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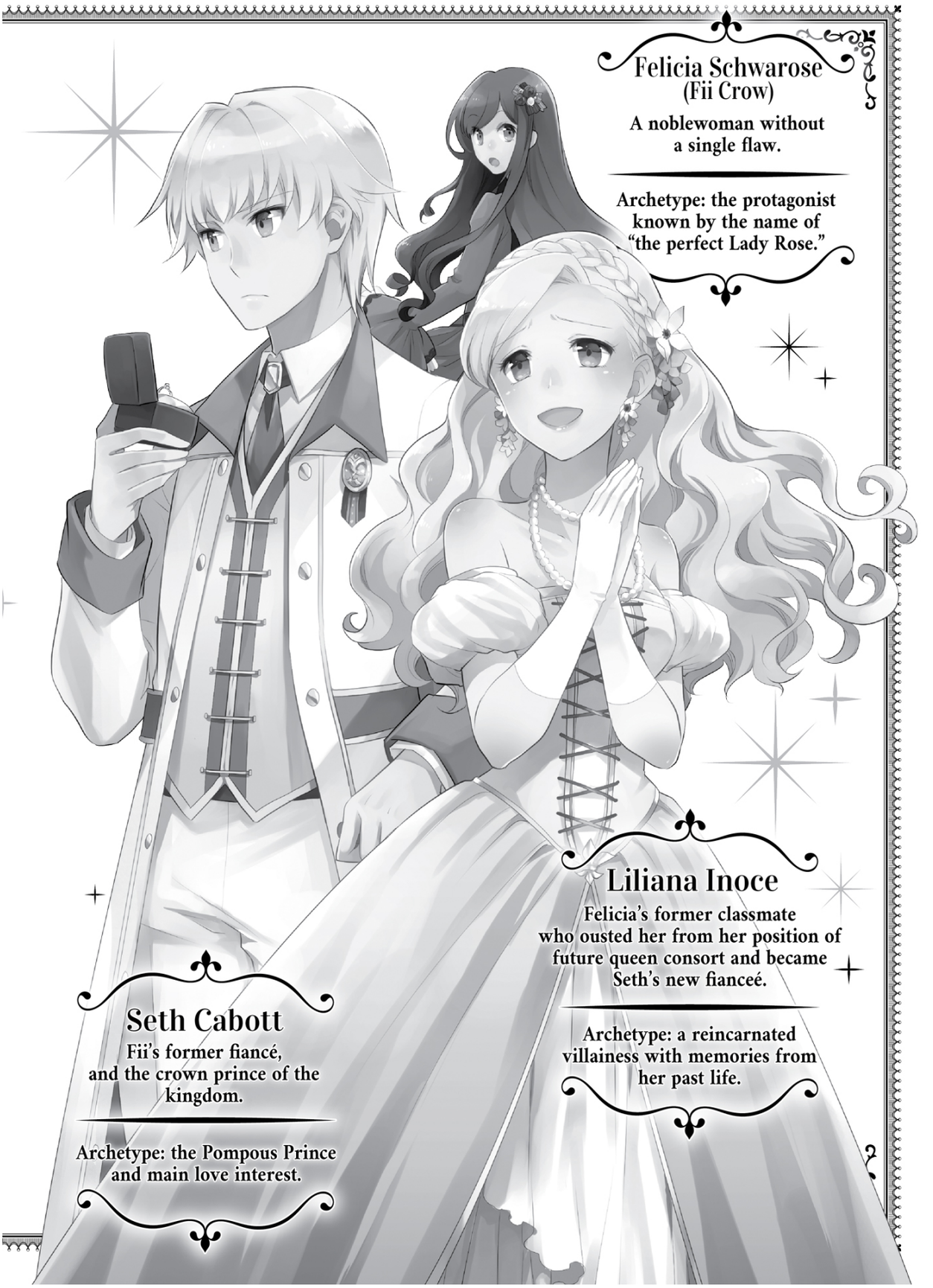
Liliana's Story



Lady Rose Just Wants to Be a COMMONER!

3


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Lady Rose
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Felicia Schwarose
(Fii Crow)

A noblewoman without a single flaw.

Archetype: the protagonist known by the name of "the perfect Lady Rose."

Liliana Inoce

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

Archetype: a reincarnated villainess with memories from her past life.

Seth Cabott

Fii's former fiancé, and the crown prince of the kingdom.

Archetype: the Pompous Prince and main love interest.



Nicholas Cabott (Nika)

Seth's older brother, who cares deeply about Felicia.

Archetype: the gentlemanly, sexy older man.



Melvin Crabitt

Liliana's first friend, who watches over her with a smirk as she pursues the man she loves.

Archetype: the androgynous genius.



Shirley

Liliana's first friend, who watches over her with a smirk as she pursues the man she loves.

Archetype: the cool older sister type who never lets her feelings show.

Savior of Nations: Lady Rose

Also known as *Lady Rose*.
An otome game where you play as the main character, Lady Rose, whose goal is to save her homeland—and the world. In the good ending, she marries the Pompous Prince, Seth Cabott, and becomes his queen consort. Liliana, the villainess who tries to interfere, is stripped of her noble title and becomes a commoner in this ending.

KEY WORDS

Lady Rose Just Wants to be a Commoner Characters



Nancy (Nana)

A nun who works at the church that Liliana always visits.

Archetype: the sweet, clumsy girl with braids.

Table of Contents

Cover
Characters
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Epilogue
Afterword
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Prologue

"Felicia Schwarose, I hereby annul our engagement!" declared Seth Cabott.

I stood by his side as he spoke, glaring at Felicia Schwarose—the woman also known as "Lady Rose."

At long last, I thought. For I, Liliana Inoce, had been watching his fiancée, Lady Rose, enviously for years now. I'd been secretly bullying her, but I'd told Seth that *she'd* been the one bullying *me*.

I already knew how this was going to play out, though. The ending had been foretold long ago. After all, Seth, Lady Rose, and I were all just characters from a romance game. I was the only one who knew that, though, since I had memories from my past life of playing the game and recognized my current world as its setting.

I'd already completely given up on rewriting the story. All I could do was play along and fulfill my role in progressing it to its destined ending. I was the villainess, Lady Rose was the protagonist, and Seth was the main love interest. It only made sense that I would be condemned for my crimes and that my story would end there. My departure from this world was imminent.

Seth's declaration was merely a feint; in truth, they'd secretly gathered evidence to prove my guilt. All that was left was to wait for Lady Rose to deny the allegations, and I knew where that would lead: My beloved Seth would come to loathe me from the bottom of his heart, and I would be condemned with a punishment tantamount to a death sentence.

Oh, at long last, I thought. *It's finally over.*

I'd spent so long struggling in vain. I'd fought so hard, I'd spat up blood. But even through the tears, I'd kept it up. And now, I'd finally surrendered, with the hope that my story could at least have a happy ending for Seth and Lady Rose.

Lady Rose turned to face Seth with a lovely smile, despite just being accused of a wrong she hadn't even committed. It was the smile she always wore: calm, kind, and *perfect*. No one could smile more beautifully than Lady Rose. It seemed wholly out of place right now, but perhaps it was just in her nature to put on a calm

smile, whatever the circumstances.

Go on, Lady Rose. Don't worry about a villainess like me. Just keep that sweet smile on, like you always do, and say your next line. Hurry up and finish me.

Then Lady Rose opened her mouth to speak. "If that's what you wish, Your Highness," she said.

Now that Lady Rose had denied the allegations, Seth would—

Wait… Huh?

Did I miss the part where she pleaded not guilty?

Chapter 1

My name is Liliana Inoce, and I've only just remembered that there's someone I'm in love with. I regained my memories yesterday, on my third birthday, when my maid, Shirley, spoke his name.

As soon as she did, my head began to spin. I felt a dizzy spell come over me, and I fainted right then and there. A second later, I regained *all* of my memories and true identity. Or, to put it more accurately, it was like I emerged as a new person: at once both Liliana Inoce, whose body I inhabited in this life, and Hino Ririko, the girl I had been in my previous life.

My father had been worried about me after I'd suddenly passed out yesterday, and so had my maid, Shirley, who had been with me since I was a newborn. After doing my best to soothe them, I'd gone to sleep, hoping to give my head a rest after the massive influx of new information I'd just been hit with.

And that brings us back to the present. It was early in the morning, and I'd awoken feeling refreshed after having come to terms with everything. I found myself breaking into a wide grin.

"I can't believe my luck! I get to live in the same world now as Seth!" I exclaimed. Then I took in a deep breath, filling my lungs with as much air as possible before letting it out. "I even get to breathe the same air as him! Air has *never* tasted this good before!"

As I rolled around happily on the bed, I tried to let out some of my excitement. I pulled my blanket over my head and shoved my face in my pillow so it would muffle the sound of my ecstatic shrieks.

The sight of a three-year-old going berserk like this would probably motivate any sensible person to call a doctor, and God only knew what tests I'd be subjected to if that were to happen. I knew I had to let out my energy like this while I was still alone in my room, so I could pull myself together before I had to see anyone. See, I was just being *sensible*. In fact, in that moment, I was the very picture of sensibility.

I'd already planned out exactly how I was going to live my life from now on. I knew the situation I'd been thrust into, and my place in the world was now crystal clear to me. So sensible, right?

"Does this mean that all I have to do is just live my life normally, and I'll get to eat the vegetables that were grown next to the ones *Seth* eats? I'll probably get to eat the livestock that's raised on the same farm as the livestock he eats too, right? Oh my God, this is too much! I'm so happy right now, it actually *hurts*!"

Just to prove to you how utterly grounded and sane I was being about all of this, let me take a moment to put all the pieces together for you.

Let's start with the basics: I'm Liliana Inoce, and I remember living in another world in my past life. Until just yesterday, I only had the faintest of memories. My name, the names of objects, and the names of countries all just floated around in my head dimly with a vague sense of déjà vu. Now, though, I could remember it all clear as day.

In my past life, my name had been Hino Ririko, and I'd died when I was seventeen years old. There had been nothing particularly special about me, nor had my life had the kind of juicy drama you'd see play out in a TV show. I'd just lived an upright ordinary life surrounded by good people.

So... How did an ordinary girl like me wind up miraculously reincarnated—past-life memories intact—into this world? Well, if I had to guess, it probably had something to do with the boy I'd loved in my past life.

I'd played a romance game called *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* in my past life, and I'd fallen deeply in love with one of the love interests. It was kind of an...*unhealthy obsession*, honestly. And that love interest was none other than the boy I've been so calmly and reasonably talking about this whole time: Prince Cabott, the prince of the Cabott Kingdom.

"Will I even be able to get any words out when I meet Seth? I mean, I'm going to *have* to, but...honestly, I feel I'm going to get so excited, my blood will boil. I might even wind up in the hospital. Or maybe a blood vessel will burst and I'll just die right there on the spot? I wouldn't be surprised..."

I'd been in middle school when I first encountered *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* in a video game store in my past life. The main

love interest, Seth, was positioned smack-dab in the middle of the cover. The moment I saw him, my heart practically leaped right out of my chest. I was so overcome with love, I almost *died*. I left the store with the game in hand and jumped straight into it. Before long, I was obsessed—with Seth, that is.

I'd loved Seth from the bottom of my heart. The people in my life had been pretty weirded out by my obsession and had tried to steer me away from him, but my love persisted. The flame of my passion never died—not even when *I* did.

My life as Ririko came to an end when a truck swerved in front of me, threatening to run over a nearby kid. Instinctively, I'd pushed the kid out of the way...ending my own life. The moment I did that, I knew I was done for. But, like I said, I'd lived an upright life as Ririko. And thanks to my good deeds, God granted my one, final wish.

"Please, God, give me at least a *one* percent chance at finding love in my next life."

I'd had an exactly zero percent chance with the boy I loved in my past life, since he was literally from another world. So, it seemed God was magnanimous enough to reincarnate me into that world.

From today until the day I die, I'll always have faith in God.

"I mean...Seth is going to be the reason that I die in this world, but I guess that's kind of nice in its own way? Maybe dying by his hand will bind us together even more than being married?"

In case you missed this part: Liliana Inoce isn't the game's main character, Lady Rose. She still features pretty prominently, though. If Lady Rose goes down Seth's route, then Liliana is the rival who tries to get in her way—or, if you wanted to put it a little less generously, she's the *villainess*.

Personally, though, I'd always found Liliana more relatable than the game's protagonist, so I was pretty okay with being reincarnated as her. Sure, it would have been nice to have been reincarnated as the protagonist so that I could be engaged to Seth automatically through the power of my family's status...but I just couldn't understand how Lady Rose could even *consider* dating another man when she had Seth *right there*. I couldn't relate at all to her in any of the routes other than Seth's, when she chose a different love interest.

Liliana, on the other hand, never loves anyone but Seth regardless of which route the protagonist takes. I'll admit she probably takes things a little too far when she bullies the protagonist in Seth's route, but to her credit, she wastes no time in marrying Seth in the other routes. I really admired her passion for Seth. It felt only appropriate that *she* would be the character I reincarnated as.

"But if I live, and one of us dies after years of marriage and a loving relationship, then maybe that would bind our hearts together even more?" I mused aloud. "Yeah… It'd be a real shame to die upon our very first meeting."

Thinking about it in simple terms, there were six love interests in the game, including both Seth and the secret love interest. That meant there was a five in six chance that the protagonist would choose a love interest who wasn't Seth, which would result in my fateful marriage to him.

I wasn't content to leave my fate subject to another's whims, though. No way in hell was I just going to sit on my hands and hope that the one-in-six result didn't come to fruition!

I didn't care if Lady Rose picked Seth's route. As long as I could get in there early and make him fall head over heels in love with me, there wouldn't be any *room* for her to make a move by the time we turned fifteen and started at Thea Academy, when the game's plot started. I'd win, and the game's script wouldn't even matter!

I also had every confidence that I could manage that. On the inside, I was the same average girl I'd been in my past life, but on the outside, I was exceedingly pretty. I looked sweet and put-together, with amethyst eyes and luscious strawberry blonde hair. But more than that, I knew that I could work hard to fashion myself into the kind of woman deserving of a place by Seth's side if I started now, at three years old.

Who cares about the protagonist, the "perfect Lady Rose"? She's got nothing on me! The moment I was reincarnated into this world, it's obvious that I *became the protagonist! I've got this in the bag!*

"Okay! Time to get up and do some studying!" I told myself.

Now that I'd completed the ritual of letting out some of my love-fueled energy, and I'd come to a good stopping place for sorting out my thoughts, I flung the blanket off of me and climbed

out of bed.

I went into the en suite bathroom and stepped on a stool (I needed it, since I was so short) to reach the sink, where I washed my face and brushed my hair. Shirley usually helped me get changed, but today I managed to put on my dress by myself. It was a classic style for aristocrats, simple and easy to move around in. After taking a look in the full-length mirror and quickly making sure I was looking presentable, I stood up as tall as I could and opened the door.

It was still only six in the morning, so I knew I wouldn't encounter anyone in the halls, at least. If I'd had study materials in my room, I would've just stayed there to study, but obviously I was going to be hard-pressed to find them in a three-year-old's bedroom. There were plenty of stuffed animals but not a single bookshelf in sight.

A teddy bear bigger than me isn't going to help much with my training. Wish I'd asked for a study set for my birthday... Oh well. Hindsight is twenty-twenty and all.

I had a vague memory of seeing lots of books in the grand library, so I headed there in search of them. It felt like I was on the right track.

I stood up tall again to open the door and headed over to the small bookshelf in the corner. I opened the drawer.

"Bingo! Writing implements: obtained!"

I tried to snap my fingers, but they didn't make a sound. I looked down at my fingers with disappointment. They were soft and puffy—a child's fingers. They probably weren't going to be fit for snapping.

It made such a satisfying sound when I snapped in my past life, I thought, dejected.

I snapped out of my snapping gloom and grabbed a quill, a bottle of ink, and some parchment from the drawer. Then I headed over to the desk and chair by the window.

I looked up at the chair. It was *awfully* tall. I considered that it would probably take an enormous amount of effort just to haul myself up onto it. Worse yet, even the desk was too big for me. I probably wouldn't have been able to use it even if I'd managed to make my way onto the chair.

After worrying over it for a bit, I ultimately decided to just sit on

the floor to study. It wasn't particularly ladylike, but I didn't care.

Next on my agenda was finding a suitable book that I'd actually be able to reach. I had a *lot* to learn in this world, which meant that there were a lot of different books which could prove useful. It seemed like a pretty easy task to find one.

I set my stationery down on the floor and headed over to the bookshelves. Even though this world was pretty Western, everyone wrote in Japanese. *Thank God I don't have to learn a whole new writing system*, I thought, as I reached for a book titled *Etiquette for the Aristocrat*. When I picked it up, I realized that it was even heftier than it looked.

Hmm… This three-year-old body is going to be even more of a nuisance than I thought.

"Maybe I'll just take one book out at a time," I said to myself. "Yeah… That's a good idea."

I took the book and walked back to the spot on the floor where I'd placed the stationery.

The floor was a little dirty, since everyone just walked around on it with their shoes on, but I didn't really have a choice. So, I sat down on my knees and leaned forward to read the book I'd pulled out. Fortunately, I'd anticipated that something like this might come up, so I'd chosen a dark gray dress to wear today to minimize any visible dirt. Besides, I was three years old… I figured it wasn't the end of the world if I sat on the floor and got a little dirty.

As I read through the etiquette book, I jotted down any important takeaways on the parchment with my ink and quill. I hadn't used quills in my past life, so it was kind of tricky to write with one now. I didn't have anything else to write with, though, so I couldn't exactly complain. At the very least, I figured I'd probably get used to writing with it the more I used it.

"Along with using formal language, noblewomen tend to use expressive, feminine phrases like 'why, yes' and 'truly.' Hmm… Come to think of it, I *do* remember Liliana talking like that in the game. I think the protagonist does too, in formal situations. 'Truly!'… 'Why, yes!'… Okay, well, th-that was embarrassing. I'll have to practice until I can say things like that with a straight face."

Just then, raised voices echo throughout the manor. Shirley had apparently gone into my room to wake me, only to realize that I

wasn't there. Afraid I'd been kidnapped, the manor had descended into a bit of chaos as everyone clamored to look for me. But until I heard the frenzied voices for myself, I just kept studying.

"Lady Liliana, I'm so pleased to find you studying, but I do wish you wouldn't worry me like that," said Shirley, looking down at me with her arms crossed. "The master is worried too, after you fainted just the other day."

"I-I'm sorry..." I replied, terrified.

Shirley was eighteen—only a year older than I'd been when I'd died in my past life—and yet she seemed so much more mature. Her blue hair and pink eyes would have made her look like a rock star in my previous life, but in this world, that was considered pretty normal. Shirley was beautiful, both inside and out, and she carried herself with the air of an intellectual. Her stern gaze and unchanging expression made it hard to wrap your head around the fact that she was the private maid of a three-year-old girl. Even in this moment, she was ridiculously intimidating. If I hadn't just fully regained all of my past life memories, I probably would've started sobbing at the sight of her.

Her words stuck with me, though. *Viscount Cain is worried about me?* Viscount Cain was my father in my current life. There were maids and butlers who lived with us here in the manor, but since my mother was rarely home, my father was essentially raising me alone. *I guess it makes sense he'd be worried... I'll have to be careful not to upset him. Boy, it's tough being three.*

"If you'd like, I'd be happy to assist with your studies," said Shirley, with a blank expression on her face.

Despite her stone-faced bearing, though, she'd at least snuffed out the intimidating aura she'd been emitting earlier. She squatted down so that she made eye contact with me as she spoke. As scary as she seemed at a glance, she was actually pretty nice. She'd take me back to my room and give me milk to calm me down before she'd scold me.

Her suggestion was actually exactly what I'd been hoping for. But just as I was about to start nodding happily in response, it suddenly dawned on me what a terrible idea that was.

"I... I would love to take you up on your offer once I'm a little older. And I'll be sure to tell you in the future when I'm going to wander around. Is that...acceptable?" I asked, giving her a strained

smile.

I hate to admit it, but I've always been a terrible liar. I know because everyone in my past life used to tell me so *all the time*. Fortunately, though, Shirley didn't seem to see through me. Instead, she just let it go with a "Very well."

There was a lot that I hoped to learn from Shirley, of course. I was still only three years old, though, so any tutor worth their salt would start with the basics, like how to write and count. I didn't feel like it'd do me much good to review stuff I could do in my sleep. It'd just be a waste of time for both of us.

What I *really* wanted to learn was how to comport myself as a noblewoman, because nothing in my past life had prepared me for that. But asking for lessons on etiquette alone would probably seem really strange. So, I'd have to learn that all on my own.

"Lady Liliana... I can't help but feel that you've suddenly grown up in the blink of an eye," Shirley said, out of nowhere, as she looked at me with her piercing gaze.

I felt a little shudder run through my body. If we'd been in a manga, there would have been a sound effect like "URK!" popping up next to my head.

Wh-What do I even say? I wondered. *I'm a terrible liar, and Shirley is sharp as a tack. If I try to lie straight to her face like this, she'll see right through me. I'm painfully aware that I can't pull that off, so I'm just going to have to switch to Plan B.*

Okay, here we go... I'll try distracting her!

"Why, yes! Because I've fallen in love!" I declared.

"You have...? With *whom*?"

"I'm afraid...that's a secret!"

The only thing that had come into my mind when I tried to think of another topic was Seth, so I'd ended up blurting out my romantic affairs. Her suspicious question surprised me, though. So, I put up a blustering front and pleaded the fifth.

I'd assumed that Shirley would brush off my declaration as just another whim of a capricious three-year-old, but she'd actually seemed to take me pretty seriously. To be fair, I didn't exactly leave the house much, since I hadn't yet made my social debut. I didn't even have any friends my age. So, I couldn't blame her for being curious about whom I would have even fallen for. But she always wore such a blank expression on her face, it was hard to tell what

she was thinking. Maybe it was something else entirely?

"Is that so? Well, then I won't pester you about it any further," she said. "That aside, Master Cain would like to see you. He's taking his break right now, so this is the perfect opportunity. Shall I walk you to his office?"

"Yes. Very well."

Relieved, I followed Shirley to Viscount Cain's office. It was no doubt improper for a noblewoman to let her maid walk in front of her, but please remember that I was only *three*. It would have been one thing for me to lead the way to a room I'd visited often, but I wasn't very familiar with the viscount's office.

Before long, Shirley stopped in front of the door to a room. She looked at me and nodded, as if to say, *We're here.* Then she promptly knocked on the door.

"Excuse me, Master Cain. I've brought Lady Liliana to visit you," she said.

"Wonderful. Thank you, Shirley. Come in, come in," replied a voice from inside.

Without making a sound, Shirley slowly opened the door and held out her hand to beckon me inside. I'd never worked a day in my life—not even in my previous life—so I couldn't help but be impressed by how competent Shirley was at her job. As I marveled at her work, I stepped inside the viscount's office.

Viscount Cain sat in a grand, luxurious-looking chair (which was also remarkably wide) behind an equally grand and luxurious-looking desk.

Hmm... With genetics like these, I'll have to pay special attention to my diet, I thought.

Viscount Cain had a warm, good-natured personality and a pleasant smile. As rotund as he was, his weight made him seem more approachable and gave him an air of open-mindedness. He had blond hair and amethyst eyes, just like me, and nice bone structure. I had a feeling he'd be quite handsome if he just lost a little weight. Honestly, he was probably already pretty popular with the ladies.

"Is something the matter, father?" I asked him, cocking my head. "Why have you called me here to your office?"

He knit his brows—an unusual sight for a man who was typically so pleasant and easygoing. Suddenly, I was struck by a

fear that I might have screwed up and gotten ink on my hands or clothes while I'd been studying. I frantically inspected myself, but I didn't see any ink anywhere.

No, there's nothing unusual about me on the outside. *Which means… Wait, don't tell me…*

"Father?"

"Liliana… Let me ask you something."

There was a slight tremor in his voice.

"O-Of course," I said nervously. "Anything."

What if he's realized that I reincarnated? I have no idea how to act like a child, much less a three-year-old. I have no idea how to act like the person I was before yesterday either.

It wasn't like I'd taken over Liliana's body or anything, though. I've always been *me*, since the moment that I was reborn. It's just…I didn't have a clear memory of my past life until yesterday.

From Viscount Cain's perspective, though, now that I'd regained my past life memories, I probably seemed like a completely different person from the Liliana he knew. Surely he wouldn't disown me or anything for that, though…

I can't risk it. I have to marry Seth, no matter what!

"Why are you calling me 'father' all of a sudden?! You were calling me 'daddy' only just yesterday! Don't get me wrong, 'father' has a nice ring to it too…but don't you think it's a little soon for that?! Can't you let me enjoy being called 'daddy' for just a few more years? At least until you're five…or seven. No, maybe eight…"

I was speechless.

Well…guess I was worried for nothing. Viscount Cain really is a sweet, simple man.

"Well, father? What did you need from me?" I asked with a smile, completely ignoring his lament.

Even now, the only man I considered my father was the one I'd had in my past life. It would have been one thing to think of the viscount as my father before I'd regained my memories of my past life, but now that I had, I couldn't just mentally replace the man I'd lived with for seventeen years with another father.

Viscount Cain was a kind, good man, and I was grateful to him for raising me. Still, I couldn't help but feel that one father—the one from my past life—was enough for me. But it wasn't *just* about that.

Sorry, Viscount Cain…the whole "daddy" thing is just a little weird for me, so I hope you can forgive me if I stick to "father."

As he looked at me reproachfully, I cocked my head a bit and grinned wider.

"Oh, you're *too* cute! I can't get over it!" he exclaimed. "Shirley, are you seeing this? Are you seeing that adorable smile my sweet little Liliana is wearing right now?!"

"Master Cain, if I may…don't encourage this behavior. Please just go ahead and tell her why you've called her here," Shirley replied.

I was impressed by how blunt she could be despite her polite language. *You're so cool, Shirley*, I thought. If she'd been working for a nobleman who liked to throw his weight around, she'd probably be dead by now. Fortunately, though, Viscount Cain didn't attach too much importance to his status, and he was always kind to his servants, so I hoped she'd never change.

"Ah, yes. Right. To start with, Liliana, how are you feeling today?" the viscount asked.

"I'm feeling quite well, thank you. I apologize for worrying you yesterday."

"Are you? Well, I'm glad to hear that."

He smiled, looking genuinely glad. Feeling the full brunt of his unrestrained love for me like this was a little uncomfortable.

Then the viscount cleared his throat, as if to signal a shift from the congenial atmosphere. Yet, when he opened his mouth to speak again, he sounded just as pleasant as he had before.

"I've called you into my office today to ask when you'd like to make your debut into high society. There's no rush, of course. I don't expect you to be ready right *now*. I don't want to leave it until too late either, but I'm happy to consider your preference."

I slowly took in what he'd just said. The moment I pieced it together, I broke into a grin.

"As soon as possible!" I exclaimed, drawing nearer to him. I tugged on his pant leg as he sat, looking up at him pleadingly. "As soon as possible…would be my preference. I'd love to make my debut at the next party, if I can. Or preferably, even a little sooner."

"The next one? Well… You would have quite a lot to learn before then. Are you prepared to do that much studying all at once?"

"I *want* to study, father! Please, oh please, let me!"

“You won’t be able to back out once it’s decided. It would be *unthinkably* rude,” he warned.

“I would never! I promise…I would never. If I try to, then please give me a proper scolding!”

I knew from the game that Seth would be making *his* debut when he was three. Partly, that was because of his status as a prince, but it was also because that’s what he himself wanted. That meant that I couldn’t waste a moment’s time in making my own debut so I could meet him and start spending time with him. But more than anything, I just wanted to meet him so badly.

I couldn’t even imagine whining about the effort it would take to prepare for my debut—not when it meant I’d get to meet Seth. My only goal in this life was to live and die for him.

Viscount Cain must have realized how serious I was about this, because he gave me a warm smile and relented.

“All right. If that’s what my sweet little girl wants, how could daddy say no?”

“Thank you, father!” I cried, leaping up at him and burying my face happily into his soft chest.



Once I’d proven that I wouldn’t embarrass myself during my high society debut, my father made the announcement. Every day up until the party, I spent hours under Shirley’s tutelage, learning about aristocratic etiquette and how to carry myself as a young noblewoman.

I stressed a lot about how to urge Shirley to skip past educational basics, but it ended up being no big deal. I just told her with a smile that I knew how to write because I’d practiced so much in class and that I’d learned all of the numbers from picture books. Contrary to all my worrying, I pulled it off pretty well.

A new bookshelf was added to my room, and I filled it with study books that would seem, to anyone who looked at them, way beyond the level of a three-year-old. I also got the viscount to buy me an age-appropriate desk that I could actually sit at comfortably.

Once my morning lessons were over, Shirley gave me a break. I placed my quill down on my brand-new, still-spotless study desk

and launched into a big stretch.

"You're a very quick learner, Lady Liliana," Shirley said.

"Do you really think so? Thank you!" I replied, smiling.

I was used to getting this compliment now from Shirley, who had taken on the duty of teaching me. Aside from what I already knew from my past life, I picked things up pretty quickly…but that was about the extent of it. I'd been worried that I might seem a little *too* smart and capable for a three-year-old, but apparently I'd been worried for nothing. Emotionally, I was a lot more mature (since I was actually an adult), but that was about it. I wasn't a genius or anything.

That was fine by me, though. I didn't want to be anyone important anyway. All I wanted was to be smart enough to be a suitable wife for Seth, and if I had to work really hard for that, I would.

My training was progressing well, according to Shirley. She'd apparently advised the viscount that I would likely be ready for my debut in about a month's time.

In just a month's time, I'll be able to meet the boy I've been pining for since my past life…

"By the way…is there anything you'd like or anywhere you'd like to go?" asked Shirley, out of the blue.

"Huh?"

I stared at her with wide eyes, taken by surprise by the sudden change in topic. Of course, looking at her didn't tell me anything; she was too expressionless for me to tell what she was thinking.

My birthday was still half a month away. I'd been putting a lot of effort into my studies every day, but that's what I *wanted* to do. In fact, I'd even pleaded with my father to make that happen. Besides, I couldn't remember doing anything that would have warranted a reward.

I must have looked pretty obviously perplexed, because I didn't even have to ask where Shirley's question had come from.

"You've been devoting yourself wonderfully to your studies lately, but your father is going to worry about you if you're *too* much of a good girl," she said.

Ah… So this isn't about a reward; it's about me acting my age. She wants me to play more and make selfish requests. Well, the viscount is *a little overprotective. It's not surprising that my behavior might worry*

him.

Hmm… But what would I even want? Let's see… Nope. Nothing's coming to mind except for Seth. If I were in the world of my past life, I could probably think of some food I might want…but they probably don't have a lot of what I used to enjoy eating in this world. Besides, I don't even want to try asking if it means potentially exposing myself.

I'm not really the kind of girl who likes wearing new clothes and accessories every day either. I prefer to pick just a few that I like and rotate them. So…that's a no-go. Maybe flowers? I like flowers. I could just walk over to the garden and see some, though, so I'm not sure that's reaching high enough to satisfy Shirley.

What about somewhere I want to go? I guess I could ask to go to the castle town? No…I'd rather be studying right now. Plus, if we went to the castle town for a sightseeing outing, we'd probably be out all day. I don't have time for that.

Ugh… I can't think of anything! The only things I'd want in this life are all related to Seth. Everything else, I've left behind in my past life. Just living my life is enough for me right now…

"Oh!" I said, suddenly coming upon an idea. "I'd like to visit a church."

"A…church?"

"Yes. Any church will do, even just the local one. Would that be all right?"

Shirley fell silent. For a few moments, she just stared at me. I didn't know how to react, so I just smiled back. Then she sighed deeply.

"Very well. I'll speak to Master Cain about it," she said.

"Thank you."

Yes! Now I can give thanks to God for everything He's given me, I thought. I had a feeling my request didn't sound very age appropriate at all, but I figured that wouldn't matter as long as Shirley conveyed to the viscount how genuinely elated I was about visiting a church.

Well…back to studying!

I picked my quill up again and assumed a studying posture, still in high spirits.

"Lady Liliana… You enjoy sweets, don't you?" asked Shirley.

"Why, yes. Everything I eat here at home is delicious, but I particularly love sweets."

Again with the random questions, I thought. I was starting to think Shirley might be a little...*different*. The blank expression on her face certainly didn't help. *I'm sure she's just got a lot going on in her head, though. And she's just such an excellent maid. Maybe she's just drip-feeding me these questions because I'm too dense to understand what she's really trying to say?*

My palate hadn't changed at all since my past life. Okay, well, maybe there were some *subtle* differences, but my love of sweets was just as strong in this life as it had been before.

I was pretty happy with the food I ate in this life, but if I had one complaint, it would be that I didn't ever get to eat rice. I liked bread and pasta plenty, but you have to remember that I'd been Japanese in my past life. I was missing rice pretty badly. I had a feeling that I'd be able to find rice plants *somewhere* in this world, though. So, when I got a little older and gained more influence, I figured it wouldn't hurt to look for them.

Whether it was because I ate well thanks to my noble status or simply because the food in this world was as good as the food in the world of my past life, I always looked forward to meals. Unfortunately, though, there weren't many sweets in this world—except for fruit, if that counted. And while fruit may be healthy, it wasn't quite the same.

"Excuse me for a minute. I'll be right back," said Shirley.

"Okay!"

I was surprised to see Shirley leaving right after my break had ended.

Wonder what's going on? Maybe our conversation inspired her to bring back some sweets? I thought. *But I'm supposed to be studying now, so I'd better get back to it...*

I opened my book on manners again. Sometimes manners practice entailed detailed explanations from Shirley, or practical training, but I could manage if I was just left alone with a book.

I was pretty confident in my ability to modulate my tone and my words according to my conversational partner's status, but I was hopeless when it came to remembering how to walk properly, how to stand, how to sit, and all the ins and outs of how to carry myself gracefully. No matter how cute I might have been when I'd asked the viscount, it did seem a *little* crazy to let a three-year-old make her high society debut.

As I was focusing on my studies, I noticed something being set down on my desk. I lifted my head, snapped out of my reverie, and noticed that Shirley had returned without me even realizing it. I must have been a little *too* focused.

I'd better take care not to let myself lose all awareness of my surroundings like that, I thought. It would be a real issue if I got so absorbed in something that I didn't even notice someone trying to kidnap me or plotting some kind of scheme. As I was ruminating on this, I looked down to see what Shirley had put on my desk.

It was a plate with several pieces of something on it—several thin, brown squares of something with a lustrous sheen. Each piece was bite-sized, about three centimeters on each side. I recognized it instantly.

"Ch—" I began.

Chocolate! It's chocolate*! Woo-hoooo! I love chocolate! Omigod, I can't believe it exists in this world too! I figured technology wasn't advanced enough for chocolate here, so I'd given up any hope that they'd have it. I'm so happy right now! This is the first time anything other than Seth has made me this happy in this world!*

"Ch... *Charred*. It looks charred. What is this...?"

I knew Liliana Inoce had never seen chocolate in her life, though, so I did my best to cover up my excitement. I wasn't doing a very good job; I couldn't hide my restlessness. I knew it was written all over my face.

I don't know if Shirley interpreted my behavior as hesitance, but I did my best to play it up. I glanced up at her as I picked up a piece of chocolate and brought it to my nose.

Oooh, yes. I love the sweet smell of cacao.

"It looks burnt, but it smells sweet," I said.

"It *is* sweet. It's called 'chocolate,'" Shirley explained. "It may not look very appetizing, but it's a delicacy. Even nobles don't have the privilege of enjoying it every day. Please, try a bite."

Oh... I've never thought about it before, but maybe chocolate doesn't even look like food to someone who's unfamiliar with it. Hmm... Yeah, if I didn't have my past life knowledge, that's probably what I would've thought too. The closest comparison would probably be a rock.

But since Shirley had told me it was edible, and since children are naturally curious, I figured it'd be okay to eat it. Plus, most

importantly…I was *desperate* to eat it.

"Okay!" I said, taking a bite.

Instantly, the sweet, familiar taste of milk chocolate coated my tongue. I could even smell it as I ate it. As I bit down on it, it melted in my mouth. The taste and mouthfeel were amazing. *Mmm… Delicious! Now this is bliss!*

"I'm so glad you like it," said Shirley.

Even though I hadn't said a thing, my delight had apparently been obvious. *Jeez… I really can't tell a lie, can I?* I thought. I could only hope that I didn't blurt out anything about my past life or the *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* game in front of Seth…

In spite of Shirley's perpetual flat affect, I could tell from her voice that she was pleased. Actually, scratch that. She seemed *happy*.

Well… Shirley is kind of like an older sister to me, so I can see why she would have been worried to see me hunched over a desk all day too…especially when I'm only three years old. I know this is her job, but if I were Shirley, I'd probably want to give that three-year-old a sweet or two too.

"I want to eat chocolate again, Shirley!" I said.

"Very well. I'll speak to Master Cain about that," she replied, her tone kind and gentle, and I felt like *this* was the reaction she'd been looking for.

Chapter 2

Today I found myself in an exceptionally good mood.

Well, to be fair, just living in the same world and breathing the same air as Seth was enough to make me feel like I'd won the jackpot, but I was in an even *better* mood than usual. Why, you ask? Because today, Viscount Cain had given me permission to visit a local church in the castle town, not far from the manor.

I was finally going to be able to give proper thanks to God for all that He'd given me. I'd been thanking Him every night in my prayers before bed, of course, but more and more, I'd been starting to get the feeling that that just wasn't enough.

And so, for the first time in my life, I took a horse-drawn carriage. It was a pretty wobbly ride, and my butt hurt like a mother. I was also feeling pretty carsick (uh, carriagesick?). It gave me a whole new appreciation for how much thought car manufacturers in my past life had put into making car rides as comfortable as possible.

"Lady Liliana, are you still feeling unwell?" Shirley asked.

"No, I…I'm fine. I'm sure I'll have to take a carriage to my debut, so I'll just need to get used to it…"

By the time the carriage reached the church, I was gasping and wheezing. I wanted to throw up, since I knew throwing up would probably make me feel better, but I held back. It wouldn't have been very ladylike to throw up in public.

I descended from the carriage and crouched down, curling up into a ball as Shirley rubbed my back. I breathed in the fresh air, taking a moment to compose myself. I was in high spirits, but my body wasn't cooperating with my mood. It felt unlikely that this problem would go away, even once I'd grown used to riding in a carriage.

Maybe I should come up with some airtight strategy to avoid these rides? I wondered. *No… I just need to push through this. It's not like I got carsick much in my past life, and besides, I already know what's causing this problem: the intense swaying. If I just build up some muscle over the years and strengthen my core, then I'll be able to ride*

comfortably without getting bounced around.

I can't just throw in the towel all because the vehicles in this life aren't as smooth to ride in. That would be silly. I need to keep at it so that I can be the kind of splendid noblewoman that Seth will want to marry.

I took in a deep breath. Now that my nausea had mostly subsided, I shook it off and contorted my face into a look of calm.

"I'm ever so sorry to have worried you," I said to Shirley and the guards. "Shall we go now?"

"Yes, my lady."

I could feel people looking at me—probably because I'd made a bit of a scene, looking so sick right outside of the church—but I straightened my spine and walked with pride toward the church doors. Shirley and the two guards, who were there to accompany us since we were out in public, followed after me.

I hadn't been to many churches in my past life, so I really couldn't tell you how they differed from the churches in this world—that is, assuming there even *were* any differences.

It was a large church, since it was by the castle. As I stepped inside, I saw a dozen or so people. It wasn't the kind of tense atmosphere you might expect if they had all been there to repent. On the contrary, everyone wore a smile on their face. Judging from the simple, staid quality of their clothing, they all seemed to be commoners, rather than nobles. There were also three people in the church who were wearing robes of the clergy.

After surveying the people in the church, I lifted my gaze. Directly above, there was a giant cross.

The moment it entered my field of vision, I ran at full force straight toward it. No one made any move to stop me or get in my way, so I ran all the way until I was almost directly below it. It was huge—much bigger than I was, and much bigger even than an adult. Its grand scale made me feel like I was actually meeting God Himself. Without a moment's hesitation, I fell to my knees.

Then I closed my eyes and offered up all of the gratitude I could possibly muster.

"Oh, thank you, Heavenly Father! Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

No matter how many times I said it, I knew it wouldn't be enough. I could keep repeating myself for years and years—

decades, even—and it wouldn't even begin to cover the depth of my gratitude.

It was a rare blessing to be given a second chance at life after leaving so much unfinished, and rarer still to be reincarnated into the same world as your first love you'd had no chance with in your previous life (for obvious reasons). I truly believed that I was the luckiest person in the world and that I owed more to God than anyone.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day," I exclaimed, entranced, in a final expression of gratitude. They were the same words I said to God every night in my prayers.

I took a breath and, feeling satisfied, stood up. I'd been so focused on regarding the cross above me as the Lord God Himself that I hadn't noticed any of the churchgoers' gazes that were following me. When I finally turned around to see everyone staring at me, I jolted in surprise.

Every one of the dozen or so people in the church was looking at me so intently, they could have bored holes into me. And it was unmistakable that they were looking at *me*, rather than the cross above me. Their gazes were too low to be looking anywhere else.

Flustered, I looked toward one of the men who was closest to me and tried to meet his gaze, but he hurriedly looked away. Then I looked to the woman next to him, but she did the same thing.

Wh-What's going on? Is everyone just staring at me because they can't believe how cute I am, or...?

I could still feel everyone's gaze on me. Whenever I tried to make eye contact, though, they looked like they'd been caught staring when they shouldn't have. I couldn't sense any ill will or judgment in their eyes, though. If anything, it was more like...they were somehow captivated by me.

Well, seems like I was right! I'm just so cute, they can't help themselves!

I'd been pretty plain in my past life, but in this life, I seemed to be a bit of a stunner.

Getting such a positive reaction from all these churchgoers gives me faith that I'll be able to make a big impression on Seth too. Heh heh... This is great!

"I'm ready to go home now, Shirley," I said, looking up at her. I

could tell I was heading down a narcissistic rabbit hole, so it felt like time to go.

"Oh, y-yes! Of course, my lady!" she replied, startled.

Wait, what…? Why is Shirley responding to me like the churchgoers did? Surely she *hasn't suddenly become besotted with me too? I mean, she sees me every day… It's not like my cute face is anything new to her.*

I… I hate to admit it, but this feels like pretty solid evidence that my cuteness isn't why everyone's staring. If I really think about it, I may be cute, but I'm not cute enough that people would lose their composure like this.

"Shirley… Have I broken the rules of church etiquette somehow? If I have, please just tell me. Oh, how I wish I'd studied more before I came here…"

"No, my lady! You haven't done a single thing wrong!" she exclaimed in a strangely excited and much louder voice than she usually used. Something was *clearly* up. "Let's go home!"

She prodded the guards, who were just as dazed as everyone else in the church had been, and they returned to their senses.

It felt a little awkward to leave now, but it was uncomfortable to feel everyone staring at me, so we left.

Once we were outside, I tried again to ask Shirley about what had just happened.

"I-If I was doing something wrong, then please tell me…" I said, tugging on the hem of her dress and looking up at her.

"You've done nothing wrong. If you must know, everyone was only staring because you were so beautiful."

What…?

The truth that she was so reluctant to tell me…was that I was beautiful? It seemed completely outrageous that *Shirley* would think a three-year-old toddler like *me* was beautiful, though. Besides, my bone structure didn't qualify me for that compliment. I was obviously the kind of girl who gets called "cute," not *beautiful*.

I was relieved to see that Shirley seemed to be back to her old self, but I was still baffled by everything that had just played out. Her answer hadn't demystified *anything* for me. If I *did* have poor manners, though, I felt confident that she would let me know. *I guess I can let that fear go, at least…?*

"When would you next like to visit the church, my lady?"

“Um, well… Perhaps once a month.”

“Very well. I’ll get the viscount’s permission.”

Huh? Wait, I didn’t ever say anything about wanting to make these church visits a regular *thing…did I? Why is she acting like this couldn’t have possibly been a one-off visit to satisfy my curiosity? She’s acting like it’s only obvious that I’d want to visit again…but why?*

And why is she talking about this like she’s so confident that the viscount will give his permission? Usually, she just says something vague, like that she’ll “speak to him about it.”

“I know this may be difficult to bear, but I’m afraid we’ll need to return home via carriage. Would you like to lie down?” Shirley asked.

“N-No! I’ll manage!”

I was actually kind of looking forward to opportunities to practice riding in a carriage now. Besides, it didn’t seem like that big of a deal to me… The strange gravity that Shirley was treating this with stuck with me.

I took Shirley’s hand and hopped up into the carriage again enthusiastically, trying to shift gears in my head. I braced myself to concentrate fully on not getting jostled around on the way home, but unfortunately, there was only so much I could do with this little three-year-old body of mine. I ended up getting pretty motion sick again.

I didn’t want my hair to get all messed up on the way to social gatherings, so I was determined not to get used to lying down. That being said, though, my slightly constricting dress was *not* helping with the motion sickness…

As I was thinking through the carriage problem, I decided to just forget about the feeling of unease I’d had with Shirley. Making sure my first meeting with Seth was perfect was a much bigger priority for me.



I looked in the mirror, taking in the sight of myself in my faintly peach-tinged dress that swayed gently with my every movement. It was a pretty, sophisticated dress with lots of lace adornments and a modest cut. I couldn’t help feeling a little taken by how well it suited the darling little girl I was in this life.

“Shirley!” I exclaimed. “Look! Look how pretty I am!”



“*Very* pretty, my lady. And you’ll be even prettier when I’ve done your hair, so please stay still for me,” she replied, humoring my self-indulgence as she wove a little braid into my hair. It was hard to reconcile her exemplary hairdressing skills with the simple ponytail she always wore.

In just a few moments, she was done, and I had a magnificent hairstyle to match my pretty dress. It was a perfect braided half updo adorned with fresh lilies. I was floored again by how pretty I looked in it.

The pastel color of my dress and my strawberry blonde hair brought a sweetness to my appearance, but the dress’s sophisticated design and my sharp amethyst eyes toned down the childish elements. I wore shoes the color of my hair, with tiny, three-centimeter-tall stiletto heels. In spite of how thin the heels were, they were blessedly short, and Shirley and I had tested them out beforehand to make sure that I’d be able to walk in them.

I twirled around in the mirror, examining myself from every possible angle. After confirming that *every* angle was a good one, I felt my mood improve significantly. One day, I’d grow out of this dress and these shoes, so I wanted to cherish them while I could still wear them. After all, I’d forever remember this outfit as the one I wore to my first meeting with Seth.

I wonder if he’ll tell me how pretty I look? No… I doubt it. But I’m going to feel *pretty when I meet him, and that’s what matters!*

Argh, stop this, Liliana! You’ve got to focus! If you keep thinking about how you’re only hours away from meeting him, your heart’s going to burst.

“Shall we go join your father?” asked Shirley.

“Yes, let’s! You’ll be with us until we reach the manor doors, won’t you, Shirley?”

“Yes, my lady. I’ll be waiting inside the carriage during the party, but I’ll be hoping that you have a lovely time.”

I nodded, smiling. I felt a little sad that Shirley wouldn’t be nearby during the party, but I knew I had to foster some independence if I wanted to be a good match for Seth.

Shirley and I left my bedroom on the third floor and descended to the ground floor, where Viscount Cain was waiting for us. His eyes shot wide open when he saw me.

“I’m ever so sorry to have kept you waiting, fa—”

“Good *God*, if my daughter isn’t just the cutest little thing in the world! Shirley, are you sure she’s truly mine?! Why, what if she’s some fairy child?! Is it really all right for me to whisk her away to a party like this?! What if she’s *kidnapped*, for God’s sake?!” he exclaimed. “Oh… Liliana, dear, did you say something?”

“No, father…”

I moved my head a little as the viscount drew me into a hug, trying to ensure that he didn’t muss my hair.

Okay, I’m not that *cute… I know I was a little smitten with myself earlier in front of the mirror, but even I know better than to think I’m some kind of fairy child.*

“We should get going, master,” said Shirley.

“Oh, Shirley… You’re no fun.”

“Nothing would ever get done if I were, master. And Lady Liliana is looking at me with a pleading look in her eyes. I can tell she wants to get to the party.”

“Y-Yes, well… I suppose you’re right. Let’s go then, shall we?” the viscount said sheepishly as he let go of me and made for the front door.

I gave Shirley a smile as a token of my gratitude. She said nothing, only giving me a little nod with a blank expression on her face—not that the blank expression was anything *new*.

As we approached the carriage, I could feel a strained look crossing my face.

“Shirley… Did you prepare the *you-know-whats*?” I asked, looking up at her.

“Yes, my lady. They’re inside the carriage and ready for you.”

The viscount studied us with a puzzled expression on his face before heading into the carriage ahead of us. Then I took Shirley’s hand and triumphantly followed him in.

“I *say*, Shirley! What is all this? Why is the carriage covered in cushions?”

“They’re for Lady Liliana’s use, master. Please feel free to make use of them yourself too, if you like.”

Viscount Cain looked on as Shirley helped me surround myself on both sides with cushions, closing the gaps between us all. Confused, he opened his mouth to inquire about them again.

“Don’t you suppose that will make things a little…*cramped*? What in the world is all of this for?”

“They’re to combat the young lady’s motion sickness. They’ll help minimize the jostling a bit,” Shirley explained.

“That’s right! And Shirley will hold me so I don’t move back and forth too much too!” I chimed in.

“I-Is that so…?”

Until my abs were strong enough for me to stabilize myself, this strategy was going to have to do the trick. I hadn’t ridden in a carriage since the day I’d visited the church, so I was still a bit nervous about whether this strategy was actually going to work or not.

The cushions on either side of me *did* make the ride a bit cramped, but they also did a pretty good job of keeping me still. Satisfied, I let out a sigh of relief.

“Preparations complete! Let’s go, father!”

I did my best to hang in there during the ride. I straightened my posture as best I could and cast my eyes as far into the distance as possible. I took deep, measured breaths and tried to think happy thoughts to help me relax.

Thanks to all my strategies, I arrived at our destination with only minimal discomfort, and I felt confident that I’d be able to cover up my motion sickness without too much effort.

“I… I still feel a little sick, but I made it, Shirley!”

“You did splendidly, my lady.”

“You two seem awfully chummy,” the viscount mused wistfully. “I wish you’d be that chummy with *me*…”

I basked in the glow of my achievement with Shirley for a bit, completely ignoring the viscount. Then I took her hand and got out of the carriage. The moment I stepped outside, I felt my facial muscles tighten.

Ugh! My heart’s pounding so loudly!

I followed the viscount inside the manor with Shirley. Aside from the extra flowers and decorations (and extra cleanliness), it wasn’t all that different from the inside of my own home. As the viscount signed us in, I felt a wave of anxiety creeping over me. Suddenly nervous, I looked away from the party and tugged on the hem of Shirley’s dress.

“This is Duke Crabitt’s manor, isn’t it?” I asked her.

“That’s right. Duke Crabitt is the kingdom’s chief financier, and he wields significant power—power far beyond what’s typical for

his station. With all due respect, Lady Liliana, please mind your manners and take care not to offend any of the guests here. That goes for everyone, of course, but particularly those of higher status."

"I know. I will."

Crabitt... I recognize that name from the game. Melvin Crabitt would be about my age right now, so I doubt he'll be at the party.

Honestly, though, I didn't even really pay any attention to any of the characters in the game other than Seth. And right now, meeting him was all I could think about.

Hold on... What was it that I wanted to say to him again?! I've been thinking about this first meeting nonstop, but I can't even remember... Ack, I've even forgotten how to properly introduce myself! I can't even remember how to walk like a lady now either. Actually, I can't remember how to walk at all*! Oh, God... Now I'm having trouble breathing! How do I breathe again?! Nngh! I-I really need some air!*

"My lady."

I'd grown a bit silent and was just starting to wheeze when I heard Shirley's calm voice in my ear. Fortunately, that brought me back to my senses, and I remembered how to breathe again.

