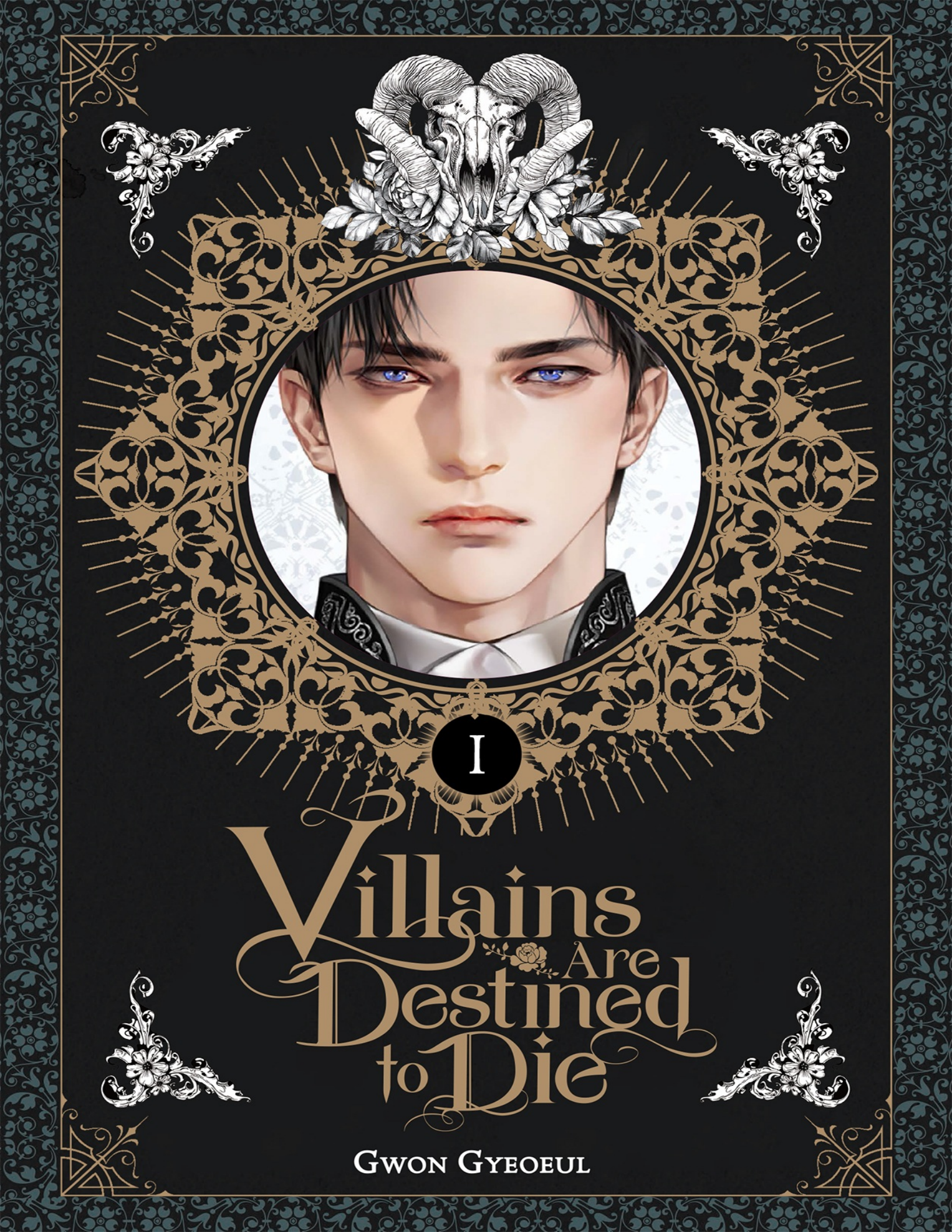
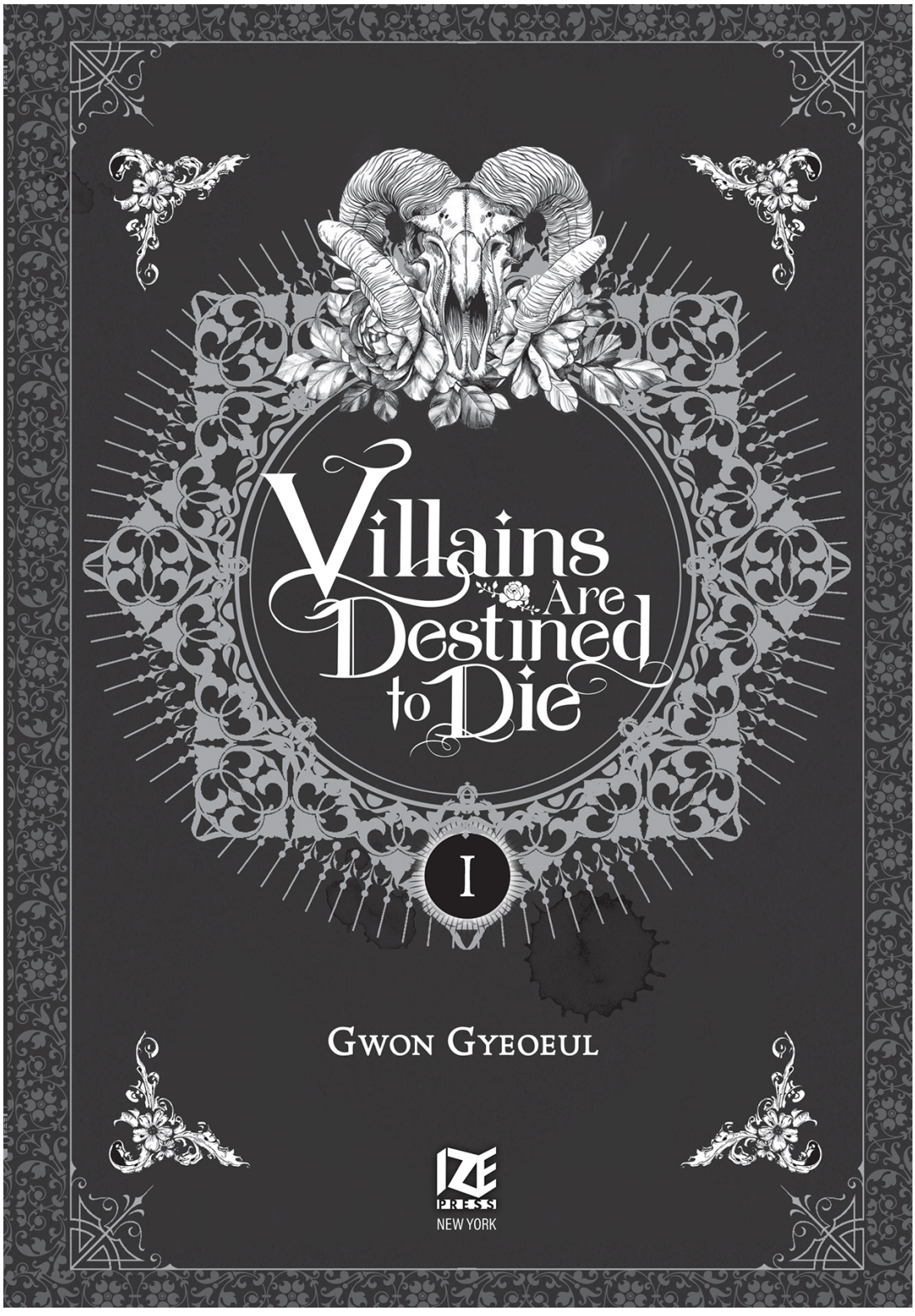

I
Villains Are Destined to Die
Gwon Gyeoeul





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IZE PRESS
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Villains Are Destined to Die 1

Gwon Gyeoeul

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Ize Newsletter

PROLOGUE





Everything was perfect.

Yes, including my tiny half-basement studio apartment that was no bigger than the bathrooms in the house I used to live in. Even the fact that I needed to jump right into a part-time job the following week to cover my living expenses was no skin off my back. I'd left that hellhole of a house and finally gained my freedom. That alone was more than enough to make me happy.

Everything *should've* been perfect, so…what was this?

"I thought I told you to make yourself scarce," the man in front of me said, looking at me as though I were a cockroach under his foot. "And yet there you were, raving like a rabid dog at the crown prince's homecoming banquet."

I was no stranger to the hatred on his face—to the not-so-hidden desire to trample me out of existence. I'd been on the receiving end of plenty of those disdainful looks back when I lived in *that* house… But it wasn't something that ever got easier.

"Just what possessed you to act like that?" His ocean-blue eyes glared daggers at me, and my lips quivered of their own accord.

It was at that moment that a white rectangle appeared out of nowhere before me, like a pop-up on your computer screen. The window was filled with text.

1. The hell should I know?
2. Nothing in particular, really.
3. (In a groveling tone) I…I just…

……What on earth is this? I opened my mouth to try to get some answers, but it felt as if something was stuck in my throat. *My voice… It's not working!*

I stood there speechless as the blue-eyed man evidently decided he was tired of waiting.

"It would be in your best interest to start talking," he said, the

threat clear in his tone. He looked ready to kill me as soon as I gave him a reason. *I'm going to die if I don't say something.* It was instinct alone that drove me to press the third option on the screen.

"I…I just…" The words that came out of my mouth were identical to the selection I'd made.

Huh? What the hell is happening? My mouth hung open in dumbfounded shock. That was undoubtedly my voice speaking, and yet I couldn't believe it. In fact, this whole situation felt surreal.

One minute I was asleep, and the next I was opening my eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling, met with the hostile sight of sinister-looking strangers scowling down at me. My head was still fuzzy, as if I'd just awoken from a deep slumber.

"'You just' what? Explain yourself," pressed the man, face set in an intimidating glower. My vague response clearly hadn't satisfied him.

As if on cue, new text appeared in the window floating in my vision.

1. I apologize. I'll be more careful, I promise.
2. I told you—it's that stupid maid's fault.
3. Those vermin weren't showing me my due respect! Me—the only daughter of House Eckhart!

I don't have time to stand here figuring out what's going on. Someone is angry, and not answering them will only make things worse. I'd learned that lesson hard and well and could apply it here, even without knowing the specifics of the situation.

Giving the man a calculating once-over, I quickly made my choice.

"I apolo—"

"If a tepid apology could mitigate things, we wouldn't be having this conversation in the first place," he said, cutting me off. With how little he let me get out, I had my doubts that what option I chose really even mattered.

His sharp tone made my stomach plummet, and I flinched out of reflex. The man continued his tirade, paying me no mind.

"Penelope Eckhart," he said coldly.

Penelope…Eckhart?

"The family name will be rescinded from you for the foreseeable future."

That name, those lines of dialogue—I'd heard them before.

My head flew up, and I finally got a better look at the man who was standing a slight distance away from the bed. I hadn't been able to study him closely before, flustered as I was.

He wasn't a member of *that house*; in fact, he wasn't even Korean, but instead a foreigner I had never seen in the flesh. His eyes were as blue as the sea, his hair black as obsidian. And above his head was a long bar reminiscent of the battery indicator on a smartphone, along with text made up of shimmering white letters.

An…affection meter? Unless my eyes were playing tricks on me, the word above his head read Affection.

"Starting now, you will be under probation. Social functions are of course forbidden, but neither are you to leave your room. You must reflect upon what you did wrong and how you will conduct yourself going forth—" He broke off, pausing for a moment. "……What are you looking at?" His previously stony expression creased in displeasure at my lack of eye contact.

I couldn't help it, though, too busy staring at the spot above his head to respond.

[Affection: 0%]

This doesn't make any sense… I couldn't stop myself from shaking my head in disbelief. This whole thing was preposterous. Well and truly impossible.

"It seems the talk of you losing your mind holds some truth," the man bit out in disdain at my inexplicable behavior.

With one last lingering glare, he turned on his heel and walked briskly to the door, as if he couldn't stand spending even a second longer in the same room as me. The letters [Affection: 0%] followed him, growing smaller in the distance.

I don't even know what I did wrong… I tried to make sense of the situation, staring after the man in a daze.

"Heh…" A scoff cut through my confusion, and I followed the

noise to find a pink-haired man standing in the shadows of the door, his arms crossed. He had the same blue eyes as the man who'd just left, but his held open derision.

[Affection: -10%]

White letters glowed above this man's head, too, shining a score in the negatives.

"Got what you deserve, stupid wench," sneered the man, his coarse words belying his pretty face. He turned to exit as well, letting the door slam shut behind him and leaving me alone in the room.

I sat there for a while, stupefied, unable to wrap my head around what had happened.

After what felt like hours and hours of ruminating, I came to the realization that both men had oddly seemed familiar, even though I'd technically never seen them before.

"This can't be real, right…?" I muttered. Apparently, now that I was by myself, the invisible hand clamping down on my vocal chords was gone, but I barely noticed. How could I, when the situation dawning on me was too absurd to even believe? "There's just no way."

It should've been impossible. The game I'd been playing right before bed was now a reality before my very eyes—and with me as one of the characters, no less.

"I must be dreaming." That was the only rational explanation. It had to be!

But no amount of pulling my own hair or pinching my cheeks seemed to wake me up.

"N-no… No, no, no! This can't be happening! Nooo!"

Penelope Eckhart. A name that was unmistakable.

The villain in the latest and hottest dating sim…and the protagonist of the game's "Hard Mode."

CHAPTER 1





The love child of a rich conglomerate family.

A wistful premise, especially if said child is a girl. In novels and TV dramas, these girls would be the protagonists of their very own Cinderella stories.

But real life is nothing like fiction.

After my mother passed away, I suddenly found myself with two half brothers. We were far from a picture-perfect family, though. The two of them harassed me nearly to death, never giving me a moment's peace.

Ignoring, deriding, or cursing at me was an everyday occurrence. They screwed with my food and living space and ruined my school years.

Asshole #2—the younger of my two older half brothers—was close in age to me, so I had the "pleasure" of attending the same school as him for a year…a year in which he promptly incited the other students to ostracize me. Even after he graduated, things didn't improve—in fact, they got worse.

My father's first wife died from a chronic illness long before I was born, but you wouldn't know that from the way my lunatic half brothers treated me. It was as if I'd killed her myself, and this was their revenge. It got so bad that even I sometimes had my doubts, wondering if I truly deserved this. Thoughts like *Maybe I placed a curse on their mother while I was only a sperm cell in my father's body*. Why else would they treat me like scum?

I actually preferred the days when I'd lived in a cramped studio apartment with my mother, even though we'd barely had a cent to our name. In *that* house, after all, I was worse than a nobody, and it showed. I lost weight rapidly, and I gained new wounds and scars almost like some kind of sick compensation for my weight loss. My father, the man responsible for bringing me into the household, didn't seem to care at all. *Why didn't you just send me to an orphanage instead?* I so badly wished to vent my anger and frustration, but no one would listen.

For better or for worse, I'd been raised by a poor single mother, and I tended to resign myself to things and give up pretty quickly. It wasn't any different once I moved. I soon came to accept that there was no point in craving affection and attention from people who treated me as if I were less than an animal.

With no money and nowhere else to stay, I had little choice but to keep living in those horrible conditions. Still, all throughout high school I applied myself single-mindedly to my studies, and after graduating, I was able to get into one of South Korea's most prestigious universities.

Those years of working my butt off weren't out of some desire for acknowledgment from my half brothers or my father—no, that was my escape plan from that hell of a house, and I succeeded.

I still remember the day I received my acceptance letter, running to my father with a bright smile on my face for the first time ever.

"Father, Father! Look! I'm in! I got accepted!"

"Yes? And? You didn't come here just to tell me that, did you?" My father hadn't offered so much as a single word of congratulation, even after seeing the elation on my face.

But that was okay. I hadn't been looking for congratulation, either.

"Please let me move out! I want to live on my own, close to campus, so I can focus on school. I don't think that's asking for too much…"

My father's indifferent stare had scrunched up, as if my request had taken him aback. *Still, I'm sure this is as beneficial of a proposition to him as it is to me*, I'd thought. *After all, his nuisance of a daughter is offering to rid the house of her presence—of her own volition, no less!*

"Very well. I'll have things arranged."

And like that, I'd achieved the escape I'd been dreaming of.

Though I hadn't faced any opposition, the move was not without hiccups. My father made the absurd decision to leave the preparations to Asshole #1—his eldest son—which meant I ended up living in a half-basement room covered in mold.

But even that couldn't get me down.

Life after leaving was marked by happiness. My dark school years were a thing of the past, and I was making tons of new friends at college. It was through those friends that I learned of a mobile game that had become extremely popular among them.

"*Daughter of the Duke's Super Love Project*? That's what it's called? Sounds like some cheesy thing tweens would be into."

The cringey title and glittering illustrations were enough to tell me what the game's shtick was, and I wasn't really interested. It was all my friends were talking about, though, so I decided I'd at least give it a try.

Having some free time since I wasn't on shift at my part-time job that day, I downloaded the game onto my phone and opened the app. The first screen that loaded presented me with two difficulty modes to choose from: Normal and Hard.

"Normal," I said, clicking the lower difficulty without hesitation. *I'll check it out for a few minutes and then go to bed.*

The game booted up and into a prologue, with a cutscene introducing the characters.

[The daughter of the duke—who disappeared in a mysterious accident when she was a child—returns to her family to take back her rightful place!]

A bubbly OST played as the innocent-looking female protagonist flashed on-screen, and with that, the story began.

The art was beautiful and high-quality, but other than that, I couldn't initially see what was so special about the game. The goal was to win over the male leads by raising their affection, but the gameplay also involved defeating the villain and accruing wealth and reputation. To get one of the story's endings, you had to fill 100 percent of a character's affection meter, which would earn you a confession of love.

"Huh, this is more fun than I expected," I found myself admitting soon enough.

The game, despite its cringeworthy name, had a well-structured

story, addicting plot, and user-friendly mechanics. The illustrations also did a lot of heavy lifting toward the player's immersion. Whoever drew them had spared no effort. As for the storyline itself, it bore a close resemblance to my own life, and before I knew it, my interest was sufficiently piqued.

Among the male protagonists were the heroine's two older brothers. Because the game took place mainly in their family home, the ducal manor, there were a lot of interactions with them—not so pleasant ones, at that. Displeased and wary of their sister resurfacing out of the blue, the brothers took to picking on her.

Huh, oddly close to my own situation. Though of course, the heroine received far better treatment than I ever did…

As I made slow progress in winning the characters over, I got more and more lost in the game. I had to hand it to them—it had me hooked, even though I'd only intended to try it for a few minutes. And regardless of the fact that I'd never played a dating sim like this before, I unlocked my first ending with little trouble.

It was definitely fun, yes, but as it turned out, the normal difficulty was too easy even for a complete noob like me. You see, all the conquerable male characters started with their affection at 30 percent. *It should've been called Easy Mode instead of Normal*, I joked to myself.

And so, just like that, I got the endings for every male lead within three hours of starting the game.

But fully clearing Normal Mode was only the beginning.

The next thing I knew, a notification popped up with an image of a lock along with the words Hidden Ending.

"'The game's hidden ending is now available for purchase'…" I read the text off the screen. "Well, how much does it—?" My eyes bulged at the number. "A—a hundred thousand won?! Are they insane?! Why is it so freaking expensive?"

If I wanted to see this hidden ending, I'd need to fork over an exorbitant amount of money. Or… The ending may also be obtained for free by clearing Hard Mode, the caveat read.

Considering, I eyed the clock. "Dammit… It's already past midnight. And I have class in the morning…" I didn't let myself

deliberate for too long, though.

"Gah, whatever! Let's see this through!" The joy I'd gotten from the good endings in Normal Mode must have flipped some kind of switch inside me. I never would have acted like this otherwise.

Fingers tingling with excitement, I clicked to start Hard Mode and was met with majestic music and a different cutscene from the one before.

"Ooh. So now you play as *her*?" In an interesting twist, the protagonist of the story had changed. And of all people, it was the villain from Normal Mode—the fake daughter of the duke who usurped the heroine's place. The setup of the plot was different, too. The timeline had been pulled further back compared with where the original MC started.

It was as if I was playing an entirely new story. "This must be why the game is so popular," I mused.

As a meticulously drawn illustration of the new POV character popped up on the screen, I felt the heaviness in my eyelids disappear. This seemed like such a fresh and intriguing take on the dating sim genre. Not to mention the whole playing-as-the-villain thing. This was the girl who'd treated the angelic heroine of Normal Mode horribly—and now I had to somehow get her to win over the completely unreceptive love interests.

Filled with a mysterious exhilaration, I exuberantly leaped into Hard Mode, confident in my ability to tackle it after clearing the lower difficulty with ease. *I bet it's not even too different from the original gameplay. I mean, how hard can it get? Some tricky dialogue choices here and there?*

How painfully, utterly wrong I was.

"What?! I died again?! Why?"

Hard Mode was more like *Impossible* Mode. Increasing any of the characters' affection was a constant uphill battle, being a villain and whatnot. To make matters worse, what little affection I did manage to accrue immediately plummeted at my slightest mistake, triggering the game-over screen. And this was not your typical fade-to-black "game over," no. It was a literal "dead end," and it always showed exactly how the protagonist died.

"Why is it so violent?" I groaned at the realistic and gory illustrations. This time, it was my character lying lifeless on the ground, having been beheaded by the crown prince. "This game is messed up…"

No matter how carefully I made my choices, it invariably ended in death, leaving me thoroughly stumped. *What were the creators of this game thinking?* Still, dying so many times only made me even more compelled to beat the game.

"Come on, let me survive just once!"

My initial goal—unlocking the hidden ending—was already long forgotten. Now fully invested, I was determined to keep this poor girl alive if it was the last thing I did.

She has to get a happy ending with someone, anyone! What crime did she commit besides being the "villain"? The writer made her that way. Force a person into a bad role, and of course they're going to be evil!

Besides, I felt a connection to the villain, who got rebuffed by everyone she sought affection from, in contrast to the original heroine, who had no trouble winning others over.

And so I'd die, and die again, and again…

"Damn brothers. I'm going to make sure I get the endings for these jerks." I gritted my teeth at another game over. The older brothers had killed the villain for the umpteenth time.

My phone was overheating in my palm, my fingers trembling from exhaustion, and I was logically aware that I'd gotten too caught up in the game's story, but…I couldn't stop myself from clicking the reset button again.

After restarting from the beginning, I selected the right dialogue choices, slowly built up the affection meters, and amassed in-game money and reputation to access different episodes. And yet…

"Ugh! Why? Why?!"

I'd died again. *This is beyond irritating. Should I make an in-app purchase and buy affection…?* If encouraging microtransactions was the end goal, the developers had succeeded with flying colors.

I hated the thought of wasting money, since I was saving whatever I could so I wouldn't have to ask my family for financial

help. Suddenly, though, the urge to spend real-life cash on a video game was almost overwhelming. *No, no, no. I'm not that far gone*, I convinced myself, ending up not actually going through with the idea. Still, I stayed up the whole night trying to beat the damn thing.

Started over and died once more. And then started all over again, and again, and again…

The sun rose, but I still hadn't reached a single ending in Hard Mode.

"This sucks… One more time…" It was as I reached for the restart button that my body finally gave in to exhaustion, falling asleep with my phone in my hands. And when I opened my eyes…

"Penelope Eckhart," said the man with an empty gauge and the gleaming letters Affection: 0% over his head. "The family name will be rescinded from you for the foreseeable future."

There I was, inside the game I'd been playing on the difficulty mode I'd failed to beat.

And I was the villain.



"Miss, it's time to get up," someone whispered above me. I was only lightly sleeping, and the quiet voice was enough to pull me out of it. I'd spent most of the night restless, hoping that I'd wake from this nightmare, though somehow I eventually managed to drift off.

"Miss," said the cautious voice again. *Is she talking to me?* No one else had come into my room after the two blue-eyed men had left, which meant logically, I was the only person she could be addressing.

"…" Still half-awake, I didn't reply right away. It was only when I heard something rustling right behind me that I roused completely. I tensed, preparing to sit up, when— *Prick!* A sharp stab of pain shot up my forearm that had been laying above the covers.

My eyes flew open. "Ahh!" I screamed, kicking the sheets off me and bolting up in bed. Desperate to find the source of the pain, I

scrambled to roll up the sleeves of my flowy pajamas.

Wh-what the…? I gaped at the sight that met me. The skin on my arm was black and blue, riddled with needle marks. If it were fabric rather than skin, I don't doubt it would have been full of ragged holes.

As I stared, appalled, I noticed that one of the needle marks had a droplet of blood welling up, as if it was fresh.

"Oh, you're awake," came a calm voice from beside the bed.

Turning toward the owner of the voice, I found a brown-haired girl with a face full of freckles. I recognized her—she looked exactly like a maid from the game. Perhaps to save on development costs, all the maids' character art had the same clothes and similar faces.

This girl, accordingly, was very plain looking. She seemed to have hidden away the needle she'd poked me with, as her hands were now empty. But I could see the dark mockery and delight in her eyes, which were carefully observing me.

What the hell is wrong with this girl?! I was literally just sleeping. I didn't do anything to her! Overcome with a flash of rage, I opened my mouth to speak.

"…!" Yet no words came out, as though my tongue were suddenly made of lead. *Why don't I get any dialogue choices? Dammit!*

Absent any other options, I simply glared at her, hoping that would get the message across. But the maid carried on, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. "The bath is ready for you. Do please go wash up, Miss." As she moved to gather the bedsheets, her lips twitched upward in an evil smirk. *She seems used to this routine…*

I sat there, biting my lip, until the maid pushed me out of bed and into the bathroom.

Uh, didn't she say the bath was ready? Where's the tub?

The room was completely empty, save for a small washbasin filled with water. Upon investigating, I realized it was ice-cold water, at that. Dipping my fingertips in was enough to make my hair stand on end.

It's not like I was expecting her to help me bathe or anything, but this is ridiculous. The game did mention the villain character being

treated like crap here and there, but it had never gone into much detail.

And now, this excruciating reality was forcing me to be conscious all over again of the fact that I was inside a game world.

As I rolled up my sleeves and saw the bloody puncture holes once more, tears stung my eyes.

This isn't right. There was nothing in the game about needles—Ah, wait! A memory flashed through my mind. The villain, wearing an off-the-shoulder dress. Compared with all the other art of her that had been flawless, in this illustration, the villain's arm had been sprinkled with small black dots.

That's insane! I thought they were freckles, or an important element of the story I just hadn't gotten to yet… How could anyone have guessed they were marks of abuse? Flabbergasted, I was also taken aback yet again at how fleshed out and detailed the story was.

"Miss, your breakfast is served." A muffled voice traveled through the bathroom door. "Are you still not done?" the maid said, as if pushing me to hurry. *That little snake.*

I could feel annoyance washing over me, but I had no choice but to dip my hands into the icy water. I'd lived through years of harassment from my scummy half brothers—this was nothing.

I'm the villain now anyway. If it were up to me, I'd go out there and prick that girl full of holes just like she's done to me. An eye for an eye and all that. Alas, I didn't have the agency to do or say what I wanted at the moment. *I'll have to wait a bit and feel things out.*

Face tingling from the cold water, I grabbed a towel and wiped myself off before stepping back outside.

The maid hadn't been lying. A meal was awaiting me, set up on a table next to the room's large window. It would seem that because of my probation on the orders of the duke's first son, I'd even be taking meals in my quarters.

"Sit down, Miss." The maid led me to a chair, and I immediately frowned. *This is my "food"? No way this is fit for human consumption…* On one plate was a green, moldy piece of bread, and next to it was a gray-colored bowl of soup with unidentifiable chunks floating about.

