipping her head low. I couldn't believe she was apologizing to him for not dying. The exchange *really* made it sound like Nika was the big bad. And what was this about her "mission"?

I knew it. There must have been something more to their exchange earlier than what Lily told me. It couldn't *have just been about how he's in love with me. But what the heck is going on*

between them?

Oblivious to my consternation, Nika gave Lily an exasperated look.

"You're every bit as guilty as Fii of making assumptions, albeit of a different sort," he sighed.

Wait... Is my habit of jumping to conclusions public knowledge? I wondered, as a look of concern crossed my face.

"But I can understand how our conversations may have left you with the wrong idea. Were I in your position, I might very well make the same assumptions. I won't deny that I held you in low esteem...but I've come to care for you as a future sister-in-law," Nika continued.

"Brother..."

Lily lifted her head as tears brimmed in her eyes. Nika patted her gently on the head to console her.

Is this just a heartfelt exchange between brother- and sister-in-law? I could've sworn there was something else between them, though...

No... Whatever it is, it looks like I was off base with my worries that it was romantic. Still, I feel like I shouldn't come between them. Yeah... I'm sure I'll start to get the picture if I just keep observing for a bit longer.

"Go talk to Seth. The two of you really ought to work on your communication," Nika said gently. He pushed Lily toward his brother, who had shrunk off to the side.

Lily stumbled a bit from the subtle force of his sudden push. Locking eyes with Seth, she steadied herself. Then, after several moments of silence, she turned back around to face Nika resolutely.

"Brother!" she called, her voice full of desperate emotion. "I believe we can change our fate! I've suffered countless failures, and I even gave up on changing my fate...but thanks to Fii, I believe again! Even if nothing changes, there's freedom to be found in holding on to that hope and believing that it *can*!"

Lily let herself catch her breath for a moment before she picked up again.

"That's why...I believe there's hope for you too, brother!" she cried.

Oh... I think I get it now. I finally understand the relationship between them. They aren't in love...

"We really are alike," Nika said, after a long pause.

They're birds of a feather.

That was probably why Lily had always felt that Nika disliked her and why Nika had always been oddly critical of her. It's painful, after all, to see yourself in someone else. And just as Nika had said himself, they bore a striking resemblance to each other. For better or for worse, deep down, there was something fundamental that they had in common.

Nika neither agreed with nor refuted Lily's sentiment. A pained smile spread across his lips as he averted his gaze from her. And just like that, he left the room.

I wonder if he's going home now? No… He promised to help me meet with the king, so he's probably just going to wait outside. In that case, though, I should probably follow him…

I looked down at Nana, who was still sitting on the floor. She wore a gentle smile, but there was something concerning about that—it was like she was fully checked out.

"So, uh… What happened, Nana?" I asked her.

"Hm? Oh. Tee hee. Turns out, I couldn't get to Heaven," she replied, giggling softly.

What the hell is she talking about? I wondered. I had a feeling I wasn't going to get any real answers, though, so I decided to leave it be. I'd come back to her later, but for now, there was someone else I needed to check in with before I left.

"Would you like the rest of us to leave so you can talk to Prince Seth alone?" I asked Lily.

"Um… Yes, I think that would be best. I believe that's what my brother-in-law wanted for us, so… If Prince Seth is willing…" she replied hesitantly, her head cast downward as she timidly glanced at Seth.

From the way she was acting, you would have never guessed that they were engaged. They would have been engaged for a whole three months now, but…maybe neither of them was there yet on an emotional level?

I looked over at Seth too. He said nothing in reply to Lily. He just kept sitting against the wall in silence. I got the message, though: *I'm not going anywhere, so if you're going to leave, then just leave.*

That's bold of you…

It seemed like he'd fallen into a pretty sour mood. I figured something must have happened while Lily and I were gone. Whatever it was, I could only hope that it boded well for Lily—no,

for the two of them.

"All right, everyone. I think we're done here, so why don't we clear on out?" I said.

Heeding my own advice, I left Lily and Seth to sort things out and made for the door. As I heard everyone else began to make moves too, I couldn't help but reflect on what a weirdly large crowd had been gathered here.

Wait... That's weird... There are definitely more people here than I'd expect.

"Hey... Why're you two still here?" I asked Nika's guards.

Right... Come to think of it, Nika left by himself. His guards just stayed here and didn't follow him. Pretty weird behavior, since it's their job not to let him out of their sight.

It was weird enough to make me wonder again if El *did* have a hand in all of this after all. Had Nika instructed them beforehand to stay behind when he left? Was he scheming something?

"Well, it's not like he *waited* for us. He just up and left. Besides, everyone needs some time to themselves to think, y'know?" said one of the guards.

Is this guy really cut out to be a guard? I wondered.

Everyone else looked over at the guard who'd just spoken, as if his exceedingly casual manner and tone had caught them all off-balance. It *was* pretty weird, especially considering that, until just now, he'd seemed to be watching everything unfold with a pretty solemn expression.

Well, if he means what he just said, then I can see how a devil-may-care guy like him might've just let Prince Nika walk out the door alone. But what about the other guard...?

"And you?" I asked him. "You seem to take your job a lot more seriously than *him*."

"Oh, I do. I always take my job seriously, and that includes now."

"It...does?"

"Yes. As a guard, it is my duty to protect. As long as I am able to fulfill that duty, then it doesn't matter *how* I go about it. Prince Nicholas is at no risk of being attacked in this neighborhood, so there is no need for us to follow him around," the formal guard said dispassionately. It was the most perfunctory answer I'd ever heard.

Are you sure about that...? I thought guards were supposed to prevent *attacks, not step in after they've already started.*

Honestly, though, I was less concerned about *that* than I was about the strange degree of certainty he seemed to have about Nika's safety.

"How are you so sure he won't be attacked?" I asked.

It didn't seem like such a given to me that a member of the royal family would be at no risk hanging out somewhere in the sticks by himself. Something about the way the guard had said that seemed pretty fishy to me—like he knew something he wasn't letting on.

"How indeed?" the guard replied, with a taunting smile. His placid, carefree response seemed to imply that I was just being needlessly suspicious.

You're answering my question with another question? Seriously?

As if to distract me and lower my defenses, the guard pointed behind me.

"If I were you, I'd be less concerned about *us* and more concerned about what's happening behind you right now," he said.

His teasing tone put me on guard, making me wonder for a moment if he was just trying to set me up. But I quickly came to my senses. If these guards really wanted to kidnap, kill, or otherwise cause harm to any of us, they wouldn't have to distract me to do it. They were strong enough to do whatever the hell they wanted without lowering my defenses.

I turned around, and sure enough, there *was* something alarming. Nolls, who had been yapping on all day without any regard for the gravity of the situation, had grown eerily quiet. Now I saw why.

"Nolls! What're you doing?!" I cried, panicked.

Hanging back a bit from the end of our procession, Nolls stood at the top of the stairs talking to Seth about something.

Where the heck is his chaperone? I thought, looking around for Zero. Then I spotted him, watching Nana intently with a serious expression on his face. *Guess he was too busy keeping an eye on Nana to notice Nolls disappearing. Can't exactly blame him for that...*

Frankly, though, I didn't feel the least bit comfortable leaving Nolls to his own devices. It was one thing for him to sow chaos, but it would be another thing entirely if he was out there sowing seeds of *war*.

I gave him a threatening glare as he ran up to me obediently.

“You’re not saying anything you shouldn’t be, are you?” I asked him.

He laughed. “Sheesh, you’ve got no faith in me, do you? Well, don’t worry. We were just havin’ a little chat. You know, prince to prince. Talkin’ ’bout prince stuff.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better at all, actually,” I said. “Ugh, you know what? I’ve had enough. Just stay quiet until we get you home, okay?”

“You don’t beat around the bush, huh? You sure, though? Lemme at least give you a quick piece of advice before I shut up. You should think about payin’ a little more attention to what’s goin’ on around you. You’ll never get anywhere if you’re blind to reality, y’know what I mean?”

For a moment, I felt like there was something stuck in my throat. That was enough to convince me that he *knew* something.

“Why does everyone keep giving me vague advice like that? If you know something, then just tell me!” I said.

“…”

“I’m sorry, okay?! Forget what I said earlier. You don’t have to be quiet! Just tell me what you know!”

“Now why would I do that? I ain’t gettin’ anything out of it,” he said.

That’s cold…but I can see where he’s coming from.

Nolls always spoke to me in an easygoing, candid way, as if to give me the impression that we were friends. But we weren’t friends. At the end of the day, he was just toying with me for his own amusement—and toys didn’t need to know anything.

I fell silent. Then, for some reason, Nolls broke into a laugh.

“*You* figure it out. No point in havin’ the answers if someone else just *gives* ’em to you,” he said. It was obvious he was trying to wash his hands of the matter, but his tone was gentle.

I heeded his advice and threw myself into a silent brainstorming session that would last until I left the manor.

After thinking through problem after problem today, I felt a little exhausted, but I also felt like I was able to wrap my head around things a bit better than I usually was. I was hopeful that I’d be able to figure things out as long as I had just a little more time…and maybe a few more hints.

⚜

As soon as I left the manor, I immediately spotted three horse-drawn carriages. Nika was standing in front of one of them. It seemed my assumption had been spot-on: He *had* been waiting outside for me. He stared at the ground, as if lost in thought, and didn't look up at me to make eye contact.

Wait…huh? Why are there three *carriages? One is obviously Nika's, and the other must be Mel's…but whom does the third belong to?*

I assumed that the carriage Lily had arrived in (hers, presumably) had been destroyed so as not to leave any evidence. Besides, this carriage didn't look like hers. It couldn't have been Seth's either. He'd gotten here before I had, and so if it had belonged to him, I should have seen it before.

Just as alarm bells were sounding in my head, Zero walked straight past me—directly to the mysterious carriage.

"Thank you for meeting us here," he said to the driver, who gave him a respectful bow. Then, addressing Nolls, he continued, "Please get in quickly, Prince Nolan. We're running short on time."

Ohhh, I get it. So it was Nolls's carriage.

Wait…that doesn't answer anything! How the heck did it get here?!

I whipped around to face Nolls and jerked on his shirttail, almost forgetting for a moment that he was the prince of a neighboring kingdom.

"Hold on a sec, Nolls! How did your driver know to come here?!"

"Whaddaya mean? You think I'd hire a personal driver who can't even figure out where to find me?" Nolls replied, as if it were obvious. He looked at me like he couldn't even fathom why I'd ask such a pointless question.

"Keeping abreast of Prince Nolan's capricious behavior is part of the job, and he is amply compensated for that responsibility," Zero explained, with a pleasant smile.

Okay, but that doesn't actually explain how *he does that*, I thought, dissatisfied. *Maybe working for Nolls all this time has made him hone his searching skills? I feel kinda bad for the guy…*

But when I stopped to consider that Nolls's country had been destitute enough to start a war before I'd intervened with my prophecy, I saw it in a different light. If they'd recovered financially enough to be throwing money at a carriage driver for something like this, then maybe that was a *good* sign?

“Well, it sucks that I won’t get to see you finish things off, but I guess we’ve gotta go,” Nolls said.

“Goodbye, now. Best of luck,” added Zero.

“Huh? Uh… Okay. See ya?” I replied.

Nolls and Zero had barged in and inserted themselves into all this mess, but when it came right down to it, they had the least to do with everything that had been going on. I didn’t see much of an issue with them leaving.

I gave them a wave goodbye as I felt a tickle of anxiety at the thought of what would become of me by the next time I met them. But as Zero walked over to the carriage, Nolls walked over to me, stopping just before our noses touched. He grabbed my head and brought my ear to his lips.

“I don’t really give a damn if you win or lose. I know I’ll get a kick out of it either way. But just don’t make any compromises you’ll regret, yeah?” he said. His grave tone surprised me.

He drew back for a moment. Then he planted a kiss on my cheek.

“See ya ’round,” he said.

He gave me a wry smile as I stood there, dazed, before he stepped into his carriage. The driver was apparently eager to go, because as soon as Nolls was inside, the carriage took off immediately.

Wow… They really must *have been in a hurry.*

It was weird, though. As far as I knew, there wasn’t a single culture in this world who greeted people or bade them farewell with a kiss on the cheek.

Don’t think you can get away with that just ’cause you look like a foreigner from my past life, Mr. Foreign Prince.

While I’d never had a relationship in this life, I’d had plenty of romantic entanglements in the one before. So, fortunately, I wasn’t about to be thrown into a tizzy over a little kiss on the cheek.

After regaining my composure, I turned my attention to the others. It was probably time to discuss the next steps. Just as I did, though, Nana suddenly clapped her hands across her cheeks. There was something oddly performative about it.

“Oh! I just remembered I’ve got some things I need to take care of! I need to go home now!” she said.

Some “things” to take care of, huh?

At this point, she clearly wasn’t even trying. I gave her a

reproachful gaze, as if to say, *I'm on to you.*

"Nana…" I said.

She giggled. "You're about to have your hands full, right, Fii? There's a ton of stuff I wanna talk to you about, but we can talk about that later! I promise, 'kay? Besides, whatever happens, it's not like *you're* gonna die, right?"

She had a point there… There was no way I was going to clear up this situation by offering to take the death penalty in Shade's and Evan's places.

Something about Nana felt off, and when I thought about it for a bit, I felt like I might know what it was that made me feel that way. She still spoke the same way I was used to hearing her speak, but she wasn't trying to hide her quick wit anymore.

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized there wasn't really anything "off" about that. If anything, it was perfectly in character for her. The combination of her sweet, innocent nature and her quick wit was exactly what made her Nana.

"Unless you think there's a reason I should come with you?" Nana said.

After a long pause, I conceded, "No… I guess there isn't."

Now that she mentioned it, she had absolutely no reason at all to come along. She'd only come to the manor in the first place because she'd just so happened to be there when Lily had been kidnapped. There was really no reason for her to come with me back to the palace now.

Nana was still such a puzzle to me, though, and there was so much I wanted to ask her. I didn't want to leave things on this note, and I would have hated for this to be the last time that we saw each other.

"Oh, I just remembered! I wanted to give you one last piece of advice—as a friend!" she said, looking me straight in the eyes as she gave me a big smile. If she'd noticed my distress, she didn't give any indication. "Remember, Fii: Everyone's got their own circumstances and reasons for doing what they do. So, no matter what's going on or who you meet, think about that from the moment you meet them and be on your guard, okay?"

"Their own circumstances and reasons." That's the same warning she gave me before. Actually, I'm pretty sure someone else *said that to me too…*

"From the moment you meet them"? "No matter what's going on

or who you meet”? “Circumstances and reasons”? “Be on your guard”?

Her words echoed in my head. They felt critically important somehow, as if they might be the key to understanding something and toppling my misguided assumptions. But I had no idea if Nana was telling me that because she actually *knew* something—and if so, I had no idea *how much* she knew.

“I know Prince Nolan just said that it doesn’t matter if you win or lose, but if *I* were him…well, I’d want my princess to beat fate’s butt! Wouldn’t that be the perfect picture book happy ending?” Nana said.

Nolls had whispered that stuff about winning or losing in my ear pretty quietly, so I was surprised she’d heard him. At the same time, though, I was caught off guard by Nana’s innocent smile. She really did look just like a little girl rooting for the princess in her picture book to find her happy ending.

“See you later, Fii!” Nana said with a smile, breaking off into a run as I stood there dumbfounded.

I turned around to wave at her and saw that she’d already left the manor’s grounds. It was a pretty long walk from here back to town, but she seemed intent on making the journey on foot.

Well, that’s her choice, I guess. At least there’s still plenty of daylight left. As long as she knows the way, I guess there’s no problem with that? If anything, I’m just worried about that injury on her hand that she got from the knife.

I thought back to her parting words and hoped that I really would see her again. No matter what secrets she held, I knew I could never hate her.

I let out a sigh and turned to where Nika was waiting. But before I could make my way over to him, I ran into Mel.

“Um, so, what are *you* going to do now, Mel? Are you gonna go home?” I asked him.

“No. I’m ‘restraining’ Shade and Evan, remember? Besides, we’re all in this boat together now, so I figure I may as well accompany you all to the palace. You don’t have enough space in your carriage to get them there by yourselves anyway, right?” Mel said. He spoke bluntly, but there was a gentleness in his words.

“Oh… Now that you mention it, I guess we don’t. Sorry…and thanks.”

I bowed my head in a show of thanks.

He's got a point. It would be pretty tough for Nika to fit Shade and Evan into his carriage with him. And if I'm joining for the ride, I worry we'll put too much strain on the horse. I wouldn't be surprised if we even managed to break the carriage. Plus, it doesn't seem prudent to let anyone awaiting trial for abduction of the queen-consort-to-be ride in the same carriage as a member of the royal family.

"We'll be pushing it a bit giving them a ride when we've already got me and my guard, so you'll have to ride in Prince Nicholas's carriage," Mel said.

Since he wasn't riding incognito, his carriage was quite a bit bigger than Nika's. I had a feeling that he could have fit one more person in if he wanted. Besides, it was going to be a pretty tight squeeze in Nika's carriage with the two of us and his guards…

It was pretty clear to me what Mel's real aim was: He wanted me to talk to Nika.

"All right. Well, I'll see you later then," I said, smiling.

I turned to walk over to Nika, trying to smooth the tense expression that had come over my face. Even as I sidled right up to him, we didn't make eye contact.

"Apologies for taking so long," I said. "Shall we go?"

"Yes, let's."

Just like this morning—which already felt like a distant dream—Nika's two guards wedged themselves between us in the carriage.

I should try to get as much information out of him as I can before we arrive at the palace, I thought. On the surface, it didn't seem like Nika had anything to do with what had just played out at the manor. But it was becoming clear to me that he knew something about what was happening behind the scenes.

I knew that I needed to take advantage of the limited time we had and broach the topic as soon as possible, but I couldn't will my mouth to open and form the words. I was afraid that it could change our relationship somehow.

Or worse—that our relationship had never been what I thought it was to begin with.

Nika and I (along with, of course, his two guards) sat in the cramped, wobbly carriage for a good ten minutes or so without even once opening our mouths to speak. Well, I say "ten minutes"—I'm completely guesstimating that figure.

This awkward, soporific silence couldn't drag on forever, though. Steadily, I worked up the courage to break it.

"Do you think there's any way I could convince the king to reduce their sentences, Nika?" I asked.

Honestly, I have no idea what you know or what you're up to, so I'd rather not ask you such a stupidly point-blank question…but here we are.

Still, as brazenly forward as my question might have sounded, it wasn't the one I *really* wanted to ask. Instead, I'd asked something close enough to the crux of it that I could scrape together fragments of the truth from which I could start to form a sensible assessment. Thanks to Nolls's and Nana's advice, I knew I had to be careful not to be misled or manipulated—even now, with Nika.

"I'm afraid it will be difficult, considering your current status and social standing. Your words won't count for much," Nika answered.

"Yes… I'm painfully aware of that."

The odds were certainly not in my favor as a commoner petitioning a king, especially when the request in question was to reduce what was objectively a perfectly fair sentence. I'd have to pray for a miracle.

Shade and Evan had kidnapped the future queen consort. They could have even *killed* her. If the king were to hand them anything other than a death sentence, it was bound to hurt his reputation. Anyone who found out about his leniency might label him "soft" and look down on him as a fool. It was almost disrespectful to petition the king knowing full well what consequences would befall him for acquiescing.

If I were still a duke's daughter—and the prince's future wife—then I'd at least have had a better chance…

"Now that my engagement to Prince Seth has been annulled and I've been disowned by my family, there's no way I could be reinstated to my former status…even if that's what I wanted," I said.

"Yes. That's true."

I'd given up countless privileges in exchange for my life as a commoner. But despite my current status, I had to find a way to save Shade and Evan.