"Make sure you always wear a smile, my lady. Everyone loves a smile, and it tends to endear you to people. So...please just enjoy yourself and let them see that lovely smile of yours."

"Thank you... I'm going to head in now."

Shirley bowed her head slightly in a show of respect as I left. I felt emboldened by her encouragement. Viscount Cain had apparently finished signing us in and was waiting for me with a gentle smile on his face. I turned to him and gave him a smile back, and we made our way to the reception hall.

The moment I entered the hall, I found myself squinting. It was like the whole place was illuminated with blinding lights. I knew, though, that my perception was probably just warped by how excited I was to finally meet my one true love for the first time.

The first thing I did when I joined the party was look around for Seth. There was no *way* he wasn't here. I knew that, following his third birthday party, he attended every party that his father, King Edward, attended. And he'd turned three before *I* had, so he couldn't possibly miss this party. It would be hard to find someone so short in this big crowd, though.

No, what am I saying? All I'd need is a single strand of his hair to find him. If I can't see him, that probably just means he isn't here.

I took in a deep breath to calm myself down.

"We should greet His Majesty first, don't you think, father? Then we can greet our host, Duke Crabitt," I said.

"Indeed we should. Are you ready?"

"But of course!"

Logically speaking, there was a very good chance that Seth would be with his father, the king. But Seth was also fiercely independent, so it wouldn't have been unusual for him to wander off on his own either. I'd have to be prepared to meet him at any moment and adapt to any situation.

Viscount Cain began walking through the crowd, presumably in the direction of the king. I followed him and discreetly took in another deep breath.

Even if I wasn't about to meet the love of my life in the next few moments, I would still be meeting his father (and, hopefully, my future father-in-law). That was a pretty big deal in and of itself.

Before long, the viscount finally stopped walking. He took care to come to a slow stop so that I'd have plenty of time to catch on. We had made it to the king, but I didn't see anyone at my eye level in sight...which meant that Seth wasn't with him. I let out a sigh and tilted my neck back to look up at the king.

His face had a gentle cast, rather than the chiseled and masculine look you might expect from someone in his position, but his blue eyes alone held a certain cool sharpness. With his golden hair, he was the very picture of a storybook prince—just like Seth. It made sense that they looked so alike, considering that the man was responsible for roughly half of Seth's genetics.

This man is no prince, though...he's a king*. One glance at him is all it takes to make that clear. Even if no one* told *me he was the king, I'd be able to tell just by looking at him. This is the kind of man who can stand there with a smile on his face even as he bears the weight of the entire kingdom on his shoulders.*

He's so regal and wise. I need to be just like that if I want to stand by Seth's side.

I stood silently and listened as the viscount gave the king a formal greeting. As he spoke, I fixed my gaze on the king as if I were honing in on my target.

“And may I introduce you to my daughter, Your Majesty? This is Liliana. Liliana, please introduce yourself,” said the viscount.

“It is a great honor to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty. My name is Liliana Inoce, and I am the eldest daughter of the Inoce family.”

I took a half step forward as I spoke, then bent a leg behind me, bowing my head slightly and lifting the hem of my dress in a curtsy. I was taking great care to ensure that I looked lovely from head to toe. After five seconds, I lifted my head. In a formal audience with the king, you’re supposed to wait for permission to lift your head again. From my studies, though, I had learned that you’re otherwise allowed to lift your head at your discretion, after you feel a suitable amount of time has passed.

Wait… That’s right, my studies! O-Oh God! I just gave the king a much more formal greeting than what Shirley taught me!

Can you blame me for getting a little stiff, though? I mean, I’ve seen the king before in the game, but it’s totally different from seeing him in the flesh! I never knew he’d be so intimidating! I know better than to think video games are just like reality, but wow, I wasn’t expecting this at all… Wh-What do I do now?!

Hold on, though… Is it really that big of a deal if I’m a little more formal than necessary? I remember a high school teacher in my past life saying that it’s actually rude to be unnecessarily formal, but surely it’s hard to be too formal with a king*, right…?*

“Liliana, was it? You know, you remind me a bit of Nicholas,” said the king. He gave me a warm smile, as if to calm the panic that was silently raging within me.

While his words gave me some relief, they were also painful to hear.

“Nicholas” was the name of his eldest son, Nicholas Cabott. He was Seth’s older half brother and one of the love interests featured in *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*. I wasn’t sure what to do with that sort of comparison…

Nicholas was a prodigy. He was the kind of man who could do anything and everything—and not only that, but he could do it *well*. In the game, he got a lot of the “spicier” scenes, but not because he was flirtatious; he was just very attractive, and the main character just kind of *happened* upon him in various states of undress by accident. He was the sort of hypercompetent, beloved

older guy archetype that would fit right at home in a shojo manga.

If you asked me why I had such a strong reaction to hearing the king say that we were similar, well… To start with, there was no way he meant that we bore a *physical* resemblance. I was a cute little girl, and Nicholas was an aloof, handsome older boy. So, the king must have meant that we were similar somehow on the *inside*, but he hadn't spoken to me enough to get a sense of my personality. That meant that he must have been struck by my introduction, which would have sounded more natural coming out of an adult's mouth than a three-year-old's. If Nicholas and I were alike somehow, it was probably because we both seemed mature beyond our years.

The comparison was a painful one. It didn't feel right to be told that I reminded him of the talented, hardworking Nicholas—not when the only reason *I* seemed mature beyond my years was because I'd gotten a head start thanks to everything I'd learned in my past life. I wasn't a prodigy like him.

Nicholas Cabott… I can't see us getting along, to be honest.

He'd given up the throne to Seth, though, and he didn't really make many public appearances. I doubted that I'd see him here today at the party.

My head was all over the place as I listened to Viscount Cain and the king's small talk. The viscount had little interest in holding power. As long as he didn't get roped into any nefarious plots or tricked into something, he didn't seem the type to try to stand out or insert himself into the world of diplomacy. I could rest easy that he wouldn't use me as a pawn for his personal gain.

His chat with the king seemed to be coming to an end, because the king looked at me again and squatted down so he was at eye level.

As the most powerful man in the kingdom, the king had nothing to gain from trying to curry favor with anyone—much less the three-year-old daughter of a viscount. Yet, he bent down on his knees just to look me in the eye as if it were only the natural thing to do.

"Well, little Liliana… If you see my son Seth, perhaps you could make friends with him? Only if you'd like that, of course. There are only two children his age here; I think it might be nice."

"Oh, yes, Your Majesty. I'd like that very much."

Yesssss! Woo-hoo! My future father-in-law (well, hopefully!) has just given me his blessing to befriend his son! Thank you, thank you! I swear I'll make him happy for years and years to come!

Wait... Hmm?

I was so lost in my reverie that it took me ten full seconds to realize that there'd been something...*strange*...about the king's parting words for me.

"Only two *children"? What does* that *mean? Surely Seth and I are the only three-year-olds here, right?*

Most kids were too busy trying to learn their left from their right to bother with adult affairs like high society parties. There was just no *point* in them attending. And most other three-year-olds, specifically, were more likely to gripe about having to go and wind up causing a scene.

It was downright weird that there would be another three-year-old here other than Seth or myself.

"Father, is there another child my age here other than Prince Seth?" I asked.

"That's right, darling. That's why *you* were allowed to attend the party tonight."

I looked at him with eyes wide. Then I felt embarrassed that the possibility had never occurred to me.

It all made sense now... No one was allowed at a high society event unless they'd been sent an invitation. The viscount must have received permission for my attendance prior to today. He might have been a doting father, but he wasn't a dotard. If he'd thought that the host seemed concerned I'd cause a scene, he wouldn't have let me come...which meant that the host must have readily agreed.

"Who—"

"Liliana, I'd like to introduce you to Duke Crabitt," the viscount said, upon spotting the duke. Partly, this was his way of discreetly telling me to save the private conversation for later, and partly, it was an answer in and of itself.

Duke Crabitt was accompanied by his wife—the duchess—and a little rabbitlike boy with white hair and red eyes who stood at my eye level. He was so cute, it would have been easy to mistake him for a girl. And just like me, he was three years old. The boy, presumably, was Melvin Crabitt, another love interest from *Savior*

of Nations: Lady Rose. I hadn't expected to meet him so soon.

As I walked over to the duke's family with the viscount, the boy seemed to notice us before his father. There was a sharp glint in his eye as he looked over at us.

In that moment, it dawned on me that I had *him* to thank for being allowed to attend the party. He was basically playing Cupid, bringing Seth and me together...even if he didn't realize it.

As the three adults began talking, the boy—whose name I hadn't been told yet but who I was *certain* was Melvin—locked eyes with me in a fierce staring contest. It definitely didn't feel like the kind of probing look that a normal three-year-old boy would give someone...although maybe I only thought that because of assumptions I was making based on my knowledge from the game. Honestly, I wouldn't have been all that surprised if someone had told me that he seemed so adult because he was reincarnated just like me.

Prodigies kind of freaked me out. I wasn't a big fan of that character archetype, to be honest, and there was a disproportionately high number of prodigies in the world of *Lady Rose*. Compared to the rest of them, though, Melvin wasn't all that bad.

Then, suddenly, he took a step toward me. He must have gotten tired of waiting around after he realized that the adults weren't going to start talking about *him* anytime soon.

"I'm Melvin Crabitt," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Liliana."

I knew it. It is *Melvin.*

In social situations, I'd learned that you don't need to introduce yourself if someone has already correctly identified you by name. I knew it probably would have been polite to continue the conversation a little, but I was eager to wrap things up and get going. I wasn't all that interested in befriending Melvin, and besides, I figured a three-year-old like me would be forgiven for not sticking around for more polite chitchat. So, I said nothing.

Unfortunately, though, it seemed Melvin wasn't going to let me get away with that. He flashed me a meaningful smile that seemed disturbingly unchildlike.

I guess I should've known better than to hope for a quick and painless exchange, though. The moment he spoke my name, I knew

there'd be more to this.

"Excuse me, father, but I'd like to speak with Lady Liliana for a bit," he said.

The duke chuckled. "Taken an interest in her, have you, Mel? Hard to resist a pretty girl, hmm?"

Melvin laughed too. "Yes… Yes, I suppose I *have* taken an interest."

I glanced over at Melvin and his father as they chatted amicably, listening in with a fake smile plastered on my face. There was no way I was getting out of this now.

The doting viscount, on the other hand, listened to their conversation with a grave look on his face. The duke's wife noticed and did her best to hold back her laughter. It was a warm, pleasant scene.

Don't worry, Viscount Cain. I can promise you Melvin isn't interested in me like that.

"Well then, Lady Liliana. If you have no objections, perhaps we could talk for a bit out on the terrace?" Melvin asked.

"Gladly," I replied.

I had no idea what two three-year-olds could possibly have to talk about, but I reluctantly accepted Melvin's hand and walked with him toward the terrace, away from the adults.

I knew that Melvin had only offered me his hand because it was the polite thing to do, but I couldn't help wishing that *Seth's* hand had been the first I'd take. It felt a little arrogant to be dissatisfied when I knew that Melvin was destined to be a sweet-faced and powerful future duke, though.

But can you blame me? I've never had feelings for anyone other than Seth before in my life—in either *of my lives. Besides, how could I develop romantic feelings for a three-year-old kid when I have memories of being seventeen in my past life? Seth is the only one I love enough for that. It's one thing for me to fall for Seth at this age, since he's Seth, but if it were anyone else, it would just be…weird. They've got to grow up a little, because I'm just not interested in boys that age. Well, except for Seth, of course.*

A love interest from the otome game I'd played in my past life was leading me by the hand, and yet, there wasn't anything romantic or exciting about it. If anything, it was just kind of…annoying.

As I lamented my fate, Melvin and I made it to the terrace. I didn't mind having a chat, but I wanted to make sure that I wrapped it up as quickly as possible so I could hurry up and look for Seth.

It was also kind of chilly outside. My dress was a little thin for the autumn weather, and the terrace had neither walls nor a roof to keep me warm. I wouldn't have expected a three-year-old to be chivalrous enough to offer me his coat, but the cold was really starting to get to me. I knew the cold was probably what had driven everyone else off of the terrace, so I appreciated it for that, but still...I was eager to head back inside.

"Lord Melvin, was there something you wished to discuss with —?" I began, before he promptly cut me off.

"Oh, you don't need to call me 'Lord' or anything. We're not in public. Actually, though, it's not that I wanted to have a chat so much as I wanted to ask you a question."

He flashed a smile at me. It was the smile of someone with an *agenda*, and it definitely didn't suit his obnoxiously sweet face.

Well, if he's giving me permission to drop his title, I guess I will. I just call him "Melvin" in my head anyway, so that makes things easier, I thought. *I wish he'd hurry up and get to the point, though.*

Melvin just kept smiling, as if he were having a grand old time. He inched closer and closer toward me and, peering into my face, cocked his head. His squinting red eyes looked beautiful.

"What are you after?" he asked me.

Hmm, I thought. His question felt childishly abrupt. If I'd been a three-year-old on the inside as well as out, I probably would have had absolutely no idea how to answer it.

Still...even if I didn't see him in a romantic light, Melvin *was* pretty adorable. I'll admit that he even made my heart skip a beat (though again, not romantically!). Honestly, it felt a little unfair that he could still look cute as a button when he was tilting his head so affectedly. If only he could donate some of that cuteness to *me*!

"What am I after? Well... I'm here because I wanted to attend the party and meet Prince Seth. How is that for an answer?" I replied breezily.

I had absolutely no intention of hiding my love from Melvin, so I didn't even feel a twinge of anxiety telling him that. Aside from Viscount Cain and Seth himself, I didn't care who knew about my

feelings. In Seth's case, I wanted to tell him myself—once he'd developed an interest in girls, that is. In Viscount Cain's case, I just didn't want him to know since I knew he'd probably make a fuss about it. Anyone else was fair game, though.

I know I'd refused to tell Shirley before when she'd asked who it was that I'd fallen in love with, but that was just a matter of *timing*. I couldn't exactly tell her that I'd fallen in love with someone I'd never met, much less someone I'd never even *heard* of. If she pressed me on it, I was bound to let something slip. I was perfectly happy to tell her *after* I'd met him, though. If she asked me what it was that I saw in him, I could just childishly declare that I loved him because he was a prince.

If real-life Melvin was anything like his in-game counterpart, then I knew he didn't have anything up his sleeve; he was only asking me out of curiosity, and nothing more. I felt pretty comfortable opening up completely about my motivations with him.

"Prince Seth?" Melvin repeated. "What do you want with him?"

"To be with him—romantically."

"Hmm… It just seems to me like you've got more on your mind than that."

"Does it? Well, it's not that deep. Trust me, I'm as shallow as they come."

Wait… What the heck are you saying?! Being open is one thing, but you don't need to be so blunt*! Why'd you have to go and blurt that out?* I thought, talking to myself.

Look, I get that you're cold and you just want to hurry up and go back in…and it is *irritating that he's acting so suspicious for no good reason…but that's no reason to talk to him like that! It doesn't matter that he was just a video game character in your past life, 'cause you know what? In* this *life, he's a flesh-and-blood duke's son, and he's higher ranking than you are! Besides, didn't Shirley tell you to mind your manners?!*

Melvin was staring intently at me. It wasn't long before I couldn't take it anymore. I tried, hoping I could cover up my social faux pas with a giggle.

"Tee… Tee hee!" I curled my hand into a fist and gently knocked it on my head, leaning into my ditzy airhead angle as far as I could. I only hoped that I was as good at weaponizing my cuteness as

Melvin was.

There was another long pause.

Nothing… No response at all. Ouch. I wish I could take that back…

A-Argh! You know what, just forget it! No more trying to look cute! I don't even have anything to gain from him thinking I'm cute, anyway. The only person I want to think of me like that is Seth!

That strategy was clearly a bust, so it was time to give up and switch gears. At the very least, I just needed to convince him that there was no need to read into things so much.

"M-Mind if I try that again?" I asked. "I'm just your typical lovesick girl, okay? All I ever do is dream about the boy I love loving me back so we can get married one day. My *one* ambition in life is to be his wife! So, whatever mysterious motivations you're digging for to satisfy your curiosity…you won't find them! There's no tangled web of intrigue to be found here. I'm just a simpleminded girl who's head over heels in love!"

Yes, that's it, Liliana! Don't hold back! Even Melvin doesn't stand a chance when it comes to the fiery passion of a girl in love! You're about to lose him! Just keep talking and smoothly transition into your exit while he's standing there dumbfounded. Don't even give him a moment to think about what's happening.

"I don't believe you have any further business with me, do you? If that's all, then I'll take my leave, because it's *freezing* out here. I'd appreciate it if you didn't run off to your parents and tell them all about my terrible manners," I said.

Then I flashed him a pleasant smile and hurriedly made for the door.

At least…I *tried*. Unfortunately, Melvin was quicker on the uptake than I'd expected, and he grabbed my arm before I could make my exit.

"What are you saying? You don't seriously think you can just drop that on me and *leave*, do you?"

O-Okay… That's fair, I thought, reluctantly turning back around.

What do you want, though? An apology for my bad manners? Will that satisfy you, you rich little brat? Hmm? You can even tattle on me to your parents, and I'm sure I'll get a good scolding for it. But what do you have to gain from telling on a three-year-old for being a little rude, anyway? I mean, come on, can't you afford to just open your heart and forgive me?

As I was giving him a real drubbing in my head, Melvin removed his coat and offered it to me in a striking show of chivalry.

Ugh, that's not going to fix this! I mean, I am *cold, but that's not the point. I'll still take it, though…*

"You've convinced me that you're in love with the prince. It's just…what if he gets engaged to someone else?" Melvin said.

His question made me realize how off the mark I was about his motivation for keeping me here. It wasn't that he was offended by my bluntness; I could see in his face that he wasn't the least bit upset. Real-life, three-year-old Melvin clearly still had the same personality as the Melvin I knew from the game. He was nothing if not curious, and there was no way he was going to let a conversation end when he still had burning questions to ask.

Oh, all right, Melvin. You win. You can have the truth.

"That's certainly a possibility. I'm not going to give up on my dream all because of that, though," I replied.

"I'm not telling you to, but…aren't you setting yourself up for heartbreak?"

"Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying that I'll be content for my love to *stay* unrequited forever. I just need Prince Seth to fall in love with me, and I'll work as hard as it takes to make that happen."

I didn't want Melvin to mistake my optimism and focus for naivete, so I puffed my chest out as I spoke, trying to project the patience of a dignified village elder with a strong grasp of the long view.

"If it amuses you to watch me dedicate my life to winning his heart, then so be it. I don't care," I declared, trying to keep an air of mystery as I gave him my most condescending grin.

Honestly, at this point, I didn't even know where I was going with this. My internal Seth Sensor hadn't gone off yet, though, so at least I knew I must have been safely out of his sight.

"You're nothing if not up-front, huh?" said Melvin.

"Well… Honestly, I'm just really bad at lying, so I don't really have any other choice."

Melvin laughed, looking thoroughly amused. For a moment he looked like just a normal three-year-old.

I guess I've got nothing to worry about… Melvin's just a curious kid,

and I doubt he's going to go off and tell on me for how rude and blunt I was. So…all's well that ends well?

I looked at Melvin, feeling like we'd finally settled things, but he was looking back at me with the same cute stare. Whenever he was deliberately playing up his "Just a Little Guy" aura like this, I knew he was up to no good.

"You know, I'd love to hear how things go between you and the prince," he said. "Let's be friends, and you can keep me in the loop. What do you say?"

"Well…I'm envisioning this as kind of a one-woman job, but I can turn to you for support if something happens? Like, for example, if external forces close the door on my chance at love or something. With your family's influence, I feel like I'd be able to overcome all kinds of obstacles."

"I see you're looking for a *transactional* friendship…"

"I mean, it's not like just being friends with you alone will give me the opportunity to marry Seth, right?"

"Do you ever think about anything other than him?"

"Nope!" I said, puffing out my chest and slapping my fist in my hand.

I'm not trying to brag when I say this or anything, but my thoughts were consumed with Seth for at least ninety percent of my waking hours!

"Hmm… Whatever verbal agreements I make with you, I *am* the heir to the Crabitt family financial enterprise. I can't promise that I'll be there to help when you need me."

I could tell that Melvin was taking me seriously and that his position made him reluctant to agree to anything.

Just take back your offer, then. We don't have *to be friends, you know*, I thought. Still…when I gave it more thought, I realized how beneficial it would be to have close ties with the future Duke Crabitt when I eventually married Seth and became the queen consort. Maybe this was my chance to negotiate some favorable terms and seal the deal on a friendship?

"How about this, then? I'd appreciate a hand whenever you're willing to offer it for your own amusement," I said.

"Works for me!"

Well, that was quick, I thought. *This is going better than I expected.*

I had a feeling that Melvin and I would be good friends. I was lured in by the prospect of a better chance with Seth, and he was lured in by the opportunity of having front-row seats to the show.

Now that we'd wrapped things up nicely, I was eager to get on my way and back to my search for Seth. I just had to give Melvin one warning before I left…

He might have been destined to grow up into a real brainiac, just like many of the other love interests, but I was starting to get the feeling that he still had a long way to go. I'm sure it was just because of his young age, but it was plain to see that he could be pretty…*naive*. As an adult, I felt obligated to give him a piece of advice before it was too late.

"By the way, Melvin, please don't ever approach me in public. It would be unbearable if the adults in our lives misunderstood our relationship and tried to do us a 'favor' by setting up an engagement between us. I don't know about you, but personally, I don't want to become the laughingstock of high society."

"You… You don't think that's taking things a little *far*? That's pretty harsh…"

"Even if we both cleared up the misunderstanding and managed to annul the engagement, I don't want Prince Seth to hear about it and get the wrong idea."

"Wait, are you even listening to me?"

"I don't want to give any other boys our age the wrong idea either, so I'll be making a point not to be nice to them. I hope you understand."

"Wow… You really *don't* have room in your head for anyone but the prince, do you?"

I gave him a smug look, as if to say, *Duh. Of course not.* My whole world revolved around Seth, and I needed people to understand that.

Melvin had a funny look on his face, which I interpreted as him being weirded out by my obsession. He was probably wondering if he'd been a bit hasty in extending that offer of friendship to me. I didn't care, though.

I took off the coat he'd lent me and returned it to him.

"Well… I'm off to find Prince Seth, then," I said, a serious expression on my face.

"Right. I'll come watch."

I'd been trying to tell him that I was ready to finally pursue my original goal, but I wasn't surprised that he wanted to tag along. I didn't mind, but he needed to understand the rules first.

"You can watch if you like, but please make sure you're completely out of sight. I'll never forgive you if you ruin this meeting," I said.

"Right. I'll do my best," he said.

Honestly, Melvin was adorable, and my time on the terrace with him had been a bit of a breath of fresh air. As he bid me goodbye with the wave of his tiny hand, I gave him a wave goodbye of my own and smiled before heading back into the hall. Then I broke out into an inappropriately fast power walk as I circled the crowd, sticking close to the walls and making my way around the hall's perimeter.

The viscount probably thought I was still with Melvin, but I knew that he'd start to worry and come look for me if I was gone for too long, so I wanted to hurry. If possible, I wanted my first meeting with Seth to be one-on-one.

I walked briskly along the wall, glancing around nervously. Anyone who saw me would have probably assumed that I was lost, but I just couldn't settle down. I was so excited and desperate to meet Seth that it was like I couldn't stop my eyes or feet from roaming, much less my pounding heart.

Then, out of nowhere, I ran straight into someone's leg as they approached me. They probably hadn't been looking down, so I'm sure they just didn't notice me.

The collision shook my balance. I tried hard to fight the momentum as I worried, in the back of my mind, that falling would probably cause a scene, but there was no stopping it. I was going to fall straight onto my butt.

Just then, though, I saw a flash of the most beautiful shade of gold in the world.

The pieces slowly started to come together: The flash of gold was a boy's hair, and he'd just grabbed me by the arm. I hadn't fallen. But none of that was what mattered. What mattered was that the boy was right in front of me, and he was… He was…

He'd saved me. Who was "he," you ask? Well…isn't it obvious?

It was the prince—the real-life, flesh-and-blood prince, my beloved Seth. Just as I was about to handle introductions between

my butt and the floor, my dashing prince had swept in and grabbed me by the arm like it was nothing. This was real. It was all *happening*.

"Be careful," he warned me, his tone brusque, as he looked me straight in the eye with those beautiful sky blue eyes of his.

Then he tore his gaze from me, his blond hair fluttering. He was perfection incarnate, the very picture of a prince, as he walked away—

Wait! I can't let him walk away*! Not only is this our very first meeting, but he just saved me from busting my tailbone! I have to at least thank him and introduce myself!*

I called out, trying to stop him, but all that came out was a mortifying sputter.

"Uh… Um…!"

I was so embarrassed, I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. But at least it'd had its intended effect of stopping him. Seth turned around to look at me, his eyes of suspicion.

Our meet-cute was straight out of a shojo manga—or, no…an *otome game*—but it felt more chaotic than romantic. What's more, Seth was just *so freakin' cool* that it was throwing me for a loop. My thoughts were totally jumbled.

I mean, not only did he manage to look incredibly dashing even as a *three-year-old*, but he'd literally just swept me off my feet and saved me, and all he'd left with me was a cool warning to "be careful"? I was dead. And to top it all off, he was a literal *prince*. How could I *not* instantly fall in love?

I was faintly aware of the person who'd just bumped into me trying to apologize, but I didn't want to hear it. They were intruding on my special moment. Finally, the time had come for my long-awaited first meeting with Seth, and I was ready to say the words I'd rehearsed over and over again, which were—

Um… Wait, what were they again?! I can't believe this is the second introduction I've forgotten today… Hold on, what am I thinking? I need to thank him before I introduce myself!

"Th-Thank you!" I exclaimed.

"Sure" was all he said in reply.

Then he turned around again, ready to leave. I knew it would be unthinkably rude to try to grab him by the arm, and anyway, I probably couldn't even bring myself to touch a hair on his head, so

I had no choice but to either call out to him or try to cut around and get in front of him. The latter wasn't going to be easy in a crowd like this, though…

Ugh, you're all in my way! Stupid human obstacles!

I racked my brains, trying desperately to remember the lines I'd practiced for our first meeting, but it was hopeless. It was like they'd flown the coop, never to return. And, as I was trying in vain to bring them back, Seth was getting farther and farther away. Soon, I would lose sight of him.

Oh, to hell with it!

"Please marry me!" I yelled. "I swear I'll make you a happy man!"

For God only knows what reason, I'd just proposed to a three-year-old. I had no idea what had possessed me to say that.

The sheer peculiarity of what I'd just said, along with the sheer volume at which I'd said it, prompted everyone around us to grow suddenly quiet. Only a single sound broke the silence: a loud, soprano laugh.

That's Melvin, no doubt, I thought.

I didn't care about Melvin or the adults around us, though. All I cared about was what *Seth* thought of that idiotic outburst.

Hesitantly, I glanced up at him.

He was looking back at me with a disgruntled expression.

N-Nooo! He's mad at me! I thought, horrified. *I didn't mean to make such a horrible first impression! My heart just slammed on the accelerator and sped straight past all the safeguards that my senses put up! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!*

"Did your parents tell you to say that?" he asked me mockingly as he shot me a look of utter contempt. Then he turned his back on me again to leave.

Oh no… Dang it! He thinks my parents put me up to that?

Honestly, though, I couldn't blame him for thinking that. I mean, what kind of kid would just propose out of the blue? I really didn't want him to think I was only trying to get close to him because he was a prince, though. He was at that age where he was extra cynical and insecure, and I would have hated to deepen his insecurities.

I'd completely ruined making a good first impression on him, and there was no taking that back. What's worse, it was all my fault. But at the very least, I wanted to clear up the

misunderstanding I'd left him with.

"I… I'm in love with you! I mean, hopelessly, *madly* in love with you! That's why I asked you to marry me! I swear it has nothing to do with you being a prince, or with my parents' ambitions, or any of that! If anything, I wish you *weren't* a prince, because then it would be easier to marry you! After you saved me like that, how could I *not* fall in love with you?!"

I could feel everyone's eyes on me, but I ignored their stares and barrelled on, turning my public proposal into a public profession of love. It was only when I'd said way, *way* too much that I finally remembered I'd wanted to offer him my *friendship* today, not my hand in marriage.

I've made a real mess of things now, haven't I?

I'd been spared a scene when Seth had saved me from falling on my butt, but now I was out here making one myself. What's worse, I was dragging *him* into it too.

I could feel tears welling in my eyes, out of both excitement and misery that things were going so poorly, and my face felt red-hot. The fact that this was the first time in either of my lives that I'd ever confessed my feelings for someone probably had something to do with it too.

"P-Please forgive me for my boorish behavior, Your Highness. If it pleases you, I would love to be friends!"

It had been a long, long journey to get here, but I'd finally arrived at the words I'd meant to say to him from the beginning.

"I thought you wanted to *marry* me?" said Seth, with a suspicious look on his face.

Yep… Saw that one coming.

"That was simply a…slip of the tongue. I'd appreciate it greatly if you could forget I ever— No, actually, please just file that away in the back of your mind for later."

"You're a poor liar, aren't you?"

I feigned a laugh as Seth looked at me with resignation in his beautiful eyes.

"I'm afraid you've read me like a book, Your Highness," I replied.

Unfortunately, I just couldn't seem to keep my lovesick lunacy under wraps. It was one thing for Melvin to think I was a fool…but it stung to know that Seth probably thought that now too. Despite my three-year-old exterior, I had seventeen years of life

experience. Where was the mature, calm composure that was supposed to come with that?

Well…seventeen-year-olds are hardly adults, I guess.

I was quickly realizing that having my past life memories didn't guarantee a smooth ride in *this* life. You can run mental simulations all you want, but that doesn't mean they'll work out the same way in reality.

Ugh! But everything I do works out so flawlessly in my head, though!

"What's your name?" Seth asked, sounding bored.

I knew I couldn't just keep wallowing in my misery in silence, so I reluctantly answered him: "Liliana Inoce…"

He probably just wants to know so he can avoid me in the future, I thought dejectedly. *I'm sorry, Viscount Cain. I've probably ruined the Inoce family's reputation with the future king. If it makes you feel any better, though, I'm so depressed right now that I want to die… So, please forgive me.*

"All right then, Liliana. Take pride that you've been granted the privilege of being my friend."

For five whole seconds, I was silent as I repeated what he'd just said to me in my head over and over again. Finally, it dawned on me what he meant, and my eyes flew open in shock.

"No way…"

"What?" he bristled. "Is that not what you wanted?"

"*No*! No, Your Highness! I just never dared to hope that you would agree to be my friend after that shameful display of mine!"

I hadn't meant to blurt that out, but I was honestly just so shocked by how well things were going that I'd almost convinced myself I was hearing things. Seth's terse reply had quickly disabused me of that idea, though.

It was just that, as much as it pained me to admit it, I'd done absolutely nothing to endear myself to him; on the contrary, I was sure that everything that had come out of my mouth had only repelled him. So, why were things working out so well for me…?

"Well, you're a terrible liar, aren't you? I like that. It makes things easier," he said.

Thank God I'm such an idiot! Who knew that the day would come that I was rewarded *for my complete inability to tell a lie?*

"Your friendship has made me the happiest girl in the whole

world! I, Liliana Inoce, will forever be your steadfast ally. I swear to do whatever I can to make you happy and to never, ever tell you a lie!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, knock it off."

At that, I clamped my mouth shut. If my fiery passion was annoying to him, then I would force myself to douse the flames on a moment's notice.

Then Seth flashed me a smile that looked an awful lot like a smirk—though whether it was out of disdain or mockery, it was hard to say. Either way, I was smitten. *Only a boy blessed by God could look dashing with a smirk*, I thought, from the bottom of my heart. *And I must be blessed by God too, for having this chance to meet him.*

"Friends, then," Seth said, offering his hand. "Let's shake on it."

Still reeling from the touching gesture, I stared down at his hand. *Even his hands are beautiful...* I mused. *I wish I could make a mold out of this hand.*

"Hey," he said.

"Hmm?"

"You're *really* annoying."

"Huh?!"

Did I do something wrong? I wondered. Then I realized I was asking the wrong question. *More like, is there anything I* didn't *do wrong...?*

What did I do this *time, though?*

While I was thinking this over, flustered, Seth took the initiative and just grabbed my hand. I felt myself freeze up immediately.

"It's kinda funny, though," Seth said, smiling.

It was a sweet smile, but it had a mean edge to it. Seeing him smile like that made a blush spread across my face. I felt a jolt run through me, all the way from our clasped hands to the top of my head and the tips of my toes. It was like my brain was melting. I knew that, in that moment, I had fallen in love with him.

That's weird... I've always *loved him, so how could I fall in love again just now?* I wondered. *Oh, Seth... I love you so, so, so much!*

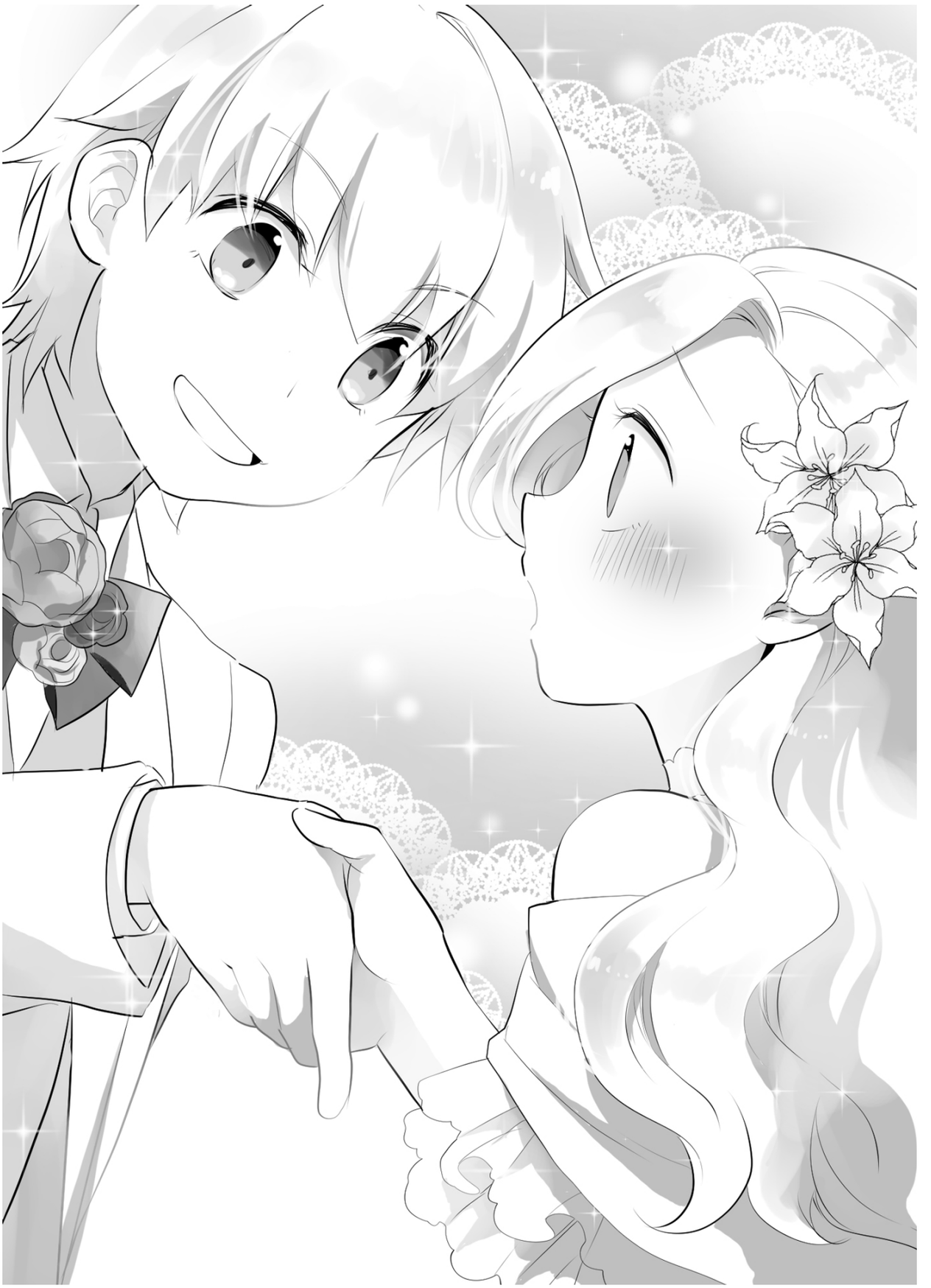
I knew in my heart that I would love Seth Cabott—and *only* Seth Cabott—for my whole life. Actually, I would probably keep loving him even after I *died*. After all, that's what had happened after I'd died in my previous life, right? Here I was in my next life, still in

love with him. I felt destined to love him forever.

My one and only love in this universe was him. I didn't need anything or anyone else. As long as he was here on this earth with me, then this world was as real to me as any.

It would have been a stretch to call my love "beautiful" when it was so firmly rooted in unhealthy escapism…but that didn't change the fact that I loved him. And that love I felt for him was all that I needed to keep on living.

Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day.



Chapter 3

I woke up surrounded by a pile of familiar cushions. Apparently, I was back in the carriage and practically splayed out across the seats. I managed to sit up and look out the window. It was dark outside, and the veil of night was descending.

Right. Guess we must be on our way home from the party, then, I thought. *But that's weird… The last thing I remember was meeting Seth for the first time and—miraculously—becoming his friend. But what happened after I took his hand?*

I racked my brains, but I had no memory of anything that followed.

Wait… Huh? Don't tell me it was all just a dream? I mean, things were *going surprisingly well, but…still!*

"Shirley! How much of that was a dream, and how much was real?!" I asked my maid.

"I daresay you're still half asleep, my lady."

Honestly, I didn't appreciate her dismissing my fears as half-lucid nonsense. When I thought about it rationally, though, I could see that I might not have done a great job wording my question.

"I don't suppose father told you about what happened at the party while I was asleep?"

"He did indeed. It sounds like your first party might have been a little overstimulating," she replied.

"What did he tell you? I want to hear everything!"

"Well… He mentioned that you'd befriended Lord Melvin Crabitt and Prince Seth Cabott. He also told me some of the secondhand accounts he heard about your meeting with the prince."

"So it *wasn't* just a dream!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands up in celebration and accidentally knocking a cushion into the air. "I don't remember anything that happened after I befriended Prince Seth, though. I didn't pass out or anything, did I?!"

"No, my lady. Your father was worried, since you seemed a little out of it, but he tells me that you behaved yourself most admirably."

"Really? Thank goodness!"

It had all felt like such a dream, but it was *real*! And what's more, I didn't even have to worry now that I'd acted silly or done anything embarrassing after my meeting with Seth.

"Hey, guess what?! You know how I said that I was in love with someone? Well, it's actually Prince Seth!" I told Shirley. I was so excited, I was practically yelling. "He's the most princely prince I've ever met, and he *saved* me! Oh, he was *so* dashing!"

"What?"

Just as I was getting carried away yapping to Shirley about my evening, I heard a hysterical voice cry out from the seat opposite Shirley's. I turned to see Viscount Cain. His typically plump eyelids and cheeks were half buried in his wide-eyed stare.

"Huh? I didn't know *you* were here, father..."

"I've been here this whole time! We came to the party in this carriage together, remember? Ah, never mind. You're in love, Liliana?! With the *prince*?!"

Oh my God...

And here I'd thought the carriage was just feeling a bit cramped because of all the cushions, not because we were sharing it with the *viscount*. I'd been hoping to keep my crush under wraps around him, since I knew it would turn into a whole thing if he found out, but so much for that. I was so excited by everything that had happened tonight that I hadn't even bothered to take proper stock of my surroundings, and I'd gone and spilled the beans myself.

I quickly tried to compose myself, returning the viscount's gaze as he clasped my shoulder and brought his face closer to mine.

"Oh well! I guess the cat's out of the bag now, so I may as well tell you. Listen, father: Your little girl is going to be a bride one day. And if I'm going to have a happy marriage based on mutual love and respect, then the natural place to start is by falling in love with someone! If anything, you should be *celebrating* that I've fallen for someone as amazing as Prince Seth! Actually, scratch that. You can celebrate all you want, but what I'd really appreciate is some tangible, practical support!"

"I can't do this... My baby girl's only *three years old*! Oh, I'm misting up..." the viscount sobbed.

Good grief, I thought. I wanted his support, though, so I figured I'd better push a little harder.

“I *live* for romance, father. You’ll be happiest if you just support me in that and give up on any notions to the contrary. Since we’re on the topic, how would you feel about talking to the king and dropping my name now and then if the subject of the prince’s fiancée happens to come up?” I tried, gently trying to reason with him.

“I can’t do this…” he repeated, inconsolable.

Now, I’ve always had a bit of a short fuse, but this really put me over the edge. I lost it and yelled, “Oh, for goodness’ sake! Shirley, *you* talk some sense into him!”

When I looked at Shirley’s face, though, I noticed something different in her eyes. As usual, her expression was completely blank, but there was a hint of something dark and despondent as she looked at me.

Huh? Wait, don’t tell me Shirley’s an antishipper?

“It pains me to tell you this, my lady, but the prince is likely to be betrothed to the duke’s daughter,” she said, after a long pause.

“I figured as much. But that doesn’t mean I’ve got *no* chance with him, right? If the odds aren’t zero, then that just means I’ve got to work hard for what I want. And even if I thought they *were* zero, well…miracles happen.”

I would know that better than anyone. I’d once had a zero percent chance of ever being with my one true love, thanks to the fact that we lived in different universes, and now look where I’d ended up. Of course, Shirley didn’t know any of that. She was probably mystified by my confidence.

“And if…that miracle *doesn’t* happen?” Shirley pressed. “What will you do then?”

It kind of felt like she was trying to rain on my parade, but I knew that she was probably just worried about me because she thought I’d set my sights too high by wanting to marry a prince. As usual, I struggled to read her expression, but I could hear a trace of dolefulness in her voice.

Well, there’s only one thing to do: counter her negativity with an extra strong dose of positivity!

“Are you asking what I’ll do if I can’t get engaged to him? Well, I won’t let it get to me! I’ll just keep on pushing forward! Worst-case scenario, even if I can’t get him to marry me, I’ll still have plenty of chances to steal his heart and become his concubine. I don’t care if

the first couple tries fail, or even the tenth or the twentieth! I'm not going to give up on him!"

Seth was my one true love, so I wasn't going to let a little thing like him marrying someone else get in my way. Besides, I knew that he was going to get engaged at five years old to someone his parents picked for him—and I was well aware that I couldn't just *undo* that. I just thought this might be a good opportunity to lock in early and shut down the competition before it even started. But it was just one of those "wouldn't it be nice if..." scenarios. I wasn't actually *counting* on it.

Shirley was speechless. She seemed to be thinking deeply about my answer, but, in classic Shirley fashion, her expression was unreadable. I hoped she'd come around. Between her and the viscount, I was much more invested in getting *her* support.

"It seems father will need a bit of time to adjust to it all, but can I count on your support, Shirley?"

"Yes," she replied, sounding reluctant. "You have my support."

I gave her a cheerful smile.

"Thank you!"

I'd been a little worried there for a minute that everything was going off the rails, but it seemed my life was still right on track!

"By the way, I just had an amazing epiphany! I don't feel nauseous when I'm talking! Maybe it's because I'm distracted? Anyway, whatever the reason, I want to keep talking about my meeting with Seth until we get home!" I said.

"That sounds delightful. Why don't you tell me about your chat with Lord Melvin too?"

"Huh? Who cares about Melvin? That's *boring*!"

"I-Is that so, my lady...?"

I had no idea why Shirley was acting so weird about this. All I was doing was speaking the truth. Compared to Seth, everyone else was entirely uninteresting. I honestly, truly just did not give a damn about the masses. So, if I could be talking about Seth, why in the world would I talk about *Melvin*?

"If you *must* talk about the prince, can't you do it another time?" pleaded the viscount. "Say, when your poor father isn't around, maybe...?"

"Oh, but I can't possibly contain myself! My lips are powerless against the torrent of my love! So, anyway! Here I go!"

I swiftly dismissed the viscount's request and launched into an account of my first meeting with Seth. I felt like I was narrating the beginning of a romance game.

Isn't love fun?



Being friends with Seth made me feel like I was living in a dream.

The day after that fated meeting, I threw myself even deeper into my studies. I might have had my complete lack of grace to thank for my new friendship with the prince, but I was still mortified by the way I'd behaved. I wanted to show him a different side of me the next time we met, and hopefully he'd see that I could also be a perfectly respectable young lady. Besides, I was *highly* motivated now. Meeting him in the flesh had only hardened my resolve.

I just love how positive I am! And I love how hard I work to make my dreams come true.

"Lady Liliana, if I may be so bold as to ask…are you studying so hard because you want to marry the prince?" asked Shirley as she set down a plate of chocolate for me. Ever since my high society debut, she'd been teaching me not only manners but also academic subjects.

I popped a piece of chocolate in my mouth and found myself breaking into a smile. Refueling on sugar is a must when you're using your brain a lot, but that had no bearing on how absolutely delicious the chocolate was. I knew it wasn't good for your skin or your figure to eat too much of it, but it was too expensive to get my hands on that much of it anyway, so I didn't need to worry about that.

Delicious! Ahh, this is bliss!

"That's right. If I'm going to become the queen consort, then I ought to be basically perfect, wouldn't you agree?" I replied.

In the game, Seth's fiancée—and the main character—was dubbed "the perfect Lady Rose" by everyone around her. And if I wanted to steal all that from her, then I needed to actually *become* the perfect lady.

I knew that I could only be so perfect at my age. I mean, I was

three. But the game wasn't exactly clear about what age Lady Rose was when she earned her nickname, so I didn't know when my deadline was. The game started around her sixteenth birthday, though, so I figured I probably had until then to become the perfect woman. Honestly, I was pretty average, but I'd work hard to fashion myself into someone special for Seth.

I had to be careful not to overdo it, though. If I was too perfect from a young age, then I might actually end up *repelling* him.

It made perfect sense to me that Seth would accede to the throne one day, but not everyone saw it that way. Despite the fact that Seth's older brother, Nicholas, had already given up his right to rule, he was brilliant, and people knew it. At this point in time, there were probably only three people who understood that Seth was the brother better suited to rule: the king, Nicholas, and me.

It must have been pretty uncomfortable for Seth in the palace, knowing that so many were skeptical about his succession. And at only three years old, he was already shouldering the burden of attending every high society party, without fail, to build bridges with each and every noble family and imbue them with confidence that he would make a fine king one day.

No doubt he'd heard plenty of snide comments from people who thought a three-year-old wouldn't notice them talking behind his back. That probably explained why my dimwit behavior had appealed to him, because he knew I wasn't even *capable* of being two-faced.

I knew he probably wouldn't want to keep anyone too perfect by his side when he was already facing countless comparisons to his brilliant brother. So while I'd work hard to become a woman deserving of the title of queen consort, I knew I didn't have to be perfect when I was with *him*. That seemed especially true at our current age.

"But...you're wonderful just as you are, my lady. You don't need to be perfect," said Shirley.

"I'm putting in all this effort because I *want* to and because it will pave the way to a happier life in the future. Besides, it's fun! I don't have any negative reasons for wanting to be perfect. It really doesn't bother me one bit," I replied, looking into her eyes with a joyful smile.

I could tell that she was just worried about me, in her own way.

And I knew that she was just sugarcoating things when she said that I didn't "need" to be perfect. It was just her way of trying to encourage me when what she *really* meant was that she didn't think I *could* ever be perfect.

She didn't need to worry about me, though.

I wanted to be perfect because I knew that I'd have an easier time achieving my dreams if people respected me. And, after all, my all-important, clearly defined goals were the whole reason I could work so hard in the first place. That's all there was to it. I mean, think about it: You can't work hard for some fuzzy, ill-conceived goal that you don't even care that much about, right? You *need* a crystal clear objective, or definite rewards, or *something*.

Basically, I was aiming for perfection as a means of making my dreams come true, but it was just one of many ways to go about that, so I wasn't planning to get hung up on it.

"So, don't worry," I continued. "Even if I can't be perfect, that's okay. I'd just appreciate your encouragement."

There was only one dream that I wanted to make come true. Nothing else mattered. I didn't need—or want—anything but to be with Seth. All I was doing, even now, was trying to make that happen.

I smiled at Shirley, encouraging her to respond. The look in her eyes as she looked at me made it seem like she was staring straight at the sun. I couldn't help but think that she must have misunderstood what I'd said. It didn't matter, though. Whatever form her support took, I'd just be happy to have it.

"Yes… Yes, my lady," she said, sounding deeply moved. "I have every confidence that you'll always look on the bright side and that you'll find your happy ending. I hope to stay by your side always and continue serving and supporting you."

You know…I think that went pretty well!

I smiled, and Shirley smiled back. It was the first time I'd seen her smile, so I couldn't help feeling a little surprised.

"I didn't know you could smile, Shirley!"

Now that I'd pointed it out, it was *Shirley's* turn to look surprised. She touched her face, as if to affirm it for herself. She must not have even realized she was smiling. She was beautiful even with that blank expression she always wore, but she was

even more beautiful when she smiled.

Good for you, Shirley. You learned how to smile! I think I can take credit for that one, don't you?

"I want you by my side, supporting me forever, Shirley. You're an amazing maid, and I appreciate you ever so much!" I told her.

Shirley nodded happily. I felt happy too.

Shirley, please do everything in your power to help me win my happy ending, I thought. *I'm happy right now, of course, but I want to be even happier—the happiest I could possibly be! And if I get to marry Seth, I know that's how I'll feel.*

After all, there was no reason to show kindness to anyone other than Seth in this world—unless, of course, it would help me to achieve my dream of being with him.



The next day, I headed out to the church again.

After descending from the carriage, I took in a deep breath and looked up at the church. It was refreshing to have made it all the way here without any motion sickness.

"It feels great to be here in peak form!" I remarked.

Just like the last time I'd come here, I was accompanied by Shirley and some guards. But unlike last time, I had a new lightness in my step (big ups to not puking my guts out the moment I disembarked).

The church was every bit as beautiful inside as I remembered, and as usual, it was bustling with visitors. *What a wonderful church*, I thought. *It's the perfect place to give thanks to God.*

Last time, I'd made a beeline straight for the cross and had prayed directly in front of it. Judging from all the attention I'd gotten, I'd assumed that my behavior must have been impolite. When I'd looked into it later, though, I didn't learn anything that would have suggested that I'd done anything problematic. It was still a mystery why everyone had been staring so intently at me.

Anyway, whatever the issue had been, I optimistically assumed that I could avoid that kind of excessive attention if I just picked a nice spot in the corner to pray today. After all, they'd probably just been weirded out last time by how I seemed to just start praying out of nowhere right smack in the middle of the church.

So, with that in mind, I quietly walked right past the cross by the church entrance and over to a distant corner. I could sense that Shirley and the guards must have been feeling a bit puzzled as they followed me, since they'd seen what had happened last time.

I took a quick look around me, but no one seemed to be looking in my direction. *Good*, I thought. *I don't want to stand out.*

I looked intently at the cross. Then I closed my eyes and shut out all of the noise around me as I began to pray.

Oh, Father in Heaven. I met Seth for the first time the other day. The Seth here in this universe, in the same dimension as me, was so dashing. I fell in love all over again.

It's all thanks to you, Heavenly Father. Thank you for the opportunity you gave me to meet him. Thank you for blessing me with this happiness that I never could have found in my past life.

I won't ask for much, Lord. I have only one desire: for Seth and I to fall in love and marry. I know I can make my dreams come true. You've put everything in place for me, and now all that's left is for me to put in the hard work required to make it happen.

I'll be happy, won't I? Happier than anyone, or anything? Please, Lord, bless me with your divine guidance.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day."

I bowed deeply. Then I opened my eyes. As I regained my sight, my hearing came back too. That's when I realized: Everyone within my field of vision had turned around, and they were all *staring straight at me! Again!*

"Huh…?"