"Eat up. You must be hungry," the maid said with a sickly sweet grin. All I could do was grit my teeth and glower at her in response.

That is, until a white rectangle popped up in front of me.

1. (Flip the table) What the hell is this? Are you out of your mind?! I demand to see the cook!
2. (Force-feed the maid) You want me to eat literal dog food? Fine, after you!
3. (Eat it)

I recognized these choices from my own playthrough. I'd gotten the game-over screen two times at this intersection.

When I chose the first option, employees of the estate had all run to the duke to gripe about the villain's wickedness. Once word reached the duke's first son—the same person who'd ordered her to be confined to her room—his rage boiled over, and as a result, he forbade her from being served anything, even water. She ended up dying of dehydration.

In my next attempt, I went with option two. The second son, passing by the door and seeing the commotion, rushed inside to separate the villain from the maid. In the scuffle, the villain was pushed and fell. A fork tumbled after her and impaled itself in her throat. It was the most idiotic death ever.

So that leaves only one choice.

This episode in the game was probably meant to establish the strife between the villain and the longtime servants of the duke. Not wanting to see the player character struggling so helplessly from the very start, I'd moved on to a different episode after those two failures. There were dozens more I could try clearing, after all.

But that wasn't the case now. There was no back button that would let me return to the episode selection screen and save me. *Dammit…*

Glaring at the maid, I forced myself to select the third option.

Almost immediately, my body lurched into action, as if in the hands of a puppeteer. My hand jerked toward the spoon, the spoon

toward the bowl, and before I knew it, I was scooping up a mouthful of the rotten liquid.

The stench of the horrifying mixture was repugnant enough, the thought of eating it was even worse, and my hand trembled violently as the spoon slowly neared my mouth. Gray droplets dripped onto the table, but I couldn't stop my hand's approach. My mouth was forced open, and the spoonful of rancid soup went in, my lips closing around it.

"Ewgh!"

The soup was lukewarm as it met my tongue, a disgusting smell rising from inside my mouth. This wasn't food. It tasted as if someone had gathered old food scraps and boiled them.

My body was acting of its own accord, though, and my throat contracted, forcibly swallowing the liquid.

"Ack…!" The maid gasped, probably not expecting that I would actually eat the trash she had laid before me.

Yuck, I feel like throwing up! Gagging around the soup, I tried to keep myself from retching. Consolingly, I thought, *I'm sure it's over now, at least. One bite had to have been enough to satisfy the system prompt.* And while it was gross, I wouldn't die from only a spoonful of rotten food. This was probably the end of the episode. "Phew…" I sighed in relief.

But I had spoken too soon.

My hand did not stop.

Wait, wait!

Next was a bite of the bread, and that was only the beginning. I continued to cram moldy bread and gray sludge into my mouth against my will. Bread, soup, bread, soup… It didn't stop. The maid grew paler and paler as she watched me scarf the spoiled food down like a pig. My body kept going, and going, and going, until—

"What's going on here?" A sudden male voice echoing through the room announced the presence of the duke's second son, who had apparently been passing by. It was only with his entrance that the insanity finally ended, the hold over my body dissipating.

"Y-Young Master Reynold!" the maid stuttered out, seemingly terrified now that we had a witness.

Not that I was paying much attention, though, too busy covering my mouth. "Blech!" I choked. The retching wouldn't stop, the contents of my stomach threatening to come back up at any moment.

Why does this shit happen to me? I despaired, bad memories stirring in my mind.

Back when I'd lived in that hell of a house, I'd had to endure many a meal of rotten food because of my two asshole brothers. And now I was being forced to go through more of the same, this time in a virtual world? *I can never escape…*

"U-urk…" Clear drool dripped between my fingers, my eyes filled with tears born of resentment and pure disgust. I tottered and groaned as if I'd been poisoned, causing the pink-haired man standing in the doorway to approach, his eyes wide and jaw slack.

"Hey, what's wrong with y—?" He froze when his eyes settled on the table. "These are…"

He had noticed the spoiled soup and moldy bread. The food was clearly inedible, and seeing it at the breakfast table of the daughter of the duke had left him dumbfounded.

It simply didn't compute for him. Not even commoners would eat this garbage. But over half of it was gone, while his adoptive sister sat pale as a sheet, lips clenched and mouth covered.

The pink-haired man scowled deeply as he turned to the maid. "You. What did you just feed her?!"

"Y-Young Master, I—I…" The maid trembled, her face ashen at the man's unadulterated rage.

To be fair, I'm sure she never thought the food would actually get touched. How could an unimportant side character have known that the fake daughter would "willingly" eat rotten food, especially considering her history of tantrums and villainy?

The maid could do nothing but stand there at a loss for words as the pink-haired man yelled at her.

"How dare you disrespect an Eckhart like this?!" he seethed. "The audacity, serving this at your own mistress's dining table!"

"Y-Young Master, no! I—I wasn't—"

"Get out. Now!"

"B-b-but…!"

"Don't think I won't tell my father and brother about this." He swiveled, shouting in the direction of the doorway. "Is anyone out there?! Butler!" Soon enough, the butler and several servants came running.

"Yes, Young Master?! What is the matter?"

"We have a tramp in need of kenneling. Take her away," he instructed coolly.

"Young Master! I-I'm sorry! Please!" Despite her pleas, the maid who had been harassing me all morning was dragged away, just like that.

But I was barely even a witness to this flurry of chaos. Trying to get my lurching stomach under control took every bit of concentration I had left.

My hand still clamped stubbornly over my mouth, I lay limply against the back of my chair, only rousing when the pink-haired man reached out and shook my slim shoulder carefully.

"Oy, you all right?"

"…"

"Why'd you just sit there and wolf that crap down? You should've flipped the table and gone berserk like you usually do, idiot."

Is he consoling me or making fun of me? Either way, it looked as though Mr. Pink Hair's personality was faithful to his original rendition in the game—just as mean-spirited.

If I hadn't been an "idiot" and eaten it, I'd have suffered death by fork. Which would've been courtesy of you, I'll have you know. Annoyingly, I could only utter my sharp response in my head, since speaking without that damn dialogue box was a no-go.

Whew… At least this part's over with, I hope? Though I didn't expect him to be the one responsible for defusing the situation. Not that I could muster up any feelings of gratitude. My arm was covered with puncture wounds—I highly doubted this one maid was the sole person here behind the villain's poor treatment.

No, actually. Not just doubt. I'm sure *she's only the tip of the iceberg.* The entire household was probably out to get me, a hive mind with the man currently in front of me as their queen bee,

giving silent encouragement. *I mean, that's the basic villain backstory, after all.*

I'd only recently woken up, but I felt exhaustion blanketing me again already.

"…Hey. You don't look so hot. Should I call a doctor?" The man's voice broke the silence. *Why is he even bothering to ask? It's not like he means what he's saying. Perhaps me not answering weirded him out…*

He bent over me, studying my face as if he was actually worried or something.

It was at that moment the white window made its reappearance.

1. Don't bother.
2. What do you care? Get out of my room!
3. Cut the nice-guy act, douchebag.

These again…? The terrible reality of my situation was well and truly sinking in. *So I basically always have to watch my step and choose carefully if I don't want to die, huh?*

None of the dialogue choices written by the game developers were sane, per se, but I went with the least offensive one.

"Don't bother…" I wanted to make it sound as sincere as possible, to most closely reflect my feelings at this moment, but it came out weakly, my throat too tired from trying to push the vomit down.

"You—" The pink-haired man frowned at my reply, but only for a moment. I blinked, and by the time I opened my eyes, his face was icy cold. *Maybe I'm so out of it that I imagined the trace of concern…*

"Fine. Stuff your face with slop and die, for all I care," he huffed, straightening up. "No doctor on the Eckhart estate would make time for the likes of you anyway."

Thud, thud. The violent sound of his footsteps stomping away reverberated harshly in the silence. Glowing white letters followed after him, disappearing into the distance.

[Affection: -3%]

His affection was definitely at negative ten percent when I saw him yesterday… It went up? This was a huge increase, considering that even a bump of a couple percentage points had been difficult to accomplish in Hard Mode. *If I'd known the rewards were so huge back when I was playing, I'd have made sure I started by clearing this episode…*

Still, I couldn't find it in me to care about the affection increase.

Negative is still negative, after all.



After emptying my stomach, I stumbled my way over to the sink and rinsed my mouth out.

When I looked up, the reflection that met me in the mirror was that of a pallid yet beautiful girl.

"Penelope."

Not a single unscripted groan had escaped my lips earlier, but now that I was alone, I could talk all I wanted. I opened my mouth and watched as the girl in the mirror did the same.

Her turquoise eyes glinted back at me like emeralds. She was a striking beauty, her azalea-like dark-pink hair swishing enchantingly every time she moved.

A face that was, without a doubt, not my own.

"Penelope Eckhart. Eckhart… Dammit."

House Eckhart was the sole dukedom in Eorka, the empire of the game world. The episode I'd experienced the day before, which had led the first son to confine me to my room, had been the de facto beginning of Hard Mode. Even that prologue-esque preliminary episode was no joke—I'd died over and over before clearing it in real life.

Trying to stay true to the villain's character, I'd selected only the insolent dialogue choices. I remembered being so indignant over dying at the very start, which fueled me to continue attempting it rather than give up.

Thank goodness I kept at it. Imagine if I'd just fallen asleep right away… That would've been even worse for me now. The thought made me sigh.

"Haah… She really is gorgeous…"

The illustrations of her had been stunning for sure, but in person, Penelope's beauty bordered on the impossible. If I'd been sucked into this game world before earning my independence, I'm sure I would've been excitedly admiring the body I ended up in. I might've even gladly accepted this ridiculous turn of events. *Yeah… I bet I'd be thanking my lucky stars for granting me a chance at a new life…*

But I had finally succeeded in striking out on my own after enduring years in that hellhole. I'd fought against all the odds of a hostile environment and gotten accepted into a prestigious university. Though it was cramped and dingy, I had a living space all of my own. My future was one where I'd escaped the clutches of my asshole brothers, and what awaited me was an upward trajectory to success.

But this? A life where the smallest mistake would ruthlessly lead to immediate death? It was by no means an improvement to my own life. It'd be a different story if I'd awakened as the MC of Normal Mode, maybe. *She* could do pretty much anything and still get a happy ending.

"……So why?"

Why now, right after I'd finally gotten out of that awful house?

"Why is this happening to me?!" I wailed, slamming my fist down on the sink in a burst of emotion. The pretty features in the mirror contorted wretchedly, leaving a vicious expression on a face that should have looked sad. *I guess that's par for the course when you're the game's big bad.*

"Haah…" I shuddered out a breath, running a hand through my long hair, some of which had fallen in my face.

Composing myself, I tried to remember everything I could about the body I was in.

Penelope Eckhart. The villain of *Daughter of the Duke's Super Love Project* and the protagonist of its Hard Mode. She grew up as a peasant with no last name.

[Penelope was raised by a poor single mother who worked as a wandering peddler.

One day, she catches the eye of the duke, who'd been desperately searching for his long-lost youngest child.

Her chronically ill mother having just passed away, Penelope is serendipitously adopted into House Eckhart.]

There was only one reason she was chosen to replace the sole daughter of Eckhart: The two bore a striking resemblance. The duke's deceased wife had also had pink hair, and all members of the Eckhart family had blue eyes.

The thought recalled to mind the second-eldest son of the duke, who'd been in my room earlier and dealt with the maid. His hair was a lovely shade of cotton-candy pink.

The magenta hair I saw in the mirror now was closer to red than pink, though. And the eyes were blue green, slightly different from the Eckharts' true blue.

"He should've searched harder for his real daughter instead of dragging some innocent kid into this mess."

As Penelope grew up, she began to resemble the duke's lost child less and less. The duke quickly lost interest and neglected her. No longer favored by her adoptive father, Penelope's new lot in life was to be abused by her two brothers and the servants.

"It's disturbingly similar…" Poverty, losing a mother, neglected by her father—the story of Penelope's life both prior to and after adoption was eerily like my own, leaving me with a sense of déjà vu I hadn't felt while playing the game. My heart sank.

The fake daughter of the duke.

Every servant in the house called her a fake. Penelope, though undeniably gorgeous, was nothing more than a cheap knockoff to the people here. Maybe if her personality had been more sympathetic, things would've played out differently… Who knows. *What I do know is that she was taken in off the streets, and her behavior seemed ungrateful and caustic.*

As the game's prologue put it, *She was nasty toward everyone*

and continued in her wicked ways regardless of time or occasion.

"No wonder the dialogue choices were all so hostile." I nodded to myself, thinking back on the pieces of frankly insane dialogue I'd seen so far. Everything about the girl came together to form the portrait of a perfect villain, even her name. Unlike the innocent and pure heroine of Normal Mode, Penelope seemed like a vixen in comparison.

Still, I found myself sympathizing with the girl. I'd only gotten a taste of her life between last night and this morning, but I'd already become viscerally acquainted with the kind of treatment Penelope received in the duke's house.

However atrocious or "fake" she may be, this is going too far. I mean, an officially recognized member of the duke's family being tormented with needles? I doubt the maids would do something so crazy even to each other.

Penelope had been adopted when she was only twelve. If this abuse started back then…what chance did she stand? Children are practically powerless in the first place, let alone a child who can't get adults to listen no matter how loud she shouts.

"They turned her into a villain." Not that it justified her behavior up until this point. But all the characters in the game had been especially harsh on her, and they had shown no hesitation when killing her.

"Poor girl," I said, brushing my hand against Penelope's frail cheek. The dark-pink hair falling harshly around her delicate face painted a sad picture.

After a moment, though, I pushed aside any feelings of sympathy.

"I'm in no position to be pitying anyone." Indulging such thoughts was a privilege I didn't have.

She is me. I am Penelope now. In other words, just as Penelope died countless times in the game, any of the male characters can kill me at the drop of a hat.

The thought made my heart seize in fear, a chill washing over me.

After leaving the bathroom, I quickly found myself a pen and piece of paper. The fact of the matter was that I was stuck as Penelope, and I had no choice but to find a way to survive.

An uphill battle was in store for me. In Hard Mode, affection that had been built up through considerable effort could plummet in a heartbeat. And when it dropped below zero, the result was death for Penelope and a bad ending for the player.

Mr. Pink Hair, the second son of the duke, had started with his affection in the negatives, which meant that if I didn't raise it to 0 percent or higher, I'd be dead no matter what, end of discussion.

First of all, I should lay out everything I already know.

To my relief, though Penelope was considered an imposter, her quarters were still properly outfitted. A luxurious desk and bookcase lay on one side of the spacious room. I beelined over, took a seat at the desk, and hastily dipped the pen in an inkpot sitting atop it.

"Let's start with the characters."

There were five main male leads in the game: the duke's two sons, the crown prince, a sorcerer, and a knight. Their affection meters all started at 0 percent or below in Hard Mode, whereas in Normal Mode they started at 30 percent.

Gliding my pen across the blank sheet, I began to fill out what I could remember about them, sorting out my thoughts.

First up, Derrick Eckhart. As the eldest son of Duke Eckhart, he was the heir and "young lord" of the estate. A typical nobleman, he was busy learning to manage the house, and thus he paid little attention to Penelope. However, beneath the surface, he held a deep resentment and disdain for the girl who had taken his lost sister's place.

Derrick rarely killed Penelope himself in the game, but he didn't hesitate to punish her harshly whenever she did something wrong. This resulted in penalties and restricted choices for the player, just like the way he'd confined me to my room the day before.

Next, there was the second son, Reynold Eckhart. There wasn't much worth saying about him. The "act first, think later" type, he was both foulmouthed and foul tempered. He was quick to pick a fight whenever he so much as glimpsed Penelope. Not only did he

take the lead in harassing her in the household, but he also always contributed to her dying of absurd causes.

"Pretty similar to those two assholes from back home, aren't they?" I mused, tutting as I looked over the information I'd summarized so far.

These two were the easiest to win over in Normal Mode. Which wasn't a surprise, of course, considering the heroine was their biological sister. Their routes culminated in familial love, not romantic love, with endings involving them living together as a happy family. Because Penelope wasn't related by blood to either of them, their Hard Mode endings were highly likely to differ.

Hmm… Shaking my head firmly, I drew a huge *X* over each of their names, despite having gone to the trouble of writing all their information down.

"Nah, there's not an ounce of hope with these jerks." I mean, Reynold had even started with negative affection. Not zero, but negative. *What even is that? A sign, that's what.* A hint from the game devs that I shouldn't even attempt to pursue his happy ending since it was a lost cause to begin with.

Not to mention, the thought of calling them "Big Bro" or treating them like actual brothers makes my skin crawl. Better to give up on them entirely.

"Moving on… The crown prince."

By name, Callisto Regulus. I had no real information on him save for what I'd learned in Normal Mode. There, the tyrant who cared little for the sanctity of life due to an unfortunate childhood met the angelic female protagonist, who changed him. By the end, he administered "justice" on behalf of the heroine and killed the villain, Penelope.

It seems like just deserts when framed like that, but from Penelope's perspective, the crown prince is practically her personal grim reaper. In fact, he had killed her the most when I'd played through Hard Mode. I'd reset the game so many times while going down the crown prince route that trying to recall any specifics only drew up a blank.

"Sooo…let's stay the hell away from him," I decided, flashing back

to the many graphic illustrations of Penelope's head being lopped off by Callisto's sword. I shuddered, my stomach dropping.

Scritch, scritch. Crossing out the crown prince's name multiple times for extra emphasis, I hurried on to the next male character.

Winter Verdandi, a marquis and sorcerer. As with most sorcerers in games like this, he was an eccentric man, hiding his identity as a marquis while he operated a guild. He traded in mysterious objects, which granted him access to the black market and various manners of information.

It was access to this information that led him to initially discover that the Normal Mode heroine was actually the duke's lost daughter, kickstarting the plot. After that, he would continue to use his uncanny well of intel to combat the evil schemes of the villain Penelope, warning her off the heroine or intervening himself. He was also quite helpful when it came to building up the heroine's reputation.

In Normal Mode, Winter was a sweet man who used romantic spells and did everything he could behind the scenes to help the protagonist. As for Hard Mode, though…I couldn't really remember what he'd been like. I was too busy getting slain left and right by the crown prince and the duke's sons to get very far in Winter's route.

He has more potential than the other three, so I'll leave him as an option for now.

"And lastly, Eckles," I said, moving on.

Eckles, a knight of House Eckhart, had originally been a slave. Duke Eckhart was going to visit a friend one night when Eckles—a slave talented with the blade—caught his eye. The duke paid a high price and made Eckles one of the ducal estate's knights-in-training. Eckles would later become the youngest swordmaster to ever exist, a self-made "young and handsome" type who even went on to earn himself a noble title.

Currently, Eckles was the most promising of the five. He was the only love interest to show Penelope any sympathy until the very end of Normal Mode. Maybe it was just out of some sense of honor toward the mistress he'd once served, but he'd been the least aggressive in dissuading Penelope from her ploys against the

heroine. When it came to Hard Mode, though, I'd never even encountered him…

"Haah… Seeing it laid out like this, I don't think I have anything useful," I lamented with a deep sigh, peering down at my filled-out sheet of paper. Because I kept getting stuck when playing, what information I did have about Hard Mode was extremely limited. And even if I had a lot more, there was no telling how much of the original system actually applied to the lived reality of this place.

Only two things were certain—I would die if a male protagonist's affection fell below zero, and I was on a strict time limit. I'd have to clear the game and get someone's good ending before Penelope's coming-of-age ceremony, since that's when the heroine would make her first appearance, marking the beginning of Normal Mode. Penelope's story took place in the time leading up to that.

Poor Penelope. The sudden discovery of the real daughter would cost the fake daughter everything, all on the day she became an adult. If I failed to unlock an ending by then, the events of Normal Mode would unfold, and the male leads would fall in love with the heroine. Their fondness of her would mean I'd likely be killed by one of them, even if I did nothing wrong. *Not that there's any guarantee they won't do that earlier, of course.*

"…I can't die," I muttered, gritting my teeth at my depressing reality.

No way—I couldn't let that happen. I'd finally managed to slip free of my own horrible family, only to meet my end in some shitty game? As if!

"I refuse to die."

My morning classes were waiting for me. I would go back to my real home, alive and kicking.

I'll make sure of it.

I stared into space and told myself over and over that I would survive no matter what it took, only pausing when I was interrupted by someone at my door.

Knock, knock.

I couldn't even hide my notes before the door flew open.

"Miss," said the venerable white-haired butler. He didn't come into

the room, choosing instead to state his business in the doorway. "His Grace the duke has requested your presence."

I doubted he could read what I'd written from all the way over there, but that didn't stop me from being offended by his rude behavior. Back in the real world, there had been a valet of sorts at my father's house. He didn't like me much, sure, but he hadn't ever opened my bedroom door without permission.

To add insult to injury, this game was set in a stalwart class-based hierarchal society, not a democracy. This butler barging in was inexcusable.

As I wondered if I should lash out at him, the now-familiar white rectangle slid into view again.

1. (Hurl an object at the butler) How dare you open my door without permission?! You wanna die, old man?!
2. Tell him to come up here himself if he has something to say to me!
3. (Glare at him for five seconds before standing up) Very well.

Ah, right. I'd forgotten again, like an idiot. I could do nothing of my own free will in this game, not even get angry at someone when I felt like it…

Not wanting to behave as aggressively as the first two choices would make me, I annoyingly was forced to choose the third dialogue option. *Affection meters can wait—I have to do something about these damn prompts first…*

"…Very well."

I guess it's good timing that the duke is looking for me, then.

After pushing my notes deep inside one of the desk drawers, I crossed the room and made to follow the butler. Everything I knew about the estate had been from brief scenes in the game, so I studied my surroundings carefully as I walked.

The manor was enormous, something one would expect to see in a movie set in modern Europe, perhaps. Penelope's room was on its second floor. The day was just beginning, and the place was already

humming with activity.

As we headed toward and down the central stairway, we passed quite a few servants rushing along the corridors. They threw scornful looks at me as they passed, but I ignored them. I was used to this sort of treatment from my experiences in the real world. The whispers and stares barely even fazed me.

The butler, having led me to the first floor, soon came to a stop in front of an ornate door. *This must be the duke's office*, I surmised.

Knock, knock.

"Your Grace, I have brought Miss Penelope."

"Send her in."

The door creaked suspensefully as the butler pushed it open. Tensing a little, I stepped inside.

This is just a scene from the game… I tried to reassure myself. There really wasn't any reason for me to be nervous, but my fingers trembled all the same. Anticipating the way the duke treated Penelope seemed to unwittingly remind me of my own father.

Duke Eckhart didn't look up, even after I entered the room. Cautiously, I approached his desk.

Once there, I bowed politely, holding my shaking hands behind my back. Bowing to the duke wasn't a detail that had been in the game, but seeing as I couldn't speak without a dialogue prompt, I figured it was the right thing to do under these circumstances.

"There you are," the duke said, finally glancing up. He had black hair and blue eyes like Derrick and looked exactly like his character art from the game—cold in the extreme.

Unsurprisingly, a white screen appeared in my vision.

1. May I ask why you summoned me?
2. I'm busy. Can you get straight to the point?
3. (Glare without saying anything)

Faced with three equally crappy choices, I kept calm and chose the first one.

"May I ask why you summoned me?"

"I heard there was something of a disturbance this morning," he answered icily. With his response, the contents of the dialogue box shifted.

1. It's none of Your Grace's concern.
2. You would like it if there had been a disturbance, wouldn't you?
3. It wasn't my fault. It was all because of that stupid maid!

The hell? None of these options are reasonable, considering how composed my first choice was. Seriously, this game is crazy…

Not that it should come as a shock. I'd experienced this already while playing on my phone. At the time, I'd been giddy at the prospect of turning the villain into an aloof femme fatale and immediately selected the second answer.

Now that I was actually Penelope and had to say one of these unhinged dialogue choices myself, I simply couldn't bring myself to speak.

I mean, I get that she's supposed to be this psycho villain, but still… Who would like a daughter who behaved this rudely, let alone an adopted one? *This sucks.*

Clack. Noticing my hesitation, the duke put down his pen and looked up from his documents. His blue eyes bore into me.

Please don't be the choice that leads to death… Trembling internally, I went with the first answer. I gritted my teeth, trying my best to keep my tone neutral.

"It's none of…Your Grace's concern." My mouth moved of its own accord, however, and fighting against it only made me sound strained.

"Penelope." The duke's voice was devoid of any warmth. It seemed as though my desperate efforts had no impact on the outcome whatsoever.

"It has already been six years since you started living here, correct?" asked the duke.

I stared, trying to remember the details of the plot. The

protagonists of both Normal and Hard Mode were eighteen during the events of the game. Penelope was adopted into the duke's house when she was twelve, so six years after that made her roughly eighteen now.

Wait… This was bringing back something about the worldbuilding that I'd forgotten.

Coming-of-age ceremonies here take place on one's eighteenth birthday. *If it's been about six years, doesn't that mean Penelope's is around the corner? Then how much time do I have left?* I thought hard, concerned by the revelation.

Thankfully, the duke continued talking, not bothering to wait for an answer. "Perhaps you are unaware, but it is no easy feat to be accepted into this household. Only those who have proved their worth and have been thoroughly vetted are allowed to pass through the Eckhart gates."

"…"

"After I adopted you, I spared no expense and provided you with everything that was due to a daughter of mine. I wholly indulged your extravagances, regardless of how absurd they were."

"…"

"However, I cannot say I've seen what worth you bring to our noble name these past six years."

He wasn't wrong. If Penelope had at least continued to resemble his real daughter, he might have maintained a tiny bit of interest in her. But her hair and eyes were now too different from the Eckhart pink and blue, robbing her of the last bit of "worth" she could have served.

I wanted to nod in agreement, but the game had me in a viselike grip from the moment he started talking, and I couldn't move a finger.

Just as I was despairing, the dialogue box popped up again.

1. So what? Do you plan to kick me out after all this time?
2. I've done nothing wrong!
3. (Fall to your knees)

Finally!

My heart leaped at the familiar selection screen. I felt excitement course through me for the first time since I'd found myself in this world.

Though it was unlikely, I feared the choices might change if I didn't make a decision soon enough. Hurriedly, I selected the third option.

Thunk!

My knees slammed onto the floor as though someone had kicked them out from behind and pushed down forcefully on my shoulders.

Ow! Did it have to be so rough?!

I'd been ready for this, but it hurt more than I expected, and I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

"What…what are you doing?" The duke seemed even more surprised than I was by the sound of my knees striking the floor, his eyes wide.

I had never tried this option back when I played the game. It just felt too out of character. *Why would I show such a big display of respect when I'm supposed to be the embodiment of all that is wicked?*

Perhaps the developers had been too pressed to create yet another branching route, or maybe they'd wanted to save on expenses—either way, the options for this part matched the selection screens from Normal Mode exactly.

1. Does seeing me on my knees make you feel better?
2. (Glare without saying anything)
3. It's all my fault, Father!

I scrambled to select the third option yet again.

"It's all my fault, Father!"

I was 100 percent certain this was the right choice, and maybe because of this, my voice rang out loud and clear.

"…What?" asked the duke, clearly taken aback.

The familiar white window flashed in my vision once more.

<SYSTEM>
Hidden quest complete!
[The Forgotten Word—"Father"]
As a reward, you now have access to the [Dialogue Prompts ON/OFF] function.

<SYSTEM>
Turn dialogue prompts [OFF]?
[YES / NO]

I pressed [YES] without hesitation.

<SYSTEM>
Dialogue prompts have been set to [OFF]. Shout (Dialogue Prompts ON) to see multiple-choice answers again.