That's right… I can't just worry about Nika right now. I need to be thinking about how to negotiate with the king while I'm trying to

figure out what Nika's deal is.

"I do know of a way to bolster your argument. It's the simplest, most effective method I can think of," Nika offered.

Until now, I'd just been looking straight ahead as we spoke, not making eye contact. But now he'd caught my attention. I turned to him with keen interest. Thanks to our cramped quarters, our faces were mere inches away.

For a moment, my brain froze. Then, as if leaping for his chance now that he had me cornered, Nika continued:

"You could marry me."

I couldn't believe my ears. *A proposal?!* All thoughts left my head, and I thought I was about to start blowing steam through my ears.

"What...?" I said, after a long pause. "*Huh*?"

It wasn't until the words left my mouth that I realized how shrill my voice had become. I averted my gaze.

C-Calm down, Fii. It's not like you've never had any romantic experience in your past life, remember? You're gonna be fine.

Yeah... It's not like he's proposing to you because he loves *you. There's nothing behind those words. It's just like he said: It's the simplest, most effective way to make sure your voice is heard. That's all. I mean, Nika didn't even set the mood or anything. He just pulled that out of nowhere and said it like it was no big deal. If* that's *not evidence that this is nothing, I don't know what is.*

I took in a deep breath, clearing my head so I could think rationally.

"Y-Yes, I suppose you're right," I said. "Even though I'm no longer the future queen consort, that would still make me a member of the royal family. My words would carry a lot more power. It won't be a good look for me to get engaged to you right after my engagement with Seth, especially in the eyes of people who don't understand the circumstances that led to it...but it could work. Surely you wouldn't have anything to gain from that, though?"

Even if Nika had no intention of claiming the throne himself one day, it was hard to imagine that he would be permitted to marry a *commoner*. No matter how much weight his words carried as a member of the royal family, it wouldn't be enough if other nobles and vassals objected to our union. And if the king himself objected? Then it would be a lost cause.

When my engagement to Seth had been annulled, I'd

admitted to all misdeeds that I was accused of. I'd have a hard time believing there was a single aristocrat that the scandal hadn't reached.

Nika had prefaced his idea with the distinction that it was the "simplest" way, but it certainly didn't seem like a very *realistic* method.

"Do you really believe yourself to have so little worth?" Nika asked me, his tone earnest.

Okay, to give myself a little credit, my acting abilities are *pretty useful across a wide range of contexts. Sure, I've had plenty of missteps, but that's because I've been trying to figure this all out by myself, trusting no one and deceiving everyone. If the people around me play along, I can play the part of Lady Rose perfectly. I could wield that power to navigate all kinds of diplomatic and domestic affairs. I'm sure that would be a valuable asset as a prince's wife.*

Still…none of that cancels out those huge downsides I was just thinking about. Nika would probably be better off finding a noblewoman to take on those duties as his wife. I don't think I have anything to offer that would make all the downsides of marrying me worth it.

"I'm surprised you're still so blind to the impact you have on people, Fii. You severely underestimate yourself," Nika said. "But I suppose I won't try to argue with you about that right now. Instead, how about this: What if there were no downsides to our marriage, and no one was opposed to it?"

No downsides…?

I racked my brain, trying to come up with a suitable rationale for that scenario. Maybe it could be…if I still held significant sway among the nobility as Lady Rose, and they didn't think of me as a bully. Then the king and his retainers would probably bless our union.

That possibility sounded a little too good to be true, but I could roll with it for now—as a hypothetical.

If that were the case, then what would I do? Would I…marry Nika? I…

"Are you sure *you'd* be happy with that, Nika?" I asked him.

I had no idea how *he* felt about it. He'd presented it as the best option for me to make sure my voice was heard, but his proposal had really come out of the blue. It was all too sudden.

I looked him straight in the eye, trying to figure out what he was thinking.

“I feel like…after we parted ways and then reconvened today, you haven’t been acting like the Nika I know. I wouldn’t dare to tell a member of the royal family that he ought to marry for love, but your proposal took me by surprise. Is this really what *you* want, Nika? Of your own free will?” I asked.

I knew I was being hopelessly naive to just ask him this so directly—especially after I’d just made a point of how important it was to suss things out in a roundabout way. But in the end, I couldn’t bring myself to doubt Nika. I’d known him since we were just kids, after all, and he’d only started acting strangely after he’d left the mansion today. I knew I wasn’t mistaken about that.

It seemed a whole lot more likely that El was pulling some strings here than that Nika had just suddenly completely changed as a person.

Nika looked straight back at me, making eye contact.

“Yes,” he said earnestly.

There wasn’t a trace of deception or doubt in his ice-blue eyes. It was impossible not to take him at his word.

At this point, it seemed unlikely that he was being manipulated without even realizing it. His behavior right now was so at odds with how he usually acted that it would have been impossible for him not to notice. He *must* have been aware of what was happening.

I knew from experience, though, that he meant it when he said he wanted to marry me. Initially, he’d made the suggestion dispassionately, but there was an unmistakable emotion behind his words now.

“You’ve always been special to me, Fii—ever since I first met you, back when you were engaged to Seth.”



My eyes grew wide in shock as I looked at him.

That wasn't the case for Nika's character in the game. In *Lady Rose*, Nika only started to develop feelings for the protagonist in the prologue, once she'd started school at the academy.

"I may be clever, but my cleverness has never compared to Seth's brilliance. And just like Seth, you radiate talent and potential. Back then, I didn't know what to *call* that quality in you, but I was enchanted. I wanted to support your future with Seth as queen consort."

It felt really weird to hear that from someone as gifted as Nika. But it made sense now why real-life Nika had fallen for me at a different time than Nika does in the game: It was because he was seeing me for *me*, not Lady Rose. Despite my best efforts, I'd apparently been walking a different path from that of the game's protagonist from the very beginning.

Jeez... My past-life knowledge of the game hasn't paid off one bit.

"Your marriage to Seth was for the kingdom's sake above all else, and I love the kingdom. That's why I pretended not to notice my feelings for you. You always wore such a mature, composed smile on your face, but when I'd find my eyes following you without thinking, sometimes I'd get a rare glimpse of a *real* smile—a smile of pure joy—flashing across your face, and I'd feel captivated. Over time, I got used to pushing those feelings down."

For a moment, I felt like I might forget how to breathe.

I would have been able to keep my cool if he'd been speaking lines from the game. But he wasn't. If I weren't so confident in my ability to read people, and if I didn't know that he was speaking from the heart, then I might have been able to stay calm by convincing myself that there was a chance he was just trying to pull one over on me. But again, I knew he wasn't.

"Now that your engagement to Seth has been annulled, I have no reason to hold back anymore," Nika said, looking into my eyes. His gaze was warm, but there was a fire burning behind it. "I've always loved you. If I may speak candidly, there is nothing in the world I'd like more than to marry you. All I wish is for you to take my hand."

He reached his hand out to me.

He meant every word. I couldn't tear my gaze away from the loving look in his eyes. My heart was pounding like crazy. I felt like I was burning up all over. There was a part of me that just

wanted to take his hand.

Wait… Stop. Calm down and think this through. This timing is just too much of a coincidence. There must be something else to this…

…

But what?

And even if there was, *it doesn't change the fact that this is my opportunity to save Shade and Evan. If that's what I want, then taking his hand is my best bet right now.*

Besides, I… I've always felt something for him too.

Just like Nika, I'd tried to ignore my feelings. I'd fooled myself into believing they weren't even there. Because if I confronted them, I'd have to face the harsh reality: Nika was a prince, and being in love with a prince was at odds with the life I'd chosen for myself. There was no way I could have them both, and so my only choice was to ignore the way I felt about him.

Now that things had come to this, though, that wasn't going to fly anymore. It was time to drop the flimsy charade.

Who was I kidding, acting like I couldn't bear to look at him because "his golden hair reflected the strong sunlight?" Ridiculous. Hair isn't that reflective. That was just an excuse I'd made up to justify the fact that I couldn't face him.

And all that stuff about him being "like an older brother"? Lies. I mean, when I first met him, he'd been more than ten years younger than I'd been when I'd died in my past life—so how could I have possibly seen him that way? But as my feelings for him had kept growing by the day, I'd tried to pretend that they were just familial.

I wasn't just subconsciously favoring him because he'd been popular with the game's fans either. I'd never been one to care much about fan popularity rankings. That had just been an excuse I'd made up to try to explain away the affection I felt for him.

I thought back on all the times I'd felt jealous of the wordless connection that he and Lily seemed to share, all the times I'd felt happy and relieved to see him, all the times I hadn't been able to bring myself to drive him away when he'd come to visit… And of course, there was the time I'd tried to cover it up by telling myself I'd just made him stick around because I was sick. In hindsight, it was absurd to pretend that was all nothing. No amount of excuses could explain any of that away.

The truth was, I'd always loved him.

"I… I feel…" I began.

But…I have to beat fate. If I don't, then I'll never get over the trauma of not being able to fight back against my older brother from my past—

No. That's not true.

My business with my older brother is finished. That story ended with my past life. All I'm doing now is dragging it into this one and dredging up old, painful memories. I'll never be able to rewrite what happened in the past, but it's just a trauma that I'll have to live with.

Ultimately, it was all just psychological. I knew this wasn't really about "beating fate" or "being a commoner." I'd just come up with those dreams as a way to try to process the trauma, but achieving them (or failing to achieve them) wouldn't actually make any difference. Now that I saw how pointless they really were, I realized that all I had to do was make the decision to move on.

I had people I cared about now. I was grateful that my older brother didn't exist in this world. Revenge was a big burden to bear, and if he *had* been here, then he probably would've become the center of my universe in this life too.

So…what's the problem?

The man I love has just told me he loves me. He's offering me his hand in marriage. It's not like losing my commoner status means that I'll be reverting back to the game's storyline or surrendering to fate, right? I'm not going to be the queen consort, after all. Even if I can't stay a commoner, I won't exactly be returning to my original position.

Most importantly: This is what I want. It's the perfect way to help Shade and Evan and to atone for what I've done. And it's something I would choose for myself regardless, because I love Nika.

It's going to be okay. I know that I'll find happiness if I take his hand, because I love him. I've always, always loved him.

"Fii…?"

So, what're you waiting for, Fii? Hurry up! Don't leave him hanging! Take his hand and claim your happy ending!

Just take it!

Take his hand!

Take his…

I couldn't will my shaking hand to reach out and take his.

I didn't want to.

"I… I don't care about my older brother, or the game's

story…or fate. None of it…matters…”

Now that I was forced to make a decision and come face-to-face with my own self-deception, I finally knew how I really felt. That’s why I could say, from the bottom of my heart, that none of that stuff mattered.

In that moment, I felt like I was finally able to put my past life behind me for real.

“But…I want to be a commoner.”

That was where I’d finally landed—that was my one, final wish.

I knew it was a selfish, uncompromising, stupid conclusion. I knew it wasn’t going to get me anywhere, and that it probably meant that I wouldn’t be able to save Shade or Evan. It was a crazy thing to say when the man I loved was proposing to me. But in the end, I wanted to protect this life I’d made for myself. I’d been having too much fun living as a commoner.

I couldn’t take his hand. Even if it didn’t end up getting me anywhere, I wanted to keep fighting with my own power for a little longer.



I couldn’t even lift my head. I felt like a spoiled, stubborn little brat for refusing a proposal from the man I loved. I mean, who did I think I was, turning Nika down? I was disgusted with myself.

But then, all of a sudden, I heard a laugh escape from him. He’d clearly been trying to suppress it, but the slightest chuckle had slipped past his lips. Immediately, I whipped my head up to look at him. He wore an amused expression.

“Huh…? U-Um… Were you just…making fun of me?” I asked, baffled.

I was going to be mortified if he’d just been joking and I’d had the nerve to take him seriously, but…Nika really wasn’t the type to joke around like that. And if he hadn’t meant what he’d said, then I wouldn’t know *what* to believe anymore. I’d have to start doubting my ears, my eyes…*everything*.

I couldn’t think of any other reason that he’d be laughing right now, though. I was stumped.

“No. I meant what I said. Surely you know me well enough to know that?” he replied.

“I-I do… But why are you laughing?”

No matter how you tried to spin it, this wasn’t really a laughing matter.

I guess he could be laughing at my stupidity and failure to grasp the gravity of this situation…

As soon as the thought occurred to me, though, I dismissed it. Nika wasn’t cruel. He wouldn’t laugh about something like that.

“Mm… I’d like to know the answer to that myself,” he said. “It’s strange… The girl I’ve loved for years turns me down, and yet I’m oddly at peace with it. I feel somehow refreshed, even though the door has just closed on what I thought to be my clearest path to happiness.”

Nika’s pleasant smile felt so out of place in this moment that I almost couldn’t help but wonder if he might’ve been possessed. A big question mark popped up in my head. Something about his phrasing stuck with me, though—in particular, the word “path.”

“I meant everything I said. But I suppose, ultimately, your free spirit and your determination to change your fate are part of what I love about you…even though it’s painful to accept your rejection,” Nika said with a sigh.

He looked at me then with a gentle fondness in his eyes.

I was astonished that he could come up with such a generous interpretation of what was obviously a purely selfish decision, but at the same time, my heart swelled with joy as he validated the path I’d chosen for myself.

Nika is such a good person… It’s not like I don’t have regrets about rejecting his proposal. I may have made this choice myself, but I’m not a big enough person to be able to claim that means I don’t have regrets.

“Don’t worry. I’ll still honor my promise to help you petition the king,” Nika said.

I suddenly felt a little uncomfortable with how mature Nika was being about all of this. It felt kind of wrong, considering that I had several years on him (if we included my past life). *I* should have been the mature one here. I’d also completely forgotten until now that we had two guards in the carriage with us. I was so embarrassed that they’d heard everything that all I could do was look straight ahead.

Look, Fii…you’ve already exposed how brainless you can be, and you’ve basically thrown all your dignity and respect out the window.

May as well bite the bullet and ask Nika for some advice, right? Time to get back up. Be positive!

"How do you think I can overcome fate? Do you have any tips?" I asked him.

Nolls had already given me his thoughts: He'd said I needed to pay more attention to reality. Nana had given me her thoughts too: that I needed to consider from the very beginning that everyone has their own reasons for doing things.

Then there was what Shade had said: that it felt like we were standing on a stage someone had set for us. It'd made perfect sense to me at the time, since I'd assumed he was making a reference to El. But it didn't seem like El had anything to do with Lily's kidnapping after all. So what had Shade meant by that?

I knew my question to Nika was pretty vague and far-reaching, but that had been my intention. I wanted to see what the question meant to him and what he came up with as an answer. I felt like if I just had one more piece of the puzzle to ponder, I'd be close to figuring something out for once.

"Good question," Nika replied. "If I were to give you one piece of advice, then I suppose it would be this: You'll need to discern the king's true intentions if you're determined to protect your life as a commoner."

The king's...true intentions?

Suddenly, it felt like all of the pieces were falling into place. I could practically hear the "click."

My thoughts were racing so fast, it was almost comical. Now that I looked at everything I'd noticed through this lens, even the things that had seemed out of place or bizarre were starting to make perfect sense. It was like a domino effect: Mystery after mystery seemed to clear up in my head.

So that's *what's been going on...*

As everything came together, though, two painful realizations dawned on me at once: I didn't stand a chance of overcoming fate, and even knowing the truth wouldn't set me free.

If anything, I couldn't help but feel that I probably would have been happier living the rest of my life in ignorance. Now I had no choice but to dance to fate's drum, even though I knew exactly what was going on.

But this meant that I had a chance of saving Shade and Evan.

That was the one saving grace here. The only path available to me now was to make an audacious attempt to fight fate,

knowing full well I was struggling in vain, and then, finally, to *succumb to it*.

Chapter 5

Our carriage arrived at the palace. After the two guards alighted without expending an ounce of effort, Nika and I followed them out.

"I'll go on ahead and speak to the king first. You wait here, Fii," Nika said.

"Right. Thank you," I replied, bowing my head, and watched him enter the palace with his two guards.

I just stood there spacing out for a while. My brain had been working on overdrive today, and I was exhausted. What's more, I didn't even have any sense of accomplishment or closure to show for it. If anything, I just felt utterly hopeless and defeated.

A sudden jolt from behind me snapped me out of my reverie. I turned around to try to make sense of it and realized that Mel, who was leisurely strolling up to me, had just smacked me on the back of the head.

"Hey, what's with the doom and gloom?" he asked. "I'm gonna give a quick rundown of the situation and hand them over. Then I'm heading home."

"Thank you for everything, Mel," I said, smiling weakly.

I had a feeling this was probably the role that Melvin Crabitt was destined to play. His status made him incredibly valuable. *Yeah...that must be the only reason he was roped into this all*, I thought. *He certainly would have been a useful pawn.*

"I don't know what's gotten into you, but you'd better wipe that dour look off your face. I can guarantee you it's not gonna help you make your case. When you're speaking with the king, just hold your head high like you always do when you talk to me," Mel said.

"Yeah... I know. I will."

Mel's crabby expression did nothing to hide how concerned he was for me, and it meant a lot to me how much he cared. He was invaluable to me. No matter what happened in the throne room—even if everything went to hell, just like I was afraid it would—I didn't want to drag him into this any further.

"I know you need a friend, so I *guess* I can step up to the plate. No matter what happens in there, I'll be here for you. So...best of

luck," Mel said, smiling as he cheered me on.

What a sweetheart, I thought. He must've known that I'd hoped he'd stick around for more than just to satisfy his own curiosity. He'd said exactly what I'd wanted to hear, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. It was precisely this kindness, though, that made me want to distance myself from him—for his own sake. And not just from Mel, but from *everyone*.

I can do this alone... Yeah. I'll be fine, even if I have to do this alone. I can do this. I know I'll make the most of it. I'm nothing if not adaptable and optimistic.

Mel and his guards walked into the palace, escorting Shade and Evan, neither of whom spoke a word or even gave me so much as a look while they passed. I couldn't blame them for that, though. I knew they were ignoring me for my sake, because they knew it wouldn't bode well if people saw wanted criminals chatting me up like old friends. Their kindness made me all the more resolved that I had to save them.

Mel handed them over to a group of royal guards who took them into the palace, then left to go home. Barely a few minutes passed after his departure before Nika emerged from the palace.

I couldn't help but feel surprised at how quickly his petition had gone, especially considering that he was requesting that the king grant me, a *commoner*, an audience. But somehow I knew, even before he told me, that the request had been granted. It felt almost like a foregone conclusion.

Just as I expected, Nika gave me a wordless nod. I followed him and the guards into the palace. Weirdly, the guards at the door didn't even blink when they saw me, despite my obvious peasant attire.

I'd been to the palace countless times. After all, I *was* the crown prince's former fiancée. It was as beautiful inside as I remembered, with furnishings practically lifted out of a storybook. Since the king preferred to relax in his private quarters and wasn't one for lavish spending, there'd been barely any new additions since my last visit.

We traversed the palace in silence, and before long we reached a hallway that led to the throne room.

"This is where I take my leave," said Nika. "The king wishes to speak with you alone, Fii."

He gave me a slightly strained smile, as if he were forcing his

face to relax so that he wouldn't make me nervous. I had no doubt that the smile I gave him in return looked even *more* strained, though. With anyone else, I would have been able to force a believable smile no matter what the circumstances. But with Nika, I just couldn't bring myself to play Little Miss Perfect.

"But just so you're aware, I haven't given up on you."

"Huh…?"

Just as I'd been wallowing in the gravity of the situation, Nika's proclamation completely threw me off my balance. All I could do was blink, stunned, as I stared back at him.

"I've come to love you more than I love this very kingdom. Besides, it's *Seth's* duty to lead as king, not mine," he continued, as if he were simply stating an obvious truth. He wasn't even blushing. "Surely you didn't take me for the kind of man to give up after only a single setback?"