I felt a chill run down my spine. Before, I could kind of understand why everyone had been staring at me. I mean, I'd been praying fervently right in front of them, so it's no wonder they'd noticed me. But why were they staring *this* time? And why had they all gone so far as to turn around to look at me?

Feeling everyone's gaze on me for no discernible reason was kind of terrifying. I took a step back, as if to retreat from their field of vision, but everyone just followed me with their eyes. There were so many eyes on me now, and they were all looking at me so *intently*. Honestly, it was enough to turn a gal scopophobic.

I looked up at Shirley, afraid and plaintive. For some reason, she

was looking back at me with a proud smile on her face.

"Um…Shirley? I'm not sure if it's this church or *me*, but something feels…" I began. But before I could finish with "off," the sight of a boy just a bit taller than me watching me with absolute reverence on his face stopped me short. I didn't know when he'd gotten so close. He must have approached me when I wasn't looking.

He seemed a little bit older than me (that is to say, older than the current three-year-old me), probably around five. And judging from his clothing, he was likely a peasant. It felt like he wanted something from me, so, as uncomfortable as I felt, I looked back at him, giving him my attention. Then he lit up and opened his mouth to speak.

"What is your name? Um…*my lady?*" he asked, tacking on the last part with a note of uncertainty. He was clearly unaccustomed to speaking to nobility.

He was probably a little older than me, but he was still just a little boy. I felt an instinctive urge to show him kindness. From the way he was acting, I figured it was all too likely that he had fallen in love with me. My pretty looks must have bewitched him. If that was all this was, then I was happy to at least give him my name.

"My name is Lili—" I began.

But before I could finish, I noticed that it wasn't just the little boy who was looking at me intently. For some reason, everyone in the church seemed to be paying rapt attention to our exchange. Suddenly, revealing my name didn't feel like such a good idea.

"It's…*Lily*," I amended.

Considering the circumstances—and considering that I was just talking to a peasant—I didn't see any problem with just giving a nickname. The boy looked absolutely delighted by my answer. I felt a bit guilty all of a sudden.

"Thank you, miss!" he cried out as he bowed his head. Then he ran off to the front of the church.

I'm sorry if my lie tarnishes this precious memory of your first love. I hope that I can at least live on in your memories as a girl so innocent and sweet, she may as well be a saint.

"Mommy! The saint's name is Lily!" the boy exclaimed.

Yes, that's exactly right. Think of me as a… Wait, what?

Flustered, I looked over at where the boy had run off to and

saw that he was speaking to an older woman—probably his mother—as she patted his head.

What a touching scene!

Wait…that's not the point here!

"The…saint?"

*Lily the saint…? Isn't that…*me*? Does he actually think I'm a saint?*

I was floored. What in the world was this little boy talking about? Had he just read too many of those weird, modern picture books, and now he was projecting their stories onto reality? He was still at an age where that could pass as cute, but he was going to be in real trouble if he kept that up into adulthood. Believe me, I would know. As nice as everyone had been in my past life, I knew I would have had a really hard time of it if I'd gone around publicly declaring my love for a video game character.

I was ready to just chalk this up to weird little boy behavior, but unfortunately, the other people in the church were making that impossible.

"Saint Lily…" someone crooned.

"Such a noble name!"

"What an honor to learn her holy name!"

The church, only moments before a place of unbroken quiet, erupted into a cacophony of loud whispers.

With an incredibly tense expression on my face, I tugged on Shirley's sleeve.

"Shirley… Something is *definitely* off."

"'Off'? No, my lady. If I may, I believe their response is perfectly understandable."

"*Huh?*" I blurted out, in a most unladylike voice.

Seriously, though… What?!

I was baffled, but I could tell that Shirley meant what she said. She really didn't seem to think there was anything weird at all about the scene playing out in front of us. On the contrary, she looked proud of me for it.

I stole a glance at the guards. They were wearing the same proud looks on their faces as Shirley.

What the heck is going on here…?

Was I surrounded by weirdos? Was there *no* remaining bastion of rationality? Why was everyone acting like this bizarre scene was entirely reasonable? Surely they were all just pulling my leg?!

“W-Well…! I’m done here now, so I’m ready to go home!” I announced.

I had a boatload of questions for Shirley, but I was eager to get out of here. It was just too strange that I was the only one who seemed to realize how terrifying this all was. So, I pulled Shirley roughly by the arm and headed straight for the exit, as fast as I could.

“At attention, everyone!”

“Please bow!”

The strangely militaristic orders were a stark contrast to the awestruck behavior I’d just witnessed. I was afraid to find out what was going on, but my curiosity got the best of me. I hesitantly turned around. Right before my eyes, all of the peasants straightened their postures and then, on command, bowed in perfect sync as they faced me.

By the time I left the church, I was practically in tears.

Oh my God… That was terrifying! What’s going on?!

“Shirley, could you please tell me what in the world just happened back there when we get in the carriage?!” I asked.

“What happened back there…? Yes, my lady… As you wish?”

Shirley wore a perplexed look on her face as she looked back at me, as if she was wondering why I was so worked up. Seeing her reaction, I felt a wave of unease wash over me that I couldn’t put into words.

Why is she acting like I’m *the one who’s being weird here? I don’t get it!*

“After we got in the carriage, I asked Shirley what happened. According to her, I seemed so devout and so overflowing with love for God when I prayed that everyone felt there was something different about me, especially since I’m only three years old. Anyway, someone had the idea to label me a ‘saint,’ and apparently, it caught on quickly.”

Melvin burst out laughing. “So that’s what happened, huh? There you go again, causing a scene!”

I sighed.

Melvin had come to visit me at the manor today, as if that were just a *normal* thing to do. What’s worse, he’d even gone through the formal process of scheduling an appointment, so I couldn’t

exactly refuse to see him. So, reluctantly, I'd invited him up to my room. Once we were alone, I had set a boundary that he was only to visit once every six months. Then we'd moved on and begun to talk openly about everything that was going on in our lives—which brings us back to the present.

Honestly, I didn't really have a problem with Melvin being here. The real problem was the horrible headache I'd gotten from being called a *saint* the other day.

"Please, Melvin! It isn't funny!" I protested. "I don't *want* to be a saint! I want to be a queen!"

"Well, why not both?"

"I don't want to ruin my characterization like that! Who knows what effect that could have?!"

If this universe worked the same way the game's did, then all I had to do was cross my fingers that the main character would pick a love interest other than Seth. As long as she did that, I'd get to marry him. I didn't even have to do anything.

I wasn't great at figuring out what adults were thinking, though. I wasn't very good at making educated guesses on how things might unfold when I only had one piece of the puzzle either. For the record, I'd never *once* won a strategy game like chess or shogi.

That's why I wanted to avoid accidentally setting the stage for any surprises later down the line. Who knew if my mystifying new saint status would result in me getting dragged into some kind of mess? Maybe it would somehow offend someone, and they'd try to stop me from becoming queen!

I was painfully aware of the fact that I wasn't all that smart. I was dead set on winning Seth's heart no matter what, but if at all possible, I wanted to avoid getting tangled up in anything that might complicate that!

"What're you going to do, then?" Melvin asked me.

"Perhaps I'll start visiting a church in some little town in the boonies instead."

"Wow, you'd really go that far? If the saint stuff bothers you that much, why not just stop going to church?"

"Oh, I couldn't *possibly*! How could I possibly stop giving thanks to God for this beautiful life He's given me? Please, Melvin!" I protested, fiercely refusing his suggestion. Then I flashed him a

contented smile. “After all, I’m just so happy that I was blessed enough to be born into this world!”

Here I was, living in the same world as my beloved. I’d been granted the opportunity to meet him in the flesh and even to fall in love with him. I felt sure that I must have been the happiest person in the whole world. Thinking about it made me smile so hard, I wasn’t sure that I could stop.

As Melvin looked into my smiling face, his expression grew strangely serious.

“Is something the matter?” I asked him.

“No, it’s just… Is it because Prince Seth is here in this world that you’re so happy to be here?”

“Of course! But if there’s anything else that concerns you, please do let me know.”

“I think it’s just my imagination, that’s all. I can tell just from looking at you that you really do love him.”

Duh, I thought, puffing my chest out with pride.

I had no idea what was going through Melvin’s head, but honestly, I didn’t really care. It was probably nothing of any consequence anyway. Sure, maybe he was a little sharp, but he was still only three. And how sharp can a three-year-old even be?

I knew that he’d look more boyish as he grew older, but at his young age, his features were soft enough that you’d be forgiven for thinking he was a pretty little girl. The Inoces were of low-ranking nobility, but we were still barely acquainted with the Crabitts. The trust they had in us extended so far as to leave Melvin and me alone in my room, but his guards were right outside the door. Still…we were only just children. Even if things might change when Melvin was older, for the time being, I had a pretty good sense that he wouldn’t try to interfere in any way as I pursued Seth.

“Anyway, can you drop the formalities already? We’re friends now, remember?” Melvin said.

“I’ve dropped the ladylike act already, haven’t I? What more do you want from me?”

“Come on, we’re the same age. It’s weird when you say stuff like ‘if there’s anything else that concerns you, please do let me know.’ Let *me* ask you something, though. I saw your whole exchange with the prince from start to finish. Why do you feel like you still

have to keep up appearances like this with me?"

I was speechless. I'd acted like an utter fool in front of Seth during our first meeting. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it had been the biggest blunder of my entire life—if only because I intended to make sure I never disgraced myself *worse* than that. And Melvin had seen it all, from start to finish. I knew what he was trying to ask me: "Why are you trying to play it cool with me, when I know better?" Honestly, I didn't have an answer to that.

"Fine," I conceded, after a long silence. "I'll drop the act. But *only* in private."

I knew he had a point. It felt pretty bad to concede to a three-year-old, though, when I had seventeen years of life experience on him.

How did this happen? I wondered. *Oh. Right. It happened because I'm such a hopeless idiot, I can't even hide it. Wow, that's sad...*

"Anyway, why are you so in love with the prince?"

"Huh? What do you mean, 'why?' Are you doubting my intentions?"

"What? No... It's just a question."

I cocked my head.

"Well, what girl *wouldn't* fall in love with him at first sight? Honestly, I don't understand any girl who doesn't. I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if even *boys* were falling head over heels for him!"

Melvin looked at me like I'd completely lost it.

"Yikes. You're really crazy about him..." he said.

Had my undying love for Seth scared him off that badly? Well, whatever. Not my problem.

"You know, Melvin, you could learn a thing or two from Prince Seth about being a man," I told him.

"Oh? All right, I'm curious, so I'll play along. Like what, exactly?"

"Well, lots! Like, let's see...you could talk in a more masculine manner, for example."

"Yeah, fat chance. I ain't here to steal your heart, so you can just forget that crap," he said, in a brusque and boyish manner that completely contradicted every word he'd just spoken.

I smiled and gave him a thumbs-up.

"That's the spirit! You sound *way* cooler when you talk like that! Maybe don't talk to Prince Seth like that, though, 'kay?"

“Right…”

An unreadable expression crossed his face. It was a strikingly unchildlike expression, actually.

Um, hello? A girl your age just paid you a compliment. Can’t you afford to look a little happier about that?

The way Melvin spoke now was actually pretty close to the way I remembered him speaking in the game. If I wanted to preserve the integrity of the game’s story, then I probably shouldn’t have been encouraging him to change. Realistically, though, I knew Melvin wasn’t going to listen to me anyway. If I directly asked him to keep talking in that rough, masculine way, he probably wouldn’t. Besides, even if he *did*, it seemed highly unlikely that that would have any impact on my chances of marrying Seth. I didn’t want to go around freaking out about any potential minor change that probably wouldn’t influence the future anyway.

“I really don’t get it,” Melvin said, after a long pause. He had a troubled expression on his face as he stared intently at me.

“What?” I asked.

“*You*, Liliana. I don’t get *you*.”

Oh. Okay.

Wait… What? Hold on, I’m confused. What exactly is there to “not get” about me? No one *is easier to understand than me. I mean, I blurt out every single thing I think. What is there to be confused about? Are you sure you’re not just overcomplicating things and making me seem more complex than I really am?*

“I’m in love with Prince Seth,” I said plainly. “What is there not to get?”

“No, I get *that*,” he replied instantly.

I nodded, glad we were on the same page about this. Again, though, how could we not be? In what world could he have missed that?

“Okay, well, I think that’s probably the only thing about me that matters. That’s pretty much all there is to me.”

Melvin frowned again.

What’s the deal? I wondered. *Why can’t you just accept what I’m saying? Is this that rebellious “threenager” stage that toddlers go through?*



I stood in front of the small, cozy church with my arms crossed, a satisfied smile on my face.

"Yes. This is it. This is exactly what I've been looking for."

The church's exterior practically screamed "no one ever pays me a visit." I felt pretty confident that there wouldn't be a crowd of weirdos hanging out inside ready to extol me as a saint again.

I'd made my carriage trek starting early in the morning, and finally I'd arrived here, at a little village on the very outskirts of town, far from the castle.

I'd picked this rural church from the map thinking that it seemed like a promisingly unpopulated spot. About a month ago, I'd let Shirley know that I wanted to go to *this* church from now on, instead of the local one. Initially, she'd regarded my request with suspicion but once I told her that I just wanted a quiet spot to focus on my prayers, she seemed to come around. Ultimately, she agreed to speak to the viscount, who gave me his permission for me to visit.

After mustering up a bit of courage, I flung the church doors open. Just as I did, a radiant scene unfolded before me. Inside, there wasn't a single soul except the priest.

Wait... He's not a priest. I think he's a pastor, right? Ugh, which is it again...? Let's see...if he works at a church, that makes him a priest, right? No, that's not right. I'm pretty sure they only have pastors in this world. God, why does this have to be so complicated?!

But just as I was dismissing the thought and striding in to begin my prayers, still in high spirits from the church's emptiness, Shirley suddenly grabbed my arm, stopping me forcefully in my tracks.

"My lady..." she said. Her tone was severe.

It was highly unusual for her to use force like this to stop me. Obediently, I came to a halt and looked up at her. She wore a concerned look on her face as she bent down to whisper something in my ear.

"That's Jack Gunnhorse," she said.

Jack Gunnhorse...

As I repeated the name in my head, I was reminded of the significance of having a family name. In this universe, family names were typically reserved only for nobility. What's more, family names with animal motifs usually signified that a person came from a particularly powerful and influential family. If

memory served, a name with “horse” in it suggested the rank of an earl.

But if Shirley was so concerned about his name that she’d bent down like this to warn me about it, then…

I looked up ahead of me again, confirming that the only people currently within the church were myself, Shirley, the guards behind us, and the pastor.

“*That’s* Jack Gunnhorse? The pastor…?” I asked.

Through the process of elimination, there wasn’t really anyone *else* she could have been referring to. I looked at him closely: He was a young man dressed in what was unmistakably a pastor’s garb, going about his duties with an air of serenity. I was pretty sure that noblemen didn’t join the clergy, though. Something about the idea felt a little blasphemous.

In the corner of my eye, Shirley nodded. If Shirley said so, then it must have been true. I knew she’d committed countless noble names and faces to memory, all so that she’d be able to tell me who they were.

“Should I…introduce myself?” I asked. “I wonder if he’s here under normal circumstances, though?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, my lady…”

The ranks of nobility, in descending order, were duke, marquis, earl, viscount, and baron. That meant that it was my obligation, as the daughter of lower-ranking nobility, to go introduce myself to the pastor.

I’m sure this goes without saying, but it should have come as quite the surprise to the pastor to see an urban noble like me in a remote village like this. Surprisingly, though, he had absolutely no reaction, even though my clothing was clearly a noble’s (despite its lack of adornment), and I’d arrived via carriage.

Something’s fishy! I thought. *Veeeery fishy!*

I had a feeling that he was just hoping I wouldn’t notice *he* was a noble. I didn’t want to get mixed up in anything weird, so I decided I’d play along.

“Shirley, let’s pretend we don’t know who he is,” I said. “I didn’t realize his identity until you told me, and he probably wouldn’t expect a maid to know either. I don’t know what complicated circumstances have led him here, but I don’t think we need to find out.”

Instead of waiting for Shirley's answer, I closed the book on our private conversation by striding into the church. I gave Earl Gunnhorse a little bow and walked straight past him.

I didn't care about anyone who couldn't help me win Seth's heart. Besides, I was here before the Lord right now.

The cross towered over me. I knelt down in front of it, breaking into a natural, gentle smile. Then I clasped my hands together and closed my eyes.

Yes, I thought. *Now* this *is how I like to pray. This is just the right spot. It's so nice not to have to hide in a corner, away from prying eyes. I feel so much better when I can kneel here right before the cross.*

I cleared my mind, focusing only on giving thanks to God. As I did, I gave everything up to Him, unburdening myself unto the Lord. It felt *wonderful*.

Dear Heavenly Father, I give thanks to you on high for blessing me with this joyful life. I want for nothing. Being here in the same universe as my beloved Seth means the world to me. Truly, I am the happiest woman alive.

Please continue to lead me, so that I may one day fulfill my fate of marrying Seth, and I swear I will be faithful and eternally grateful to you, Lord, until the day I die.

After praying with all my might, I opened my eyes and lifted my head. Then I said one final prayer of thanks.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day."

When I turned around, I saw Shirley, the guards, and Earl Gunnhorse all looking at me with that same expression I'd seen before on all of the churchgoers' faces.

It seemed it would be harder than I thought to escape the image of sainthood. Fortunately, though, this church was remote enough that rumors of my supposed sainthood probably wouldn't spread like wildfire. And if Earl Gunnhorse had some sort of complicated and scandalous reason for being here, then even if he knew who I was (or found out later), he was unlikely to ever tell a soul he saw me here.

In any case, I was done. I didn't want to leave the door open for the one in a million chance that Earl Gunnhorse might try to talk to me, so I was determined to leave as soon as possible.

But just as I was about to head toward the exit, I realized that

one more person had joined us in the church. Just in front of the church doors, exactly where I was headed, there was a child standing with their mouth agape, staring at me.

They had disheveled chestnut-colored hair that looked like it hadn't seen a brush in years. It looked like not an ounce of care had been put into their clothing, its only purpose to cover them for propriety's sake. It was hard to see their face under all their messy hair, so I couldn't even discern if they were a boy or a girl. Judging from their height, though, they were probably about my age. Something about them made me think that they probably came from a pretty rough neighborhood.

That's weird... This little village didn't seem *all that rough to me?*

Maybe I could have done something for the child if I'd extended my hand to offer some help, but it didn't feel right to do that when I knew it would only be a one-off thing. This isn't a very nice analogy, but it was kind of like petting a stray dog that you knew you couldn't take home with you. I couldn't take care of the dog—or the child, to drop the metaphor—forever, nor did I want to. So, I felt like the right thing to do here was to just ignore them. Honestly, I was just too busy trying to attain my own happiness to think about anyone else's.

My guilty conscience was nagging at me, but I ignored the child as I began walking again and made swift strides toward the exit. I passed right by them as I left.

"Thank...you," the child said as I passed, their voice almost a whisper.

I didn't know if those words were directed at me (and if so, for what?), or if they'd just been talking to themselves. Either way, I could hear the genuine gratitude in their husky, tearful voice.

For a moment, I stopped walking. Then I started up again. I heard the footsteps of Shirley and the guards running after me, apparently having finally come back to their senses. I walked all the way up to the carriage and let out a breath that I hadn't even realized I'd been holding in.

"Sheesh... I came all this way to get away from that trouble in the local church, but it feels like I've just stumbled into a *different* kind of trouble..."

I briefly entertained the idea of picking yet another church to visit in the future, but I didn't have much confidence that I'd be

able to find another nice, empty church like this in a suitable location. I knew I couldn't travel much farther than this from the manor, and if I looked for one any closer, then it probably wouldn't be nearly as unpopulated.

Well, whatever. I'm sure I'll be fine. As long as I don't talk to that pastor or that child, there shouldn't be an issue!

Chapter 4

I don't need friends. As long as I have Seth, I'll be happy.

I really, truly believed that…and yet, here I was, surrounded by a bunch of girls a little bit older than me.

I let out a sigh.

How did I get here, you ask? Well, long story short, I'd gone to another high society party with the viscount, where I was promptly cornered the minute that we went our separate ways. "Just come here for a minute," they'd said with absolutely no further explanation, and so I'd followed them to the corner of the castle hall where today's party was being held and found myself immediately surrounded by about ten little girls.

Look, honestly? I was every bit as confused as you must be. Technically speaking, I hadn't been given any explanation yet as to what was going on, but…well…objectively speaking, it probably had *something* to do with either Seth or Melvin.

I'd made no attempt whatsoever to befriend their little posse of girls, and yet here I was hanging around the boys that they hoped to one day make their husbands. Logically speaking, they probably didn't look too kindly on that. Only one member of the group would have to voice their displeasure, and it was sure to quickly ignite similar complaints among the others—especially since I didn't have a single friend in the group to speak up for me. The natural conclusion to this was that they would confront me.

That was my best guess as to what this was all about, anyway.

One of the girls in the group—the one who'd dragged me here—wore a frilly pink dress. I was pretty sure she was the daughter of a marquis. Based on her family's high rank and her confident personality, it felt safe to assume she was the ringleader.

"I'll get straight to the point," she said, putting her hands on her hips and leaning back in a show of haughtiness. "Could you please refrain from having anything more to do with Prince Seth and Lord Melvin?"

Uh-huh. Bingo.

"I'm afraid I can't agree to that. I don't believe you have any

right to weigh in on my friendships. Only my parents and my friends themselves are entitled to that privilege."

I tried hard to keep my poker face as I spoke. Since they were older (and obviously taller), I had to look up at them to make eye contact. Pink Frills looked absolutely livid.

Instinctively, I flinched—a reaction that baffled me.

Whoa, hey! What are you so scared of? Who cares if you're outnumbered when you're outnumbered by ten-year-old girls*? Get a hold of yourself!*

"Well, *that* won't do. I am very disappointed to hear that, young lady. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you? Or am I using words too big for your little brain to comprehend?" said Pink Frills mockingly. The other girls started to snicker, as if spurred on.

They might have just been a bunch of kids, but it still didn't feel great to be on the receiving end of that. A typical three-year-old probably *wouldn't* have picked up on their insinuation, to be fair. But *I* did!

"You ought to find an outlet for that jealousy of yours. It's unbecoming," I shot back. Instantly, all of the girls stopped laughing.

Just as I was privately gloating, though, I felt the terror of all of their eyes on me. They were glaring daggers.

Seriously? Come on, Liliana, they're just a bunch of ten year old girls! I reminded myself. It didn't help though. I could feel my hands shaking. I didn't want to know what would happen if they noticed, so I quickly hid my hands behind my back.

All of the girls were taller than me. They were probably stronger too. Physically, after all, I was still just a three-year-old.

Oh, God... What do I do? If they try to pull anything, I won't be able to stop them. Actually, wait... I could probably scream loud enough for the adults to hear. No, that won't do... I can't cause a scene here.

I was the victim here, and I felt confident that I could prove that. The problem, though, was that the viscount might decide that high society parties were too dangerous for me. I didn't want to risk losing the privilege to attend them over something like this—not when it would mean that I wouldn't be able to see Seth anymore.

"Oh, but I have. Don't you see that's why I'm confronting you?" said Pink Frills, her tone icy.

Without thinking, I broke eye contact and took a step back.

I hadn't ever really been bullied or gotten into fights, not even in my past life. Sure, I'd had a spat here and there with friends, but I wasn't used to being on the receiving end of hostility from a big group like this.

What am I going to do? I wondered. *Even if I manage to survive this, there will be other high society parties. This won't be the end of it.*

Should I ask for Melvin's help? No… Our friendship is too transactional for that. If I call in a favor, I'll just be putting myself in debt to him. Besides, I'm the one who made a big show of telling him not to talk to me in front of other people so there wouldn't be any weird rumors about us.

What about Seth, then…?

No, that's ridiculous. That's even more *of a reach. I don't want to burden him with this, and besides, he probably wouldn't be willing to help me anyway. After all, the whole reason he attends these parties so religiously is so that he can build bridges with the nobles. It's so important that he even cuts into time he could use studying to be here. He wouldn't sacrifice his relationships with all of these girls just for a viscount's daughter, and I wouldn't* want *him to do that anyway.*

Besides, Seth is busy right now. I mean, we're on his home turf here in the palace. He must have tons of important guests attending this party. He only agreed to be my friend for kicks, so why would he cut into time he could be spending cozying up to those important guests for me?

Yeah… I just have to deal with this myself. If I want to marry Seth and be queen consort, then I've got no other choice.

Pink Frills chuckled. "Aw, are you gonna cry? Well, I'm a nice person, so I'll ask you one more time: Could you please refrain from having anything more to do with Prince Seth and Lord Melvin? I promise we'll be nice to you if you agree."

"No," I replied, after a long pause.

In the silence, my stomach had started to hurt. That one word had been all that I'd managed to spit out. I couldn't even look her in the eyes. Privately, I'd been calling her the "Pink Frills Monster," but I couldn't even get more than a word of protest out. I felt like I was shrinking away from her. I wasn't afraid to rebel against her demands privately, but outwardly, my fear seemed to control my entire body.

Why am I shrinking away from her like this? This is so stupid. I want to be stronger than this. All I'm doing right now is encouraging her. Maybe I should make a run for it? At this point, it feels like staying here will only make things worse.

My cynical thoughts seemed to have thoroughly primed me for escape. I didn't even hesitate to take a step back, ready to make a run for it. My cowardice disgusted me.

There was just one thing I hadn't accounted for: As I took that step back, my foot *hit* something.

Maybe someone heard the commotion and came to see what it was all about? I thought. *Oh God… What do I do now?*

The one thing I was most afraid of was the possibility that I might not get to see Seth again. So, naturally, the last thing I wanted to do was to cause a scene. I turned around hesitantly and looked up at the person I'd just bumped into. It was my one true love, the boy who inspired feelings so strong that I loved him in each and every dimension.

"Liliana is my friend. If you don't wanna get on my bad side, then you'd better start being nice to her," he said to the girls.

I still hadn't totally wrapped my head around what was going on, but here was Seth—yes, and I was *sure* it was him—telling these girls off for me.

Before the girls could reply (although, really, there was only *one* reply they would ever dream of giving), Seth grabbed my arm and turned his back to them, stomping off with me in tow.

As he dragged me off with him, it should have felt the same as when Pink Frills had dragged me off…but it didn't. Unlike the vivid sense of cold reality that I'd felt then, *this* felt warm and dreamlike. I was happy to let him lead me wherever he wanted to go.

We left the hall and headed for the stairs. *Where is he taking me?* I wondered. But I was happy to go *wherever* he wanted to take me, so it didn't really matter. I just followed him in silence.

Finally, Seth stopped in front of a door to open it, and I sensed that we had arrived. It looked like someone's bedroom. I entered hesitantly, my head full of questions.

"Thank you for inviting me here," I said. "Um… Where *is* 'here,' exactly?"

"We're in my bedroom. Obviously. Where else would I take you?"

“Huh?! Wait… *What*?!” I shrieked, jolting a bit.

I put my free hand—the one Seth wasn’t holding—to my chest as I reflected on how astonishingly rude it was for me to even consider looking around the room. *Liliana, you idiot!* I scolded myself, lightly slapping my cheek.

“Are you okay?” Seth asked, watching me self-flagellate with deep suspicion on his face.

“Oh yes! I’m in tip-top shape!” I replied, beaming.

I knew he was probably asking about my *mental* state, rather than my physical one, but…I was pretty sure I was all right in the head too. I was in tip-top shape all around.

“Right… Well, take a seat.”

“A-All right.”

At Seth’s prompting, I looked around for a chair.

I bet Seth sits in that chair all the time, I thought when I spotted one. *I can’t just* sit *on it like it’s nothing! That seat is sacred!*

Honestly, just the realization that I was breathing his bedroom air was making me so nervous, I felt like I was going to get indigestion.

But as I was standing around dawdling, Seth took a different seat and looked up at me, waiting.

“I think I’ll just stand!” I exclaimed. “I’m not worthy of taking a seat!”

“Okaaay… If you really *want* to…”

Nice! That was a close one. I might’ve gotten a little too excited and started spurting blood from my nose if he’d insisted… And then I might’ve passed out from blood loss.

For now, at least, I’d narrowly averted disaster.

With Seth seated, though, I stood noticeably taller, and something about that felt outrageously disrespectful. So, I knelt down where I was. I could feel Seth’s bewildered eyes on me, but I just ignored his confusion and entreated him with a smile.

“Hey, are you…gonna be all right? In hindsight, it probably wasn’t the best move for me to step in like that,” Seth said.

He looked embarrassed for some reason. I cocked my head, unsure what he meant by that.

“I mean…I’ve probably just made it even harder for you to form friendships with those girls in the future. That’s going to close some doors for you socially. Compared to men, women are much

more emotional and cliquey, and they spread gossip like wildfire. No one's gonna want anything to do with a viscount's daughter who has the royal family standing at the ready to come running to her aid."

Huh? Seth took the time out of his busy schedule to help me, and now he's even worrying *about me?*

I'm so touched… God, I love him. I love him so *much!*

A burst of joy welled up inside of me. But simultaneously, I felt a wave of anxiety come over me.

I couldn't help but feel that Seth was a little *too* perfect. I mean, he was only three years old. I had memories from my past life to explain all my precocious behavior; he had less than four years of life experience. I certainly didn't remember meeting *any* three-year-olds like him in my past life.

Is it just his desire to be a great ruler one day that makes him such an amazing person, despite his tender age? I wondered, in awe. *He's going to make such a splendid king…*

I knew I'd have to work on myself more so that I could be deserving of a place beside him. I couldn't just *look* the part either. I needed to be the kind of woman who was genuinely capable of supporting him.

"Oh, please don't worry about me. I'm perfectly satisfied with the friends I already have, and I sincerely appreciate your help with those girls."

Seth's eyes widened in surprise. Then he broke into a sweet smile and said, "Okay."

It was just a single word, but as he said it, he stood up and approached me. I felt frozen in place, my heart pounding in my chest at the sight of that sweet smile. Then he reached out and gently patted me on the head.

"You can stay here as long as you want to, but those girls won't be able to hurt you anymore, so you can go back to the party when you feel up to it. I've got a lot to take care of, so I'm going to head back down now."

As I knelt there, still speechless and paralyzed, Seth quickly left the bedroom.

A whole five seconds later, I made an attempt to get up. I say "attempt" because I unfortunately forgot that I was wearing a big dress and tripped, basically falling face-first onto the floor. My

heart wouldn't stop pounding. My breathing was so labored and my blood pressure was so high now that I felt like I was going to die.

My beloved is so dashing, it hurts! Oh, but I love him!

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day!"

That was the prayer I said during each church visit, and every night before bed, but it wasn't like there was any rule that said I couldn't say it outside of those times.

Dear God, I'm truly grateful that you gave me a second chance at life in this world. Thank you!

"Actually, it's a little worrying that Seth doesn't have any qualms about leaving a girl who's desperately in love with him alone in his bedroom… I guess that just means that he trusts me, though, right? Hmm… I'm not sure whether to be happy or frustrated about that!"

As I said that, I realized that I was still lying face down on the floor. I wouldn't have been able to explore every nook and cranny of the room like this, even if I'd wanted to. But Seth had said that it was okay if I stayed here, so I decided to take him up on that. For a while, I just stayed where I was and groaned for a bit.

It probably took about half an hour before I worked up the nerve to get up. I stood up and brushed my dress off, doing what I could to make myself presentable again. I couldn't muster the audacity to take a look around his room in the end, so I decided to just leave and head back to the party. Just as I was on my way to the door, though, I realized something.

"Wait… I actually haven't even *told* him I'm in love with him yet, have I?"

Okay, yes, I had told him back when I first met him—but that was part of my request to be friends, so that didn't really count.

As far as Seth knew, he'd just stood up for a friend and taken her back to his room to calm down. He probably had no idea that I was in love with him.

Nnngh… Crap. This is just gonna make it harder to tell him again.

I returned to the party, feeling a little dispirited, and went straight to the viscount to tell him I was ready to go home. He didn't say a word to me about the little spat I'd gotten wrapped up in earlier with those girls. He was too much of a doting father to

stay silent about it if he knew, so I had a feeling he must not have heard what had happened.

Fortunately, it seemed Seth had nipped any gossip in the bud.

The only hitch was when Shirley pointed out the wrinkles in my dress during our carriage ride home. Let me tell you, it was a real challenge to make up an excuse for *that*.



At the next party—a much smaller affair than the previous one—I got the chance to catch up with Melvin. I really played up the confrontation with Pink Frills's posse, but to tell you the truth, I still felt like I was on cloud nine.

Melvin, for his part, just seemed disappointed to have missed out on all the drama. His reaction felt a little cold, considering that you could easily argue *he* was half the reason I'd wound up in the bullies' crosshairs.

Sheesh, Melvin... Are you even human?

Since word of our friendship had apparently gotten out, I'd started talking to him pretty openly in public. Maybe I'd have to rethink that, though...

"When *you* fall for someone one day, I hope she doesn't even give you the time of day."

"Hey, don't curse me like that!" Melvin replied, cackling, but he didn't seem the least bit concerned.

Uh-huh... Figures. I guess a pretty boy duke's son like you doesn't even have to worry about your luck with love.

I felt my mood starting to sour a bit. I was starting to wish I'd just avoided Melvin today. But as I looked over at Seth, who was making pleasant conversation with some adults and clearly doing his best to get in some networking, I felt a little better. My mood always improved so easily when he was around. Not to toot my own horn, but I felt pretty darn blessed.

As usual, Seth looked completely comfortable talking with the adults. None of his conversational partners looked like they were just humoring him either; they seemed to be genuinely enjoying the conversation. *How much studying do you have to do to be cultured enough to have a real conversation like that with adults?* I wondered. I didn't think I'd been capable of that even in my

previous life, when I'd been a high schooler—and I certainly didn't feel capable of that *now* either. Reflecting on that really hit home for me that it wasn't so much about age as it was about hard work and motivation.

Hmm... This is gonna be a long road for me if I can't even handle a few ten-year-old girls.

"Hey, Liliana. Why do you like Prince Seth, anyway?" Melvin asked suddenly, just as I'd been privately reaffirming my resolve to work on myself. He'd stopped laughing uncontrollably, but there was still a trace of laughter in his voice as he spoke.

I'm so glad you asked! I thought. *Do you want the one-hour version?*

A disgruntled look came over Melvin's face as he noticed my eyes lighting up.

Hey, what gives? You asked*, didn't you?*

"You're always going on and on about how in love with him you are, but every time you talk about him, it's only about the superficial stuff. I can't figure out why you're so obsessed with him *specifically*," said Melvin.

When he put it that way, I could kind of see where he was coming from. I obviously couldn't go around telling everyone about the video game I'd played in my past life, so my obsessive crush on Seth must have seemed pretty random to everyone.

I don't want to get into anything off-limits, but maybe I can just tell him about my experience falling for Seth again after meeting him in real life?

"There aren't many people out there who can carry the weight of the whole kingdom on their shoulders like he can. And even though he's saddled with so much responsibility, he still cares about people," I explained.

Thinking about it now, it was probably his soul that I was so attracted to. I mean, I thought he was hot too, obviously. I'd fallen in love with him at first sight both in this life and my previous one, after all. But it was his fundamental nature—the way he saw the world and moved through it—that I loved so much, I didn't know what to do with myself.

Melvin looked like he still didn't quite get it, so I decided to elaborate.

"You and I can act a bit older than our age sometimes, but

Prince Seth acts *way* more mature. Isn't it amazing that, at only three years old, he's making the rounds at parties to network and studying like crazy, all so he can be a good king one day? And what's even more amazing is that he's doing all this because he *wants* to, not because someone told him to. You and I are still focused on amusing ourselves, but Prince Seth…he's different, don't you think?"

"He is?" asked Melvin, staring at me.

His question took me a little bit by surprise.

Wait… Are you not seeing what I see? I wondered. *Are you just taking everything he does at face value and assuming that he's motivated by short-term gain and emotion? Do you not see the ambition driving him?*

Maybe I'm just paying way more attention to Seth than anyone normally would? I mean, I guess I have a lot more context, since I know all about his circumstances and his relationship with his older brother from playing Lady Rose *in my past life.*

Sounds like Melvin doesn't get it, though. You know, I'm kind of relieved by that, actually.

Watching Seth carry the weight of the kingdom on his shoulders made me worry a little. But that was just the kind of person he was, and I knew that was why he always acted so mature. As for me, well…I could remember the seventeen years I'd lived in my past life, so it only made sense that I'd seem mature for my age too.

Compared to the two of us, though, Melvin didn't have much reason to act mature, so it was actually a good thing that he didn't get it. In fact, it was a relief that he couldn't imagine the perspective of someone who thought so differently from him.

Well… Seems like Melvin's a little young to wrap his head around this, so I'll try to explain what it's like to be Seth for him—at least, as far as I can understand his experience.

"He has a brilliant older brother who could be next in line to be king, right? And these are the years where any normal kid is making friends, relying on the adults in their life, and just having fun. But Prince Seth is willing to throw all of that away to be king," I explained. "He's throwing it away not because he doesn't *want* to have fun and be a kid but because his number one priority is to become a good king. He can't afford to get distracted, so he

dedicates himself single-mindedly to his goal. That way he doesn't hurt anyone."

"Look… That's really admirable and all if that's true, but you don't actually *know* that's how he feels, right? You sure you're not just deluding yourself?"

Honestly, I could understand where he was coming from with that. But…if *anyone* understood how Seth felt, it was me. Even if I didn't "know" he felt all of that, I could *feel* it.

"I'd know better than anyone," I declared. "I don't have eyes for anyone but him, remember?"

"Uh-huh…" replied Melvin, sounding a little annoyed. If there was one thing he understood about my crush on Seth, it was that I was absolutely obsessed with him.

"Anyway, I think the only reason that Prince Seth agreed to be friends with me was because he thought I wouldn't get in the way of his mission."

"Wait, seriously? And you're…*okay* with that?"

"Of course I am. That doesn't diminish my love for him one bit."

I puffed my chest out with pride, trying to show Melvin that, if anything, I was actually *proud* of that fact. It meant that I knew how to read the room and that I had demonstrated to Seth that I wasn't going to impede his studies or social obligations. I loved Seth more than anyone in the world, so I'd always be happy to take the back seat. And if Seth ever thought that I was the kind of girl who *couldn't* do that, he'd cut me off without a moment's hesitation.

That's why I was happy to just be his "friend."

"Prince Seth is wholeheartedly devoted to his mission to become a good king, but he still took the time to lend a hand to a three-year-old, no-name viscount's daughter like me when I was about to fall flat on my face. And just recently, he cut into precious time that he could have spent networking to save me from a group of mean girls! He doesn't have a moment to spare, but he still reaches out to help people. Don't you realize how incredible that is? He'd never be able to do any of that if he was just *acting* like a good person. It just doesn't add up unless he's genuinely got a good heart."

Listening to myself speak, I realized with a bit of pride that I must be pretty smart if I was able to put something as elusive and

emotional as love into words like that.

To be perfectly honest, though, it wasn't like I loved him for a list of reasons I could just put in bullet point form like that. The way I thought about it was a lot dumber than that, actually. It was more like: "I love him because I love him." But it wasn't like I was just making stuff up either. Melvin had pressed me for concrete reasons, and this was what I'd come up with when I'd tried to put my feelings into words. So, really, it was all completely genuine.

I gave Melvin a self-satisfied look, as if to say, *Well? Prince Seth is pretty amazing, right?* Then I gave him a pointed look to prompt him for an answer. Melvin looked a little annoyed, but after a long, seemingly thoughtful silence, he spoke up.

"Well, I've certainly got a different impression of him after hearing all of that. He seems less like a 'dashing prince that all the girls want' than a 'dependable boss who works his butt off behind the scenes for his subordinates,' though," he said.

"Yeah, there are definitely parts to him that people easily misunderstand," I agreed. "Wait... What's all this stuff about bosses and subordinates, though? Where did *that* come from? Are you sure you're not lying about your age? Do you secretly have a job already?"

"My family manages the kingdom's finances, so I've got a front-row view of the pecking order."

Right... That makes sense. With Melvin's penchant for people watching, he'd be getting a lot out of that privileged position. Yep... I can see now why he acts so mature.

"Hang on, though... I thought I could talk freely with you about this, since you're not a girl, but...you're pretty cute. You'd better not seduce Prince Seth with that sweet face of yours, got it?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" he shot back.

He looked genuinely irritated as he glared at me. Relieved, I reached out to pat him on the head, but he quickly swatted my hand away.

"When I get older, you won't be able to reach my head anymore," he said.

"Pfft! Whatever you say, Melvin."

I knew from the game that Melvin wasn't actually going to grow up to be all that tall. But of course, I didn't tell him that.

Besides, considering that there was already an anomaly like *me*

in this universe, I had no way of knowing if things would even unfold exactly as they did in the game. Well, aside from me (ideally) marrying Seth one day, that is. Maybe it was entirely possible that I'd set off some sort of butterfly effect that would somehow result in Melvin growing to be even taller?

Nah. In his dreams, maybe.

Sorry, Melvin.

Chapter 5

Two years had passed since I'd regained all of my memories.

When I looked back on those two years, they hadn't been all that eventful. It had just been a quiet period of growth as I'd devoted myself to my studies and steadily improved my ability to hold a conversation with Seth.

Yes, you read that right. Even though two years had passed since I'd met Seth, here in this universe where we now coexisted, I'd yet to tell him how I felt about him.

It's just…Seth had been a surprisingly faithful friend to me. In fact, I was his *only* friend. It made it kind of hard to venture out of the friend zone and declare my love for him.

It's hard to think of anything else that had changed in these past two years, but one thing does come to mind. The pastor and the nun who worked at the church in that village on the outskirts that I'd started visiting were now calling me a saint too. Granted, it was just the two of them, but it was weird that they'd somehow picked up my unwelcome nickname too.

Other than that, I'd started learning some self-defense techniques. I thought they might come in handy one day in a worst-case scenario where I might need to fight my way out of a sticky situation, and I wanted to be confident in my skills if that day ever came. Shirley didn't seem too pleased about the idea—she worried that it would cut even further into my beauty sleep—but the viscount was totally on board, since it would be reassuring to know I could defend myself from any unsavory men who tried to lay a hand on me.

The fact that the viscount wasn't more concerned about me being kidnapped said a lot about our family circumstances. His wife was working overseas and rarely ever came home. Ostensibly, it was work that kept her away, but I'm sure the viscount must have worried that some of the men in her life had designs on her.

Anyway, like I said: Two years had passed. I was five now, and so were Seth and Melvin. That meant that *she* would be turning five now too. Presumably, at least.

In three days, the Schwaroses were hosting a formal party to celebrate their only daughter Felicia's debut—along with her fifth birthday.

"Felicia Schwarose." There was no reason for me to be familiar with that name, but I recognized her last name from the game *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*—it was the last name of the main character. And since Felicia Schwarose was around five years old, that made her the same age as Seth and I…which meant that she must have been the main character, Lady Rose.

I felt vaguely uneasy. A main character's personality is defined in large part by the choices that the player has them make throughout the game, so I had no idea what kind of girl this Felicia would be. In the game, Seth and the main character were drawn to each other at first sight, but would it play out the same way in this reality?

At the very least, I felt confident that she wouldn't overshadow me intellectually. After all, I was able to keep up whenever I spoke to Seth or Melvin—and they were ridiculously mature for their age. I was also the prettiest girl I knew now, so I doubted that she'd beat me in the looks department either. But most importantly of all, I knew that she didn't have a chance in hell at loving Seth more than I did.

It didn't feel like I had this in the bag by any means, though. I mean, she was the game's *main character*, and she was really bright. Like, *outrageously* bright. She had the kind of intelligence that was unattainable without cheating. Plus, she was destined to be engaged to Seth by virtue of nothing but the family she was born into! She basically had a huge head start!

No matter how I tried to look at things, I couldn't help feeling anxious. So, I grabbed a workbook aimed at fifteen-year-olds and dove into my studies. I was able to solve almost all of the problems perfectly, but it didn't make me feel much better. Turns out, being able to solve a bunch of applied problems wasn't quite the confidence-building exercise I'd hoped it would be.

I might have been Liliana Inoce, the game's rival-slash-villainess-slash-whatever you want to call her, but that wasn't going to stop me from launching a full frontal attack and stealing Seth's heart. I was going to get my happy ending, dammit.

Just as I was firing myself up to hit the books, I heard the sound

of footsteps outside my door. *That's weird*, I thought. *No one in the manor ever makes that much noise when they walk unless there's something serious going on. And I'm pretty sure* running *is completely out of the question.*

Then the footsteps stopped in front of my door, and I heard a loud knock. I was starting to get a really bad feeling about this. Was there some sort of emergency? Was *I* involved somehow?

"Lady Liliana, it's Shirley. Lord Melvin has come calling, so let's get you presentable. Could you please let me in?"

Looks like I was right on the mark, I thought, reluctantly putting my studies to the side and standing up from my desk.

So, I forgot to mention something else that had changed in these last couple years: Melvin had become a *lot* more forward. His sense of propriety had always been a bit shaky at the best of times, but now it was pretty much nonexistent. I'd told him not to show up at my house out of the blue like this, but apparently that hadn't made an impression on him. He was as capricious as always...

I resigned myself to letting Shirley put me in a dress and doll me up. Halfway through, though, her hands suddenly stopped moving.

"My lady, Lord Melvin was...asking me lots of questions about you," she said uncomfortably. "So, I answered him."

"Huh? Well, I can't really think of anything I wouldn't want you to tell him, so I don't mind. What was he asking about?"

"He wanted to know what you were like in your everyday life and how you interacted with me...things of that nature. I have no idea why he wanted to know any of that, though."

I didn't really have any ideas either, but I chalked it up to Melvin's inquisitive nature. I accompanied Shirley to the parlor room, all dressed up for Melvin and not the least bit concerned about the little inquisition he'd apparently launched earlier. When I opened the door, I saw Melvin lounging on the couch as if it were his own home. As soon as he saw me, he sprang up from his seat.

"Liliana!"

"Lord Melvin, I thought I'd asked you to please refrain from these unexpected visits," I said.

Since Shirley and some of the other maids were in the room with us, I'd adopted a formal, aristocratic tone, instead of the

casual one I usually used with him. I still didn't hesitate to cut straight to the chase, though.

"Listen… I'm here because I need to talk to you. *Alone*," he said, not looking the least bit contrite.

"Okay… What about?"

I was the adult here, so I graciously decided to hear him out. If this was about something stupid, though, then I was prepared to make my displeasure known again.

I assumed that Shirley and the other maids had overheard our exchange, so I gave them a meaningful look that said, *You can go now.* They left, leaving Melvin and me alone together.

Melvin's expression turned serious.

"Before we get into it, let me confirm something. Who is the person you love most after Prince Seth? It doesn't have to be romantic either. It can be totally platonic," he said.

"I've never really given that any thought, to be honest."

"Okay, then how about that maid, Shirley? Or one of the other maids?"

Why the heck is he interrogating me about this? What is he trying to "confirm" exactly? I wondered. I had absolutely no idea what he was after with this.

My confusion must have shown pretty clearly on my face. After thinking about it for a good three seconds, though, I figured that if I had to pick someone, it'd probably be Shirley.

Just as I opened my mouth to answer him, though, he shut down the conversation.

"Thanks. That's all I needed to know," he said, his tone businesslike.

Jeez, Melvin. You can't just ask someone something and then end the conversation before they even have the chance to answer. That's just rude.

Honestly, though, I didn't want to stay on this tangent any longer than necessary. So, I said nothing and instead gave him a look that said, *Well? What did you come here to talk about, then?*

"I've known you for two years now, so I wanted to clear something up," he said. "You really don't care even one bit about anything or anyone except for Prince Seth, do you?"

"Yep."

"Not even your father, who adores you, nor the maid who's

always with you, nor *me*, your friend. In your eyes, we're no different from the faceless masses, are we?"

"Yep."

I nodded along. Then I looked at Melvin, whose expression hadn't changed much at all, and asked him, "Is that so bad?"

Everything he'd said was right on the mark. I didn't think there was anything *wrong* with that, though. I mean, just because someone feels affection for you, that doesn't mean you owe them exactly the same amount of affection back, right?

"No, not really. It's just…strange*,* that's all. Why throw away every other relationship except for your relationship with Seth, right from the beginning? It's not even that you're just not *trying* to form relationships—it's more than that. I mean, people fall into your lap, and you push them away. Why do you keep everyone at a distance except for the one person who matters most to you?"

Hmm… I see, I see. Seems like Melvin's trained up that inquisitive eye a fair bit since we met last, I thought, breaking into a small smile.

"You really *are* a curious one, aren't you? But listen…some things are best left alone," I said.

Relationships were enough of a pain without all these nosy questions. It was all well and good for Melvin to be curious, but he was going to run into problems if he started crossing the line and poking around where he shouldn't. If he kept this up, he was probably going to wind up taking it too far one day. Then he'd *really* pay the price, though it was entirely up to whoever's business he found himself in whether the cost would be physical or emotional.

Fortunately for him, I was too gentle for that, so I probably wasn't at risk of hurting him—physically *or* emotionally.

Still, he needed to be more careful. So, I just kept smiling at him meaningfully, saying nothing more.

He clicked his tongue in a show of frustration.

Huh? What was that for?

"Oh, *come on*. I don't care if our friendship is just temporary or transactional or *whatever*. We're still friends, aren't we? You probably don't know this, since you don't have any other friends, but friends are supposed to put their trust in one another. Friendship's all about lending a listening ear or a helping hand."

For a second, it felt like my whole world shook. I'm not talking about an earthquake, obviously—I mean my *emotional* world.

If I'd met him in my past life, I was certain I would have been proud to call Melvin my closest friend. It was a bittersweet thing to reflect on. And if I'd never had a single other friend before, or if I'd never regained my past life memories, then I probably would have considered him my closest friend in this life too.

But that just wasn't the reality. I *did* have all my past life memories, and they were painfully happy ones—so happy, it almost hurt to recall them. After all, the book had closed on that life once I'd died. So, I didn't need any more friends. I didn't need anyone but Seth.

I couldn't bear for anyone in this life but Seth to touch my heart.

"Stop acting like you know what's best for me," I said softly, trying my best to keep my voice even. I didn't want him to know he'd gotten under my skin. "What's the harm in being *focused*? And trust me, I'm *always* trying to do what's best for myself. So, I'd appreciate it if you could just sit on the sidelines and watch until your curiosity is sated. I'm perfectly happy with our purely transactional friendship."

My rejection was kind but firm. I didn't need friends, and I didn't need Melvin.

I knew that Melvin had only been trying to look out for me, though. Maybe he'd be upset that I turned him down so firmly? *He* was the one who'd started this whole conversation, though. I was just trying to draw the line a little thicker for Melvin so he could see it more easily, that's all.

So, if this was goodbye, then...good riddance, I guess.

"Do you *really* think that stealing Prince Seth's heart is all you need to be happy?" Melvin asked, his voice dripping with suspicion.

"Yeah. I do," I replied, without a moment's hesitation.

Uh, duh? That's kind of my whole raison d'être.

Just existing in the same universe as Seth was enough to make me happy. Stealing his heart and being able to stand at his side would just be the cherry on top.

"Well, I'll let it go then. I'll cheer you on...for now," said Melvin, laughing.

Something about the way he said that gave me pause, but I decided to let it go too. Melvin had already backed off, so this conversation was over. From now on, we'd just be fake, superficial friends—and that was exactly how I wanted it.

"If you ever fall in love with someone, I'll be here to cheer you on too," I said.

"Didn't you already curse me in the romance department?" he shot back. "And don't talk about love like you're so much more experienced. Who do you think you are, the love guru?"

I slammed my fist down on the table with a loud *wham*! Since I'd already cleared everyone out of the room, I wasn't worried at all about putting on a ladylike act.

"Um, hello?! Yes! I'm *obviously* more experienced than you when it comes to love!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah? Sure doesn't seem that way to me."

"Okay, well...I'm more experienced when it comes to *loving* someone, at least!" I amended, smirking smugly at him.