And with that, the damned screen vanished.

Yes! I clenched my fists and gave a silent cheer.

Turning dialogue prompts off was a hidden feature in the game. The way you activated it was rather silly: You had to call the duke "Father." Doing so did away with the strict written choices, leaving only the numbers 1, 2, and 3. It also gave you the option to type your own answers using your phone's keyboard, such as "Yes," "No," the names of the male leads, or simple dialogue lines.

In Normal Mode, the feature had been made intentionally easy to unlock. I thought the goal must have been to add a little flavor to the repetitive choice-making, encourage faster gameplay, and make things more immersive for the player. I never actually used the feature after unlocking it, though. Normal Mode was so easy and quick that I hadn't found the need to.

Thus, in Hard Mode, I ended up skipping through this particular scene without a second thought. I'd only been choosing the most brash answers at that point, and had no idea that the episode and feature-unlocking would so closely mirror Normal Mode.

Those brash answers, evidently the wrong choices considering

this similarity, meant that I was unable to even unlock the dialogue tree that led to the option of turning the prompts on or off back when I'd been playing Hard Mode. I'd been having so much fun with the villain's in-character dialogue, though, that the thought that I might need the feature hadn't even crossed my mind.

Man, how clueless I was… Little did I know that the fun I was having would later come back to bite me in the ass…

Bemoaning my foolishness, I finally, *finally* spoke of my own free will, pronouncing each syllable carefully.

"Fa—ther."

I nearly cried—it felt inexplicably good to be able to say what I wanted again. Real tears might have even welled up, I was so moved.

The duke's eyes grew even wider, probably from disbelief at hearing Penelope address him as "Father." He likely couldn't recall a time she had ever done so.

I continued to speak, my words flowing freely. "I apologize for causing trouble during my punishment. In failing to comport myself properly in front of a subordinate, I disturbed everyone."

"…"

"I will reflect on my actions for the remainder of my probation. You can rest assured that I will not cause a commotion like this within our household again. Will you please forgive me this once, Father?" I begged, going down on all fours.

In reality, the events of this morning were in no way my fault. The maid abused me, and I, the victim, had every right to ask for help. But the way Penelope had acted thus far in her life forced my hand, leaving me no choice but to prostrate myself and speak reverentially to survive.

I wouldn't be in immediate danger of death if I offended the duke, no, but doing nothing and moving on without attempting to fix things just because I got what I wanted and unlocked the hidden feature would probably cause problems for me in the long run.

It was a logical assumption, considering this happened off the back of Penelope getting confined to her room for doing something wrong. Derrick had been the one to order that punishment, and

being obstinate now would only lead to his affection dropping later.

"I've long behaved arrogantly and childishly, I know."

"…"

"But if you overlook my mistakes just this once, I will strive to prove my worth to you before my coming-of-age ceremony."

I stayed on the ground after I finished speaking. I had never groveled like this, even to my real father. This stupid game was making me do things I never would have stooped to doing otherwise.

I'm on my hands and knees pleading to you, dammit. Hurry up and accept my apology already. I'd been in fight-flight-freeze-or-fawn mode ever since waking up that morning, and I needed a break.

"You…" The way the duke gazed upon me… It was like he was seeing me for the first time. I could tell he was struggling to speak. After faltering for a bit, he finally managed to say, "I understand. You may get up."

"Yes." I stood without delay. My legs had been going numb.

"We of House Eckhart say little, Penelope," the duke spoke in a low voice, staring me down, "and the little we say must matter."

That could mean a lot of things. I bowed deeply.

"Thank you. I will make sure you don't regret giving me this chance, Father."

"You are dismissed."

I hurried toward the door as soon as he bid me leave, scared that moving too slowly might trigger some other branching storyline.

Creak…

I felt the duke's eyes boring into my back as I turned the doorknob and exited the room. It was strange—he was acting completely different from how he had been when I entered, not even deigning to look up at me.

Having left the office, though, I decided to push that out of my mind. Duke Eckhart wasn't one of the characters I needed to raise the affection of, and I wouldn't have any business with him after I reached an ending with one of the male protagonists at my coming-of-age ceremony.

I closed the door carefully behind me and moved to leave…only to be promptly stopped in my tracks by an icy voice piercing the quiet.

"I'm certain I told you to make yourself scarce."

"Eek!" I gasped and whirled around.

Across the gloomy corridor loomed the hulking shadow of a man. The letters [Affection: 0%] glinted in the darkness. The figure had blue eyes and black hair that seemed to meld with the shadows.

It was the duke's eldest son, Derrick.

"Emily."

"…"

"She served as a faithful maid in this house for nearly ten years."

Derrick's footsteps rang out across the floor as he emerged from the darkness. Crossing the wide corridor in only a few steps, he came to stand right in front of me, turning his intimidating blue gaze down toward my face. He had the look of a man who'd discovered a pest in his home.

I winced before the hatred and scorn emanating from him, even though I hadn't really done anything wrong.

"No matter how high we set the pay, no one would agree to take on the role of your personal maid. Emily was the only girl willing to deal with your caprice."

"…"

"Well, until today, that is. Your conceited theatrics have driven your last maid away."

My timidness suddenly morphed into outrage. When had I said I wanted her banished from the house?! If he wanted to talk about theatrics, he should've looked to his brother—Reynold had caused much more of a fuss than I had.

And that rotten food almost drove me *away from this mortal plane!*

I wanted to shout at him, but the glowing letters over his head gave me pause.

Hold it in. If his affection drops any further, I'm dead.

Taking a deep breath, I suppressed my frustration. *Affection: zero percent. Zero percent…*, I repeated to myself.

I was already drained from begging at the duke's feet earlier. And in the aftermath of hyper-focusing on disabling the multiple-choice dialogue, I couldn't seem to remember much about this scene from the game.

Staying calm, I decided to use the game's system to fish for information.

Dialogue prompts ON! I shouted in my head, the white screen popping up accordingly.

1. Ha! Why are you so upset? Did she service you in bed or something?
2. She only reaped what she sowed!
3. (Glare without saying anything)

Having skimmed through my options quickly, I immediately thought:

Dialogue prompts OFF! OOOFFFFFFF!

<SYSTEM>
Turn dialogue prompts [OFF]?
[YES / NO]

I pressed [YES] at lightning speed. If I went with the crazy options provided by the game devs, I'd be dead in an instant.

My brain was humming, trying to think of a solution, and Derrick's expression grew stonier and stonier at the delay.

"Ha! And now you think my words aren't worth listening to, it seems?" It sounded almost like a threat. I had no time to dally.

I settled on saying, "I'm sorry for causing a scene."

How many more times would I have to apologize for something I hadn't done? *It's not as if I don't have my pride.* Having to grovel and fawn like this over and over left me feeling miserable and dirty. I hated it.

Still…it would be a small price to pay if it kept me alive. Besides, these were virtual characters inside a game, not real people anyway.

—"Father! Big Bro! She scratched me!"
—"Figures. If it looks like vermin and acts like vermin, then it probably is vermin."

I'd pleaded for forgiveness countless times when I lived with my asshole half brothers. That hadn't been so different from my current situation. Not begging for mercy hadn't put me at risk of death back then, of course, but I'd been just a child at the time, and everything had been equally scary. Bowing and scraping before others had been an everyday occurrence.

Compared with the life I'd already lived, Penelope's current lot was nothing to complain about. After all, unlike myself, she actually had caused some trouble.

Perhaps because I'd already been through much worse, being inside a game in which begging for forgiveness was a legit tactic felt easier, on the contrary.

Really, though, this is revoltingly similar to my own experiences, I mentally grumbled, recalling the realization I'd had when I first found myself in this world.

At the same time, I finally spoke, keeping an even and deferential tone. "As you've said, I have forgotten my place."

"…What?"

"We don't need to send that maid away. It was my own behavior that fell short. In fact, I just asked Father for forgiveness as well."

Derrick's expression grew strange at my words, his blue eyes slightly round. *A similar reaction to his father's.*

I continued smoothly, finding it easy to repeat my earlier performance. "I'll do my best to stay out of your sight and avoid causing you concern from now on, so please forgive me once more," I implored, following the words with a deep bow.

Did I sound too insincere? I wondered, suddenly worried that I hadn't been convincing enough. *As ruthless as this story may be, he wouldn't suddenly cut me down when I'm begging for mercy, would he?*

I was pretty certain Derrick wasn't a nutjob like the crown prince,

though, and it was with a lighter heart that I waited for his response. I wanted to get this over with and return to my room. Even standing was starting to take its toll on me.

Come to think of it, I was starving. That damn maid's food had made me throw up in the morning, and I'd had nothing to eat since then, my upset stomach leaving me weak.

Despite my earnest desire to end this and rest, it took Derrick a full five minutes to speak.

"…One more time, then," he finally conceded.

"…"

"I will overlook it just this once."

Right when I was thinking that this was easier than I'd anticipated, he tacked on, "But bear in mind, this is the last time I'll excuse your insolence."

His response was much more spiteful than the duke's. As expected, however, I'd avoided death. Though relieved, I couldn't bring myself to thank him for it.

Yeah, sure, of course, whatever you say, Mr. Hotshot, I thought sarcastically, just as I would often do with Asshole #1 back in the real world.

After giving one final deep bow, I turned around, intending to head straight back to my room.

"Ah—"

A sudden rush of dizziness came over me, my vision starting to blur. The relief seemed to have drained the last of my strength right out of my legs, and I swayed on unsteady feet.

I'm going to fall!

Just as the floor rushed up to greet me, someone grabbed my shoulders roughly.

"Hey."

I could feel a hand move to hold me by the upper arm, propping my body upright. Upon turning my head, I was met with bright, burning blue eyes.

Derrick had caught me before I could fall.

"You ate spoiled food," he said gruffly, jolting me out of my daze. While I stared in shock, he continued on, asking, "Shouldn't we call

for a doctor?"

My waves of inner turmoil immediately settled.

So he knew. He knew it wasn't my fault and yet had tried to blame me for what the maid had done. *If I hadn't begged him for mercy right away, if the scenario had played out as in the game, he would have ruthlessly killed me.*

It felt as if someone had doused me with ice water.

"No need, Young Lord." I jerked away from the hand that was grasping me, the movement intuitive, like some sort of survival instinct.

Only to immediately regret it. Suddenly afraid that I'd pissed him off, I did my best to smile. "Not when I've only just promised to not cause you any more trouble."

So piss off and leave me alone.

"If you'll excuse me."

With another polite bow, I hurried away. I must've looked silly, rushing down that corridor as if a serial killer were hot on my heels.

But my worry wasn't unfounded. I had no reason to trust Derrick wouldn't stick a knife in my back for shoving his hand away.

In my rush to escape up the central staircase, I failed to notice the look on his face.



"…'Young Lord,'" Derrick repeated unconsciously, staring after Penelope's retreating form.

This was the same girl who couldn't even bring herself to address the duke as "Father," the same girl who would always insist on calling him and Reynold "Big Bro."

Somehow he couldn't forget how she'd blanched when he'd caught her. With a strange light in his blue eyes, he watched her flee, almost as if she were escaping from him.

Soon, however, he turned away, as if no longer interested.

[Affection: 5%]

White letters that Penelope had missed glinted above his head of black hair.



I raced up the stairs and back to my room. After shutting the door behind me, I jumped onto the bed.

"Phew…"

My body melted into the soft embrace of the sheets. It was still morning, approaching midday, but with how drained I was, it felt as if I'd spent a full day running around.

Taking several deep breaths, I tried to calm my pounding heart, which had been beating like crazy since my encounter with Derrick.

All of a sudden, I burst out laughing.

"Ha! Somehow I'm still alive." I guessed my repeated efforts to make at least some progress in the game hadn't been a complete waste. I'd actually had the presence of mind to address Derrick as "Young Lord," despite how flustered I was.

As the tension left my body, snippets of information began to come back to me. When I'd first started the game, Derrick's affection had fluctuated intensely, unlike the other love interests. I'd manage to select the right dialogue and gain some percentage points with lots of trial and error, but one little mistake was often enough to undo all my hard work. For the longest time, I just couldn't figure out what triggered these sudden deductions.

Does he have some sort of personality disorder? I had wondered. *Why the roller-coaster ride of emotions?*

Multiple deaths later, I eventually found the reason. Derrick detested Penelope so much that he even hated hearing her call him "Brother" or the like. Whenever I chose a dialogue option with the word *brother* in it, his affection would plummet, leaving me puzzled.

"He's so finicky. Even more so than Asshole #1." I frowned, clucking my tongue.

In any case, the only reason I wasn't dead right now is because

I'd remembered this about him at the last moment.

Right, note to self: Never call him "Brother" ever again.

I repeated this multiple times so I wouldn't forget. Of course, best-case scenario would be avoiding him altogether where I could, but I had to be ready for details and paths in the story that I didn't know about.

My eyes began to close as I lay in bed, thinking. *I really should eat something…* Food would provide much-needed energy. It was nearly lunchtime already, but because of the chaos of this morning, I didn't have much of an appetite.

Ugh, whatever.

Feeling too tired to do anything, I simply let my eyes flutter shut. *Sleep first, food later.*

Maybe I just wanted to escape the horrible reality I'd found myself in.

I was fast asleep seconds after I closed my eyes.



"Well? Why was this in your room?" said a cold voice, surprisingly close to my ear.

Before I could process, a different voice shouted from beside me. "Answer him, you rat! You stole it, didn't you?!"

"Reynold," the duke said in warning to his son about his language. Reynold clamped his mouth shut but stamped his foot angrily.

What is this…?

Snapping out of my daze, I looked around before lowering my head. I seemed to be shorter, my hands smaller.

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks—I was in Penelope's dream.

"Explain, Penelope. Why do you have my daughter's necklace? I seem to recall telling you that her bedroom was off-limits."

"Father! Why do you even have to ask? She obviously stole it!"

Despite the duke's warning, Reynold kept butting in with his accusations.

Penelope glared back at him. "I didn't steal it! I've never stolen anything!"

"Don't make me laugh! Why else would Father's birthday present for Ivonne be inside your dresser?!" Reynold shouted, shoving the necklace in her face.

I'd never seen it before. In line with her personality, Penelope shook her head and shouted back just as vehemently, "I don't know, either! I've never gone in her room!"

"I saw her," a voice cut in, a man stepping forth from the crowd of people that had gathered.

The duke, who'd been groaning at Reynold and Penelope's screaming match, turned to look at the speaker.

"Pennel." It was the butler.

"These past few weeks, I often witnessed Miss Penelope going up to the third floor. I checked Miss Ivonne's room just in case and found the door unlocked."

Everyone turned to Penelope again, dozens of eyes pointed like daggers at the little girl. Even the arrogant Penelope could not ignore the accusation in all those gazes.

"…I-it wasn't me," she insisted, backing away.

She was telling the truth. She'd been going to the third floor a lot, yes. It was the least frequented place in the manor and also led to the attic. But she'd only done so because she didn't want to be alone with the maid who harassed her, not to steal anything—especially not something that had once belonged to the duke's real daughter.

"It really wasn't me, Father! I swear! I've never, ever been in that room!" Penelope yelled at the duke desperately, reaching out in a display of trust and affection for the man who'd brought her in and given her a new home.

But the duke ignored her cries.

"Pennel, see that all the third-floor rooms are properly locked. As for Ivonne's bedroom—nail it shut."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"And summon the jeweler tomorrow."

"F-Father…" Penelope faltered.

The incident, which had happened not long after Penelope was adopted, was wrapped up without any regard for what the girl had to say. Penelope, frozen and pale, simply stared at the duke with pleading eyes.

He left without another word to her.

"That's why you should've gotten the hell out of our house while we were still asking nicely, stupid," Reynold whispered nastily once his father was gone. Then he promptly shoved Penelope to the floor before following after the duke.

"Vile scum," Derrick spat frostily at the girl slumped on the ground.

The scene shifted.

From then on, Penelope would purchase an outrageous number of jewels and valuables from merchants who visited the manor. The servants would nearly pass out at the amount of money that exchanged hands, with Derrick and Reynold fuming that she had no right to spend so lavishly.

And Penelope never called the duke "Father" again.

…Knock, knock.

Quiet rapping against my door pulled me out of my deep slumber. I blinked my eyes open, half-awake.

Knock, knock, knock.

The sound continued when I didn't respond. The knocking was sharp, almost irritating. I hefted myself up into a sitting position slowly.

"Who's—?"

Ker-click. The door swung open before I could even finish asking who was there.

"It is me, Miss."

Light poured into the room from the hallway. The sun seemed to have set, since my room was dark otherwise.

Blinded by the sudden brightness, I squinted at the person illuminated against the door.

"The butler…?" I muttered.

"I come regarding an urgent matter."

It wasn't normal for the butler to seek Penelope out like this, so my stomach plummeted. The dream I'd just woken from probably heightened my anxiety.

"Wh-what happened?" My voice trembled miserably. Had the brothers framed me again? Was I being accused of something?

At my question, the butler finally explained why he had so rudely burst into my room.

"We must select a new personal maid for you before dinner—"

My mind went blank.

"Wait," I said, holding up a hand.

The butler stopped speaking. He seemed offended that I'd interrupted him, judging from the frown lines creasing his forehead.

That's it? Funnily enough, the first feeling that washed over me was relief, though it was quickly replaced with furious disbelief. *He strolled into his sleeping mistress's room without permission over a maid assignment?!* The more I thought about it, the more affronted I felt.

"…You." I called the butler in a low voice.

"Yes, Miss?"

"What is your name?"

"I beg your pardon?" he said stupidly, clearly not having expected the question.

I generously repeated myself. "Your name. Tell me."

"It…is Pennel, Miss."

"And what is my name?"

"Miss, what is with this sudden line of questioning?" he asked, looking displeased that I had changed the subject. The lines in his brow deepened.

"Answer my question. What is my name?"

"…Penelope Eckhart." The words came out begrudgingly, as if they had been dragged kicking and screaming out of his throat.

"Correct. Penelope *Eckhart*. The noblewoman," I said, nodding and emphasizing my name. I continued amiably. "I, for one, have never heard of any rules of etiquette that would allow a commoner,

let alone a servant, to burst into a noble's room without permission. Do you know something I don't?"

Penelope, you foolish girl. If this kind of treatment made her angry, screaming fits were not the answer. She should have brandished her social status as a weapon to put the servants in their place.

As she was an officially recognized member of the duke's family, pulling rank was the perfect way to combat the butler. *I mean, she has one up on me there—back in the real world, I was just the bastard child of some wealthy family. She's the daughter of the freaking duke.*

"You know, if a grown man keeps frequenting the room of a young lady of the aristocracy… Why, that sounds to me like the type of messy gossip that's popular among the common folk," I said insinuatingly.

"…"

"Isn't that right?" An innocent smile accompanied my question.

"M-Miss!" The butler blanched in fear. Such a rumor would have disastrous consequences for him. *Wow, social status sure is an amazingly effective deterrent.*

Seeing the butler's haughty expression waver satisfied something deep within me. Letting the smile drop off my face, I murmured, "Are you going to keep making me strain my neck?"

This was a roundabout expression often used by the most self-confident nobles in the game, who seldom experienced being spoken to without the speaker first kneeling before them. This would include, for example, Duke Eckhart, the "blade of the empire," who bent his head to no one save for members of the Imperial family.

"I—I apologize, Miss!" The butler was quick to understand my meaning. He collapsed to the floor, his stiff legs seeming to turn to jelly.

"I—I grew careless in my haste and breached propriety. Please forgive me…!"

Seeing the man on his knees did make me feel a little better. I'd been having a terrible day from the moment I woke up.

I wondered briefly if I was being too harsh, considering the butler

was much older than I was, but I didn't tell him to get up. No doubt this man had done nothing but talk down to Penelope and ignore her these past six years.

"…I don't think I'd appreciate seeing your face again any time soon," I said, staring coldly at him. "I'm sure the feeling is mutual." At last, I arrived at what I really wanted to say. "From now on, if you need something from me, don't come in person. Send someone else."

"But, Miss, the assigning of maids is my respons—"

"Yes or no," I cut him off. "Only one of those is the correct answer."

"…Yes. Understood, Miss," the butler agreed with great effort. I could see on his face how difficult it was for him to do the simple job of deferring to me. "Serving your meal, then—"

"Will be unnecessary. Get out," I spat. Lying down on my bed again, I turned my back to the man. I could soon hear his cautious footsteps retreating.

Creak. The door closed much more softly than it had been opened, plunging the room back into darkness.

Wait… What if he goes straight to the duke and tells him everything I said? I briefly worried.

"Well, what's done is done." Let him do as he would. I couldn't stop him.

Besides, I would do the same over and over again if it would help ease some of Penelope's built-up resentment.

Not to mention I'd spoken quietly the whole time. Not one object was thrown, nor fit pitched.

Inside the game, you were meant to build a good reputation by improving your relationships with the side characters as the story progressed. This would later aid you in reaching various endings with each of the love interests.

I had no intention of tackling the game in an orthodox manner, though. With no need to unlock multiple endings, any time I spent on irrelevant people was time wasted.

I'm already up to my ears in keeping the affection meters from dropping. Reputation points don't concern me. It was a luxury you

could only afford when playing on your phone.

Shoving aside my useless musings, I closed my eyes again. I hadn't been able to sleep properly since first waking up as Penelope, and the butler had interrupted my nap. I needed more rest…



Penelope seemed to be quite the early bird for a high-strung woman. My eyes opened early in the morning despite any lack of a wake-up call from a maid.

Sitting up in bed, I started doing a set of light stretches. That is, until someone knocked on my door, as if they'd been biding time until I showed sign of rejoining the waking world.

Knock, knock.

Straightening up, I stared, waiting. *Let's see if yesterday's warning was effective.* A few seconds passed. It didn't seem to be the butler, that was for certain—the door didn't fly open like last time.

"Who's there?" I finally said.

"Miss, it's me, Raina." Ah, the head maid. My new tactic had apparently worked splendidly, and I hummed to myself, satisfied with the results.

"Come in."

The door clicked open, and a middle-aged woman stepped inside. "Did you sleep well, Miss?"

"What is it?" I ignored her question, getting straight to the point.

"I've come to speak to you concerning the matter of selecting a new personal maid. Do you happen to have a specific person in mind for the role?"

Of course I don't. I said nothing in response, but she didn't seem put off or surprised by this; neither did she suggest that I choose someone from the existing staff.

"If not, perhaps a new girl can be hired on—"

"The one who was serving me before—what was her name?"

"Pardon? You mean Emily, Miss?"

"Ah, right. Emily," I said, pretending to have forgotten. "Has she been kicked out of the manor?"

"She hasn't, no, but—"

"Then what's she doing now?"

The maid looked suspicious at my line of inquiry. "In addition to being docked three months' pay for her…negligence, she's been assigned to the laundry."

"Hmm, I see."

"Why do you ask, Miss?"

There was a faint flicker of unease in the maid's expression, despite her composure so far. *I guess she's wise to what's been going down. Or could it be that she's behind the maids' poor treatment of me?*

Fighting down a smirk, I answered her nonchalantly. "Let her continue as my personal maid."

"…Excuse me?"

"It's inconvenient, having no one around to serve me. And any new girl will be inept until she gets used to the work. The bar may be low, but I'd prefer my original maid." Penelope would never have provided such a detailed explanation. But since I needed the head maid's cooperation for my own agenda, I decided to play nice.

"Understood? Then send her up here, please." I shot a smile at the older woman, whose jaw was hanging open.

She was obviously shocked by the change in me, and after some thought, she replied cautiously, "B-but, Miss, Young Master Reynold himself punished her on account of her offense against you—"

"So? Are you refusing to do as I say?" I didn't let her finish making excuses.

"…" The maid clammed up immediately. *I knew it.* Though it was only the dawn of my second full day in the manor, I'd already come to the realization that no one ever did as Penelope asked the first time around.

Has it always been like this? The hierarchical societies I'd seen in movies and books had never allowed for servants to question those of higher status. Besides, the servants who had cared for the

heroine in Normal Mode were endlessly accommodating, hanging on her every word. *Which means whatever this is, it's not normal.*

My good mood was sullied by irritation in less than a minute.

"Do as I say while I'm still asking nicely." *I even said* please*. Do I have to act like the real Penelope?* "I already told you finding a new maid is more pain than it's worth. Send my old one up like I instructed. Unless you want to attend to me yourself?"

"…If that is what you wish, I shall clear the matter with His Grace first, Miss." *She refuses to listen to me till the very end.* I laughed, incredulous at her arrogance.

"Don't bother. I'll go ask him myself now." I stood abruptly. "While I'm at it, I'll give him all the details of what happened yesterday and tell him I've forgiven Emily."

"…"

"Where is my father?" I asked, moving to leave.

"M-Miss!" The head maid's eyes had gone wide.

The previous day's incident had fizzled out somewhat quietly with only one maid demoted, but if I told the duke the full truth, things could rapidly spiral out of hand. A maid had abused the duke's daughter, and his second son had witnessed it to boot.

"H-His Grace left for the Imperial Palace early this morning," she stammered.

"Really? All right. Well, I'll tell him when he retur—"

"I shall go retrieve Emily right away!" the head maid interrupted frantically, probably afraid that I was dead set on seeking out my father. "I tend to worry too much the more I age. I nearly did not recognize your generosity, Miss. Please forgive me."

It didn't please me so much as make me feel bitter to see the head maid now bowing her head. I wasn't planning on making use of the reputation system by currying favor with the servants in the first place, but this felt as though I was eating away at what very little reputation I did have.

"Shall I bring her now, Miss?" the maid asked, eyeing me fearfully.

"Don't make me repeat myself to you ever again, Raina," I said in answer, my tone somewhat mournful. My day was already ruined

beyond repair. “Get out.”



The head maid must have done as I asked, because Emily came up to my room with a rolling cart in no time.

“M-Miss… Y-your breakfast is ready…”

Her hands were trembling as she set out the plates under my watchful gaze. *I guess she’s been through the ringer ever since being dragged away yesterday.* The insanity of actually eating rotten food hadn’t been for naught, apparently.

The food she served me this time—a fresh salad and a juicy steak—was worlds more palatable in comparison. *Looks edible, to say the least.*

The stress from the day before hadn’t dissipated yet, though. I didn’t really have much of an appetite. Deliberately staring at Emily, who was standing stiffly to the side, I slowly ate.

Unsurprisingly, she didn’t dare meet my eyes. *Maybe she feels guilty.* No doubt she was confused as to why I’d chosen to keep her on as my personal maid.

I hadn’t even finished half of my food before I put my fork down. “Emily.”

“Y-yes, Miss!” she responded immediately, her voice much too loud. I must’ve jolted her out of her thoughts.

Having her attention, I held out a hand.

“Bring me the needle.”

“Pardon? What do you—”

“The needle you stuck me with every morning,” I said casually, as if I were talking about the weather.

“Ack!” she gasped. Perhaps taken aback by my affable tone, it took a moment for my words to compute. Then, in a flurry, she went pale and fell to her knees.

“M-Miss! I’m sorry! Please forgive me!”

Thump, thump. Her forehead banged against the floor as she

begged, bowing over and over.

Come on, seriously? If she was going to fold like a napkin, why did she even do something so ballsy in the first place?

On one hand, I was amused to see how spineless Emily truly was; on the other, my mood worsened at the confirmation of my suspicions: Someone else was the mastermind behind the abuse. Any desire to wheedle what I wanted out of her vanished, and when I spoke next, all traces of friendliness were gone from my voice.

"Didn't the head maid tell you? I don't like having to repeat myself."