"H-Hold on, hold on! Let's just forget about all this, okay? Trust me, you don't want me! I'm *really* obnoxious! You're amazing, Nika. You could find someone—anyone—way better than me."

"And what would be the point in that if I didn't love them? Or perhaps you're suggesting I *settle*?" he teased, cocking his head.

I was at a complete loss for words. There was nothing I could say to that—not after I'd thrown away the path to queenhood, my family, and pretty much literally everything all because I refused to settle for anything other than a commoner's life. Heck, I'd even turned down his proposal for that very reason.

Come to think of it, Nika did *say that he'd always thought I was special, ever since the day he'd first met me. I was five when Seth and I were engaged, so if Nika is three years older than me, then he would have been about eight. In which case…maybe…*

"Nika, was I…your first love?"

"Why, yes."

"Oooh… Right. Okay. Uh-huh… I get it now."

Everything makes sense now. It's just like with Seth, isn't it? It's hard to move on from your first love.

That being said, if my fate was as inescapable as I thought, then I wouldn't even have any reason to turn down Nika's proposal anymore.

So, shouldn't I just be happy about it? Maybe I can find happiness even within the confines of fate?

"Oh…I wanted to ask about something, Fii. Did I see Prince Nolan kiss your cheek back at the mansion?"

“Huh? O-Oh… Well, yes, I guess he did.”

Right… Totally forgot about that.

I’d assumed that Nika was too lost in thought to notice, but apparently not. *Why is he bringing this up* now*, though?* I wondered. Before I could mull that over, though, I found myself reflexively putting some distance between us.

I watched Nika carefully, but there was no sign that he was behaving any differently than usual. Still…my gut was telling me to watch out.

“L-Let’s just talk this through calmly, all right? It’s no big deal, really! Nolls is always messing around like that!”

“Is he now?”

“Yeah! Wait… N-No, I don’t mean it like *that*! It’s not like he’s always kissing my cheek, okay?!”

“Are you sure? Because you looked awfully unperturbed…almost like you were used to it.”

“No, listen! That’s… That’s because I knew he was just messing around! Besides, I’m not some blushing schoolgirl who gets flustered by a little kiss on the— *Oh*.”

I clapped my hand over my mouth, realizing that I’d just dug myself into a massive hole. Honestly, I would have loved nothing more than to crawl into it and die at this point. I couldn’t believe I’d actually *said* that. What was I thinking?!

Ah ha ha… I understand Lily so well now, it’s not even funny. N-No, I’m just kidding…

“Then you wouldn’t object to one from *me*?” Nika said.

Oh, crap. Should’ve seen this one *coming!* I thought, just as I realized I’d almost completely forgotten about my business in the palace.

“Yours is the *only* one I’d object to!” I yelled, running away from my problems here and off to the throne room.

I stopped running when I was about a meter away from the throne room and turned around to check that Nika hadn’t followed me.

I put my hand over my chest, relieved. Sure enough, there was no Nika behind me. For some reason, though, Nika’s two guards apparently *had* followed me.

“Um… What are you two doing here?” I asked them.

“Our current assignment is Prince Nicholas, but we’re technically employed by His Majesty. It’s our job to protect the

big guy too."

"We'll be the only ones accompanying you into the throne room. The fewer people the better, but if we let you talk to him alone in there, you might lose your mind and try to murder him. We certainly can't have *that*."

Right... So it's just gonna be the four of us during this negotiation. I guess that makes sense. That's certainly more convenient for His Majesty.

I nodded, showing that I understood.

"We've also got another matter to talk to the big guy about. Don't worry your pretty little head about *us*, though. You're still beet red, you know. How 'bout you focus on cooling off before you go in there?"

"That earlier display was bad enough, but the lovers' tryst you forced us to witness in that cramped little carriage was *hell*."

"Wait, really?" said the casual guard. "I thought it was hilarious. I was tryin' not to bust a gut."

I hadn't exactly *forgotten* that the guards were there in the carriage with us (well, maybe I had at some points—but not for the entire ride), but it was mortifying to hear them talk about what had happened this candidly. And it certainly wasn't helping my current blushing problem.

In a weird way, their joshing around did calm my nerves, but I didn't know how I was going to make my face look any less red before I entered the throne room. I poured all my anger into glaring at them, but they just shot back mean-natured smirks.

"Well, good luck havin' your chat with the big guy, Fii," said the casual guard.

"Rest assured, Fii: We'll be here to collect your bones and scatter your ashes," said the formal one.

They closed in on me as they spoke.

Are you just doubling down on making fun of me? I thought, glaring even harder at them. Strangely enough, though, I could sense a familiar affection in their eyes, as if they really *did* care about me. It was a complete one-eighty from how they usually acted. I was so taken aback that I could feel the pink draining from my cheeks. I didn't show it, but subconsciously, I appreciated their concern.

Ugh... Still gives me the creeps, though. I think I'm getting goose bumps.

⚜

Once I'd calmed down a bit, I took in a deep breath and walked up to the throne room doors, holding my head high just like Mel had told me to.

I knocked on the door, and before long, I heard the king's voice bidding that I enter. Since apparently even the doormen had been sent away, I worked up the courage to open the doors myself and step inside.

I looked straight ahead of me as I walked. The king's face bore a strong resemblance, as always, to those of his sons. Yet his expression was gentler than Nika's and calmer than Seth's. It held the dignity of a king and the wisdom of an older man. It was plain to see why the kingdom adored him. His smile projected boundless magnanimity, yet there was a stately self-possession that lay behind it.

In my past life, my parents had practically been strangers to me. They had barely ever paid attention to me and only had love for my older brother. In my current life, my parents were callous and power hungry. They only saw me as a tool for their own ambitions. The king was the only man who'd been like a real father to me.

Only a mere three months had passed since we'd last seen each other, so I knew it should have come as no surprise that he seemed much the same as I remembered him. Now that my heart had been put through the wringer, though, his gentle smile that I used to love seemed strangely hollow.

Adhering to custom, I knelt down before him. The two guards, who had both followed me in, knelt down beside me—one on my right, and one on my left. To an outside observer, they might've looked like they were there to guard *me*. But the real reason they knelt on either side of me was to keep me in check; they were ready at a moment's notice to put me down if I tried anything foolish.

When I thought back to the inhuman speed and dexterity with which the casual guard had leaped out of the carriage this morning, I knew they'd have absolutely no trouble doing so. I barely knew how to *make a fist*; putting up a fight was out of the question.

"Lift your head, child," said the king.

I slowly looked up and into his blue eyes. They weren't quite

the same sky blue as Seth's eyes or the ice-blue that I saw in Nika's. They were the color of the ocean.

I already knew what I wanted to say to him and how I wanted to say it. I'd made up my mind before I'd come in.

"It's so lovely to see you again, Your Majesty. Please allow me to express my deepest gratitude for this opportunity to speak with you today. It was most gracious of you to grant a humble peasant such as myself an audience, especially on such short notice."

The king laughed. "Oh, enough of that. You may be a commoner now, but that doesn't erase our history. There is no need to speak so formally amongst friends. I'm just glad to see you're doing well."

I swallowed the urge to protest. I'd resolved to keep my composure from start to finish—no matter how the conversation unfolded.

"I'm here to speak with you regarding the kidnapping of Prince Seth Cabott's fiancée, Liliana Inoce…but I presume you've already been told the details?" I said.

"So I have," he replied. "And I've also been told that you and your friends resolved the crisis before I could even lift a finger. I imagine that you must have some complicated feelings toward our future queen, and yet you saved her. You have my sincere thanks, child."

Keep it together, Fii. Keep it together!

Let's get back to the task at hand. That isn't what you came here to talk about.

"I presume you've also been told that the culprits behind her kidnapping are Shade Schwarose and Evan Douglas, then. I've requested this audience with you to humbly request that you lessen their sentences."

I looked him earnestly in the eye. The look he returned was kind yet troubled. *Impressive acting*, I thought, as if it had nothing to do with me.

"I see. Mm… Well, I'm sure you must have your reasons for asking that of me. But I'm afraid I'm not able to honor your request. I'm sure you understand? These criminals must be brought to justice. There isn't a king living or dead who would ever dare leave them unpunished. I'm relieved to hear that Liliana is mostly unharmed, but she could have died at their hands. There is no way around it, child: They must pay for this

with their lives."

His reasoning was sound—almost sound enough to convince me. After what he'd just said, I'd concede that anyone would probably see this kidnapping incident as a huge deal. But I knew there was more to this, and I had faith in myself that I now knew the *full* truth of the situation.

"I know this line of discussion will likely be fruitless and that no matter what I say, I'll probably never be able to change my fate. But please, Your Majesty, hear me out," I said, not hesitating to argue.

The king smiled, and I took this to be his way of giving me permission to continue. Knowing him, he would probably listen quietly until I had said all I had to say. I also knew that he would probably be looking down on me the entire time I spoke, fully aware that I was struggling in vain.

The king was a kind man. If nothing else, I'd always believed in that. All I had to go on was the snippets of information I'd gleaned about him from the game and the way he'd treated me when I was a kid—but that was enough for me. I didn't believe that his kindness had ever been a lie. But it would have been the height of arrogance to think that knowing that about him meant I *understood* him. His kindness was only one part of who he was. As a king, he had no choice but to take advantage of my gifts and bend them to his will—for the betterment of the kingdom. I was a valuable *asset* to the state.

When I thought about things that way, it shook the foundations of everything I'd assumed.

"Are you certain that no one knew about the kidnapping until it occurred, Your Majesty?" I asked him.

Shade had said something before about how it felt like we were all standing on a stage that had been set for us. I had a feeling that I knew what he meant by that now: It was almost like everything had been going *too* well for him.

The only people who were in on the kidnapping plan were, ostensibly, Shade, Evan, and the driver who had driven Lily off in her carriage. I should probably also include Shade's birth parents in that list, even though they had no idea what was happening. With so few people involved, they probably would have been able to keep a lid on their plans.

But wait... Is that true? Are we really supposed to believe that no one else *knew* anything *about what was going to happen?*

“Lady Liliana is the future queen. Surely it can’t be that easy to kidnap someone of her station?” I asked.

Hypothetically, you could make the argument that Lily might have asked for some space due to her mental health struggles and that this accounted for why she’d been left unguarded. But even if she’d sent them away and insisted upon being alone, surely there would still be several who stayed with her, covertly standing guard? It would be insane for them to let a future queen sneak off to some peasant village all by herself.

I mean, obviously, it was insane for Lily to do that in the first place…but it was even *more* insane that they *let* her.

“Then there’s the matter of what happened next. It’s too much of a coincidence that all those people were there at that random village church when she was kidnapped. It’s strange enough that no one could prevent her kidnapping, but stranger still is how Prince Seth managed to shake off all his guards and make it all the way to the manor without a single one in tow. I have a hard time believing royal guards to be that incompetent. If I may speak candidly, the whole situation seems highly unusual.”

I couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed in myself for not realizing something was off about that sooner. The conveniently gathered crowd at the church was one thing, but it was beyond bizarre that Lily and Seth would go about unaccompanied. It should have been immediately apparent that something was amiss there.

I had still been seeing this world as a video game, though, so I think I’d been subconsciously taking everything for granted as a plot device. Now that I was seeing this as real life, it was obvious that it was all a little *too* convenient. It seemed a lot more likely that it was some sort of setup than mere coincidence. There was a time when I would have assumed that the mysterious “El” was behind it all, but when I put my assumptions to the side, I realized that there was someone *else* who was a more obvious candidate for the mastermind.

“But if you were pulling the strings, Your Majesty, then it would all make sense. You could have ordered Prince Seth and Lady Liliana’s guards to turn a blind eye, letting them slip out to the church unaccompanied. You could have also fabricated some reason to draw everyone else that was there to the church. Those two strings were the only ones you had to pull to set everything into motion.”

Everyone who'd gathered at the church had a noble lineage of some sort, so it would have been a simple matter for the king to compel each of them there with a suitably appropriate reason. In fact, no one would have ever thought to question it.

"If I'm correct in assuming that this was all a play that you directed just to get your hands on me…then, if anything, it would be in your best interests if this incident *didn't* come to light."

The king's expression didn't change, despite my accusations. I had kind of expected him to start looking uncomfortable at this point—that is, if I was on the right track—but he still wore the gentle smile he'd had on his face since the beginning.

"The commoners might recognize Prince Seth, but they likely wouldn't recognize anyone else who was there that day. Even if some of the townspeople had witnessed the kidnapping, they would have assumed that the target was a lesser noble. They certainly wouldn't have ever thought to guess that the future queen consort would sneak out of the palace to their little village in the first place, never mind the rest."

It had only been three months since Lily and Seth had been engaged. The only people who would have recognized the viscount's daughter were other nobles and anyone who worked for the Inoce family.

"Since these two guards were at the manor, they would have easily been able to deal with any unexpected trouble that arose. I wouldn't be surprised if you had also stationed extra guards to hide around the perimeter to make sure that news of the kidnapping didn't leave the premises."

When I thought about how capable the two guards next to me were, it was clear that there was no risk of death to anyone whom the king couldn't *afford* to lose. Lily had come close, but the king had apparently considered that to be an unavoidable and acceptable loss. As much as it pained me to try to wrap my head around that, I could see why he saw it that way.

And in case you're wondering how I figured out that the king might've stationed other guards around the manor's perimeter, it was the formal guard's comment about how Nika wasn't at risk of being attacked that had clued me in.

"With all that in mind, surely the only people who know that the future queen consort was kidnapped were those of us who were there. Wouldn't you agree?"

Nolls and Zero might have been the only people who'd been

there by pure chance. The king probably wouldn't appreciate the possibility that a foreign prince and his aide—both of whom would be difficult to silence—could blab about what had happened today. Something had clearly occurred between them and Nana, but they didn't seem to have any obvious role to play. I couldn't imagine that the king would have felt it necessary to have them there.

Maybe even His Majesty can't predict Nolls's next move. It sounded like Nolls and Zero had something on the agenda for today that they were really late for, so maybe the king had set that up to try to lure them away *from the scene?*

It was still a bit of a mystery what part Nana had had to play in all of this. Despite her commoner status, apparently she'd known about the mansion's secret rear entrance, so it was entirely possible that she'd been there for a reason. Considering that she worked at the church where all of the key players had gathered, it wouldn't have been difficult for her to involve herself in what had happened today.

I'd posed a question to the king just before, but I had no expectation that he'd actually answer it. And so, I barreled on.

"When I began to suspect you, Your Majesty, I realized that something had been off since the very beginning," I continued.

By "the beginning," I meant ten years ago—back when I'd first met the king.

"I find it hard to believe that a man who carries the fate of the nation on his shoulders as king would never once have sensed that I might just be putting on an act."

For all his brilliance, it was understandable that Nika might not have caught on. After all, he and the others were *younger* than I was (if we're counting my past life). What's more, I'd taken pains to act my age in this life, and I had the means to pull it off and convince most people. I didn't expect most people—even Nika—to realize something was amiss.

But was it really possible for me to pull the wool over the eyes of a *king*? I didn't have *that* much confidence in my acting skills, particularly when I was still young and trying to make sense of the universe I'd just been reborn into. Had he really not seen through my act at all?

Even if he *had*, though, he would never have imagined that I'd developed these skills from the trauma I'd faced in my past life. I mean, there's just no way he could have known that. Besides,

most people wouldn't take someone at their word when they acted like they could see the future. That was an absolutely bonkers conclusion to come to. Instead, they would probably just assume that their "clairvoyance" was an uncanny perceptiveness and an ability to draw causal conclusions from whatever they picked up on.

The logical conclusion, then, was that the king must have assumed I was a child prodigy. With my wit and lack of life experience, I would have made the perfect pawn. Of course, he was sorely mistaken about that.

Truth is often stranger than fiction, after all.

"If I may, Your Majesty, let's entertain the one-in-a-million possibility that my performance was somehow so incredible that you never suspected me for a moment," I said. "If that were the case, then you'd have no reason to disbelieve Lady Liliana when she lied about me harassing her, wouldn't you agree?"

In the game, Lily is the one on trial—not me. Her lies and bullying are easily exposed. But although I corroborated Lily's lie in this universe, even a cursory investigation would have set things straight. It seemed only reasonable to expect a thorough review of the evidence in the face of such serious accusations against the crown prince's fiancée, but no such investigation had ever been conducted.

And thinking back, I remembered the guilty, heartbroken expression that the king had given me after the trial. Now I could see that for what it was: The king had known the truth all along but had pretended not to as he handed down my punishment. It was the one chink in his armor that he'd revealed to me.

"That's why I believe you knew I was lying. But I can only assume that you decided it was actually in your best interests to let me be a commoner—if only briefly."

I wasn't the only one who'd wanted that outcome. That's why, even in this universe that deviated so much from the game's, there were still only targeted changes to the scripts. It was like the powers that be had zeroed in on my banishment as one of the few acceptable changes.

It didn't seem likely that the king had known from the very beginning that I'd wanted to be a commoner. But when he found out that Seth had announced that he'd be breaking off our engagement, the king had probably decided that stripping me of my status was the best outcome for *him*.

In a sense, I'd betrayed the king first by lying to him. Maybe he'd realized this, and he'd decided to use my betrayal to his benefit.

"My parents are awful, power-hungry people. If we're being honest, wouldn't you say they're a burden—both to you and to the kingdom? But if you could pull the strings for me to be disowned, then I'd be free of their fetters…but I'd also lose the freedom and civil liberties that I enjoyed as a duke's daughter."

Commoners' very lives were at the whims of noblemen and royals. Presumably I'd only avoided any harm because I'd been surrounded by good people who treated me with dignity.

You could even make the case that the king's roundabout method of making me kneel here of my own volition before him was, in a way, an act of kindness. If you asked me if I could accept that, though…the answer was "no." I wouldn't even be able to bring myself to nod my head. I was too willful for that.

"To be honest, I don't know how much of this you calculated. But I have a feeling that you're the one to thank for putting in a good word with my parents and convincing them to choose stripping me of my title, as opposed to any of the other punishments I might've suffered."

To anyone else, that punishment probably would've seemed like overkill—especially considering that I was a video game protagonist. And because I'd pretended to have just-above-average talents, there was a real risk that my parents would have wanted to keep me around. Instead of stripping me of my title and disowning me, like what happens to Liliana in the game, they might've just given me a slap on the wrist.

For my theory to be true, the king *had* to have known that my parents would be willing to punish me the way I secretly wanted. By now, though, it seemed pretty unlikely that the king had also been reincarnated into this world. He must have simply had a very discerning eye. He knew that my hysterical parents would be receptive to the idea—or, rather, that they'd be wide open for the king *himself* to convince them. Surely that would be the quickest way? It was easy to control people's minds when they'd already lost them.

Since the king's goals and mine had just so happened to align, I hadn't even realized his ulterior motives.

What I'd taken as an incredible stroke of luck now seemed plainly to have been part of his plan for me from the start. I'd

thought I'd suddenly been banished from my gilded cage and thrust out into the real world, but in reality, the king had arranged for me to live in a peaceful, friendly little town where I could easily find employment. And what's more, it was the very same town where Lily regularly dropped by the church.

All of it—every little moment of happiness—had been carefully orchestrated by the king, as if I were nothing more than his toy.

But that didn't change the fact that, from the bottom of my heart, I'd been happy. Even if that happiness was fleeting, and even if it was all part of the king's scheme, I was grateful to him.

I took in a deep breath.

"And now, here I am; of my own volition, I offer myself as a pawn of the kingdom and kneel before you to humbly request that you pardon Shade and Evan from their sentences," I said. Then I added, with a smile and an ironic tone, "Everything has gone exactly as you planned, Your Majesty."

Well…that's that on that. I know all this struggle has been in vain, but at least I got it out of my system.