He caved, throwing his hands up as if to say, *Okay, okay! I get it already!*

Satisfied, I sat back down.

"Do you have a type, Melvin?" I asked him. "I know you're only five, but you act so adult, I figure you must have *some* idea of what kind of girls you like, right? *Well*?"

For a while, Melvin was silent.

"Well... I guess I like smart girls who have kind of a...sophisticated beauty. And, uh...girls who are elegant and mature," he finally said. It kind of sounded like he was making it up as he went, but it was also a surprisingly specific description.

Wait... Is he making fun of me? I wondered. *Is that why he's listing adjectives that are the polar opposite of an immature, dumb, pretty little girl like me? Is this a diss?*

Hang on, actually...that description perfectly matches the protagonist from the Lady Rose *game! I guess that makes sense, considering he's one of the love interests. I don't think he would have met Lady Rose yet, but maybe this explains why he falls for her later?*

Oh God... If that's true, then it's probably the same for Seth! Ugh! This... This really sucks.

"Well, good luck with that, Melvin! You do your best to land a girl like that, and I'll do my best to land Seth! That way, we'll form a

perfect circle and get our happy endings!" I said.

"You know, I have *no idea* what you're talking about."



I'd been to dozens of high society parties by now, but something about me felt different today.

I was even more fired up than usual, and my braided hair was extra soft and lovely. It was the first time in a while that I'd worn a dress with a lily motif too. I'd specifically ordered a new one: an exquisitely made white dress that, for all its elegant craftsmanship, still managed to be super cute. The skirt had a lovely fullness to it.

I'd gone to bed nice and early last night too, so my complexion was radiant and pristine. I mean, to be fair, my skin was *always* radiant and pristine (courtesy of being only five years old), but...I figured it couldn't hurt to take some precautions.

In this life, I always looked adorable from every possible angle, but today I was *twice* as cute as usual. I was flawless.

It wasn't public knowledge, but I knew from the game that Seth and Lady Rose's engagement would be announced today at the party. I had every intention of stealing the show, though.

Heh heh... I'm going to look so cute today when I'm cozying up to Seth at the party! Lady Rose is going to feel sooo insecure.

Bring it, little miss protagonist. We'll circle Seth like sharks and do all our fighting underwater. We're too underhanded to fight with our fists.

I might have had some advantages from my past life experience, but I didn't let that make me complacent. I'd poured everything I had into becoming the best version of myself that I could be for today. I wasn't going to let myself be the hare in your typical Aesop tortoise and the hare scenario!

"You're in fine form today, Liliana dear," said the viscount as we rode together in a horse-drawn carriage to the Schwaroses' manor.

"Oh, father, you misunderstand me. I'm not in high spirits, I'm in a *fighting spirit*! Just you wait. A womanly battle of wits and wiles is about to unfold behind closed doors!"

"Sometimes I haven't the *foggiest* idea what you're on about, sweetheart. Ah, women..."

Before long, we arrived at the party. Apparently, the

Schwaroses didn't live all that far from us.

I bid Shirley farewell outside the carriage and headed off for battle, full of determination. After I greeted everyone I was obligated to greet, I let the viscount know that I was ready to wander off on my own.

"I'm going to go look for Prince Seth now," I told him.

"You're just head over heels for that boy, aren't you? Oh, all right. Go on, then."

As the viscount watched me go, I set off and looked around the party hall, taking extra care to move with grace.

Heh heh... I hope everybody here starts calling me "Lady Lily" after today.

It wasn't long before I located Seth, thanks to my Internal Seth Sensor. He was looking even more dashing and handsome today than usual. I had to fight to suppress the urge to run over to him. Instead, I walked slowly and gracefully, making my way over to him one small step at a time.

"How do you do, Prince Seth?" I said.

"Oh. Hey, Liliana."

He let his face relax when he saw me, dropping his grown-up act and allowing himself a smile that was ever so slightly childlike. Seeing him like this was my special privilege. Even if it wasn't about *me* so much as it was about the fact that I was his *friend* (and his only friend, at that), I still felt blessed. I just knew, in my heart, that I was the only person Seth would allow himself to relax around.

"I wonder what Lady Felicia will be like?" I said. "I'm *so* looking forward to meeting her!"

"Yeah. This is actually my first time meeting her too," he said, the implication being, although he didn't say it aloud, *Even though she's my fiancée.*

Of course, I wasn't supposed to know that yet, so I left that alone.

I tried to get a read on how Seth was feeling. He seemed pretty much the same as usual. There was no sign that he was just bursting with excitement to see Lady Rose's big entrance.

I guess his number one priority is always to become the best king he can possibly be, though. Makes sense he wouldn't have room in his head to be thinking about girls.

“Everyone’s here. Surely she’s gonna make her entrance s—”

Seth suddenly stopped speaking, mid-sentence. It wasn’t hard to figure out why.

The mood in the hall had completely changed. It was like everyone had suddenly gone quiet. All at once, the partygoers’ gazes converged. I knew, because I was looking exactly where they were. There was someone standing on the slightly raised stage across the hall. Even with my short stature, I could still manage to catch a glimpse once I’d woven through the crowd a bit.

There, standing on the stage, was a little girl.

Despite her young age, the words “beautiful” or “gorgeous” would have been more fitting than “pretty” or “cute.” She was so perfect, so beautiful, so *elegant* that it hurt. All she was doing was standing there on the stage, and yet she’d captivated every single person in the hall. Everyone’s eyes were on *her*. As much as I hate to admit it, she’d captivated me too.

You could claim that it was her stunning beauty, her elegant mannerisms, or her striking, bright red dress that made us all look her way…but I knew that it wasn’t really about *any* of those things. My gaze had been naturally drawn to her before I’d even noticed any of that. It was like there was something magnetic about her. I could *sense* it.

She was the main character.

“Lady Rose…” someone whispered.

It was only in this very moment that it hit me just how incredible it was that she’d earned that nickname for herself. How remarkable that someone would call a five-year-old girl a “lady” and compare her to a rose…and how remarkable that the name should catch on, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

As I stood in fear and awe of her beauty, I felt goose bumps prickle my skin.



But immediately, I felt ashamed of myself. Beauty was no reason to be *afraid* of someone. When I pulled myself together and took another look at her, I saw that the expression in her eyes and the way she held herself was perfectly gentle. It was wrong to think that she was terrifying; there was nothing about her that should have struck fear in me.

I'd let myself get all worked up for no good reason. I'd completely convinced myself that if I competed with her…I would lose. And that *really* bothered me. I couldn't stand to think that I could possibly lose, much less that I'd somehow already *lost*. That feeling was the real reason I'd been afraid of her, but I didn't want to admit that to myself. So, instead, I'd tried to cover it up with a dumb explanation like "it's her *beauty* that terrifies me."

It's okay, Liliana… It's going to be okay. Yes, you've lost the battle today. There's no way you can compete with the girl standing on that stage right now. Let's just admit that, okay? It's understandable that you wanted to avert your gaze from the truth. But the fact that you could admit to yourself in the end how frustrating this is means that you can keep fighting. You will *win the next battle.*

I took in a deep breath and did my best to compose myself.

Naturally, since Lady Rose was so far away, I couldn't hear a word she was saying, nor could I make eye contact with her. But even so, standing before her like this, everything else in the world felt somehow unreal. *That's* how perfect she was. She was, beyond a doubt, the real protagonist of this world. If you'd told me that the world revolved around her, I would have believed you.

I still hadn't actually stepped into the ring with her. I'd just labeled her my rival in my head, that's all. She wouldn't even *look* at me. As far as she was concerned, I might as well have been a garden weed. As I looked at her, all of that hit me with painful clarity. I tore my gaze away from her. Then, slowly, I looked to my side at Seth.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

I forced the words out of my mouth in an attempt to reach him, but they just dissipated into the air.

Seth probably didn't even realize that I was looking at him. It wasn't hard to follow his line of sight to the girl onstage. After all, that's where I'd just been looking too, until moments ago.

It wasn't hard to guess the meaning behind his gaze either. He

was looking at her exactly the same way that I looked at him. Even if I didn't want to acknowledge that, I had no choice.

"…"

I took in another deep breath.

It's…gonna be okay. Yeah. You're gonna be okay, Liliana.

If Seth fell in love with Lady Rose…well, then that just meant that this universe was following the script of the game. I *knew* this would happen, right from the very beginning. It was just kind of shocking to see how intense his feelings were up close and personal like this. I hadn't expected that he'd feel as smitten with her as I was with him.

But it was going to be okay. Whatever my chances were with him, at least they weren't zero. There would still be plenty of opportunities for me to win his heart.

Sure, Lady Rose was so stunningly perfect that it was easy to assume, after only taking one look at her, that I had no chance. But it's not like people fall in love with someone just because they're perfect. Worst-case scenario, even if, despite all my efforts, Lady Rose turned out to be a much better fit for the role of queen consort, that didn't necessarily mean that Seth wouldn't still fall in love with *me*.

I can do this. I know I can. After all, I've loved Seth since before I was even born into this world. I know exactly what he likes, and I have faith in myself that I can bust my butt to be his ideal woman. Who cares how many battles I lose, as long as I win his heart?

"Liliana! Hey, wait! Stop!" cried a voice.

Its loud volume was wholly inappropriate for a high society party hall. What's more, its owner even had the nerve to grab the hem of my *dress*. In shock, I stopped in my tracks.

Wait… What? "Stopped in my tracks"?

When I looked around, I saw that I wasn't in the party hall anymore. I was *outside*. There was a chill in the air, and I was wheezing. Had I been running? How long had I run for? As far as I could see, I was in a well-manicured garden, so I figured I must not have left the Schwarose manor grounds, at least.

When I stopped, the hand let go of my dress. Then, it took my hand instead.

Yes… It's just like when we first met here in this universe, I thought. But when I turned around, it wasn't Seth who was holding my

hand.

"Sorry I'm not Seth," said Melvin, with a pained look on his face.

But I knew that already from the sound of his voice. I would never have mistaken it for Seth's.

I had a feeling that Melvin must have chased after me because he was worried about me. But whatever face I'd been making when I'd turned around to look at him, he must have felt compelled to apologize. I opened my mouth to say something—probably to give him some excuse—but nothing came out.

God… I'm pathetic. So much for being able to admit defeat gracefully. I can't believe I blacked out and ran away. No wonder Seth would never fall for me. Lady Rose would never behave like this.

Seeing that I couldn't speak, Melvin spoke up instead.

"I realized something: It's not at all what I expected in reality!"

His voice cut through the cold air. Of all the things I'd expected him to say, this definitely wasn't one of them. I actually had no idea what he was talking about, so I just stared at him with a blank look on my face.

He must have realized that he wasn't making any sense, because he hurried to explain.

"I mean, turns out, perfection is actually kind of boring," he said, talking quickly. "Plus, it's hard to tell what a girl like that is thinking. And if she's *too* mature, then I'll feel like I can't bridge the gap between us. So, actually, I think I'd prefer a girl who's stupidly earnest and straightforward."

Oh… Come to think of it, I asked him what his type was the other day, didn't I? I guess he's trying to tell me that Lady Rose isn't actually his type, now that he's seen her in real life.

Okay…but why is he telling me this? I wondered, still giving him a blank look.

Melvin must have noticed that I was still lost, because he blushed with irritation and embarrassment, squeezing my hand even tighter.

"What I'm trying to say is: You've got a lot going for you, okay?! If *I'm* reconsidering my type, then maybe Prince Seth will too. So, don't get discouraged!"

What's with him? Is he trying to cheer me up? He saw how shocked I was when I laid eyes on Lady Rose, and now he's trying to make me feel better by telling me she's not that special after all…is that it?

Yeah…that must be all this is. After all, there's no way he would have actually been so unimpressed when he first saw her. He's just trying to make me feel better.

Melvin had run out of the party hall to catch up to me, all to cheer me up. I couldn't believe he'd do that after I'd turned him down so firmly the other day. I knew he hadn't just forgotten about that. But in spite of that, he'd still come running. He really was a good guy.

Ah ha ha. Jeez… What a laugh.

"Hey, what gives?! Why are you crying when I just told you not to get discouraged?! Shouldn't my encouragement have had the opposite effect?!" Melvin cried, bewildered.

I touched my cheek and realized he was right. I'd meant to smile, but I'd started crying instead.

"I… I'm just touched that you're trying to encourage me," I said.

"I've been doing that from the start, haven't I?! Where've you been?!"

"I know, it's just… I'm usually my *own* cheerleader, but right now, I don't have it in me. So, it means a lot to me."

My love for Seth was my whole reason for living. Having my hopes threatened the way they were today jeopardized the very core of my being. I was shaken, but Melvin had come and lifted me up.

"I may be crying because of Prince Seth, but *you're* the one who made me cry, Melvin," I said, smiling through my tears. It was my way of saying "thank you."

Melvin fell silent, looking taken aback. Then he composed himself again and slapped me on the back.

Um, ow!

"Right…well… You may be stupidly earnest, but you can't cry when you're alone, right? So, guess I'll just have to bear the burden of being the one to make you cry, then," he said.

He's such a good egg, I thought, smiling a little again. Then I turned around.

"Okay. Let's go back inside," I said.

"You sure you don't want to just call it a day?"

"No. I want to go back to the party. As much as I hate to admit it, I know how fragile I am, but I don't want to let that stop me. I want to keep fighting."

I was nothing if not stubborn, and Melvin knew that too. He squeezed my hand a little harder.

Oh, right. I forgot we were still holding hands.

"All right. Keep it up, then," he said.

"Thanks, Melvin. That's exactly what I needed to hear right now."

After that, I made it back to the party, but I didn't make an effort to walk or behave with extra grace anymore. I just went up to Lady Rose and gave her a simple, formal greeting.

Her greeting to me was perfectly polite, but it was no different to the greeting she gave anyone else. It kind of hurt to realize that she didn't take any special notice of me, but I didn't dwell on it.

After all, just managing that introduction made me feel like I'd made it to the starting line. And it had given me the opportunity to remind myself that, one day, I was going to beat Lady Rose and win Seth's heart.

Good. Now I feel like I can go on living.



She's brilliant—no, beyond *brilliant. She must have been leagues ahead of me from the moment she was born. It would probably take me all day to do what she could bang out in five minutes.*

Those were the thoughts that'd swirled in my head the moment that I had laid eyes on Lady Rose.

I didn't want to believe that it was really her *first time* attending a high society party. The way that she fielded everyone's curious glances as if it were no big deal, it seemed like she was already a pro. Actually, it was like she *expected* everyone to be staring at her. Maybe this "Lady Rose" was totally full of herself!

It didn't really matter either way, though. I knew that the real problem was *me*. What was I going to do now?

Yeah... I've got my answer. Who cares if a brilliant girl like her can accomplish anything in five minutes? If it takes me a whole day, then fine. I'll take the whole day to do it. Maybe I'll just have to work three hundred times as hard as her. No choice but to get to work!

It had been three days now since I'd resolved to work my butt off.

Shirley had started doing everything she could think of to make

me take a breather. But I felt like I'd die if I stopped. It was like I was swimming in a vast body of water, and if I stopped, I'd suffocate and drown. I just wanted everyone to leave me alone and let me swim.

"Lady Liliana, why are you pushing yourself like this? You're going to drive yourself to exhaustion."

"I want to keep working, Shirley. Don't worry, I'm not going to let myself burn out. I wouldn't want that to limit my efforts."

"That's not the issue, my lady... You've already far surpassed what anyone would expect of a girl your age."

"Well, that's not good enough. It doesn't matter who I surpass if I can't surpass the one person I *want* to beat."

I didn't want all my hard work to stunt my growth, of course, so I made sure to at least eat and sleep the bare minimum. I was looking after my health just fine. And yet, Shirley sounded practically in tears as she begged me to take better care of myself. I didn't even look her way though, so I didn't know what kind of expression she was wearing. I was too busy to pay her that much attention.

Okay, wait... If I just ignore her, she might try to force *me to stop, and that would turn into a colossal waste of time. I'd better nip this in the bud right here and now.*

I stopped what I was doing and turned to look at her. Sure enough, she looked like she was about to turn on the waterworks.

"You can try to stop me however you like, but you're going to have to resort to some pretty permanent measures if you want it to take. I'll just keep studying. You can shut me away in an empty room, and I'll write out my notes in my own blood. You can tie me up, and I'll just drill myself on the names of noble families. You can even gag me, but I'll still be able to review my study materials in my head," I said.

"So don't do anything that will just turn this into more hassle for me," was the implication.

I smiled at her, and she looked at a complete loss for words. Then I turned my back to her again and resumed my studies.

The rights afforded to each rank of the nobility were far too numerous for me to commit each and every one to memory. I had to, though. A commoner could generally just get away with going by the general rule that they had to do whatever nobles asked of

them, but it was more complicated when you were dealing with nobles as a *fellow noble*.

"Why…? Why must you go to such drastic lengths, my lady?"

"Because there's only one thing that I want in this world, and I would do anything for it," I answered her.

I knew that I'd have to work myself to death if I wanted to be happy, and I was prepared to do that. What was so hard to understand about that?

For several moments, Shirley was quiet. She just looked at me without saying anything. I felt her gaze on me, but I was too busy concentrating on my studies to pay too much attention to her. I'm not sure how much time passed, but eventually, Shirley left the room and immediately returned. Then she placed something small on my desk.

"It's chocolate," she said. "Please, at least eat some of *this*."

Chocolate, huh? I thought, not even looking at it. *Chocolate's not great for your skin. I know it's my favorite food in the world, but still… Hmm. Shirley's just trying to be nice, though, so I don't want to spite her. I guess I can have just a little…*

"Thank you," I said, reaching out to take the plate. I took the brownish-black lump and popped it into my mouth in one bite.

As it melted in my mouth, I relished its sweetness. It was undeniably delicious.

Chocolate might be bad for my skin, but at least sugar helps activate the brain. Hmm… But…

"You haven't spiked this with any sleeping medicine, have you?" I asked.

"I-I would *never* deceive you like that, my lady!"

"Good."

That's strange. There's something…off about the way this tastes. I feel like the chocolate in this world was sweeter the last time I ate it. Maybe it's just my imagination, though.

I was glad there wasn't any sleeping medicine in it, but I didn't want to eat it if there was anything *else* in there that wasn't supposed to be there either. Just as I opened my mouth to ask about that, though, I heard footsteps from outside the door. They weren't just the prim footsteps of someone walking either; they were the loud stomps of someone who was sprinting at full speed.

Reflexively, Shirley and I locked eyes. Then we heard a knock at

the door, and before we could even respond, the door flung open.

A maid came tumbling into my bedroom. Whatever the circumstances were, it was completely unprofessional behavior. Shirley looked ready to rebuke her, but before she could say anything, the other maid spoke up.

"Prince Seth is here!" she gasped.

"*Huh*?!" I blurted out, jumping up from my seat. "Y-You're excused for barging in! Just...argh, jeez! Prince Seth is here?! In my *house*?! That's wonderful, but...! Sh-Shirley, help me get ready! Ngh, I hate that I'm going to have to rush this! Well, just make me look as nice as you can with what little time we have!"

"Lady Liliana, p-please just calm down!" Shirley said. Then, to the maid, she said, "You there! Stop curling up on the floor and gather the others to help Lady Liliana prepare! Grab anyone who isn't busy looking after the prince! I want all hands on deck!"

There was a flurry of movement as Shirley and the others rushed to make me presentable, cramming me into a dress and doing up my hair. It was nothing too fancy, but I looked presentable enough for a high society party, at least. I didn't want to keep Seth waiting for even a little bit, so I quickly hurried down to the parlor room.

"Excuse me! It is I, Liliana, here to see you!" I declared from outside the parlor room. I felt like a samurai or a ninja announcing himself to his liege.

Immediately, Seth gave me permission to enter. Hearing his voice made it feel all the more real that he was here right now, *in my house*. Letting the feeling wash over me, I opened the door.

Seth was giving me a slightly sheepish smile.

"Sorry for barging in on you like this," he said. "I only realized what an imposition this might be on you once I was already on my way over."

"No need to apologize! I made a vow to the Lord God that I would never, *ever* think of you as an imposition! In fact, I've had positively *too much* time on my hands! Why, I thought I might *die* of boredom, so I assure you this is a very welcome surprise!"

I could see the servants grimace, since they knew how far from the truth it was. The fact of the matter, though, was that my schedule had completely cleared up the moment that Seth had arrived. So, in a sense, it was true that I'd had nothing but time on

my hands.

Fortunately, Seth didn't seem to realize that was only a half-truth—possibly because, despite the fact that I was a terrible liar and he knew it, I'd spoken from the heart when I'd said that his visit was a welcome surprise.

"But I confess I truly wasn't expecting this. May I ask…to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about. Before I get into it, though, take a seat."

Oh God… I didn't even realize I'd been standing this whole time! How could I be so rude?! He must think I'm so arrogant…

I quickly took a seat, sitting across from him. I tried to make eye contact, but he averted his gaze.

Huh?! Wait, what is that all about? Ugh, this is what I get for getting all carried away about how he wanted to talk to me. Here I was on cloud nine, but obviously he didn't just come over for a fun little chat.

It was strange enough that Seth was paying me an unscheduled visit and that he'd cut into precious time that he could be spending studying to visit little old me. Stranger still was that he didn't even seem to be in a hurry to cut to the chase and wrap things up quickly. To top it all off, he was avoiding eye contact. That was *way* out of character for the ever-earnest Seth I knew. I was starting to get a really, really bad feeling about this visit.

"Would you mind clearing the room?" he asked me.

"Certainly."

You sure you want to be in a room alone with me? I wondered. But he probably wasn't even worried about me taking the chance to pounce on him. After all, he was only five, and he only thought of me as a friend.

I could sense that the servants were hesitant to leave me alone with a member of the royal family, but they didn't really have a choice in the matter. They weren't going to turn down a direct request from the prince!

I couldn't help but wonder what he'd want to talk about that required clearing the room. Once everyone had left, I gave him a look that I hoped said, *Go ahead, whenever you're ready.*

But he still wouldn't meet my gaze. He opened his mouth, as if

looking for the right words, but soon fell silent again. After a while, he opened his mouth again to speak.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said.

"Of course. Please feel free to ask me anything" was my instantaneous reply.

I waited for him to continue. He hesitated, falling silent again for a few moments.

"How do you win someone over? Not, like, in a bad way. Just…how do you make them like you?" he asked.

"Well…I guess you just do whatever they want you to do."

"But I have no idea what that would be."

"You can ask them directly. Or, if you want a more efficient method, maybe you could get them a gift? It won't endear you to anyone if they already dislike you or if you overdo it. But they'd probably appreciate it if it's just something little and you're already acquainted."

"I see…"

From the way that he said that, I figured he was probably talking about someone he'd met already. And putting two and two together with the timing, I had a feeling that he'd met this "someone" at the party the other day.

Wait… Is he seriously having this conversation with me*?! I mean, I guess Seth doesn't exactly know that I'm in love with him, but…wouldn't he be better off having this discussion with his older brother? Something about this just isn't right.*

I'm in a tough spot here. Maybe I should just take this opportunity to tell him how I feel? I know I don't have a chance with him right now*, since he's in love with someone else… But I feel like it'd be worth it just to put myself on his radar as a romantic option.*

As a silence descended upon us, Seth finally looked over at me. He wore an uncomfortable look on his face.

"You're the only person I can talk to about…emotional stuff like this," he said. "Can I get your advice if something comes up again?"

Seth was always so dashing; it was kind of cute seeing him look so embarrassed and out of his element. He'd never felt like this before, and he didn't know what to do with his feelings. Even though he was always so used to doing everything on his own and being independent, he'd come to *me* for help about this.

I had a feeling that if I said no, he'd give up on Lady Rose. But I *couldn't* say no, not when he was turning to me for help like this. He never asked for help, and if I turned him down now that he finally had taken the chance to, he might never ask for help again.

Seth had clearly come to see me as a trustworthy friend. I hadn't really even done anything all that special, but over the past two years, I'd followed him around and he'd thought of me as his friend. So, whether consciously or unconsciously, I guess he'd probably come to trust that he could count on me if he needed me and that I wouldn't betray him.

But…if I agreed to this, I'd probably be friendzoned forever. It was pretty obvious to me that it'd be *reeeally* hard to get out of that.

"Why, of course you can!" I said, blurting out the exact opposite sentiment of what I'd just thought through logically. I smiled at him and, without hesitation, went on to say, "I would never, *ever* say no to you."

Boy, I can already tell I'm going to regret that… Why'd I have to go and say something so stupid? I couldn't bring myself to say anything other than that, though.

Seth beamed at me. His smile looked so joyful, it was absolutely radiant. And it was a smile for *me*, not her. Whatever pain I had to endure, it was nothing in the face of this gorgeous smile.

"Thanks, Liliana. I'm really glad you're my friend," Seth said.

He had no idea how easily he could dispel all of the despair I tried so hard to forget. It was like he was shining a brilliant light onto the impenetrable darkness. He gave me a reason to live.

There wasn't any room in my heart now for anyone other than Seth. He was *everything* to me. So, while of course I would keep working every angle I could to win his heart, hearing him say that made me think that even if I failed…even if I *couldn't* win his heart…

I'd probably be happy to die for him.

Chapter 6

I think I've done the best that I possibly could.

One year later, I still wasn't the girl I wanted to be. Even so, I kept striving ever onward and pouring myself into my studies.

Two years later, I made some friends and learned how to act in a group. Not *real* friends, mind you, but superficial ones that I could use to my advantage.

Three years later, Seth started walking around all the time with the little golden cat that Lady Rose had given him as a birthday present. I was burning up inside with jealousy, but I just kept smiling and supporting him.

Four years later, I noticed that I couldn't control my emotions the way I wanted to. To better suppress them, I started paying more attention to the stories I attached to things and took care to foster a more objective, high-level perspective.

Five years later, I was finally the kind of girl that turned heads at parties. I still wasn't beautiful or brilliant enough to compare with Lady Rose, though.

Six years later, I came to terms with the fact that I'd outgrown Shirley's teachings long ago. It was time to find a tutor, but that proved to be difficult. There seemed to be few people out there capable of tutoring me, and that wasn't just limited to academic studies. In the end, I couldn't find anyone suitable.

Seven years later, I started trying to find ways to spend more time with Seth, but his feelings for me weren't changing. Neither were my feelings, of course.

Eight years later, I started getting a lot of attention from boys at parties. They'd come try to chat me up, so I learned how to avoid them. I was glad that I could turn heads when I walked, though, because it told me that the investment I'd been making in my appearance was paying off. Beauty was much harder to quantify than points out of a perfect score or facts I could memorize.

Nine years later, I was only a year away from the beginning of the video game, when everyone enrolled at Thea Academy. I started spending even more time on my studies. Every day was

nothing but review, review, and more review.

Ten years later, I bested Seth, Melvin, and Lady Rose in the academy's entrance exams. I ranked at the top of our class. In fact, I'd just gotten a letter informing me of my results only yesterday. I'd read over it without a trace of surprise. It had been exactly the result I'd been expecting.

Ten years... Ten years have passed.

It had been ten years since that day that I'd first laid eyes on Lady Rose, and not a day had gone by since then that I hadn't worked my butt off. In my past life, I'd just been an average, run-of-the-mill high school girl. Honestly, I hadn't even known that I'd had it in me to work this hard. But I did.

Good job, me!

I gave myself a little mental pat on the back as I looked up at the giant cross in the back of the faraway church I'd been visiting like clockwork for the past twelve years. I didn't even pray; I just stared up at the cross, talking to myself.

Could you blame me for being a little proud of myself, though? I'd finally become exactly the kind of woman I'd wanted to be. I could even stand proudly next to Lady Rose, knowing that I could hold my own.

"I've finally...achieved my goal..." I said, to no one in particular. My words dissipated into the air.

I knew it was probably about time to give up now. It had been a whole ten years, after all. For ten years, I'd been working nonstop to improve myself. And for ten years, I'd stayed by Seth's side, and I'd made countless memories with him.

Seth and I snuck out once to walk around the castle town together in search of a birthday present for Lady Rose. We were quickly caught, of course, and we both ended up getting an earful for it. Seth did try to cover for me, but it turns out he's a terrible liar. I guess that makes sense, since he's always led such an upright life. Besides, it's hardly my place to judge someone for being a bad liar. Anyway, despite getting in trouble, we had a lot of fun that day.

Lady Rose was discreet to the extreme and rarely showed how she was feeling openly. It must have taken a toll on Seth's mind because, one day, he shared with me his fears that he might upset her. Even after all this time, Seth still tended to tease the girl he

liked, as if he were a grade-schooler. It was charmingly childlike (to be fair, he *was* a child).

I suggested that he could practice being nice to Lady Rose with me, by pretending that I was her. He really struggled, though. "This is way harder than any studying or diplomacy I've had to do," he'd said, hanging his head in his hands. It was a little depressing to undergo a full transformation into Lady Rose during our little practice sessions, but it was also kind of fun to role-play with him.

There was also a time once when Melvin, Seth, and I all hung out together. I can't remember what led to that now, though. Um... Oh, right! The two of them had been playing some sort of strategy card game, but they'd wound up stuck in a stalemate. That's why they recruited me to play, in hopes that an extra player would help move things along. I'm pretty sure they only ever talked about the game the whole time we were hanging out, but it was still pretty fun.

Even now, Seth was still in love with Lady Rose. She was the only girl that he had eyes for.

No matter how much I tried to make him fall for me, the smile he always gave me was only ever a friendly one. He'd never once looked at me with the passion or the love and respect with which he looked at *her*. If I'd ever spotted even a sliver of an opening, I probably would have pounced and professed my love for him. I would have taken any opportunity if I'd thought that it would give me a future with him.

But Seth wasn't falling in love with me, and I knew better than to think he would. That wasn't how the game's script went, and that wasn't how people's emotions worked either. I simply didn't have the power to change his heart. No matter how much I struggled, I'd only ever be Seth's best friend. As long as he was in love with Lady Rose, there was nothing I could do. My love was doomed from the start.

I felt like I'd exhausted every last reserve of my energy trying to change that. There was nothing left for me to do now. Even if I wanted to keep fighting in vain, I didn't know *how* to. I needed a miracle, but a plain girl like me could never hope to move mountains.

It had actually been easier when I could just blame myself for not working hard enough. At least that gave me some hope that I

could still *achieve* my dreams, if only I just worked harder. Acknowledging that I hadn't done anything wrong meant that there was nothing more I could do. And wasn't the logical conclusion of that to give up? How could I admit to myself that there was nothing left to try?

I *couldn't* admit that. I couldn't admit that, no matter how hard I tried, I would never realize my hopes and dreams. I couldn't admit that my one and only reason for living was a lost cause and that I would never beat Lady Rose no matter what I did.

I didn't want to admit any of that. And so, for ten years, I had refused to concede.

But no matter how much I tried to delude myself, it didn't change the truth that it was a cold, hard world, and God wouldn't always be on my side.

And besides, wasn't my current situation so much better than it had been in my past life? Back then, I wouldn't have even been able to make eye contact with Seth. Now, he saw me as his best friend. I would just have to find a way to be happy with that.

My love for him just kept growing stronger and stronger, though, and I didn't know what to do about that. I'd lived almost my whole life so far just standing by his side and doing everything I could to try to win his heart. What was I supposed to do *now*? I mean, I'd built my entire lifestyle around finding a way to be by his side. I didn't know what I'd do with myself if someone told me that I didn't need to do that anymore.

No one could ever replace Seth in my heart. There was no second-best option. There was no *future* for me.

I had no other desire, and no other reason to live, than to be with Seth. Giving up on my love for him was tantamount to giving up on my life's meaning.

I glanced behind me and saw that the nun was staring at me with a twinkling, affectionate look in her eyes. She always looked at me like this. She'd looked pretty disheveled when I'd first met her, but over the years she'd become a splendid, sweet-looking nun. Since that first meeting, though, the way she'd looked at me had never changed.

I knew she called me a "saint" too—and I could tell she was serious. But it was hard to reconcile that moniker with who I really was. Sure, I'd been toiling away endlessly for my whole life…but it

was all for selfish aims. All I ever thought about was how I could be with Seth.

"A saint, huh…?"

I'd never asked to be called that, and I *definitely* didn't deserve it. But…it was kind of nice, actually. Maybe *that* could be my new reason for living?

Yes… I've made up my mind. From now on, I'm going to become a saint—a real *saint.*

I'd be the necessary sacrifice that helped everyone else attain their happy ending. This world had already given me plenty of happiness, so it was time for me to return the favor. I'd help pave the way for Seth's happy ending now, just like how it played out in the game.

I'd become the villainess who bullies Lady Rose and then tries to frame *her* as the bully. Seth would learn of my lies and despise me. I'd be stripped of my noble title and expelled to live among the commoners. For a noblewoman, that was basically a death sentence. But it would offer Seth and Lady Rose the perfect opportunity to rise above an obstacle and find happiness together.

I could make Seth happy.

It wouldn't be like in my past life, where I'd just been making choices from the other side of the screen. No, this time, I'd make him happy with my own two hands.

Being in a relationship with him was a dream, that's all. That's all it had ever been, since the very beginning. I'd just been fooling myself—about my happiness, my role…all of it.

The whole reason I'd been reborn into this world as Liliana Inoce was to make *Seth* happy. And what a blessing it was. My role had been determined from the very beginning. And because I'd played *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*, I'd known, from the very beginning, exactly *how* to make him happy.

But I was *me*, not the Liliana from the game, so I couldn't be happy just staying friends with him forever. I knew that, one day, it was bound to break me. So, before I broke, I wanted to ensure that my work was done for good.

I lifted my head one last time to look up at the cross—up at God.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day," I said.

Even if my greatest wish would never come true, it was still a blessed path that had been laid out for me. Maybe the door was closed to romance, but I could still make a worthy sacrifice of my love.

I took a step, readying myself to leave, and it felt lighter than I'd expected. Suddenly, I found myself reeling a bit, caught off-balance. Then I let out a little chuckle.

It wasn't just my steps that felt lighter; it was my whole body. *Wow... It's like I've been carrying a giant weight on my shoulders this whole time*, I realized. No wonder it had been so hard to see the finish line, even though I'd been running all this time.

But I could see it now. I *knew* what that finish line was.

Shirley, my maid, greeted me after I made my way back to the carriage. She was no less beautiful now than she'd been ten years ago.

"Welcome back, my lady," she said. "You seem to be in high spirits."

"I certainly am. I suppose you could say I've had something of a change of heart. I feel lighter than ever," I told her.

As a kid, I used to think that Shirley had a complete blank slate of a face, one that all human emotion just slid right off of. If three-year-old me had seen the brilliant smiles and angry glares that she flashed now, I would never have believed that she was the same person.

I'm sure she'll have no trouble finding a new employer when I'm gone, I thought.

I climbed inside the carriage, and it took off back toward the manor.

"That reminds me, my lady! I wanted to surprise you on the way home, so I kept it a secret, but... Ta-da! I brought some chocolate for you! Please, have a bite!" Shirley said, handing me the dark brown lump as she slumped forward.

"Thank you," I replied, giving her a smile in return.

I could feign my pleasure well enough, but I couldn't really taste it. I'd lost the knack after I turned five. It didn't happen all at once, but by now it could just as well have been a heap of ashes in my mouth.

I knew I needed the nutrients, though, so I still ate three meals a day and never refused an offer of food or drink. Fortunately, I

could still appreciate the mouthfeel, at least.

I rolled the lump of chocolate around in my mouth as it melted, thinking, *Chocolate… This used to be my favorite food.*

"It's delicious," I said, not meaning it at all.

I looked out the window. *You know…I've gotten a bit better at lying over these past ten years*, I thought to myself with a little smile.

But the girl who looked back at me through my reflection in the window wasn't smiling at all.



It had felt strange to meet the characters from *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* as real-life people, but it felt even stranger to live in and move through the *settings* of the game.

The main setting of the game was Thea Academy, the school that young nobles attended from the age of fifteen for a period of three years. Everywhere I looked, it was exactly the place I remembered seeing from the other side of the screen. It was so weird to think that everyone at the academy was a real person with their own hopes and fears, just like me. *Which came first: the game or this universe?* I wondered. But of course, I wasn't God, so I had no way of knowing the answer to that.

Since I'd gotten the highest marks on the entrance exam, I had the privilege of representing my class and giving a speech during the opening ceremony. You might think that would have been a nerve-racking ordeal, but it wasn't, really.

I stood up at the lectern on a stage in the gymnasium. For just a few short minutes, I would be standing above everyone else in the room. I spotted Lady Rose almost instantly, without even having to look around, and looked down at her from my lofty spot. But she wasn't even looking at me. She was as beautiful as ever, and I knew that the story would unfold entirely according to her whims from here on out. I couldn't glean any information from looking at her as to what those whims might be, though.

She was the only person in the school who still somehow felt like a fictional construct from the game—its protagonist, to be specific. It was as if she were an exquisitely crafted *character*. And yet, at the same time, she was more perfect and more righteous than anyone, and this somehow made her the only person in this

world who felt *real*.

After finishing my mind-numbing speech (intentionally so, mind you), I stepped down off of the stage. Just as I was returning to my seat, I heard several familiar voices call out to me. I regarded them all with surface-level friendliness.

The rest of the opening ceremony went on without a hitch. Before long, it was over.

After the ceremony, we would be assigned to our classes. I was reasonably confident that Seth, Lady Rose, and I would all be assigned to the same class. But before the announcements, we were given an hour of "free time." Given that this was an academy for nobles, it was really more like "networking time."

The academy encouraged its staff and students to do away with formalities during their time here, though—largely because they were an inconvenience. As an extreme example, imagine being a member of the royal family. You wouldn't be able to walk through campus without being assaulted by every single student and staff member who felt obligated to show their respects. If anything, all those formalities were an obstruction to scholastic achievement. The school's policy made it easy to just talk to and network with whomever you wanted—provided that they wanted to talk to you too, of course. In a school full of nobles, though, most of these interactions were highly calculated and laden with ulterior motives.

I made a beeline for the crowd. There was someone I wanted to see more than anyone—even more than *Seth*. Don't get me wrong, it was still for Seth's sake, but *she* was the one I was going to have the most to do with at this academy.

Just as I'd expected, she was at the center of the throng. But I managed to walk straight up to her as a path cleared before me, letting me through.

I might not have been worthy of a name like "Lady Rose," but I was still beautiful, and I'd established a reputation for myself. I also had friends in high places—like Seth and Melvin—so people *knew* me. I wasn't just some random viscount's daughter. I was *popular*. Anyway, that's probably why everyone got out of my way.

Finally, Lady Rose turned to look at me. The waves of people parting must have been too dramatic to ignore by this point.

"How do you do, Lady Felicia? I'm so pleased that we'll be

attending the same school as of today," I said, repeating the lines I'd read in the game word for word.

Prepare yourself, Lady Rose. I'm going to follow the game's script and bully you just like I'm supposed to. I know how unforgivable that is, and you don't have *to forgive me. It's the best path I can offer you and Seth to a happy future. I'll accept any punishment I'm given for this.*

Even with all of those complicated feelings swirling around inside my head, I prided myself on being able to project an image of the ultimate lady: beautiful and refined.

"The pleasure is mine, Lady Liliana," Lady Rose replied, with a smile.

Her reply didn't sound quite as refined as my greeting, but every one of her mannerisms had a bewitching charm to it. The way she spoke made it clear that she wasn't just talented; she was *brilliant*.

But none of that rattled me. The way she spoke to me and the words she said (all straight out of the game) were well within my expectations of her. I would have been able to stay perfectly calm, if it hadn't been for one thing: I could see something hiding behind her sweet smile.

You see, I'm pretty perceptive when it comes to people's emotions. After all, I *had* to be, when I'd spent almost my entire life trying to win over the boy of my dreams. I wasn't a naturally gifted empath or anything, so I'd had to build those skills intentionally. I'd learned to pay close attention to people's mannerisms and expressions, down to the smallest details, so that I could build my social circle. I knew I'd need all the support I could get if I was to become queen one day.

It's not like this was all in my head either. I had plenty of experience reading people's faces, and I'd basically gotten as good at it as someone can get on the merits of hard work alone. That's why I knew *exactly* what Lady Rose thought of me from the way she'd just smiled at me. Even if I didn't want to know, I had no choice.

She thought I was…*cute*.

I… I can't believe this. She thinks I'm cute*? What the heck is that supposed to mean?*

Normally, that would have been flattering. But I'd been waging

a war in earnest against her for all these years. In my head, she'd always been my bitter rival. I had no idea what to do with her thinking I was cute.

I thought we were equally matched foes, standing face-to-face against each other here in the ring…but she didn't seem to see me that way at all. I mean, who thinks about their rival that fondly? No one, that's who. She was the last person in the world I wanted to think of me that way.

Why? Because "cute" was an insult coming from her. It meant she *pitied* me.

Oh, how I despise her…

I didn't even have to pretend to hate her; the feeling was completely genuine. Whenever I thought of her I felt my heart drench itself in pitch. I was well-versed in the art of concealing my emotions, but I had a feeling that even a crowd of onlookers wasn't enough to hold me back from blurting out something shot through with malice. I forced myself to turn my back to her.

"See you around!" called Lady Rose's cheerful voice as I left, digging the knife in a little deeper. As unpleasant as I found her, though, I hated *myself* for feeling that way.

I didn't speak to anyone after that. Instead, I made my way to a discreet corner of the gym where I could compose myself. Unfortunately, several students still came over to chat; I just gave them perfunctory replies until they seemed satisfied.

Finally, networking time was over. It was time for our class assignments to be announced.

Just as I'd expected, Seth, Lady, Rose and I were all in the same class. It was just like in the game. I knew what this meant: I'd see their faces every day from now on, now that we were sharing a classroom.

As I made my way to the classroom, Seth's voice called out to me.

"Liliana," he said. "Looks like we're in the same class, huh?"

"Yes, I'm so pleased to hear it. And I'm sure you must be so pleased that *she'll* be in our class too."

"Hey… Not so loud. People will hear you."

"I don't see any problem with that, considering she's your fiancée? But very well. I'll take care to speak more quietly," I said, smiling.

I was actually a bit more calm right now than I'd been earlier. I was still crazy about Seth—crazy enough about him to *die* for him—but I'd already made up my mind to give up on him, and that made all of this a little easier.

Seth's ears burned red as he looked around the classroom, embarrassed, with what looked like a scowl on his face.

I had a feeling that I'd have fewer and fewer chances to spend time with him and chat going forward. After all, I was going to have my hands full trying to bully Lady Rose on the sly so that I could make Seth worry about her and create opportunities to bring them closer. Also, I knew Seth would hate me for it, but I figured that a betrayal from his best friend would hurt a bit less if we weren't as close. If I wanted him to be happy, I'd have to keep my distance from him.

You know, I'm actually not half bad when I'm thinking about Seth like this. Look at me, putting aside my own feelings all to grant him a happy ending. If I may say so myself, that's a little...saintly.

As I smiled to myself about this, I noticed a girl walking over toward Seth and me, looking like she was ready to cut right between us. Then she let out a gasp, as if she'd just noticed us, and approached us.

"Prince Seth, my necklace is... No, never mind. It's nothing," she said, cutting herself off in a manner that felt oddly forced before smiling and sweeping it under the rug.

Then she picked up her pace again, looking down at the ground as she walked, and began to walk past us.

I know what this is, I thought. *This is the event in the prologue where Lady Rose loses the necklace that Seth gave her when they were kids and talks to every character except for the secret love interest in her quest to find it.*

She doesn't end up finding it, though. It's Seth who finds it and gives it back to her.

Of course, Seth didn't have that context from the game. He looked displeased that Lady Rose had just left him hanging. After a few short moments, he turned around.

"You go on ahead," he said to me.

I watched in silence as he ran after Lady Rose. Then I pressed on to my original destination—the classroom—which was in the opposite direction.

Is there really any difference between bullying Lady Rose out of a surface-level distaste for her and doing it out of a deep-seated hatred? I wondered. *I guess in the eyes of the victim or the onlookers, there wouldn't be.*

With the way things were now, I didn't feel like I could bully her out of just surface-level distaste anymore. I couldn't be cruel to her without putting my heart into it.

Lady Rose's happiness was practically written in the stars. I mean, there was no way that she'd ever get one of the game's bad endings. Seeing her in person, I knew that she wasn't the kind of woman who would ever screw things up that badly. She was going to be oh so happy. I would make sure of that. So, I wanted to at least relish leaning into my loathing and making her miserable for just one short year.

As I entered the classroom and looked around, I casually checked to confirm that Evan Douglas was in my class too. Sure enough, there he was. It was hardly a surprise to see him, considering that he was one of the love interests and that I already knew from the game that he was in the same class. Satisfied, I took my seat.

Seth and Lady Rose hadn't returned by the time homeroom had begun. Again, it was just like the game. That wasn't a bad thing, though. That meant that I could knuckle down and concentrate on the problem at hand without being distracted by them.

There was just one little problem at present with my plan to bully Lady Rose and help her and Seth get their happy ending: my transactional friend, Melvin, whom I'd yet to run into today. My friendship with him risked implicating him by association, and I didn't want that. It would have been one thing if it had been some random nobody, but Melvin was actually a really good guy. I felt it was my duty to at least warn him before I moved to carry out my plan.

Since it was only the first day of school, we didn't have any actual classes. After homeroom ended, we were free to go.

Before I got in my carriage to head home, I hurried over to Melvin's classroom and waited outside for him. I remembered the map of the school pretty well from the game, so I could find my way there more quickly than any other first-year. My memories from the game were from more than fifteen years ago now, but I'd

kept writing them down (in code, of course) before blotting them out or burning them, so they were still pretty fresh in my mind.

I peered into the classroom and quickly spotted Melvin, thanks to his telltale snow-white hair. I opened my mouth to call out to him and let him know I was here, but he noticed me first and began to make his way over to me. I thought he might be trying to keep things discreet, so I didn't say anything until we were face-to-face.

"Didn't expect to see you here," he said. "You need something?"

"Yes, I suppose you could say that. Do you have a moment?"

"Sure."

Melvin seemed to be in a good mood for some reason as I led him to a spot in the rear garden, under the shade of a tree behind a bench.

"Whoa... This is, like, a total blind spot. You can't see behind this tree from any angle. How'd you find such prime real estate?" he asked me.

"An acquaintance gave me a tip about it."

"Yeah? All right, well, keep your secrets then. Anyway, why're you talking in that stiff, aristocratic tone when no one's even here to see you?"

As I made eye contact with Melvin and processed the quizzical look on his face, I couldn't help but notice that he seemed to have grown a little bit taller than me. *When did that happen?* I wondered. *Jeez... After all that fuss I made about drawing a line in the sand with him that our friendship was purely transactional, here I am thinking about something like* that*. We really have been friends for too long.*

I'm sure I'll think of him a little in my final moments.

"I think it would be best if you kept your distance from me from now on," I said curtly, without a trace of emotion on my face, as I ignored his question.

"Why?"

"I'm not going to answer that. Just consider this a warning. I know our friendship is purely transactional, so I thought you ought to know that it may come to cost you in the future."

He narrowed his big, red eyes, as if searching my face for answers. Then he smiled.

"Awfully *sweet* of you to have the consideration to worry about that, considering we're just using each other," he said.

I could sense his pointed implication, and I couldn't help feeling a little shaken by it. He was right. It was a lame excuse to tell myself that I was just pushing him away out of guilt because he was such a good person.

I was only casting suspicion on myself by warning him like this. What's more, I wasn't bothering to warn any of my other superficial friends…which meant that the moment I warned Melvin, I'd cemented his place in my heart as someone special.

Ugh, I'm such an idiot! I knew I shouldn't have said anything to him. There was no reason for me to screw up the game's script like this. All I had to do was follow it to the letter, and I would have been able to guarantee Seth's happiness…

"Well… Consider yourself warned," I said.

The damage had been done now, and there was no point looking back and regretting this. Whatever happened now was up to Melvin. I turned to leave.

Melvin didn't chase after me.



I had never feared anyone as much as I feared Felicia Schwarose.

Lately, though, I'd been thinking…maybe it wasn't just my *fear* that made her seem so strangely inhuman?

It'd been six months since we'd enrolled at Thea Academy, and already, she seemed to have gone through every one of Seth's events in an almost mechanical, emotionless manner…almost like she was just ticking items off of a list.

And all the while, I'd been bullying her nonstop.

Whenever I hid her things, she'd just tell the teacher plainly, without a trace of emotion on her face, that she'd forgotten to bring them to class. When I'd set up a contraption to pour water over her head in the bathroom (discreetly, of course, so there wouldn't be any evidence), she'd act like nothing had happened. And when I'd put food scraps in her bag, she'd just take it home with her and act like she didn't notice the smell.

The worst, though, was when I'd cut up my own uniform into scraps and blamed Lady Rose for it. I'd confronted her in tears, playing the victim, as everyone gathered round and rebuked her

for her “cruelty.”

But she’d just stood there, looking at me with a soft, kind look in her eyes, and I knew I hadn’t gotten under her skin at all.

No matter how much I tried to isolate her and harass her, Lady Rose never lost even a trace of her dignity, her elegance, or her beauty. She was just like a doll. I found myself wondering if she even *had* any emotions.

Why does nothing ever ruffle her feathers? I thought. *It’s weird… Even though I only ever saw the game’s protagonist through my screen, she seemed* way *more human somehow.*

Lady Rose just kept smiling sweetly, regardless of how much I glared at her, verbally abused her, and hurt her. It was insane. I was practically screaming in her face, full of unrestrained hatred, but it was like she didn’t even *see* me.

All of the rage that I threw at her seemed to fly right past her. I couldn’t even vent my anger at her. Maybe she was just a leftover data fragment from the game? Maybe she was the only person in this world that wasn’t actually *real*?

Despite it all, though, my self-loathing only grew.

Throughout my life, I’d tried to make people happy. Sometimes I’d fail and upset them. But I’d never intentionally tried to bring someone down like this—I’d never even *wanted* to. Now that I was doing exactly that, I couldn’t help but wonder how other people out there could bully others so easily. Wouldn’t they hate themselves for it? Wouldn’t they feel like they were the worst person in the world? Wouldn’t they just feel *awful* about it?

I had no integrity left—no sane way to claim that I was still a good person. Over time, I started to lose my sense of self-worth. I’d given myself a free pass by saying that everything I did was for Seth and that I’d be punished for it all eventually, but I knew that I’d never be able to take back what I was doing now. My actions would live on forever in my memory, no matter how distant they became.

I wanted to just hurry up and end it all. I wanted it all to be over. I couldn’t imagine wanting to keep living as the horrible woman I’d become. I was counting down the days until I could finally clock out for good—until the coming of my appointed judgment day, when my beloved would hate me enough to want me dead and consign me to my punishment. As far as I was concerned, it

couldn't come soon enough.

"You seem kind of tired lately," said my beloved, suddenly jolting me out of my thoughts and back into the present, where I was sitting with him on a bench in the rear garden.

Huh? What was I just doing? How did I end up here on this bench? I can't remember...

Whatever I'd been doing, though, I had a feeling that Seth hadn't been sitting next to me here from the start. He'd probably come to sit next to me just recently and had been calling out my name without me even realizing it.

"I think I'm just...tired from all the studying I've been doing," I said.

"Right, yeah. You always make the best grades in the class, huh? They were just talking about you in the staff room. The teachers were saying that it's not just that you're smart but that you're careful not to make any mistakes or overlook any details."

"Goodness. You flatter me."

I did actually hit the books pretty hard every day, but that was nothing new for me. It felt worth it for me, since I wanted to be absolutely sure that I didn't make even one misstep until the end and jeopardize my chances of making Seth happy.

Seth fell a bit silent after that. He opened and closed his mouth a couple times, as if he were searching for the right words.

Then he looked straight into my eyes and said, "I'm not great at all this 'feelings' stuff, so...if there's anything you want, just tell me." His beautiful blue eyes penetrated my soul as he spoke. "You're my best friend. Almost anything you want, I can probably make it happen for you."

What a sweetheart. My beloved really is too kind, I thought. But the sad truth was that I only had one wish, and he could probably never grant it. Telling him would only make him feel bad. After all, even if he *wanted* to help me, he probably couldn't.