"M-Miss…"

"Give me the needle."

Emily was shaking like a leaf. In fact, she looked as if she might faint at any moment. Yielding to the pressure, though, she began to rummage in her hair, which was pulled up in a bun. From it emerged a long needle.

Damn, clever hiding place. No wonder Penelope had fallen victim to their plotting. There would have been no easy way to find evidence the maid had been pricking her.

"H-here you are…," Emily said, her hand quivering as she held out the needle.

I looked down at the object that had been used to torment Penelope for years. Objectively, it was a tiny thing, smaller than a single fist. But I knew from experience what terrible pain that prickly point could inflict.

It must have hurt so much… I couldn't help imagining Penelope waking in pain every morning, discovering her arm covered in wounds both fresh and old, with no one ever paying any mind to her suffering.

"Raise your head," I commanded through gritted teeth.

Emily hesitantly looked up. Her eyes were full of despair, probably envisioning what atrocities she'd be subjected to at the hands of the duke's vicious daughter. Sadly, however, what I was about to do wasn't exactly revenge for Penelope.

"Watch closely, Emily." I held out my hand that wasn't clasping the needle, showing her its smooth, uninjured surface.

Then I promptly plunged the needle straight in.

"Ahh! Miss!" Emily screamed as if she were the one who'd been stabbed.

More than half of the needle had sunk through my skin, and I immediately pulled it back out.

Ngh. A bead of blood was beginning to well up from the small wound. I'd steeled myself for the pain, but it still hurt like hell. Tears glistened in my eyes, but I refused to show any sign of discomfort on my face as I jabbed the needle back in.

"Argh!" I shouted. The pain was too great to hold my cry in this time.

"M-Miss!" Emily was nearly hysterical, hyperventilating at this point. It was almost laughable, the way she cried, not knowing what to do with herself in the face of my unexpected behavior. *She had been pricking me every day. What is she freaking out for?*

"Miss, why are you doing this?!" she sobbed.

"…No need to cry, Emily. You're the one who did this to me, after all," I said softly as tears dripped down her cheeks. Her face went blank at my words.

"What? I…did?"

"There are only two wounds in my hand now, but later, there could easily be three, four, or even five."

"…" Emily had stopped breathing altogether, tremors settling as well, still as a statue.

"From now on, I will accept anything you prepare for me without question. The water you bring me to wash up with in the morning, clothes, food—everything."

"M-Miss…"

"But as you do…perhaps more puncture wounds will appear on my hand. And at a certain point, someone is bound to notice, don't you think?"

"…"

"'What impudent individual would dare to abuse a lady of House Eckhart?' that someone will wonder. Someone like my brother Reynold, for example." I smiled widely, saccharinely sweet, as I continued. "Do you understand? It all depends on how you act going

forward.”

My personal maid said nothing in response to my threat. She was sickly pale, as if she’d just been strangled.

“Get up,” I said, withdrawing my hand. “Your mistress has finished her meal. Time for you to get to work.” I turned leisurely to the large window next to the table in a clear message of dismissal.

Though she’d been frozen in place kneeling on the floor just seconds before, Emily jumped to her feet at my words and mechanically gathered the dishes.

Looks like she got the message. That’s definitely a weight off my shoulders. I should be able to make use of her from now on.

My situation wouldn’t have improved by hiring someone new as my maid. Since I refused to continue being bullied, I’d decided instead to turn Emily into a pawn I could control. Luckily, being the one responsible for physically abusing Penelope made her vulnerable and ripe for the picking. Not to mention she was pretty spineless, the type who knew when it was in her best interests to switch sides —those were features I could appreciate.

I studied Emily as I turned the situation over in my mind. She’d continued to busy herself around the table and soon finished her work.

Bang!

That was when someone kicked the door open so hard it sounded like a thunder crack. Whirling toward the entryway with a jolt, I caught sight of cotton-candy-pink hair.

Reynold Eckhart, the vulgar second son of the duke, was glaring at me.

“You.”

He stormed into the room, and in seconds, [Affection: -3%] was shoved in my face.

“What the hell are you thinking?” Reynold demanded without preamble, ferocity radiating off him. Noticing Emily standing beside me at the table, his mood fouled even further.

“You…!”

“Y-Y-Young Master!” Emily stiffened, the color draining from her face.

Darting my eyes over the tabletop, I saw that all the cutlery had been gathered in a tray, with the exception of a lone fork left in front of me.

Oh no! Filled with an ominous sense of foreboding, I quickly moved the fork to the tray as well and gave the area around me one last scan just in case anything remained that could be used as a weapon. *Phew, all clear.*

I turned to Emily and spoke. "You may leave."

Emily picked up the tray lightning fast, as if she'd been desperately awaiting permission.

"Where do you think you're going?!" Reynold shouted, indignance clear in the taut lines of his body.

"Go on," I urged, giving Emily a look that said she should get out before the young master threw a fit. The girl seemed to understand, scurrying toward the door and making herself scarce. I was reminded of the way I'd fled from Derrick the day before, fearing for my life.

His protests ignored, Reynold settled his angry gaze on me.

"Out with it. What are you scheming?"

I paused for a moment to consider. Game Penelope never spoke to Reynold in the respectful way that was expected of younger siblings in polite society. And since Reynold was only two years older than her, the two of them bickered like cats and dogs.

Just like me and Asshole #2—clashing all the time. Even the age gap is the same. Unlike Penelope, I hadn't fought back viciously, of course. I'd simply allowed myself to be bullied.

In any case, I briefly wondered if I should be formal and polite with Reynold just as I'd been with Derrick, since he *was* older than me, but soon thought better of it. It would be silly for me to suddenly start deferring to him when I'd been talking back only the day before.

"So now you're flat-out ignoring me, is that it?" Reynold spat caustically at my lack of immediate response. *Gosh, can he have a modicum of patience?*

I decided to answer him flippantly, as the real Penelope would have.

"What are you going on about?"

"What am I— Why did you take that girl back as your personal maid?!" he fumed.

The letters [Affection: -3%] glinted threateningly from above the fluttering strands of his pink hair, warning me how imminent death was. *What do I say to avoid his affection dropping?* I wondered if I should turn on the dialogue-prompt options, but it was already too late. *It wouldn't have been helpful anyway. The choices are always unhinged.*

Gulping, I glanced over at a pissed-off Reynold. Penelope probably would've said something that would hasten her death, like "Shove off" or "Get the hell out of my room."

"It's nothing," I settled on saying. "Don't worry yourself about it." I wasn't Penelope, though, so I softened my tone. Reynold would be disagreeable regardless of what I said, so I had a feeling that things would go over better if I chose a more digestible approach.

"What…did you say?" Apparently, the effect was the opposite of what I'd hoped for. If looks could kill, the glare that appeared on Reynold's face would be charged with first-degree murder. "It's 'nothing'? How is serving her mistress rotten food 'nothing'?!"

"No, I meant—"

"That lowly trash doesn't know her place! She made a mockery of House Eckhart!"

"…"

"We have no need for insolent maids in this manor. Not when there are countless others who would die for a chance to work here!" Reynold seethed.

His unexpected tirade had me at a loss. In fact, he seemed angrier than me, the actual victim. "…Ha!" I couldn't help the incredulous laugh that spilled out of me.

Lowly trash! You don't know your place. That was the line Reynold always said when he saw Penelope in the game.

"You're laughing? What about this is funny to you?" he asked, a scowl marring his face. "How much did you let that maid look down on you to think she could get away with treating you that way?"

He was right. Everyone in the duke's household looked down on

Penelope, not a single servant ever willing to do as I told them to.

My heart, which had been tempestuous with the fear of death that might come at any moment, suddenly calmed.

"I talked with Father about this yesterday, actually." I looked at him with eyes afresh, icier than before.

"You did? Well, I'm sure Father agreed. I told him to kick that impertinent girl to the curb," Reynold said, puffing his chest as if he was proud of what he'd done.

Does he want praise from the fake sister he hates so much? Sorry to disappoint, but I have zero intention of offering any.

"Actually, Father and Derrick don't want Emily to be kicked out."

"Huh?" Reynold said, his blue eyes widening incredulously. "Father…and Brother?"

Reynold looked completely caught off guard by this revelation. To be fair, neither the duke nor Derrick had said those exact words. Derrick had only brought up Emily's long tenure in the house as grounds to chastise me, nothing more. A reminder that I was worth less than a maid about to be let go. But I didn't care that I was technically twisting the truth. I was pretty sure I could cover my tracks.

If the lie catches up to me later, I can just brush it off as being open to interpretation.

"That's why you've decided to continue using her as your personal maid instead of throwing her out?"

I nodded calmly. "That's right."

His smooth forehead furrowed with a deep frown, and all at once, he exploded.

"Are you an idiot?! You should have told them no!" he shouted, the volume so loud it caused my ears to ring.

"What difference would that have made?"

"'What difference'?! How about you not dying from eating that garbage she serves you! Or—"

"Can you guarantee that a new maid wouldn't do the same thing?"

"…" He fell silent at my words, deflating like a popped balloon.

I gazed warily at the [Affection: -3%] hovering above his head

and considered. *I shouldn't make it sound like I blame any of them for things getting this bad. That'll just rub Reynold's pride in the Eckhart name the wrong way.*

If only the affection meter were a rage indicator instead. Then it would be easier to decide what to say based on what didn't aggravate him.

His affection is still negative. If it drops any more, I'll meet one hundred percent certain death. I sighed inwardly. This was why I hadn't been the least bit excited when Reynold's percentage had crept up.

"I didn't go see Father yesterday to talk about punishing the maid," I said slowly. "I got down on my knees and begged for forgiveness for causing trouble when I was meant to be serving my punishment."

"What?" The surprise in Reynold's voice was clear as day. Penelope had never once apologized for anything. The very idea seemed to appall him. "You begged…? Wait, did Father…did Father demand that you apologize?"

He had done no such thing, of course, but I skimmed over that detail.

"I told him I'd behave for the remaining period of my probation."

"…"

"So please just leave this be."

I wanted to tell him that, frankly, none of this was his damn business. But if I could get this hot-tempered man to simmer down, half the potential deaths waiting for me in the game could probably be prevented. And to that end, I had to choose my words carefully.

Please don't pick any more fights with me. You live your life and I'll live mine, okay?

Of course, I couldn't be so direct with him, so instead I made my tone as sincere as possible.

"That's all I ask, Brother."

Reynold stared as I bowed my head, as if I were some sort of otherworldly anomaly. He seemed too flustered to speak for some time, before finally stuttering out, "Y-you… I don't…"

I watched as his face twisted into a scowl again, bracing myself

for another of his cantankerous, senseless criticisms. "You're delusional!" or "The rotten food messed up your brain!" or something like that. *Which, yeah, fair. I'm being much too reasonable, considering Penelope's usual brand of crazy.*

But I never could have expected what he actually said.

"Do you have no self-respect?!" he boomed in a thunderous rage. "You're gonna just let this slide after what she did to you?!" His words seemed to flip a switch inside me, even as he continued to yell. "Are you out of your mind? At least shout like you always do! Scream! Throw and break things! That's more like you!"

Reynold's anger almost seemed to be out of concern for me. Sadly for him, I didn't feel grateful in the slightest.

"But you expected all this, didn't you? Ever since you put that necklace in my room?" I shot back, unable to contain my ire. "This is exactly how you wanted me to be treated. Everything you've done is so I could end up like this, isn't it?"

"…What?" Reynold's mouth was hanging open.

I shouldn't have argued, considering his affection was still in the negatives, but I was just too angry to think. *He has some nerve lecturing me about self-respect—the very one responsible for Penelope's current situation.*

The butler, the head maid, Emily…they were just opening acts. The true ringleader was right in front of me.

Finally snapping out of his stupor, Reynold choked out a response. "Penelope… That's…"

"I didn't bring that up to rehash it. It's in the past. And goodness knows I'm far from an angel."

"…"

"But I'm tired of all that now," I said, looking him directly in the eyes. "I'll have my coming-of-age ceremony soon. You know I can't cling to the Eckhart house forever."

Reynold paled. "You… What are you saying? You think you can leave?"

"Well, that's up to Father and Brother," I said with a shrug. Of course, the words were far from the truth, only an attempt to appease Reynold.

As was the case with most stories set in these times, I could easily be forced into some kind of arranged marriage by the duke or Derrick. I had no intention of letting that happen, not to mention the nature of the game's story wouldn't allow it anyway, so I could rest easy in that respect. I would choose a love interest, reach his ending, and get the hell out of this place forever.

And you're not even in the running, Reynold, so don't you worry.

Once again, I tried to politely convince him to butt out.

"No need to waste your concern on me." *I can take care of myself. Laugh in my face or tell me I got what I deserve—just go back to minding your own business like usual.*

"It's time for me to wash up. You should go," I said, glancing at the door.

When I looked back, Reynold's face had fallen, causing my stomach to drop. I'd never seen that particular expression on his face in the game.

Suddenly, I was seized with fear. *Does this mean his affection is going to drop? No!* I hadn't raged at him as Penelope typically did. I'd even done my best to be reasonable. Why was this happening?!

Just as I was catastrophizing, the empty gauge above his pink hair began to glow.

[Affection: 3%]

Huh? I felt numb. *Why did it go up?* It had risen by a whopping 6 percent, at that.

While I blinked in confusion between Reynold and his affection meter in turn, he seemed to recover himself. "I'm an idiot for spending even a second worrying about someone like you," he bit out.

There was an almost wounded look in his furious blue gaze before he spun away.

My eyes must be playing tricks on me. Watching as he left like he came in—in a whirlwind—I decided that whatever I'd seen was nothing but a trick of the light.

Bang! The door slammed shut behind him, leaving the room in complete silence.

I considered the situation, planting an elbow on the table and

resting my chin in my hand. I felt…odd. It was satisfying to see Reynold's affection rise like that in real time. I'd written him off as a lost cause.

"Turning off the dialogue-prompt setting really was a good move, then?" I'd managed to keep both brothers' affection meters from dropping despite how much they hated Penelope, after all.

"I'm keeping it off," I said, making my decision before getting up. Saying I needed to wash up hadn't just been an excuse.

As I tugged the bellpull for the servants, something occurred to me.

I guess I can't call Reynold "Mr. Negative" anymore.

CHAPTER 2





I thought my probation would last forever, but it ended sooner than I expected.

"An invitation from the Imperial Palace?"

"Yes, Miss. The young lord has asked that you get ready."

"The young l— I mean, my eldest brother did?" I asked, cutting myself off before I could call him by his formal title in front of a servant. I was the youngest sibling of House Eckhart, adopted or not. It was probably best the other members of the household didn't notice anything weird was going on.

Really, though. What a surprise from Derrick.

Though he hadn't said it in so many words, this was effectively him putting an end to my confinement.

"Here's the letter, Miss," Emily said, holding it out with both hands in a display of politeness.

The name *Penelope* was written clearly on the stiff paper, which was embossed with the symbol of the Imperial House: a golden dragon. The invitation was for the second prince's birthday celebration, set to take place the following day.

"Guess I'd better prepare myself…," I muttered.

I was actually a little disappointed that my period of isolation had come to an end so soon. It had been nice simply enjoying Emily's attentive care, while having a legit reason to avoid both of my brothers. If I was now allowed to leave my room, the game's plot would inevitably draw me into encounters with Derrick and Reynold…

Hold on a second.

As I was worrying about my problems inside the manor, a thought suddenly crystallized, causing me to freeze.

If I'm going to the palace…that means I might run into the crown prince!

No, not *might*—it was all but certain. Though there had been no actual cutscene showing Penelope going to the palace in the game, the birthday banquet marked the beginning of the crown prince's

storyline. It was the first episode he appeared in.

As the various illustrations featuring Penelope's beheading at the crown prince's behest materialized in my mind's eye, I couldn't help the scream that left my lips.

"Nooo!"

"M-Miss?!" Emily gasped, startled.

I can't go. Should I say I'm sick? Finding a reason to play hooky was the only way I could avoid the lunatic.

My maid seemed morose, probably thinking she'd done something wrong.

I hurriedly asked, "Emily. Did Father happen to say he'll be joining us tomorrow?"

"He has other matters to attend to, so the young lord will be escorting you there instead."

Shit. I'm royally screwed…

I despaired. If I wanted to beg off the celebration, I'd have to convince Derrick, not the duke. And there was no way of knowing how that would impact his affection.

If it had been Reynold, I might've taken the gamble. I considered his affection, newly escaped from the negatives, and sighed. I didn't dare risk Derrick's reaction. Maintaining 0 percent was hard enough as it was.

"U-um, Miss? Are you all right? You look a bit pale…," Emily hedged cautiously, seeing the glum look on my face.

"I need to think. Please leave," I said, waving her away distractedly. "Haah…" I sighed heavily as soon as the door clicked shut behind her.

I die if I do, and I die if I don't… Shitty rigged game. I was already missing the days spent locked in my room, which seemed heavenly in comparison to this mess.

"Maybe I can just avoid him like the plague?"

I tried to dredge up what I could about the game event, but nothing came to me. While playing Hard Mode, I'd met the crown prince in a garden maze at the palace, and he'd killed me before we could even have a proper conversation. It had happened over and over and over again; I swore I was hitting the reset button every

five seconds.

"I guess I should try to say I'm too sick to go…"

Ah.

That was when I was struck with an idea.

"Why don't I try dying?" I wondered aloud. It seemed reasonable. *If I'm no longer alive here, maybe I'll wake up in the real world.* After all, a game over was a game over, right? *Better to give up now than grind toward a happy ending with one of these hopeless men.*

Besides, the game should have a reset button.

Just the idea of it was thrilling.

Unlike with the user interface in the actual game, I couldn't see any buttons that would allow me to access the settings or go back. The only thing available to me now was the white box with dialogue choices. But there had been the screen that popped up to turn those prompts off. Who was to say there wasn't a reset button, too?

"Why didn't I think of this sooner?"

As long as there was a reset button, there was no harm in trying.

"All right. Let's go meet the crown prince and let him kill me!"



The maids woke me up earlier than usual, and the extra hours were spent making me presentable. I bathed in milky water mixed with scented oils and received a massage and face mask treatment. And then they'd repeat, starting this boring procedure over multiple times.

By the time I finally escaped the bathroom and sat in front of the dressing table, I was already drained of energy. Things were only getting started, though.

"How about this gown, Miss? It's a new one you bought and never wore!"

"What about these earrings? I think they would look lovely with that dress."

"Hair up? No, a half-up, half-down style might be better… What

do you suggest, Miss?”

“How should we do the makeup…?”

The maids’ chattering was endless. Weren’t they all supposed to hate Penelope?! They were so excited, you would’ve thought they were the ones going to the party, not me.

Turning, I looked at myself in the mirror. The multiple face masks and baths seemed to have done the job, at least. My skin was glowing.

I suppose it would be fun to play dress-up with a face this beautiful.

Understanding the maids’ reactions a little better, I nodded and said, “Bring me a different dress, something that comes all the way up the neck. As for the accessories, the fewer, the better. Beyond that, I don’t really care.”

“What?!”

The maids looked at me in horror. One of them hastily added, “But, Miss, the party is being held at the Imperial Palace…” She trailed off, but her meaning was clear: I should look my absolute best.

The red dress with a low-cut neckline they’d originally brought me complemented Penelope’s dark-pink hair. The accessories matched perfectly; they would only highlight and enhance her beauty.

But I wasn’t heading to the palace to parade around like a peacock, showing off my good looks. I couldn’t exactly tell them I was going there to die, though, so I opted to respond as Penelope might have.

“Just do as I asked. Nothing elaborate,” I said coldly.

The maids looked put out but protested no further, retreating to the dressing room. They brought back three outfit options, all subdued and modest unlike the previous dress.

“This one,” I said, selecting a dark-green evening dress. It covered even my collarbones completely, and the dark color wouldn’t make me stand out.

After changing into the piece, I made sure the maids kept the makeup light. I chose to wear only a pair of earrings—tiny emerald

stones that matched the color of Penelope's eyes.

Once fully dolled up, I checked my reflection in the mirror and found an austere girl who could've been heading to a church service staring back at me.

This should keep me from attracting any attention.

The maids looked about as disappointed as I was satisfied.

"Everyone leave except Emily," I said, sending them all away. I had an extra request for my personal maid. "Emily. Would you fetch me some gloves the same color as my dress?" It would be the finishing touch on the pious look.

"You're…going to wear gloves, too, Miss?" Emily seemed hesitant, as if she were unwilling to concede on this last point.

"Of course. I can't have anyone seeing these, can I?" I reminded her in a pointed tone, raising the hand I'd pierced with the needle a few days ago. The scabs had healed over, and the needle marks had almost faded to nothing. Still, there was no telling what eagle-eyed individuals might be present at the banquet.

Unsurprisingly, Emily blanched at the marks.

"Come on, gloves," I said again, impatient.

"Y-yes!"

She hurried away, and I clicked my tongue. *Can't have her thinking she's won my trust just because she's served me well recently. I need to keep her on her toes.*

Once I'd slipped the gloves on, the look was complete.

I was finally ready to go to the palace.



Derrick was already at the front gate, waiting for me. Upon my arrival, he scanned my appearance, a look of shock crossing his face.

"It seems your punishment has taught you something about being a proper lady," he snarked. *First time we talk in days, and he's giving me attitude?*

I had no time to be angry at him, though, the glowing letters

above his head grabbing my attention.

[Affection: 5%]

Huh? When did that go up? Derrick's affection had risen without my knowing. A whole 5 percent, at that!

Frankly, I was nonplussed. How much did he hate Penelope for his affection to rise after only a few days apart?

I should've tried playing sick, after all, I thought, lamenting that I hadn't known about this beforehand.

It was too late, though. A fancy carriage engraved with the Eckhart coat of arms was already parked at the gate.

Nodding to Derrick, I held out a hand to the knight standing nearby, since the step up into the carriage was higher than I'd expected. Too busy gathering up the folds of my dress, I failed to take note of what Derrick was doing until I settled in my seat and turned.

Derrick was holding out his hand to no one in particular, staring at me with a stiff expression.

Why is he acting weird? I wondered. We needed to leave soon if we wanted to make it on time. *What's he waiting for? He has to get in his own carriage.* I sat there, expecting the door to shut…only for Derrick to suddenly step up, joining me in the carriage.

Wh-what? Why is he coming in?! I racked my brain, trying to quickly figure out if I'd done something to make him angry, but nothing came to mind. We'd just met and exchanged greetings, nothing more. And yet there Derrick was, sitting himself directly across from me.

I was so confused that I couldn't help blurting out, "Y-you're riding with me?"

Derrick frowned at this.

"Is that a problem?"

"N-no, of course not."

What is he doing? He never did anything like this in the game! I shook my head frantically to prevent myself from saying anything else. But a scowl had already found its way to Derrick's face.

"If you're so bothered, you may get down and find yourself another," he said, his voice filled with ice.

I glanced at the door, seriously considering the suggestion. He'd already closed it on his way in, though, and it would be silly to open it again and get out.

"I'm not…bothered," I said, turning back to Derrick and forcing myself to say my next words. "Just…pleased?"

Glancing up through my eyelashes, I cautiously studied his reaction. His glare melted into a blank gaze, and eventually he turned away from me altogether.

You obviously hate it. Why are you making both of us uncomfortable? Was this a new way of picking on me?

I was affronted by his cold behavior, but a glance at the text above his head calmed me somewhat.

[Affection: 6%]

It had risen by 1 percent.

I stared, surprised, and the carriage lurched forward.

All right. It's just one little carriage ride. Should be no biggie.

I had an affection of 6 percent to fall back on now, after all. It was hardly likely that all 6 percent would vanish in the short time it took for us to travel to the palace, wasn't it? *Better just make the best of the situation.*

It didn't take long for my positive attitude to dissolve into regret.

I was wrong! I'm dying here! Somebody save me!

My patience was tested to the very limit as we moved toward the palace.

I could only appreciate the view in front of me—the cold but handsome man sitting with his legs and arms crossed and an aloof look on his face—for so long when the silence between us was suffocating.

I twitched, wondering if I should open the window, but Derrick's stare landed on me the moment I moved, forcing me to sit still. If I so much as fidgeted in discomfort, his eyes would flash open, and

he'd pin his ghostly blue glare on me.

Dammit, why are you looking at me like that?

I kept glancing at the [Affection: 6%] above his head and sweating. When the carriage finally pulled up to our destination, I couldn't help letting out a little cheer internally. After not being able to move a muscle for most of the ride, I was finally about to escape the oppressive silence.

The first thing I'm going to do once I open that door is take a deep breath of nice, fresh air.

However, as soon as our vehicle rolled to a stop, Derrick jumped up and off, beating me out the door.

"Here," he said, holding out his hand.

I had already gathered the billowy folds of my dress, prepared to step down on my own. *What's gotten into him?* I stared at him in a daze, my eyes wide. *Is he trying to help me down?*

He frowned slightly at my hesitation. "Well? Are you coming or not?"

Realizing I'd frozen, I looked around me and noticed that the other nobles who were arriving were all staring at us.

"Thank you." I quickly took his hand and stepped off the carriage.

I continued to hold on to his arm as we climbed up the white steps to the ballroom.

"Announcing Young Lord Derrick Eckhart and Lady Penelope Eckhart of the ducal house!" An attendant heralded our arrival.

As the ballroom's massive doors slowly opened before us, I heard Derrick's cold voice in my ear.

"Don't do anything stupid. I trust you haven't forgotten that your probation was lifted only yesterday?"

"…"

"If you cause another ruckus, being confined to your room will be but the start of your punishment."

The swell of excitement that had been coming up on me crashed back down in an instant at Derrick's quiet threat. I felt the urge to retaliate but bit my tongue.

"Yes. I'll be careful," I said meekly, forcing an appeasing smile onto my face.

Derrick turned away without a word.

Tch. I pouted while he wasn't looking.

Palace parties were very proper. So, in other words, terribly dull.

As soon as we were in the thick of it, Derrick abandoned me and busied himself with greeting the many people who approached him. Not a single person came up to me; evidently, Penelope's notorious reputation preceded me.

Looking around, I could see other noble ladies my age moving about in clusters, dancing and whispering in one another's ears. In comparison, I was like an island, no one coming within a certain distance of me. I moved to a secluded corner as I watched the proceedings.

I am not lonely. And I'm definitely not attempting to console myself. Really. I came here with a clear objective, and if all went well, there was a chance I could get out of this shitty game once and for all…

Ugh! When is that damn crown prince getting here?! I internally grumbled about the absence of the man necessary to my plan.

As the ball progressed, more and more people began glancing in my direction and murmuring, as they no doubt noticed how unusually subdued I was.

Just as I was starting to think I couldn't keep standing around awkwardly much longer, an attendant shouted, "Announcing Her Majesty the empress consort and His Highness the second prince!"

Here we go. The game's storyline was finally starting to unfold.

The guests ceased their chatter and bowed deeply, facing the entrance. Noticing this, I gave a cautious curtsy as well.

The empress consort—wife to the emperor—and the second prince looked every bit the haughty Imperial family members they were as they strode down the red carpet lining the center of the room. Their blond hair—said to signify Imperial blood—shone under the lights.

They crossed the ballroom and, at the other end, climbed the stairs to the high platform reserved for them. I watched with bated

breath and was shocked to see where the second prince sat.

Isn't that the crown prince's throne?

The second prince had taken the tallest seat at the center of the dais, a golden throne circled by a fancy and equally golden dragon. It was the seat of the emperor, technically, but the emperor himself basically never showed up in the game, and the crown prince always sat on the throne in his place.