Just like I'd told the king at the beginning of our meeting, everything I did was for nothing more than my own satisfaction.

I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive my insolence, I thought. *But come on…how could I* not *be frustrated when all of our suffering is thanks to one person's manipulations?*

When I looked up at the king, I saw that his expression hadn't changed a bit. He was looking back at me with the same wise, gentle look on his face. I glared back at him, like a child reluctantly admitting defeat.

Well… I wonder what he'll say now?

I closed my eyes and began to rack my brains in desperation.

Maybe he'd act like he hadn't heard a word I'd said but would find some discreet way to take me up on my offer by acting like he'd just thought of it himself. Or maybe he wouldn't even beat around the bush; maybe he'd just confirm everything I'd said and order me to be his puppet. And there was always a third option: Maybe he'd feign innocence and flat out deny everything I'd just accused him of.

He might have been a king, but I'd see right through him if he tried that last strategy. The minute he tried to deny it all, I'd call him a liar straight to his face.

Speaking of strategies, one strategy I'd deliberately avoided in

this negotiation was to ask for a more lenient sentence on the basis that Shade and Evan's actions had technically been *my* fault. I knew that would be a pointless suggestion. After all, it would only take a few words from them to refute this: All they had to say was that they'd committed the crimes of their own volition, and my argument would be moot.

The king probably knew that too. And even if he didn't, I didn't want to show the king any weakness if I didn't absolutely have to. There was every chance he'd try to take advantage of any openings he saw. I knew it would be better to just concede and live as the king's puppet than to keep struggling in vain and causing more issues.

And if I didn't want to cause issues for anyone, then it was better not to drag my friends into this. I didn't know what kind of life I would lead (or rather, be forced into) once I'd exchanged my undying loyalty to the king for Shade's and Evan's lives. But whatever happened, I didn't want anyone else involved.

If I'd accepted Nika's marriage proposal, then maybe I could've negotiated more comfortably with the king. Maybe we could've entered this master-servant arrangement on better terms, without any hostility or resentment.

I wondered what Nika would think of me now—struggling in vain against fate, unable to change anything and forced to admit defeat. Would he be disappointed in me? Maybe he'd try to pat me on the back and console me, telling me that I tried my best.

Ugh... It feels awful to fail so miserably and surrender my freedom like this after he told me how much he loved my free spirit.

Nika had said something to me before about how his father had "given him his blessing." I finally knew what that meant now: The king had probably given Nika his blessing to marry me as a way to bind me to the royal family. I doubted that Nika had been given the full story, but he'd probably started to catch on to the king's plans by the time we'd arrived at the mansion. That would certainly explain the *timing* of his proposal.

Nika must have chosen the path that he felt would make him the happiest, even though he knew it had been paved for him from the beginning by the king.

There was still no response from the king.

I'd thought through all of this at length, but anything else I could figure out now would be pointless. At this point, all I wanted was for him to hurry up and put an end to my suffering.

To be totally honest, I was completely exhausted.

If there's no hope, then I'm ready to concede that and admit defeat. Just hurry up and tell me so I can start switching gears.

I opened my eyes and looked up at the king again. Just as I did, he opened his mouth to speak.

"A splendid defeat. I daresay there's no coming back from this," he said.

I looked at him with suspicion.

Why would he say that? Is he gloating? Is he celebrating the fact that everything's gone exactly as he planned and now he's in full control? I mean, he's not wrong…but he doesn't have to rub salt in the wound.

I continued staring at him in silence, and he looked back at me with a gentle expression on his face.

"Don't you see? The battle was won the moment that you figured everything out," he said slowly, as if explaining something to a child.

…?

I kept staring at him, still silent. I had no idea what was going on. Was he making fun of me?

His victory hadn't been threatened whatsoever by my knowledge. Shade and Evan were essentially being held hostage to enforce my compliance. I didn't have the heart to abandon them, which left me with no choice but to obey.

"It would be most unwise to keep you so close if you're harboring animosity. I would have no way of knowing if you might one day decide to turn on the kingdom," the king said nonchalantly, with all the gravitas of someone talking about the flowers blooming in their garden.

I was absolutely dumbfounded.

With the power that he wielded as king, surely that was nothing but a trivial concern? And knowing him, he'd know exactly how to make the best use of my talents.

"Your Majesty… Are you making fun of me?" I asked him, with a serious look on my face. I was careful not to betray any emotion.

"Why, no…" he replied, with a troubled expression. "I would have to be an utter fool to employ advisors who bear ill will for me. They'd be delighted for the opportunity to stab me in the back, and I'd be handing them one on a silver platter if I put them in such an important position. Even one untrustworthy

advisor would be enough to make me lose sleep—and Heaven knows how much I value my rest."

He made a compelling case. I couldn't imagine that he was just making that up. But if my learning the truth was all it took for him to give up, then I couldn't understand why he'd go to all the trouble of pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Why waste all that time?

I still harbored some lingering suspicion toward him, but it stood in stark contrast to the memories that suddenly came flooding back. Back when I was just a little girl, the king would invite me to take naps with him. I'd found his invitations a little confusing, but it had always made me happy to retreat to his bed and have a rest together.

Whenever I woke up, though, he'd be getting an angry earful from one of his advisors for abandoning his work. He'd always look so sheepish. Then we'd make eye contact, and he'd break into a childish giggle. Even though he was the ruler of the kingdom, we'd laugh like mischievous kids who'd just been caught making trouble. Of course, his advisor would always scold him even *harder* for that.

It was a fond, pleasant memory...but there was no point revisiting it now.

"It hardly matters if you were to hate me personally or even if you were to kill me. But it would be a terrible tragedy for you to hate the kingdom," the king said. "You wanted a lighter sentence for Evan Douglas and Shade Schwarose, yes? You make a fair case for it. Just as you said, I did indeed look the other way when I could have easily prevented their crimes. Now, then...what to do with them?"

Where in the world is this going? I wondered, feeling completely lost. But the king kept talking.

I had no idea what to do, so I looked desperately to the guards flanking me for help, even knowing that they weren't on my side. They looked as serious and stoic as ever, not breaking their composure by even a hair. It seemed they were committed to doing the work they'd been assigned, and nothing more.

"Hey... What's going on here? Does this have something to do with El?" I asked one of them (the casual one) quietly.

Then I noticed the formal guard move a bit, so I looked over in his direction.

"Please stop trying to drag our master's name into this with

more of your wild misunderstandings. Master El is far too dignified to get down in the dirt with such *messy entanglements*," he said.

Got it. So El doesn't *have anything to do with this after all.*

But..."wild misunderstandings"? After all that's happened, am I really still making misguided assumptions? Does that mean that everything is playing out just the way that the formal guard expected it to?

"I've got an idea. How about I let the boys off easy, with just a warning? In exchange, perhaps you can promise to lend your aid to the kingdom in its time of need. What do you say, Fii?" said the king, smiling gently.

Is he giving me tacit permission to stay a commoner? I wondered.

It all seemed too good to be true. I knew I should have been elated, but I couldn't let my guard down. If anything, I felt even more afraid than when I thought I *knew* the king's intentions.

"Y'know...somethin' about this whole exchange feels a lot like déjà vu," said the casual guard.

"I can see now why it was decided that Prince Seth should accede to the throne instead of Prince Nicholas. Both Prince Nicholas and the king are much too lenient," said the formal one.

"Nothin' wrong with that, though, right? After all, that's what Master El loves about the king."

"Yes, well, I suppose all's well that ends well. Better to have a bleeding-heart ruler than a bloodthirsty one. I can't say I care much for blood."

"You've grown soft, y'know that?"

"I could say the same of *you*."

The two guards quietly exchanged jabs over me as I knelt between them. Their bantering felt completely out of place with the serious workplace expressions they wore on their faces. It was so lighthearted, you would've thought they were just loafing around in their bedroom chatting.

"Um... I have a question," I said, facing them.

I still didn't have a clue why the king was suddenly going so easy on me. But...

"Do I...not have to rack my brains anymore? Does this mean I can keep living as a commoner? Can I...be happy?" I asked.

I had no idea what the king was thinking. But if I took the king at his word—and if he *kept* his word—then even if there was

some kind of catch, it felt like a much better future than the one I'd expected.

After all, my one wish was coming true.

The two guards didn't respond. But when I looked between them anxiously, their composure fell—and for some reason, they burst out laughing.

I'd never seen or heard them laugh like this before. It was an open-mouthed, genuine laugh that came out of both of their mouths. All I could do was watch, dumbstruck. They looked to be about ten years older than me, but seeing them laugh like this made them look strangely childlike.

"I see… You're having trouble believing me, are you?" said the king. He didn't sound angry—just concerned.

I didn't even look at him as he spoke. I was so mystified that all I could do was continue to look to the guards on either side of me.

"I'd have to put up with quite the glares from these two if I tried to take you by force, and I'm not ready to die yet," the king continued, sounding defeated.

My eyes widened in shock as I looked again between the two guards. They'd gone back to being completely expressionless; it was almost like I'd just *hallucinated* their laughter.

"I've no idea what you mean by that, Your Majesty. What you do with Lady Rose is none of our concern."

"Yeah, what he said. We only care about her enough to step in if she's about to get jumped on the roadside or something."

"Oh? Well now, that's funny… I could have sworn I'd heard you say exactly the same thing about someone else before. And if memory serves, you then went on to risk your lives to protect them. Or maybe that was all just my imagination?" said the king.

I had a feeling he was talking about El.

Come to think of it, the casual guard *had* just said something about how my conversation with the king felt a lot like déjà vu. Maybe that was about El too?

"Huh, did we? I don't remember that."

"Yes, as you said, Your Majesty: just your imagination. I guarantee that."

The king laughed. "Right," he said. "I see, I see."

The king gave them a wise, knowing smile. Despite the fact that the guards were full-grown adults, just like the king, it was hard to see them in that moment as anything other than little

kids stubbornly refusing to admit to having a crush in front of their dad.

It was a heartwarming moment. But when I thought of how the king and I used to be like father and daughter too, a small part of me burned with jealousy.

That being said, watching their exchange play out left me with the sense that I had the guards' silent intervention to thank (at least in part) for the opportunity to keep living my life as a commoner. Even though I'd never hold a candle to El in their hearts, maybe they *did* have a soft spot for me?

Throughout my first meeting with the casual guard, I was pretty sure he'd been glaring daggers at me. They'd never done anything that had given me the impression they were particularly fond of me either (at least, not that I could remember).

When did that change? I wondered.

"Well, Your Majesty...we should prob'ly leave you to it. I know you had to cram this meeting into your jam-packed schedule."

"If there's anything else you'd like to say to Lady Rose, perhaps now is the time, Your Majesty. Knowing you, I doubt you'd reach out to her again unless something major happened."

"I tell ya, these Cabotts can't talk about their feelings to save their lives. I mean, just look at how Prince Seth turned out. Not to mention Prince Nicholas—he could've confessed his love ages ago, but noooo. He just *had* to drag his feet."

"Shh! As *comfortable* as you may feel around His Majesty and Lady Rose, you can't go around insulting the royal family like that. Do try to keep up appearances."

"Oh, *fine*. I'll keep my observations to myself."

The two guards were talking so freely, you would've thought they were among family. *How can they get away with saying all of that?* I wondered. *Are they just so formidable that anything goes? Or do they have some kind of dirt on the king?*

The king just laughed awkwardly at them as they mouthed off. Then he looked at me, growing silent as if thinking deeply about something.

"Tell me, Fii: What do you think is your brightest talent?" he finally asked me.

It was a wholly unexpected question, but I immediately had an answer. It had always been obvious to me where my talents lay. But when I thought about how much pain and suffering

those talents had caused, I hesitated to say the answer aloud.

"My...acting abilities," I said, mumbling a bit.

"I see. Yes, that's certainly *one* of your talents," the king replied.

It almost sounded like he'd been expecting a *different* answer. I tried racking my brains for something else that I was better than most at, but I couldn't think of anything. I looked up at the king to see him smiling kindly at me. The look on his face was so full of compassion, it hurt.

"Personally, however, I think your greatest talent is your magnetic personality," he said.

Now *that* was an answer I hadn't been expecting. Before I could take in his words, though, the faces of all the people I knew flashed in my head.

They had all been there for me, giving me a push when I needed it. They'd taught me so much too. If it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't even be here right now—and I would *never* have secured a future for myself as a commoner.

Maybe they stuck around because they cared about me more than I thought?

My real talent wasn't my ability to pull one over on people; it was my ability to draw people in and make them genuinely care about me. Thinking about it that way was nice, and it let me accept the king's words effortlessly.

"I wish you all the best, Fii," said the king.

The smile he had on his face was the same gentle smile, full of compassion, that I'd always seen him wear when I was a child. I loved that smile.



If I read between the lines, I could see how it wouldn't make much sense for the king to make me his pawn if it meant I would resent him for it. If I had a magnetic personality, and the people in my sphere of influence were all powerful people in their own right who would carry the future of the kingdom, I could easily sow the seeds of rebellion. The king cared too deeply for his country to let that happen. It was no wonder that he would be anxious about what might come of it.

And yet… And yet…

As tears threatened to spill down my cheeks, I turned my back to the king, abandoning all sense of propriety and running toward the doors that led back to the hall.

"I… I've always loved you like a father. You've been more of a father to me than my *real* father," I choked out, desperate to be heard even through my tears.

Then I ran out into the hallway.

Naturally, neither the king nor the guards followed after me.

Ever since I'd stepped into the throne room today, the king's smile hadn't wavered. I would have been able to see through it if it were fake…but it wasn't. I had no doubts now that he really was watching over me with warmth and compassion.

If I'd never realized the truth behind all of this and I'd surrendered to the king in blissful ignorance…then he probably would have traded Shade's and Evan's freedom in exchange for my devotion to the kingdom. Even if it pained him to do so, he probably would have believed he was acting in the kingdom's best interests.

But if he'd meant what he said about my magnetic personality…and if that really *was* one of my talents…then maybe the king had come to care for me too? As king, it was natural that he'd yearn to put my talents to use to help the kingdom flourish. But maybe there was more to his feelings than that. Maybe, just as I loved him as a father, he loved me as if I were his real daughter?

Even though he might have planned from the start to give me my freedom if I figured everything out, he'd probably hardened his heart to me for the sake of the kingdom.

Of course, I didn't actually *know* any of that. It could have just been wishful thinking—but I'd settle for that. A little wishful thinking never hurt anyone.

After I left the throne room, I spent several minutes sobbing.

When I eventually composed myself, it finally hit me that I'd be going back to the outskirts where I'd made my new home.

The guards were probably staying put here, and there would be no horse-drawn carriage to send me off. That was okay, though. Not many commoners get the chance to ride in carriages anyway.

Just like the day I'd been disowned, I decided to walk all the way back to town. Unlike back then, though, it wasn't early in the morning. The thought of walking back in the evening didn't sound so bad, though. And what could be better than arriving home after a long walk and crawling into my modest futon for a good night's sleep?

All right. Time to get going, I thought, as I wiped my tears and set my gaze on the hallway ahead of me. There, standing at the end of it, was Nika.

The moment I noticed him there, my body started moving before I could even think, and I found myself running toward him at a full sprint. When I reached him, I stopped to steady my breathing before looking up at him. He looked like he'd been waiting for me.

I love him... I thought, as I looked up at his face.

"I get to stay a commoner," I told him, with a genuine smile on my face. I was still riding on the high of everything that had just happened.

I knew I'd have started crying with joy if I told him how I'd claimed my victory against fate. Before I could even stop to worry about how Nika might be feeling about everything, he gave me a smile back.

"Is that so? Well, then I look forward to paying you another visit in town," he said.

Without even thinking about it, we both broke into a laugh.

Nika lifted up his hand gently, and for a moment I had no idea what he was doing. Then I realized and broke into a chuckle again at how absurd it was that Nika was trying to high-five me.

Without saying a word, we both slapped each other's hands—just like commoners do—and left it at that. Still silent, we both walked past each other and carried on in our opposite directions.

After that brief encounter, I walked straight out of the palace, and no one else stopped me.

I paused to take in a deep breath and fill my lungs with fresh

air. Then I set off again for town. I knew I probably wouldn't be home until the dead of night, but I had a warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest.

This feels different from the elation I felt when I first made this trek to the outskirts, though. I don't think I'm going to be tempted to start skipping this time, I thought. So instead, I just walked.

If there was anything that still nagged at me, it would have to be the mysterious "El."

But now that it was all over, this "El" business just seemed like a complete coincidence. Maybe they'd never actually had anything to do with me? It felt like when something is foreshadowed in a video game as if it's significant, but then there's no payoff. To be fair, this *wasn't* a video game, and it wasn't like real life didn't leave you lots of loose ends and open questions. I'd basically resigned myself to the reality that I'd probably never get an answer, but...a part of me still couldn't let it go.

Maybe I'd jumped to conclusions because that conversation with Nolls about El had felt significant, thanks to coincidental timing? And maybe it was all just a remarkable coincidence that El had made that prophecy sixteen years ago about a baby? Maybe I'd just become obsessed with learning about El, even though they had nothing to do with me, and that's why I'd been so needlessly suspicious of Nika's guards for their coincidental connection with them?

Coincidence, coincidence, coincidence...

It was all just a coincidence. I didn't get it, but that was the reality, and I had no choice but to accept it.

Just as my bright mood was darkening, I heard the thunderous sound of something quickly approaching me from behind. It was an incredible *dmp dmp dmp dmp dmp dmp* noise.

I whipped around to see what the heck was going on and, instantly, I felt something whiz by me on both sides.

"Looks like I win the race."

"Dammit! I was just an *inch* away from winning! This sucks!"

I turned back around to face forward again and saw what it was that had just hurtled past me: the two guards, who were now standing before me wheezing and trying to catch their breaths. I was shocked that humans were even *capable* of running at speeds like that. I looked at them in astonishment, still doubtful that the incredible clamor I'd heard earlier could

have been footsteps.

"Hey, Fii. So, we meet again!" the casual guard said.

"You say that like we didn't *just* see each other," I replied. "Hey, aren't you guys supposed to be, you know…*guarding*? Why did you follow me here?"

The guards worked for the king and were employed to protect Nika. I couldn't even imagine what would have compelled them to follow me.

The casual guard threw his hands up, fingers splayed in a celebratory "ta-da!" gesture, and puffed his chest out as if to say, *Great question!*

"'Cause as of today, we quit! Woo-hoo!"

"We've decided to move into your town, so we figured we may as well escort you there while we're at it. The sun's going to set soon, though, so we had to hurry."

"Oh, okay… Wait, *what*?!"

I gave them a baffled look that said, *What the hell are you two talking about?* but it didn't seem like they were lying.

They must *be, though…right? I mean, they're super elite guards—good enough to guard Nika—so they wouldn't just up and quit their jobs to come live in the countryside, would they?*

"Stooop! I'm scared!" I whined. "Does this have something to do with El? Seriously, *stooop*! I'm begging you, please don't make me do any more negotiating or puzzle solving!"

"Whoa. Is it just me, or did she just regress, like, ten years?" said the casual guard.

"Perhaps she's finally snapped, and now she's just showing her true colors? Come to think of it, she *is* only sixteen. Maybe she's acting out because she was so mature as a young child that everyone always treated her like an adult?" said the formal one.

I didn't appreciate him calmly psychoanalyzing me, but it *was* a reasonable theory. Even in my past life, my parents had largely ignored me, and I'd had to act like an adult just to protect myself from my older brother. And in my current life, I hadn't really been *allowed* to ever be a kid. I'd had to be "the perfect Lady Rose" basically from the moment I'd left the womb.

Wait, what am I supposed to call these guys now that they've quit their jobs? I can't exactly call them "guards" anymore, I thought. *Actually, you know what? Screw it. It's too late to change how I address them.*

"Okay, if I'm bein' honest…we miiiight have an ulterior motive

in walkin' you home. We're kinda countin' on you owin' us one for it," said the casual guard.