If only we could have felt the same about each other...

"Thank you, but I'm already so happy. There's nothing I could want for," I told him. "Goodness, look at the time! I'd better head home."

I stood up, smiling at him. Without even waiting for his reply, I started walking away. On school grounds, we were just classmates —not a prince and a viscount's daughter—so I knew that no

offense would be taken.

"Liliana!" he called after me.

I'd told myself that I wouldn't let that stop me, but I did. Then I thought of something to say to him.

"Actually, there *is* one thing I'd like to ask of you. Whatever happens, please be happy," I said, giving him one last smile.

He looked at me with wide eyes. I walked off, leaving him alone on the bench. After a short walk, I reached the carriage, where Shirley was waiting for me as always.

"Welcome back, Lady Liliana," she said.

"Thank you" was my perfunctory reply.

I made to enter the carriage, but Shirley didn't make any moves to open the door for me. Something very strange was happening. A young noblewoman would *never* be expected to open a door for herself. I cast a puzzled look toward Shirley.

"There's something we need to discuss," she said. Her expression was grave.

I fell silent, glaring at her. Then I motioned toward the door, as if to say, *Fine, but at least open the door for me.*

But Shirley ignored me. Instead, she just kept talking.

"You need to stop this, my lady. There's nothing wrong with disliking someone, but the way you're acting...it isn't *like* you," she said.

I couldn't let anyone at school see me gathering food scraps, constructing water-dumping contraptions, or disposing of stolen items...so I did it all at home. I hadn't said anything to Shirley about what I was doing, but she was with me pretty much all the time, so she must have realized what was going on. She wasn't oblivious, after all.

The one thing I hadn't accounted for, though, was that my maid would turn on me like this. And I *certainly* hadn't anticipated that she would confront me in a public setting.

In our kingdom, nobles had extraordinary power and influence. One order from me was all it would take to send her head flying—and I mean that in a very literal sense.

"I can't bear to see you like this anymore!" Shirley cried.



Shirley was an earnest, beautiful woman. She'd also become *quite* sentimental over the years.

I smiled.

You've done such a wonderful job all these years, Shirley, I thought.

"This is exactly the person I've always been, from the very start. Sorry I couldn't be the perfect *saint* that you imagined me to be," I said. "If you won't listen to commands, you're fired. Now get out of my sight."

Shirley looked shattered. She looked like she wanted to say something, but instead, she silently nodded. Then she took in a deep breath.

"I won't speak a word of what you've done to anyone, Lady Liliana. But please don't think that means you won't ever face retribution. I'm only saying this because I care about you," she said slowly, as if trying to persuade me.

I let her words hang there, saying nothing as I regarded her with a blank expression.

"I wish I could have stopped you before it came to this, but I was out of my depth. I'm sorry."

Shirley left. I ended up at a loss for words. I just watched her go. When she'd crossed the threshold of the school gates, and I'd checked that I couldn't see her anymore, I whispered something to myself.

"I'll never stop. This is the only path available to me."

"You sure about that? 'Cause it kinda looks to me like you're just throwing away your one and only ambition and shooting yourself in the foot."

I was surprised to hear a response, but I knew immediately whom it had come from. I turned around and saw Melvin, just as I'd expected.

How long has he been standing there listening? This can't be good. Has he guessed that I'm the one behind the bullying?

No, what am I saying? Melvin Crabitt may not be well-versed in human psychology, but he's a professional gossip hound. If he wanted simple information, it would be almost impossible to hide it from him.

With Melvin's connections, intellect, and *ample funds*, he had a lot of power to leverage when it came to information brokerage. He'd probably known from the start what I've been up to.

Well… That's fine.

I ignored Melvin and made to leave. Since my maid was gone now, I signaled with a glance to the driver for him to open the carriage door for me. I would have loved to just open it myself so that I could hurry up and get out of here, but I knew that wouldn't do.

The driver came over, looking flustered and deeply confused by everything that was unfolding, to open the door for me. Melvin didn't seem the least bit bothered by how I'd just completely ignored him. He just kept talking.

"You can't unilaterally decide to end a friendship *just like that*, you know. It's a two-way street. As far as I'm concerned, we're *real* friends, and I'm not going to stop saying that!"

What in the world is he going on about? And in the middle of the carriage park too? In public! This is mortifying.

I felt tears prickling in the corners of my eyes. My feelings hadn't changed, though.

"Start driving," I ordered the driver, as I climbed inside the carriage.

I closed my eyes, trying to shut everything out. Only the recoil of sudden movement and the sound of hooves told me that we'd begun to move.

Everyone's being so annoying... I don't need friends! I don't need family! I don't need upperclassmen or underclassmen... I don't need anyone*, and I don't want to think about anyone except for Seth!*

"I don't need anyone in this world. I mean, they don't even *get* it," I whispered, without thinking, so quietly that even the driver wouldn't hear.

Anyone who'd never died before couldn't possibly understand why I was so fixated on Seth, and Seth alone. But that didn't matter. I didn't *need* them to understand. I intended to live and die for Seth. All I needed anyone else to do was stay out of my way.

"Take me to the church," I ordered the driver, without a trace of any inflection in my voice.

In Seth's route, the game typically ends about a year after the school's opening ceremony. But I didn't know which *month* that was, exactly. All I knew was that it must have been spring.

That's why I wanted to say my last farewell to God as soon as possible.

Now that Shirley was gone, I would probably be assigned a new

attendant, and I didn't want them to be suspicious of my visits to the church.

The carriage arrived at the church. As I descended the carriage steps, I heard the sounds of laughter. I turned to pin down the source of the noise and saw a little girl standing a ways away from me. She was surrounded by people.

I recognized her. I remembered that nun's habit, that face, and those bouncing braids. It was the girl who always looked at me with the reverence most would reserve for a heavenly body and called me a "saint."

I found myself stopping in my tracks to listen in on the conversation.

"Your smile always brings me peace, Nana. You're just like an angel!"

"Heh heh, really? Thank you, ma'am! I love your smile too!"

"I've never known a girl as sweet as you, Nana. You treat everyone with kindness and respect, regardless of their status."

She really was purehearted. Her smile was so joyful, it was almost blindingly radiant.

Why would a girl like her, who's genuinely pure, always look at me like I'm *the one who's holy and inviolable?*

"Is there anything you want? Anything we can get for you?" someone asked her.

"Nope! All I want is to go to Heaven. I don't need anything else!"

Even her dreams were pure. I had every confidence that this girl would make it to Heaven. I was bound to go to Hell for all the horrible things I was doing to Lady Rose; I wouldn't be able to meet her again there one day.

We don't need to ever speak again, though. It's all right if we don't ever even cross paths again, as long as she can live her life happily, I thought. I tore my gaze from her and approached the church.

I walked straight up to the cross. Then I knelt before it, as if to pray. I was here to say my last goodbye, but the words I spoke were the same as always.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day," I said.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I was struck by how empty they sounded.

That's strange, I thought. *I meant them, though. I really* am *happy.*

Chapter 7

The day was finally here. My long story was drawing to a close.

What tipped me off—the sign that told me *today* was that day—was when Lady Rose and I suddenly bumped into each other as we'd been rounding a corner. In the game, that was Liliana's final straw. With that chance encounter, her jealousy had reached a boiling point.

"I'm truly sorry for keeping the truth from you all this time, but I simply couldn't bear to tell anyone...not even *you*. I could dismiss the physical and mental toll this has taken on me, but I simply cannot stay silent any longer when I think about the consequences that your marriage to Lady Felicia could have for both you and the kingdom. I may be too late, but I resolved to myself that it would be the right thing to tell you the truth."

In the academy's rear garden, I repeated Liliana's words from the game (which I'd memorized, of course, word for word) as Seth listened silently.

"This past year, I've been the target of Lady Felicia's vicious bullying," I continued, in a flagrant distortion of the truth.

Seth just stared right through me, saying nothing.

I'd been best friends with Seth for the past decade, so I knew him pretty well by now. I could sense from his silence that he didn't believe a word I was saying. If he had, he would have jumped in by now.

I knew it... There's no way I can win against the protagonist, I thought, mentally surrendering. I couldn't let my resignation show, though. I'd resolved to play my villainous part until I drew my dying breath.

After I'd given Seth my spiel, I called Lady Rose over. I'd asked her to be present for this in advance, so she was standing ready nearby. She approached us with her usual grace. As usual, she looked so beautiful and refined just *standing* there. She didn't even have to do anything special. It was almost comical, really. I sure wasn't laughing, though.

I can hardly blame myself for losing to a woman that perfect, I

thought. *Take care of Seth for me, Lady Rose.*

In a direct contrast to my thoughts, I flashed her an almost mocking look. After all, I was the villainess, Lady Inoce. I had to play my part.

Now that Lady Rose was also present, I went on to regale Seth with the details of how she'd "ruthlessly bullied me." Once I'd said my piece, Seth spoke up. His voice was loud and clear.

"Felicia Schwarose," he said, "I hereby annul our engagement!"

I mentally reviewed what happened next in the game—and what was now set in motion to happen in *real life* too. I'd devoted so much effort to memorizing the story that I had every confidence it would play out just as I remembered.

Lady Rose would deny the accusations. Then Seth would smile mischievously, because he'd never doubted her from the start.

"I knew you'd said that," he would say. Then he would turn to Liliana—to *me*—and say, "*You're* the real villain here."

In an instant, Lady Rose's fate and my own would be reversed. Seth would present a mountain of evidence of my wrongdoing, and it would all be over.

That was how the story went, and that was exactly how things were going to go now. All I had to do was say the words, and everything would all come to its unsatisfying denouement.

Go on, Lady Rose. Don't worry about a villainess like me. Just keep that sweet smile on, like you always do, and say your next line. Hurry up and finish me.

Then Lady Rose opened her mouth to speak. "If that's what you wish, Your Highness," she said.

Now that Lady Rose had denied the allegations, Seth would—

Wait... Huh?

Did I miss the part where she pleaded not guilty?

Something was very wrong here. This was *not* how the story was supposed to go. This was her cue to deny any wrongdoing and turn the tables on me...so why was she just going along with my accusations?

What could she possibly stand to gain from letting her engagement crumble, all because of my baseless lies?

She certainly couldn't have been doing this all just because she wasn't interested in Seth. She *had* to have been. Otherwise, why would she have diligently pursued his route at every opportunity?

It didn't make any sense. And the annulment was one thing, but she had a lot more to lose from this than just that. I mean, why in the world would she let herself be branded a villainess? All she had to do was deny the accusations.

Was the story falling apart? I hadn't noticed any signs of that up until now, though. I hadn't been able to sway Seth's heart all this time; his feelings for Lady Rose hadn't budged an inch. So, why was everything falling to pieces *now*, all of a sudden?!

I stood there absolutely befuddled as Lady Rose promptly took her leave. I was pretty sure that Seth was every bit as confused as I was.

I had no idea what was happening, but one thing was clear: There had to have been some kind of mistake.

That wasn't your line, Lady Rose! You're not the one in the wrong here. You shouldn't be punished. This wasn't the ending I wanted…

I opened my mouth, preparing to call after Lady Rose's vanishing figure and put a stop to all of this. But the words wouldn't leave my mouth. I was frozen.

Huh? Why can't I say anything? I need to hurry up and stop her. I need to make this right and confess that I *was the real bully so that I can put the story back on track. I've worked too hard to secure Seth's happiness for it to all fall apart now… As much as it hurts me, I* have *to do this.*

But strangely enough, the words still didn't come, and my body still refused to move. I couldn't make sense of it. I *knew* I had to do something. I'd worked so hard all so that Seth could have his happy ending, and yet…

What's…going on? I have to…speak up. I have…to move. I have to stop her.

Why is nothing happening? If I don't say something…if I don't make a move…if I don't stop her…it will all be for nothing.

But despite all my attempts to will myself to do something—*anything*—I just stood there, silent.

I'd worked so, so, *so* hard to win Seth's heart, but it had all been in vain. Ultimately, I'd had no choice but to give up. Even if I couldn't be happy, though, I at least wanted my beloved to, and that had given me a new purpose. But I couldn't deny that, deep down, I still desperately wanted to be with him. No matter how I tried to suppress it, I couldn't give up on my doomed dream.

And that doomed dream…was coming true now.

But if I didn't speak up now, then that dream would be forever tarnished. I would have won Seth's heart through deceit, after tormenting Lady Rose and eventually inciting her downfall. I couldn't bear to stoop that low and *win*. How could I live with myself if none of this was for Seth's happiness anymore? I knew I would hate myself even more than I did already—enough to take my own life. I could never forgive myself.

I couldn't imagine a more powerful motivator to speak up…but I just couldn't do it. I could see the path to virtue unfolding right before my eyes, but I couldn't bring myself to take it. I didn't even care if it made me a bad person, as long as I could be happy.

God, I disgust myself.

Eventually, Lady Rose disappeared into the distance. I hadn't managed to say a single word to stop her.

Think, Liliana! Time may feel frozen right now, but the clock is still ticking. Why did Lady Rose wait until the very last moment to deviate from the script?

Right up until now, she'd been the picture-perfect protagonist in every way. There'd been no indication whatsoever that something was different. Now that she'd so clearly deviated from the game's script, though, the entire world that we were living in was now basically an alternate universe. There must have been *some reason* that this was happening.

What's different between the game and this universe? I wondered. But I barely had to ponder this question. The answer was so obvious, it was practically staring me in the face. *There's only one glaring difference: me.*

My very presence here was an anomaly—by which I mean, the *me* that resided inside of Liliana. Logically speaking, that would have made *me* the reason the game's script had gone so off the rails. Maybe I had changed something inside of Lady Rose—something I wouldn't have been able to see from the outside?

I thought back to everything I'd done to her. The best explanation I could come up with was that my bullying had been underpinned by a deeper hatred and jealousy than what Liliana had felt for her in the game.

I'd been pretty positive that the grudge I'd borne against Lady Rose hadn't fazed her in the least. But how else could I explain this

outcome? Maybe I'd been too hasty in assuming that she wasn't fazed, all because she simply *appeared* not to be bothered by any of it? Maybe I'd hurt her so much that she didn't even have it in her anymore to dispute my accusations? Maybe she'd just…given up?

It was all just conjecture, but that was all I had. I couldn't think of any other reason this could be happening.

I can't just let this happen, though, can I? It wouldn't be right for me to be the only one with a happy ending…

After shaking myself from my egocentrism, I decided to tell Seth the truth. But for better or for worse, just as I opened my mouth to speak, Seth spoke up first.

"She…didn't even apologize," he said.

He didn't look disappointed in her, though. Rather, he looked…almost sad, like she'd forsaken him. Seeing that look on his face rendered me speechless.

In that moment, I realized something: This wasn't just between Lady Rose and me. It was about *Seth* too.

Even if Seth had only declared their engagement annulled because he'd trusted Lady Rose to step in and deny the allegations, he was a prince, and his words carried power. It would be no easy feat to take them back. And Lady Rose accepting them without a fight showed that she didn't understand him—or what he was trying to do—at all.

It was too late for me now to admit what I'd done. I should have at least spoken up when Lady Rose was still here.

This is all because of my stupid, stupid wish to be happy…

"Liliana, I love you. Will you marry me?" Seth asked, with an awkward smile.

I couldn't believe my ears. I almost thought I must be hearing things, but when I thought about it, it did actually make sense. Seth had just made a show—however disingenuous—of choosing me over Lady Rose. This was the only choice left to him now.

Well… I guess I'll take it. I didn't see this coming at all, and it kind of sucks, actually, but here we are.

It was weird, though. Seth had just said the words I'd always wanted to hear from him, but I didn't feel anything at all. I felt like I'd actually been happier back when I was a kid, when I'd first been reincarnated. That didn't make sense, though…

Surely I was just *so* happy that it hadn't hit me yet, right? I kind

of felt like I was going to cry too, but maybe they would be tears of joy?

It seemed like there was no feeling behind Seth's words—like he wasn't even really looking at me—but hadn't I sent Lady Rose off on her merry way just to hear them?

I knew that Seth probably didn't really love me. I couldn't blame him for that. I mean, he'd literally just broken things off with his fiancée. But now I'd been given a chance to change that. As his new fiancée, I'd be the closest to him, always supporting him. And now that Lady Rose was out of the picture, Seth was sure to fall in love with me.

So it was no problem whatsoever if he didn't love me right now.

Yeah, that's it. I'm starting to feel better now. I just have to work hard to make him notice me, that's all. I've gotta stay positive.

Right... And I need to give him a response!

I was too full of emotion to speak, so I just gave him a little nod.

Then, to drown out all the crazy thoughts I was having, I whispered to myself my usual refrain:

This—"Thank you,"—*isn't*—"Father in Heaven,"—*the happiness*—"for blessing me again"—*I dreamed of*—"on this joyous day."

I'm happy now...aren't I?



Before the day was over, I told Viscount Cain about my new engagement.

"Hnnngh...! Yes... Yes, I suppose it's only natural, at your age, for you to be getting engaged," the viscount sputtered through his tears. "All I can do as your father is give you my blessing, then. To think that you'll be marrying the love of your life! I'm so happy for you, sweetheart."

The viscount was an amazing father, and I knew I didn't deserve him. His love was wasted on a daughter like me—on someone who didn't even think of him as her father but was perfectly willing to drag him down with her. Still, I felt no emotion as I reflected on this.

"I'll have to let your mother know. Yes, I'm sure she'll want to hear the news in person. I'll send a letter at once requesting that she return home from Theague Kingdom."

“Please, father, there’s no need,” I interjected. “I know how busy mother is. I’ll just send her a letter with the news.”

I didn’t want to get too close to my parents, so I always kept a careful distance. It made things a lot easier for me that my mother was a diplomat, always traveling to different countries, and that she rarely came home. I was happy with the way things were, and I wanted to keep them that way.

“But…” the viscount began to protest, unwilling to let it go.

I reassured him with a smile, as if to insist, *A letter will do just fine*.

“I’d best be going, then. I need to write that letter and get some studying done,” I told him.

Now that I’d given him the news, I headed off back to my bedroom to do some serious studying. I was going to be the future queen, after all, so I wanted to make sure that my academics were up to snuff. Besides, I needed to make myself the kind of woman that would turn Seth’s head. I was going to be very, very busy from now on.

As I made my way up to my room, in high spirits now after thinking about my future, the viscount called after me.

“I know it’s hard for you to ask for help, so I’m so glad that you’ll be marrying for love instead of political gain,” he said gently.

I had no idea how to respond to that. So, instead of saying anything, I just turned around for a moment and gave him a smile. If this had been my first life, I had a feeling that I would have been able to think of the viscount as my real father and that I would have truly loved him. I probably would have been so happy to be his daughter.

When I went to school the next day, everyone seemed to have heard the news about Seth’s sudden engagement to me (and the annulment of his engagement to Lady Rose).

I figured that Lady Rose probably wouldn’t be coming to school today. She was probably under house arrest right now, waiting for the trial—the one that was *supposed* to have been for me—which I knew from the game was today, the day after the annulment.

In the game, Liliana’s punishment for bullying Lady Rose was severe. After all, Lady Rose wasn’t just anybody; she was the future queen consort. What’s more, Liliana had also deceived Seth. Both

counts were considered treason. She was stripped of her nobility and expelled to live among the peasantry. For a noblewoman, that was a fate akin to a death sentence.

But for Lady Rose to have bullied *me* was nowhere near so consequential. It wasn't like she'd been bullying the future queen consort, after all (at least, not at the time), and she'd made no attempt to deceive Seth. When you got right down to it, her only crime was to act in a way that was unbecoming of someone in her position, so her punishment was bound to be lighter than Liliana's.

Surely she won't get the death sentence… I think.

There was no point in worrying about that, though. I needed to be focused on the matter at hand, which was that I was suddenly getting a *lot* more attention now that Lady Rose was gone.

"Good morning, Lady Liliana!" a girl called out to me.

It would have been a stretch to say that we were friends, even superficially, but now she was smiling at me and acting *very* interested in talking to me. Even the way she spoke was a lot more polite than I remembered. It was clear from her demeanor that she was hoping to ride my coattails, now that I was moving up in the world.

I smiled back and returned the greeting.

If I was going to be the future queen, then I'd need to learn how to make use of sycophants like her.

I was painfully aware of how magnetic Lady Rose had been. Even now, I felt the piercing glare of several classmates who didn't think too highly of me for usurping her position. I figured that having a posse might shield me a bit from the glares, and I'd need that if I wanted to spend any time with Seth. As things currently stood, he would probably feel a bit uncomfortable approaching me.

Of course, the only person in the whole world that I wanted to be with was Seth. But right now, I felt more comfortable being surrounded by a bunch of girls who felt absolutely nothing for me.

Once I made it to the classroom, I noticed some graffiti that had been written on my desk in black ink. Several of my classmates appeared to be trying to wipe it off for me.

Well… Looks like the bullying's begun, I thought coolly. Honestly, I'd expected this.

Now that I was the future queen consort, no one could say or

do anything to my face…but that didn't mean they wouldn't do stuff like this behind my back. After all, there were plenty of people who loved Lady Rose and were upset about what had happened to her. There were also quite a few people who didn't appreciate my newfound status.

That was all just fine, though. I had sinned, and I would accept every punishment I received for it. If anything, I actually *appreciated* it. After all the harm I'd caused, I hadn't been held at all accountable. I'd take any punishment I could get, even if it was just a little stupid bullying.

Right now, though, I had to figure out what to do about the classmates who were wiping off my desk. *Aristocrats don't exactly walk around with rags*, I thought. *Wait, is she wiping my desk with that expensive-looking handkerchief…?*

I didn't care if these classmates were doing this out of genuine affection for me or out of calculated self-interest. All that mattered was that they would probably be more loyal to me than to Lady Rose, and in my books, that made them excellent friend material.

"Oh, thank you so much," I said, with a smile. "I'm so touched you would do this for me."

After showing them my gratitude, I told them that I would just ask the teacher for a new desk and told them to head back to their seats. I explained that it would take too long to wipe the graffiti off and that I'd need a clean desk before Seth could come and visit me.

"I'm ever so sorry," I said. "And thank you, truly."

Suddenly, I could feel someone staring at me with such intense loathing that it sent a chill down my spine. I was filled with terror. But I didn't turn around. I had no interest in finding out who it was.



The next day, Lady Rose had received her sentence. She had abruptly been stripped of her noble title and exiled to live among the commoners. The exact death sentence I'd feared, essentially.

I didn't know whether the universe had contorted itself to fit the game's script, despite all odds, in an attempt to course correct, or if Lady Rose's power-hungry parents had suggested the sentence

themselves in an effort to disown her.

She'll probably die out there, I thought.

If I'd been in her position, I was pretty confident that I could have at least survived, as difficult as it might have been. After all, I had my past life memories to fall back on and no particular loyalty to the aristocracy as an institution. But there was no way that a girl like her, who'd only ever known the comfortable life of a noble, would ever make it.

It was as if I'd killed her myself.

And yet, here I was, going to school again and carrying my head high as I always did. I knew that Lady Rose's fans would probably keep harassing me, but today was bound to be especially brutal. Her sentence had just been handed down, and emotions were running high—which meant that inhibitions would be at an all-time low. I was ready to accept whatever they threw at me, though—*all* of it. It was a selfish sacrifice. I was motivated purely by the desire to lessen my guilt through atonement.

Just as I was wallowing in my suffering, I felt someone tug me roughly by the arm. They dragged me over to the grass, where I fell to my knees.

Huh... Maybe I'll even get assassinated, I thought, without a trace of emotion. I closed my eyes, preparing to accept my fate.

...

...

Three whole minutes passed, but nothing had happened. Nervous and confused, I opened my eyes.

Standing before me was a boy I knew all too well.

"I thought you'd find your happy ending if you shook me off, so I was ready to just step back and watch things play out from a distance. But I should've known better. You sure don't look happy to me," said Melvin, smiling mischievously.

I can't believe you'd still want anything to do with me, I wanted to say. Of course, I knew that when it came to Melvin, the best course of action was to just shake him off again without a word. But his words echoed in my head. I couldn't let what he'd said go uncontested.

"I *am* happy," I said, irritably, as if he'd just said something absolutely absurd.

I am happy, even if I had to make everyone else around me

unhappy. That's the choice I've made.

Melvin laughed loudly.

"You always were a terrible liar, you know that?"

"Well, I'm *not* lying. And I'll have you know I've gotten much better at it, anyway. Now stop it with this nonsense."

"How long do you think I've known you, Liliana? You might have everyone else fooled, but I can see straight through you."

I clammed up. There was nothing I could say; he was right, after all.

But if I couldn't fool Melvin, then I obviously needed a lot more polish. I needed to be an excellent liar, good enough to fool *anyone*. I had to be the kind of woman who could lie straight to the king's face—to the whole kingdom, even.

At the very least, I had to surpass Lady Rose. It would be an uphill battle, but that was my duty. I bore full responsibility for her downfall…and her death.

Just as I was getting lost in my thoughts, I felt Melvin's hands clap both of my cheeks gently, as if to try to pull me back to reality.

"You're too stubborn to ever admit to yourself that you're not happy, aren't you? Well, fine. But we're friends, remember? So, don't forget my promise: If I feel like it, I'll come help you," he said, looking me forcefully in the eyes.

As I looked back into his beautiful red eyes, I remembered something.

Oh, that's right… I forgot about that promise. When we first met, I asked him to lend me a hand whenever he was "willing to offer it for his own amusement." It was exactly the sort of silly promise that young children make.

Melvin really is something else… He always knows exactly what to say to make me want to depend on him.

I had to admit that he'd shaken my resolve. But that didn't mean that I wanted his help. I'd made my bed, and now I had to lie in it. Still…I was moved that he'd reached out to me like this.

I could admit it, now: Melvin was my best friend. And I was *proud* of that.

I couldn't bear to make anyone else unhappy, all because of my selfishness—and I especially didn't want to make Melvin unhappy, especially now that I'd finally admitted to myself how much I cared about him. I knew I needed to distance myself from him as much

as possible, so he wouldn't be hurt.

Not a day had gone by that I hadn't thought back to those last moments in my previous life. My happy-go-lucky days had been abruptly cut short, and in an instant, everything and everyone that I'd ever loved was gone, just like *that*.

It hurt so badly I couldn't stand it. I didn't need friends in this life because I'd had them in my last, and I'd never forget the pain of losing them. Not just friends either, but family too…and teachers, classmates, and friendly faces. I didn't need any of those. All I needed was my first relationship in this life.

I'd only ever loved one person, both in this life and my last, and that was enough for me. He was all I wanted.

It would have been impossible for anyone who hadn't been reincarnated like me to understand the unbearable loneliness and despair of losing an entire lifetime of happiness and suddenly being thrust into a whole new life, right after your death. And they would never understand what Seth meant to me and how, thanks to him, I'd found a reason to live: for love.

Listen, Melvin… I've carried this despair with me for fifteen years. The thought of making an incredible friend like you only to have you suddenly ripped away from me again is too horrible to bear. So, please…just forget about me. I'll rip the bandage off first to make it easier for you.

"That promise was just childish drivel, and it's long expired. Besides, I don't *want* your help. I don't even think of you as a friend, so just leave me alone," I said, as coldly and dismissively as I could manage.

I grabbed Melvin by the wrists and tore his hands off my cheeks forcefully. Then I stood up.

"I told you. You're a terrible liar," Melvin called after me obnoxiously.

I'd only ever been able to live my life honestly; no matter how good I thought I'd gotten at it, I'd always be a terrible liar—especially when I was trying to get one over on someone I'd known for as long as Melvin.

Still…I was going to get better. I was going to be *the best*. *So just be quiet and let me have this*, I thought. I would never admit to him that he was right.

"Fine. Have it your way. But I might just lend a hand anyway, for

my own amusement—and you can't stop me. That's the promise we made, and I'm sticking to it."

No matter how many times I tried to push Melvin away, it never seemed to have any effect. But even as I fought back tears, I'd never turned around and asked for help. That was the one thing I would never do.

I had no right to be saved.



Now that I was Seth's fiancée, I was given a place at his side—and a much better chance of making my dream of our romance come true.

At least, that's how it *should* have been. But while we might have been in closer physical proximity now, it was like his heart was even farther out of reach than before. To be fair, I felt a bit uncomfortable about the way everything had unfolded too.

But in the whole month that had passed since our engagement, I couldn't remember having a single conversation with him that was just for fun, rather than business. I mean, maybe we *did* have some fun, lighthearted conversations, but they certainly hadn't stuck with me. What I can say is that there was never any laughter—at least, not any that was genuine. I couldn't even make Seth meet my gaze, which told me that I'd need to work *a lot* harder.

What am I doing? I wondered. *I just want to enjoy things the way they are right now and be positive about it all.*

Unfortunately, I couldn't expect the royal schedule to give me the leeway I wanted. I was to be officially recognized and introduced to the kingdom's populace today as Seth's fiancée in a public ceremony.

At the castle, Seth and I briefly went our separate ways to get ready. I was dolled up in a dress and accessories that were *much* more extravagant than what I usually wore to high society events, and the servants spent a whole hour doing my hair and makeup. When they were finished, I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I was certainly beautiful, but I almost looked more like a doll than a human.

That's a good thing, though, I think. Isn't it?

The doll in the mirror matched my movements and smiled back

at me. It was hard to put my finger on what it was, exactly, but there was something about her that made me think of Lady Rose. But Lady Rose was Seth's type, after all, so I supposed that was a good thing. The doll was just right.

There was still plenty of time until the ceremony, so I walked down the castle hallways to Seth's room, accompanied by a single maid.

Sensing that I must be nervous, the servants assured me that it would be perfectly appropriate for my usual group of maids and butlers to escort me, but I didn't really want their company. I had a feeling that it wouldn't really make any difference to my mental state whether they came or not. But for appearances' sake, I needed at least one servant to accompany me, so I picked a maid that I knew to be a tactful woman of few words.

As we walked down the hallway in silence, I noticed with a pit in my stomach that someone was walking the other way—someone it would have been impossible to ignore.

Accompanied by two guards who walked behind him was Seth's older brother, Nicholas Cabott. And once Seth and I were married, he would be my brother-in-law. He regarded me with an icy look in his eyes. If I just told you that they were "pale blue," you might expect that they were quite similar to Seth's sky blue eyes. But they had a disagreeable glint to them, and I found myself perpetually put off by how cold and piercing his gaze was.

Of course, the castle was also his home, so it was an unfortunate inevitability that we'd run into each other here. Still...I couldn't help but wish that I wouldn't see him. I never knew how to act around him.

"Good day," I greeted him and quickly moved aside so that he could pass.

But instead of passing me, Prince Nicholas—no, I suppose I ought to start saying "my brother-in-law"—stopped to talk to me.

"I understand that you'll be moving into the palace as of today," he said. "Have you been shown to your room yet?"

His words took me completely by surprise. I was dumbfounded.

"I'm...going to be living here...in the castle?" I repeated.

"You didn't even know *that*?" he said, an exasperated look crossing his face.

How could I have been expected to know that, though? I mean,

no one had *told* me. At least…I didn't think they had? There's no way that I would have just forgotten if Seth had told me…right? Surely…

"But…we're still only engaged. And…I'm just a viscount's daughter. I couldn't possibly stay here in the *palace*…" I protested.

"Everyone's a bit on edge after what happened with Seth's *previous* fiancée. I'm sure you can appreciate that it was all rather scandalous."

Oh… I thought, with a pang of understanding. I nodded, wincing.

Lady Rose's engagement ended in a scandal, so they want me living here at the palace so that they can keep an eye on me twenty-four seven, huh?

Seth might have chosen me himself, but in the palace's eyes, there was still every risk that I might offend or upset him—and no one wanted to deal with the fallout of that. Of course, I knew that I would *never* do anything to offend or upset him, so it hadn't even occurred to me that the palace would be concerned enough about that possibility to keep me under constant watch.

"The royal family has all too much sway in the kingdom, I'm afraid. As unreasonable as the order may be, you have no choice but to obey," said my brother-in-law sardonically.

He didn't say so directly, of course, but both his tone and his choice of words left me with the distinct impression that he didn't agree with the extraordinary influence that his family held. I got the sense that he might have been thinking about the harm it had caused Lady Rose when she'd just had to go along with the annulment.

His gaze had been dreadfully cold the whole time that he'd been looking at me. I might have felt uncomfortable around him, but his feelings for me clearly went beyond that. He *despised* me.

Ultimately, the game's script had, remarkably, remained almost entirely intact. It was just that Lady Rose's and my positions were now completely reversed. But it was the same only on a superficial level. After all, *I'd* been the real bully. Sure, I'd built an airtight alibi for myself and had made sure not to leave behind a trail of evidence and witnesses, but a proper investigation into the matter would quickly reveal the truth behind it all. It was entirely possible that my future brother-in-law knew the full story—which would

explain his hostility.

"How much do you know, brother-in-law?" I asked him, watching his every tiny movement like a hawk.

He glared at me, his eyes full of spite.

"'Brother-in-law'? That's rather bold of you. Well, no matter. Call me whatever you like. Now, then…how much do I know, hmm?"

I knew it was a little presumptuous to call him that to his face, but I was impressed that he was magnanimous enough to just let it go, especially when it must have really rankled him inside.

I was determined to keep calling him that, though. After all, I wanted to make my determination to marry Seth abundantly clear. Besides, I wasn't going to make any headway if I let myself be afraid of his brother. I didn't care who hated me for it or how much they hated me. As long as I was happy, that was all that mattered.

"I have high hopes for Seth, but Felicia is a close friend of mine," my brother-in-law said. "So I must say, I'm quite upset with Seth for the decision he's made here."

At the mention of Seth's name, I felt a simultaneously physical, mental, and emotional jolt. It didn't matter to me if my brother-in-law hated *me*. But to think that I might be causing friction between him and Seth was just…so awful…

"And, as I'm sure you're aware, I can't stand you," my brother-in-law said plainly, as if to land the final blow.

I *was* aware of his disdain for me—painfully so. But I hadn't expected him to come right out and express it directly to my face like this.

"Felicia has no reason to engage in childish antics like bullying. In fact, I doubt you ever even crossed her mind," he continued. Then, after a pause, he said, "Now that you've stolen her standing, will you be able to do a better job than she could? Do you really think you can surpass her?"

His words were cold, and they shook me to my core, but there was also a kindness in them.

People might have called him "brilliant," but the reality was that he was only ever merely "gifted." Sure, he had natural talent, but he was the kind of man who worked hard to excel, even if he took care to never break a sweat publicly. I only knew this from playing the game, but almost everything in this universe seemed to line up pretty perfectly with the game, so I suspected that the man in

front of me shared this characteristic with his in-game counterpart.

Just like him, my competence was mostly earned, rather than innate. I'd been working hard from the shadows all this time just to compete with Lady Rose, but I knew that hard work alone would never be enough to match her when it came to her natural magnetism and grace.

After watching Lady Rose for so long, my brother-in-law had likely come to the same conclusion. Those of us who are merely gifted are keenly aware of how different we are from people who are *brilliant*.

So, it stood to reason that he was probably angry at me for stealing Lady Rose's position when I knew full well that I could never surpass her. And if he thought I *didn't* know, then I could tell he would waste no time trying to disabuse me of my fantasies and persuade me to give up.

I felt reasonably confident that I was now the kind of woman who could hold her head high next to Lady Rose. But if you asked me if I'd managed to comprehensively surpass her in every way, or if I thought I might be able to in the future, well… I was certainly *motivated* to surpass her. I had to, after all. But I couldn't bring myself to simply say yes, when I knew that would have been a lie.

I mean, I'd almost killed myself trying. I'd even given up at one point. And yet, I couldn't bring myself to give up for good even in the final moments. Instead, I'd just reached out and grabbed the victory that I'd won in the most underhanded way possible. I knew I never could've won fair and square.

"I'll make every effort to," I told him. Even *I* knew how stupid that sounded.

"It's hopeless. An average girl like you could never dream of reaching those heights, no matter how much effort you expend. She's *special*. I would have thought that you'd know that," he shot back, his tone scathing. "Why don't you just give up?"

I knew that, but I couldn't bring myself to give up. So, I just hung my head and looked down at the floor. Everything he'd said had been true. I had nothing to say for myself. Nicholas Cabott had always been an upstanding gentleman, a man of real moral character. That wasn't just my mastery of the game talking; I'd seen it in person. I could sense his integrity in the scattered

interactions I'd had with him at high society parties and from the times he'd been a substitute teacher at the academy. He was only being so aggressive with me now because he saw how dishonest and wicked I was—how I'd hurt the people he loved the most. I had no right to be offended by the way he was treating me.

He walked off, not even waiting for an answer. I heard his footsteps diminish into the distance. It seemed his question had been merely rhetorical.

"Why don't you just give up?" was akin to asking me "Why don't you just die?" But I knew that it was probably the right thing to do.

I took in a deep breath and lifted my head in an attempt to pull myself together. Surprised, I noticed that my brother-in-law's two guards, who had been standing behind him all this time, were still loitering in the hallway.

I glanced around, but I didn't see my brother-in-law anywhere. Sure enough, he was long gone. *Why didn't they follow him?* I wondered. But as I looked closely into their faces, the answer suddenly hit me.

The guards' faces weren't especially distinctive. They were, in a word, *plain*—so plain, in fact, that they would have had no trouble blending in with a crowd. But I'd memorized the faces of everyone important in the kingdom, not just the royal family's—and I recognized them.

They were the Peerless Death Gods: the most formidable mercenaries in all of Cabott Kingdom. Those in the know called them the kingdom's "secret weapon."

But what were they doing, escorting my brother-in-law everywhere? And why were they sticking around here in the hallway instead of chasing after him?

Oblivious to my wariness, one of the guards spoke up in a jaunty tone. "Y'know, Lady Rose may have that certain je ne sais quoi, but technically, Lady Liliana would probably best Lady Rose in every *specific* skill set. Too bad that had to blow up in her face, all because the prince doesn't like that he sees *himself* in her."

"They really are exactly alike, aren't they? Both of them had given up, and yet now a glimmer of possibility has arisen from this unexpected situation that neither of them would have ever hoped for. And it's thrown *everything* off-kilter."

I had a feeling that the first guard was probably referring to my

academic achievements and practical skills, such as my etiquette. I could see where he was coming from, but I had absolutely no idea what the second guard was talking about—especially the part about my brother-in-law and I being "exactly alike."

But I was less concerned about what the two guards had said than the fact that they were literally the *Peerless Death Gods.*

I was pretty sure that my brother-in-law had had different guards before my engagement to Seth, and I'd *never* heard of the Peerless Death Gods acting as anyone's personal guards. So, why were they here now, guarding my brother-in-law? Something about this was very, very suspicious.

"Excuse me, guards. My brother-in-law-to-be has already taken his leave. Are you sure you don't need to follow him?" I asked in a pompous tone as I swept my hair over my shoulder.

I was trying to project a slightly intimidating air, since I wanted to hear more—and quickly—but the Peerless Death Gods seemed wholly unfazed. Ultimately, they didn't end up giving me a single piece of worthwhile information. They just made an absolute fool of me, having a ball at my expense. With a bitter taste in my mouth, I swiftly took my leave.

I was pretty exhausted, and the engagement ceremony hadn't even begun yet. I didn't tell Seth about my run-ins with his brother or the Peerless Death Gods, though. I picked nice, easy topics that I was sure would be safe, blathering on about how nice the weather was today and what a dream it was to be in the ceremony.

In the end, the ceremony went perfectly smoothly. I waved from the fifth-floor palace balcony down to the gathering of commoners below, smiling. I put my hand on the rail, straining my eyes so that I could make out each and every one of their faces. Until now, I'd never really had the opportunity to interact with commoners like this. To be fair, though, I was still pretty far removed from them up here.

Still, I examined them all closely. *That woman in the crowd looks familiar, but it can't be...* I thought. I was going to be queen, so it was essential that I learn how to engage the commonfolk.

Before I'd even realized what I was doing, I was leaning pretty hard against the balcony rail.

“The balcony’s pretty sturdy, but it’s not worth the risk,” said Seth, as he wrapped his arm around my waist and gently pulled me away from the rail.

This threw me into a complete tizzy. I felt like I was going to melt on the spot, all because he’d wrapped his arm around me. I backed away from the balcony rail, as if to make a run for it. Seth gave me an awkward smile, but he said nothing. Then he turned to look in another direction.

The rest of the ceremony unfolded in much the same manner. On the surface, at least, there had been no wrinkles whatsoever. Privately, though, I was ruminating the entire time on why Seth was always so nice to me.

I mean, he was being *way* too nice, considering that he’d basically been forced to propose to me. But why? I thought and thought, but no answer came to me.

Then, finally, it hit me. *Of course…* I’d completely forgotten, but I was his *best friend*.

All this time, I’d been thinking that Seth had had no choice but to propose to me after he’d broken things off with Lady Rose. He was a king, and he needed a queen. That was all there was to it…or so I’d thought. But I was wrong. Seth wasn’t some pitiful loser with no options. How could he be, when he was so determined and hardworking? He’d been doing everything in his power, ever since he was a child, to prepare for his ascent to the throne. So why had he proposed to me, then?

Or rather: For whose *sake* had he done that?

The ceremony was coming to an end. Seth made his closing remarks and offered his hand to me. I took it and clasped it in mine.

We were doing exactly what we’d practiced. Everything was going exactly as planned. And yet…

I looked up at him hesitantly.

But instead of focusing on my self-consciousness, I was focused on how long it had been since I’d last looked into his eyes like this. Ever since that final moment with Lady Rose, I’d started to avoid his gaze without even thinking. I felt so guilty for what I’d done, I couldn’t even look at him.

For the first time in a long time, I looked straight up at him. He gave me a sweet, gentle smile.

I didn't feel any passion or romance in his smile, although that was to be expected. But there was definitely tenderness in his eyes. I could feel his affection for me.

The two of us walked back inside the castle, still holding hands. Now that the ceremony was over, all that was left was for us to change out of our ceremonial attire. That meant that we had just a little time on our hands.

"What do you plan to make of the kingdom once you're in charge?" I asked him, before I'd even realized what I was saying.

Even though Seth's eventual ascent to the throne was a core part of who he was, I'd never once broached the topic. In the game *Lady Rose*, the protagonist falls in love with Seth as a man, not a king. So, I'd always assumed that I didn't really *need* to broach the topic of his eventual status as monarch. It wasn't that it felt like the topic was off-limits, though, or anything.

Seth answered my question immediately.

"I want it to be the kind of kingdom where *everyone* can live a happy life. Even the commonfolk at the farthest reaches of the land," he said.

I could sense the deeper meaning in his words. He was clearly thinking about Lady Rose, who'd only recently been cast out to live as a commoner. But I didn't press him on that.

"What kind of ruler would you like to be then?" I asked instead.

He answered that question just as quickly as he'd answered the last. His response was so instantaneous, it would have been impossible for him to have just come up with it on the spot.

"The kind of ruler who can bring a smile to the face of every subject in the kingdom and to those who stand beside me," he said.

"Those who stand beside me"... He means me, I thought, as fat tears rolled down my cheeks. I couldn't stop them. It felt like everything was coming together now.

The whole reason that Seth had proposed to me...was for *my* sake, wasn't it? After what had happened, it was easy to picture that our classmates at the academy and the other aristocrats might rebuke me. I'd just be the viscount's daughter who'd gotten Lady Rose expelled from high society. But by proposing to me, he'd spared me from that fate, because now I was the *future queen*.

Seth knew everything I had done, but he'd shouldered the

burden for me and reached out to catch me when I fell. Lady Rose had brushed him off when he'd offered a hand to her. She might not have meant to do that, but she had...and after that, there was nothing more he could do to help her. But he'd chosen to protect *me*. I'd lied and hurt the one person he loved most in the world, but he'd still decided I was worth keeping safe, because I was his friend. He'd put my feelings before his own.

I'd betrayed him, and Lady Rose had followed suit in quick succession. And yet, here he was, sheltering me... I couldn't believe his kindness. I didn't deserve him.

That's why I had to steel myself. I would do anything to make Seth happy, and I mean *anything*. No matter what happened to me, I had to ensure that he was happy.

I'm going to be a saint for him. This time, I mean it.

I smiled, and Seth smiled back at me happily. This felt like real happiness. *I guess I haven't really been happy all this time*, I thought. *I can't imagine that happiness is even possible, if you're always doing the wrong thing.*

I'd fix my mistakes, and then I'd *really* be happy. I wanted to find a kind of joy that felt authentic to me, even if it didn't make sense to anyone else. And if it was what made Seth happy, then nothing else mattered.

Chapter 8

I adjusted pretty quickly to life at the palace, although that might have just been thanks to my trauma-forged mental fortitude. Viscount Cain was actually a lot more upset about my sudden move than *I* was.

Since I'd just recently fired Shirley, a new personal maid was appointed to me.

"My name is Tifa. Please refer to me not as your maid but as your lady-in-waiting," she said, bowing her head. I recognized her from somewhere.

She looked a bit like a younger version of Shirley. She even had the same blue hair and pink eyes. But it wasn't just that she looked like someone I knew; I'd actually seen her before, several times...with Lady Rose.

Basically, she had to have been one of Lady Rose's former maids. But what was her relationship to Shirley?

Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure Shirley mentioned having a younger sister once. Maybe she was talking about Tifa?

It seemed like an awfully big coincidence that Tifa was now my maid—excuse me, *lady-in-waiting*. What a strange turn of events.

There were several maids in the palace, but a lady-in-waiting outranked them all. Tifa's insistence on the distinction gave me the impression that she must be quite a prideful woman, although maybe she was just used to being called that from back when she worked for Lady Rose. That was fine by me, though. I had a feeling we weren't going to become especially close.

As I was pondering all of this, Tifa raised her head and suddenly shot me a look that seemed an awful lot like a glare.

"You ought to know that I despise you for driving out Lady Felicia and putting me out of a job. There was no one I thought of more highly than her. Nevertheless, I intend to carry out my work to an impeccable standard. But if my words have offended you, then please feel free to demand my head," she said.

I blinked twice. Then I stared back at her.

I could easily understand her contempt for me. It didn't seem

like she was just trying to provoke me either.

Well, she seems like a good person, and she's nothing if not honest. Despite how she feels about me, she's also clearly earned a reputation for being trustworthy. Otherwise, she wouldn't be allowed to be alone with me like this. At least, she's as trustworthy as she can be, considering they probably stationed her here in the castle so they could keep an eye on her too. And she must be pretty smart if she managed to get herself appointed as my lady-in-waiting. She's clearly a very capable woman.

Her hatred and complete lack of desire to get to know me was convenient, at least. But I knew it was also kind of sad that I felt that way.

"A pleasure to meet you," I said, forcibly taking her hand.

She looked visibly displeased. *Good*, I thought.

"Well, I've got some business to take care of, so feel free to take a seat and have some tea or something," I said.

"No. I'll remain standing, thank you," she replied, swiftly retracting her hand.

I didn't mind whether she followed my suggestion or not, though. She could do as she pleased. I let her just stand next to the doorway and watch me while I resumed my investigation.

Sorry to say, Tifa, but I just don't have the time to deal with you right now.

Now that I'd made up my mind to make Seth happy, there was one thing that I absolutely *had* to take care of as a top priority. It was something that the protagonist had dealt with in the game, which is to say, something that *Lady Rose* was supposed to have dealt with.

I'm talking, of course, about saving the kingdom.

To be honest, up until now, I'd been so concerned with just romancing Seth that I hadn't really paid any mind to concerns like war or the kingdom's salvation. I mean, until I'd enrolled at Thea Academy, I'd kind of been counting on Seth to marry Lady Rose…so I'd fully expected *her* to do something about the fate of the nation. But now that she couldn't, the task fell to me. I had to do whatever I could to keep the war between Cabott Kingdom and the neighboring kingdom of Galion at bay. And if staving off war wasn't possible, then I at least had to minimize the damage.

That's why I was here in the palace's archive, reading everything

I could get my hands on about Galion.

Over the course of several days, I spent any time I could both at school and at the palace speed-reading all the documentation I could scrape together. As I sat on a bench in the school's rear garden, hiding from any curious onlookers, I concentrated on connecting the dots from what I'd read.

Yeah... There's definitely something strange *about all of this*, I thought.

Galion Kingdom was currently enjoying an uncanny period of peace. That didn't make a whole lot of sense, considering that at this point in the game they would have been suffering from financial ruin. A bad harvest and an epidemic should have been causing widespread fear and unrest. And yet none of that was reflected in the data I'd just read. I took a moment to pore over the documents again, reading every detail carefully from A to Z. If Galion was plotting a war, they sure were doing a good job of hiding it.

Sure, they could have just falsified all of their public records, but the more natural conclusion seemed to be that they weren't actually suffering from financial hardship at all.

All of the data seemed to suggest that they'd gone through a rough patch about ten years ago. As much as they'd tried to cover it up, it just wasn't possible to fully hide the state of decline they'd found themselves in. But they seemed to have undergone a steady recovery, and in the last five years, things had seemed relatively stable for them.

Something had changed the course of their fate. The kingdom seemed to have somehow averted the crisis that befell them in the game.

Someone must have pulled some strings to make this happen...but why?

If there was any possibility that this *someone* wanted to harm Seth, then I needed to talk to someone with influence from Galion and find out what had happened here. Fortunately, I knew both the prince of Galion and his aide from the game. That was actually part of the reason I was hoping to never have to cross paths with them, but as things stood now, they had the potential to be powerful allies. I'd just have to give my best shot at strengthening

our diplomatic ties.

Everything I do, I do in the service of becoming a saint for you, Seth.

As I was sitting quietly on the bench in the rear garden, alone and pondering all sorts of things, I heard the faintest sound in the distance: footsteps. They seemed to be drawing nearer and nearer. I turned and saw Melvin just a short distance away. *You again?* I wondered, my expression hardening.

I stood up, preparing to leave. Suddenly he was drawing *very* close—and then he passed me.

Huh? Wait… What was that all about? Was I just being full of myself assuming that he was here to see me?! God, how embarrassing!

Just as my expression hardened into an altogether different cast than the one it had lined up moments before, I heard a rustle from just behind me.

I whipped around and looked behind me to see Melvin, his back turned to me as he sat on the ground just behind the bench I'd been occupying.

What the heck?

"I'm just talking to myself here," he said suddenly and implausibly. He spoke loudly enough that I could hear him easily, even when he was speaking with his back turned to me.