So why is the second prince sitting there? I was puzzled by how calm the two royals appeared despite the second prince having done something so out of the ordinary. Was there a tradition that allowed members of the Imperial family to sit on the throne on their birthdays or something?

"Everyone, rise," the second prince ordered solemnly after he'd settled. Accordingly, all the nobles in the ballroom rose from their bows and curtsies in a noisy bustle.

"I thank you all for making time to attend my birthday ball. It is a most humble affair, but I hope you'll enjoy yourselves nonetheless."

The prince's brief speech marked the beginning of the celebration in earnest—or rather, it should've, until the end of it was suddenly interrupted.

Bang! Along with the slamming of a door, there was some kind of commotion at the ballroom entrance.

"Huh?"

"Wh-what's going on?"

The nobility murmured among themselves as they turned to face the source of the noise.

Someone was advancing through the parting crowd, their footsteps ricocheting piercingly through the room. Their approach was accompanied by the unsettling sound of something heavy being dragged along the ground.

"I-it's the crown prince!" someone shouted, sending a jolt of shock down my spine. I immediately turned to search for him in the crowd.

His hair was instantly noticeable, elegant waves that looked as if they'd been spun from pure gold. I'd been mistaken earlier. The empress consort's and second prince's hair, their royal looks? A faint

glow in comparison. With his crimson cloak streaming behind him, this man with golden locks was the epitome of beauty, shining bright enough to blind.

"W-wait… Is he dragging a person?"

"Eek! Th-that's…"

People screamed as the crown prince passed them by.

Too mesmerized by the prince's appearance, I hadn't noticed the limp human form trailing behind him at first—the source of the strange sound, it would seem.

"Happy birthday, Little Brother," the crown prince said, arriving at the steps before where the empress consort and second prince were seated and pitching the slack body forward.

"B-Brother!"

"P-Prince Callisto!" stuttered the empress consort, jumping to her feet and brandishing an angry finger. "Wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

"What am I doing? Why, I'm attending my brother's birthday celebration, Mother."

"You're the crown prince! How dare you do such a horrid thing, and at a party you weren't even invited to, at that!" The empress consort was seething, quivering with anger. She avoided spelling out exactly what the crown prince had done—namely, beating someone and dragging them inside, apparently.

"Not invited? Now that hurts," he said.

"What gave you the right to come here?!"

"I received an invitation, and I put aside all pressing matters of state so that I could make it," the crown prince said with a shrug. He didn't look upset at all, contrary to his earlier words.

I couldn't really grasp what was going on. *Is the empress consort not his real mother?*

The crown prince continued. "I will say, though, the attendant you chose to deliver it wasn't very good at his job."

He bent down, grabbed the man he'd dragged in by the hair, and yanked his head up. The man's face was covered completely by a black mask. *He's dressed like an assassin…*, I realized.

"I asked him for the invitation, but he seemed intent on doing

something else entirely, so I had to teach him a lesson."

"…"

"Brother dearest, you should really choose your men more wisely."

In the blink of an eye, the crown prince's sword came free of its sheath, and in the next moment, he had decapitated the assassin.

Blood immediately began gushing from the dead man like some kind of morbid fountain.

"Enjoy your birthday present," the crown prince said, tossing the severed head at the second prince's feet.

"Eeeek!" The empress's shriek filled the ballroom as the head rolled about like a ball. The second prince was ghostly pale, looking about ready to faint.

"If you want more presents like this, feel free to send as many of your men as you please."

The ballroom was shocked into silence, and the only person smiling was the crown prince. It was a fierce, hellish smile.

He disappeared as quickly as he'd come, leaving an astonished hush in his wake.

Once he was gone, I could hear people exhaling around me. I sighed gustily to myself, realizing I, too, had been holding my breath.

What the hell was that? I brought a hand to my chest and desperately tried to remember. *The game never showed a scene like this!*

It had been a startling sight, to put it extremely lightly, so I was certain I wouldn't have forgotten if it did come up. It wasn't even a case of something I'd noticed in passing but disregarded, like the needle marks on Penelope's skin.

[The crown prince, having never had a good relationship with the second prince, left the ballroom upset following a slight disturbance.]

That was all I could recall from the game.

This is what you call a slight disturbance?!

I watched as the attendants gathered the body and mopped up the blood, only to be interrupted by the white window sliding into view again.

<SYSTEM>
A new episode is available.
[Crown Prince of Blood and Iron—Callisto Regulus]
Teleport to the maze garden?
[YES / NO]

I considered it for a long moment. The crown prince seemed to be way damn more of a lunatic than I'd been aware of, and I didn't feel brave enough to follow him. *What if he cuts off my head the moment he sees me?* But at least the death would be quick. I had come here to die, after all. *I just need to go through with it once, then I might be able to go home.*

Besides, I had the reset button as much-needed insurance. If I really died, I could surely reset my progress.

Doing my best to suppress my anxiety, I pressed [YES] with a trembling finger.

My vision immediately faded to white.

When I opened my eyes again, I was standing at the entrance to the maze garden.

"That's convenient."

Honestly, I was a bit directionally challenged, so I'd been worried about finding the right place. I hadn't realized I was able to insta-travel, just like in the actual game.

"Now then, let's go get killed, shall we?"

Steeling myself for what was to come, I stepped into the garden. Thankfully, there was no chance of losing my way once I was in the maze. Perhaps out of an act of kindness, the developers had added lighting only on the correct path. And so I made my way deep inside, following the glow of the lamps.

How much farther do I have to go? I'd been walking for a good

while now, but the maze didn't seem to end.

Just as I was thinking about how my feet were killing me, I noticed a bright light in the distance. I'd finally arrived.

Rushing over, I turned the corner into a vast open area with a small fountain and a bench.

"Huh? Where is he?"

I couldn't see any more lamps around me, which meant I'd definitely reached the end of the path, but the crown prince was nowhere to be seen. Puzzled, I approached the fountain with tentative steps.

Shing.

All of a sudden, something cold and heavy was pressing down on my neck. I gasped.

"I was wondering what little rat was creeping along after me," the crown prince said, advancing from behind in a semicircle and coming to a stop in front of me. The blade held to my neck slid across my skin as he moved.

I felt a prick of pain as the metal bit into flesh, something warm dripping down my neck. I wasn't really consciously aware that he'd cut me, though, too tense to notice.

"Why, if it isn't the Mad Dog of Eckhart."

His golden hair shone in the moonlight, and his eyes were red as if soaked in blood. It was as if a demon were smiling down at me in amusement. However, that didn't last long, and the smile dropped off his face with his next words.

"That you thought to follow me after seeing what happened in the ballroom suggests your madness stems from a death wish." His expressionless face sent shivers down my spine. "Tell me. Why did you sneak after me like a rat in my shadow?"

The blade was slowly biting deeper into my skin, but even more frightening was the bloodlust shimmering in his eyes. I knew in that moment that the crown prince was about to kill me.

The reset button! I darted my eyes around frantically for it—even if I died now, I had to learn where the button was first.

"If you don't have an answer for me, how about some farewell words to the duke and your brothers, then?"

The button was nowhere to be found.

"I'll personally deliver to them your final wishes."

I couldn't see it anywhere.

The button! The reset button! Where is it, dammit?!

I felt as if I was going to pass out. I couldn't find the button anywhere. What's worse, the crown prince seemed hell-bent on killing me. He was lifting his sword above his head, preparing to strike.

"W-wait! Wait a second!"

The crown prince tilted his head to the side at my scream.

"So now you feel like talking, huh?"

"Yes! I'll talk! I-I'll talk!" I said, nodding along desperately.

He lowered the sword to my neck again and stared down at me haughtily.

"Then by all means."

"W-well…"

I'd shouted in an attempt to stall for time, but now I couldn't think of anything that might appease him. What was I supposed to say? "I stalked you so you'd kill me"? As if! I could no longer recklessly tempt death without a reset button I could press to undo it.

Should I turn on the dialogue prompts again? But those wouldn't save me. In fact, it was because I'd had them turned off that I'd survived thus far.

"I can almost hear the gears grinding away in your head." The crown prince smiled cruelly as I racked my brain. "I'm really looking forward to hearing what you have to say." The letters [Affection: 0%] blinked tauntingly above him. "Your reason better be to my liking, daughter of House Eckhart."

"…"

"You see," he began in an ominous tone, "I really hate being interrupted." The blade of his sword dug almost tenderly into my skin, and yet more warm blood trickled down my neck.

Overwhelmed with the sudden primal fear of dying, my brain completely short-circuited.

"I…I love you!" I said, blurting out the first thing that came to

mind.

"…What did you just say?" His red eyes widened. He was clearly taken aback.

Screw it! I squeezed my eyes and, my mouth no longer under my control, shouted, "I-I've been in love with you for a long time, Your Highness!"

"…"

"Seeing what happened earlier, I thought you might be upset, so I came to comfort you…!"

This was bullshit of the highest degree, and it wasn't a part of the existing story in either Normal or Hard Mode. While it was true the Normal Mode heroine met with the crown prince and consoled him, that was only because she hadn't seen him behead the assassin earlier.

Shit, shit, shit. Why did such an insane thing leave my mouth? It was utterly absurd, even in light of the fact that I'd been out of options. But then again, there was only one logical reason a noble lady would chase a man into a secluded maze…or so I would have thought, if this game were anything resembling a normal love story.

Goodbye, you twisted-ass game. If I return to my world after I die, I'm one hundred percent leaving a scathing one-star review.

Keeping my eyes shut, I trembled fiercely in anticipation of the swing of his sword.

But no matter how long I waited, the high-pitched whistle of steel splitting the air didn't come.

"Hmm… So the duke's 'mad dog' loves the hellion of the Imperial family?" he muttered, as if to himself.

A night breeze tickled my nose. I opened my eyes cautiously.

"That's…"

"…"

"That's quite unexpected, as excuses go."

His bloodred eyes were inches from my face, and my breath hitched in my chest. I could see amusement dancing in his gaze.

"We aren't properly acquainted, are we? Nothing beyond brushing by each other at my homecoming celebration, I believe."

We'd *never* met, actually, since I'd entered this damn game after

that party.

Stiffly, I replied, "I-it was love at first sight."

"What exactly made you fall for me, then?"

"Well, I…"

This time I was well and truly stumped. What could I even conjure up? I'd crossed out his name over and over to remind myself to stay the hell away from this guy!

I studied him despairingly, desperate to find something to say before his patience ran out.

"Your looks… You're so handsome…"

"My looks are all I'm good for? How depressing."

"Y-you're also…brave…and good with a sword…"

"Too cliché. Have you nothing more creative?"

"I… Uh…"

I could feel the likelihood of just straight-up fainting increasing with every reason he shot down. My knees were on the verge of giving out, in fact, and it was by sheer force of will that I was still standing. The cold metal at my neck terrified me to no end.

"Well…you see…"

The grin stretching his red lips deepened the closer I got to outright crying. *What was I thinking, purposefully trying to die at the hands of this psycho? I must've lost my mind.*

I was about to collapse when he finally spoke.

"Fine. Though I'm not entirely satisfied with your reasoning, I'll let it slide this once."

He lowered his blade. Looking up in shock, I found the crown prince's eyes gleaming down at me with excitement.

"But the next time we meet, I'll have you regale me in full detail just why, how, and when you started to fall for me."

I nodded my head eagerly.

"Go on, then," he said, waving me off and sheathing his sword in its scabbard.

Before I could move, the meter above his luxurious golden hair started to glow. Then it changed.

[Affection: 2%]

I stared at it, not because I was happy, but in pure outrage.

"What are you doing just standing there? Did you want me to add more cuts to your neck?" the crown prince offered, miming a slicing motion by sliding his thumb across his throat.

"N-no, of course not!" I said, jolting and haltingly backing away.

When I reached the corner exit, I turned and walked as fast as I could. It didn't occur to me to offer any polite parting words to the man, even though he was a member of the Imperial family. The only thing I was capable of was not breaking into an all-out run as I felt his eyes on my back.

As soon as I rounded the corner and exited his sight, I started to sprint, causing the cold wind to graze the cut in my neck. In the moment, though, that pain was inconsequential.

There's no reset button.

Even as the crown prince was about to cut me down, the lack of the reset button was what had filled me with the most fear. The insurance policy I'd been counting on didn't exist, which meant I only had one chance at navigating this whole thing.

What if one life is all I get? I thought dying might return me to my own world, but what if dying here is just…the end?

I was but an ordinary college student. Risking my life on the off chance that dying would bring me back was something I didn't have the gall to do.

The only option left was pairing up with one of the game characters and unlocking a happy ending somehow.

But how?

All the male love interests were poised to kill me at the slightest provocation. How could I beat the game in these conditions? It didn't matter that their affection meters were rising, not when they could plummet in an instant.

What if someone's affection drops drastically like it did when I was playing the game? That would mean all my effort was for naught, for one thing, and certain death, for the other.

I don't want to die! Why is this happening to me? I'd managed to scrape by in the real world until I could escape my half brothers. *Why do I have to work so hard to please these men I don't know? Why do I have to die a stupid death in this stupid game world that's*

not even my own?

I was breathing hard, and I realized belatedly that sobs were escaping in between gasps. Having sprinted along the lit path, I'd arrived at the maze's entrance before I knew it. I was about to exit altogether when— *Slam!* I collided with someone I hadn't seen in the darkness.

"Ah!"

Fear took complete control of me. *Is it the crown prince? Did he follow me to kill me after all?* Just as I was preparing to make a run for it, the other person seized my wrist.

"Let go of me!" I cried, terrified out of my wits. "Let go!"

"My lady?" an unfamiliar voice said.

"Why do I have to die? I don't want to die! I won't!"

"My lady! Please calm down!"

I frantically tried to shake the hand off my wrist, but as the newcomer grabbed me by the shoulders, I slowly started returning to my senses.

"Are you all right?"

Navy-blue eyes wide with surprise were staring down at me, silver hair illuminated in the faint glow of the lamps. Above his head glinted [Affection: 0%]. I sobbed again at the sight, trying to slow my breathing.

"Shh, there now. I mean you no harm," said the man in a soft voice, seemingly mindful of my obvious distress.

Another love interest? I despaired when I realized who this was: Winter Verdandi, the marquis and sorcerer.

"I'm…I'm okay now." The realization that it wasn't the crown prince hunting me down was enough to settle me. I hastily wiped away the tears running down my cheeks.

At this point, I just wanted to go home. I didn't want to spend another minute in this place, and I most definitely wasn't equipped to deal with Winter right now.

"Though it seems I've made a fool of myself in front of a stranger. Please forget that you saw me like this. If you'll excuse me," I rattled off quickly, trying to recover my composure. I nodded to him and attempted to beat a retreat, but he sidestepped, standing in my way.

"You're bleeding quite a lot." He pointed to my neck. "Not to mention you look pale. Let me help you to a doctor."

"Thank you, but I'm in a hurry…"

"Then take this, at least."

While I didn't want anything to do with him, he didn't seem willing to let me leave. He quickly picked something out of his breast pocket.

"Press this against your wound. It should stanch the blood flow."

In his hand was a white handkerchief.

I stared blankly at him for a few seconds before accepting it. I couldn't return to the ballroom dripping blood, after all.

With another nod, I replied, my voice devoid of emotion, "Thank you. I'll be sure to return the favor someday."

"There's no need," he said politely, suddenly reaching out his hand. "I only wish that when next we meet, the sadness is gone from your lovely eyes."

His warm fingertips brushed my face.

[Affection: 9%]

I was too busy staring in astonishment at the glittering letters above his head to notice the way he was gazing at me.

My neck had already stopped bleeding by the time I arrived at the ballroom entrance, Winter's handkerchief pressed against the wound. Who knew, maybe the sorcerer had cast a spell on it? I was about to go inside and look for Derrick when I paused, giving my clothes a once-over.

Who would have guessed choosing dark green would come so in handy?

The deep color made the bloodstains almost imperceptible to the naked eye. I tidied my hair, which had become tousled from running, and entered without further delay.

Finding Derrick was simple. The cold, handsome male lead had a magnetism about him that made him stand out even amid the large group gathered around him.

He told me not to cause any trouble… He'll probably throw a fit if

he sees the cut on my neck.

I was so busy thinking about his warning that I failed to realize that people were staring at me. Just because my dress looked fine didn't mean *I* did.

"Brother," I said softly, trying not to attract any attention. He somehow heard me, much to my relief, and turned his head to look.

"I'm not…feeling very well… I think I should head home first."

Derrick's blue eyes slowly widened at the sight of his ashen sister, a bloody handkerchief clutched against her neck.

"Right…away…," I said as my vision faded.

The last thing I saw before fainting was Derrick rushing over to me, his face gone white.



I couldn't remember what happened after that.

"Miss!"

"Hurry! Fetch a doctor!"

I heard a shrill scream and hurried footsteps, all very faint and far away.

It was just a shallow cut, but I was bedridden for several days after returning to the manor. It seemed the stress from trying to avoid death at the hands of the game's cruel devices had taken its toll.

I dreamed endlessly while I was unconscious. Now that I was Penelope, I'd assumed my dreams would all be about her past, but I was wrong.

I dreamed about my own past, memories I'd forgotten.

In one dream, I'd just started living at my father's house. I had begun attending a high school populated almost exclusively by the children of ultrarich families. I was getting ready to leave after classes had ended for the day when someone tapped my shoulder.

"Hey. Your brother is looking for you. He wants you to come see

him in the gym storage room."

The younger of my two half brothers was one of the biggest bullies in the school, and the student who'd approached me was one of his lackeys. I went to the storage room without giving much thought to the request. Though my second-eldest brother seemed to be slowly but steadily working toward making me an outcast, I didn't have cause to be super concerned at that point.

"Hello?" I pushed the door open cautiously and hovered in the doorway. It was so dark that I couldn't see anything.

As I squinted into the dim room, something was suddenly pulled over my head. It felt like a plastic bag.

"Wh-what the—? Hey!"

I was shoved inside, unable to see, and what followed could only be described as a thorough beating. Dozens of feet kicked me from all directions, and I was helpless to do anything to stop them. All I could do was scream and try to shrink away from the barrage of blows.

"Whoo, that felt good. How'd a beggar-reject like her end up here anyway? They don't usually let her kind attend our type of school."

"Hey, are you sure we'll get away with this? What if her brother finds out?"

"You're clueless, aren't you? He hates her. I went with my dad to one of his get-togethers, and I saw him there. His jaw was clenched so hard I thought it would break when we started talking about her."

I struggled and failed to get to my feet, hoping I wouldn't pass out, while the students snickered and jeered. Their words hurt more than their kicks.

"You. Stay out of our way, understand? And don't you dare tell anyone about this."

With that, they left me on the storage room floor. I lay there on the ground, completely still, for at least an hour. The pain prevented me from moving a single muscle. There had been no warning, and I'd been defenseless against the unexpected violence.

I finally sat up with great effort, and when I removed the plastic bag from my head, I saw that my uniform and backpack were a mess. I went to the bathroom, hoping to erase all the dirty footprints

from my clothing. When I glanced in the mirror, I realized my uniform was the least of my problems.

My eyes were already beginning to swell and bruise. Someone must have kicked me in the face, too. A laugh bubbled up in me at how obvious it was that I'd been beaten up.

Honestly, I couldn't actually remember clearly how I'd felt back then, dazed and groggy as I was.

I trudged back to the dreadful house I was forced to call home. I wished I never had to go back, but I had nowhere else to go.

Stepping inside, I found, to my chagrin, that my biological father and half brothers were drinking tea in the living room.

"I'm home," I said with a quick nod before rushing toward the stairs. I wasn't allowed to interlope in family activities.

"Wait a second. Stop."

They usually never even noticed when I came home, but today seemed to be my unlucky day. Asshole #2 called out to me.

"I said stop!"

I ignored him and walked faster. He sprang out of his seat and grabbed my wrist before I could reach the stairs.

"What happened to you? What's wrong with your clothes?" he demanded.

"It's nothing… I tripped and fell," I replied, my gaze fixed on the floor so the bruises around my eyes were hidden from him by my hair.

"Hey, look at me. Did someone hit you?"

"No. I fell."

"Oy, I told you to look at me!"

I wanted to go and rest, but he forced my chin up.

"What happened to your face? Son of a… Who did this to you?!"

He parted my hair, revealing the black-and-blue mess that was my face.

"I told you, it's nothing."

"It's obviously not nothing, stupid!" he cried.

"It's nothing, so please! Please just leave me alone! Leave me the hell alone!!" I finally screamed hysterically, shoving his hands away before I knew what I was doing. My father and eldest brother, who'd

never seen me angry, looked on in shock.

It was my most wretched moment. They'd been sitting in the living room eating apples while I was being beaten to a pulp.

"Why are you acting like you care all of sudden?! You've never given a damn about me!"

Even so, I had achingly envied them, sitting together like that in the living room. It was a miserable feeling, knowing I had no place among them.

"Just leave me alone! When have I ever asked you for anything? I've lain low and kept quiet, so why?! Why do you keep doing this to me?!"

A terrible silence filled the living room. I knew crying made me look weak, but my emotions were out of my control at that point. The tears I'd repressed for so long poured out, and I sobbed like a baby, oblivious to their expressions as they watched.

The younger of the brothers came to see me a few days later, when the bruising around my eyes was starting to fade.

"I found all those little shits and beat them within an inch of their lives," he said in greeting.

I'd heard that a group of bullies had been transported to the ER all at once, so I had an inkling of what had happened.

"How much did you let those scumbags look down on you to think they could get away with treating you that way?" he asked scathingly as I hung my head without comment. "Anyway, it's handled now, and it won't ever happen again. Got it?"

He seemed proud of himself, but I didn't feel even the slightest bit grateful. All this would do was isolate me further at school, and the bullying would only grow worse.

"…Thank you, Big Bro," I forced myself to say.

But really, I wanted to scream at him, tell him that this was all his fault. Why should I be grateful to him for cleaning up the mess he created?

You know what? I truly and sincerely…

"—is all you said it was, so why isn't she waking up?!"

…Someone was shouting nearby.

Head throbbing, I squinted my eyes open in slits.

"—try it, at least! I'll kill you and that royal lunatic if—"

"Too loud," I croaked. Someone rushed over to me.

"Hey, are you all right? Can you hear me?"

My vision was blurry, and I couldn't see who was looming over me. The voice, though, I knew painfully well.

It was Asshole #2, my second half brother.

"I…really…hate you…," I said with all the force I could muster. I'd wanted to say this for so long. "I hate you…so much… More than you hate me… A hundred times more… A thousand times…"

"…"

"I hate you more than anyone else…"

Having managed to get the words out despite the difficulty, I finally relaxed, my eyes shuttering again.

I fell asleep too quickly to see the way the pink-haired man's whole body seemed to turn to stone, his blue eyes frozen in wide circles.



It took me four days to recover. The first person to greet me was a tearful Emily.

"Miss…are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah. I'm all right," I reassured her.

"Thank goodness! I've been worried sick. The young masters and His Grace the duke were also super worried."

"You don't say?" I answered absently. It was clear to me that she was just being polite in tacking their names on.

Emily nodded enthusiastically and kept chattering. "I do! Young Lord Derrick was as pale as a sheet! He ran all the way back to the manor with you in his arms!"

"My brother…did?"

"Yes! His Grace was extremely upset. He demanded that all the

most distinguished doctors from the capital be summoned right away. Oh, and the butler Pennel barely managed to stop Young Master Reynold from storming off to the palace."

Emily's words hit me as surprise after surprise. Though I was certain she was exaggerating a little, I hadn't expected that the occupants of this house would go out of their way for a girl they seemed to hate so much.

"I was so afraid something was terribly wrong with you…" The other girl trailed off.

"You must have had a hard time, Emily."

"A hard time?! Oh no, please don't say that. I'm your personal maid, you know!"

Looks like there's been quite the shake up while I was unconscious. I was puzzled by the way Emily teared up, insisting she was my *personal maid*. It was as if she were a completely different person from the girl who had jabbed me with a needle every day.

"Oh, right! No time for dawdling. I'll go inform His Grace that you're awake!" Emily hastily rose from where she'd been seated by my side.

I nodded easily. "Bring some melon sherbet with you when you come back, will you?"



The first thing I did after getting out of bed was look in the mirror. I was in a terrible state, but that was to be expected considering how long I'd been bedridden. On top of that, the place where the crown prince had cut my neck with his sword had a bulky bandage packed onto it.

"Why are the bandages so thick?" I wondered aloud. *You'd think I broke my neck or something.*

I briefly considered removing the stifling bandages, but I decided to leave them for a little longer. It occurred to me that playing the ailing patient might work to my advantage.

After finishing the clam stew and melon sherbet Emily brought me, I went back to resting in bed.

Knock, knock. Someone was at the door.

"Miss, it's me, Pennel."

The butler. *Seems he's learned his lesson about opening my door without permission.* Still, I couldn't help frowning. *I remember telling him to send someone in his place if he needed anything from me.*

I hadn't completely forgiven him yet, so I sent Emily to answer.

"Go and see what he wants."

Emily left the room without a fuss. Moments later, she returned with unexpected news.

"Miss, he says His Grace wishes to see you," she reported.

"My…father?" *Well, I suppose when the lord of the manor calls, the only suitable messenger is the butler.* Understanding why the old man had come himself, I moseyed my way out of bed.

"Please bring me a robe, Emily."

"You're not going to change, Miss?" she asked, puzzled. I was wearing a white nightgown, hardly suitable for a meeting with another adult.

"Sick patients don't have to dress up," I sniffed imperiously, pulling on the robe.

Seriously, though. To drag a just-awoken daughter from her sickbed… The adopted child's eternal lot in life, I guess.

Even though it hadn't been on purpose, I'd caused another scene at the palace. My punishment last time had been confinement to my room, so there was no knowing what was in store for me now. If I had any hopes of softening the blow, I had to make sure they could see I was still ill. Thankfully, the four days in bed had left my face gaunt, and I looked pitiful without even trying.

Story of my life… With a deep sigh, I exited my room. The butler —who'd been waiting at the door for a while by then—immediately straightened up.

"This way, Miss," he said, politely gesturing with his free hand at his waist.

Huh? I knew which way the duke's room was, but so far, the butler had always walked ahead of me. I shot him a bemused look,

and he suddenly bowed.

"I am but a humble servant. I dare not walk in front of the mistress I attend."

I studied his face, wondering if he was mocking me for my previous outburst, but I couldn't detect any sarcasm. In fact, his solemn expression made it seem as though he had been waiting for this day to come.

"After you, Miss," he prompted in a perfectly proper tone. Something felt different about him. It was almost as if…

He reminded me of a restaurant owner greeting a regular who hadn't been around for a while: "We've been waiting for you. Your usual, I presume?"

There's something weird in the water at the manor today. What's the matter with everyone?

The servants, who'd always glared at me contemptuously when I so much as stepped foot outside my room, now dropped their eyes and bowed decorously when I glanced over at them. Little did I know that it was because of the butler, who glared at them fiercely as he walked behind me.

"One moment, Miss." When we arrived at the duke's office, the butler—who'd been following silently like a cat—suddenly pounced forward.

Knock, knock.

"Your Grace, Miss Penelope has arrived," he announced.

"Send her in."

The butler opened the door, the perfect picture of a respectful servant.

"Here you are, Miss."

An odd feeling rushed over me as I entered, but I concealed my confusion with indifference. *Seriously, did he sneak off to go to butler boot camp while I was sick?*

"There you are," the duke greeted me. Unlike before, when he'd talked to me from behind his desk, he was sitting on a sofa next to the table reserved for receiving guests.

"Hello, Father," I said with a bow. He nodded and gestured to another couch.

"Sit down."