"What?! *Hell no*! I'm going home by myself!"

"Oh, you're not goin' *anywhere*," he replied. "Besides, you *already* owe us for when we helped you negotiate with the king, remember? It's thanks to us that you can go home to your peasant life now."

He grabbed my collar with catlike reflexes, tragically preventing any escape I might've been planning.

I hated to admit it, but he was right. The king himself had said that the guards had played a big part in his decision-making. I stopped flailing, and the guard let go of my collar. I glared up at him, like prey trying in vain to fight back against its natural predator.

The El issue was still weighing on me, but I absolutely wasn't looking to fight any more battles. If that was the only loose thread, then I was content not to tug on it further.

"S-So, what kind of favor are you going to cash in...?" I asked, hesitantly.

"Don't worry. All you have to do is keep a secret."

"And do a little mediating."

"Oh, that's right. That's probably the most important thing you can do for us."

What on earth are they talking about? "Keep a secret"?

Oh... Come to think of it, the casual guard said something once before about not saying a word about El's identity to anyone. Maybe that's what they're talking about?

I still don't get what exactly they want me to mediate, though. What's that *all about?*

The two guards watched my response. Then they turned to look at each other.

"She seriously doesn't know who Master El is, does she?" said the casual guard. Then, turning to me, he said, "I was sure you'd figured it out. That's why I was tryin' to intimidate you when we first met. Sorry 'bout that, by the way."

"I certainly wouldn't have put it past Master El to reveal that information personally. But seriously, you need to learn how to think before you speak."

"No can do. Who else is gonna balance you out when you've got that stick so far up your ass?"

"There you two go again, getting lost in your own little world,"

I said, a little annoyed. “So? Who is this ‘El’ person?”

The guards looked back at me again.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” the casual guard teased. “Just sit tight and chill out for a bit. You’ll find out tomorrow.”

“Exactly. Just focus on playing your part as a mediator tomorrow, and there won’t be any issues.”

“I still have no idea *what* I’m mediating, though!” I protested.

“Just wait ’til tomorrow,” said the casual guard.

“You’ll find out tomorrow,” said the formal one, at the same time.

It was a relief to know that I’d at least be able to find out who El was in the very near future, but I was a little scared of what tomorrow held in store for me. I had a funny feeling that I might be better off never finding out.

“Oh, almost forgot to tell you something: Congrats on successfully defending your commoner status!”

“Yes, and congratulations on changing your fate. You fought valiantly.”

It felt too weird to give them an earnest “thank you” after the conversation we’d just had, but I could tell that they were genuinely happy for me.

“Thanks,” I managed awkwardly, after a bit of a pause.

Urgh… If these guys are serious about moving to my village, then I might end up seeing a whole lot of them in the future. They don’t seem like bad people, but I can easily imagine developing a stomach ulcer or two from their brand of malarkey.

“Hey, just answer me one question. Is El a bad person?” I asked.

“Oh, *please*,” they replied, in unison.

Their identical cries of incredulity put me at ease. *Guess I can just put this out of my head until tomorrow, then*, I thought optimistically and started walking again.

For today, at least, I was done with puzzling over things in my head. I felt ready to hit the hay, and I knew that the moment I climbed into bed, nothing was going to wake me.

Chapter 6

When I woke up, my whole body hurt.

I'd woken up in an unfamiliar place, tied up after being submitted to grueling torture. It was the start of a new chapter for me, a tragic future where everything started to unravel before my eyes…

I'm just kidding. I was just sore as hell from overextending myself.

It was pretty much to be expected, honestly. I was generally pretty sedentary outside of work, but I'd been running around at a full sprint damn near all day yesterday. And, y'know, I'd made the trek from the palace grounds to my home in the boonies *on foot*.

But as sore as I was, the pain felt like a fair price to pay for winning against fate. I would accept it happily. Still, exhausted as I was, I'd nonetheless managed to wake up at my usual early hour. My body's internal clock was still in fine form, at least.

I looked out the window, taking in the sight of the morning sun. And what a beautiful sight it was. I felt a smile spread across my face as I admired it.

For breakfast, I finished off the rest of the baguette that Lily had only taken a single bite of yesterday before returning it to me. But I wasn't about to spend my morning just loafing around, so once I was done with breakfast, I headed straight out of the house.

You can probably guess exactly where I was going. Now that everything except for this El problem had been resolved, I figured it wouldn't hurt to stop by.

I arrived at Michelle's bakery and flung open the door with such force, I must have looked like I was in a battle manga, crashing a rival's stomping grounds ready to trounce every last person I found there.

"I know I'm only four days into my weeklong break, but I've resolved everything now, so please let me work again!" I boomed.

Michelle gave me a dumbfounded look. Undeterred, I entered the bakery and looked around. My eyes were wide as saucers as

I took everything in.

Naturally, I was checking that Michelle hadn't hired any new staff to replace me while I'd been away. As far as I could tell, though, there was no sign of anyone but the two of us in the bakery. I was still a little on edge, but I felt a bit hopeful now that I'd safely retained employment here (especially considering that I'd returned after only four days of my weeklong enforced break).

When I turned to look at Michelle again, she looked like she was in shock. I knew I'd made quite the entrance—what with all the door flinging and booming—but surely I couldn't have startled her *that* badly?

Just as I was starting to think that her surprise was a little weird, I caught her whispering something quietly.

"I thought you'd never come back…" she said.

Wh-What? You told me I'd just be on break for a week, but you thought I'd never come back? I knew it… That was *your polite way of telling me I was fired, wasn't it?*

No… Something's off. Michelle seems way too rattled for it to be just that.

"I won't get into the details, but look: No matter what kind of hopes people have for me, and no matter how hard I've fallen for a member of the royal family, I've made up my mind to come back here," I said. "You told me that you would welcome me back when I returned, so please don't go back on your promise, Michelle."

I shot her with a childish, sulky look.

I loved my life as a commoner. I loved living in this little town and working at this little bakery. I loved Michelle too. To be honest, I'd kind of been expecting that she would welcome me back with open arms. But now, it was starting to feel like she'd given up on me. I felt like I was going to cry.

Sure enough, she didn't even smile. Instead, her expression grew grim.

"Are you sure you won't regret this?" she asked me.

The way she said that, it almost sounded like she knew about what had happened between Nika and me. I mean, that was the only thing I could think of that I could possibly regret.

Michelle seemed to somehow catch on to everything that was going on with me. She'd immediately realized that I wasn't doing well when I'd had a rough patch after recovering some of my

repressed past-life memories. She'd also given me a week off of work to gather my strength because she'd had a feeling that there would be tough times ahead. There was no reason she would have known any of that, but she always seemed to see right through me. It should have been impossible, given my acting abilities, and yet...

The way Michelle responded to me reminded me of how my past-life parents had been so attentive to my older brother or how other kids' parents always seemed to notice what was going on with them. She was always so warm and kind to me. If the king was the father I'd always wanted, then Michelle filled the equivalent maternal role.

"I probably will," I answered honestly, with a smile.

As much as Michelle could see through me, she wouldn't have had any way of knowing everything that had just transpired. I didn't feel like trying to make it all digestible for her and explain it, though. So instead, I just leaned into her motherly warmth and spoke my mind without trying to explain or dress it up.

"I'm sure I'll look back on the decisions I've made and regret them, again and again. When the man I loved...no, the man I *love*...one day gets engaged, I'm sure I'll regret not choosing him. I'll probably even cry," I said. "But that's okay. Lily's love for Prince Seth is touching, and I really admire her for always putting him first, but I'm not the kind of girl who'd be happy throwing everything away for the man I love. I guess I'm just not very ladylike."

I forced a little chuckle. I could never be this honest with Nika. In fact, I had a feeling Michelle was the *only* one I could say any of this to.

Michelle gave me a smile, looking deeply moved by what I'd said.

"Oh, Fii... I *knew* you were the one who could change fate."

I looked back at her with wide eyes.

Change...fate?

I guess I *had* done that, huh? None of it would have been possible without all the help from my friends, and the king's benevolence. If even one of those things had been missing, I probably never would've made it here. But...here I was, living my hard-won, happy life as a commoner.

How could Michelle know that I'd changed my fate just from looking at me, though? It couldn't have been what I'd just said

that had tipped her off. Honestly, all of that should have been pretty incomprehensible to her.

Oh… I've probably said something to her before about "fate," though. It wouldn't be surprising if that comment had stayed with her, considering that people don't usually go around talking about heavy concepts like that in day-to-day life. I probably looked pretty downtrodden when I mentioned it too. She's probably just guessing that I must've changed my fate because I look so happy now.

"By the way…does this mean I'm fired?" I asked, instead of responding to what Michelle had just said. I was a little scared to hear her answer, but I had to know.

Even though I'd cleaned up the mess that I'd made with all my past behavior, the fact remained that I had a history of stirring up trouble. And, if I was being honest, I couldn't exactly promise that I'd never stir up trouble *again*. As painful as it was, I would have understood if Michelle felt that a troublemaker like me wasn't the right fit for a peaceful local bakery.

"You must still be exhausted, Fii," said Michelle, giving me a smile full of motherly affection. "You can come back to work today, but only for a half day."

For a moment, I was so shocked that I didn't register the meaning behind her words. As it slowly dawned on me, a joyful smile began to spread across my face.

"Okay! But please let me start working full-time again tomorrow!" I said.

As high as my spirits were, I had to admit that I *was* still pretty exhausted. I agreed to Michelle's terms, but I ran over to her with a spring in my step to show her my gratitude with a big, excited hug.

"All right, all right," she said, her voice slightly exasperated yet kind as she gave me a comforting pat on the back.

My half day passed quickly, but I was over the moon to be baking and selling my beloved bread again after being in withdrawal for four days. I'd found work that was deeply meaningful to me, and I could say with full confidence that I was happy.



I didn't feel like I'd had my fill of work yet by the time that lunch rolled around, but I couldn't argue when Michelle shooed

me out of the bakery. I was still riding on the high of a good workday, though (well, a good *half* workday), so I wasn't ready to go home just yet.

I wasn't about to wear myself out enough that I wouldn't be ready for another day of work tomorrow, of course, but I felt like I had to do *something* to cool my jets. And ever since I'd become a commoner, there was always just one place that sprung to mind when I needed to unwind: the local church. I'd also promised Nana that we'd talk again when we last parted ways. Just like I wanted to get to the bottom of the whole "El" mystery, I wasn't content to let things end without hearing Nana's story either.

Determined, I made my way to the church to see Nana.

As I approached the church and saw Nana heading inside, she noticed me before I could even call out to her. With a smile on her face, she ran over to me.

Behind her, Pastor Jack gave me a little bow and hurried back into the church, as if he were eager to avoid me. I didn't let it bother me, though. My priority was talking to Nana, after all.

"Fii! You're back!" she cried. "That means you beat fate, right?! Heh heh! I *knew* fate had nothing on you! Great job getting your happy ending!"

Her braids bounced as she spoke. She sounded so happy for me, it was like she was celebrating her *own* victory.

Oh, Nana... You're every bit as cute as always.

Something about the words "happy ending" stuck with me, though. Weirdly, it made me think of video games.

There was one other thing that stuck with me: Nana wasn't wearing her usual nun's garb today. Instead, she was wearing a casual white shirt and bottoms—the kind that commoners often wore.

On second thought, though, it wasn't all that surprising. When I'd seen her stripped to her underwear back at the mansion with her nun's garb rumpled on the floor, I'd kind of had a feeling that she wouldn't be wearing it again. Plus, her new pure-white attire suited her. It made her look just like an angel.

If there was anything different about her, it was the white bandage that she wore around her hand where she'd been injured yesterday. It was kind of heartbreaking, but I'd kind of been expecting to see it, so it didn't exactly stand out to me.

The thing that stood out to me most was actually her large

luggage, which must have been about fifty square centimeters. It was strange to see her carrying something so large when she usually walked around empty-handed.

"Thanks, Nana. Do you have some time to chat?" I asked her.

"Probably not much. I think I've gotta go soon," she said.

"Oh... Well, I kind of wanted to ask you about some of the stuff that happened yesterday."

"Hmm... Okay! I don't think I've got more than an hour, but I'm sure it's okay if we chat for a little bit."

I had a feeling that Nana's time pressures had something to do with the luggage. I felt kind of bad for pushing the issue when she was in a hurry like this, but I was relieved that she seemed to have time to answer my questions.

The two of us headed toward the plaza, where we usually had our chats. The moment we arrived, we grabbed some juice and took seats across from each other at one of the plaza's modest tables.

"So, um... Jeez, I'm not even sure where to start. What's all the luggage for, Nana?" I asked.

I had so many questions that I didn't even know where to begin, so I started off with a softball about the mystery right in front of me.

Nana glanced down at her trunk, as if to say, *Oh, this?*

"I'm moving today. These are all my essentials," she explained with a smile.

Wait... What?! My eyes went wide with shock. *Y-You're moving?! Huh?! But why?! Does this mean we won't see each other again?! Wait, and isn't this all a little sudden?!*

I'd intended for that question to be a softball, but she'd slammed it right back in my face. I was absolutely speechless.

Seeing the shocked look on my face, Nana laughed.

"I know, it's crazy, right?! I packed it myself, and even *I* couldn't believe how little there was! Pastor Jack was pretty surprised too," she said.

"That's not the issue here! What's crazy is that you're *moving*!" I shot back.

I mean, to be fair, the fact that she'd managed to fit all her essentials in fifty square centimeters *was* a little surprising. Nana's answer, which wildly missed the point, did at least bring me back to my senses.

"Hmm? Ooh. Well, I'm not moving far away or anything. I'll

come back to town once a week!" she said.

"Huh? Wait, once a week? R-Really? I guess that *is* pretty close..."

The only places close enough to casually come back into town once a week were the neighboring towns. Once I'd put those pieces together, I felt a little relieved. *She probably just wants a little more independence*, I thought.

I took in a deep breath to steady myself. Then I decided to cut straight to the chase and ask her the question I *really* wanted to ask: "Who *are* you?" I couldn't help but suspect that Nana was probably reincarnated, just like Lily and me—maybe she was even the mysterious "El."

The guards had reassured me yesterday that I'd find out who El was "tomorrow"—and now "tomorrow" was here. I knew I probably didn't need to ask Nana to find my answer, but if she *was* El, then I wanted to hear the whole story from her. After all, she was my friend.

"Nana, do you know anything about the prophet El?" I asked her directly.

For a while, Nana was silent. It was like her excitement from earlier had evaporated. She didn't seem displeased with my question, though. The expression she wore was simply sorrowful and mature.

"Yeah... I do."

It seemed weird that Nana would know who El was, when I'd been told that the only people who even knew of their existence were the royal family and those who worked for them (including, apparently, the guards). As far as I knew, Nana was just your average commoner. The only reasons I could come up with were that either someone in the know had told her or that she herself was El.

From what I'd witnessed back at the mansion, the latter seemed the most likely...but I couldn't even imagine what El would be doing living in the outskirts as a commoner, much less a *nun*.

"Was it just a coincidence that you went to the mansion and got wrapped up in everything that played out there?" I asked her.

"Hmm... What do *you* think, Fii?" she asked back.

I thought back to everything that had happened.

Let's see... The king knows who El is, so I guess it would make sense for him to use Nana as a pawn and station her at just the right

place if she were El. But if that's what happened, then I doubt the king let Nana in on anything. He was probably just manipulating her.

That said…it would also make perfect sense for Nana to run after Lily and try to save her of her own volition if she was there when Lily was kidnapped.

"I…don't think it was."

"I see," Nana replied, nodding. Then, after falling into a thoughtful silence that lasted for several seconds, she opened her mouth to speak again. "If you think about it, a coincidence is really just a miracle of fate, right? I think it was one of those miracles that I met the saint—and that I met you."

Coincidences are just miracles of fate, huh? I guess that's true. A "coincidence" is just what we call a fateful encounter that no one orchestrated.

And if that's what it means, then I guess it was *a coincidence that Nana and I met. I don't think anyone planned for or set up that first encounter on the church steps, when I saved her from a fall.*

"As much as it was miraculous, and fateful, *and* a total coincidence that I went to that mansion, though…I had my reasons for going, and my personal circumstances played a bigger part in that decision. So, I guess you could also say it was my *destiny* to go."

"Reasons"… "Personal circumstances"…

Nana seemed to use those words a lot. But until today, I'd never asked her about what they *were*. We looked each other in the eye, and Nana nodded. She gave me a smile and began to answer the question I hadn't asked yet.

"See, I can remember everything about my life—even from the moment I was born," she said.

"What…?"

I was fully expecting her to reveal that she was also reincarnated…but something felt very off about what she'd just said.

I mean, I'd technically gained consciousness immediately upon being reborn into this world as a baby, but it hadn't been until I was five years old and engaged to Seth that my full consciousness had been unlocked. It was only when that engagement triggered the memory of playing *Lady Rose: Savior of Nations* in my past life that I had realized I was in the world of the game and that I had gained full awareness of my

surroundings. I could remember plenty about my past life, but any memories I had from this life of when I was younger than five years old were hazy at best. I couldn't recall them with any clarity.

That had never seemed unusual to me, though. After all, *no* human can remember their early childhood well—that didn't change just because I'd been reincarnated.

That's why what Nana had just said struck me as so strange. There was no reason that she should have been any different in that regard.

"Right after I was born, my parents abandoned me," she continued.

I blinked in surprise. *Right after she was born? What?*

As bizarre as what she'd told me was, I'd still been expecting her to tell me she'd been reincarnated. But now it seemed like this was going in a completely different direction. I was completely thrown off guard.

"I don't just know that because Pastor Jack told me either. I *remember* it. I remember every conversation I overheard, including the reason they abandoned me and the reason Pastor Jack took me in. I remember everything."

Nana sounded completely detached as she explained this to me, and it didn't seem like she was making it all up. But if I'd been in Nana's shoes, I know I wouldn't have wanted to know *any* of that.

I felt completely blindsided. I mean, I didn't remember a *word* that had been said before I was five years old. And if that was the case for me, then it wouldn't make any sense for her to follow this up with "and I remember it all because I was reincarnated."

Maybe it's not *that Nana was reincarnated... Maybe the only thing that's different about her is this uncanny perfect memory of hers?*

Since I was reincarnated myself, I'd been looking at everyone through the lens of the possibility that *they* might be the same. But if this universe included people like Lily and me, then why wouldn't it also include people with *other* eccentricities? Objectively speaking, it was probably much more realistic that someone would have memories from birth than it was that someone would be reincarnated into this world with the knowledge that it was based on a video game.

“Anyway, my parents are the young master’s—uh, what was his name again? Shade?—they’re *his* parents. So, I guess I’m actually his biological older sister. It doesn’t really feel like it, though, since they abandoned me before he was even born. I saw that hidden passageway when I was a baby, so that’s why I knew about it and— Jeez, listen to me! I’m probably giving you way too much detail,” Nana said, as if she’d just gone on a boring tangent.

I gave her a faint smile to signal I was far from bored. If anything, it was hard to keep up with all of the crazy revelations she was throwing my way.

Come to think of it, I did *wonder how Nana knew about that secret passageway. If her parents abandoned her as a baby, though, then Shade probably has no idea that he has a blood-related older sister. I mean, they don’t even really* look *alike. No one would ever guess that she was his older sister returning to her birth home and that she knew its secrets from having seen them as an* infant.

Shade was a distant blood relative of mine, so if she and Shade were birth siblings, then didn’t that mean Nana and I shared a bloodline too? From the way she spoke about her birth family, though, I had a feeling that bloodlines probably didn’t mean much to her.