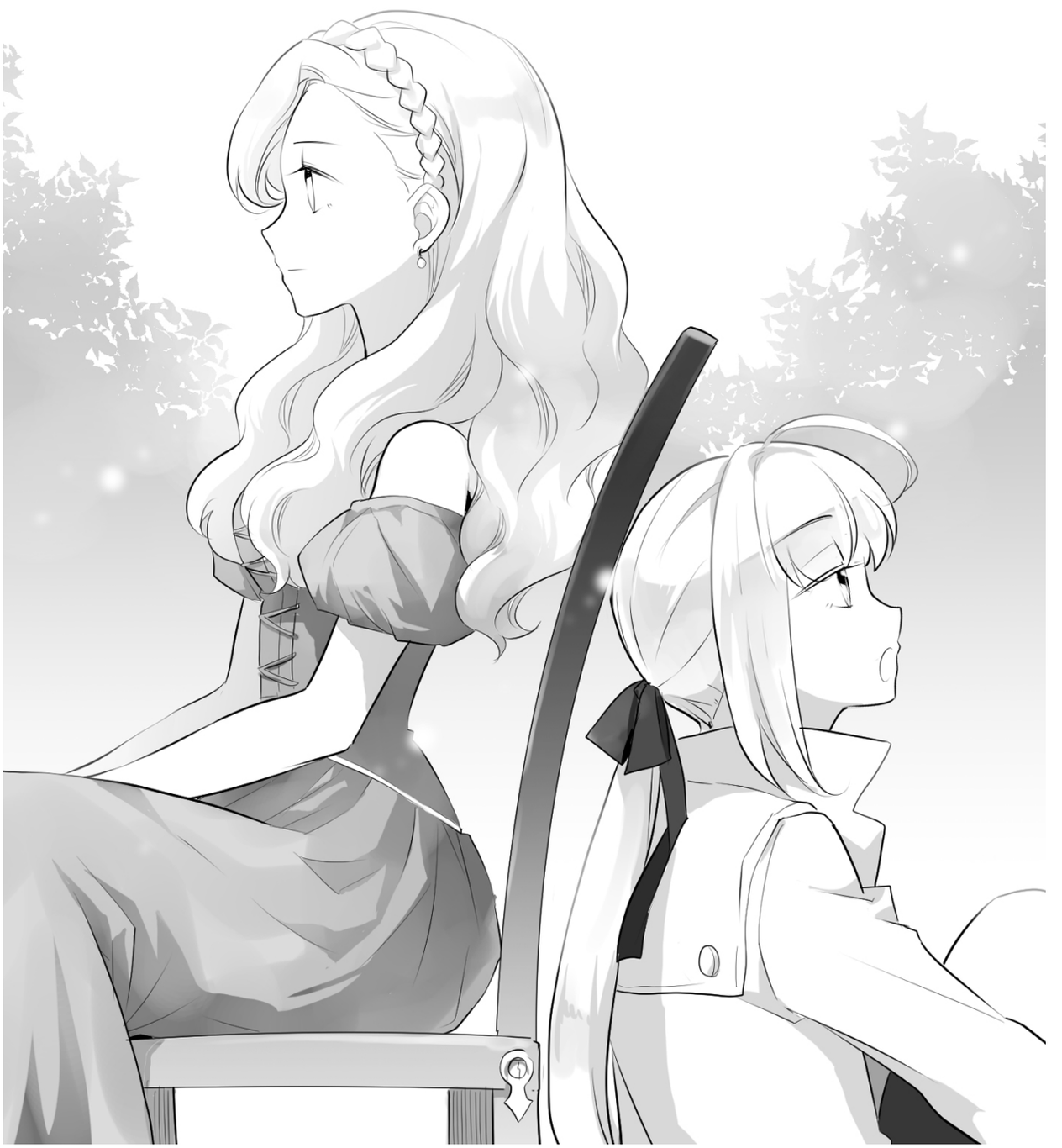
The implication was clear: *so just shut up and listen*. The whole situation had me feeling pretty flustered, but I figured I could at least hear him out, so I sat back down again. Instead of turning around to look at him, I looked straight ahead.

"I would probably be on high alert right now, if I were Liliana. Lady Rose is alive and well," came the voice from behind.

My eyes grew wide.

Lady Rose…is alive? How could she have survived being expelled from high society when she's such a dyed-in-the-wool noblewoman? I wondered. *I mean, I'm glad to hear she's okay, though. I'm genuinely happy that she's still alive.*

"And she's apparently pretty happy about the annulled engagement and her new commoner lifestyle. I heard that straight from the horse's mouth. She was also weirdly curious about what her stepbrother Shade's been up to lately," Melvin continued, his tone grave.



I can see his point that I should be on high alert. I certainly can't just ignore everything he's said, I thought. There was a real possibility that *Lady Rose* could have been the one pulling strings with Galion. I didn't think she was a bad person, mind you—after all, she was my *victim*—but I knew how much influence she held, and my unwelcome presence in this universe seemed to have made her deviate from the script somewhat. It wasn't out of the question that, in this universe, at least, her influence might have extended to even the neighboring kingdom's economy.

Surely that was a wild leap of logic, though, wasn't it? Or...was it?

"Anyway, if I breathe a *word* of this to anyone, I'll apparently have to become her servant or something. Good thing I'm just talking to myself here..."

Her "servant"? Melvin, what in the world are you talking about?

He'd sounded so serious when he'd said that, but maybe that was just part of the joke? I mean, in what universe could *Melvin Crabitt* be someone's servant? Not only was his father a duke but an exceptionally powerful, high-ranking one at that.

Either way, though, despite the guilt I felt toward Lady Rose, it'd probably be wise to handle her with care.

"I didn't mention anything about my friendship with Liliana, though. I talked about her like she was a stranger, and I don't think Lady Rose suspected that we had any deeper relationship. So, even if she *is* scheming something, I don't think I've done anything to put Liliana in her crosshairs, at least."

From the way he said that, it sounded a lot like Melvin had gone to speak with Lady Rose for *my* sake and he was prepared to protect me if it seemed I was in any danger. I knew he had a big heart, but he didn't need to go out of his way like that for me. I brought nothing but trouble, and I had a feeling that I was becoming an extraordinary burden on him.

Melvin must have said his piece, because after that, I heard the rustling of him standing up behind me. Then came the sound of footsteps. He must have been leaving, but I didn't turn around, nor did I acknowledge his friendship in any way.

But I did whisper, "Thank you...even if you *were* just talking to yourself, I appreciate it."

"No problem. I was just talking to myself though."

Until the day I died my second death in this world, I had a feeling that the bond I shared with Melvin would never be broken.

It was a thought that filled me with equal parts joy, pain...and fear.



Between the engagement and the official engagement ceremony, I'd headed straight to the church whenever I'd found the time for a visit. In my prayers, I'd alternated again and again between chants of gratitude and penance.

I felt that I'd committed a grave sin, and yet, I felt absolutely paralyzed to make any real restitution. The only path forward seemed to be staying the course. I said nothing to Seth or Lady Rose and instead unburdened myself to God in a pure stream of consciousness, that I might force myself to keep moving forward.

It was purely motivated by selfishness, but the fleeting relief that I felt from being forgiven was somehow enough to help me get back on my feet again.

I was still paying the church frequent visits. But the reason for my visits had changed.

"This time, I want to become the kind of woman who's *really* worthy of being called a 'saint,'" I announced resolutely as I knelt before the cross. I wanted to declare my intentions aloud to God so that I'd never go back on my word and sin again.

I visited the church again and again, each time repeating those same words.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day," I said finally and stood up. The hem of my party dress swayed gently as I moved. I'd be attending a function immediately after leaving the church. I'd had to get dressed early to make it here in time. The church was actually on the way to the house where the party was being held, but I could tell that Tifa was annoyed by the stop. She probably thought I was being willful for no reason.

I quickly exited the church and returned to the carriage, where Tifa was waiting for me. The look she gave me was as contemptuous as always.

"Are we finished here, Miss Saint? Let's hurry straight to the

party. We're running short on time," said Tifa sarcastically.

"Miss...*Saint*?" I repeated, baffled, as I looked to her for an explanation.

I assumed that she'd been too far away to hear anything, but maybe she'd caught my whispering? Or maybe she'd just heard the pastor or the nun call me that?

"I'm hardly deserving of a title like that. Why, I'm really nothing of the sort, so please don't—"

"Nonsense, Miss Saint. There's no need to be humble," Tifa interrupted.

You can't possibly mean that, I thought, giving her an awkward smile. She seemed pleased by my discomfort.

Well... She keeps up appearances in public, but I suppose I'll just have to get used to this sarcastic title when we're alone, I thought. *Actually, maybe I should just think of this as a little push? It'll put on some much-needed pressure.*

"I'll do my very best to earn that title, then, Tifa," I told her.

She said nothing, regarding me with only a scornful look in reply.

No matter how kind I am to her, she'll probably never warm up to me, so I'd better not let my guard down, I thought as I stepped into the carriage. I knew that Tifa would probably be insulted to know that I thought about her that way, but could you blame me?

Even I wouldn't make a point of stopping by the church for no reason during a busy period like this, though. *Give me some credit here, Tifa.*

Prince Nolan of Galion and his aide, Zero, would be at the party today. It was pretty hard to figure out what Prince Nolan was thinking, making a point of showing up to a relatively small party like today's when he'd never deigned to attend one of the *palace* parties. He was an obnoxiously unpredictable young man.

But enough about that. The important thing was that this was a golden opportunity to wheedle some information out of them about Galion's current situation and what (if anything) had happened to change the course of their history. I needed answers, and the whole reason I'd stopped by the church today was to help me get in fighting shape to pursue them.

My first course of action when I arrived at the party was to greet the king, after which I went to greet Seth before anyone else

could get to him. After saying hello to him, I quickly set off to look for Nolan and Zero, the prince of Galion and his aide.

Thanks to their eminent status, I assumed it would be no problem for me to greet them and have a quick chat. And because Seth and I were still only engaged—not married—no one would bat an eye if we made our rounds at the party separately.

It only took me a few moments to spot a young man with distinctive bloodred hair. Its striking color gave him a fierce impression, which was enhanced by the fact that the resting state of his face seemed to be a penetrating glower, but he seemed to be perfectly at ease at the party.

I recognized him instantly as Nolan Galion. He was surrounded by people who seemed to be genuinely quite taken with him, rather than hangers-on who just wanted to bask in the presence of a prince. His expressive face and disarming smile drew people to him, and it was clear that they weren't intimidated by him.

In the game, he gave off the impression of a bloodthirsty young man who easily wormed his way into people's hearts and always seemed on the edge of slitting throats on a whim. His affable nature and candor were probably completely genuine, but that didn't mean that he didn't have a calculating side too. He had a real talent for breezily endearing himself to people and carving out a place at their sides and in their hearts.

I'd spotted him at several high society events, since he was often summoned from his kingdom to attend.

I'd always sensed that he must be pretty smart. He was clearly sharp, and he had the kind of creativity that wasn't fettered by convention. I'd fully expected that he might see right through me, down to all the most unflattering, scheming parts of me. It wouldn't have been surprising if he'd dropped all social graces and taken our conversation to a dark place, so I'd always been careful to keep my distance. The last thing I'd ever wanted was to incite him to some outburst that might jeopardize Cabott Kingdom in any way.

But things were different now.

Of course I didn't want to put the kingdom at risk, but I wasn't the least bit afraid now of my own death. I felt newly emboldened to step into the ring and strike up a conversation.

Besides, it wasn't Nolan that I wanted to talk to.

I stole a glance at the tall, glasses-wearing man at Nolan's side. Zero had the look of an intellectual and comported himself with the grace of someone who never lost his cool. Seeing my glance, Zero looked over to Nolan. The two of them then swiftly made their way over to me.

"Prince Nolan, such a pleasure to see you here," I said. "Please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Liliana Inoce."

"Just a sec..." replied Nolan. Then, after a pause, he continued, "Liliana, huh? Riiiight... You're the new future queen, ain'tcha? Well, excuse my poor manners, and nice to meet you. I'm Nolan Galion."

"Please, Your Highness. We're at a party, not an official diplomatic ceremony. There's no need for formalities with me. I'm merely the prince's fiancée at the moment, and nothing more than a viscount's daughter."

"Huh? Wait, for real? You're a viscount's daughter? Well, damn. That's quite the promotion. You must be pretty ambitious, huh?"

"You misunderstand, Your Highness. I've never had any ambition to be queen."

"Yeah? Huh..."

Nolan's steadfast refusal to beat around the bush gave me the impression that he'd be a real thorn in the side for anyone power hungry and insecure. It was hard to tell with him whether or not he was actually interested in hearing my answer to his question, if he was just blurting out his unfiltered thoughts for the hell of it, or if it was somehow a strategic ploy. Whatever the case was, I'd had enough. I quickly brought our conversation to a close and turned to Zero, the man at his side.

"I'm sure it must be quite the surprise for you as well, Lord Zero, that the prince of Cabott Kingdom suddenly has a different fiancée. But I hope I can look forward to a productive relationship with you and your kingdom," I said.

"I appreciate you extending your kind regards to me. Cabott Kingdom has certainly been through some challenging changes lately, hasn't it?"

"While it pains me to admit it, yes, we certainly have. I suppose you both were well acquainted with the prince's previous fiancée, Lady Felicia?" I asked, doing my best to adopt a casual tone.

"Nah, not really. Right, Zero?" said Nolan.

"Yes, I wouldn't say we knew her all that well. We've exchanged

pleasantries with her in the past, of course, and her elegance certainly leaves an impression. But she never seemed particularly interested in developing any sort of close relationship with us," Zero added.

"Yeah. She just seemed like some kinda supercharged noblewoman archetype, y'know? I'm not really into that."

Nolan didn't seem to be lying. Still...it was my first time encountering anyone with so little interest in Lady Rose. Even if Zero was just completely dedicated to his duties, Nolan seemed genuinely unimpressed by her.

Not that I have any interest in any man but Seth, but...didn't Nolan make a roundabout comment like that in the game about preferring unladylike women? If classic noblewomen aren't his type, then I guess it would make sense that he wouldn't be into Lady Rose, who's basically the platonic ideal of a noblewoman.

But never mind that. I'm getting sidetracked. Time to get back to the topic at hand.

"I mean no offense in bringing this up, but I've heard through the grapevine that your kingdom's poor harvest is still ongoing," I prompted, with a concerned expression. I was hoping that limiting the scope of my question to their crops would make it seem like I was just concerned for their well-being.

I waited nervously for their response, mentally running some simulations of every possible reply and how I would respond.

"You sure know your stuff," said Nolan, sounding completely unfazed. It was clear that he wasn't pretending too; he *genuinely* didn't care that I knew about that.

Strange... In the game, the poor harvest was treated as a major secret, coming to light only as war was just about to break out.

"You heard correctly, but you needn't worry. Your king provided us with much-needed financial support during the most dire period. Thanks to his intervention, the situation isn't quite so grim these days," Zero added, just as casually as Nolan.

I couldn't let go of what he'd just said, though. The king had provided Galion with financial support during the most dire period...?

"Please pardon my asking, but could you perhaps tell me when, exactly, His Majesty provided this assistance?" I asked.

"Li'l less than ten years ago now, maybe?"

“Yes, exactly as Prince Nolan said. It was during the epidemic, which would have been eight years ago.”

“Apparently some little girl prophesied the whole thing. I’m still not sure I totally believe all of that prophecy stuff, but it got your king to give us the support we needed, so I’m sure as hell not complainin’. Hey, do you know who that little girl was? She must really be somethin’ if her words hold enough weight for the *king* to act on them.”

I’d never heard of someone who was able to make real prophecies before. It was hard to believe that a prophet would have spurred the king to action like that.

In the game, our kingdom never provided Galion with any kind of financial support. The king made a comment about *wishing* that he had, but that was about it. He lamented that everything could have been different if only he’d known what was happening.

A little girl…? How could a little girl have been influential enough to spur the king to action? If this was eight years ago, then I would have been seven years old. What little girls would have been in the king’s orbit back then…?

I was grateful for all the networking and studying I’d done as a child. I felt confident that I could land on the answer to this with just a little brainstorming.

The only person who fit the bill—both in terms of her gender and age at the time—was the prince’s fiancée, Lady Rose. Her prophecy was a very tidy way to prevent a war. There was no doubt in my mind that she would have *had* to have known the future to predict something like that. But the only way that would have been possible was if she’d been reincarnated into this world, just like me—and there was *no way* that was the case. I mean, one look at her was all it had taken to completely put me in my place. A protagonist *that* perfect, *that* refined, and *that* beautiful couldn’t possibly be on the same playing field.

Besides, if Lady Rose *had* been reincarnated, then it wouldn’t have made any sense for her to just accept the death sentence that had been handed to her when her engagement to Seth had been annulled. After all, she would have known that Seth was expecting her to jump in and deny my accusations.

Sure, maybe she could actually survive as a peasant (thanks to her past life experience), but why would she ever choose that life?

She would have grown used to the comforts of an aristocratic life in this world, and even though it might not have all of the conveniences of the world in her past life, it would have been a hell of a lot better than living as a peasant. Besides, even if she'd been a part of the middle class in her past life, that was a much cushier life than a commoner's in this world.

Melvin had said she was doing well now, though. According to him, she was *happy* with her current life and happy that the engagement had been annulled.

I just couldn't wrap my head around it. Her happy ending had been all but guaranteed. All she'd had to do was not screw it up, and she was smart enough to avoid that. But she'd thrown it all away on purpose, and now she was *happy*? I couldn't understand the logic behind it at all.

Melvin had said something about how she might be scheming something. That seemed like a pretty solid theory to me too.

But if she wasn't reincarnated, then what *was* her deal? Was she a legitimate prophet? No...that didn't take into account what a mastermind she was. The most natural conclusion was that she'd done copious amounts of research and was plotting something.

"If you happen to come into contact with Felicia Schwarose again, I would greatly appreciate it if you could let me know," I said.

"Huh? Why? Considering she isn't here today, she's probably either been cast out of the public eye or sentenced to death, right?" said Nolan.

"No. She's living as a commoner now, so I doubt you'll cross paths. But...if you *happen* to...I would appreciate the notice."

I didn't know what Lady Rose was up to, but if she was hatching a dangerous plot of some sort, then it seemed reasonable to assume that the war-hungry, bloodthirsty Nolan might come knocking on her door before too long.

Zero looked deep in thought. It seemed he'd caught my drift and was considering the likelihood that Lady Rose was the little prophet girl. He probably would have also realized how unusual it was that she was now living as a commoner.

That's right, Zero. Keep your guard up around her.

I looked over at Nolan, curious to see how it was all sitting with him. To my surprise, he was *beaming*, and there was a strange,

excited glint in his eyes that gave me a sinking feeling.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa... Back up a sec. You said she was a *commoner* now?! That picture-perfect noblewoman is a *commoner*?! This is frickin' wild! I love it!"

Oh, God! I thought, repulsed. It was like watching a grade school boy light up after finding a giant rhinoceros beetle.

Zero looked at him too, seeming just as concerned as I was.

"Prince Nolan, let us *please* consider what this young woman has just told us. The implications of this are enormous. We need to strategize and consider our next moves," he said.

"Huh? You can do whatever strategizin' you like, but leave me out of it. I only wanna talk about shit that catches my interest."

Oh, come on, I wanted to say to him. *I know you hate to listen to Zero, but can't you tell this is important?*

Surely this meant that Nolan didn't have any reason to start a war with Cabott now, right? I mean, the ruinous state of Galion had only ever been a pretense anyway, but now there *was* no pretense. Even Nolan wouldn't start a war out of foppery and whim, right?

I knew that what I *really* had to be worried about was Lady Rose. What if *she* wanted to start a war? Or what if she wanted to use a war to gain some sort of foothold in the kingdom for her own personal gain?

It pained me to think that I might have bungled this; all I'd managed to do was fan the flames of Nolan's curiosity and push him further in Lady Rose's direction. Zero might be approaching her with caution, careful to suss out her motives, but Nolan seemed perfectly ready to show up on her doorstep all because he got a kick out of the whole situation. As I was trying to figure out how to recover from this misstep, I could sense Nolan peering unabashedly into my face, making absolutely no attempt at discretion.

"Y'know, it's too bad. You're obviously a smart cookie, but you've got no confidence, and you sure don't look very happy," he said.

It felt a little weird to hear that after I'd made such an obvious blunder, but it was flattering nonetheless. I knew Nolan well enough to know that he wouldn't say something like that unless he meant it.

He was right that I lacked confidence, but I was troubled by the

other bit. Why would he say the same thing Melvin had said to me about seeming unhappy?

"I won't argue with you on the rest, but please retract the latter half. I'm perfectly happy, thank you," I protested.

"If you're so happy, then how 'bout a smile? Look, if this kingdom is suffocating you, come with me. I'll take you back to *my* kingdom."

Nolan flashed me a big smile, as if to say, *See? Like* this*!*

I thought I *had* been smiling, but apparently my face wasn't doing what I thought it was. *Guess I've still got a long way to go*, I thought.

That was neither here nor there, though. More importantly…what was this strange feeling I was getting? It was just a gut response, really, but I couldn't help feeling that the Nolan in this universe was somehow different from the one I'd encountered in the game. In the game, he'd *acted* friendly and innocent, but he was actually brutal and bloodthirsty deep down. I couldn't imagine the kind of guy who wouldn't hesitate to stomp all over someone's heart saying something *nice* like that to me for no reason, especially not when we barely even knew each other.

It's not like he was even all that interested in me—at least, not as far as I could tell. I was a pretty average noblewoman, so I didn't have any of the eccentricities that would have drawn him to me.

Then there was Zero. For some reason, he was looking at Nolan with a pained look on his face, but it wasn't the kind of look that he wore when he was just *frustrated* with Nolan. There was something more to it…something strange about it. It was almost like there was a trace of *guilt* in it.

Have I touched on something from their past? I wondered. There was nothing I could think of from the game, but maybe there was something that the game hadn't included. Whatever it was, I seemed to have accidentally pulled on their heartstrings.

Either that, or…maybe Nolan was just *nicer* in this world, thanks to Lady Rose saving his kingdom from the brink of ruin? But that still didn't explain the changes I was noticing in Zero…

Was Lady Rose the X factor? I mean, she was *obviously* suspicious… But she apparently hadn't even been on their radar until now, so, taking that into account, maybe it was someone

else? Whatever the situation was, it was clear that someone other than me was screwing around with the game's canon.

I didn't yet know whether that would be a blessing or a curse for Seth, though. I'd have to keep probing until I knew more.

Oh, right. Nolan was just asking me if I wanted to move to his kingdom. My answer was so obvious to me, I forgot to even say it out loud.

"I'd rather die than betray Prince Seth," I declared.

"Yeah? Fair enough. I guess Heaven's probably a nicer place than this dump, huh? I feel you. I'm looking forward to kickin' the bucket one day and takin' a one-way trip to Heaven too," Nolan replied cheerfully.

A guy hell-bent on going to Heaven wouldn't start a war...right? I thought. I looked over at Zero, fully expecting him to weigh in with a witty remark.

"Heaven, hmm? Personally, I have my doubts as to whether Heaven even exists to begin with," he said quietly.

That's...not quite the witty remark I was looking for, Zero. We're not actually having a religious or philosophical discussion here. Why're you getting so hung up on that angle, anyway?

"What do *you* think? You a believer or nah?" Nolan asked me, for some reason.

Seriously, why are we talking about this? And why are you asking me what I *think? I couldn't care less about this.*

"No. I don't believe in Heaven."

"Not much of a dreamer, huh?" he sighed.

If Heaven *was* real, then surely I would have made it there at the end of my past life. I'd been a good, upright person, but instead of going to Heaven, I'd been given another life to live here in this world. So, sure, I guess you *could* say I wasn't much of a dreamer.

I appreciated the second chance I'd been given, but I wished that God had at least erased my memories of my past life. No matter how much I tried to forget them or dismiss them as unimportant, the despair of all I had lost clung to me and refused to leave my head. That's why my only option was to yearn for Seth and only Seth. I couldn't turn my attention to anything else; winning Seth's heart was all I could do.

Well, okay...I *did* have other options, but it was obviously much

more pleasant and enjoyable to live my life with a positive attitude and choose Seth every time.

"Can't blame you for bein' an unbeliever, though. You've probably never met an angel before," said Nolan, with a pitying tone.

Wait, what? Are you living in some kind of fairy-tale world? I thought, incredulous. I had a feeling that asking him about these "angels" wouldn't get us anywhere, though, so I decided to just leave it.

After that exchange, I quickly wrapped up the conversation and took my leave. I was exhausted and a little demoralized from the mixed results of my reconnaissance. I felt a headache coming on, but as Seth's fiancée, I had obligations to uphold. So, I continued to make the rounds, greeting all of the VIPs and exchanging various pleasantries.



By this point, I was getting less than three hours of sleep a day.

I was barely eating too. I requested minimalist meals that could be eaten quickly and which were just barely sufficient to satisfy my nutritional needs. I really appreciated that the palace chef was both willing and able to accommodate that. I couldn't taste anything anyway, so food didn't do much for me other than give me the energy I needed.

Besides, I wouldn't have had any time to relish meals, even if I could. I needed to solve this Lady Rose puzzle and look into any suspicious domestic organizations and financial comings and goings that might shed a light on the situation with Galion. Separately, I needed to prove my worth as Seth's fiancée now that I was living here in the palace and take the initiative to help him with his duties as crown prince.

Seth had been reluctant to let me help with anything, telling me that I didn't need to concern myself with his work. But I *wanted* to help, and once I'd reassured him that his work would go faster with my assistance (and that I would respect the confidentiality of any matters that were for his eyes only), he ended up acknowledging my capabilities and letting me lend a hand.

I had my hands full now, but not so full that I didn't have time

for anything else. Still, while I might have had the *time* to continue my personal investigation, I felt like I was hitting a wall now for other reasons. Turns out there's only so much information that a viscount's daughter is privy to.

Of course, I just so happened to be acquainted with someone who was intimately familiar with the kingdom's financial matters, but I couldn't bring myself to ask him for help with this—not even for Seth's sake, and not even when I knew that he was probably *waiting* for me to ask. Of all the people I cared about, he was the only one I'd managed to avoid causing problems for. Sure, he'd taken it upon himself to do some digging for me, but my sins had yet to cause him any pain, and I wanted to keep it that way.

The Crabitt family single-handedly controls the flow of money in the kingdom, but there are other ways to get the information I'm looking for. Maybe I could cozy up to some of their subcontractors? I'm also in a prime position to get close to the kingdom's treasurer or financial minister.

I was sitting at my desk, weighing my options, when I heard a knock at the door. I looked toward the door, expecting that it might be a servant with my meal.

"It's Nicholas Cabott. Do you have a moment?"

Brother-in-law?!

I twisted around so forcefully in my chair that I almost sent it clattering to the floor with me, but fortunately, I somehow managed to avert that. I was so flustered that my first thought was to be proud of my physical conditioning.

Thank God for all the self-defense lessons and the core training I did to make sure I could walk with good posture. Wait… Why am I wasting time patting myself on the back for that? I need to say something to my brother-in-law!

"Please, come in," I said.

After a long pause, he replied, "I'm afraid that wouldn't be proper, when we're both unmarried. You may be Seth's fiancée, but I wouldn't feel comfortable entering your room."

Oh. Right. Duh. I forgot what a gentleman (and a stickler for the rules) he is.

It was clear that I had no choice but to meet him at the door or in the hallway, so I rose from my chair and made my way over.

My brother-in-law was accompanied by the two Peerless Death

Gods, who, as usual, were standing at his side and staring at me blankly.

Doesn't he hate me? I thought. *Why would he make a point of visiting me like this?*

We passed each other in the halls sometimes and made trivial small talk, but that was about the extent of our relationship. Even if he needed to speak with me in person about some important business matter, couldn't he just tell me through the door?

"You're going to make yourself sick if you carry on like this," he said finally, after staring at me for several moments. There wasn't a trace of sympathy or concern in his voice. The implication was clear: *think about the impact that will have on the palace*.

"I'll take better care of myself. But please rest assured, I'm meeting all of my sleep and nutritional needs. I don't believe I'm at any risk of falling ill."

"I wasn't referring to your physical well-being," he replied. "But no matter. I won't press the issue."

Then what were *you referring to?* I wondered. He'd been peering at my face when he'd said that, so I'd assumed it was my somewhat haggard appearance that had prompted that comment.

It didn't matter, though. I knew he hadn't come here to make pointless small talk, so I decided to just drop it.

After a long pause, he spoke up again.

"What do you think of Felicia?" he asked me, looking at me intently. There was a probing look in his eyes.

What's he after? Why would he ask me that?

If I'd answered honestly, my most charitable reply would have been that I found her disagreeable. My *less* charitable reply would have been that I simply thought she was selfish. It didn't really feel like I had any way out of speaking poorly of her.

I should probably try to avoid bringing feelings into this.

"Leaving Prince Seth and the annulment out of it… I suppose I find her a bit unsettling. Ever since I first met her, when we were only five years old, I've struggled to tell what she's thinking."

There was only one instance in the entirety of my acquaintance with her that I'd felt confident I knew what was going through her head. It was when we'd first officially met and she'd regarded me with a look that conveyed clearly that she thought I was *cute*. I could only assume that Lady Rose must have underestimated me,

assuming that I would just act exactly as she expected me to rather than having a mind of my own. She probably thought I was cute in a *pathetic* way.

"I mean no offense by this, but…I simply can't say with any confidence that she seems, well, *human*."

Despite my insistence that I meant no offense, it was a pretty disrespectful thing to say. I gave my brother-in-law a strained smile, fully aware that he might consider it an insult.

But he didn't seem the least bit offended.

"I can't figure out what she's thinking either," he muttered quietly, instead.

He even *smiled*, which was a pretty rare sight. It wasn't a cold, mocking smile or a fake smile either. It was a slightly childlike, troubled smile.

I realized that this was probably the smile he reserved for Lady Rose. *He must smile often around her*, I thought. *Oh… Maybe he's got a bad case of unrequited love too?*

It was just a gut feeling, but I felt pretty confident that I was right.

One of the Peerless Death Gods had made a comment before about how he and I were alike. I'd had no idea what he was talking about back then, but now I understood: He meant that both my brother-in-law and I had harbored unrequited feelings for Seth and Lady Rose, who had been engaged to each other.

I guess we are *kind of in the same boat…*

This also explained my brother-in-law's feelings about *me*. We were in similar positions, and yet I'd stolen my rival's place through underhanded means. No wonder he hated me—no, *despised* me. That would piss anyone off.

But there was still the question of Lady Rose, whom both Seth and his brother loved. Ultimately, I just didn't buy that she was a bad person. As inscrutable as she was, it seemed unimaginable to me that Seth and my brother-in-law would have so drastically misjudged her like that.

The picture that I was forming of her from the situation with Galion was certainly suspicious. But putting that aside, I'd been watching her like a hawk since we were only five years old. No matter how jealous or resentful I might have felt toward her, she'd never seemed like a bad person to me.

“I should go,” said my brother-in-law.

It seemed he’d asked all that he’d come here to ask, although I had no idea whether my answers had satisfied him or not.

“W-Wait…! Please,” I called after him suddenly.

It was only after I’d stopped him that I realized there was something I wanted to ask him too. If he and I were in the same boat, then what I wanted to know was…

“Do you think it’s possible to change your fate?”

“Fate,” to me, meant the cruel possibility that all of the blessings I’d enjoyed in my past life could be taken from me in an instant. No matter how hard I worked to change my fate, it eluded me—as if it were *taunting* me. And yet, it kept shoving karma into my face again and again.

As much as I hated fate, I felt resigned to accept that it was impossible to rebel against it. I’d given up long ago on the idea that I could change it. I’d given up on my chances of ever making Seth look my way too. All I cared about now was becoming a saint in service of him. Nothing else mattered.

I’d given up. But what about my brother-in-law? Had he?

Almost ten whole seconds of silence passed; he seemed lost in his thoughts. Then he softly cast his gaze to the floor.

“How should I know?” His mutter was almost a whisper.

I was a little surprised by his response. I’d fully expected him to give me an immediate “no.” I thought he’d probably suggested I “just give up” that one time in the hallway because I’d done something that he himself had already given up on long ago.

But based on the answer he’d just given me, he *hadn’t* given up yet.

“I hope you can change your fate, dear brother-in-law,” I said to him with a smile. I meant those words from the bottom of my heart.

I had no idea what he thought of that, or if he’d even want to hear a sentiment like that from me, considering how much he despised me. But it was my sincere hope that he—and anyone else who hadn’t given up—could find a way to change his fate and be happy.

Chapter 9

I felt like I was going to get used to people's spiteful looks before too long.

My brother-in-law's glares paled in comparison to the murderous intent I sensed from other folks, and it felt like I was getting those looks more and more by the day.

So, this is what it feels like when people want you dead…

I'd had a pretty strong reaction to them initially. I'd flinch when I felt them, and I'd notice a drop in my stomach. But by now they didn't really bother me anymore.

I felt those looks on me often when I was at school, so I figured that there must be one person from whom they disproportionately originated. I wasn't interested in taking any precautionary measures to protect myself, though. *If someone wants to assassinate me, let them*, I thought, despite the terror of death that had burned itself into my memory ever since I'd died in my past life and reawakened in this one.

Maybe I was just starting to grow numb to everything. I'd been spending a lot more time lately discussing domestic affairs with palace officials, and that had been further cutting into time I might have otherwise spent sleeping. I didn't feel like my physical health had taken a major hit, but maybe I was becoming more apathetic or something. I couldn't complain, though. If anything, that was probably to my advantage.

"You… You *are* picking up on this, aren't you?" asked my lady-in-waiting, Tifa, the moment that we took off in the carriage ride back home from school.

It was unusual for her to strike up a conversation with me outside of a purely work-related context—unless she was being snide, that is.

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, *that glare*. You turned around for a moment to look for the source, didn't you? Surely you must feel it too?"

Oh. She means that murderous hostility, doesn't she? Come to think of it, yes, I did pick up on that just before I got into the carriage.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then why aren’t you taking any precautionary measures? I’m sure His Highness—or anyone else in the palace—would be happy to help you put some into place if you let them know about this. Aren’t you concerned that someone might have designs on your life?”

“There’s no need for any precautionary measures. I see no value in protecting my life. If I were to suddenly depart from this world, I would regret that I would never be able to repay the debt I owe to Prince Seth. But truthfully, the chance to disappear forever would be very welcome,” I said dispassionately.

I was far more interested in poring over documents I’d brought with me on the kingdom’s domestic affairs than discussing this. But then I thought of Tifa and the impact it would have on her. I lifted my head, tearing my eyes away from the documents to look at her.

“Of course, I can appreciate that my disappearance would mean the end of your employment. I’m sure you’d be pleased to see me go, on an emotional level, but I apologize for any logistical inconvenience that it may cause you,” I said.

Tifa said nothing in reply to my roundabout apology.

Actually, no…I really can’t say for certain whether she said anything or not. Because in the next moment, just as it seemed that the world had suddenly gone quiet, everything went black. The only thing I was aware of was that I’d collapsed on the spot, as if someone had cut a cord that had been holding me up.

I don’t remember anything after that.



As soon as I regained consciousness, I was struck with the realization that I wasn’t in the carriage anymore but in my bedroom in the palace.

Obviously I’ve been sleeping in bed for a while now, but how did I get here, and what was I doing before that? Was I just on autopilot? I wondered. *And why do I feel this strange sense of urgency?*

Right… I remember being in the carriage. I’m pretty sure I passed out on the way home from school. Maybe I dozed off because I haven’t been getting enough sleep? That’s not good…

I turned suddenly to my lady-in-waiting standing in the corner of my room, who was watching me.

"Tifa, what time is it?" I asked her.

"Six o'clock," she replied.

So, I've been asleep for three hours, then. Thank God... That means I can still make it.

I was supposed to attend the leadership meeting today. If I got dressed *now*, I still had a chance of making it in time.

I got up out of bed and walked over to Tifa.

"Tifa, I need to hurry. Please, help me get ready qui—"

"You need to rest, my lady," Tifa interrupted chidingly, without letting me get another word in. She raised an eyebrow at me.

Tifa might have despised me, but she never let that get in the way of her work. She always put her feelings to the side and performed her job admirably. Why was she arguing with me about this?

"But I've just had a little rest. Please, there's no time. I need to —"

"It's too late."

"What?"

"Lady Liliana, you've been asleep for a whole day."

It was highly unusual for Tifa to call me anything other than "Miss Saint" when we were alone together. But more than the way she addressed me, it was what she'd just said that made me freeze.

"The doctor's diagnosis was 'exhaustion.' He suggested that it may be just as psychological as it is physical. He seemed to think that you've been pushing yourself too hard, so his recommendation was a weeklong bed rest."

I passed out from exhaustion? I've...been working too hard?

I could feel all of the color draining from my face as I took it in.

I've screwed up. I've really, really screwed up now. I've been doing everything I possibly could to be the kind of woman worthy of standing at Seth's side—someone fit for the role of queen. Even though I've done things I can't take back—no, because *of those things I've done—I've been working so hard to be a saint in service of him. And yet...*

What damage had my collapse caused? What had become of the leadership meeting that I was supposed to attend? How much

had I inconvenienced the people around me and let them down? What was *Seth* thinking about all of this?

I felt pathetic. How was I going to hold a candle to Lady Rose—the woman who, by all rights, should have been here in my place—when I couldn't even look after my health?

"Lady…Liliana?" asked Tifa hesitantly, her voice wavering.

Give me just a moment, okay, Tifa? I'll be able to respond once I collect myself here.

It's going to be okay. This is hardly the first time I've screwed up. I'll get back on my feet again, I know it. I'll be okay. I'll be okay. I'll be okay. All I have to do is put a smile on my face and keep pushing, just like I always—

My thoughts were interrupted by the strange sensation of something *wet* rolling down my cheeks.

"What's…happening?"

I touched my face, and sure enough, it was wet. Liquid was practically gushing down my cheeks, and it showed no signs of stopping.

Why am I crying? This is hardly appropriate. I don't have time for tears right now. I need to hurry up and compose myself—physically and *emotionally.*

"Forgive me. I'll…put a stop to this at once," I said to Tifa. "I just… I don't understand what's happening to me right now. I'm… I'm sorry."

Oh God… I'm only getting more worked up! How could I possibly stay calm right now, though, when these tears refuse to stop? I've been doing everything I can to stop crying, but I'm like a leaky faucet. The tears just keep flowing.

It felt like everything I'd tried so hard to bottle up was coming bursting out of me now. I knew I had to dam the flow, but I was powerless against it.

Oh, Seth… I was so happy just to have the chance to see you. That should have been enough for me. I never dreamed I could claim a place at your side as I have now. Surely I should be the happiest girl in the world. I'm happy with my decision to safeguard your happiness, dearest Seth. But I… I…

For some reason…I find myself desperately wishing that I could turn back time, back to when I could only see you through a screen…back to when I had a zero percent chance of ever being with

you.

"I'm sorry, Tifa… I think I need to be alone for a little bit," I said.

I knew that Tifa despised me and that she would probably jump at the chance to kick me when I was obviously down. But to my surprise, she quietly acquiesced and left my bedroom. She even looked a little worried about me.

She's always seemed like a sweet woman, at heart. I can hardly fault for her hating me so much when I stole the one person she cared about most from her life. It's my fault for being so unrepentantly evil.

I'd asked to be alone, but the truth was, I wanted to see Seth. I wouldn't beg him to fall in love with me or make any other unreasonable, selfish demands of him. I just wanted him to wrap his arms around me and hold me. But I couldn't possibly tell him that I wanted to see him, because it wouldn't have been for *his* sake. A saint would never utter something so self-centered.

Stop acting like a spoiled child, I chided myself. *It's your wickedness that's caused all these problems. You have only yourself to blame. You brought this on yourself, so stop wallowing. You wanted this, so stop complaining. Don't act like you hate this when you know you love it.*

No matter how much tough love I gave myself, the tears still wouldn't stop. I couldn't turn the faucet off on this unending terror and despair.

That's when I realized that I had been through this before. I didn't want to remember it, but before I could stop the memories from flooding in, I was suddenly pulled into a flashback of the final moments of my past life.

The day I died started off much like any other.

I was on my way home from school and had just parted ways with my friend, who was lending me the game cartridge for *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*. As I slipped it into my pocket, I set off alone down the road to my house. From here, it would only take me five minutes to get home.

There were lots of other pedestrians, but one in particular stood out to me. She was an absolutely gorgeous woman, and the moment I spotted her, I found myself following her with my eyes. I had a feeling I wasn't the only person captivated by her. No doubt *everyone* in the area was watching her too.

If I'd had to guess her age, she was probably a university student. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life. *Someone that beautiful probably floats through life without a care in the world*, I thought, but I quickly found that that was not the case.

When she looked over in my direction, I saw that she was frowning. She looked so distraught and anguished, I couldn't help but feel terrible for her. Then she broke out into a full-on sprint. It was obvious from the look on her face that she wasn't just running late or rushing to finish an errand.

It was telling that, even though she looked so harried, my attention was drawn first and foremost to her beauty. She was probably even more beautiful than Lady Rose.

Being in such a frenzy must have given her tunnel vision, because she didn't even seem to see the streetlight. She completely ignored it, sprinting across the street just as a truck began to round the corner.

A horn blared. Screams filled the street. The truck slammed into the woman and sent her flying into the air.

The truck driver must have swerved, trying to avoid hitting her, because the truck had suddenly changed course. I couldn't blame him for making that split-second decision, since he'd clearly been trying to save the woman's life. But now the truck was heading straight toward the sidewalk—hurtling toward *me*.

I tried to run. I thought I had a chance of jumping out of the way just in time. Maybe I could escape with my life if I just ran straight ahead.

But I willed my legs to stop, because right beside me, I could see a child who was still just standing placidly on the sidewalk. They didn't seem to have a clue what was going to happen to them.

I moved quickly, scooping them up into a hug in hopes that I could protect them. I knew it was probably pointless, considering that I was up against a *truck*. Maybe all I'd done was create even more victims for no reason.

Still, I couldn't hold it against past me for trying. Her heart was in the right place.

It hurt like hell when the truck hit me. My whole body was in searing pain. I lost feeling in some places, but that just scared me

even more. It was hard to breathe. Bright red seeped out onto the pavement into a pool that grew wider and wider.

But when I looked away from the red pool and up to the sky, I saw that it was every bit as beautiful as ever, and I was left with the sense that life was going to keep carrying on as usual—for everyone but me, that is.

And in that moment, I was seized by an unbearable feeling of loss.

Even in my last moments, I didn't blame anyone for what had happened. From the bottom of my heart, I genuinely felt that no one had done anything wrong. Still, as the pain sent tears down my cheeks, I was overtaken by the anguish and despair of knowing that I could lose everything I loved in an instant. Everything could be right with the world, and five minutes later, it could all be gone…just like *that*. I closed my eyes, feeling as though I was drowning in a deep well of hopelessness.

If I'm going to die here, then I hope I can have at least a one percent chance of finding true love in my next life, I thought, in a blustering show of defiance, as I clutched the game cartridge in my pocket.

I would have given anything not to die, but in that moment, my blissful past life came to an end.

No matter how many times I relived that memory, it never grew any less painful. As I finished replaying those last, hopeless moments, I curled up on my bed, taking in shallow breaths and letting my gaze fall out of focus.

Yes, it was true that God had granted my wish. I *had* wanted to find true love. But I was off to a rocky start, having lost *everything* to get here, and the aftershocks of that grief still reverberated throughout my life. It was like my life in this world had begun with a giant void in my heart.

I'd tried to cover up that void by becoming the kind of girl who cared about nothing except finding love. I'd managed it too…for a while. But each time something wore away at my love, the void would come back into view.

The real me—the one that wasn't putting up a front or trying to hide anything—was already bruised and battered from the moment I'd been reborn into this world. Because the truth

was…the *truth* was…I never really wanted that stupid wish I'd made with my dying breath to come true.

"I never wanted any of this," I said, without thinking.

I'd known that from the moment I'd been reborn, but I'd just been closing my eyes to that reality the entire time. I didn't want to experience the despair of death again, so I just kept staying in denial so I could keep on living.

The fact that one person I loved was here didn't make it worth it to be suddenly thrust into a whole other world. I'd been *happy* in my previous life, as Hino Ririko. I'd wanted to keep living *that* life.

I was still too much of an average high school girl to just suck it up and accept my fate.

"I can't take this anymore!" I cried.

The tears just kept flowing. I could sense that I was probably on the verge of breaking. Since dying was so painful, I'd always thought that I'd be better off forcing myself to live. But if living was going to hurt like *this*, then I just wanted it all to end.

"I hate this. I hate this so much…" I whined feebly.

Being confined to bed rest for a whole week like this was going to be torture.

If that's my fate, then I may as well…

I dragged myself out of bed and crawled over to the window. Grabbing the ledge for support, I stood up and unlocked it.

There was no wind tonight. I looked down at the ground far below. My bedroom was on the fifth floor, so I was pretty high up.

If I jumped from here…

But I just kept standing there at the window.

I couldn't even bring myself to jump. I couldn't bring myself to end my life. Whenever I readied myself to do it, memories of the pain I'd felt in those final moments of my past life came flooding back and stopped me.

"Please, someone… I'm begging you, just…" I rasped. And before I could finish the sentence, I passed out again.

As per my bed rest orders, I was forbidden from doing any work or attending school for the whole week.

Obviously, that was a pretty big issue in and of itself, but the *biggest* issue was that this whole ordeal had shaken me so much that I'd gone and blurted out the one thing I shouldn't have: the

truth. As far as I knew, no one had been around to hear me say it, but that wasn't the point. The point was that, if I ever wanted to get back on my feet again, then the truth needed to stay buried.

Seth was kind enough to pay me several visits, but if anything, it only made me more distressed to feel like a burden to him.

As for Tifa, I'd expected her to lash out at me pretty harshly after she'd gone out of her way to take care of me all day yesterday, but for some reason, she just kept offering words of sympathy and looking after me with surprising tenderness. Maybe she knew that would just throw me even *more* off-kilter?

No… She's not that kind of girl.

I had a feeling that Melvin might try to pay me a visit too, so I tried to nip that in the bud by letting Tifa know to turn him away if he tried. That turned out to be pretty good foresight, because only hours later, Tifa let me know that he'd come by and she'd rebuffed him.

Surprisingly, my brother-in-law also came by to visit me. I figured that he might have seen Tifa send Melvin away and that he'd come to berate me for it. Criticism felt like exactly what I needed right now, so I invited him in without a second thought.

Unlike last time, he didn't make a fuss about entering "an unmarried woman's room" and order me to come out into the hallway. He actually came into my room…which I guess made sense, considering that I wasn't in much of a state to get up and walk around. Still, it *was* after dark, so I'd half expected him to try to carry on a conversation with me while he stood in the doorway. It was nice to see that my fears were unfounded.

Tifa had opened the door for him, and before I could even get a word out, he came striding over to the bed, where I was sitting up under the blankets. I noticed with some surprise that the two guards accompanying him were, like last time, the Peerless Death Gods.

"I've arranged for you to meet with Felicia," said my brother-in-law suddenly.

I couldn't believe my ears. *He wants me to meet with Lady Rose?*

"The servants tell me that you've been a husk of your old self ever since you fainted. Felicia seems to hold the power to change fate. Meeting with her may give you a change of heart. Perhaps it could even change *your* fate."

Everything he said sounded so far removed from reality—almost dreamlike. Meeting with her would give me a change of heart? It could change my *fate*? It was utterly absurd. I'd given up hope on that already. I didn't need to change my fate anymore.

"I see she's given *you* quite the change of heart, brother-in-law," I remarked.

Previously, he would have never thought to arrange a meeting between us, no matter how frail and sickly I was. Even if it was my dying wish, he would have coldly refused.

Lady Rose truly was an incredible woman. Knowing her, she probably *could* change a person, right down to their core. But not me. Without hope, I had no chance of changing.

"Very well. I shall agree to meet with her."

It was mysterious enough that my brother-in-law had arranged for us to meet, but I had no idea what would compel Lady Rose to agree.

Whatever end was awaiting me, though, I had a feeling that it would be coming soon. So, before I departed from this world, I wanted to at least first apologize for all I'd done. It was probably just a selfish wish, but I wanted to atone for my sins.

So, while this meeting probably wouldn't achieve the results that my brother-in-law was hoping for, I didn't object to meeting with her.

"I'll let Fii know, then," he said, smiling slightly, before taking his leave. The Peerless Death Gods followed after him.

That smile must have been for Lady Rose. There's no way it was for me, I thought.

I was struck by the name he'd used at the end, though: Fii, not Felicia. Was that Lady Rose's nickname?

Well, at least things seem to be going well between them.

"Tifa. I'm ready for bed. You may leave now," I said, calling to my lady-in-waiting.

"Very well, Miss Saint. Good night," she replied, then left the room.

She might have despised me, but she was a clever, sweet girl deep down. I knew I wouldn't be able to get her to kill me.

Once I was alone, I opened the window. The autumn breeze felt cool on my skin. I looked down. I couldn't bring myself to jump tonight either.

So, instead, I left the window open and climbed into bed, praying that some assassin might climb up through my window and kill me in my sleep.



The next day, I set off to visit the church. Fortunately, while I was still under convalescence orders, no one tried to stop me.

Presumably, I was allowed to go because there was a tacit understanding that my breakdown had been psychological, rather than physical…but that didn't fully explain things. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have been allowed to leave the palace like this. I was the future queen, after all, so I couldn't just go wherever I pleased.

I knew it… They must not need me anymore, I thought.

I felt that Seth would probably try to stop me if he knew, but I wasn't exactly going to go and tell him about my plans. That would have been tantamount to *asking* him to stop me, and I couldn't bring myself to do that.

So, that left only one person to try and stop me.

"Miss Saint, you really ought to just be quietly resting in bed right now," said Tifa.

For all that she loathed me, she wasn't about to wash her hands of me so easily.

"I *must* go, Tifa, and I must go *now*. If I don't, I may even give up on my hope of making Prince Seth happy, and if that happens, I fear I won't be long for this world. Let me go, please. You don't have to accompany me. You can stay here and do whatever you like," I told her, with a smile.

I didn't even wait for her response. I just walked right past her. Unsurprisingly, after a few short moments, I heard footsteps behind me. Tifa had no choice in the matter, after all. Once a noble put their foot down, there was no room for a servant to argue.

We didn't talk much during the carriage ride. It probably took a long time to reach the outskirts, but by the time we arrived at my usual church, it felt like mere minutes had passed.

I entered the church, and just as I always did, I made my way straight to the cross. I let out a sigh, my brother-in-law's words still echoing in my head.

“Why would he tell me something like that only *now*?” I wondered aloud.

I would welcome the chance to apologize to Lady Rose, but it was too late to think about changing my fate. That never seemed to go well for me, and I’d given up on trying a long time ago.

But I’d had enough of dwelling on that conversation. Instead, I switched gears and recited my usual vow.

“I swear to you, Lord, I’ll become a true saint.”

Until then, I couldn’t take my own life. I couldn’t disappear from this world. I had to keep standing and fighting. I had to steel myself for anything that came my way.

After making my vow, I repeated my usual prayer of thanks.

“Thank you, Father in Heaven…for blessing me again on this joyous day.”

I didn’t even know why I said that anymore. Did I even still *believe* in God? Was there really any use in making up excuses for why I couldn’t end it all, when I knew that only my cowardice was holding me back now?

I’ve said my vows and my prayers now. I think it’s time to head home.

I turned around, facing the church doors as I prepared to leave. Tifa was standing by the exit, waiting for me silently. And if I looked a little to the side of her, I could see the nun and the pastor standing there too.

Suddenly, a memory hit me.

It was a scene I’d witnessed once, though I couldn’t remember when. An image of the nun, surrounded by the local townsfolk, resurfaced in my mind. I heard them saying what an angel she was.

An angel…

Come to think of it, didn’t Nolan say something odd about angels back at the party? He seemed to be suggesting he’d met *one.*

That angelic nun has nothing to do with the kingdom’s fate or my own. She’s just a sweet girl, with no relation to the game whatsoever. Maybe it would do me some good to talk to her? Maybe it would give me a little more motivation to keep on living? Or…maybe it could have the opposite effect?

Either way, I knew that it was worth a shot. I was on the edge of breaking. What did I have left to lose?

And so, I did something I'd never done before: I called out to her.

"How would you like to chat for a bit?" I asked.

"Huh?! U-Um... Are you talking to *me*?!"

"Why, yes."

The nun turned bright red, flapping her arms about like a bird. I couldn't help but worry that this might have been a bit too much of a shock for her.

"Wh-Why...?!"

"'Why'?" I repeated, but I could understand her confusion. This must have seemed wildly out of the blue to her, when we'd barely ever spoken to each other over the course of the ten years that I'd been visiting this church.

"Well, I feel that there is a force at work in our world—something akin to fate, perhaps—that a mere viscount's daughter such as myself could never dare to fight. As far as I can tell, only a handful of brilliant minds can influence it. But I'm just so tired of being swept up in its schemes, unable to make my own choices. I suppose...I simply wanted to talk to someone who doesn't have that influence—someone who isn't involved."

I didn't want to burden her with my honesty, and I knew that I'd probably taken this a little far by being so open about how exhausted I was. But I also felt like it would be unfair for me to talk to her about all of this without filling her in at least a little on the situation.

The nun frowned. It was hard to tell whether she'd understood anything I'd just said.

"I'm...not really sure what you're talking about. I'm kind of stupid," she said.

Well, there's my answer. I guess she didn't understand, I thought. She looked a little reluctant to dive into this with me. *Maybe she's not a big fan of complicated topics?*

I couldn't help letting out a little chuckle at this.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I see I've made things needlessly complicated. All I meant to say was that I simply wished to talk to you. Would that be all right?"