I sat opposite him, going over the excuses I'd prepared in my head. There was a brief silence before the duke began speaking in a serious tone.

"The reason I summoned you today—"

"Father, wait. Please allow me to say something first," I quickly interrupted. Jumping to my feet only to fall to my knees the next moment, I kneeled next to the sofa.

"What happened was all my fault." This was my strategy. I would take the initiative and apologize before he could say anything. "My probation only just ended, yet I seemed not to have learned my lesson. I caused another scene at the palace, bringing dishonor once again to the family name." The words tumbled out of me easily.

He wouldn't kick me out, would he? Not when his sickly daughter was begging him on her knees. I figured this way, I could beat him to it and head off whatever he'd decided to do to me.

"Wait a moment," the duke said, visibly confused.

My plan seemed to be working.

"I don't dare ask for your forgiveness. I know better than anyone that I have done wrong."

"What are you—?" the duke tried again.

"I'll endure whatever punishment you deem fit. So please—"

"Enough!" he shouted, raising his hand, just as I'd been about to plead for leniency.

"Penelope Eckhart," he said, this time in a calmer voice. *Oh no. Maybe the same tactic won't work twice.*

I grew worried at the thought. Taking a deep breath, I replied, "Yes, Father?"

"Get up."

"…Huh?" I said, confused. The duke's forehead was pinched.

"A member of House Eckhart does not grovel under any circumstances. Do not be so quick to lower your head, Penelope."

"…"

"You are an Eckhart, and no one can force you to kneel, not even a member of the Imperial family!" The duke's voice seemed to grow louder at the mention of royalty. "If that is clear, then get on your

feet!”

“Y-yes, Father!” I immediately bolted up and returned to my seat on the sofa.

The duke had never been this assertive in the game. My heart was racing. *Is it something I said?*

He continued in a grave tone, “Penelope. I did not call you here today to reprimand you.”

“Really? Then why—?”

“I wished to hear in detail about what happened at the palace,” he explained.

“…”

“Tell me. What on earth transpired between you and the crown prince?”

I thought back to the moments leading up to when I passed out. I’d followed the crown prince with the intention of letting him kill me and had nearly been decapitated by his sword as a result. I’d only managed to escape with my life by making the absurd claim that I loved him.

The memory alone sent a chill down my spine.

“I…”

Unaware that the duke was watching me closely, I paled but pieced together a story with some finagling.

“I went out to the maze garden for some fresh air, but I took a wrong turn and stumbled upon the crown prince. It just so happened that His Highness wasn’t in a good mood, and…”

None of what I was saying was remotely close to what had actually went down. *Ever since I entered this game, I’ve been on track to becoming a professional liar.* But what did it matter? I legitimately couldn’t tell the truth. And besides, my story wasn’t *completely* made up.

“And?”

“…”

“You mean to say he mutilated you because he was *in a bad mood*?” The duke’s eyes glinted furiously as I trailed off.

“Huh? Well, *mutilate* is a pretty strong word, but—”

“What else would you call it? How dare that hellion take a sword

to an innocent noble lady solely because of a foul mood?!”

I couldn’t grasp why, but the duke seemed extremely upset. *The crown prince’s ears must be burning somewhere.* Since I had been somewhat responsible for the situation in the maze garden, I rushed to add, “I—I was the one who tried his temper in the first place, I think.”

“Well done,” the duke said in a sudden act of praise.

“Uh… What?”

“We can use your condition as leverage to keep the crown prince indebted to us. You have matured beautifully into an admirable member of House Eckhart, Penelope.”

The duke was becoming increasingly impossible to predict, leaving me stupefied more often than not.

“He needed to be taken down a peg sooner or later. All that talk of him being a war hero has made him think himself untouchable.”

“F-Father…” If anyone heard him talk like this, he would be charged with treason.

The duke didn’t seem fazed, though. “As you well know, Penelope, House Eckhart is a neutral faction in the political sphere.”

“Yes, of course.” *Didn’t have the foggiest clue till right this second.*

“He may be next in line for the throne, but he’ll be hard-pressed to survive without a single supporter at his flank. Since Her Majesty the empress’s death, the number of forces backing the crown prince has dwindled.”

“…”

“And while the crown prince was away at war, the empress consort—mother to the second prince—successfully spread her influence throughout the palace.”

“…”

“We sit at a delicate point where the next reigning emperor is not yet clear,” the duke said.

I’d had no idea that such a detailed political backdrop to the story existed. The stupid game had only told me what I needed to know to win over the love interests.

No wonder he acted like a madman at the ball. I hadn’t even

been able to guess why the empress consort and second prince had sent an assassin after the crown prince, but now it was all making sense.

"So continue to act as you have been," concluded the duke. Then, with a satisfied smile, he said, "Since you've achieved a commendable result, a reward is in order, not a punishment. Is there anything you'd like in particular?"

"A reward?" I'd come in here expecting a talking-to, not the opposite. I stared at the duke with wide eyes, the surprise plain on my face, and he gave a curt nod.

"Shall I summon the jewelers again? Or, since the season is soon changing, perhaps a fresh wardrobe would suffice? You could have all new dresses fitted."

My jaw dropped. *Damn, is that the scale we're talking? Guess it's my lucky day.*

Still, Penelope had already accrued more clothes than I could ever reasonably use, and I didn't really need any of the things he was offering. I thought for a moment before replying, "I'll think on it and let you know what I want later, Father."

With a click, I closed the office door behind me, only to be immediately greeted with a white window popping up in my vision.

<SYSTEM>
Your relationship with the manor inhabitants has improved.
Reputation has increased +5 points.
(TOTAL POINTS: 5)

"Huh?" I laughed, perplexed. *What did I even do?* I hadn't worked at improving any of my relationships, only threatened the servants a little to teach them their place.

Was being hurt by the crown prince that big of a deal? The duke had reacted completely unexpectedly, and everything was unfolding so differently from how I'd imagined.

At the same time, I also felt the warmth of satisfaction in my

chest. Whether it was affection or reputation, "plus" could only be a good thing.

All right. Let's keep this up.



"You're back, Miss?" Emily greeted me as I entered my room.

I nodded idly and briskly strode over to my desk. I had a lot to think about, including what reward I wanted from the duke.

"Here, Miss…" Emily scurried over and handed me something. "You had this against your neck the day you fainted. Young Lord Derrick told me to throw it away, but I kept it and washed it just in case."

"Ah."

I stared at what Emily was holding out in her hands. It was the white handkerchief that Winter Verdandi had given me. It had totally slipped my mind.

"Thanks, Emily," I said, praising her since she'd done something to my liking for a change. She visibly brightened.

The handkerchief was completely white again, and there was no sign that it had ever been drenched in blood. I stared at the fabric, considering what I should do with it.

I really should repay his courtesy, right? Though I hadn't required help, I couldn't ignore his kind gesture. And he was one of the love interests, so I'd definitely be seeing him around.

"Hmm… Emily, would you go to the butler and tell him to summon a jeweler tomorrow?"

"A jeweler?" Emily questioned the sudden request, her eyebrows scrunching in confusion. Then she clapped her hands together, exclaiming, "Oh! Are you looking to buy some new accessories for the festival, Miss?"

"The festival?"

"Our empire's founding festival is next week! I've heard the festivities will be grander than ever before, since the crown prince

has returned from war…”

“Please don’t bring him up,” I said bitterly.

“Eep!” Emily gasped, clasping a hand over her mouth at her faux pas.

The very mention of him was enough to make my stomach turn now.

Emily was staring at me apprehensively, so I waved her away.

“Go on, speak to the butler.”

“Y-yes, Miss! I’ll be back as soon as possible!” Emily said before rushing off.

The room fell quiet again after her departure. Drumming my fingers on the desk, I began to think aloud.

“A festival next week, huh…?”

The game was made up of a bunch of different episodes, each one focusing on one of the male leads. For example, the ability to pursue the crown prince’s storyline had been made available after I’d made some progress with Derrick and Reynold.

Meeting Winter immediately after the crown prince had been a bit of a surprise. According to the game, I was supposed to meet him at the palace banquet, so not too much of a difference, but still. Now that I’d encountered Winter, the only character who remained was the knight Eckles. And if my memory served me, the duke was meant to appear with the final love interest in tow around the time of the festival.

“What did Penelope do during the festival again?”

All I could remember was receiving a notification that said the duke had brought a new character to the manor. I never saw hide or hair of Eckles in Hard Mode. There was an episode in both Derrick’s and Reynold’s stories that revolved around attending the event, “Check Out the Festival Together” or something like that? I’d been too busy dying over and over trying to beat it to pay any mind to Eckles.

“Just thinking about it is making my blood pressure rise,” I scoffed, shaking my head.

I hadn’t actually succeeded in making a festival date out of anyone in the end.

I could feel bile rising in my throat, anger flaring within me. Trying to tamp my frustration down, I slammed open the desk drawer and retrieved the piece of paper I'd hidden deep inside.

Reading through what I'd written previously, I muttered resolutely, "I need to find him before the duke does."

After surviving my encounter with the crown prince, I resolved not to squander the only life I had. I'd reach one of the endings as soon as possible and get the hell out of this screwed-up game.

Which meant I had to focus all my efforts on the affection meter of the easiest mark.

"Eckles," I said, my eyes gleaming as they landed on the final love interest's name. "I choose you."



In the following days, I busied myself roaming around outside the manor, ostensibly on "walks." The estate was so large that it wouldn't be a stretch to compare it to a small village. Past the beautiful gardens and broad fields was the training field and quarters used by the knights in the employ of the house. Beyond that lay a small forest.

There must be a hidden path around here somewhere…

What I was *actually* doing was looking for an opening that would allow me to escape the manor unnoticed for the festival, but the grounds were so vast that the task was proving difficult.

Striking out yet another day, I plodded back to the garden and asked Emily to fetch me some refreshments. As I waited, I sat under an enormous tree to read for a while in its shade.

As I neared the climax of the book, I heard the rustle of shoes on grass.

"Emily. Hand me a bookmark, would you?" I held out my hand without looking, immersed in the story. It was only when I'd finished the few remaining pages that it struck me she had given no answer.

"…Emily?" I asked, looking up.

"Are you…feeling better?" The person holding the tray of refreshments was decidedly not Emily.

"Uh…," I said stupidly.

[Affection: 8%]

I stared at the letters above Derrick's head. It had been 6 percent when I'd last seen him, and I couldn't fathom how or why it had increased again.

A slight breeze blew past us, carrying the refreshing scent of flowers. My hair fluttered around, a few strands blowing into my eyes and pulling me from my daze. Realizing I hadn't stood to greet him, I hurriedly moved to rise.

Derrick stopped me halfway through my jolted movement. "It's all right. You needn't get up."

"No, it's fine. I was just about to head inside anyway," I told him.

"So you no longer need these refreshments?"

"Ah…" I frowned, eyes falling to the platter he was holding. *Dammit, why did Emily give it to him, of all people?*

"Emily didn't ask you to carry that for her, did she, Young Lord?" I asked politely.

"No. I told her I would take it since I had something of importance to speak to you about."

"To me?" The person he hated the very sight of? What could he possibly want with me?

I was stumped for a moment until it slowly dawned on me. "You wish to talk about that day at the palace, right?"

Though Duke Eckhart had been lenient, Derrick for sure wouldn't let it go so easily. *Ugh. I'll just give him the apology I meant to make to the duke.*

I sighed, selecting my words carefully. The apology tumbled out of my mouth, mechanical and dry. "You warned me not to cause any more problems. My behavior that night must've affronted you. I'm sorry."

"…"

"I put you in an awkward position, didn't I, Young Lord? Well, I promised Father I'd keep to myself for a while. If you require a stricter punishment, however—"

"What I wanted to say…," he said, coldly cutting me off. "What I came to say…wasn't regarding that." His face was twisted into a discontent scowl as he peered down at me.

Wait, really? It wasn't?

I glanced at the letters above his head.

"Then why—?"

"Why are we back to 'Young Lord'?" he interrupted.

"…Huh?"

"Nothing, never mind. I misspoke."

Before I could make sense of what he was trying to say, Derrick abruptly changed the subject.

"The reason I came to see you is because I wanted to give you this." He effortlessly balanced the tray he was holding in one hand while rummaging about in his pocket with the other. My eyes widened when I saw what he held out to me. It was a women's scarf that looked strangely out of place in his large, calloused hand.

"This is…"

"You can't attend formal events swathed in bandages," he said gruffly, casting a glance at my neck.

I'd kept my wound tightly covered in thick bandages in hopes that when I inevitably met Derrick, he would have mercy on me. I must have looked almost comical, wrapped up like a mummy around the neck, but he remained expressionless.

"Your reputation is already at rock bottom. What will people think if you traipse around with the possession of some unknown man?"

"…"

"Always bear in mind the weight of your actions and how they might affect our family name."

I alternated glances between the scarf and Derrick, my mouth agape. He was talking about the handkerchief Winter had given me. Though he'd told Emily to throw it away, it now lay in my desk drawer, clean and laundered.

How did he even know a man gave it to me?

I hadn't realized he was so perceptive. I'd been sure I was in for another dressing down… I truly hadn't expected this reaction from Derrick.

I considered him, taking a moment to process his strange shift in attitude. "…Thank you," I finally said.

Keeping in mind how much I knew he hated Penelope, I took the scarf gingerly, careful not to let our hands touch.

Well, well. This actually looks pretty expensive.

It wasn't wrapped or presented like a proper gift, but I knew from the soft drag of the fabric over my fingers that it was made from a luxurious material. I smiled, pleased at the unexpected present.

"I'll treasure it, Young Lord."

I peeked up through my eyelashes, meeting his gaze. He seemed to falter, and his expressionless face turned ice cold.

G-geez, what's his problem this time? I thought, frightened by the mercurial shift in his mood. I peered at the blinking affection meter above his head warily.

"I…I seem to have forgotten something urgent I have to tend to."

I watched as Derrick practically fled, striding out of the garden with the tray still in hand.

"What's his deal?" I wondered.

My eyes widened as I caught sight of his disappearing affection bar, though.

[Affection: 10%]

The white numbers had changed.

"What the hell is with this game?" I muttered to myself. *I can't make sense of the brothers' affection meters. They seem to rise without rhyme or reason. To be fair…that probably explains why I kept dying.*

I stared down at the scarf and had the odd feeling that things were getting further and further from the game I'd originally played.



"There you are!"

My long days of searching around the estate at last yielded a discovery. The walls surrounding the manor were nearly flawless in

construction, but I'd uncovered a small gap in the wall near the training field, no doubt used by the knights when they wanted to play hooky from drills. It was meticulously hidden behind some brush, and if I hadn't tripped on a rock and fallen right into it, I'd probably never have found it at all.

"Ha! Why does this dumb game never tell you about the useful stuff?"

I got up and dusted myself off. Feeling a sudden rush of annoyance, I kicked at the rock that had tripped me before readjusting my scarf, which had been disturbed by all my flailing about. I'd removed the ridiculous bandages recently and replaced them with Derrick's gift.

"At least I found it before the festival," I sighed in relief.

I'd been cutting it close. My deadline was just around the corner, with the festivities beginning the next day. *I can't say I wasn't worried.*

A simpler route would've been to receive formal permission from the duke or Derrick to leave the manor, of course. But there was no way I'd be allowed off estate grounds without guards when the capital would be filled with endless crowds.

Complicating matters was my need to participate in the slave market, which opened only during the dead of night. Discretion was my sole option.

"I'm going through a lot of trouble to save you, Eckles. You better be worth it," I muttered quietly, staring down at the doghole I'd discovered. I rearranged the trampled grass from where I'd fallen until it was once again hiding the gap from sight.

My task complete, I straightened just in time for someone to call out to me from behind.

"Hey, what are you doing over there?"

I flinched and spun to face the newcomer. The letters that glowed above his pink hair made me doubt my eyes were working correctly for a moment.

[Affection: 7%]

Reynold's affection had risen by 4 percent over the past week, even though I hadn't seen him once in that time.

Come on. Do these guys seriously gain affection for Penelope the less they see her?

Something about the prospect made me upset. While playing the game, I'd been forced to meet them due to the circumstances of each episode. I'd had no clue that raising their meters would be as easy as simply staying away. *So much time wasted and sleep forgone resetting over and over and over…*

"Why are you staring at me like an idiot? I asked you what you were doing," Reynold pressed, bringing me back to my senses.

"H-huh?" I looked away from his affection meter. "I'm…taking a walk."

"A walk?" Reynold narrowed his eyes. "You just so happen to be taking a walk near the hole in the wall, huh? What an amazing coincidence."

"…"

I almost reacted but managed to keep my face neutral. Goose bumps prickled the skin on my arms. *How the hell does he know? I'm pretty sure I did a good job covering my tracks!*

I peeked over at the brush, confirming that everything looked the same from before I'd disturbed it. Willing myself to stay calm, I changed the subject.

"…Well, what are you doing here?"

"Training just wrapped up. I'm on my way back now."

I belatedly noticed that Reynold's pink hair was damp with sweat. The loose clothing he wore for exercise allowed me to catch a glimpse of his physique, which was usually hidden.

Ooh, he's got a nice body. Though he had a delicate, pretty face, his body was toned and muscular. The combination was strangely sexy.

I deserve something nice every now and then as payment for suffering through all the nonsense in this game. I scanned his body surreptitiously, then promptly pretended I had done nothing of the sort.

"Don't let me stop you," I said indifferently. "I'll be continuing my walk." I started to stroll away from him casually, but he called out to me after I'd taken only a few steps.

"Oy, cut that shit out."

In an ideal world, I could ignore him, but in an effort to keep his affection from taking any damage, I stopped and turned to face him.

"Cut what out?" I asked innocently.

"Don't get any dumb ideas. You already tried sneaking out of the manor four years ago, remember? After you saw some slacker knights climbing over the fence. Your broken leg is the reason Father had the walls rebuilt to be taller."

"…"

"I could probably write a book with all the nasty stuff the knights said about you afterward, cursing you to hell and back."

No wonder the walls around the manor are so damn high! Something like that really happened? Penelope, you little scamp, you…! Four years ago, at age fourteen, she would've already finished the majority of her etiquette lessons.

The game had told the player nothing about Penelope's wild past. This, coupled with Reynold's derisive tone, annoyed me deeply.

"…It's not like that." Even *I* thought I didn't sound convincing.

"Just get permission from Father and go out the main gate. Don't do something stupid again and invite trouble for it," Reynold warned.

"I said I'm not!" I shot back, silencing him.

With a final suspicious narrowing of his eyes, he spun on his heel and strode away. I watched as the letters [Affection: 7%] bobbed along with him.

A white window appeared in my vision.

<SYSTEM>
Surprise event unlocked!
[Check Out the Festival] with [Reynold]
Would you like to proceed?
(Rewards: Reynold's Affection +3%, other benefits)
[YES / NO]

This was the quest I'd been dreading.

"I have to try this festival event with that jerk again? And for a

measly three percentage points of affection?”

I recalled his brusque tone just now and shuddered. When I’d been playing the game, that 3 percent had been enough motivation to attempt the quest. It had resulted in the repeated use of the reset button. What was worse, I never actually beat the episode.

“Nope! No way!” I pressed the [NO] button vehemently without a hint of remorse.

“How would I even enjoy the festival with him angrily breathing down my neck?” I grumbled to myself.

Besides, losing the chance to gain 3 percent was no longer something to be all too sorry about. I had a respectable 10 percent affection with Derrick and 7 percent with Reynold, after all. Plus, enjoying the festival sights was not worth the effort it would take.

Reynold now completely gone, I glared at the spot he had been occupying.

Nasty jerk. Doesn’t he know? The more you tell Penelope not to do something…

“…the more she’ll want to do it!” I huffed—the same words I’d wanted to say to Reynold the previous day—as I threw an armful of sheets out the window. Drained, I draped myself over the windowsill and tried to catch my breath.

The first day of the festival had dawned. I’d waited patiently until nighttime, and after Emily retired for the evening, I’d pulled all the sheets from the closet and tied them into what seemed like a long enough rope. It was one of the oldest tricks in the book for escape via window.

“Time to try and get down, then.” My breathing settled, I pushed myself back from the sill.

I was thoroughly prepared for the adventure ahead of me. Wearing a hooded cloak that hid my hair and face, I carried the blank check and gold I’d requested as my reward from the duke. Now all that remained was to safely make my way two stories down.

“Do I really have to do this?” I lamented, peering down into the darkness outside my window. Steeling my nerves, I shimmied over

the frame and rappelled down the makeshift rope. The distance to cover was short, seeing as it was only a two-story drop.

I'd eyeballed the length multiple times during my walks outside the manor and concluded that the height was manageable. I'd been so certain I'd make it with no problem, and yet…

"Problem! Yes problem!!"

My sheet rope was much shorter than I'd expected. *What do I do? I can't jump down without making a crapton of noise and possibly alerting someone. And it's so dark out that I'd probably hurt myself landing anyway…*

"Dammit!" I despaired at the stark difference between expectation and reality. Looking back up, I saw that the distance to the window was no joke, either. Not that it mattered—I didn't have the energy to climb back anyway. The most I could do was cling to the rope and pray I didn't fall.

"Ugh… What do I do now?" My arms were beginning to tremble, my palms growing sweaty. Slowly, I started sliding down involuntarily. Glancing below, I felt terror wash over me, fueled by my long-forgotten fear of heights.

"I'm screwed…," I said, sniffling. I was quite literally at the end of my rope.

That is, until a voice called out.

"Oy. What the hell are you doing?"

It was coming from below. I glanced down and locked eyes with someone.

"What the…?" he said with a laugh.

"…Reynold?"

The faint glow of moonlight shimmered off his pink locks. Reynold was gazing up at me from the window below with a look of dumbfounded amusement.

"Wh-what are you doing down there?" I asked, still clinging desperately to the remaining length of my bedsheets.

"Are you joking? My bedroom is right under yours."

"…"

I had no response to that. *How was I supposed to know these details?!*

“You… I don’t even know what to say, this is so absurd… Are you trying to run away from home?” Reynold laughed.

“Of course not!” I exclaimed, indignant. “I-I’m just going out for a bit.”

“Going out? Is leaving by way of window the trendy way for girls your age to ‘go out’ these days?”

“…”

I stared into the distance, unable to come up with a reasonable reply. So preoccupied with our conversation was I that I’d forgotten my arms were at their limit.

My grip finally decided to give out, my hands unable to support my weight any longer, and for a brief moment, I was hurtling toward the ground.

“Eek!” I screamed, managing to stop my fall at the very tip of the rope.

My breath left me in panicked pants. I was flush against the wall like a cicada clinging to a tree, the tremble of my arms making me shake like a leaf.

“Hey!” Reynold shouted, quickly vaulting onto his windowsill. He seemed pale as he launched himself outside, his eyes fixed on me. “Let go,” Reynold said, holding his arms out wide beneath me.

“E-excuse me?”

“Let go. I’ll catch you.”

I nearly said “What makes you think I’d trust you?!” but caught myself just in time.

“Or keep hanging there forever, if that’s what you want,” he snapped, seeing my hesitation.

I had little choice.

“…No dropping me. Please catch me, okay?” I begged earnestly. I might be his unwanted adopted sister, but he wouldn’t let me fall on purpose, would he? Willing myself to believe that was the case, I took a deep breath and let go.

A violent rush of wind swirled around me, accompanied by the feeling of weightlessness I’d felt only once before on a roller coaster.

Then, with a solid thump and an “I got you,” Reynold was holding me in his arms, a wicked smirk on his face.

"P-please put me down," I said, hurriedly pushing away from him when I realized how close our faces were.

I was smoothing out the wrinkles in my cloak when Reynold asked, "So where are you going?"

"Just on a walk—"

"If you say you're going on a walk one more time, I'm going straight to Father," he said, cutting me off.

I glared at him. Why did he have to be the one to catch me sneaking out?

Actually, I suppose I should be glad it wasn't Derrick.

Changing strategies, I gave him a more plausible excuse.

"I'm going to the festival," I said without any more explanation.

"This late? You could've gone during the day. And why escape out the window, at that?"

"I have my reasons. It has nothing to do with you anyway," I replied.

"Nothing to do with me, my ass! You're trying to go alone with no one to guard you! Do you know how dangerous it is out there right now? You seriously have no sense of self-preservation—"

"Reynold," I interrupted irritably. "I truly appreciate your help, really. But like I told you, I can handle my own affairs, so you don't need to pay any attention to me."

"Oy, you…" Reynold seemed at a loss for words at my cold rebuttal.

Glancing at the [Affection: 7%] above his head, I said judiciously, "I'm an adult. Whatever happens, good or bad, will be my responsibility and mine alone. As my brother, the best thing you can do is pretend you didn't see me—"

"I'm going with you."

"What…did you say?"

Reynold, though, didn't seem to find anything about his statement strange.

"We'll go together. I'll be your escort. *That's* the best thing a brother can do. Problem solved, no?"

"…"

"I'll keep it a secret from Father. Let's go together," he urged

again.

What? Flustered, I couldn't find the words to respond. What on earth had gotten into him? *This is the same guy who hated the very sight of Penelope! Why does he suddenly want us to be all buddy-buddy?*

Growing more and more nervous by the second, I cautiously tried to dissuade him. "But…you hate me, right? So why would you go out of your way to—?"

"Hate you?! Says who?" he bellowed, immediately irate. "You're the one who was raving about hating me 'a hundred' and 'a thousand times' more than anyone in the world!"

"Shh!" I said, panicked at his outburst. I looked around us frantically, afraid someone had heard him, but thankfully, no one came running to investigate. The quiet night hum remained uninterrupted.

"Okay, fine, I get it! No need to shout," I whisper-yelled, frowning. "And when did I ever say anything of that sort?"

I wanted to rip into him for making things up, but alas, there was no time to waste. The clock was counting down on my mission to save Eckles.

"In any case, I'm coming, and that's that," Reynold insisted petulantly. "I don't care if you refuse."

A notification flashed before my eyes.

<SYSTEM>
Surprise event unlocked!
[Check Out the Festival] with [Reynold]
Would you like to proceed?
(Rewards: Reynold's Affection +3%, other benefits)
[YES / NO]

The quest I'd declined the day before popped up again. With the stubborn determination in Reynold's eyes bearing down on me, I looked at the quest pop-up and exhaled heavily. I'd been left with little choice.

"Fine. Together, then."



We walked toward the training field in silence. When I stopped us in front of the doghole in the wall I'd found the day before, he shot me a knowing look, his suspicions confirmed.

Shoving aside the brush that covered the opening, I was about to climb through when a biting voice called out, "What are you two doing?"

Reynold and I turned, horrified. I saw the affection meter first, its glow cutting through the darkness.

"Where do you think you're going this late at night?"

"Brother," said Reynold.

Derrick approached us in long strides, glaring. He took in the hole in the wall and me, crouched beside it, and raised an eyebrow.

"W-well…," I stammered, scrambling for some kind of explanation. *Dammit.*

Reynold, on the other hand, had no such trouble. He pointed at me, throwing me under the bus without a second thought. "She wants to see the festival."

"The festival?" Derrick repeated, frowning.

"Yeah. I'm just going along to protect her and make sure she stays out of trouble," said Reynold.

Derrick's gaze traveled from his younger brother to me, and I flinched under the weight of his cool stare.

I'm not even going to be able to leave the house. There goes my plan to make Eckles my "all-in" man. I hung my head in frustration, all but giving up on attempting the Eckles storyline.

"A member of the nobility should always be accompanied by at least two guards," Derrick said in his usual aloof tone. "I will accompany you as well."