“This world was pretty much hell on earth for me thanks to the way I grew up. That’s why I decided to devote my life to making other people happy, so I’d be able to make it into Heaven when I died,” Nana continued.

I could see where she was coming from with that. It made sense that she’d be so insistent on going to Heaven when her most formative experiences had been filled with so much despair.

Experiencing that kind of trauma only shortly after being born into the world would set up just about anybody to expect the worst of everything and everyone. Really, it was no wonder. But it made me deeply sad to learn that she’d felt compelled to mount such a strong self-defense and that she’d felt life was so wretched that her only chance at happiness was in the afterlife.

“That nun’s habit was my ‘proof’ that I was a good girl. I put that on for the first time the day that I’d sworn to make it to Heaven. In a way, it was a symbol of that effort. So, the moment I decided I didn’t have to devote my life to that effort anymore, I felt like I couldn’t keep wearing it. It’s not like I *hate* it or

anything, but…it just didn't feel right," Nana said, with a trace of nostalgia, as she looked down at her simple commoner attire.

It had always seemed obvious to me that the town loved Nana because she was such a sweet girl, and so did I. I'd never once second-guessed that. But now I understood that it was all because she'd committed so much to being the light of other people's lives when what she'd wanted most was some happiness of her own.

"I owe a lot to the saint. She probably doesn't realize it—or remember any of this, actually—but she's saved me twice now. I felt that I owed it to her to return that favor. I thought I'd never make it to Heaven unless I did. That's why I couldn't bear to let her die until I'd paid back the favor and ensured her happiness. It was just pure selfishness, really," Nana said, laughing at her own expense. The look on her face was so much more adult than the innocent smile I was used to seeing from her.

"Pure selfishness," huh? Well, maybe Lily would see it that way, since Nana only prevented Lily's death for her own sake. But that doesn't change the fact that Lily's still alive today thanks to Nana. And it's thanks to her that Lily and I were able to clear up all those misunderstandings. At the very least, I think Lily's a lot better off now than if she'd died carrying the unnecessary burden of all those sins she didn't even need to feel guilty for.

No matter what Nana's intentions had been, her *actions* weren't misguided. All's well that ends well, right? Come to think of it, I'd kind of done the same thing as Nana, actually. Against her will, I'd tried to save Lily for the sake of my own happiness too. I didn't even feel bad about it, though.

You should follow my example, Nana. I think you could afford to be a little more shameless, personally.

"So…there you have it. That's my story, and those are my reasons. It was probably my destiny to return to the mansion and fight the saint's death for my own selfish reasons."

Now that I'd heard the whole story, it certainly did feel like destiny—or fate, or whatever you want to call it. And yet, maybe it was also a coincidence. It felt like the line between the two had gotten blurrier and blurrier.

Let me just get this all straight…

From Nana's perspective, Lily had suddenly been kidnapped from right under her nose, and so it felt like her destiny to chase after her. It just so happened that this chase led her to a familiar

mansion, but she was destined to use her knowledge of the mansion's secret passage to break in. Then, by pure coincidence, she stumbled into the room at the exact moment that Lily was about to try to take her life, yet it was her destiny to save her.

Nana had started acting really weird after that, but looking back on that with the knowledge I have now, it was probably because she had just been exhausted. She had probably been as fed up with life as Lily was.

Nana had probably helped a lot of people during her tenure as a nun. But the only reason she had done that was because she was laboring under the illusion that it would protect her and guarantee her entry into Heaven. No matter how hard she tried, though, it must have seemed like her efforts were for nothing. When her protective mechanisms failed, Nana had ultimately been left with only two tragic choices: keep living in hell, unable to ascend to Heaven, or die.

But there was still hope.

"Do you still think you're in hell?" I asked her.

"Nope. Not anymore," she replied immediately.

Her quick answer gave me comfort.

When I'd gone back into that fateful room in the mansion with Lily, after our heart-to-heart, Nana had looked happy sitting next to the crumpled mess that was her nun's habit. She'd declared that she wouldn't make it to Heaven with a smile on her face, and there hadn't been a trace of despair in her voice. I didn't know what had happened, but I could only assume from what I saw that Nolls must have had some sort of positive influence on her.

I'll have to treat him to another baguette next time I see him, I thought. It sounded a little weird to talk about "treating" the prince of a foreign country to a *baguette*, of all things, but...this was Nolls we were talking about, so I knew he'd be delighted.

"So...you're not El, Nana?" I asked, finally.

Putting all the pieces I'd just learned together, the only unusual intel Nana had was anything she might have seen or heard as a young child. That wouldn't have given her anything to make a prophecy off of, so she *couldn't* have been a prophet.

"Nope! I actually hate people like El," she said.

The vitriolic sentiment stood in stark contrast to her sweet grin. Something about the way she said it gave me the sense that she might actually *like* El.

Never took you for the hot-and-cold type, Nana, I thought. I felt like I'd just seen a new side of her.

If Nana knew who El was, then she'd probably heard about them when she was just a baby. Whoever had been talking about them must have assumed it was safe to do so in front of her, so no one would have expected that she would understand what they were saying, much less grow up to retain all of her memories from such a young age. The most likely candidate who would have been close to Nana was Pastor Jack…but it seemed a little too early to make that call just yet.

If Nana wasn't El, though, then I didn't really feel like pressing her for the details of their identity or how she'd learned of it. After all, I was apparently going to learn who El was today whether I wanted to or not. And if Nana wasn't El, then that was all I needed to know for now.

"By the way, you seem a lot more grown-up all of a sudden, Nana," I said, changing topics.

"Yeah! That's 'cause I'm alive!" she said.

I had no idea what she meant by that, but I could tell from her joyful smile that there must have been some deeper, happy meaning to it. I found myself breaking into a smile too.

"Oh!" Nana exclaimed suddenly, as if she'd just remembered something. I flinched as she jumped up out of her seat, her braids swaying gently. "I've gotta get going! My ride's gonna be here any minute!"

"Your *ride*…?"

"Yeah, my ride! I've gotta hurry! Sorry, Fii. Let's talk more next time!" she said quickly, after downing the last of her juice and quickly looking around to make sure she wasn't forgetting anything.

Come to think of it, she did warn me that she only had an hour. But…what's this about her "ride"? Is Pastor Jack taking her to the next town over in a carriage?

"'Til next time, Fii!" she called, waving goodbye before she turned around.

As dramatic as this might sound, as I watched her break into a little jog, it honestly felt like I was watching an angel ascend to Heaven.

One of the hair ties holding her braids together came out as she ran. Nana stopped for a moment in surprise, but then she broke out into a laugh and just took out the other one before

picking up her pace again. With each step she took, her braids unraveled further and further.

What an angel, I thought, as I watched the wind unleash her gentle curls.

Then she stopped running—and the moment I saw the people who were waiting there for her, I couldn't just keep watching her in silence anymore. Before I could stop myself, I blurted out their names, perhaps a bit louder than was strictly *polite*.

"Nolls?! Zero?! Wait...*you're* her ride?! What's going on here?!"

I'd spent several hours talking to Nolls and Zero, who had apparently come to pick Nana up, and I was exhausted. Who knew talking to people on such radically different wavelengths was so taxing?

Nolls and Nana had such a completely different way of thinking than I did, and it was hard to keep up. I'd cried out several times that what they were saying made no sense, but it had been pointless. The two of *them* seemed to somehow get each other, but Zero and I had found ourselves just left in the dust. Nolls had also said something that sounded a whole lot like a casual proposal...but I decided to chalk that up to just my imagination.

I shook my head, trying to shake the whole conversation off as a thing of the past. It was time to go home. Michelle had insisted that I get some rest, so I knew it wouldn't do to wear myself out any more today. So, I took the familiar, well-trodden path back to my little abode.

As I walked home, making a conscious effort to clear my mind, my house finally came into view. I'd made it without anything else eventful happening.

The two guards had seemed pretty intent on roping me into some business with El today, but right now, at least, they were nowhere to be seen. Relieved, I walked up to my front door, thinking I was off the hook. But just then, I saw something that made me stop in my tracks.

"H-Huh...?" I exclaimed, my face reflexively contorting into a look of displeasure. Then I gasped, trying to fix it back into a smile. "Oh, uh, sorry! Force of habit! I'm not actually at all upset to see you guys, though! On the contrary, I'm delighted! Welcome, welcome!"

“Calm down. No one cares,” said Mel, annoyed, as he flicked me forcefully on the forehead.

Yeowch! I thought, instinctively taking a step back.

I rubbed my sore forehead, feeling a little self-conscious that my teary eyes were probably pretty red. I looked into Mel’s cute, boyish face reproachfully, but he just looked back at me with a serious expression that betrayed not even a trace of guilt. I couldn’t bear to keep looking him in the eyes, so I averted my gaze.

“So? What are the three of you doing here, gathered in front of my house like this?” I asked.

“We all just happened to be here,” Mel replied.

“I got here about an hour ago to pay you a visit, sister dearest. I realized you weren’t home, but it seemed inappropriate to bother you at work, so I’ve been waiting here ever since, like a loyal dog. Half an hour after I arrived, Evan showed up. And just five minutes ago, as we were talking, Mel showed up too.”

Well…that’s some *coincidence*, I thought stupidly.

I was surprised that they had all gathered here in front of my house like this when we hadn’t even made any plans, though. What if Michelle had let me work a whole day today, instead of just a half day? Would they all have been waiting for me here until the evening?

It sure is inconvenient that there’s no telepathy in this world…

Evan was the only one who had never visited me at home before, but it didn’t strike me as strange that he’d found his way here. After all, he must have done a lot of digging into my life as part of his preparations for kidnapping Lily.

We stood around outside the house talking for a bit, but eventually, I invited them in. And so, Shade, Evan, Mel, and the six guards accompanying them all crowded into my tiny little house. With all ten of us it was a pretty tight squeeze. If we were all standing, you couldn’t walk more than three steps without bumping into someone. Fortunately, the guards were conscientious enough to stand back against the wall, so that cleared up some space. It did feel a little ominous to have a line of guards taking up an entire wall, though.

“Oh… I forgot I’ve only got two chairs,” I said.

My house was a tiny, one-room abode (aside from the bathroom), so you didn’t even have to turn your head to take in

the whole interior. I could sit on my folded-up futon, but that still left one person (not counting the guards) without a seat. As I stared at the futon, brainstorming other seating options, I felt Shade tug at my sleeve.

"I can sit next to you on the futon," he said. "We're brother and sister, after all, so it's fine, right?"

He leaned over and peered up at me, giving me a sweet smile. It felt like it'd been a long time since I'd seen this cheeky playboy side of him.

At least he's back to normal? I thought, wondering if this was something I should actually be celebrating.

Playboy motivations aside, though, I was really grateful to him for picking up on my consternation about the chairs. All of my guests were too high-ranking for me to ask them to stand, so his idea was a nice compromise.

"I'm not sure it's appropriate for *former, adoptive* siblings to share a futon," Evan said.

It was hard to argue with that.

"The real problem here is the disturbing lack of furniture. Shall I bring four extra chairs next time I visit?"

Slow down there, Mel. Are you trying to turn my house into some kind of hangout spot for nobles? Well, banish the thought from your mind, because six chairs are going to take up half the space in my house! Who knows what they'll do with that power? The chairs might start throwing their weight around and, at some point, it might start looking like their *house instead of* mine*. Unlike your house, mine is running on limited space!*

"If you're growing out of this puny kennel, then you ought to start building some expansions before you put in more furniture," Shade said, casually denigrating my home and adding fuel to the fire.

I didn't appreciate them measuring my house up against the standards of noble mansions, but that wasn't because I was ashamed of it or anything. The real issue was that I didn't *want* my house to be any bigger.

So don't hold it to the same standards as your old McMansions, please!

"I *like* my commoner-y, commoner-ish, commoner-esque house, thank you very much! I expect that you're all open-minded, tolerant noblemen...but if there's anyone among you that *isn't*, then you can show yourself the door," I said.

Everyone immediately took a seat. Each of the three young men seemed to have their own response to my defensiveness, though. Mel looked dumbfounded yet resigned; Evan looked miserable, like a dog who'd just been scolded; and Shade, who was sitting next to me, was inexplicably wearing a smile.

The other two seem to get that they're in trouble… Why don't you*, Shade?* I wondered. But then I remembered what he'd said before and realized that he was probably *happy* that I'd just gotten upset with him, since he equated my anger with me seeing him for who he really was. That was no fun to contemplate.

I patted his head, desperate to show him that I was still seeing him for him even when I wasn't angry and that I'd always love him as my cute little brother. He seemed pretty pleased.

"Felicia…I've come here today because there's something I wanted to talk to you about," said Evan.

His sudden, somber proclamation echoed throughout my cramped house, breaking the peaceful, pleasant vibe. I'd been distracted trying to show Shade my affection, but now I turned my full attention to Evan.

Evan stood up from his chair. There was a dark look on his face. I stood up from my spot on the futon too and faced him, feeling the weight of the tension that had fallen over us.

"I want to apologize for the trouble I've caused you with my foolish and shortsighted behavior," Evan said.

He bowed his head so forcefully that I almost took a reflexive step back. I'd stood up directly from my spot on the futon, though, so I wasn't about to go *anywhere*, even if I'd tried.

I'd kind of expected that this might happen, though. Even though I'd pleaded for Evan's sentence to be reduced to assuage my own guilt, it was easy to imagine that my assistance would exacerbate *his* guilt. In a weird way, it was kind of like he and I were playing tug-of-war over whose turn it was with the self-loathing.

Now that the matter had been resolved on the outside, all that was left was for him to resolve it on the inside. I hoped that, in time, he would find a way to move on. It had all started with that lie I had told him, but the extreme actions he'd committed on my behalf had brought the incident to its boiling point. Ultimately, it was up to him to make peace with that.

"I can see now that my very feelings for you are a burden. It's

all too easy to imagine that I might act recklessly again in the future and burden you further if I remain by your side," Evan continued, his head still lowered in a deep bow.

I couldn't deny the truth of what he'd just said. And yet…the direction this was taking was starting to feel a little ominous somehow.

"As such, from today on, I will renounce my feelings for you and will never come to visit you again."

I couldn't see the look on his face, but I could tell from the quiver in his voice and the way he looked so much smaller than usual that he must have been heartbroken.

Wow… Okay. So this is where you've landed, huh?

I let out a big sigh. Then I took in a breath and said, "You're doing this for *me* again, aren't you?"

I could hear an edge in my tone, as if it were a criticism. Evan, still bowing, flinched at my words.

Evan tended to be ridiculously self-abasing, and I couldn't act like it didn't occasionally drive me a bit nuts. Initially, I'd been tempted to console him by saying that *I* was to blame or by beating *myself* up in response. But I felt coolheaded enough now to see that none of that would save this stubbornly romantic, self-sacrificing golden retriever of a man from himself.

"If people could quit being in love just because they decided to, then no one would ever have to suffer," I said.

If it were that easy, Lily would never have been in such agony. And here I was, still in love with Nika. I couldn't just will those feelings away—if I *could*, then it would never have been love in the first place.

That being said, though, you could probably slowly get over someone if you distanced yourself from them and threw yourself into some new work or hobbies…maybe even a new romantic interest? I didn't exactly feel comfortable recommending that approach to Evan, though. God only knew where he'd wind up channeling his energy.

"Lift your head and listen up, Evan! The way you're so eager to sacrifice yourself for my sake like this? *That's* what bothers me more than anything!" I said, gripping his shoulders and practically forcing him up.

I looked straight into his pitiful, downcast eyes and gave him a good hard glare.

"If you love me, then keep loving me! I don't care! I have

absolutely no desire to marry a nobleman—whether that's you or anyone else—or to ever return to being a noble again, and I am *very* determined not to go back on my word about that! What I mean is: Your love for me isn't a burden! So just keep giving it your best shot! You're the earnest puppy dog type, so you're just going to make a mess when you slink off into the shadows! I mean, we've seen how that goes already. If anything, I'd much prefer for you to stay where I can *see* you!"

I knew I was really going hard on the offensive here and that I probably sounded pretty high-and-mighty…but it had to be said. Riding high on that energy I'd just put in, I reached out my hand to Evan.

"For my part, I promise to stop lying and being evasive," I said. "Friends?"

I'd basically just bulldozed through that whole spiel, but I had a feeling that Evan needed a little push. I wasn't worried about what Shade would think, but it did worry me a bit what Mel might be thinking. Right now, though, all of my attention was on Evan.

I don't know if I'm doing the right thing here… Maybe Evan would *be happiest distancing himself from me, even if he was only doing it to be a martyr. Nobody can tell me the answer to that, though, so all I can do is follow my heart.*

At this point, though, Evan wouldn't even make eye contact with me. He just looked at the ground with a miserable expression on his face.

"But I… I don't want to burden you, Feli—" he began.

I quickly interrupted him. "Objection overruled. This all started because of that lie I told, and you've already apologized for the part you played."

"I think…I'm too deep in love with you, Felicia. My love must surely be a nuisance to you. It's too much for you to bear. I should—"

"I appreciate the thought you've put into this. But I'm sorry, Evan…I just can't let you distance yourself for my sake. Like I said, no matter how much you love me, it won't bother me. You're just not the kind of guy to make yourself a bother. If you ask me, I'd prefer that you just *talk* to me about this stuff. We can always figure something out together."

I just kept poking holes in his cynical thinking.

In the back of my mind, I was impressed that Evan could still

find anything to love about an aggressive girl like me. Not to dis myself here, but I couldn't help feeling that he'd be better off with a sweet, reserved girl.

In my defense, though, I never would've made it this far if I weren't so stubborn.

For good measure, I made a show of swinging my hand in front of his face, as if to say, *Here! Shake it already!*

"Come on. Take my hand," I said.

"I'm humbled by your mercy. Thank you," Evan replied, with tears in his eyes.

Then he knelt down on the spot and planted a kiss on my outstretched hand.

Uh... Evan? I was looking for a friendly handshake, not a kiss on the hand to swear your fealty. Wait... But isn't this a sign that he's on board with what I just said, at least? Well... I guess that's a win. Heck, I'll take it!



“I’m so lucky to have such a gallant older sister…” Shade muttered.

“Wow, *that’s* what caught your attention? You and your sister sure are something…” Mel said. “Think you’re ever gonna be able to leave her nest?”

“Whether I’m ‘able to’ or not is irrelevant. I’ve no intention of doing so in the first place.”

“Oh… Okay, then.”

As I overheard Shade going off in the background—and Mel sounding absolutely done with him—I turned my attention away from Evan in an attempt to avoid thinking about what had just happened.

“By the way, what are *you* doing here, Mel? I kind of figured Evan and Shade were here to show their appreciation for me getting their death sentences reduced to slaps on the wrists, but what’s the reason for *your* visit?”

“Dunno. Just felt like stopping by.”

“Huh? Wait… You just came by for no particular reason? Really? D-Does that mean you just wanted to see me?! Is it ’cause I’m your very best friend?!” I asked, overjoyed. I could feel the sparkles in my eyes.

“Ugh, there you go again, getting way ahead of yourself. Settle down, will you?” Mel replied, his face contorting into an expression of genuine irritation.

Ouch…

“Melvin came because he assumed that Evan and I would be coming,” Shade said, with a shrug. “And he’s too much of an upstanding guy to just leave you alone with us.”

Mel glared at him reproachfully. He didn’t deny it, but I could tell that he wished Shade had kept that to himself for some reason.

“Why didn’t he want me to be alone with you? Mel was there that day too; he knows what really happened. He wouldn’t see you guys as a threat.”

“Oh, he would. Just not the kind of threat *you’re* thinking of.”

“That’s right. He knows that Shade and I both have…certain *proclivities*,” Evan added awkwardly.

I blinked in response, completely in the dark about what the heck he meant by that and why it was so hard for him to say.

“Huh? We’re not talking *violent* proclivities, though, right?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say ‘no’ to a little violence,” Shade replied.