At this, her face lit up.

"I'd love that!"

I straightened up, readying myself now that I'd been given the

green light. If we were going to talk about all of this, then first, some introductions were in order.

"We've crossed paths so many times, but we've never properly introduced ourselves, have we?" I began. "I know it's a little late, but please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Liliana Inoce."

"I-I'm Nancy! You can call me Nana!" replied the nun cheerfully.

This might be a rude thing to say, but the way she spoke was so childlike, I felt like I was talking to an actual child. I knew, though, that I was measuring her against an impossibly high standard. My entire life, I'd been surrounded by aristocratic peers who all acted like fully mature ladies and gentlemen, regardless of their age, thanks to their upbringing.

"Um, so... What do you wanna talk about?" Nana asked.

"I'd like to hear more about *you*, Nana. How long have you been working at the church?"

I couldn't exactly start talking about myself, so I turned the conversation to her. Nana nodded and happily obliged.

"Let's see... Fifteen years, I think? Maybe sixteen? Somewhere around there. Pastor Jack pretty much raised me."

"Nana... How old are you?"

"Fifteen or sixteen! Oh, I was abandoned pretty much at birth, so...yep! I've been here just about all my life!"

She seemed a little fuzzy on exactly how old she was, but it sounded like we were around the same age. I was struck by what an honest upbringing she'd had, though, considering that she'd been abandoned at birth.

*Wait... Huh? I feel like she looked pretty...*raggedy*...when I first met her. We would have both been around three years old then, and I'd assumed from her unkempt appearance that the church had only just taken her in. I guess I was mistaken?*

"Things were a little rough before I met you, Miss Saint. But the moment I first laid eyes on you, I realized I needed to work hard too! Ever since then, I've been striving every day to make the people around me happy, so that I can go to Heaven someday!"

Nana's eyes sparkled as she spoke, as if she were recounting a precious memory.

Oh, that's right... She thanked me once when we passed each other by, back when we were around three years old. I was really confused

by that at the time, but I guess I must have inspired her somehow. That's kind of ironic, considering that I'm looking to her *for inspiration now.*

"Oh, that reminds me! This feels like the perfect opportunity to ask you something I've been wondering about. Do you mind?"

"Oh? Whatever could it be?"

"Are you happy, Miss Saint?"

I can't believe you're asking me that.

Instead of answering her directly, I just gave her a vague smile.

"Isn't it bliss...to be a princess?"

I could tell from Nana's strange question that she must have heard about my engagement to Seth. That wasn't all that surprising. We'd had a public engagement ceremony, after all, and my identity wasn't being kept a secret. I'd just assumed that news wouldn't have reached most people this far away from the castle.

"Not necessarily. Becoming a princess doesn't always grant you your deepest wish, I'm afraid."

"Oh..." Nana said, her voice suddenly dejected. But in the next moment, she lifted her head, and the sparkle returned to her eyes. She grabbed both my hands in hers and said, "Please, Miss Saint, leave it to me! I swear I'll make you happy, no matter what!"

It was a sweet thing for her to say, but something about it felt somehow...off. *That's strange*, I thought.

"I'll find a way to sort everything out!" she added, flashing me an innocent smile.

Something about her declaration struck fear in my heart.

No matter how childlike Nana might have been, there was just no way that she didn't grasp the vast difference in our positions. So, normally, a declaration like that would have been nothing more than just talk, because surely Nana would understand how impossible that really was.

But...Nana seemed serious. There wasn't a trace of doubt or hesitation in her eyes. It was like she was deliberately ignoring all of the realities of the situation and blindly offering herself up as a sacrifice.

"Why...would you go that far for me...?" I asked, still unable to put a finger on the strange sense of unease I felt about this.

Her smile didn't waver.

"Because you saved me. You brought me happiness, so now I'm

going to return it. That's what you do if you want to get to Heaven," she said.

That sounded...perfectly reasonable. It was a nice sentiment, really. But her expression had *hollowed* as she spoke, a great emptiness appearing in her eyes, and it filled me with a palpable dread. I couldn't help but get the feeling that she would do anything to fulfill her promise, crossing lines most people would never dare to cross. And I had a feeling that she'd do it without hesitating—with a smile on her face, even.

There was something *dangerous* about her.

I should have listened to that gut feeling I got when we first met as kids that told me I'd better not have anything to do with her, I thought.

The fear I felt was something completely different from the sort of fear you feel when your life is in peril, but it was no less potent. I made to leave without even saying goodbye, desperate to get away from her. As I began walking through the church doors with Tifa, I heard Nana call out behind me.

"Nana will save you. So, whatever you do, don't you die on me, okay?"

It felt like she'd just put a curse on me.



That night, I still slept with the window open, but I didn't even dream of trying to jump.

When the sun rose, though, I was filled with an unbearable despair that I'd awoken to another day. I started getting dressed and preparing to make another trip to the church.

"I think it would be best if you didn't meet with that commoner girl Nancy again," said Tifa, giving me pause.

I could see where she was coming from. It was all well and good for me to visit the church in hopes that it would inspire me to go on living, but it was undeniable that Nana posed a real threat. And if there was any risk that she might cause real harm to something I cared about more than my life, then the choice was clear: no more visits to the church. And yet, here I was, readying myself to make yet another pilgrimage. Was my brain malfunctioning? Or maybe I was just driven by a self-destructive

impulse?

Still, something about what Tifa had said struck me as strange.

"Why are you trying to stop me, Tifa? I was under the impression that you despised me. You needn't listen to your conscience when it comes to me," I said.

Even if I died, I would never think to blame Tifa for it.

I assumed that Tifa would back off at this point, considering how much she hated me. But instead, she shot me a defiant glare.

"Since your breakdown, I've been privately looking into what you've been up to, Miss Saint. Don't you think there's something strange afoot in the kingdom? Since your collapse, it's as if the palace has completely dropped their surveillance of you. If I were scheming something, then this would be the perfect opportunity to strike."

Tifa stopped to take in a breath. Then her expression turned even graver.

"The palace guards seem on edge. It's like they're bracing for something to happen today. If you want to visit the church right now, I doubt any of them will be able to escort us."

Right... Now this all makes sense. Tifa is just looking out for the kingdom; that's why she doesn't want me wandering off anywhere right now.

If the kingdom was in danger, then I knew that visiting the church should have been the least of my concerns. But in truth, it was taking everything I had just to keep standing. There was no room for me to think about anything else. I could sense that I was about to start raking myself over the coals for being so pathetic, so I decided to quickly switch gears.

"Even if something were to happen to me, the kingdom would come to no harm," I told Tifa, smiling gently. "My life hardly matters enough for my death to make any real waves."

Tifa gave me a probing look.

"You know, you really are the polar opposite of Lady Felicia," she said with a sigh. She gave me a sad smile and fell momentarily silent, as if searching for the right words. Then she said, "I don't want you to die."

I found myself transfixed by her earnest gaze.

But I knew that her real focus was Lady Rose. Maybe Lady Rose had given her orders in advance to stop me if I tried to leave

today? What if Tifa was only refusing to let me go—or rather, to let me *die*—for Lady Rose's sake? It was a painful idea to consider.

All I wanted was to at least be able to make my *own* choice about when to die. I didn't want Nana, Tifa, or the day that Lady Rose's engagement had been annulled dictating that for me.

"I'm sorry, Tifa."

I left for the church, disregarding Tifa's advice. I knew that the carriage driver would be more likely to follow my orders than Tifa. That was just the way the pecking order worked in this world.

Despite everything, Tifa ended up accompanying me. I wasn't about to question or criticize her for that, so I just let her come along. And so we headed to the church together in the carriage, just the two of us.

After a bumpy ride, we finally arrived at the church. Immediately, I noticed a familiar carriage parked outside the front.

I was so shaken that I disregarded all ladylike pretense, flinging the carriage door open myself and making a run for the church. But just as I opened the church doors, I saw *him*.

"Fair enough. I guess Liliana would probably feel more comfortable with you, so—"

At the sound of the doors opening, he stopped talking and turned to look at me. Sure enough, it was Melvin.

I was disturbed to hear him talking about me with Nana, though. And why did they look so close? In a literal sense, there was barely any distance between them, and in a figurative sense, I got the distinct impression that they'd somehow known each other for years.

What was going on here? Why would a nun who worked at a church on the farthest outskirts of town be talking so familiarly with the son of a preeminent duke? What was everyone thinking? Who was pulling the strings? And who could I trust?

No... I'm thinking about this all wrong. Placing my trust in someone is tantamount to leaving my life in their hands. Isn't that exactly what I'm trying to avoid here? I just need to handle this alone. Things will work out much better for me that way.

Melvin ran over to me. I regarded him as if he were a stranger.

"Hey, are you all right? Shouldn't you be resting?" he said.

I could tell from his tone and expression that he was genuinely

worried about me, but he didn't ask me what I was doing here—probably because he didn't need to. The answer to that was obvious.

But I'd never told Melvin which church I visited, much less the church's location. In fact, I'd never even told him that I was a churchgoer at all.

"I'm fine, thank you. My collapse was caused by psychological exertion, so I'm sure this change of scenery will only aid my recovery," I replied, with a fake smile. It was half true, at least. "But never mind me. You and Nana seem to be awfully close… What is your relationship, if I may ask?"

This was probably the first time I'd ever doubted Melvin. Throughout the entirety of our relationship, I'd trusted him implicitly.

Even now, I figured that there was probably some kind of misunderstanding. Just because Melvin and Nana seemed to be well acquainted, that didn't necessarily *mean* anything. But the long and short of it was that it made me deeply uncomfortable to think that something might be happening behind my back.

"We're friends," replied Melvin simply, without a moment's hesitation.

A nobleman and a commoner? Friends?

There was no way that Melvin would fail to grasp the inherent challenges, risks, and downright *weirdness* of such a friendship. Yet he made it sound as if their friendship was hardly worth remarking on.

A commoner could easily take a noble hostage, and a noble could just as easily end a commoner's life with a single word. Cultivating a friendship that crossed the class divide like this was a high-wire act for both parties.

I didn't really care that Melvin had friends other than me, though. I mean, it would have been a little rich for me to get upset about that when *I* was the one who kept denying that we were even friends at all. So, what was it exactly that I was upset about…? The only thing I could think of was that I didn't appreciate them talking about me behind my back.

They could talk about whatever they liked, as far as I cared—just as long as it had nothing to do with me, Seth, or the kingdom. But if they were going to meddle in *my* business like this, then—

But just then, before I could come to any wild conclusions, the church doors flew open. Startled, I whipped around, and I saw a hulking man barge into church. His face was covered, and he wielded a heavy-looking wooden club.

I assumed that he was going to make a beeline for me, so I reflexively adopted a stance that I'd learned from my self-defense training. The hulk clearly had plenty of raw physical strength on his side, but after all the diligent conditioning I'd put myself through, I was confident that he wouldn't be *that* hard to fend off.

But instead of coming for me, I watched him home in on Tifa, who was standing by my side. He lifted his club above her head, and in an instant, I mentally calculated its trajectory and the damage it was likely to cause. I had no choice but to act.

Without wasting a moment, I moved to shield Tifa. I felt a strong blow connect with the side of my head and fell to the ground.

I was only dimly aware of what was happening now. In the last moments before I lost consciousness, I saw Tifa's tearful face and heard the sound of the key to my desk drawer hitting the floor with a *clink*.

"I'm sorry, Tifa."

I knew that Tifa would probably bear the blame for what had happened to me. So, in my final moments, I wanted to apologize to her for that. But on the edge of consciousness, it was hard to say whether I'd actually managed to get the words out, or if they'd even reached her.

Chapter 10

When I next came to, I was inside a carriage.

I could tell without moving even an inch thanks to the vibrations of the carriage. I didn't sense that I was bound either, so I figured that my situation couldn't have been *that* dire. The holster around my thigh, which I kept hidden under my dress, was also still intact—which meant that my small self-defense knife probably hadn't been stolen.

I'd been well aware, even from a young age, that I was an attractive hostage. I'd taken pains to ensure that I'd be able to fend for myself without any outside help if I were ever taken. It was a lofty goal that I'd set, but I'd say I probably pulled it off, if you don't mind me crowing about it a little.

I opened my eyes slightly and took in my surroundings. From what I could see, I was apparently back in the carriage I'd taken to the church. I even recognized the driver's voice. It sounded like he was under threat and was being forced to drive me to my kidnapper's intended location—wherever that was.

It stood to reason, then, that my kidnapper probably wasn't armed with a ranged weapon like a bow. It had looked like he'd been carrying a wooden club when he'd barged into the church.

Should be perfectly doable to get out of this mess on my own, then, I thought.

Melvin had probably come to the same conclusion. He knew I wasn't just some damsel in distress, because he would have been all too familiar with my self-defense capabilities. After all, we'd known each other since we were only three. And unlike with Seth, I dropped the ladylike act around Melvin, so we'd often played together like normal children do. Sometimes that had included indulging in some self-defense practice for fun.

I thought back to the crazy ideas that had been swirling in my head, right before I'd passed out. Putting aside Melvin's connections, there was no just point in doubting him. I knew Melvin would never betray me.

Still, I'd made up my mind: I was never going back home again.

I felt at peace with everything now, and being kidnapped had actually come as something of a relief. I wasn't going to use this situation to my advantage and try to take my kidnapper by surprise. Instead, I slowly roused from my prone position. My kidnapper looked at me intently, and I gave him a smile in return.

"Well, hello, my dear Grim Reaper. Have you finally come to put me out of my misery?" I asked.

My kidnapper was no longer wearing a face covering. It was hard to tell if he'd taken it off himself after the kidnapping or if someone else had forcibly removed it. He looked at me as if I'd just sprouted another arm.

"I'm afraid I won't be a very lucrative hostage. I may be the future queen, but that really isn't worth all that much. There's no shortage of young women who could easily replace me."

My kidnapper's incredulous gaze transformed into an uneasy one, probably because he was taken by surprise that I seemed so unruffled despite the circumstances.

I wasn't really *afraid* of my life ending. It was just that I'd lacked the courage to end it myself. I was ready, though. I'd already written out a letter confessing all of my crimes to be read posthumously. Essentially, though, it was a suicide note. That way, whoever killed me would be cleared of any suspicion for my death. I stored it in a locked desk drawer in my bedroom, but just before I'd lost consciousness at the church, the key had fallen out of my pocket.

That's why there was no turning back now.

I had to be careful, though. I didn't want to die under circumstances that would cast any suspicion on my suicide note.

"This carriage is running at breakneck speed. You're not getting out of here," the kidnapper warned me. I guess he must have thought I was just trying to play it cool to throw him off so I could make a run for it.

Hmm... True. I could *get out of here, if I really wanted to, but that's good to know.*

I flung open the carriage door while it was still in motion. My kidnapper suddenly froze, probably thrown off by this wholly unexpected and reckless move. I readied myself to make a jump for it...but then I thought better of it.

"Mm, yes... My odds of failure are a bit too high for my

comfort," I said, turning around to face the kidnapper with a smile.

He snapped out of his reverie and, back to his senses, moved to close the carriage door.

"L-Like I said, that's a death sentence! So, don't even *think* about escaping."

Death isn't what I'm afraid of here, but whatever. There's no point correcting him.

"What're you smiling for?" said the kidnapper. He was clearly unsettled, but he tried to hide it with a gruff, threatening tone as he glared at me. I felt kind of bad for him that I saw right through his bluff. I hadn't *meant* to smile, though. I did my best to rearrange my expression into one of contrition.

"Oh, I do apologize! It's just... I'm so happy right now. I thought I was backed into a corner before, but now that I'm *really* backed into a corner, I feel like I can finally do it."

I closed my eyes. A grin spread across my face as I mentally ran through a simulation of what I'd do without hesitation.

"Now, I feel like I can finally fly."

The scenery outside the window was flying by me so fast, it was nothing but a blur. And at just the right moment, I could take a step forward and fling myself straight into it. By the time the kidnapper realized what was happening, it would be too late to stop me.

"Oh, for God's sake... I took this gig 'cause I needed the money, but I didn't sign up to deal with a crazy broad like you."

With that, I felt something hit me hard on the head, and I passed out again.

The next place I regained consciousness was somewhere outside of a mansion. I awoke just as my kidnapper was dragging me from the carriage, so he let me walk the rest of the way.

I could tell just from the mansion's exterior where we were and whom it belonged to. I don't know if my kidnapper expected me to be familiar with it or not, but I'd memorized where every noble in the kingdom lived—even the branch families.

This mansion belonged to a branch family of the Schwaroses.

Lady Rose belonged to the main branch of the Schwarose family, so she wouldn't have had much to do with this branch family. The one major connection was that her family had taken in

the branch family's son, Shade, as her younger adoptive brother.

Shade Schwarose was a love interest in the game, but I never paid much attention to him. I've only ever had eyes for Seth, after all. If we were here at his family's mansion, though, then I could only assume that he must have had something to do with the kidnapping. Maybe I'd incurred his wrath from the way I'd treated his beloved sister? That seemed like reason enough to kidnap me.

The kidnapper and I walked swiftly up to the mansion. Surely it must have been a relief to him that I was just accompanying him obediently, without a word of protest or the faintest attempt at making a break for it, but he was looking at me like I was some kind of monster.

Sure enough, once we reached the front door, a young boy I recognized as Shade was waiting for us. He regarded us with a blank stare, his features so perfect they were almost doll-like. I didn't have much of a range of motion to speak of, thanks to my captor restraining me by the arm, but I gave him the most ladylike curtsy I could manage. Then I lifted my head and gave him a smile.

"Are you the one who will put me out of my misery?" I asked him.

Shade regarded me with suspicion. Then he looked to my kidnapper reproachfully.

"Don't tell me you *tortured* her? Have you broken Lady Liliana's spirit?"

"N-No, my lord! She's been acting like this since I met her!"

I felt bad that I'd apparently created some sort of misunderstanding.

Oops.

Shade sighed and handed the kidnapper a stack of bills. It was clearly a hefty sum.

"Your job here is done. Nice work," he said.

The kidnapper happily took the money and left in a hurry. My arms dangled freely now that he was no longer restraining me. It seemed a little odd to me that I'd be allowed this freedom.

"Do you know who I am?" Shade asked me.

"Why, yes. Shade Schwarose, I presume? I can easily guess why you've brought me here, so I have no questions to ask you."

"I doubt that, actually. But if you *had* been right, your

provocation might've been enough to make me snap. What if I had stabbed you?"

"Oh, dear me. It seems I keep stepping on everyone's toes."

I hadn't *meant* to sound like I was egging him on. *Why does communication have to be so difficult sometimes?* Shade's tone was so monotonous, it was hard to tell what he was really thinking. His threat had no effect on me, though. I wasn't afraid of that.

"Well, it makes no difference to me why you've kidnapped me. Are you going to punish me or not?" I tried again.

"No, I can't punish you. But there's someone else in the mansion who I'm sure will be up to the task. I can see that your spirit is already broken, but he'll probably destroy it beyond repair. He really, *really* hates you."

To my surprise, Shade gave me a pained smile as he said this. And here I thought he always wore that blank expression, but he was more emotive than I'd given him credit for.

So, the mastermind behind this kidnapping is here in the mansion? I can see why Shade would be a little shaken, then, now that I'm here right in front of him.

"If you want to avoid that fate, then feel free to make a run for it. It's no skin off my back if you do," Shade suggested suddenly. He must have thought I'd fallen silent because I was scared.

It was starting to make sense now why I was allowed to walk freely. Shade really *didn't* care if I stayed or tried to run away.

Well, that's a shame, I thought, shaking my head.

"Actually, I couldn't destroy either my body or my spirit by my own hand, so I should very much like to meet someone who can."

I tried to give Shade a pleasant smile, but it must not have had quite the effect I intended. Shade just shrugged, as if to say, *This crazy girl is clearly beyond saving.*

"So be it. I'll escort you to your execution, then," he joked, his tone entirely flat, and invited me into the manor.

Shade led me to a room at the top floor of the mansion. Looking at it from the outside, I could tell that the door was probably soundproof. He opened the door just slightly and called inside.

"It's Shade. I've brought her."

Then, before he'd even gotten a response, he flung the door

wide open. When I saw who was waiting for me inside, I was honestly floored.

It was Evan Douglas, of all people—the son of a marquis, and my classmate at school. He was also one of the game's love interests. I'd never expected him to be the kind of person to pull this off. I remembered him as an earnest, upright young man who put people at ease and had lots of friends.

My stomach sank, though, when I realized how familiar his gaze felt. It was the same murderous gaze I'd been feeling on me for weeks now. His green eyes bored into me with a dark intensity as he glared at me.

"Well, that's my job done. Take your time," said Shade, not even entering the room. Instead, he just pushed me inside with a bit of force and closed the door behind me.

As I stood in front of the door, Evan slowly approached me. Then, as soon as he was right in front of me, he whipped out a knife and held it to my throat. His movements were remarkably efficient. He'd clearly been training for this. That was hardly surprising, though, when I really thought about it. It made sense that the reason he hadn't come after me immediately was because he'd been setting a more elaborate plan into motion. Someone with that level of murderous intent wouldn't just be futzing around doing nothing.

"I have a knife to your throat, and yet you show not even a trace of fear. I suppose *nothing* ruffles your feathers."

"As far as I'm concerned, there's simply nothing to be afraid of. That's all."

"Oh? Then tell me, do you know why you've been brought here today?" Evan asked me, his voice dripping with loathing.

I gave him a careless smile in return.

"Why?"

"I don't care why," I said honestly.

The second those words left my mouth, I felt the tip of his knife press against my neck. It stung a little, but there was only enough pressure to draw a little blood. The knife at my throat was far less threatening than Evan's face, suddenly stripped of emotion. It stood in such stark contrast to the hostile look he'd been wearing up until now. If I hadn't been so eager for the knife, then it probably would have sent a chill down my spine. Any sane person

would have tried to get the hell out of here.

"Well, that just isn't good enough for me."

As if to collect himself, Evan withdrew the knife from my throat and took a step back.

"I'm going to reveal all of your misdeeds right here, right now, in front of your fiancé. And then I'm going to kill you. I'm sure it goes without saying that you have no right to object."

His threat moved me so deeply, I couldn't help but nod along vigorously. It was the righteous thing to do, exposing all of the most sinful parts of me to Seth and forcing me to taste the deepest depths of Hell before putting me to my death. In my eyes, Evan was a hero.

"A splendid idea," I said, and I really meant it.

Frankly speaking, I admired and genuinely liked Evan as a person. Evan was probably in love with Lady Rose. But if he was willing to take these drastic measures, then it was clear that his priority was her happiness, not his chances with her. He was clearly willing to risk everything for her, even if it meant that he couldn't be by her side. There was a sober darkness in his eyes that suggested he knew a future with her could never be possible.

He was exactly the kind of figure that *I* had wanted to become. If only everything had gone the way it did in the game, where my misdeeds were exposed and I disappeared forever, or if only I had stopped Lady Rose that day as she was leaving and confessed everything, then surely I could have been virtuous like him.

"You know, it's strange. I feel like I ought to doubt your compliance, but when I look at you, I don't feel at all suspicious."

"You can doubt me if you like. I truly believe our goals are one and the same, however."

After a long pause, Evan looked at me with bewilderment and said, "How can it be that we're seeing eye to eye like this?"



“I suppose it’s because we both share the exact same idea of what’s just and right,” I replied.

I was impressed by his insight.

Kidnapper and victim, villain and avenger, sinner and convictor…there were no labels you could apply to us which made this conversation seem *normal*. There was something undeniably unusual about how much we were on the same wavelength. It should have been impossible for our values to align. It wasn’t because my values were different that we’d diverged down such different paths, though; it was simply because I hadn’t had the *courage* to do as I’d wanted.

Evan’s face contorted into a look of disgust, probably because he didn’t appreciate being told that his values aligned with someone like *me*.

“How can you say that, after the horrible way you’ve treated her?”

“I was living in a dream, you see. A dream where doing all of those horrible things was exactly what it would take to make everyone but me happy.”

“A dream indeed. I think it’s time for you to wake up to reality.”

“Yes. It really is.”

His argument was so sound, all I could do was agree. At this, Evan raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t help but think we might’ve been friends, had we met under other circumstances. But unfortunately, as it stands, I despise you.”

“Friends… Yes, that’s quite the pipe dream now, isn’t it?”

I flashed him a resigned smile, and his expression darkened.

“Please, don’t make that face. You’re doing the right thing. I don’t blame you for despising me. Why, I hate myself too,” I said brightly, trying to cheer him up.

I knew that it probably would have been ideal to have ended things by my own hand, so that I could minimize the number of people I hurt. But I *wanted* Evan to punish me, because I knew it would make me feel like I had chosen the right path.

My strange conversation with Evan came to an end. After some time passed, the door opened with a loud *bam* and Seth entered the room alone. I wasn’t exactly surprised to see him. Evan had told me pretty explicitly that his plan was to expose me for my

misdeeds in front of him, after all.

Immediately, Seth lifted his sword—which was already drawn—and struck the knife from Evan's hands. I was amazed that Seth had pulled that off so effortlessly, managing to take Evan by surprise when the latter had no doubt taken great pains to prepare for *any* eventuality today. I stared at him in awe, captivated.

"You've got some nerve, treating my fiancée like this," he said, brandishing his sword again. He looked like he was ready to kill Evan.

Suddenly, the gravity of the situation hit me, and I snapped out of my awestruck reverie. I considered making use of my own knife, but I knew it would be too small to do any good. Instead, I grabbed Evan's knife, which had conveniently landed right by me, and inserted myself between the two men, clumsily parrying Seth's sword.

The force of Seth's blow sent an intense shock wave through my arms. Of course, considering the gendered difference in our strengths, the angle of his blow, and his no-holds-barred approach, that was hardly surprising. Still, I'd actually managed to *catch* it. Seth looked at me in astonishment as he withdrew his sword. I gave him a smile, wiping the sweat off my brow.

"Thank you," I said. "But please, you ought to hear what Lord Evan has to say."

As Seth regarded me with doubt in his eyes, I approached him, still smiling.

"After all, you bear some blame too, for pretending not to see what was right in front of you. Wouldn't you agree?"

Suddenly, Seth froze.

Yes, that's right. That's why you need to hear the truth too, Seth.

Evan, who was still standing some distance away from the two of us, began to give a succinct account of all of my lies, including the false allegations against Lady Rose. There wasn't a trace of emotion in his voice; he gave only the facts.

When he was done, he said, "Now you know the truth. Lady Felicia loved you, Your Highness, and yet you abandoned her. If you feel any remorse, then you ought to set things right—back to the way they were—and make Lady Felicia your queen."

Seth listened to everything Evan said silently, without even once

interjecting. But when Evan was done speaking, Seth turned to look at *me*.

"Liliana… Why are you making me hear this *now*?"

There was blame in his voice. It hurt, but I'd known this was coming and had steeled myself for it. I bowed my head in repentance.

"There are no words to express how sorry I am," I said, after a long pause. "I know what you must be thinking. If I regret my actions that much now, then I should have never done all of this in the first place."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I'm asking you why you had to *accept* these allegations."

At this, my eyes grew wide. He was reproaching me not for my misdeeds but for *admitting* to them. Even after Seth had heard everything and *knew* it to be true, he'd still been willing to turn a blind eye and pretend it was all baseless nonsense…if I had only played along.

I was overcome with emotion.

That makes me so happy, I thought. *But this can't go on.*

Seth could never be happy with me. His guilt would haunt him forever, and he would never be able to put it behind him. There was only one way forward…and that was for me to disappear.

"You're too kind… Far kinder than I deserve. But this can't go on, Seth. I need to put an end to this, and you mustn't stop me. That is your burden to bear, for knowing the truth of it all and yet pretending that you were merely deceived."

I knew that this was exactly what it would take to make sure that Seth wouldn't try to stop me. If I laid some blame at his feet, then the guilt he felt for my sins and for the impact they'd had on Lady Rose would surely paralyze him. After all, no one had a stronger sense of duty than Seth. I'd never been his lover, not even for a brief moment, but I'd always been his friend. I knew what he was like.

"So, it's…*my* fault…?" Seth muttered, slumping to the ground with a forced smile on his face.

Oh, Seth… I've hurt you so much.

I'd never wanted to see him like this. From the bottom of my heart, I'd just wanted to see him smile—for him to look at me forever and ever with a smile on his face. And yet…

It hurt so much to know that this look of despair would be the last I ever saw of him. But I knew I only had myself to blame for it. I refused to accept even his kindness now. It pained me to reject it, but I had to if I wanted to ensure that this would be the last time I hurt him.

"Don't worry, Seth," I told him. "I'll take your sins upon me, and through my death, they, too, shall be cleansed."

As I held Evan's knife to my throat, my whole life suddenly flashed before my eyes—from the moment I was first reincarnated until now. There was no more reason for me to live, so I could see it all now unfiltered. I didn't need to fool myself anymore.

When I died in my past life and found myself reborn into this world, I'd been both overjoyed and terrified. I hadn't even realized at first that I was in the world of *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* or that Seth was here with me, but I'd just been so happy to have another chance at life. I hadn't wanted to die, after all. But I'd also been afraid, because I now knew the pain of being happy and having it all ripped away from me without warning. I desperately wanted to avoid dying and having to go through that again.

The joy of being alive again wasn't enough to make up for the pain of having lost so much. That's probably why my past life had been only a hazy memory for me until I'd heard Seth's name. But knowing that Seth existed in this world was enough to give me hope. It gave me a reason to live, because I could tell myself that I'd been reborn to find love.

That love—which I could never have attained in my past life—was the one thing that kept me going.

Even when an amazing person like Melvin reached his hand out in friendship to me, I couldn't bring myself to reach back and take it. There was only one person I could ever reach out to.

If all of my hard work, all of my sins, and all of my love would only ever bring despair, then I knew it would be best if I just disappeared and let this world go back the way it was supposed to be. Even if it wasn't a full course correction, it would be better than nothing. Maybe I was just running away, now that I knew I'd never fulfill my dream of true love. But I hated myself so much that I just wanted to end things here and now, because maybe that way I could find something to *like* about myself—even if only a little.

Father in Heaven, I don't want another life after this one. I don't

want any memories or any "me." I don't want to exist if all I ever do is cause people to suffer. I don't need a self or an ego that's only capable of hurting the ones I love. But if I may, I'd like to ask for just one wish. I don't need happiness or forgiveness. All I want is for this story to continue when I'm gone and for Seth to be happy. Please, dear Lord. Please. Please. Please…

"With this, I'll return everything to the way it was supposed to be. I loved you, Seth," I said, looking into Seth's eyes.

They were the most beautiful, sky blue eyes in the world. And in that moment, gazing into them, I felt truly happy, because I felt convinced that Seth was thinking of nothing else but me. Maybe that was just a delusion, but I didn't care.

This is all I need. I don't want you to say anything, because that would only make this more painful. Anything you could say would only hurt to hear. Before I crossed the boundary into this world, it would have never been possible to meet your gaze like this. But in my final moments, you're looking into my eyes. How could I be anything but overjoyed? I have no more regrets.

My voice was a whisper as I spoke the prayer I always said under my breath.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day."

And with that, I thrust the knife toward my throat with all the force I could muster.

Chapter 11

Just as I was trying to end my life, something came flying out of nowhere and interrupted me. The knife I'd been holding in my hand suddenly careened across the room. Bewildered, I whipped around to see who was responsible.

There, standing in front of the flung-open door, was none other than Lady Rose. I hadn't seen her for a long time, but she was every bit as bewitching as I remembered. Her peasant clothes were ill-befitting of her beauty, and her previously waist-long hair had been trimmed to shoulder-length.

Just then, the faintest thought crossed my mind: *I can't even pick how my own life ends, can I? Am I not even allowed a mere moment of happiness?* But I didn't want to acknowledge this painful reality.

As Seth and Evan began talking to Lady Rose and Shade, who had come in with her, I looked for an opening amid the chaos and seized on it, reaching for the knife.

"Wait!" I cried, calling everyone's attention to myself.

Lady Rose looked on in horror as she noticed that I had gotten a hold of my knife again.

"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," Evan agreed and stopped talking to Lady Rose. I knew he would see reason.

You know what needs to be done, Evan. We just need to restore everything to how it was, without Lady Rose ever needing to be unduly burdened by anyone else's plight.

I smiled serenely and held the knife to my throat again.

"Oh, Lady Rose, your beauty and kindness are beyond 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."

Smiling until the very end, this time, I plunged the knife straight toward me.

I heard Lady Rose yelling something, but I didn't even pay her any mind. I just closed my eyes and focused on the task at hand.

I felt the knife's tip pierce through skin. Blood splattered all over my neck, my clothes, and my face. But strangely enough, I didn't feel any pain at all.

…

…

This doesn't make sense. Why doesn't it hurt at all*?*

The force I'd felt upon my neck wasn't that of a sharp object plunging into my skin but of something oddly *soft* pushing against me.

Hesitantly, I opened my eyes and saw that I'd let go of the knife. But it hadn't fallen onto the floor. Instead, it was right there in front of my eyes…lodged in someone's *hand*.

"Whew! You sure didn't hold back, did you, Miss Saint? Let's work on that survival instinct, okay?" joked Nana, who had taken the blow meant for my neck with her own hand. She pulled it out without a moment's hesitation.

A fountain of blood spurted out from the gash, its crimson color pulling me back into reality.

Oh my God. This is really happening.

"Nana…?"

The anguish I felt at being thwarted again in my attempt to end it all paled in comparison to the shock of seeing Nana, who wasn't even supposed to *be* here, showing up out of nowhere and thrusting her hand in front of my throat at exactly the right moment.

Nana laughed as she looked into my astonished face.

"I wish you wouldn't run off and try to put yourself down like this. You have no idea how much trouble you've caused me," she said.

I could never in a million years have imagined this girl, who'd called me a saint with such naked adoration, taking that icy tone with me. It was completely and utterly out of character for her, and it made a chill run down my spine.

I just couldn't wrap my head around it. And what's more, in the very next moment, she looked up to the ceiling and started making excuses to someone—who, specifically, I couldn't say—

that she hadn't meant what she'd said and that she was just upset that I was trying to die.

I had no idea what Nana was really after. Why had she gone to such lengths to stop me?

No matter how many times I'd tried to take my life, I always wound up getting interrupted right at the last second. Did this mean that it was fate that I wouldn't be allowed to die by my own hand now?

Just as I was practically dissociating from the despair of it all, the crowd in the room grew suddenly bigger. In walked Melvin, Melvin's guard, my brother-in-law, the Peerless Death Gods, Nolan, and Zero. Apparently, there had been a hidden door in one of the room's walls, which was how Nana—and now, this new crowd—had gotten inside. It was all starting to come together now.

It had just so happened that this hidden door was *right behind* me. If I'd been standing even just a little bit farther away, Nana wouldn't have been able to reach me in time.

I must have the worst luck...

"It's gonna be okay, Miss Saint. Nana's here to help," said Nana sweetly, out of the blue, as if to redirect my attention toward her.

Jolted back to reality, I let out a quiet scream.

I'd never asked for help; it was *forced* on me. Her "help" didn't actually help me in any way. It was just terrifying and burdensome.

I couldn't make sense of what Nana was after at all. But with the direction that things were heading, I felt doomed to face an ending I didn't want, all thanks to her and Lady Rose.

"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 to Lady Rose, with no regard whatsoever for what *I* wanted.

I looked frantically around the room for a way out of this impossible deadlock. My self-defense knife was too small to do lethal damage. I'd have to find something better suited for the job...

As I was looking around the room, I made eye contact with Melvin.

I wasn't all that surprised to see him here. After all, he'd been at the church with Nana when I'd been kidnapped...so if Nana was here, then it made sense that he might be here too. But I had no idea what was going through his head right now, so I had my

guard up.

To my surprise, though, Melvin didn't say a word to me, even when I met his gaze. Instead, he just gave me a little smile, as if to say, *Everything's going to be all right.*

I was impressed as always at Melvin's insight. He knew better than to say anything, because I would protest immediately. So, instead, he'd opted for a silent signal.

Come to think of it, didn't he say that he and Nana were friends? I thought. If Nana was his friend, then surely I had no reason to be afraid of her. Melvin had always been on my side, and his reassuring smile spoke volumes. *I trust him.* Back at the church, I'd been suspicious of everyone—even Melvin. But now that I was thinking a little more clearly, I realized that there had never been anyone, not even from my past life, that I could trust more than him.

My nerves had finally settled a bit, so I was ready to leave the room with Nana for some of her "counseling." To my surprise, though, my brother-in-law's two guards, the Peerless Death Gods, followed us out the door.

I thought it was a little unusual for them to accompany us like this, but it didn't feel suspicious enough for me to try to shoo them away. I just let them follow along.

Nana seemed more unhappy about their presence than I was. She glared at the guards, but she must have realized that any attempt at confrontation would just be a waste of breath. Ultimately, she let out a sigh and looked away, as if reluctantly conceding to their escort.

We left the soundproof room and stood face-to-face in the hall, a silence suddenly falling upon us.

Then Nana spoke up.

"Nana really, *really* wants to save you, Miss Saint. Think you could spare a tip or two on how to go about that? Pretty please?" she asked me point-blank.

Her question was so direct and earnest, and I didn't see anything in her expression that suggested an ulterior motive. When I took into account her friendship with Melvin, I decided that I probably had nothing to fear from her.

In all likelihood, Nana just had a very *childish* way of thinking. She didn't seem to give much thought at all to how to

communicate in an accessible, easily digestible way. Instead of sharing her thought process, she blurted out exactly what she was thinking and feeling without any context, so it could be pretty hard to follow her. Sometimes, depending on the situation, it could even be a little frightening. Knowing this about her certainly explained her uncanny directness, incoherence, and abruptness.

The only thing I couldn't figure out was whether her childishness was genuine or contrived.

So, she wants to make me happy, huh? Well…that's kind of a tall order, actually. Making me happy is no simple matter. I can't repay her kindness with a new lease on my life, I'm afraid.

"You told me before that you had to repay my kindness by making *me* happy. Do you remember that? Well, you needn't worry about that anymore. I'm plenty happy already," I said.

"But that's not good enough!" she cried, sounding as if she were at her wit's end.

I was so stunned, I couldn't speak. I decided I might as well hear her out.

"Nana *has* to pay you back… You've saved her twice now, and she hasn't even saved you *once*. If this keeps up, she's never going to get to go to Heaven. Yeah… That's gotta be it. That's *gotta* be why she hasn't been beamed up to Heaven yet. You're in the same boat, right, Miss Saint? You must've done something bad—something to send you to Hell—and now you want to end it all so you can get to Heaven, right?"

The way she spoke was half conversation, half empty monologue. I didn't really understand all that stuff she was saying about Heaven and Hell, but something she said stuck out to me. Even if I tried to get on her conversational wavelength, though, I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to get my idea across to her.

"Nana… Can you tell me how, specifically, you became indebted to me?" I asked, hoping it would help me to contextualize what I was going to say next.

Nana gave me a little nod.

"Back when we were still alive, you must have tried to save Nana, right? And then Nana met you again here in Hell. Nana was so surprised when you came to visit the church, Miss Saint! Seeing how beautifully you shone and how hard you were trying, Nana felt inspired to keep living so she could go to Heaven!"

“Are you suggesting that our meeting at the church wasn’t actually our first but our *second*?”

“Yep! Nana doesn’t know what your name was back then, but she knew right away that you were the older girl who tried to save her. After all, you looked just like her when you were praying to God!”

“Back when we were still alive”…I tried to save her? And when she says “Hell,” does she mean this world? Then, the past life she must be referring to… Does she mean what I think she means?

An older girl whose name she doesn’t know…praying to God…

Putting those two pieces together, I quickly found the answer I was looking for.

“Are you the child I tried to save from the truck?” I asked her.

I didn’t even remember her face, but looking back on it now, I *did* have a faint memory that she’d been a little girl. And I remembered how young she’d been—maybe even too young to have started elementary school. She’d still had her whole life ahead of her.

“Yep!” Nana confirmed cheerfully.

Oh… Oh.

It wasn’t really a surprise that I hadn’t been able to save her in the end. I’d literally been up against a *truck*, after all. And if I’d been reincarnated, then it only made sense that she would have probably been reincarnated at basically the same time. So, no wonder we’d wound up here in the same world.

That also explained why Nana thought our current world was the afterlife. She was just a little girl; she hadn’t even lived to be ten years old. She probably would have had no way of knowing that we were currently living in the world of an otome game. One could hardly blame her for drawing the conclusion that she had. And judging from the way she assumed that we were in Hell, she’d probably encountered more than her fair share of suffering here in this world.

When we first met in this world, in the church, she’d looked like a poor little orphan girl. Looking back on that now, I realized that she’d probably never had the chance to enjoy her new life here. I’d been dealing with my own hardships, but poor Nana had it rougher than I could have imagined; she’d lost her parents at a young age, unable to ever see them again.

And since Nana thought we were in Hell, she was under the mistaken impression that all she had to do was pay back her debt to me, and she could ascend to Heaven. She clung to that belief because it felt like her only ticket to salvation. The reality, of course, was that saving me wouldn't beam Nana up into Heaven. We were plainly *alive* right now. Although we'd come into this world after dying, it was neither Heaven nor Hell. It was simply another world.

I really wanted to help her, but I just didn't have the energy or the strength.

"In this moment, Nana, I'll be happiest if you let me die. How about you consider us even then?"

I did feel bad about leaving her behind in this world, but I didn't have the means to help her—or anyone else—right now. I knew how cruel my request was, but I just gave her a smile and took advantage of her ignorance.

Nana shook her head, looking deeply troubled.

"I'm not sure about that. If you take your own life, you won't be able to make it to Heaven," she said.

So that's *your concern, huh? Well, this is going to make things difficult…*

The sense of urgency had disappeared from our little "counseling session," so I had a feeling that this was probably the perfect moment to catch Nana off guard and grab the knife from her. But in all honesty, I was a little afraid to try to steal a lethal weapon from a girl who clearly had no regard for her own safety. Plus, there was still the matter of the Peerless Death Gods, who were silently standing watch. I still had no idea why they'd followed us out here. I was also more than a little unsettled by the idea of stabbing myself to death right in front of Nana, when she was basically just a *child*.

"Besides, Mel will be really sad if you die, Miss Saint. He loves you," Nana continued.

At this, I felt myself freeze.

Well, that's fair. After how much I've wasted his time, and all the trouble I've caused him, of course he'd be upset if I died and made it all for nothing, I thought—but then I caught myself. *No… What am I saying? Melvin would never think like that. He would probably just be sad if I died because I'm his* friend.

“I know that, but I still want to die,” I said. “I just want to make Seth happy.”

I was touched that, after all I’d done, so many people—Seth, Lady Rose, and Nana—had tried to stop me. But that didn’t change my resolve. If I were to just accept their kindness and keep living the way I had been, then I felt certain I could never make Seth happy. And I would probably come to loathe myself even more than I did already. My self-loathing would become a bottomless pit.

I was determined not to go back on this. I *couldn’t*.

I had a feeling that Nana and I would just keep talking past each other, so what was the point? I let out a sigh. Based on the way Nana was pouting, I had a feeling that she’d probably come to the same conclusion.

“Well, I tried!” she exclaimed, exasperated. “Guess I’d better let Fii take it from here.”

Nana began walking back toward the soundproof room, looking dejected. As I watched her leave, my eyes zeroed in on the staircase behind her that extended all the way to the ground floor. *Maybe I should just jump?* I thought, looking down. But I couldn’t. I knew that if I ended my life that way, there might be suspicion that someone *else* (namely, Nana) had actually ended it for me, and I didn’t want to put her under that kind of scrutiny.

As I was peering over the staircase, I heard a voice call out to me.

“It would be such a shame to see you go so soon,” said one of the Peerless Death Gods. “Could you please reconsider?”

I knew that the Peerless Death Gods had been here the whole time, but it was like they’d completely disappeared into the background—so much so, I’d *forgotten* they were here. Their reputation was apparently well deserved.

I turned to glare at them. Then I gave them a smile.

“What an interesting request. I assume you must have followed us here to protect Nana, then? I suppose she must be your real priority. Whoever’s pulling your strings doesn’t care about my brother-in-law; they want *her* protected,” I shot back (though, admittedly, I was kind of reaching).

Whoever was working behind the scenes here, I had no idea why they would be so fixated on Nana. It was also perfectly

plausible that their aim wasn't to *protect* her but to keep an eye on her. Fortunately, unless they'd been there at the scene of the truck incident with us, it would have been impossible for anyone to make sense of the conversation I'd just had with Nana. Whatever conspiracy was afoot, I felt pretty confident that I hadn't just given them any new cards, at least.

The Peerless Death God I'd just shot back at raised his eyebrow at me. Contrary to what you might assume from his polite way of speaking, he was apparently pretty short-tempered. His partner inserted himself between us, trying to cool things down.

"No need for anyone to get upset now! Don't even worry your head about it, Lady Liliana. None o' that will cause any problems for you and Prince Seth, rest assured!" he said.

I didn't really want to get into any arguments with them, so I quickly retreated.

"I'm not worried. I could hardly care less," I replied dismissively.

I gave the casual Death God a probing look. *Interesting*, I thought. *He managed to de-escalate things without either confirming or denying my shot in the dark. You'd think he'd be the one always on the verge of flying off the handle, but I'm getting the sense that he's actually the more levelheaded of the two.*

Typically, though, they act like exactly the sort of people you'd expect them to be from their speech mannerisms. There must be a reason for that...

"We just do it for shits and giggles...same reason we do lots of stuff," said the casual Death God, as if he were reading my mind. He smiled, seemingly in an effort to defuse the tension.

I had a feeling that I'd regret it if I kept engaging with them, so I decided not to probe any further. Instead, I turned my back to them and abruptly ended the conversation, heading back toward the soundproof room.

My feet were sluggish as I walked to the door. Nana's parting words had left me with a sense of dread that I'd surely be forced to speak with this "Fii"—Lady Rose, probably—upon my return. Reluctantly, I opened the door.

Sure enough, when I returned to the room, Nana seemed to be talking to Lady Rose about something. I walked up to them so that I could listen in on their conversation more easily. To my dismay, Nana was *seriously* running her mouth.

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

“And the way *you* think is altogether too *spiritual*. How am I supposed to have a conversation with you when everything keeps coming back to Heaven and Hell?” I retorted, exasperated. I didn’t even address her first point.

I was surprised, though, to find myself letting my guard down and speaking so casually to her. Maybe it was just the relief of finding someone who’d lived in the world of my past life after so many years? Was “spiritual” even a word that people used in this world? It seemed a little too lofty—a little too *spiritual* itself, if you will—to be in common parlance here.

Unsurprisingly, the people in the room were wondering what in the world was going on. Nolan munched on a baguette in the corner, cocking his head and staring at me with a plainly befuddled look on his face. Zero stood at his side, giving me an uneasy, probing stare of his own.

“And I’m sorry to disappoint you, Nana, but I have nothing to say to Lady Rose,” I blurted out, trying to save face. I didn’t even turn to look at Lady Rose.

Until just yesterday, I’d been desperate to apologize to her—even if I could only get out a single word of contrition. With the turn things had taken now, though, I figured I’d better put that dream to rest. Lady Rose was sure to be shaken if I took my life right after apologizing to her.

All of a sudden, I heard a voice call out to me.

“Liliana,” it said, in a commanding tone that sent a chill down my spine. It belonged to my brother-in-law.

“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 me when you agreed to that,” he said.

There was no question here; it was an order.

Seeing the strained look on his face made me remember how, in spite of all the cruelty I’d inflicted on her, sweet, tenderhearted Lady Rose had been practically in tears from my failed suicide attempt.

I felt confident that I understood what my brother-in-law was trying to tell me.

I let out an empty little chuckle.

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

"Good," he replied, regarding me with a look of concern.

He didn't turn to look at Lady Rose, but that didn't surprise me. After all, it would have caused no shortage of issues if anyone were to catch on to how he was feeling.

I'm always just the spoiler candidate, aren't I? I thought with a sigh. But I knew that I never would have been able to even get that far if not for the engagement getting broken off, so I could hardly complain.

It seemed that my brother-in-law was determined to hate me until even my final moments. He clucked his tongue at me, then approached Lady Rose and began to discuss something with her. I knew he would recoil with disgust and deny it vehemently, but I couldn't help but feel that the Peerless Death Gods and the king had been right when they'd said that he and I were alike.

You're much more talented and brilliant than I could ever hope to be, but at the end of the day, we're both only human.

If I were in his shoes, I knew that I'd probably be doing exactly the same thing.

I know the role that I must play. It's my duty to make Lady Rose understand that "Liliana Inoce" must die, no matter what, and that it has nothing to do with her. I need to make her give up on saving me.

Basically: If I was going to die, then I needed to do it right, and I needed to fulfill my role until the very end.

"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!" Nana chirped as she shooed us away.

Knowing Nana, she probably still had something up her sleeve. It was a little unsettling not knowing *what*, but whatever it was, I felt reassured knowing that Seth would be safe. There were too many people in the room—not the least of which included the Peerless Death Gods—for her to try anything crazy.

I left the room with a blank expression on my face, and Lady Rose followed behind me. I walked to the staircase and turned around. Looking at Lady Rose head-on like this, I was struck that

she was just as gorgeous as ever. Not even her peasant clothes could diminish her beauty.

She wore a grave expression on her face, and I could tell that she was about to launch into a serious conversation. Before she could start, though, I lobbed a casual question at her.

"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?" I asked, pointing at the door we'd just come out of.

To be perfectly honest, I'd figured out that it was soundproof the moment I'd first spotted the door. But it would have been exceedingly rude to say so to her with any confidence if she hadn't figured it out herself. I had to ensure that she felt we were on equal footing. As a noblewoman, formalities like this had been deeply ingrained in me from a young age, and I could hardly just let go of them now.

"Huh? Oh…yes. Shade did say something about that," she replied, seeming almost disappointed in where I'd taken the conversation.

In noble negotiations, there were certain ironclad rules one had to follow. One such rule was that, if you want your conversational partner to agree to something, you ought to let *them* guide the pace and feel in control. On the other hand, if you want to reject or refuse something, then you ought to disturb the conversational flow and force them to match *your* pace.

Of course, Lady Rose was naturally brilliant. She wouldn't have known about the strategies that people like me—who *worked* for everything they accomplished—had to employ.

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

"Yes. Why?"

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

Lady Rose seemed absolutely dumbfounded by what I'd just dropped on her. *Good*, I thought. It was the first time I'd had a conversation with Lady Rose where I actually felt like *I* was in control. Honestly, though, it didn't feel as good as I'd expected.

"I'm so glad that you're still here. 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?" I paused briefly, then gave her a sweet smile and continued. "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."

Until now, I'd never once claimed a victory over Lady Rose. But just for this moment, I felt like I was winning. I wasn't going along with her bargaining tactics. I couldn't, because what I wanted more than anything was to ensure that everyone—me, Lady Rose, and *especially* Seth—could be happy. It wasn't out of grief alone that I had come to this conclusion. In my mind, this was the best-case scenario.

Perhaps the strength of my convictions had stunned Lady Rose, because for a moment, she seemed speechless. But then she broke her silence with a loud entreaty.

"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!" she cried, as if trying to fight back.

It was such an earnest, dazzlingly optimistic sentiment.

Yes, well… If anyone can find a way, I suppose it's Lady Rose. I'm sure she *could figure this all out*, I thought self-deprecatingly. *But I won't stand for this. I can't let her steal my role from me—it's all I have left.*

I knew that she spoke from a place of kindness. She wanted to *help* me. But every single word she'd said felt like a knife.

Go ahead, Lady Rose. Play your part and hate me. It's all right.

"You really are a strange one," I 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?" she asked, bewildered.

This time, it was *me* at a loss for words.

No, I thought, *this is to be expected. Calm down, Liliana. It makes perfect sense that she'd see you that way. Lady Rose hasn't done anything wrong.* You're *the villainess here.*

I felt like all of the feelings I'd been bottling up were ready to burst out of me, but I managed to keep the lid on.