His unexpected response made my head shoot up just in time to catch the white window appearing again:

<SYSTEM>
Surprise event unlocked!
[Check Out the Festival] with [Derrick]
Would you like to proceed?
(Rewards: Derrick's Affection +3%, other benefits)
[YES / NO]

I'm totally screwed. Ha-ha-ha! I laughed in disbelief to myself, resigned to my cruel fate.



I'd heard before that festivals were best enjoyed at night, and I could now see why.

The streets were thronged with people, even though we hadn't traveled too far from the manor. The main road, which was usually close to deserted, was now filled with beautiful floating lanterns and a wide variety of stalls. I'd been to similar festivals like this in the real world, though, so I passed by the stalls without so much as a glance.

"Hey. I thought you wanted to check out the festivities?" Reynold said, finally questioning my lack of interest.

I spared him a glance, replying tepidly, "I am."

"You're not even asking us to buy you anything, Miss Shopaholic." He gestured to a group of stalls selling general goods for women.

Does he seriously think I'm here to enjoy the festival with him?

I shot him a cold look before turning away silently. Frankly, I couldn't focus on the festival right now. My head was elsewhere entirely; I was stressed over not knowing where to start looking for Eckles.

"Oy, come over here for a sec." Reynold took my hand and pulled me toward one of the stalls.

"H-huh?"

Derrick followed us in silence.

“Look. This place has some nice stuff.” Reynold had drawn me over to a shop selling jewels and other accessories.

“Welcome, welcome! Take your pick! We have many new products directly from the east,” the merchant boasted, gesturing to his wares.

I stared up at Reynold, curious as to what he wanted at this random stall.

“You heard the guy. Go on, choose something!” he said, frustrated.

I finally cast my eyes on the wide array of sparkling accessories. The items on display were unique, the kind you’d only be able to find at a festival. I didn’t really want to buy any of them, though. Penelope’s jewelry box was already fit to burst with pretty things. I lost interest quickly, but an arm at the edge of my vision redirected my attention.

“This one’s not bad,” Derrick said, picking something up. It was a bracelet with plum-colored gems strung on a platinum chain.

“My, my! You have fabulous taste, my lord! That bracelet was made from rare gems found only in the mines in the east! The artisans worked on it for three entire months without rest, and…” The merchant continued to blabber on enthusiastically, sensing a potential buyer.

An odd feeling washed over me as I stared at the piece of jewelry in Derrick’s hand—the purple gems resembled the color of my hair. *No way. He’s not thinking of buying that for me, surely?*

I watched him, bemused, the [Affection: 10%] bobbing above his head. This entire situation was preposterous.

“I’ll take this, then,” I interrupted, picking out something I liked, since it seemed Reynold was paying.

The merchant, who’d been eagerly extolling the wonders of the bracelet, fell silent.

“You’re not serious, are you?” Reynold asked incredulously, frowning at the item in my hand. Derrick was also looking at me skeptically.

“Deadly. I’d like this mask.”

I’d selected a white mask that had been poking out from

underneath a pile of other knickknacks. It was a smiling mask with holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth. After some thought, it had occurred to me that even if I was concealing myself with a cloak, the slave market wouldn't just allow a young girl entry. A disguise was a must-have.

"This one, please."

"Oy. Listen, I've been meaning to ask you this for a while…," Reynold said, a strangely grave expression falling over his face. "You don't feel ill or anything, do you? Dizzy spells, waking up to find yourself standing in strange locations, stuff like that?"

"If you don't want to buy it for me, you can just say so."

"No, that's not— You really want that mask?" Reynold asked.

"Yes, I do!" I snapped, annoyed with his repeated questioning.

The look in his eyes was dubious, but he finally purchased the mask, in addition to the bracelet Derrick had picked.

Suddenly, I heard a brash, drawn-out noise coming from some distance away, like a brass instrument. I turned and found a procession of people large enough to fill the entire road. Firecrackers exploded all around, and the night air was flooded with sound. The parade had begun.

Attendees rushed out to the main road to watch. Swept up in the excitement, people pushed past me left and right, knocking me around. I was too flustered to fight the swarm.

"Here, grab hold." An arm clothed in expensive fabric appeared in my line of sight. Its owner, Derrick, gazed down at me with his usual composed expression.

"…Thank you."

I hurriedly grabbed him, fearing I'd be whisked away by the crowd otherwise. Under my palm, something snagged awkwardly. *What am I holding on to?*

The loud crackling of firecrackers started up again. The procession was passing by the stall we were gathered in front of, and I tightened my grip on Derrick's sleeve so I wouldn't be carried along.

Only I suddenly felt something rip under my hand. "H-huh?!"

"Penelope!" Derrick cried.

The jacket gave way, and I was swept into the mass of people.

"O-oh no…"

Caught in the throng, I was unable to escape; it was no short amount of time later that I finally shimmied myself free.

Taking stock of my surroundings, I found myself standing in an unfamiliar, dark alleyway. Clutched in my hand was the golden button I'd accidentally torn from Derrick's sleeve and the mask Reynold had bought me.

"Where the hell am I…?"

I made a face as I peered around, my eyes meeting only pitch blackness.

That is, until a sudden flash of white filled my vision.

<SYSTEM>
A new episode is available.
[Slave from a Tragically Fallen Nation—Eckles]
Teleport to the slave auction?
[YES / NO]

My jaw hung open.

"Just like that?"

I thought my adoptive brothers had ruined any chance I had with the Eckles route, but apparently, it had worked itself out.



I pressed [YES] and reappeared instantly in front of the slave auction. The exterior was shabby, something no one would give a second look. I could see a few people forming a line outside, faces hidden.

Smart thinking with the mask.

Mine was rather cheap looking compared with what some of the other nobles were wearing, but what did it matter as long as I could

hide my identity? I slipped the smiling mask over my face and joined the queue, making sure to tighten the hood around my head so that my distinctive hair was covered.

The line moved quickly, and soon it was my turn.

"Your invitation." A large, mean-looking man held out his hand expectantly.

I need an invitation? I was caught off guard. It hadn't even occurred to me that this might be invite only. *You never said anything about this, you stupid game!*

The man frowned at my visible confusion.

"No invitation? We're members only. No entry without one. Next __"

"W-wait!"

The words *members only* caused an idea to form in my head. I rummaged through my pockets.

"Here," I said, holding out the button I'd torn off Derrick's sleeve. The Eckhart symbol glinted clear as day on the surface of the round gold disk. The man's eyes widened.

"I forgot my invitation, but I trust this will do?"

"I—I beg your pardon. I was unaware we were in the presence of such high nobility. P-please, go right ahead."

He hurriedly stepped aside, and I swept past him calmly, coolly, and collectedly, though I was internally quite surprised.

Our family name really is powerful.

Or perhaps my tactic only worked because the duke was already a frequent VIP customer at the black markets, occasionally bringing home useful slaves. Thinking about it left a bitter taste in my mouth, even if this was only a game.

An attendant approached me as soon as I entered. "Allow me to guide you to the auction."

I followed him down a set of narrow stairs. A door stood at the end, a faint glimmer of light peeking out.

The room behind it was incongruously luxurious and large. *Whoa, that narrow stairwell was hiding all this?*

The broad hall seemed to be modeled after a Roman amphitheater, with tiered seating for the audience overlooking a

central stage.

"Please have a seat here, ma'am. And take this." The attendant had brought me to a seat at the very front with a prime view of the stage, handing me a paddle for making bids before leaving. I stared at it blankly.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the auctioneer's voice boomed, interrupting my daze. "Tonight's event is finally set to begin!"

Without delay, the auction opened. Slaves started filing onto the stage, restrained by chains laden with heavy weights.

"Ten gold! Ten gold, do I hear any more? Going once, going twice… Sold!"

The slaves all looked despondent, but regardless, they were bid on and sold in quick succession. As the auction moved forward, slaves of exceptional beauty or unique talents began to appear onstage, causing the prices to skyrocket.

"A hundred gold! A hundred gold! Anyone else? Ah, looks like we have a hundred and two gold!" the auctioneer cried.

The atmosphere in the room was heated, the participants in the hall thrumming with a desire to win whatever caught their eye. I, of course, was only interested in one person, and after a while, my patience was rewarded.

"Now, what our distinguished guests have all been waiting for. Here is the much-anticipated final item in today's auction!"

I'd been watching the proceedings with a bored expression, but I straightened immediately when I saw who it was.

"This slave hails from a barbaric nation woefully conquered by our great empire of Eorka! Introducing…Eckles!"

I stared at the man onstage. Gray-brown, almost ash-colored hair, mouth muzzled with a hideous gag, eyes gleaming fiercely at the gathered crowd. *It's him.*

"I'm certain all in attendance are acquainted with the rumors about this slave," the auctioneer said with a broad grin. Though I had no clue what he was talking about, everyone around me was nodding and murmuring. "But a thousand rumors can't compare with seeing the real thing in the flesh!

"That's why today we have prepared a special demonstration for

you all! Feast your eyes!" The man gestured dramatically, and a worker tossed something to Eckles. It was a small wooden practice sword, the kind used by children taking their first lessons in fighting.

Huh? What is that for? I wondered, perplexed.

My answer came with the clang of a metal gate sliding open, followed by the low snarling sound of five hyenas prowling onto the stage.

Wh-what the…? What the hell is going on?

I was appalled by the sight unfolding before my eyes. The beasts circled Eckles, salivating as if they hadn't eaten in days. His hands and feet were bound, the shackles on his ankles connected to a chain that limited his range of movement. All this, and he was given only a single wooden sword to defend himself. He wore no armor, naked except for the rough drape of cloth covering his lower body.

How is that fair?! My heart sank. At this rate, the starving hyenas would tear him to pieces and make a meal out of him. *What do I do? Should I intervene—stand up and shout that I'll buy him?*

"Grrr!"

The snarling of the beasts broke through my fretting. Mid-prowl, the biggest of the animals suddenly launched itself at Eckles. He rolled and stabbed the hyena in the eye with a lightning-fast motion and followed up with a powerful kick.

The beast whimpered as it was launched backward. It slid across the ground and slumped, lifeless.

"Grrr!" "Ruff!"

With a cacophony of growling and barking, the remaining hyenas lunged at him all together.

"Eek!" I couldn't help but scream. He may have been able to take down one of them, but it seemed obvious to me that fighting multiple hyenas at once was a losing battle.

I needn't have worried, however. Without a single superfluous movement, he avoided the creatures' sharp claws and teeth, cutting them down efficiently one by one with nothing but that wooden sword. In no time, two of the hyenas crumpled to the floor, joining their lost companion. Only two remained.

While Eckles was occupied with one beast, the other lunged at

him from behind. He snapped the neck of the first, then spun, weapon at the ready.

"Yip!" The last hyena let out a high-pitched yelp. Eckles's sword plunged deep into its belly as it leaped on him, even though it was just a practice weapon with a dull tip. The final animal fell to the ground with a deafening thump, splattering blood everywhere.

The fight was over.

Eckles huffed, gasping for air. His shoulders were heaving, bright-crimson blood dripping from his hands. The entire auction house had fallen silent, and for a few seconds, the whole world stood still.

Then someone clapped, then another, and soon enough, the applause grew to a thunderous din as the entire room joined in.

"Thank you!" shouted the auctioneer as light flooded the room once more, the showcase complete.

It wasn't over for Eckles, though.

"Grah!" The slave let out an almost inhuman growl. Seemingly in a deep state of bloodlust, he wildly swung the wooden sword still in his hand, swiping threateningly at the workers who approached him.

That is, until his body suddenly seized up, and he collapsed to the ground, twitching. His limp form was promptly dragged offstage. *I guess there's some "security measure" to prevent the slaves from "getting out of hand,"* I thought grimly.

"Ha-ha, isn't he a feisty one?" The auctioneer chuckled, calming the uneasy crowd. "Not easy to handle through *normal* means." He winked. "Now, then! Shall we start the bidding off at a nice, low five hundred thousand gold?!"

The bidding for Eckles had finally begun. Compared with the previous slaves, his starting price was steep, on a totally different scale. I focused on the proceedings, feeling tense.

"Six hundred thousand!" shouted one voice.

"Nine hundred thousand!" exclaimed another.

"A million! We have a million!"

The price was rocketing upward at a frightening pace. If this kept up, it would easily reach ten million, which was the going price I had anticipated.

"Two million! I'm hearing two million gold— Ah, we have four

million over there!”

Thankfully, the fierce competition gradually died down. Eckles was a slave from a conquered enemy nation, and he couldn’t perform services in bed or be used for other enjoyments any time soon, given that he was so dangerous. Not many were willing to pay over five million in gold for him—not unless they were crazy. You could buy a small house with that amount, after all.

“Five million! Six million! We have six million!”

Only two bidders remained: an old woman, whose mask obscured her face but not the prominent wrinkles on her neck, and an extremely heavyset man. Their eyes glistened with greed and desire. There was no doubt in my mind what they both wanted Eckles for.

“Nine million! We have nine million!”

The old woman drove the price up an additional three million in what was probably her final bid.

“Ten million! We’re standing at ten million!”

But the man wasn’t giving up. The auctioneer stared, slack-jawed, apparently surprised by the amount of money they were willing to offer.

The woman viciously slung her bidding paddle aside. She had lost.

“Ten million! Do we have no more bids? Going once!”

The countdown had begun. I looked around carefully, trying to scope out any potential rivals that might appear to challenge the man.

“Going twice…”

When I was certain no one else would step forward, I brandished my paddle.

“One hundred million!”

The auction house fell into dead silence once more. If the barrage of gazes that flew at me could produce sound, I would have drowned in a deafening deluge of noise.

“One hundred—” The auctioneer’s mouth hung open in utter shock. He stammered, as though unable to believe his ears, before collecting himself and hollering gleefully, “One hundred million! A hundred million gold! Do we have any more bids?”

As I expected, there weren't any. But even if there had been, it wouldn't have mattered. I'd come prepared to call ten times the amount offered by the final bidder.

My life depended on this, and I would gladly pay any price, be it a hundred million or even a billion.

"Sold to the lady over there for one hundred million gold!"



"Th-this way, please." Following the auction's conclusion, the auctioneer himself guided me through the building. *I guess that's not his only job. He must be someone of importance within the organization.*

He led me to the cells where the slaves were kept, Eckles himself being held in solitary confinement deep in the prison.

Our approach was met with the sharp crack of a whip. Several workers were lashing out at the same time, whips violently striking Eckles's bare skin.

He was being manhandled, taken toward where I assumed the carriages were. As far as I knew, purchased slaves were immediately moved to fortified carriages and then transported to the address of the buyer.

Crack!

With another snap of a whip, blood sprayed from the now-open wound on his back.

Oh my gosh. He was in such a terrible state that I could barely stand to watch.

I frowned, recalling what I knew about the game. There, the duke had bought Eckles at the height of the festivities. He'd seen the knight while they'd been transporting him and paid a premium to take him off the buyer's hands.

To beat the duke to him, I'd sneaked out on the very first night of the festival, consequences be damned. *I'm glad I found him earlier than the game would have had me. How much worse it could have*

been…

"How will you be paying, ma'am?" My train of thought was interrupted by the auctioneer—or rather, the slave trader—his tone greasy and groveling.

"Here." I passed him the blank check.

"My, my!" he gasped at the sight of it. His eyes gleamed greedily as he asked, "Which house shall I bill this to?"

"House Eckhart," I said confidently. The duke would be upset to learn I'd spent a hundred million gold on a slave, but I'd already thought of a suitable excuse.

The trader looked surprised, before eyeing me suspiciously.

"Uh… If you don't mind, ma'am… Do you have any proof of your identity?"

"Are you saying you don't believe me?" I asked coldly.

The trader balked, waving in denial. "O-of course not! That would be absurd! However, it is usually a different member of House Eckhart in attendance at our auctions…"

Left with no choice, I rummaged around in my pocket. I threw the small round object I'd found earlier at the slave trader, unimpressed.

"Bring that when you come to collect the payment."

"O-oh my! I—I beg your forgiveness, my gracious lady, if I seemed doubtful!" The trader bowed deeply at the sight of Derrick's gold button, which was unmistakably marked with the symbol of House Eckhart.

He proceeded to pull something from his own pocket and hold it out toward me. "Please take this." It was a ring set with an enormous glimmering ruby.

"What is it?"

"It's a…token of sorts. Proof of ownership for the product."

With little choice, I accepted the ring, staring at it since I didn't know what it did. The slave trader pointed at Eckles.

"You see the choker around his neck?"

There was a leather choker adorned with a yellow marble nestled against Eckles's throat. I nodded.

"It's been enchanted with paralytic magic. If you press the ruby

on this ring, it will cause the yellow marble to produce shock waves, allowing you to bring him to heel if necessary."

This must be what he used to subdue Eckles onstage.

"Try not to use it too often, though, lest you fry his brain," the trader warned.

Fry his brain? This is so incredibly cruel. I frowned at the ring in my hand.

"Please keep it on you at all times. For the petite sort like yourself, he'll prove dangerous to handle. Go on, try it on."

Thanks to the mask, the slave trader couldn't read the acrid distaste in my expression, continuing to insist I put the ring on. Unable to refuse, I slid it onto my index finger, when—

"Aaargh!" A panicked scream pierced the air.

My head shot up as I searched for the source of the commotion.

Eckles's thighs were clenched around a worker's neck, choking him out. The chains previously restraining his ankles lay discarded on the ground, useless.

"Q-quick! C-contain him!" screamed the trader, his face draining of all color.

The workers, too afraid to get close to the vicious slave even as he tried to kill their companion, lashed out with their whips.

Both Eckles's and the workers' attacks continued for a bit without either side giving up. Eckles's victim gasped for air, slowly dying, all while Eckles's skin tore open from the continuous whipping. *I can't stand by while a man dies. I really didn't want to use this, but…* After a long moment's hesitation, I pressed the ruby mounted on the ring.

"Ngh!" Eckles stiffened immediately, jolting as if he were having a seizure, and slumped to the floor.

The worker gasped, huffing and gulping for air. Purple-faced and freed from Eckles's clutches, he darted away.

I approached Eckles where he was trembling on all fours.

"W-wait!" the slave trader called out in warning, but I ignored him.

Eckles groaned, glaring at me with unveiled hostility, despite the crippling pain he was no doubt in.

The closer I got, the brighter the threatening letters floating above his head glowed. [Affection: 0%], they read. I crouched in front of him and gripped his chin to lift his drooping head.

"Eckles." I made eye contact, calling his name quietly as his eyes glinted at me with hatred. I could tell he intended to kill me as soon as he recovered from the choker's effects. *I can't take him to the manor like this.* Biting my lip, I considered briefly before unclasping my mask.

"Look at me, Eckles," I said. I could think of no other way to calm him except praying he would come to understand his current situation. "Look into the face of the mistress who paid a hundred million gold for you."

Moving the mask away, I could tell the exact moment he saw my face. His pupils dilated for a moment, perhaps because Penelope's seductive beauty was so out of place among the stark cells of the slave house.

I looked him right in the eyes.

"Don't mistake my paying an exorbitant sum for you as me just throwing around money. Under normal circumstances, no noble, however crazy they may be, would waste a hundred million on a slave from a conquered foreign nation. Do you understand?"

I wasn't making things up, considering that the last bid for Eckles before I entered the fray was ten million gold. One hundred million was probably enough to purchase a castle on the outskirts of the capital.

"Where do you suppose this defiance will get you? You fight, you escape from here, and then what? You have no homeland to return to."

I seemed to have struck a nerve. Eckles gritted his teeth, struggling to shake free from my hold on his chin, but I only gripped harder, forcing him to look at me again. I leveled an intimidating glare at him.

"I despise fools who don't know their place. I saw potential in you, and so I made an investment. That's the reality of our situation." I hadn't invested only money, of course. It had been a lot of hard work to get to this point. "So you'll have to demonstrate how

valuable you are. Prove my money wasn't spent for nothing."

"…"

"Otherwise, I'll send you back here without a second thought. Is that clear?" I asked, my eyes flashing.

To be completely honest, I was surprised at how harsh I sounded. *I guess this is just how desperate I am to survive the messed-up game I've found myself in.*

The only way to calm him was to instill in him the cold, hard truth, cruel as it may seem. He was no longer the noble he had once been. Now he was nothing but a slave to be sold.

Eckles's intense stare wavered as he seemed to realize I had bought him for a reason, not just for fun or my entertainment.

"Nod if you understand. I need to get home quickly," I said.

It took him a long moment, but he eventually gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod. And thankfully, his affection remained unchanged. *That's good enough for me.*

"A-are you hurt?" the slave trader asked, hesitantly approaching after I'd replaced my mask and risen to my feet. He gripped his whip tightly like a lifeline.

"You," I called.

"Y-yes! I-if there's anything you need at all, I—"

I nodded at Eckles with my chin as he staggered to his feet.

"Release him from his shackles."

"Wh-what?" the slave trader stuttered.

"I said release him."

"B-but this slave is—" he said in protest, though I didn't let him finish.

"Leave the cuffs and choker; remove the ankle shackles and gag. I'll be taking him home myself," I spat irritably.

The slave trader gestured to a worker, unable to deny me. Soon, Eckles was free of his restraints, barring the cuffs on his wrists. The workers and trader backed away hurriedly, but Eckles remained still, no longer in a rage.

"And you," I said, pointing at the worker who'd whipped Eckles with the most enthusiasm.

"M-me?" he asked.

"Strip," I demanded, ice lacing my voice.

"H-huh?"

"Give him all your clothes except for your underwear."

While the slave trader and worker stared, aghast, I threw down the pouch of gold coins I'd brought with me. It flopped to the ground at his feet.

"And make it quick."

With that, the near-naked Eckles was dressed presentably enough to not cause a stir on the streets outside.



Sunrise was beginning to paint the sky gold by the time I emerged from the auction house with Eckles trailing behind me. It had been a tense, sleepless night, and I was thoroughly exhausted.

"Haah…" I sighed heavily when I noticed that dawn was breaking. I'd managed to make my way here against all odds, but getting back to the manor? That was another challenge entirely.

"All right, follow me," I ordered, glancing back at Eckles.

He said nothing. It wasn't an acceptable response from a slave, but I didn't have the energy to rebuke him.

I led him into the first alley I could find after exiting the auction house, wanting to find the main road so I could ask for directions. The alleyway twisted and curved, and just as I was turning yet another corner, a large crowd rushed at us.

"There they are!" yelled a voice.

The narrow path was completely blocked by a wall of men.

"Hello there." A man I didn't recognize emerged from the sea of people and greeted me. He was short and heavyset.

"Who are you?" I asked guardedly. The leader laughed as if I'd said something ridiculous.

"Ha! You don't recognize me?"

"Am I supposed to?" I asked, derision bleeding into my voice.

"Why, I am the famous Kluy—"

“M-Master!” interrupted one of his lackeys, eyeing him nervously in an attempt to prevent him from proudly revealing who he was.

The man cleared his throat, realizing his mistake. “Ahem. I’ve been waiting here for a while because…” He trailed off dramatically.

“…”

“I want you to hand over that slave,” he revealed, his eyes traveling to Eckles.

It suddenly came back to me—this was the guy who, along with the old lady, had been one of the last bidders.

“Eckles, stand behind me.” I positioned myself in front, hiding him from greedy eyes.

A master should know how to protect those in their care. I was his mistress now, so I needed to be brave and handle this myself.

There was, of course, an ulterior motive behind my actions, too. *This could be a chance to gain affection.*

The man’s thugs looked intimidating, but I doubted the situation would escalate much. *I’m the only daughter of the powerful House Eckhart, after all.*

My internal pep talk over, I looked down my nose haughtily.

“Are you forgetting that I just bought him for a hundred million gold?” I asked.

“W-well…” His face immediately flushed an angry red. “I didn’t have that particular amount on me today. I’ll pay you ten million in advance and give you the rest by next week, so—”

“One billion.”

“E-excuse me?”

“I came here fully prepared to outbid the highest offer by tenfold.”

“But th-that’s—”

I didn’t let him finish. “If your bid had been a hundred million, I’d have gone in for one billion. Which means the final value of this slave is one billion gold.”

“That’s nonsense! Flat-out coercion!” The pig of a man shrieked at my words.

“Coercion? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.”

His face turned bright red, like a balloon about to pop.

Apparently, he'd assumed I'd part with Eckles easily. And with every refusal of mine, he was becoming all the more upset.

"J-just hand him over already! Why are you making this so difficult? Do you have any idea who I am?!"

"I think it's you who should be worrying about who *I* am," I countered smoothly.

I was prepared to remove my mask if necessary, since I had given Derrick's gold button to the slave trader and had no other means of identifying myself. My dark-pink hair and turquoise eyes would immediately clue him in as to who I was.

I moved to do so, but the large man was faster.

"Why, you impudent bitch!"

With a gust of air, his enormous palm came flying toward my face. I realized a moment too late and tried to back away.

"Aaargh!"

The pig's hand came to a halt in front of my nose, bent at an unnatural angle, held there by an arm that had shot out from behind me.

Wasn't Eckles wearing handcuffs? I stared blankly in wonder.

"Ow! Hrgh!" The man cried in pain. "Jack! Jack, kill…kill them both!" he ordered one of his men at the top of his lungs, cradling his broken wrist.

Polite hands nudged me backward. "Please stay back," Eckles said, and what followed next was a second round of the violence I'd witnessed at the auction house.

Screams upon screams, the crack of broken bones filling the alley—the wave of opponents seemed to pose no threat to Eckles. With every one of his movements, multiple thugs were thrown to the ground with a sickening splat, the sounds of battle bone-chilling.

"Ngh…" I backed away hesitantly.

This was different from sitting safely in the audience and watching him fight some hyenas for his life. This was a massacre.

Blood splattered and flesh split with every swing of his hands, and I felt my chest tighten at the crimson red staining my vision, reminded of the crown prince's beheading of the assassin at the palace. The same terror from back then washed over me now, the

same metallic stench filling my nose.

I'm scared…

I began to tremble, clinging to the wall, as Eckles continued to slaughter the men like some kind of killing machine.

The fight was over before it had even begun.

The large pig of a man sat slumped among the bloody bodies of his men, stock still with the same look of horror that no doubt painted my own face. A dark spot formed under him and began to grow into a yellow puddle.

I didn't have the capacity to be disgusted, instead rooted in place as Eckles approached me. His handcuffs were destroyed, hanging limply from his wrists, and sticky blood dripped down his arms and hands.

I gasped for air, terrified of the expressionless man with ashen-brown hair before me.

How did I dare to threaten him earlier? Luckily, I hadn't removed my mask; otherwise, he would have seen the look of pure fear I wore.

"…Mistress," Eckles said after a pause, falling to his knees at my feet. I was still processing the sight when he continued, "I killed every last one of them." His gray eyes stared up at me intently as he pushed his face against one of my hands. "Please praise me, Mistress."

He rubbed his cheek against my palm like a puppy, the friction warming my cold fingers. I was too overwhelmed to realize the hand he was nuzzling was the one that wore the control ring.

Frozen in place, I stared down at the top of his head.

[Affection: 18%]

Choosing him had been the correct decision.

CHAPTER 3





"M-Miss!" exclaimed Emily.

It was already early morning by the time I arrived back at the manor with Eckles in tow. The butler and Emily, having seen our approach in the distance, ran to me, faces pale.

"Miss Penelope, where in the world…?" the butler began to ask, then trailed off.

"You disappeared in the middle of the night!" Emily said in a panic.

It was at that point my hopes to sneak in unnoticed with Eckles were dashed.

"Does…Father know?" I hedged.