“Huh? Wait, what do you mean by that?”

“If that’s what you wanted, Felicia, then I would gladly accept it,” Evan said.

“Who do you think I am? I don’t want anyone going around raising hell!” I protested.

“Oh… Really?”

“Really?”

The conversation seemed to have suddenly gone off the rails, but I wasn’t going to let my question go unanswered. I opened my mouth again to ask about these dangerous “proclivities,” but before I could even get the words out, Mel struck up a different topic.

“Hey, Fii. I’m hungry. Let’s eat some bread. You must have some lying around, right?”

“Jeez, you say that like I’m some weirdo who won’t even leave her house without bread… You’re not wrong, though. You bet I have some bread! I even bought enough today for four people!” I said jauntily, reaching inside my bag.

I passed the baguettes around to the three of them. I felt bad thinking that the fridge would go another day sitting around eating into the power bill, but that’s just the way it was. It did seem like a waste to let the food inside rot, though, so I resolved to do some cooking tomorrow.

But today we were celebrating me being a commoner—which meant that I was going to eat my fill of bread, bread, and more bread!

Hey, did Mel just bring that up to distract me from my line of questioning? I totally trust Mel, though, and I know he’s not the type to try to shield me from conversations I’d find painful…so I’m sure he must have had a good reason. I’ll just be an adult about this and drop it. All this talk about “proclivities” was kind of suggestive, so maybe the conversation was taking a vulgar turn. I never knew Mel was so easily scandalized…

“Wait… Did you just call me ‘Fii’?! That’s the first time you’ve called me by my new name, isn’t it?!” I pressed. I might’ve been willing to drop the “proclivities” thing, but I wasn’t going to let *that* go.

“Shut up and eat some bread,” he replied, shoving a baguette into my mouth and displaying an elementary mastery of bread’s fate-defying powers.

I was hopeless when it came to bread, so I accepted this new fate obediently. But through my chomping, I cheerily proclaimed, “I heard you, though! You called me ‘Fii’!”

Ahhh… Nothing like Michelle’s freshly baked bread.

As the four of us enjoyed a lovely dinner of bread together, we talked about all kinds of things. The conversation took many turns—some joyous, some somber. The time passed quickly without us even realizing it, and by the time I looked out the window, the sun was just about to set. No one said anything, but we all sensed that it was time to call it a day. And so, I walked the three of them to the front door.

“Come visit again, you three!” I said.

“See you tomorrow!” Shade replied cheerily.

“Oh, give her some space,” Mel chided him.

Evan gave me an uncomfortable “thank you,” complete with a whole interminable parting speech. Mel finally had to yank him away and drag him home.

Oh, Mel… You always know just what to do, I thought, impressed.

I was relieved to know, at least, that Mel wouldn’t have come if he hadn’t wanted to. Evan and Shade were certainly characters, though, and I had no doubt that he’d also come in part because they’d piqued his curiosity.

It seemed like a good point for me to call it a day too. I’d be getting up early tomorrow, so I decided to head to bed early and get a good night’s sleep. After I watched my three guests disappear into the distance, I retreated back into my home and shut the door—

At least, I *tried* to. Before I could shut it all the way, a hand snaked through the crack from outside. I couldn’t even make sense of what I was seeing. Before I could put the pieces together, the hand grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me outside. I didn’t even have the chance to see who it was before my assailant wrapped their arms around me from behind, almost as if pulling me into a hug, and pinned me down. Then they clapped a hand over my mouth.

I flailed, trying to fight back, but I was no match for my assailant’s strength. It was so obviously futile that, if anyone had seen us, they probably wouldn’t have even been able to tell that I was fighting back.

My heart was pounding in my chest. I had no idea what was

happening—this stranger had just come out of the blue—and I was terrified. I could feel cold sweat dripping down my back.

Who's doing this? I wondered. *Who would have anything to gain from kidnapping me? Who would want me to go through this?*

I was exhausted. Physically, I wasn't going anywhere. Mentally, though, my mind was racing, spinning in pointless circles. My helplessness only amplified my panic.

One of my assailant's hands was covering my mouth, but the other was pushing me forward now, forcing me down the street. It was obvious how easy it was for them; they moved effortlessly. The hand over my mouth also kept me from turning my head to get the faintest glimpse of what my assailant was wearing. The most I could make out, from their large hands and the sheer force they used, was that they were probably a man.

Am I going to be murdered? Violated? Tortured?

My thoughts began to take a darker and darker turn.

I'm a woman living alone who carries herself like an aristocrat… It would hardly be surprising if this were just some random ruffian that's come by to rough me up. Worst-case scenario, he might tick off all those boxes: sexual assault, torture, and *murder. And he'll probably take all my money when he's done with me.*

No…based on the timing, he's probably been waiting here this whole time until my guests left. That means he's more likely to just keep me hostage than kill me, probably in hopes of extorting a ransom from my friends. If that's what he's after…then I'll have to make sure I don't cause trouble for everyone. I need to get out of this pinch on my own.

Realistically, though, I knew better than to think I had the skills to pull that off. It was obvious that this situation was only getting worse.

Then I spotted someone waiting at the entrance to a back alley. Thanks to the light at his back, I couldn't make out his face. All I could see was his stature as he gave us a little wave. I could only assume that he was in cahoots with my assailant.

I closed my eyes and racked my brain hard, searching desperately for a way to make an opening so I could break free.

"Whoa! Here I thought you'd just escorted her here in a flash, but you *kidnapped* her?! For cryin' out loud! What would the palace maids think if they saw you turn heel, huh?! All that reputation you've built playin' the coolheaded gentleman would fly right out the window…along with all the squeals and hearts in

their eyes!" said a familiar voice.

Wait... That's weird, I thought, straining my eyes to get a better look at the figure ahead of us. And upon closer inspection, my kidnapper's buddy had a *very* familiar face. Even if his features weren't so distinctive, I would have recognized him anywhere.

"I have no idea what you mean. This was simply the fastest way to get her here," my kidnapper said. His voice was familiar too.

"Okay, sure, but where's the *technique*, my man*?* This is just barbaric!"

"Well, I can't think of a more skillful method than *this*, personally. I didn't even leave any witnesses."

"It's not just about skill, okay?! It's about being stylish! And cool! I mean, this ain't even funny. I laugh at the drop of a hat, and I'm not laughin' right now! Ugh... Let her go already! Just lookin' at her is makin' me sad!"

My kidnapper let me go surprisingly easily. But before I let myself breathe a sigh of relief, I turned in the hopes that I might verify my suspicions. I needn't have bothered second-guessing myself.

"I just have to say, that was by far the scariest thing that's ever happened to me *in my life*. Did I do something to make you hate me or something?" I asked.

"No. Not really."

"I'm making a note that I owe you a knuckle sandwich."

Before he could even respond, I raised my hand up and aimed at his face, ready to smack it with the full force of my fist, but he caught it in his palm. Now I was even *more* furious.

Ugh! I know you can stop my punch, but just let me go for it! Surely a tough guy like you can soak a blow from li'l ol' me, right?!

"Sorry 'bout my partner here, Fii."

"You should be! Jeez... I always thought *you* were the one who was messed up in the head, but now I see how wrong I was! This guy's only *pretending* to be sane, and that makes him all the more dangerous! Turns out, you were the normal one all along!"

"Yeah! Go off, Fii! Hit 'im where it hurts!" the casual guard said, seeming completely unfazed by my dig about him seeming messed up in the head. He threw in an enthusiastic whistle to egg me on, but unfortunately for him, it had the opposite effect.

I let out a big sigh, as if releasing all of the remaining anger from my body.

“Well… Are you ready to go now, Fii?” asked the formal guard.

“Seriously? You think I’m just gonna come along willingly when you haven’t even offered a single apology? Are you insane? There’s something very wrong with you… Did you just not show up when they were handing out consciences?”

“Hey, I totally feel you, but I promise he’s usually way more on top of it than this. He’s just losing his cool right now ’cause he’s nervous. And honestly, I’m right there with him,” said the casual guard.

To be fair, I hadn’t really known him long enough to get a good feel for his personality, but the formal guard didn’t really *seem* like he’d always just been hiding that he was this unhinged.

Why is he nervous, though? I’m sure this isn’t about me, so what is *it exactly that they’re so freaked out about?*

“Can’t you just say sorry, man? C’mon, don’t you wanna smooth things over?”

“I’m sorry,” the formal guard said.

“Wow… I don’t think I’ve ever heard such an empty, disingenuous apology in my life,” I replied.

Well, I guess that’s just the way he is, I thought. I’d entirely given up on him by now. From here on out, I didn’t want to have anything to do with him in my personal life.

“Okay, well…let’s move right along, then. Just come with us,” said the casual guard, giving me a little push.

“You promised you’d come yesterday, remember?” said the formal one, with a hint of a threat.

I had a feeling I didn’t really have a choice in the matter. Even if I refused, they’d probably force me to go with them anyway. Plus, I kind of felt like I owed them for their help back at the palace, so I reluctantly agreed.

The three of us set out again, this time with the casual guard in front, me in the middle, and the formal guard taking up the rear. It was clear that they’d deliberately sandwiched me so I wouldn’t be able to change my mind and run off.

At first, we just walked silently. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. But around five minutes in, I started getting nervous.

“Why?” you ask. Well, around that time the casual guard in front of me started suddenly sweating bullets, despite it being a pretty cool day. His breathing started getting shallower too, and even his gait had become oddly stilted. The only explanation I could come up with was that he’d suddenly come down with a

serious disease. I turned around to look at the formal guard, and sure enough, he showed the same symptoms.

This is very, very weird…

"Wh-What's going on here?" I blurted out.

"Nothin'. Don't stop walkin'!"

"Seriously, you should take a look in the mirror. Something is *definitely* wrong. How about we take a little break, okay?" I tried.

"We can't stop, or we'll never get there. Please just be quiet and keep moving," said the formal guard.

The air was tense. Something was clearly the matter with the two guards, but they refused to acknowledge it. Left with no other choice, I shut my mouth and just kept walking.

We hadn't even been walking for all that long, though, when the two guards suddenly stopped. I'd been so busy trying to figure out what was going on with them that it was only now that I realized how familiar my surroundings were. In fact, I was *intimately* familiar with the establishment we'd just stopped right in front of: It was none other than my workplace, Michelle's bakery.

I cocked my head in confusion.

"You go in first," the causal guard said to me. He wore a serious and deeply anxious expression as he looked me in the eyes.

Then he ran to hide behind me.

What the heck is going on? I was sure we were heading off to meet El, but these two aren't acting like they're about to see the beloved "master" they keep raving about. With the way they've been acting, I can't imagine they're on their way to meet anyone but an archenemy—and only then, reluctantly.

Their anxiety was proving infectious. The guards were really putting on the pressure, though, so I conceded. On high alert, I opened the door to the bakery. I stepped inside, and the two guards followed.

Naturally, Michelle was there. We locked eyes immediately. I looked around, but it seemed like the bakery was otherwise empty. That was certainly understandable, considering that it was almost closing time. But then who would the two guards quivering behind me be so afraid of?

"Fii? What are you doing h—" Michelle started to ask, before catching herself mid-sentence.

I turned around to see what had caught her attention and

saw the casual guard smacking the formal one onto the floor. The latter hit the floor with such force that a loud “bam!” echoed throughout the bakery.

“Huh?”

I stared down at the guards in shock.

The formal guard seemed to be doing everything he could to fight back against the casual one, flailing around wildly and making a huge ruckus as he tried to get away. The casual guard, for his part, seemed to be restraining the other with all the force he could muster to make sure he didn’t make a getaway.

“You frickin’ idiot! You think you can just haul ass and leave me here to fend for myself?! *Huh*?! Well, fat chance, buckaroo!” cried the casual guard.

“*You’re* the idiot! Let go of me! Let’s rethink our plan and come back when we’re actually ready!”

“That’s just puttin’ shit off until later! We’ve come this far, so it’s time to face our fate like *men*!”

“Nothing’s worth our lives!”

The two guards rolled around the floor, arguing like grade schoolers and exchanging verbal jousts that were beyond my realm of comprehension.

I was afraid that the bakery was likely to get caught in the cross fire of their scuffle, but I didn’t want to risk breaking a couple bones in an effort to break them up. I decided to try to intervene verbally instead.

“Don’t horse around in someone else’s establishment!” I yelled. “And if you don’t need me anymore, I’m leaving!”

In the back of my mind, I couldn’t help but feel a little pleased with how audacious I’d become. I know it might seem a little silly to pat myself on the back for that, but I think *anyone* would be impressed to hear me shout like that after I’d been completely restrained earlier, unable to even call for help.

Unfortunately, the guards didn’t seem to care at all. They just kept going at it. Just as I was resigning myself to just letting them get it out of their systems, though, the two of them suddenly stopped moving.

“Okay, we’ll quit it. Can’t have our mediator walkin’ out on us,” said the casual guard, grimacing.

I didn’t appreciate being called their “mediator,” but I was glad that they’d settled down, at least. Now that I didn’t have to keep an eye on them anymore, I turned around to face Michelle again.

Her shock at seeing the two guards tussle seemed to have dissipated. She looked at me now with a troubled expression.

"Fii, who are these boys?" she asked.

"Um... Well, I think you've probably seen them several times before, actually. They used to be Nika's guards. I have no idea why they wanted to drag me out here, though. Sorry, but I'm as mystified as you about that."

"Oh, yes, I remember now... But what's this about how they 'used to be' Nika's guards? Are they not workin' for him anymore?"

"They both quit yesterday, apparently. And now they want to come live here in our little village."

I still had several questions for the guards myself, but since poor Michelle had been dragged into all of this now too, I did my best to explain what little I knew. As I was relaying this information to her, another loud *wham* rang out from behind me. I turned around to see if the guards were horsing around again, not even trying to hide the disgusted look on my face.

To my surprise, though, they weren't horsing around—far from it. The two of them were actually fully genuflecting, facing Michelle and me, with beautifully perfect form.

I blinked, absolutely stunned by this display.

"Please forgive us for quitting without your permission, master. Ever since you became a commoner, we've served the royal family just as you asked for more than a decade. But no matter how much you tell us not to waste our talents on you, you're the only master we want to serve."

"Yeah, what he said! And *you're* the one who told us our lives were worth more than our talents and that we'd be happier if we didn't always prioritize puttin' 'em to good use! We talked it over with the king, and he was cool with it too! So...here we are! Please, forgive us, master!"

The two guards took their usual opposite tones, but it was clear that their pleas were heartfelt and solemn. Even though I was just a bystander, I couldn't help holding my breath as I waited for Michelle's response. I could see even from a distance that the guards were trembling. It felt completely out of character for such battle-hardened men, but that just went to show how serious they were.

Without even thinking about it consciously, I discreetly took a few steps to the side to get out of their way.

I averted my gaze from the terrified guards and turned to look instead at the person they were addressing: Michelle. From what they'd just said, Michelle was apparently their true master—in other words, I was finally face-to-face with the mysterious "El."

There was barely any observable change in Michelle's expression as she regarded the two guards bowing before her. It was almost exactly the same troubled expression I often saw her wear.

"You boys are incorrigible," she said affectionately, with a sigh.

Instantaneously, the two whipped their heads up to look at her.

"You don't need to be so *afraid* of me, you know. I've softened over the years—in the heart as much as in the *body*," she joked.

She walked over slowly to the guards, wearing the gentlest, warmest smile. Then she knelt down in front of them and gave them both a hug.

I watched on in stunned amazement as the two fully grown men's faces crumpled, like they were about to burst into tears. It was a pretty unusual sight, to say the least. But at the same time, my head was reeling trying to make sense of it all.

"Ever since you became a commoner, we've served the royal family just as you asked for more than a decade." That's what the formal guard said. Does that mean that Michelle wasn't *a commoner until about ten years ago? Well... I guess that makes sense. If Michelle is El, then she can't just be a run-of-the-mill commoner. But what is she doing here now in this little village, living as a commoner and running a bakery?*

I had a feeling that I'd be able to put the pieces together from the little hints that the guards had let slip. But instead of thinking through it for myself, I tugged on Michelle's sleeve like a little kid, hoping she would explain it all for me.

She turned to look at me with a gentle smile. Then she gave the guards one last big hug and stood up. The guards looked at me with a hint of embarrassment on their faces before standing up too, in unison as always. They began to close up the bakery, as if they'd done it before a million times.

Michelle took me to the kitchen at the back of the bakery and took a seat in a chair. She smiled at me, directing me to take the chair across from her, and I obliged.

She let out a small exasperated noise, looked me straight in

the eye, and began to explain everything.

"A long time ago, I went by the name 'Micheala Zahmchesta.' You're probably familiar with my other name—the one that the palace gave me, back when I worked for the royal family. But now you know the real name of 'El the prophet too."

I'd pretty much erased every aristocrat's name from my memory since becoming a commoner, so I had no idea what kind of rank the Zahmchesta family must have held.

Well... I guess that doesn't really matter much, anyway, does it?

I nodded, signaling for her to continue.

"I'm sure this may sound awfully far-fetched, but I really *was* a prophet. I wasn't just a con woman or a kid telling lies for attention; I could genuinely see the future. I've always been able to see people's futures, ever since I was born. It's like second nature to me. I can only see a *little* into the future, though, mind you."

A prophet... She's a real prophet...

If I hadn't just had that conversation with Nana beforehand about how she could remember everything from the moment she'd been born, I might've had trouble fully believing Michelle's story now, as earnest as I could tell she was. But if there were people in this world who had been reincarnated and people who could remember everything since birth, then it didn't seem all that out there to think that there might also be people who could see the future.

Also, if Michelle was an actual prophet, then that actually explained some of her behavior. There were times that she'd seemed awfully...*prescient* about things that would come to pass. I'd just chalked it up to her having good intuition, but knowing what I knew now, I realized that the easiest explanation was that she'd known what was going to happen from the outset.

I nodded along.

"Honestly, taking a glimpse into the future comes as easily as breathing to me. That's why it drove me *crazy* that everyone made such a fuss about it. But worst of all was that they kept me locked away in the palace, saying that they needed my prophecies for the good of the kingdom. Not being able to live my life the way I wanted was what hurt the most."

I knew all too well what that was like. The restrictions I'd lived under had been nothing compared to Michelle's, but I'd run away from exactly the same fate.

A prophet would have been an enormous asset to the kingdom, though. While the palace's methods had been cruel, I could kind of understand why they'd resort to basically keeping her under house arrest. Still…that didn't make what she'd gone through any less horrible.

The only thing that made me feel a little bit better was that the current king wasn't the one who'd been on the throne when Michelle was a little girl. At least *he* hadn't been responsible for her horrible treatment.

"It was around that time that I met those two boys. We first crossed paths because one of the prophecies that I'd made at the palace concerned their village. One thing led to another, and they became my personal guards. We…weren't exactly on the best terms at the beginning. I wonder why they're so fond of me now?"

Michelle looked over at the guards as she spoke, smiling warmly.

Apparently, even *she* didn't know why they were hopelessly devoted to her. Thinking back on it now, the guards had probably been shaking in their boots like that before because they'd been afraid she'd be upset with them or cut them out of her life. Honestly, I was every bit as surprised as Michelle that they seemed to adore her so much. I could only imagine that a lot had happened over the years for them to think so highly of her.

"So much has come and gone since… Eventually, I reached my limit and fled the palace. But I was just a sheltered nobleman's daughter. There was no way I could just run off to the outskirts, without any preparation whatsoever, and make a living. I didn't know anything about the real world. But I was very lucky to meet someone who helped me when I needed it most. He's not here with us anymore, but he was the man who became my husband. He worked at a bakery, you see, and I fell in love with his bread. I thought it was the most delicious thing I'd ever eaten—and in fact, I still do."