With a smile, I explained, in the sweetest voice I could manage,

“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. Not *one* thing has gone the way I wanted. That’s why I’m in this position now.”

I know it’s all true, but why do I have to admit defeat to her *of all people?*

I felt tears prickle at the corners of my eyes as Lady Rose stared at me intently. What was she thinking? I realized that I needed to hurry up and bring all of this to an end.

I can’t take this anymore. I’ve done what my brother-in-law demanded of me. I don’t need to draw this out any further.

I wanted my final moments, at least, to be pleasant and peaceful. But talking to Lady Rose was anything but that. Our conversation left me deeply unsettled.

“What do you—” Lady Rose began.

“Why must I graciously answer each and every one of your questions? I despise you,” I spat, interrupting her.

I knew those words would hurt. Lady Rose probably had no idea what it felt like to be hated. After all, it would have been unthinkable for anyone to hate her in the first place. That was all that needed to be said on the matter. I didn’t want to hurt her any more than I had already. But she didn’t even seem to be thinking of herself right now. She just kept looking at me with an anguished expression on her face, as if she were still determined to save me.

“Why do you look like you’re about to cry?” I asked her. “You really are far too kind. As if I didn’t already know that.”

At this, she seemed to be pushed even *further* to the brink of tears. I let out a sigh. It seemed I wouldn’t be able to fulfill my brother-in-law’s request after all.

“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.”

I cast my gaze down slightly, feeling guilty that I couldn’t fulfill the role my brother-in-law had asked me to play. Then I smiled at Lady Rose, who was once again speechless, one last time before averting my gaze.

Unsurprisingly, her feelings don’t seem to have changed at all. I guess I couldn’t change fate.

“Why don’t we close the book on this story, Lady Rose? Please

don’t mourn for me when I die.”

I felt like I heard a whimper as she tried to stop me, but I didn’t pay any mind. I left her and headed back to the room, walking straight to the door.

But then I felt a look of utter despair bore into my back, and I stopped.

That’s when I realized something: This was just like when Lady Rose’s engagement to Seth had been broken off. Our positions were reversed, and the whole situation was different, but both times, we’d each been silently begging the other to turn around.

“You’ll be all right, Lady Rose,” I reassured her. “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.”

I knew that the meaning behind my words would probably be lost on her. But when I thought about the most appropriate parting words for me, the villainess, to give to her, the protagonist…it seemed only appropriate to reference the game somehow.

This time it’s actually over, I thought, reaching for the door.

“Hey, Lily…have you heard of *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*?” Lady Rose called out from behind me.

I couldn’t believe my ears. It felt like I was hearing the very wheel of fate changing course.

Chapter 12

I froze. For a while, all I could do was just stand there, absolutely dumbfounded. Lady Rose didn't move either. Finally, I turned around. I didn't have it in me to dress up my language in ladylike flourishes now, so I just blurted out exactly what I was thinking.

"No… No way. You… You of all people… There's no way you'd…"

I could feel the tremble in my voice as I spoke. I bit my lip, knowing full well that my behavior was utterly unbefitting of a noblewoman.

It was impossible, though. This was the *one thing* that I just couldn't even imagine. I mean, how could someone from my world ever be such a *perfect main character*? How could a mere human have such a magnetic presence that everyone bowed before her?

She was supposed to be inhumanly *brilliant*…wasn't she? I'd always thought that she'd just had a massive head start on me. But if she was reincarnated, just like me, then…then…did that mean that I just hadn't worked hard enough?

I couldn't accept it.

"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?" Lady Rose asked me.

It was clear that she wasn't going to give up until I acknowledged that we'd both been reincarnated into the game. I kept crying out that it was impossible, that this couldn't be happening, but she just kept taking slow steps toward me.

"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?"

As insane as this whole situation felt, the words coming out of her mouth *did* make sense. Looking back on the strange feeling I'd gotten from her, and all the anomalies I'd noticed, her behavior had been plainly suspicious.

Okay… I just need to take a moment to compose myself. If Lady

Rose is reincarnated, just like she says, then what does that mean about everything that's happened thus far?

"Lady Rose… Are you suggesting that you had some personal reason not to refute my accusations that you'd bullied me?" I asked, in an almost pleading tone.

All this time, I'd meant to carry the weight of my sins for the rest of my life. In fact, I'd intended to carry them with me even after I *died*. But if my relentless bullying *hadn't* broken her…if it had somehow been a part of her plan all along…then I…

"Yes. I wanted to become a commoner," she replied simply.

I couldn't believe my ears.

A commoner? She wanted to be…a commoner?

Such an ambition—if you could call it that—seemed so radically unlike the high-minded, beautiful, roselike woman I knew who could have had anything she wanted. Nor did those peasant clothes she was wearing suit her. Beauty like that was meant for dresses. But I knew better than to think that happiness came from following the wishes of others and what they felt was right for you. If she were to tell me that *this* was what made her happy, whether it suited her or not…then I could accept that.

In life and in death, only we ourselves can judge whether or not we're happy. No one else can determine that for us.

I could understand her reasoning. But that didn't mean that I fully believed her yet.

"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," she replied, sounding a little embarrassed. Her words felt genuine.

Was it really not my fault? Does this mean I don't have to bear the weight of all that's gone wrong on my shoulders?

I slumped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. If I'd been even a moment slower to react, I probably would have fainted.

No matter how much I'd struggled to defy my fate, I'd never succeeded. But *Lady Rose* had the power to change fate, and on the day of the annulment, she'd rewritten the script our lives were bound by as if it were nothing. For better or for worse, it was clear

to me now that *I* didn't have that kind of power.

So, even if it was beyond my comprehension, she was clearly reincarnated—just like me. She'd been reborn into this world as a brilliant young woman with the power to defy fate.

"Am I just…having a wonderful dream right now? One where everything goes right?" I mumbled.

I really did feel like I was in a dream. Tears welled in my eyes. Then, like a dam bursting, they gushed down my cheeks. It was completely different from the last time I'd burst into tears a few days ago, though. Back then, I'd exhausted myself and collapsed, making myself a burden to everyone around me. I'd been so scared of everything, and memories of my death had come flooding back.

This time, I was weeping because I realized that I didn't have to keep suffering in silence anymore. The realization hit me on an emotional level before I understood it intellectually. I used to scold myself for crying, because I'd felt like I didn't have the right. But now everything was different.

It didn't change what I'd done. But…

Ever since the moment I'd first laid eyes on her, I'd always, always admired how beautiful and noble Lady Rose was. All she had to do was stand there, and she was the picture-perfect leading actress. She was a real *rose*. I'll admit I envied her for how she'd captured Seth's heart. But despite my jealousy, she was still the person I admired most in the world.

I hadn't changed who she was. My sinful envy wasn't what had twisted her fate. She wasn't some tragic heroine who had been wrongfully stripped of her title. She'd been reincarnated, just like me. But unlike me, she was a *protagonist*. She could change her fate at will.

As fat tears rolled down my cheeks, Lady Rose squatted down next to me and pulled something out of her bag.

"This is all I've got, but…you're welcome to have it," she said, handing it to me.

To my utter confusion, it was…a baguette.

"It's magic bread. All you have to do is eat it, and you can change your fate," she explained, with a completely serious expression.

Unable to help myself, I burst out laughing. I took her baguette

in both hands. I didn’t really care for food. I only ate to survive. But since *Lady Rose* was offering this baguette to me, and claiming that it could change my fate, I couldn’t refuse. I ripped off a piece and brought it to my mouth.



The bread didn't relent easily when I tried to tear off a piece. But its resistance signaled to me that I was *alive*. Maybe I was just being impressionable, but as I chewed on it, I really did feel like it was imbuing me with its magical properties. I felt a warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest.

"This is delicious," I said. I couldn't taste it, of course, but I knew that it must be.

Just after saying that, though, my eyes flew open in shock.

I *could* taste it.

Ever since the day that I'd met Lady Rose, almost ten years ago now, I'd gradually lost my sense of taste. It wasn't as if I'd been eating bland food this whole time. If anything, I'd probably lived like a veritable *gourmand*. So, it wasn't like the taste of the bread itself had been anything miraculous. My loss of taste must have been psychological. If I had to guess, I'd say that I'd probably been just so overwhelmed with everything, I hadn't had the *capacity* to taste food.

That was just how it had been, ever since I'd met Lady Rose. And now, thanks to her, I could taste it again.

I didn't know anything about the person who'd baked this bread, of course, but I felt sure that they must have had a kind heart. I could practically taste their compassion. Something about it gave me the delusional hope that I could be happy.

Unable to bear the power of the baguette's magic, I rudely handed the baguette straight back to Lady Rose.

"It's very powerful bread, so I think one bite is plenty," I said. "Besides, I have a feeling its fate-defying properties work best when *you're* holding on to it."

It wasn't the baguette, after all, that had worked a spell on me; it was Lady Rose herself. And it was in her hands that it became "magic bread."

I took in a deep breath. Then I looked at Lady Rose.

No... Maybe I shouldn't call her that anymore.

"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... You should know I don't really hate you, Felicia."

In that moment, we shared a laugh for the very first time.

I went on to tell Felicia all about my life, glossing over some parts just a little bit.

I told her that I'd been so happy when I realized I was reincarnated, and that I'd worked myself to the bone trying to make a dream from my past life come true. I told her about how seeing her for the first time had been such a heavy blow. I told her about how I'd kept trying to rewrite the game's script again and again and again, only to fail every time. I told her how I'd decided to play my part and follow along with the script to make everyone happy and how I'd enrolled at Thea Academy. I told her about how I hadn't been prepared to shoulder the sins I had to commit in order to stick to the game's canon. And yet, I told her, I'd still been desperate to make my dream come true—even if it was all in vain. But my heart had broken first.

Finally, I told her about my plan to commit suicide and leave behind a note that revealed everything. That way, I could restore her to her position as a duke's daughter, and she could get engaged again to Seth.

"But…I suppose that wouldn't have made you happy at all if what you really wanted was to be a commoner."

"Yeah. I don't want to be a noble, much less a queen," she replied bluntly.

At this, all I could do was laugh sardonically.

"Ah ha ha…"

No one would have been better suited to live the life of a noble or play the role of a queen. And yet, she'd thrown it all away like it was nothing.

"Go figure…"

All I'd wanted was to make Seth and everyone else happy. But it wouldn't have made Felicia happy. And even if I'd forced her to be queen anyway, I still didn't even know if that would have made *Seth* happy.

After all, Seth's feelings for her were unrequited. Felicia had cared far more about becoming a commoner than she had about him. That was just the fact of the matter.

"You haven't done anything to me that you need to feel guilty for. So, why not just accept your position as future queen consort?" Felicia asked me, as if it were a simple matter.

Of course, it *wasn't* that simple. Me becoming queen consort wouldn't make Seth happy. Besides, I didn't want to marry for purely political reasons.

“Because…that won’t make my dream come true. There would be no point,” I said evasively.

I wasn’t about to tell her about my feelings for Seth. I mean, how *could* I? Considering who she was to him, it was just too awkward.

“Don’t worry. I know your dream will come true,” Felicia said breezily. It sounded almost cruel.

How the hell would you know? I wanted to say.

Instead, I just laughed and said, “That’s easy for *you* to say.”

As I laughed, I was surprised to notice, in spite of myself, how quickly I’d lost interest in dying.

That’s not what will make Seth happy right now, I realized.

What Seth and I shared…it probably wasn’t enough.

I couldn’t help but think that Felicia was probably picking up on my resignation. I can’t explain why… It was just a feeling, I guess.

What a strange relationship this is, I thought to myself.

As we cleared the air, apologizing to each other for this and that, the mood seemed to get lighter.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me: *Nana was there when that truck hit, and we were both reincarnated into this world. So, does that mean that Felicia might have died there too, around the same time as us?*

“Just out of curiosity, why are you still speaking to me so formally?” Felicia asked.

Do you even realize the respect you command? It would take a lot of guts for anyone to speak to you casually, I wanted to say. But instead I just mumbled something vague about looking up to her and took the opportunity to change the subject a little.

After all, it wasn’t just about her being Lady Rose; it was about who she might have been in her past life too. And I *really* wanted to know more about that.

“Do you remember when you died in your past life, Felicia?” I asked her.

“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.”

I couldn’t help but grimace. It sounded all too familiar.

“Mm-hmm… I thought so.”

Sure enough, she’d been the cause of the whole chain of

accidents: the beautiful woman who'd run out into the middle of the street in a panic. I'd been wondering how it was possible that Felicia wouldn't mind or even notice all of the attention she received. She didn't even seem to be aware of how insanely talented she was.

But now that I knew who she'd been in her past life, it all made sense; the college-aged woman I'd seen that day was even *more* beautiful than Felicia.

"You thought so?" Felicia repeated, startling me.

Crap! I thought.

I obviously hadn't *wanted* to die, but I couldn't blame her for causing my death in our past lives. I was sure that she must have been dealing with a lot when that happened, and I didn't want to hold it against her. Besides, I knew she would feel awful if she realized that she'd been responsible for the deaths of Nana and myself…

I can't let her find out about that!

"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."

I knew how dumb that sounded, but it was the best I could come up with. I had a bad feeling my eyes were furiously darting around the room as I spoke.

Oh, God…

I'd gotten pretty good at lying over the years, but now that my guard was down, I was back to being *terrible* at it—almost as bad as I'd been before the truck.

"More importantly," I said, trying to change the subject, "you must've solved the problem with the neighboring country with your knowledge from your past life, right?"

That *did* explain a lot, actually. Since Felicia was reincarnated too, she could have passed off her knowledge from the game as a "prophecy" and used that to request help from the king in solving Galion's problems.

Knowing that it had been Felicia who'd been pulling the strings, I felt all of my worries about that situation instantly evaporate.

"I just wish we could have talked openly about this a long time

ago and avoided all these pointless misunderstandings," Felicia said.

"I do too. It feels like we took a pretty roundabout journey to get here."

We laughed.

Then, after a little more chatting, Felicia gave me a puzzled look and said, "Hey... Why Seth?"

I looked back at her with wide eyes. What in the world was she even asking me right now? I mean, "Why Seth?" What kind of question *was* that? *Because* he was Seth, obviously! Wasn't it self-explanatory?

Oh... Maybe she's just trying to make conversation?

"It was love at first sight," I said proudly, putting on my brightest smile.

"Oh. So, it's his good looks, huh? I get it. Prince Seth definitely has that 'Prince Charming' look about him."

*His "good looks"? His "*good looks*"?! You say that like he's just some average pretty boy!*

Those were fighting words. I looked at her with fire in my eyes.

It's not just his "good looks," okay? He's perfect in every single way! You got a problem with him or something? Huh? Huh?!

"I've been wondering for a while now, but...are you not a Prince Seth fan?" I asked her. "You... You *did* play the game, didn't you? Did you skip his route?"

You played it all the way until the very end, didn't you? So, surely you would have seen him in all his glory. You'd know *how dashing and adorable and perfect he is, despite his inability to ever be honest about how he feels. You would have gotten the full Seth Experience, right? And—*and!*—you've been living in the same dimension as him for years now, experiencing him in 4D!*

"No, I played it... I'm just not a big fan of arrogant types, I guess," she said.

I knew it, I thought, eyeing her with suspicion. *She really* isn't *human.*

So, she didn't like arrogant types. Fair enough. But that was only a tiny *fraction* of Seth's charm. And really, he was just taking the lead, that's all. That didn't make him *arrogant*. So...

Ugh... I just don't get it!

Should I plumb the depths of my vocabulary trying to explain my

love to her, just like I did that time with Melvin? I wondered. But I quickly thought better of the idea.

"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," I said instead, a serious look on my face.

"T-True!" she agreed emphatically, looking relieved. Even though she was agreeing, I felt kind of annoyed by her response. I decided to just let it go, though.

I wouldn't know what to do with myself if Felicia suddenly fell for Seth *now*, after everything that had happened. Plus, I wouldn't want to interfere with my brother-in-law's romantic affairs.

Well…silence is golden, right?

I noticed Felicia peering at me, looking a little afraid. I cocked my head, as if to say, *What's the matter?*

"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…" I said, heading toward the door.

Before I could get very far, though, Felicia tugged on the sleeve of my dress and stopped me. I turned around to look at her, surprised by the desperation in her grasp.

"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?" I repeated.

I racked my brain, trying to figure out which conversation she was referring to. Then I remembered that we'd only spoken once today.

"Oh… You mean, when I told him that I would 'play my part'? That was—" I began, before stopping mid-sentence.

I'd been about to give her a straight answer, but then I thought better of it. If I told her the truth—that he'd basically ordered me to make her come around to the necessity of my death—then her opinion of him would probably take a nosedive. I'd have to think of a more…*delicate* way to put it.

I thought about it for a minute. Then, with a smile on my face, I tried again.

"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," she 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."

That's right… I'm just sparing her the ugly details and giving her the highlights, that's all. I mean, look, I know I totally covered up that stuff with our past lives…but this is different, okay?

But Felicia just looked at me with a serious, skeptical expression, as if she hadn't been convinced by a single word I'd just said.

"I'm not lying to you, I promise," I added, flustered. "The entire gist of our conversation was that he loved you and despised me. There really wasn't anything more to it."

Personally, I could see where my brother-in-law had been coming from, so I didn't feel there was any sense in getting into it. *Please, Felicia, just drop it.*

She gave me a probing look. I glared back at her, as if to say, *I'm* not *lying! I swear!* Eventually, she seemed to resign herself to the fact that she probably wouldn't get any more answers.

"I thought he was in love with *you*," she said.

"*Excuse* me?"

Huh? I'm sorry, what?!

I couldn't even believe my ears. How in the *world* had she come up with that? With a faint smile, I clapped both of my hands on her 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," I told her.

As she began to explain her reasoning to me, bit by bit, I began to feel like my head was going to explode. Apparently, most of her conversations with him had revolved around *me*. And just before, back in the soundproof room, he'd been looking at *me* the whole time instead of looking at *her*.

What in the world? Seriously, what am I getting myself into here?

"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!" I exclaimed earnestly.

I didn't know how nice he acted when he was around Felicia, but when he was with me, he only ever regarded me like I was a

piece of trash. I mean, I'd kind of brought that upon myself…but still.

Wait… Did *I really bring that upon myself?* I wondered.

If Felicia had become a commoner, just like she'd always wanted, then my brother-in-law didn't really have any legitimate reason to hate me after all, did he? I couldn't blame anyone for misunderstanding the situation—I had too, after all—but didn't I have a right to be angry?

Yeah… That's right! Next time, I won't take it lying down.

"Nika sees me as a little sister. I like to think we're friends now too. He probably *does* give me special treatment sometimes," Felicia replied.

There she goes again, acting like the most oblivious woman on the planet. You'd think she'd never been in love before in her life.

Here I was, ready to put my life on the line for my first love, and she had the gall to deny that she and my brother-in-law were in love when it was staring her right in the face. *You've got to be kidding me*, I thought.

"You… You can't possibly mean that, can you?" I said.

She tried to back away from me, but I refused to let go of her shoulders.

I just couldn't wrap my head around it. I knew she wasn't a bad person—if anything, she was an *amazing* person—but, whether she was pulling on your heartstrings or hitting a nerve, she really had a habit of getting to you. And she probably didn't have any idea she was doing it either. That's probably what so many people were drawn to…and also why she was always getting herself into trouble.

The ups and downs of my life had mostly been at the whims of other people and their plans for me. In contrast, the ups and downs of *her* life had almost certainly been a result of the actions *she'd* led people to take. It was like we were polar opposites.

None of that mattered now, though. What *did* matter was Felicia's complete obliviousness to her own feelings. There was absolutely no way that she didn't love my brother-in-law. It seemed pretty clear to me what had happened here: She'd tried desperately to push down and stamp out her feelings, all because of some silly misunderstanding that he was somehow in love with *me*.

What really irritated me about all of this, though, was that she was also oblivious to *his* feelings. How in the world could a woman who was so beautiful—both in this life and her past life—not realize how much he adored her? Surely she was plenty used to being adored, after two lifetimes of it?

I hadn't had many opportunities to see the two of them talk, but the few times I had, he might as well have had hearts in his eyes. From the sweet, gentle tone he took with her and the adoring looks he gave her, it would have been obvious to *any* onlookers how much he loved her.

"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."

I tried to get the words out as quickly as possible, bombarding her with the facts. I wasn't going to drop this until I made her see reason.

For a second, I could've sworn that I saw her give a little nod of understanding. But in the next second, I saw her eyes grow distant and empty. I began to take some deep breaths to compose myself. Based on what I'd learned about Felicia today, I had a feeling that I knew *exactly* what she was doing.

"You aren't trying to pretend we never had this conversation, by chance, are you?" I asked her.

She gave me a weak, wordless smile. I could tell she was completely out of her depth. Instinctively, I took my hands off of her shoulders.

There must be a reason she's so insistent on playing dumb, I thought. *But can she really not even acknowledge their feelings for each other? I mean, they're in love! Obviously it'd be a challenge to make things work, considering the difference in their status. But isn't that something they can figure out together after they acknowledge their love for each other?*

"Felicia... Aren't you in love with him too?"

"I..."

To be honest, I was getting a little frustrated with her. *You both feel the same way!* I wanted to yell at her. *Why're you dancing around it like this?!*

But when I saw the light leave her eyes, I realized that I'd pushed her too far. It wasn't my place to butt in like this. Thinking about it now, there was clearly something I didn't understand—something important. After all, she'd been given a second lease on life, and she'd thrown away *everything* just to be a commoner.

Plus, *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* had been Felicia's favorite game. She got to live in its world now, with all of the characters that she loved. And, equipped with everything she knew about the game, she could have romanced any of the love interests that she'd wanted. No one would give all of that up without a good reason. There must have been something from her past life that was haunting her—something terrifying enough to make a beautiful woman like her run out into the street without looking.

I knew all too well what it was like to bear the burden of remembering my past life. Seeing that Nana bore that burden too, I realized that it wouldn't have been surprising if Felicia were also in the same boat. I shook Felicia's shoulders roughly, apologizing again and again. I was desperate to bring her back from the brink. I don't know if anything I was doing actually helped, but gradually, the light began to return to her eyes.

A few seconds later, a mysterious look crossed her face as she opened her mouth to speak.

"I'll forgive you…if you stop calling me 'Felicia,'" she said.

"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?!"

Ignoring the flummoxed look on my face, Felicia—no, Fii—reached out her hand to me as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

I hesitated for a moment, confused, but then I took her hand and gripped it tightly.

Whenever Fii was around, I felt like my emotions always ran high. It was exhausting and it made my head hurt. But at some point over the course of our conversation today, I felt like I'd

recaptured the hope I'd had as a little girl, back when I'd only just started my new life in this world. I felt like my old self again.



Still holding hands, we returned to the soundproof room to find Nana disrobed down to her underwear, her nun's habit discarded in a heap beside her.

Something big had obviously gone down while Fii and I were having our long chat in the hallway. But Nana was smiling happily, so whatever it was, I felt like it was nothing to worry about.

The only issue, then, was that Nana didn't have any clothes—and she didn't seem all that amenable to putting the nun's garb she'd just thrown onto the floor back on. Fortunately, Nolan stepped in and offered her his coat. It wasn't a perfect fix, but it would do for now.

Nolan and Nana were talking like they'd known each other for a long time, without any sense of distance or formality. *If Nana and Nolan really do know each other, then maybe it's thanks to Nana's influence that Nolan and Zero are a bit different from how I remember them from the game*, I thought. *Still...when would a foreign prince and a lowborn nun ever find the opportunity to cross paths?*

Anyway, the weight on my shoulders might have been lifted substantially now, but that didn't mean I had time to be worrying about other people's business like this. So, I decided to just let them do their thing.

Just as I'd made up my mind to let that go, I saw my brother-in-law make a beeline toward me. Fii and I had let go of each other's hands in the midst of the whole no-garb-Nana debacle, but he'd probably taken notice that they'd been clasped when we walked in.

I spoke up preemptively, before he could say anything.

"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," I said, bowing deeply.

I knew that was probably overkill, but I still felt that I owed it to him. He hadn't even come out and asked anything of me—it was more of an implicit order, if anything—but I was the one who had readily accepted, after all.

"You're every bit as guilty as Fii of making assumptions, albeit of

a different sort. But I can understand how our conversations might have left you with the wrong idea. Were I in your position, I might very well have made the same assumptions," he replied.

Wait... What? What is he even saying right now? What have I gotten the wrong idea about, exactly? I thought, still bowing my head. I was completely mystified.

"I won't deny that I held you in low esteem," he continued. "But I've come to care for you as a future sister-in-law."

"Brother..."

Instinctively, I lifted my head. Tears were brimming in my eyes. After all the crying I'd just done, I figured I was probably more easily moved to tears than usual. He gently patted my head with his big hand, as if he were trying to soothe me.

Maybe he wasn't ever trying to order me to do anything? I wondered. *Maybe he was genuinely just worried about me?*

If my brother-in-law had started to care about me, then it was probably due to Fii's influence and how often they talked about me. But maybe I could take just a *little* credit for all the hard work I'd put in too? Did this mean that all of it *wasn't* for nothing? That maybe it could even bring some sort of happiness...?

"Go talk to Seth. The two of you really ought to work on your communication," my brother-in-law said, gently pushing me toward Seth, who was practically hiding behind him.

His push took me by surprise, and I stumbled a bit. *If you'd pushed anyone but me like that, they probably would have fallen over!* I wanted to protest. But he was only just starting to warm up to me, so I didn't want to push my luck.

I looked in front of me at Seth, and Seth looked back at me. The worried expression on his face made my heart ache. I wanted nothing more than to run straight over to him and talk to him about everything, but first, I turned around to face my brother-in-law again. He'd given me the push I needed, and I wanted to return to the favor.

"Brother! I believe we can change our fate!"

Talking to Fii had given me hope. It was still just a tiny flame, but I could feel its spark there in my heart—and I wanted to share it with my brother-in-law. If he was still the man who couldn't answer me when I'd asked him if he thought we could change our fate...if he was still the man I knew who hadn't given up on

love…then I knew he could take control again.

"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!"

I stopped and took in a deep breath.

If anyone could say that with confidence, I felt that it was me. After all the setbacks I'd run into, I'd given up on ever changing my fate. I knew better than anyone what it was like to lose hope. Even now, if someone told me that I was guaranteed a bright future, I would have laughed right in their face. All I was doing was choosing to hold on to hope, and that's why I felt like I was the best person for him to hear this from.

"That's why…I believe there's hope for you too, brother!" I cried.

I didn't know what my brother-in-law's fate was or how he might want to rewrite it. But I still felt the same way I had before: Even if *I* couldn't change my fate, I hoped that he could change his.

"We really are alike," he said, after a long pause.

I couldn't believe that he'd say that. I'd never even imagined that he might have seen himself in me.

Leaving me with nothing but that, he left the room alone.

He hadn't signaled his agreement or disagreement with what I'd said—in fact, he'd had pretty much no reaction to it at all. But that was okay. The important thing was that I'd gotten to tell him. What he'd said about my communication was true. I never explained myself to people, giving them very little to go on. That was true not just with Seth but with my brother-in-law too. Actually, it was true of *everyone* I'd met in this world.

I'd leave it up to my brother-in-law to figure out what he wanted to do with my exclamation. Right now, my job was to seize the opportunity he'd created for Seth and me to have a proper talk. Everyone else in the room must have gotten the hint, because they began to leave shortly after him.

As they were heading out, Melvin approached me. He was escorting Evan, lightly binding his arms.

I thought he might chew me out for trying to pull a disappearing act or tell me he was done with me and my antics. All kinds of other cynical possibilities crossed my mind, and I felt

myself getting overwhelmed.

Whatever he was here for, I knew I ought to apologize. I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could get any words out, Melvin briskly walked right past me.

“Good luck,” he whispered into my ear.

And with that encouragement, he left.

No matter what happens, Melvin is the first person I want to see when this is all over, I thought. After I filled him in on everything, there was something important I wanted to tell him.

I looked over at Seth to see if everyone had left yet, but for some reason, he was talking with Nolan. Or, well, actually…Nolan was kind of talking *at* him.

“Kinda sucks bein’ a prince sometimes, huh? People put all these expectations on you, and you still end up drawin’ the short stick.”

Seth said nothing in reply, but Nolan just kept going.

“It’s not all bad, though, y’know? Just keep stridin’ forward with your chin up, and good things will come your way, just like they did for me,” he said, giving Seth a smirk. He sounded awfully pleased with himself.

Then he said something softly to Seth that I couldn’t catch.

“Nolls! What’re you doing?!” Fii cried, in the authoritative tone of someone telling off a child. I wasn’t even surprised to hear her calling this foreign prince by a nickname. That was classic Fii, really.

After hearing her call after him, Nolan ran through the open door and left the room.

Then the door closed slowly, and Seth and I were alone.

In spite of the fact that we were engaged, it had taken this whole wild journey for us to finally really *talk*. And now here we were, finally starting to open up to each other.

Nolan’s parting words to Seth still stuck with me. The foreign prince could be surprisingly perceptive sometimes, so I couldn’t help but feel that he’d picked up on something.

“Do you not want to be king anymore?” I asked Seth, adopting a casual tone that made it clear I was only asking out of mild curiosity and nothing more.

It felt very new to me to talk to him like that. All this time, even

having a relaxed conversation had felt completely impossible for me. So, I wanted to make a point of keeping things light when I asked him about that.

Seth went quiet for a bit, as if he were mulling it over.

Then, with an uncomfortable smile, he said, “For as long as I can remember, I’ve dedicated my entire life to that goal. But when you asked me that, I didn’t have an immediate answer for you. I guess that’s pretty telling.”

He isn’t sure if he wants to be king? Doesn’t that shake the very foundation of who Seth is? I thought, feeling a growing sense of unease. As I looked into Seth’s clear, sky blue eyes, it felt like I was watching dark clouds blow in.

“My brother is free to devote his life to another. But I don’t have that freedom. As future king, I can only devote my life to the *kingdom*.”

So…does that mean there’s someone you want *to devote your life to?* I wondered. *Do you feel shackled by your destiny to become the next king?*

It was clear whom my brother-in-law had decided to devote his life to: Fii, of course. But being a prince and being a *crown* prince were two entirely different matters, each with very different expectations. It was no wonder that Seth would be envious of the freedoms his brother’s position afforded him.

“Nolan was right. All I can do is keep pressing forward.”

I could hear the strength in Seth’s words. It was a dashing, noble sentiment. But I found myself shaking my head.

“I think it’s okay to look back sometimes. In fact, that might even be just what you *need* in order to move forward,” I said, confident that Seth would know just what I meant.

On that fateful day, when he’d broken off his engagement to Fii, he hadn’t looked back. He’d taken the blow of my mistakes, all to protect me.

I wanted him to be able to say what it was that he’d *really* wanted to do that day. Even if it sounded pitiful or pointless, even if he’d never again be able to speak like this as just Seth, rather than as future king, even if Fii would have never turned around and run back to him anyway…I still felt that he needed to speak his truth.

This was much, much more important than becoming a strong,

dashing king.

"I think this is the first time you've ever argued with me," he said, lifting the corner of his mouth into the faintest smile.

Now that he mentioned it, I could see that it was true. Seth always made the right choices. Even when he made the *wrong* ones, he did it for the right reasons—to protect people. So, until now, I'd never felt any need to argue with him.

"I love you, Seth," I said. "You've probably figured that out already, but I wanted to put it into words for the first time."

At this, Seth looked a little surprised. But he gave me a little nod. I knew it couldn't have been the content of my confession that he was surprised about—after all, he must have known, since he'd made me his fiancée—but that I'd actually said it out loud. What's more, he knew me well enough to know that I wasn't the kind of woman to profess my love like that unless I felt absolutely certain my feelings would be returned. And yet, I'd just come straight out and said that I loved him.

The thing was, though, that I hadn't told him that in hopes of starting a relationship. I had a different goal in mind.

"I don't have any special talents, and no matter how hard I work, I can never compare to Fii. But if there's one thing that I have complete confidence in, it's my love for you. I love you more than anyone else in the world," I said.

Seth listened to me quietly. He wasn't exactly the quiet type, so I knew that he must have been deep in thought.

"I know that I can keep improving myself and become a woman worthy of your attention. I vow to keep working hard to make you fall for me in earnest."

I knew that I was probably just damning myself to another endless loop of working my butt off. *Is this all just going to be for nothing?* I wondered. *Am I an idiot?*

I took in a deep breath, trying to quell the internal conflict about whether or not I actually wanted to tell him any of this.

I wasn't a saint. And, honestly, I knew that I never would be. But that's exactly why I had to say what I said next.

With this, Seth…I release you.

"You don't have to do this anymore."

Seth just stared at me, like he'd forgotten to even blink.

"You should tell her that you love her. Admit it to her…and to

yourself," I continued.

I knew that anyone looking from the outside in would probably think I was being completely moronic right now. I mean, who pushes their beloved right into the arms of another? But that wasn't what I was really trying to do here.

"That's my wish for you, as your lifelong, childhood best friend," I said. "There's nothing in this world that I want more than for you to be happy, Seth."

Even if this led Seth to break off our engagement—even if it meant I had to start over from square one—that was okay. I was happy with the choice I'd made. I didn't have to be a saint to wish for my beloved's happiness. I didn't even have to be *his* beloved to wish for that.

I wasn't going to give up. I'd keep doing everything I could to win his heart. If that meant that Seth and I both went our separate ways, each chasing our own unrequited love...then I could live with that.

Seth blinked once. Then he matched my gaze dead-on, and I was so happy to see that the dark clouds had disappeared from his eyes. Whatever he said next, I could take it.

"Ever since I met you, you've always had my back," he said.

I'd thought I'd been prepared for anything, but I hadn't expected *that*. I was completely bewildered. What did he mean by that? *I'd* always had *his* back?

I could only imagine that he must have been joking. I mean, as far as I was aware, all I'd ever done was cause him trouble.

Seeing the baffled look on my face, Seth gave me a mischievous smile.

"You didn't have any idea, did you? I kinda figured as much," he said.

I still *don't have any idea*, I thought.

Then Seth's tender smile suddenly turned serious.

"Felicia has always been much more mature than me. No matter what I did, she'd just give me a calm, gentle smile...but never anything more."

There was sadness in his voice as he spoke. All I could do was nod along quietly, encouraging him to continue.

"In the entire time that I was engaged to her, I never once felt that we were on equal footing. I tried to put on a front and act

cool, like I was some kind of big deal, but it didn't change anything. I knew I'd never reach her. Even until the very end, she never let me in or showed a trace of vulnerability."

That…sounds about right, yeah. I'm sure that's exactly how things would have played out between them.

After talking to Fii about how she *really* felt, I'd realized that almost everything about her when she'd been a noblewoman had been fake. It only made sense, considering that she'd probably made up her mind from the very beginning to abandon her entire life to become a commoner. It took astounding willpower and resolve to throw away a life you'd built for yourself over the course of fifteen years just *like that*.

But what did all of this have to do with me?

The sad look on Seth's face disappeared, replaced with a warm, tender smile. Then, as if to answer my question, he continued.

"But you, Liliana…you're always so earnest and open. The whole time, you were there by my side, smiling and accepting me for who I was—even the parts of myself that I was ashamed of or embarrassed by, that I'd done everything I could to hide. You probably have no idea…how much that meant to me. You saved me."

I felt like my whole world was being turned upside down. This whole time, I'd been devoting my life to making Seth happy. I'd agonized day in and day out over how to achieve that, but I'd never felt like I was getting anywhere. To hear him say that I'd *already* saved him, that I'd managed to bring him even a little bit of happiness…it was beyond my wildest dreams.

"I did love Felicia. She was my first love, and I fell for her at first sight. But nothing I did to get her attention ever worked, and in the end, I got tired of trying."

Even though I'd *told* him to admit his love for Fii, I hadn't actually expected him to just come out and say it like this. This felt completely different from when he'd asked me for romantic advice when we were kids. The way he was saying this now signaled that it was all over. I realized now what a cruel thing I'd asked of him. Pushing him to tell Fii he was in love with her was like watching him face the difficult road ahead of him and just leaving him with a "good luck."

But Seth, for his part, didn't even seem bothered at all. He was

talking about all of this like it was no big deal. I couldn't help but worry that he was just masterfully hiding his pain and forcing himself to push through.

"Seeing her now, I realized that I never even knew the first thing about her," he said with a sigh. In spite of his weary tone, though, he was smiling. "Whenever she's talking to anyone but me, she seems so happy and carefree. It's refreshing to see, actually. And…I've seen how my brother looks at her, and how she looks at him. Honestly, I've probably known how they feel about each other for a while. I just didn't want to admit it."

Even talking about the woman he'd loved being in love with his brother, Seth didn't seem all that distressed. Fii and my brother-in-law had been fawning over each other for a long time, so of course Seth would have picked up on something between them. It must have been so painful for him to see that, when she was *his* fiancée.

He never talked to me about that, though, I thought. *No…of course he wouldn't. This is Seth we're talking about, after all. If he'd said anything about their feelings, he might have put them in a really difficult position. He probably kept it to himself for their sake. He's been carrying this burden all this time, hasn't he?*

"I knew everything. But I couldn't even give them the push they might have needed to tell each other how they felt, like you just did with me."

"Please, don't be hard on yourself for that. Even I couldn't bring myself to do it until *now*. It's not an easy thing to do," I said.

It wasn't that simple. It was actually pretty incredible that I'd been able to do this, honestly. So, instead of criticizing myself for not being able to do it sooner, I figured I'd give myself a pat on the back for managing to do it now.

"Love sure is complicated, huh?" said Seth.

"I…fell in love at first sight too. But that love gave me a reason to live. It meant the world to me that you were always thinking of me and protecting me. I think it would be wonderful if everyone could be more carefree about romance. I'm sure that's not very convincing, coming from *me*, but…"

I knew how crazy that sounded. I mean, I was the last person to be able to make a claim like that, considering I'd almost died for love. But to put it a bit more generously, you could say this was the

conclusion I'd come to *because* I'd reached that point.

I chuckled, embarrassed.

"I think you can love someone without putting your life on the line for them."

Maybe that was a rejection of the person I'd been until now—and the person I'd hoped to be—but even if I was willing to make every effort I could for love, I'd made up my mind now not to give up my life for it. I was going to embrace love with a smile. From now on, that was the way I wanted to live my life. After all, surely Seth and I would both be happier that way.

I don't know how much power I have to influence things. But it gave me hope when Seth said that I'd saved him, just by being me.

I smiled. Privately, I made a wish, trying to work some magic just like Fii had before.

I hope you can love with all the joy in your heart, Seth. Even if the one you love isn't me—

"In that case, I'd like to be with you," Seth said. And before I even realized what was happening, he had his arms around me.

My mind went completely blank. I froze, unable to formulate a single thought, as Seth leaned in to whisper into my ear.

"Liliana?"

"Y-Yes, that's me."

"'Yes'? Is that your answer?"

"Huh?! No, I— Wait, I don't mean '*no*'! That wasn't a 'no' as in 'no, I don't want to be with you,' it's just, when I said 'yes,' I meant…um…?!"

My brain had completely stopped working, and "no" had suddenly lost all meaning to me. I had no idea what I was saying anymore. Seth just laughed, still hugging me.

"I've been in love with you for some time now, you know. I guess you really didn't have a clue, huh?"

Huh? Wait, but… I mean, I did notice that he was using past tense when he talked about his feelings for Fii, but…how was I supposed to realize that he had feelings for me? *I-It's not my fault! Is this even real? This isn't just some mean prank, is it?! He's never said one word about being in love with me all this time, so…*

Okay, okay. I guess I'd *never said a word about being in love with* him *until now either. And I know Seth isn't the kind of guy to pull a mean prank like this. Does that mean I can trust him when he says*

that? Does that mean I can celebrate that my one, dearest wish that I've held, ever since being reincarnated…has come true?

It does, right?

I slowly hugged Seth back, as if to check that this was all really happening.

Then, in a shaky voice, I repeated my usual prayer.

"Thank you, Father in Heaven. I'm truly blessed. I could die happy right now."

Well…it had *started* as my usual prayer. But as I started to say the words, the prayer shifted organically to something different—something more heartfelt than any prayer I'd ever said before.

Seth gave me a look of affectionate exasperation.

"Don't even *think* about dying," he said.

Touché, I thought, laughing through my tears.



Epilogue

Yesterday had been one of the most eventful days of my life. I'd gotten kidnapped and attempted suicide. I'd found out that both Nana and Fii had been reincarnated, just like me. I'd made up with Fii after a long, heartfelt talk.

The cherry on top, though, had been finding out that Seth was in love with me too.

It had all shaken my world so much that, when I woke up this morning, I couldn't help wondering if it had all been just a dream. And now, here I was, in the Crabitts' manor—which is to say, Melvin's house. With everything that had happened lately, I'd ended up desperately denying that we were friends. To be honest, this was actually the first time I'd visited him at *his* house.

I sat on the sofa in his parlor room, fidgeting nervously and fretting about how I was going to break the ice. Melvin, for his part, sat on the sofa across from me looking as relaxed as ever.

He must have grown impatient with my silence, because he ended up speaking first, giving me a succinct briefing on what everyone had gotten up to after they'd left the manor.

"When I stopped by the palace yesterday to deliver Shade and Evan, Fii was heading into the throne room with Prince Nicholas and his guards to speak directly to the king about lightening their sentences. Prince Nolan and Lord Zero returned to Galion, and Nana... Well, she *said* she was going home, but I'm pretty sure she left for Galion with Prince Nolan. So? What've *you* been up to?"

He hadn't even given me a chance to chime in with an "mm-hmm" or an "oh!" I knew he was moving the conversation along quickly out of kindness, to help put me at ease. Mostly, I was moved by his thoughtfulness, but it also made me feel a little overwhelmed and pathetic.

After taking in a deep breath, I braced myself to give him the news.

"H-He loves me back."

To be perfectly honest, it still didn't feel real. But it made me bashful to say it out loud, and I could feel a furious blush

spreading across my cheeks. Melvin didn't laugh at me, though. He just gave me a nod of understanding.

"Your most heartfelt wish came true, then, huh? Well, congrats," he said somewhat nonchalantly.

Before I even knew what was happening, I had suddenly burst into tears. Melvin just stared at me, eyes wide with shock.

"I-I'm sorry!" I cried. "I cried so much yesterday that I think my tear duct muscles must have taken a hit! I'm crying at the drop of a hat now!"

"R-Right..."

Melvin seemed pretty taken aback. I could hardly blame him, though. Who *wouldn't* be shocked to see someone act this emotionally unstable? I felt like a leaky faucet.

Sorry, Melvin... I thought. *Please just let me say my piece, though.*

I slammed my hand down into the table between us and stood up abruptly. Anyone who'd had the misfortune of witnessing that would have certainly wondered what had happened to my manners.

"B-But come *on*! What the heck is that lukewarm response, huh?!" I exclaimed. "And how come you never thought to mention that you were friends with Fii and Nana?! Was I just so much of a pain in the butt that you thought, 'Ah, screw it'? You and I were friends *first*, you know! Sure, it was just transactional, but *still*!"

I knew I was throwing a tantrum. I felt just like a possessive little kid who didn't want their best friend playing with anyone else on the playground.

"Sheesh... You've always been such a handful, you know that?" Melvin said with a sigh.

Oh crap. I've really gone and done it now...

Flustered, I hurriedly knelt in front of the couch, dropping down into a full-on kowtow. As I was touching my head to the ground, though, it suddenly hit me how *weird* this must look. I mean, no one bowed like this in this world...

Oh well. As long as I can get my feelings across to him, that's all that matters, I thought. *My forehead is literally touching the floor that people walk around on with their shoes on! If this doesn't show him how serious I am, nothing will!*

"Please be my friend," I said.

I was fully aware of how presumptuous that request was,

considering how hard I'd been trying to push him away all this time. But I wanted to be completely open with him now, without holding anything back. If the answer was no, then so be it. At least I'd know I'd tried. To be completely honest, it wasn't that I was no longer afraid of making friends. I still hadn't forgotten the pain I'd felt in the final moments of my past life. It had been agony to feel my body growing cold, knowing that I was going to lose everything.

But for all the fear in me, my longing for a friend was stronger.

"No matter how many times I have to experience the pain of loss, I want to be friends. Even if the universe takes you away from me one day despite my best efforts, I want to be by your side, laughing and smiling, until that moment comes! The truth is, I'm greedy. I want love *and* friendship!"

I wanted to embrace hope, not despair. It sounded kind of high-minded, but it was really just a selfish wish.

I heard Melvin sigh. Then I heard his footsteps as he approached me. With my head still touching the floor, I started shaking, unsure of what to expect. Then, as if he were petting a big dog, he stroked my head roughly.

"I can hardly be angry with you when you're being this earnest," he said.

I knew my hair was probably a mess now, but I didn't try to fix it. I just lifted my head up to look at him and saw him smiling at me.

"I've always found people like Fii a bit *challenging*, but I went to visit her out of hopes that it could help *you* somehow. She just grew attached to me because I was nice to her, though. That's all. As for Nana, I never would have even met her if not for you. I only ended up visiting the church and getting to know her because of *you*. So, it's all your fault that I've wound up being friends with all these exhausting women," he spat, plainly irritated.

I was completely stunned. I couldn't have ever imagined that *I* was the reason he'd gotten to know the two of them. I couldn't believe Melvin would go so far out of his way for me like that.

"I had no idea I'd put so much on your plate. You didn't even have any time to find love, then, did you?" I blurted out.

He thwacked me on the head.

Ow!

“You said that you wanted love and friendship, but it sounds to me like you missed something,” he said.

I rubbed my head, trying to soothe the pain. Then, as I tried to make my hair look presentable again, I pondered what he was trying to say, but I was drawing a complete blank.

I really can’t think of anything I’ve missed… Honestly, love and friendship feels like more than enough to me.

Seeing the blank look on my face, Melvin gave me another thwack.

What the heck was that for?!

“Your maid did everything she could to stop you from being kidnapped, even though she’d suffered injuries herself. She kept shrieking that she hadn’t even had the chance to tell you how much she cared about you. Your previous maid was worried about you too. She came to visit me earlier and asked me to look after you for her. And you know your father, Viscount Cain, would be overjoyed if you made even a paltry effort to get close to him. He’d return that token affection tenfold. I’m sure your mother would love to come visit you too, if you told her that you wanted to see her. I’ve only met her once, but when I told her we were friends, she wouldn’t stop talking about you.”

I was floored. I had thought for sure that Tifa hated me. I mean, she’d said so herself, so surely she must have hated me in the beginning, right? Had she come to grow fond of me? And Shirley… I’d been so cruel to her when I pushed her away, after she’d tried to stop me from bullying Fii. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d held a grudge against me, after the horrible way we’d parted. After everything that had happened, I’d kind of expected that she hated me even more than Tifa did, honestly. I’d never once thought of Viscount Cain as my real father. As for my mother, well…over time, I’d come to treat her like she didn’t even exist. Was it really not too late to develop relationships with them?

After all the time and effort Melvin’s spent trying to help me, though, it would be disrespectful to drag my feet on this, I thought.

I’d start by visiting Tifa. I didn’t know if her injuries were serious enough that she’d be in the hospital or if she was just recovering at home, but I hadn’t seen her at the palace today. I figured I’d ask the other servants where she was and go visit her. There was a lot I wanted to talk to her about.

Next, I'd go home. I hadn't been there in a long time. I'd wrap my arms around Viscount Cain and call him "father." I'd say it from the bottom of my heart. After that, I'd write a letter to my mother and let her know that I'd like to see her.

Finally, I'd ask my father where Shirley was. Even if she'd moved somewhere far away, I'd go see her. I wanted to apologize for everything and see how she was doing.

I also wanted to tell everyone that I hoped that they could be part of my family. Now that Melvin had mentioned it, I realized for the first time: I *did* want a family.

"And what about the engagement and the kidnapping? Are you going to make all of that public?" Melvin asked, swiftly moving on from the conversation about what I wanted, as if it were just another everyday topic.

I was a little disoriented by the sudden shift in topics, but I thought back to what Seth and I had talked about.

"I don't feel any need to make the kidnapping public. After all, I never would have found this happiness if I hadn't been kidnapped. And nothing has changed with our engagement. It would be a little weird to annul it after we've just professed our love to each other."

Our relationship hadn't changed at all, actually. That was true both in an official capacity and behind the scenes. The only thing that *had* changed was that Seth and I could now face each other honestly and say the things that were hard to say, baring even the most pitiful, vulnerable parts of ourselves to each other.

I'd probably never cast my gaze downward again. Sure, looking at the ground might have helped me look away from my suffering, but it had meant that I'd overlooked opportunities to be happy too.

I'm nowhere near perfect, but I like who I am just fine now, I thought, smiling happily. Then a sudden realization snapped me out of my reverie: Melvin had never answered my question!

"Wait, so...will you be my friend or not?!" I cried, clinging to Melvin's ankles.

He gave me an amused smile.

"We were *already* friends, remember?" he said.

"Y... Yes!" I exclaimed. "Wait a second, okay? I'm gonna go tell Seth! I was feeling a little hesitant about coming here today, so he

told me he'd wait outside for me. He's there now, so I'm just going to go let him know!"

I immediately got up and started running for the front door in a hurry.

"Yeah, I kinda figured that out when I saw the fancy carriage outside the door," called my best friend's voice from behind. "You do what you need to. I'm just glad to see that you seem happy."

I turned around and gave him a big smile.

"Yeah! I *am* happy!"

Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day!

Afterword

Thank you for picking up *Lady Rose Just Wants to Be a Commoner: Volume 3*. I'm the author, Kooriame.

Felicia's story wrapped up in volume 2, but I wanted to tell the story from Liliana's perspective in volume 3. She's got a very different personality from Felicia, so this volume has kind of a different feel to the previous two, but I hope you enjoyed it.

In my opinion, Liliana is more of a "normal girl" than Felicia. That being said, if we weren't comparing her to Felicia, it'd be no exaggeration to call Liliana "the perfect noblewoman." She excels thanks to her hard work and dedication, and she's charismatic enough that people call her a saint. Even though she desperately doesn't want to die, she doesn't ever hold it against the people who are destined to cause her death. She's a good kid, with a good heart. Felicia is just so over the top (in both good and bad ways) that she makes Liliana look normal by comparison. You've gotta feel bad for the poor girl that her self-esteem keeps taking hits because of that. She really didn't need to be that hard on herself.

Seth didn't get any chapter interludes with his perspective in this volume, since it would have ruined the ending. I feel kind of bad that he got the short end of the stick with that. He and Liliana both got the short of the stick, in many ways, so I guess they're just an unlucky couple. Throw Melvin in there, and you've got an unlucky trio. I'm sure they'll all get their happy endings now that the story is over, though, so I think that'll make up for their misfortune.

On a different note, I couldn't exactly spell this out thanks to the perspective constraints, but there was a reason Melvin didn't seem the least bit worried about Liliana in his chapter interlude at the end of volume 1. Just as Liliana suspects, Melvin knows that she can probably outmaneuver her kidnapper. He also senses that, objectively speaking, it'll be better if he leaves it to someone *else* to save her. That's why he decides to spend his time in that carriage ride to the manor thinking about other stuff. It must have terrified him when he arrived to see Liliana's suicide attempt, though.

Now that I've filled up some pages, let's move on to the formalities.

I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to tell the story of *Lady Rose*, including publishing a volume from Liliana's perspective.

Thank you again to Hidaka Nami-san, the illustrator for volumes 1 and 2 who returned to do the illustrations for this volume as well. I'm always so thrilled to receive your gorgeous illustrations, which convey the characters' actions and expressions so perfectly. I'm so lucky to have my favorite illustrator provide the illustrations for my novels. Thank you so much for all your hard work.

Thank you also to both my previous and current editors, who have given me so much valuable advice on how to structure this story and put it together, 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 picked this volume up.

On a final note, I wanted to promote the manga version of *Lady Rose Just Wants to Be a Commoner*, which is currently being serialized online. You can read it for free on Flowers Comics's website. If you're interested, please take a look!

Kooriame



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Lady Rose Just Wants to Be a Commoner: Volume 3
by Kooriame

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