This was the first time I'd heard about her husband. It was a surprise to me; I'd thought Michelle had always been here all by herself baking bread.

Huh… So, her husband was a baker, huh? She must have tasted the same happiness in his bread that I taste in hers, I thought idly.

"Of course, I only managed to spend a few days in hiding before the palace came knocking and hauled me back. Still…I

never forgot the taste of his bread," Michelle said. "In the end, I had to push hard for it, and it came with all sorts of conditions, but with the guards' help, I managed to get permission to live as a commoner. I'm the only living prophet these days, so that gave me some pretty strong leverage. That was about, oh...seventeen, eighteen years ago now?"

I nodded again. I understood Michelle's motives entirely. I could tell that she'd left a lot out of her story, but it wasn't like I needed to know every single detail. Besides, I could always ask her more whenever the bakery was empty or we were baking together.

I won't press her for any more details right now.

"Why is it such a secret that you're El?" I asked her.

"Well, it'd cause quite a stir if people found out that a real, live prophet was out here in the boonies slinging bread, don't you think? And I wouldn't ever want to lose the life I've made for myself as a commoner. Bakin' is what gives my life meaning, and besides...I wouldn't wanna leave my husband behind and move somewhere else."

Michelle looked off far into the distance as she spoke, as if thinking of someone—well, her husband, obviously—and a bittersweet smile spread across her face.

Seeing that look on her face, I felt like I could understand why the guards were so fiercely protective of her privacy. I swore to myself that I'd do whatever it took to keep her real identity a secret too.

"Oh, I hope you didn't encounter any unpleasantness from those two at church on my account?" Michelle said suddenly.

"From the church? You mean Nana and Pastor Jack? No, I don't think so..."

"Well, that's a relief. They're good kids, though, so I'm not surprised to hear they didn't take out their anger on you."

Take out their anger...? What is that supposed to mean?

I stared at Michelle intently, pressing her to explain. A sad smile spread across her face.

"Jack is a timid boy, but he's had to take on the duty of relaying my prophecies to the palace all these years. I just feel awful for him, bearing the burden of being one of the few people who know my real identity. He must live in fear of revealing that secret. As for Nancy... Well, I'll never be able to apologize enough for what I did to that poor dear. She really is a good girl, though.

I know she is."

I thought back to the strange look that had briefly crossed Nana's face when she had relayed an apology from Pastor Jack. What's more, the apology had seemed to come the moment he knew I was working at the bakery.

Nana had even joked that my employment must have had something to do with the apology. Then she'd given me that stern warning about how everyone has their own reasons and circumstances and how I shouldn't just trust people blindly.

Nana had probably known who El was from the start. Since she'd been able to remember everything since birth, she probably remembered seeing Michelle relay a prophecy to Jack for him to pass along to the palace. What's more, she apparently hated El. That probably explained why she'd given me that warning.

I didn't know what had gone down between Michelle and Nana, but when I thought about it logically, it seemed likely that Nana probably just held it against Michelle that Pastor Jack was so afraid of her. What Michelle had said about him stuck with me, and I could definitely see how it might leave a stronger impression on her. The way Nana had said that she "hated" El told me that she probably didn't *actually* hate her, though.

In any case, it wasn't really my place to make judgments about that. Whatever bad blood existed between them, that was their business. And, if anything, I wouldn't have put it past Nana to say goodbye to Michelle before she moved. Whether she was in her nun's habit or out of it, Nana really was a sweetheart.

Now then, what else did I want to ask...? Oh, right! I still can't help but wonder how I had such incredible luck—it's almost like things went too *well for me. It feels so egregious that I even privately doubt that the king was pulling all the strings. But maybe it has something to do with Michelle seeing the future...?*

"Um... When I came to this town, I was totally lost. I probably still had a whiff of the aristocracy about me too. But you employed me right away..."

"Oh, that? Well...you reminded me of myself. It made me want to look out for you, in the same way my husband looked out for me back then. You were nothin' like me, though, hon. I was a naive little princess, but you were a hardworkin' gal right from day one."

So it didn't have anything to do with any prophecy... That

explanation makes sense, though. She just saw herself in me, huh? What a remarkable turn of fate.

Maybe fate isn't so bad after all...

"I don't usually look into the future for my own benefit, but I took a real shine to you, so I made a little exception. You were the first person who ever overturned the fate I saw set out for you, you know."

"I...was?"

"That's right. In the future I saw, you were supposed to marry that Nika boy and return to the aristocracy without ever findin' out the truth. I didn't think that'd be such a bad future for you, so I never said anything about it," Michelle explained.

I was shocked, but it did make sense. And it certainly explained why she'd been so shocked that I'd come back today.

Wow, though... I guess I really did manage to take control.

"Nothing makes me happier than knowing that the future I foresee can change without me havin' to meddle in it," she said, beaming.

I might've expected Michelle to be uneasy about the future changing all of a sudden when it had never changed before, but she seemed genuinely happy. It really hit home how hard it must have been for her to carry the burden of foresight all these years.

I was so moved, I felt myself tearing up. I extended my hand and flashed a smile, trying to cover it up. Michelle gave my hand a puzzled look.

"Let's both make the most of our commoner lives, Michelle!" I said.

Our lives might have been worlds apart back when we were nobles, but now that we were both commoners, Michelle was probably the person I had the most in common with. That's why, as simpleminded of a conclusion as it was, I decided that made us friends. And so I'd offered my hand in a show of friendship.

Michelle chuckled, then took my hand in hers.

"Oh, also... I'd appreciate it if you could give Mr. Formal Guard a good talking-to! He's got a few screws loose right now, and he scared the daylights out of me earlier," I said, not afraid to snitch.

"Oh...? Sure thing, hon. Leave it to me."

Even as Michelle smiled warmly back at me, I could sense that she had it in her to be *incredibly* formidable. For a split second, a thought crossed my mind: *I'd better watch out for her... Today*

might very well be the last day that formal guard spends breathing.

"A-Anyway! I'll leave you three to enjoy your reunion! Have fun!" I said and practically ran out of the bakery. I carefully avoided the guards' gazes as I left.

I-I'm sure they'll survive the night... Probably.



Just as I left the bakery, I walked headlong into someone new. I blinked in surprise.

"Nika? What are you doing here...?"

"I told you I'd come see you again, remember?"

"I know, but...I *just* saw you. Don't you think it's a little soon?"

I was being serious, but there was something so funny about this that I couldn't help breaking out into a laugh. Nika started laughing too.

After we finally stopped and caught our breaths, Nika and I walked side by side in silence back to my house. We hadn't decided he would walk me there or anything; it just kind of naturally happened. After all, this was what we always did.

The only thing different about tonight was that the two guards who always accompanied him had quit, and so they'd been replaced by unfamiliar faces—and not *two* unfamiliar faces but *five*. I wasn't surprised by that, though. Five normal guys seemed like *lowballing* what the last two were capable of.

Other than that, though, everything was going just as usual. Or so I thought...

My heart was pounding in my chest. I decided to strike up a conversation to distract myself.

"You've been keeping tabs on Lily, right? I wanted to ask you: How has she been faring since the kidnapping?"

This felt like a very natural conversation to have. After all, we always talked about Lily.

"What, Liliana? Hmm... How can I put this...?"

"Huh? Wait...*that* sounds ominous! It can't be good news if it's got your tongue tied like this!" I said, hounding him. I couldn't help but picture the look of despair on Lily's face the moment she'd tried to take her life.

But when I looked at Nika's face, I saw that he was only wearing a troubled expression—not a sad one—and that immediately put my mind at ease. Plus, I knew that if things had

deteriorated, Nika would be there looking after her rather than here with me.

"Well… We had a talk this afternoon," Nika said. "From what Liliana told me, it sounds like the situation itself hasn't changed. That said, *she's* changed…and so has Seth. No matter how things unfold, I don't think we need to worry about them anymore."

His response was ridiculously discreet, but I had a feeling I knew what he was trying to convey to me.

Well, that's good to hear, I thought, giving him a smile in response.

If the situation hadn't changed…that probably meant that Lily and Seth were still engaged, but they hadn't had any heart-to-hearts that had suddenly brought them closer.

That's something…although I'm not sure how he feels about me *now.*

Lily's and Seth's perspectives had shifted though. In fact, their very worldviews had changed—and accordingly, so had the paths that they would likely choose for themselves. I agreed with Nika that this was probably a good thing; whatever paths they chose, they would probably be just fine.

Even if they ultimately decided to break up and suffer the heartbreak that came with that choice, they'd be all right. I knew, deep down, that Lily and Seth would both figure things out for themselves.

"I didn't press her for any details, though. Still, they've known each other for a long time now. I'm sure they must share a bond that goes beyond my understanding. I can't imagine that they'll break things off and never speak to each other again," Nika said.

"Wait… What do you mean, they've known each other for a long time?" I asked.

I didn't remember Lily and Seth having any history—much less the long history Nika seemed to be alluding to. There was no mention of that in the game, and I certainly hadn't picked up on it in the sixteen years I'd been living in this universe either.

Nika stared at me intently.

"You really *didn't* have the slightest interest in Seth, did you…?" he asked.

"Huh? Why do you sound so astonished? Have I missed something big here?"

"Seth and Liliana have been friends since long before you and he were engaged."

“Huh?! Seriously?!” I blurted out.

Wait… Seth and I were only five years old when we were engaged, though. Does that mean that he and Lily have been friends since they were even younger than that?

“Seth has always been willful and bossy. He’s always had sycophants and admirers following him around, but he’s rarely had any friends. Liliana is his oldest and closest friend.”

“How did I never know about that?! I mean, we were *engaged*!”

“Yes, well…that’s what *I’d* like to know. I suppose you must never have asked him about his friends, since you weren’t interested in him to begin with. And Seth isn’t the sort to talk about another woman in front of the woman he loves, so I can’t imagine he would have ever mentioned it either.”

Right… Well, that would *explain it!*

Thinking back to how I used to engage with him, I realized I’d always just given the bare minimum responses to Seth’s boasting and demanding. I would never have thought to ask him any questions!

And it made sense that Seth wouldn’t bring up their friendship with me too. I mean, why would he have talked to his fiancée about another woman if I hadn’t even asked? He’d probably told me about playing with his friends, but he wouldn’t have ever mentioned her by name. Honestly, though, I couldn’t even remember what he’d told me. All of our conversations were just hazy memories to me.

“Even so… I crossed paths with Lily plenty of times in high society get-togethers. How could I not have made that connection?” I said.

“How indeed…?”

“Wow… This is really highlighting for me how blind I was to so much of the world around me.”

Looking back on it now, I hadn’t even *noticed* Lily among all of the other noble girls until she’d introduced herself. I only knew the Liliana Inoce from the game, so I hadn’t recognized her at that young age. It was only when she’d said her name that I’d given her a second look, and even then, I’d just gone on my merry way pretending not to know anything about her. It felt kind of nostalgic to think back to those memories now.

Lily, on the other hand, had told me that she knew at first sight that I was the protagonist.

“…”

"..."

Now that the conversation had died, an awkward silence descended upon us.

Was it always this awkward being with Nika? I wondered. This felt completely different from the awkward silence in the carriage ride to the palace yesterday, though. *What's going on here? I need to think of something new to talk about, and fast! I'd do anything to fill this dead air!*

"A-Anyway, I know this is a little off topic, but did you hear about Nolls and Nana?" I asked him.

"Prince Nolan...and the nun? No, I don't believe I have. But from the way you said that, I suppose they must be in a relationship now?"

"Well... I don't think they're in a *romantic* relationship, but it seems like they're friends now. At least I *think* they are?"

Despite being the one to pick this topic of conversation, I apparently didn't have anything of substance to say about it. I'd had to come up with it in a hurry to fill time, though, so it was kind of inevitable that it wouldn't be the best conversation starter.

Nana had seemed completely unperturbed by Nolls's proposal to me, so it didn't seem likely that they were romantically involved. Surely they were just friends... At least, that's what it looked like to me. I still wasn't entirely sure what a friendship between a foreign prince and a commoner would even look like, though.

"Well, best to leave it to them to sort that out. I'll worry if you go poking your nose into their affairs, Fii," said Nika.

"I-I know. I'll stay out of it."

I decided not to tell him that I'd already poked my nose into things... Since nothing had come of it anyway, though, it was kind of beside the point.

It's not like I can help poking my nose into things when I love Nana so much.

"..."

"..."

O-Oh god, what now? The awkward silence is back!

Um... Uh... I can't talk about learning El's identity, since that's a secret. I can't exactly tell him about Nana remembering everything since she was a baby either. That's probably not mine to share. I don't feel like I can talk about Shade, Evan, and Mel visiting either—

not after Nika told me he loved me. That would just be inappropriate.

Wait… Huh? Oh, yeah. I forgot that Nika told me he loved me. And I love him back. We feel the same way about each other.

Why am I even thinking about this right now? I mean, it's not like that's news. I knew all of that already. Actually, maybe that's why this is so hard… Knowing how we feel about each other just makes this all the more awkward! I have no idea what to talk about! I mean, what did we even talk about before?!

"Is something the matter?"

"Huh?! Wh-What do you mean?!"

"It's just…you seem quite tense. Is there something on your mind?"

Nika peered into my face, his concern for me plainly evident. Instinctively, I took a step back.

"Oh! No, it's… It's not like that! Don't worry about it! There's nothing on my mind or anything. I'm just a bit tense right now, that's all!" I protested. Honestly, though, even *I* didn't know what exactly I was protesting.

I really wish I had some bread on me right now… What am I supposed to do without my messiah? My fate-defying accessory? I already gave out all my bread to share with everyone for dinner, and I don't have any in my bag. I really wish I'd taken some of the unsold bread home with me after visiting Michelle with the guards.

How was I supposed to interrupt that touching reunion to ask for leftover bread, though?

"…"

"…"

The painful silence was back. And this time, Nika was staring into my face suspiciously, trying to figure out if I was okay. Basically: Things had only gotten *worse*. I felt a flop sweat coming on.

Why can't I see my house yet?! I screamed internally, wishing that this could all just be over with.

Judging from Nika's behavior, though, he didn't seem to mind the silence much. Come to think of it, I never used to mind sharing silence with him either.

If I'm going to have to put up with this anxiety every *time he comes to visit, I have some concerns about my long-term heart health… Argh, to hell with it! Pluck up some courage, girl!*

"I've never actually fallen in love with anyone before!" I blurted

out, getting my anxiety off my chest.

Nika looked at me with a stunned expression on his face.

“In the past, everything I did was about getting away from my older brother. But sometimes I just felt like it was so hopeless and that I couldn’t afford to pursue a relationship with him in my life! I even tried dating someone when they asked me out, but my brother ruined the whole relationship before I could even really fall for them! I basically couldn’t have *anything* when my brother was around!”

I knew Nika was probably baffled about this “older brother” I was talking about—one that clearly didn’t exist in this life. Come to think of it, though, I was pretty sure I’d mentioned my older brother before when Nika proposed to me too.

I have a feeling I’m going to end up telling Nika about my past life one day, though. I have faith that he can handle it.

I’d been pretty chill about it when I was just imagining the conversation in my head, but telling him in reality was entirely unlike anything I’d rehearsed. I was breathing heavily, and tears were welling in my eyes.

“A-Anyway, what I’m trying to say is: Being alone with the man I love has been making me really anxious!” I cried.



I could feel myself cooling down a bit now that I'd gotten that off of my chest. In fact, now I was starting to feel *embarrassed*.

Wait, did I seriously just say that? I thought, feeling the blood rush to my cheeks. *Surely that didn't just leave my mouth! What am I doing, acting like a blushing maiden all of a sudden?! How was that pathetic vent supposed to be a display of "courage"?! I didn't pick my words carefully enough at all... I basically just shot myself in the foot!*

"Fii—"

"Well, that's that! Gotta go!" I said.

My house was finally within sight, so I took off for home before Nika could say another word. I was certain that anything he'd say would make me so mortified, I'd just want to crawl in a hole and die. I took one last glimpse at Nika's face. It looked like he was beaming—him and *all his guards*.

Ugh... This is humiliating!

No sooner had I made it back home than I dove straight into my futon. I covered my face with both hands, wondering how I was ever supposed to face Nika again. I flailed around, silently screaming.

Calm down, Fii! Just calm down!

Ummm... Okay. Right. We both feel the same way about each other, but that doesn't mean we can actually be together. After all, I'm not willing to throw away my life as a commoner, and Nika isn't willing to abandon his duties to the kingdom. I know Nika said he loved me more *than the kingdom, but that's not the same thing as saying that he'll leave behind his duties and his royal status to live with me as a commoner. Besides, I know the kingdom needs him.*

Basically, it's a battle: Either I'll break first and agree to marry him, or he'll break first and give up on me.

Yeah... Thinking about it as a battle makes me feel a little better for some reason. It is *basically a battle, I guess. It's a battle of attrition, that's all.*

I closed my eyes, feeling a bit more settled now, and took deep, measured breaths.

I wonder who will win in the end: me or Nika? I have no intention of losing, but who knows what the future holds? As long as we both fight with everything we've got, whether I win or lose, I know I'll be able to face any of the potential outcomes with a smile. And I'm sure Nika will too.

Putting it all together like that brought a smile to my face.

Relieved, I suddenly felt a wave of drowsiness hit me. But

there was just one thing I had to do before I fell asleep. I'd fallen asleep last night before I'd gotten to get this out of my system, so I wasn't going to let that happen again tonight.

As I rolled around in my futon, I took in a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. Then, in the loudest voice I could muster, I yelled:

"I love being a commoner!"

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Lady Rose Just Wants to Be a Commoner Volume 2*. I'm the author, Kooriame.

I can't even begin to express how grateful I am that I was able to publish this second volume. I know I ended the first volume on a bit of a cliff-hanger, so I'm relieved that I didn't have to leave you all hanging with no follow-up.

I know this second volume felt a bit like a mystery novel, what with all of the clashing motivations and perspectives, but I think this story is a lot more straightforward than an *actual* mystery. For one thing, I'm not a big fan of gimmicks and twists. I don't like to read them *or* write them. What I mean by that is: If you just ignore the main character's misleading conjecture, it's actually pretty easy to understand what's going on throughout the story.

I'll wrap up the serious discussion here and pivot toward sharing a bit of fun character trivia, just like I did at the end of volume 1. I won't be able to fill up the remaining two pages otherwise.

I talked about our heroine, Fii, in the first afterword, so I'll talk about our hero, Nicholas Cabott, in this one.

I wrote Nika to be the kind of gentle, cool older brother character who seems perfect on the outside (read: in front of Fii, at least). But I like that when Fii isn't looking, it's clear that he's fighting hard to win her heart, and he's actually kind of a doofus. I love intelligent characters who don't even realize how brilliant they are. I love intelligent characters who *do* realize they're brilliant too, but we have Nolls filling that niche already.

Both Fii and Nika think they're not good enough for each other because they're blind to their own talents but they recognize each other's. They also think that their respective statuses and ambitions make their love impossible. If it hadn't been for all of the events of the story, I think they probably could've gone their whole lives without even revealing their feelings for each other.

I think I've filled out enough space now, so I'll get back to the formalities.

I'm so happy that I was able to complete the story of *Lady Rose* in book format. Thank you again to Hidaka Nami-san, the illustrator for volume 1 who returned to do the illustrations for this volume as well. You do such an incredible job at making the characters shine with your drawings, and seeing them makes me fall in love with each character even more.

Thank you as well to my editor, who has given me so much valuable advice and support throughout the process, and to everyone at Beans Bunko. I'd also like to extend my thanks to everyone else who had a hand in the making of this book.

Most of all, thank you to all of my readers, who have stuck with me to the end.

I hope I'll see you all again soon.

Kooriame


Kooriame
illustrator
Nami Hidaka
2
Lady Rose
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by Kooriame

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