"Of course! The young masters have been out all night searching for you with the knights, and some slave traders came calling at the break of dawn. The whole household is freaking out!"

I rubbed at my temples. *Coming to collect as soon as the sun's up? That impatient slave trader bastard must not have trusted me. And it's just my luck that he beat me here…*

As for Derrick and Reynold, they'd obviously gone and made a huge fuss—the least they could've done was kept things a secret as I'd asked. *Crap… I knew letting them tag along was a bad idea*, I thought with a groan.

Emily began pushing me toward the gate. "Please hurry inside, Miss. Quickly!"

"Just a moment, Miss." The butler stopped us. "Who is this man?" He'd stepped in Eckles's way as he made to follow me.

"…He'll be my personal bodyguard from now on. Prepare a room for him so he can get some rest," I ordered.

"M-Miss! You can't just—" The butler eyed Eckles up and down, taking in his wounds and shabby clothing. He looked outright appalled. "I'm afraid that's unacceptable! Simply letting a person of unknown background into the manor—"

"Pennel. Have you already forgotten our little chat?" I was exhausted from spending the whole night at the auction house. I

wanted to go directly to my room and throw myself in bed, but I had a lot of things to take care of before I could even think of sleep. I had no time to waste on the butler. "Give Eckles a place to rest and make his stay comfortable. Please."

"Understood…Miss," the butler said, bowing reluctantly.

Phew. I would have resorted to threats if he hadn't listened, so I was relieved it hadn't come to that.

Hastily, I advanced toward the front entrance with my entourage.

"Oy! You!" Reynold, who had been pacing nervously in front of the door, was the first to spot me.

The duke, who'd been sitting nearby, immediately stood. "Penelope!"

"Father…," I said, faltering under the duke's powerful glare. He seemed to be holding back the urge to follow Reynold in his shouting. Instead, he gritted his teeth and finally settled on telling me sternly, "Come to my study. Now."

He stormed away like an icy blast of wind, and I sighed deeply. *Ugh. How am I going to beg my way out of this one?*

Was all this trouble worth it just so I could pursue the Eckles ending? Feeling a burst of resentment, I spun to face him, but my irritation fizzled out when I saw the letters above his head.

[Affection: 18%]

I have to get through this. He's my best option for survival.

Reynold, noticing Eckles standing right behind me, turned his glare on him, staring the slave down menacingly.

"And who's this beggar-looking asshole?"

"Go with the butler, Eckles," I ordered hurriedly, trying to preempt any fighting.

"Go with the butler where? Do you think just anyone can waltz in here?!" Reynold yelled, furious.

However, probably because I was expected in the duke's office right away, he said no more on the matter. The same was true of Eckles, who was gazing at me silently, lips opening and closing as if he wanted to speak.

"Hurry up now. Good boy," I said, plainly dismissing Eckles before he had second thoughts and said something. I didn't have time for

that.

Leaving my mask with Emily, I scampered after the duke.

As soon as I stepped inside his office, the duke's cold voice cut through the quiet.

"Penelope Eckhart."

"Yes, Father," I replied, politely coming to stand before him. The duke sat behind the desk, his back to it.

"Explain yourself. What is the meaning of all this?"

My blood ran cold at his stern tone. I couldn't see his face from where I stood, so I was uncertain if I would be able to manipulate this conversation as well as I had our previous ones.

I didn't care about losing the reputation points I'd gained by improving my relationship with him, but I was concerned about the implications of us falling out. It might negatively impact the Eckhart brothers' affections.

Thoughts bounced frantically around in my mind, and I eventually decided to continue with the tried-and-true strategy that had worked for me so far.

"I'm sorry I left the manor without telling you, Father."

"You seem to be apologizing an awful lot lately," he replied, unimpressed. A sorry wouldn't cut it a third time, it seemed. His next words, though, left me at a loss. "You're quick to apologize, but without actual reflection, they come off as empty words. Do you disagree?"

"I…" I chewed my lip and switched tactics, starting with addressing what had concerned him the most thus far regarding Penelope. "I swear, I did nothing to disgrace our family name, Father."

"I did *not* wait all night to hear mere lip service!"

I'd barely finished speaking when the duke slammed his fist loudly on his armrest. I couldn't help but suck in a small breath, having never seen him this angry while playing the game—his relationship and interactions with Penelope had been marked by total disinterest. Terror ran through me at the switch-up.

What do I do? My head was beginning to spin. *Was I mistaken in thinking that feigning remorse would get me off the hook easily, as it*

had last time with the crown prince incident?

"No more digression, Penelope Eckhart. I want details. Why did the daughter of the duke leave home at night without any guards to protect her?"

Overcome with fear, I was unable to speak. Noticing this, the duke finally let out a ragged sigh. When he continued, it was in a softened tone. "And who were those vulgar men who came knocking at our door this morning? Just what were you doing all night?"

I let out a quiet breath. If the duke was so insistent on getting an explanation, apologizing would do me no good.

"I…wanted to see the festival at night, so I sneaked out."

"Why at night when you could have gone during the day? And if you were truly so intent on going, you could have asked for my permission, no?" the duke said in rebuke.

"I didn't think you would say yes."

My words gave him pause. "What do you mean?"

"You never allow me to leave unless it's for an official event."

I wasn't making this part up. It was the reason I'd searched high and low for that gap in the wall. Even in the game, Penelope's scenes had always been set in either the ducal manor or a ballroom. Though nothing was said about it directly, I'd realized practically as soon as I set foot in this world that Penelope's life itself was virtually one of confinement.

They kept her in the manor to prevent her from causing any trouble, and she was only allowed to participate in events she was explicitly invited to. That was why she didn't have a personal guard like all the other daughters of nobility. Employing a guard for that would be nothing but a waste of resources.

"…" The duke was silent for a moment, then said in a low tone, "And?"

"I ran into my brothers on the way out. They tried to stop me at first, but I begged them to let me go, and they decided to come along as my guards instead. I couldn't wake the knights so late at night just to escort me, after all."

"…"

"We were walking around the festival together, but I got

separated by the parade. While wandering around lost, I found myself in a dark alleyway. I nearly met trouble when I was accosted by a nasty nobleman there."

"Wh-what?!" The duke shot out of his seat, turning to look at me. "Who would dare?! Name the bastard!"

"I—I was too confused at the time to recognize him," I said, startled by his outburst. His eyes were burning with rage, and I got the sense he might do something rash if I didn't offer up some information. "He did call himself Kluy or something…"

"Kluy. Kluy, you say?"

I'd only mentioned that pig of a man as part of my cover story, but the duke muttered the name to himself over and over as if committing it to memory. I felt a chill as he sat back down, continuing to mumble darkly. Frightened of things escalating, I hurriedly moved on.

"Eckles, who happened to be passing by, helped me."

"…Eckles? You mean the man you brought back with you?" the duke clarified.

"Yes. He was escaping from the slave auction house at the time." The duke frowned heavily at the word *slave*.

I rushed to add, "He was formerly a noble in his country before our empire defeated it in the war."

The duke's concerned expression smoothed at my words, the change in his demeanor leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Because he stopped to save me, the slave traders who were pursuing him recaptured him. I happened to have the blank check you gave me and a button from Derrick's sleeve, so I bought him."

"For one million gold?" the duke said in disbelief.

"I couldn't turn my back on the man I owed my life to."

My story was quite far from the truth, but I *did* owe my life to Eckles—or at least, I would down the road.

"I did not give you that check so you could buy a slave," the duke said, anger seeping into his voice.

—"*Look at you. How many dresses do you plan to buy with a*

blank check?"

I remembered the way he'd chuckled as he handed me the slip. Still, there wasn't much more he could say if my story was to be believed.

"But it's my fault he failed to escape. He would've been dragged back to the auction house if I didn't step in."

"…"

"Even a beast knows to be grateful to its savior. As an Eckhart, how could I not repay what he did for me—?"

Bang!

I was prevented from furthering my case by a loud slamming noise. The duke's office door flew open, heralding the arrival of someone.

"You!" It was Derrick, pale and covered in sweat. He strode into the room, glaring at me with a frightful scowl. "Where in the world have you been?!"

"B-Brother," I said, taken aback and glancing cautiously at the duke.

Derrick looked beside himself with worry.

"I spent the entire night scouring every corner of the capital for you. Even the red-light district! I was terrified you'd been taken by human traffickers. You—" He cut himself off, overwhelmed with emotion.

"…"

"What if you…?!" Derrick grabbed my shoulders as he trailed off, his voice filled with a panicked urgency.

I'd never seen this expression on him before, and my shock only grew when I glanced above his head.

[Affection: 13%]

What the hell?

I abruptly remembered his distraught face when the button had ripped from his sleeve, his alarmed scream as I'd been carried away from him, his frantic struggles to grab hold of me again.

—"Penelope!"

Derrick didn't just dislike Penelope—he hated her with every fiber of his being. Simply calling him "Brother" had been enough to eat away at his affection. That was why I'd never even considered Derrick as a valid option after I found myself in this world. I mean, it was a success to me if I could simply keep his percentage above zero.

It hadn't even registered that he'd acted so unlike his usual self when he'd lost me at the festival.

So why?

Forgetting that the duke was still there, I stared at Derrick and the meter above his head.

Why do you look so desperate?

"Derrick." It was the duke who put a stop to his eldest son's spiraling inquiries. "We were having a private conversation. Have you no qualms about this insolence?" he asked harshly.

Derrick's downcast gaze betrayed his uncertainty, and I was finally able to compose myself.

Releasing the viselike grip he had on my shoulders, Derrick backed away. Bowing to the duke, he said, "Forgive me, Father."

My shoulders ached where Derrick's hands had been, and I rubbed at them to soothe the pain.

Uh, wait a second. Why isn't he leaving?

Derrick had settled himself next to the duke's desk, his eyes peering down at me like his being allowed to remain was a given. The duke, though surprised, didn't comment. Derrick was obviously determined to listen to my explanation.

Ugh… Now I've got two *of them to contend with…* I heaved a sigh inwardly.

"Ahem." The duke cleared his throat. "In any event, I understand what you're saying, Penelope."

Thankfully, he seemed to find the excuse I'd spun acceptable, at least. While I let out a little huff of relief, he directed a different question at me.

"But if you bought him, you could have simply let him go. Why

bring him here?”

“Eckles is an excellent fighter, Father. That was the reason for his exorbitant price,” I replied at once. I’d been ready for this line of questioning. “I’d like for him to be accepted as a knight-in-training here. I assure you, he’d be very useful.”

“A knight of House Eckhart?”

“Yes. I believe it would be better to teach him formal swordsmanship than have his talent go to waste as a mere servant __”

“Do you realize how preposterous you sound?” Derrick interrupted. “Most would consider it a great honor to be tasked with even menial work in our household.”

“…”

“This man is not even a commoner,” he continued. “He’s just a slave from a conquered nation. What point is there in him studying the sword here?”

I glanced over at the duke and could tell by his face that he agreed.

Dammit. If you’re not going to leave, can you at least not stand in my way?

A wave of exhaustion hit me, and I did my best to keep my voice level as I plowed forward.

“I want to make him my personal guard.”

“…Your personal guard?” Derrick repeated incredulously.

“I can’t be without one forever,” I said simply.

The duke seemed surprised, though. “‘Without one’? There are over twenty-thousand knights in the service of our family.”

“I know they don’t think well of me, Father.”

“…”

“That’s why you haven’t assigned any of them to protect me already, right?”

Both the duke and Derrick were silent, evidently unable to refute this. A daughter of nobility usually had five or six guards assigned to her, and the more influential the house, the more guards. This ensured the protection of the lady at any cost.

After Reynold had mentioned the knights’ dislike for Penelope, I’d

asked Emily and found out that Penelope had never been given a personal knight. If she did have to leave the manor, any knights who happened to be free were assigned to her temporarily.

Is this her reputation at work? Or is it that she isn't worth protecting in their eyes?

It had been a stab in the dark, claiming that no one wanted to protect Penelope, and I was disconcerted by both the duke's and Derrick's lack of protest.

"I'd rather not leave my safety in the hands of those who don't care if I live or die."

"…"

"And there's no guarantee that something like yesterday won't happen again after I leave this house."

"Leave this house?!" both Eckhart men shouted almost simultaneously.

"I don't understand. What do you mean, 'leave'?" asked the duke urgently.

"I mean exactly what I said. I'm almost an adult now, am I not?" I shrugged, intentionally widening my eyes. "I'd like to ask that you let me choose my own guard, if only for my safety. Father, Brother…I beg of you."

I bowed my head. They seemed reluctant to refuse.

More like they can't. What had happened last night wasn't entirely my fault, after all. That no one was willing to protect the duke's daughter when she left the manor was a huge problem, especially considering House Eckhart possessed so much influence in the empire.

I didn't really need a guard, of course. I just wanted a reason to keep Eckles around, and as far as excuses went, this one worked marvelously.

"Well…," the duke said with a groan. *Hook, line, and sinker!* "I understand where you're coming from. This whole ordeal must have been harrowing for you. Go and rest. I will send a physician to come see you when you wake."

"Yes, Father," I acquiesced, though I wasn't hurt anywhere and didn't need to be looked over. I bowed a quick farewell and turned

to leave.

"Derrick, you stay," the duke ordered firmly as I exited the office.

It would seem he had intended to follow me. As the door swung closed, I caught a glimpse of him through the crack.

Sheesh, what's his problem?! In my shock, I had quickly shut the door in his face. *What more could he possibly have to harass me about? The conversation is over and done with.*

Thankfully, the door remained closed.

I gave a sigh of relief at this whole ordeal finally being over. Just then, the system window popped up in front of me.

<SYSTEM>
[Check Out the Festival] with [Derrick]
Event quest failed!
Try again?
(Rewards: Derrick's Affection +3%, other benefits)
[YES / NO]

What am I, insane? No way in hell!

The festival was far from over. I slammed the [NO] button multiple times, shuddering in disgust. The window vanished, leaving me feeling deeply wronged by the game.

Also, why did I fail? I went with him, didn't I?

I couldn't figure out this ass-backward game's rules. Wasn't it an accomplishment in and of itself that I'd gone anywhere with them at all?

If I'd failed with Derrick, then the same was probably true for Reynold.

Whatever. I got a three percent increase in affection anyway.

As I fumed to myself, overcome with annoyance, I recalled the letters that had floated above Derrick's black hair.

[Affection: 13%]

Though I'd failed the quest, at least I'd still somehow gained the same amount as I would have if I'd succeeded.

Further confirmation that the key to winning the brothers over is

staying out of their sight.

Deciding that I'd avoid them as much as I possibly could, I made my way to the central staircase…only to have my new resolution instantly derailed.

"Oy," came the telltale gruff bark of Reynold. "Are you a mute? I asked you a question. Where are you from?"

Reynold was prodding at Eckles, who stood at the foot of the stairs, while Emily hovered anxiously nearby. I frowned and hurried closer.

"What are you doing?"

Reynold turned at my accusation, the word above his head turning with him.

[Affection: 10%]

His meter had gone up, just like Derrick's. Instead of complying, he nudged Eckles again, answering my question with another of his own.

"Who the hell is this dude?" he demanded.

I glanced up. [Affection: 10%] above pink hair and [Affection: 18%] above ash brown.

The choice was a no-brainer.

"Come along, Eckles," I said.

Eckles, who hadn't given any response to Reynold's repeated pestering, moved like lightning to obey my command. He came to stand right beside me, at precisely the spot I'd gestured to.

"The hell?" Reynold scowled, then promptly broke out into a peal of laughter, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Didn't Emily tell you? He's to be my personal guard from now on."

"A personal guard? You're gonna let this slave bastard protect you?" Reynold sneered.

"Yes." I didn't deign to say more than that.

"What's gotten into you? Did you eat something weird during your little escape attempt? Were you that set on running away, reputation be damned?"

"I told you—I wasn't running away," I snapped back, turning to leave. I felt close to passing out from exhaustion. "I'm tired. We'll

talk more later."

Reynold moved in front of me before I could take another step.

"Where do you think you're going? I'm not done talking to you."

Eckles twitched. I could sense a rising wave of hostility emanating off my new guard, perhaps in response to Reynold's threatening tone.

Before he could do anything, I raised a cautioning arm out to Eckles—I couldn't let him be kicked out less than an hour after bringing him to the manor.

"Reynold," I said with a sigh, biting back my irritation.

"Why do you need a bodyguard anyway?" he shouted, still not willing to let it go. "All you ever do is stay holed up in your room."

"It's about time I have one. I don't want a repeat of yesterday's events."

"Then choose any one of the knights we already have! As it stands, there's more of them than we know what to do with!"

"Any one of the knights who were 'cursing me to hell and back,' as you so eloquently put it? I have no need for a guard who looks down on his mistress."

"…"

Reynold's reaction was the same. Just like the duke and Derrick, he stiffened and immediately fell silent, unable to say anything at my damning words.

"How can men who think so poorly of me be expected to have my safety as their top priority? Do you think they'd even try to protect me?" I asked.

In saying this, I was giving him his share of the blame as well. He'd done nothing to stop the knights when they'd disrespected Penelope, allowing their behavior to fester undisciplined. Who knew—maybe he'd even encouraged it.

Either way, he was struggling to find an excuse. His blue eyes wavered uncertainly.

"Penelope. I just meant that as a—"

"If you're going to say it was a joke, save your breath. I was lucky enough to return in one piece this time, but if something like last night were to happen again, I…"

"…"

"If Eckles hadn't been there, I would've been violated, Reynold."

The color drained completely from his face, as if someone were choking him.

Nothing of the sort had happened, but I'd chosen the grimmest scenario that came to mind to shock Reynold. Though this time I'd ventured out with a clear purpose and destination in mind, everyone knew what could happen to a young noble lady if she wandered around outside without anyone to protect her.

"Do you understand now, why I want Eckles to guard me?"

"…"

"I'm sorry to have made you worry, Brother," I said in parting.

Then I breezed past Reynold, who stood frozen in place, and up the stairs. An expressionless Eckles followed me, along with Emily, her head bowed somberly.

A consequence of being despised was neglect, and I simply couldn't find it in myself to forgive those in the Eckhart household who'd knowingly left Penelope exposed to the dangers of the world.

For the sake of the girl that I was before coming to this world.

I'd just climbed the last of the steps when I got another notification.

<SYSTEM>
[Check Out the Festival] with [Reynold]
Event quest failed!
Try again?
(Rewards: Reynold's Affection +3%, other benefits)
[YES / NO]

I selected [NO] without so much as a second glance.

Eckles trailed behind me like a puppy all the way to my door. Emily's expression grew more and more horrified as it became obvious that he was intending to follow me into the room, and I was forced to intervene.

"You're not going to follow me in, are you?" I said, planting myself firmly in the doorway.

"But…," he said with some difficulty, tilting his head and coming to a stop. "You said I have to demonstrate my value."

When it clicked into place why he'd been so subservient until now, I couldn't help feeling disheartened.

Well, I guess that's the degree to which he wants to avoid going back to the slave auction.

The yellow marble embedded in the choker glinted from where it was strapped to Eckles's throat.

The ring.

I was suddenly reminded that I held a magical item that could restrain him if necessary, and my excitement at his 18 percent affection cooled. The memory of how he'd broken his cuffs and slaughtered all those men in the alleyway was still achingly vivid.

In Normal Mode, he'd been a courteous knight who'd remained loyal to his mistress even though she was the villain of the story. But this untamed Eckles was dangerous beyond imagination. It occurred to me that perhaps the reason he had stayed so loyal to Penelope originally was only because of the choker.

I can't let his sweet face fool me. He killed a pack of hyenas with his bare hands and a wooden sword, I reminded myself, resolving that I needed to stay on guard.

"I didn't mean I wanted you to service me in bed," I said.

"Then what do you…?" Eckles trailed off hesitantly, unsure what I wanted from him.

"You heard what I said earlier, didn't you? I brought you here to make you my personal guard."

"Yes," Eckles replied softly.

"Your first duty is to get the residents of the estate to accept your presence here."

"My…duty?"

"Correct. I can't insist they keep someone around forever if they provide no worth," I said dryly, making it clear what I expected. *Wait, did that come off as too callous?* I forced myself to adopt a kinder tone. "I trust you won't let me down. You can do that for me,

can’t you?”

Eckles nodded slowly, and his gray eyes seemed to sparkle as he gazed at me.

[Affection: 20%]

His affection suddenly increased, putting his meter the closest so far to Normal Mode’s 30 percent starting point.

Haah… And even when I do finally get to thirty percent, I’ll still have such a long way to go before I reach an ending. I felt tired just thinking of the work ahead of me.

“Emily, show Eckles to whatever room Pennel prepared for him.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Before I could move, Eckles called out to me.

“Mistress,” he said, sounding just as drained as I felt. “I’ll work hard to earn your praise.”

Blinking, I reached out and stroked his dirty hair, playing it cool and pretending it was nothing. Eckles eagerly rubbed his head against my palm.

The terror I’d felt when he’d slaughtered those people was still fresh in my mind, yes, but I was also hopeful that I’d made the right choice, and that I could one day escape this world.

“I’m so happy it was you who saved me, Mistress.”

And that hope was what moved me forward.



After successfully bringing Eckles to the manor, I locked myself in my room for a while on the pretext of self-probation, pretending to be penitent for my behavior. The duke and Derrick ended up letting him stay, the alibi I had created doing its job splendidly. They also made no comment when I didn’t show my face around the manor, shutting myself away for days on end.

However, I was kept up to date on news by Emily. Hearing that the duke had been searching high and low throughout the empire for a noble by the name of Kluy made a chill run down my spine.

She also told me the knights of the estate were undergoing harsher training and discipline.

He won't actually succeed in finding that pig of a man, will he…?

Not that anything would happen to me even if he was found, of course. But I did feel a bit guilty, as things had quickly gotten out of hand, spiraling in a direction I hadn't predicted.

"Ugh, whatever!" I said, pulling myself out of my thoughts. I threw aside the book I'd been holding and flopped onto my bed, the partly drawn curtains allowing the warm sunlight of noon to stream in.

Perhaps because I'd just cleared the massive hurdle that was the "saving Eckles" episode, the game seemed to have granted me a brief period of peace. I could stay in bed until late afternoon, nibbling on snacks and reading, and no one came to bother me.

Probation really is the best. I wished Derrick would confine me to my room until I reached one of the game's endings. I didn't have to do the laundry or clean, and food was brought up to me at mealtimes. What a life!

Knock, knock.

"Goodness! You're still in bed, Miss? Get up—it's time for lunch," Emily said from the doorway. *Just when I was thinking about what a sweet deal this is… Creepily accurate timing.*

"What's on the menu today?" I asked lazily, not moving from where I lounged as Emily brought in a tray.

"Sweet pumpkin salad and roasted drumsticks."

"That's it?"

Today's lunch was disappointingly simple, and I let it show on my face.

"I told the chef you wanted something spicy, and he developed a special sauce."

"Really?" I perked up, sitting up immediately with a smile.

I'd been nagging Emily about wanting to eat spicy chicken for a while now, and it had finally reached the chef's ears.

"Speaking of, Miss, it seems your tastes have completely changed recently. You only ever used to like bland foods…," Emily mused, looking puzzled as she arranged the plates in front of me on the

table.

I felt a twinge of anxiety. Emily might have looked down on and hated Penelope, but she'd still served her for many years. I could tell she was confused at times by the slight changes she saw in her mistress.

"People's palates develop with age, you know," I said nonchalantly, raising my fork.

"That's true," Emily said, nodding placidly.

Luckily, her bemusement was quickly alleviated.

"Lunch is served," Emily said, gesturing for me to eat.

Gone was the girl who'd played tricks with my food. She had separated the meat from the bone and placed it on my plate, allowing me to eat the chicken without any effort whatsoever on my part.

"Does it taste okay? Please chew slowly." She was busy making sure I was eating properly even though she'd already deboned the meat, her attitude so devoted that I was finding it hard to reconcile the maid in front of me with her previous self.

Still, that didn't mean I wasn't on high alert whenever mealtime came. She probably had no idea I was studying her suspiciously, even as I ate everything she gave me.

This should be sweeter… It's not the spicy-sweet yangnyeom *flavor I was looking for.*

After tasting the food carefully, I only started eating in earnest when nothing seemed to be wrong with it. What I'd really wanted was the spicy fried chicken I'd sometimes eaten with my friends at university, but the chef's efforts had only resulted in drumsticks that stung my tongue, nothing more.

I'll have to nag Emily about adding a sweet-and-salty flavor now.

Though it wasn't the taste I was craving, I still enjoyed the numbing sensation on my tongue, having not had anything spicy for some time now. Soon enough, I'd eaten the plate clean.

"I'm full now," I announced, putting down my fork. Emily quickly cleared away the plates and served dessert.

"The Founding Festival is nearly over," she said, making small talk as I devoured my melon sherbet.

"That so?"

"Mm-hmm! I'm so used to you attending every festival and bringing back all sorts of gems. Was there nothing to your liking this time?"

"Something like that," I equivocated.

I'd been too busy to even take note of what was being sold, though her words made me recall that Reynold had said something similar. Original Penelope must have been seriously obsessed with jewelry.

Quite the diligent spender.

Imagining her going from stall to stall during the festival and purchasing endless piles of gems made me feel numb all over again.

"Oh, by the way! The butler asked me to tell you that your order from the jeweler has arrived," Emily said.

"…My order?"

"You summoned the jeweler before the festival began, remember?"

"Ah."

Her words finally rang a bell, bringing to mind a certain someone I'd completely forgotten because of the Eckles ordeal.

"Do you want me to go fetch it for you?" Emily asked, noticing that my expression had grown pensive.

I nodded absently. "Yes. Right away, please."

Emily soon returned with a box small enough to hold a single item of jewelry. It was wrapped in fine velvet, luxurious at even a passing glance. I took the box from her and opened it.

"Wow! The color is so beautiful!" Emily exclaimed at the sight of the round jewels, which were the same navy blue as the deep sea. Lapis lazuli usually had small flecks of gold or white, and the fewer such imperfections it had and the darker the navy color, the more expensive it was. I rotated the box, checking for flaws, but there wasn't a single impurity to be found in the dark-blue gemstones.

"I like them," I said in appraisal, setting the box down on my desk. The jeweler had bragged endlessly about the high quality of his wares—and he had delivered—so I didn't regret the lavish expense.

"Are these a gift for the duke, Miss?" Emily asked innocently as she peered at the enormous lapis lazuli twinkling from where they were set in men's cuff links.

Yeah right, I thought bitterly, and I swiftly changed the subject instead.

"Emily. Would you bring me one of my jewelry boxes? Any will do," I said.

"A jewelry box? Right away!" She seemed perplexed by the request but complied without question. With a soft thump, she set down a large, heavy wooden box on the desk. I pretended to mull something over before addressing her.

"I have an errand I need someone to run for me."

"Yes? What is it?" she asked curiously.

"Do you know anything about the information guilds in the merchant district?"

"Information guilds…" Emily hesitated. "I don't know much about them myself, but the girl I share a room with probably would. She used to be an errand girl in that district before she started working at the manor."

"Really?" I paused again. "What's her name?"

"L-Lena, Miss…"

"And where is she now?"

"B-but, Miss, if there's something you need done, I can do it better than Lena!" Emily rushed to say. "She knows a lot, yes, but she has a big mouth."

She carefully studied my reaction. It was as though she was afraid I'd cast her aside for this other maid.

"Emily, it is of the utmost importance that this task is completed in secrecy. Extreme discretion will be necessary." It was because of this task that I'd insisted on taking Emily back as my personal maid in the first place. From the start, there had been no other suitable candidate.

"You're asking me to trust you with this? Aren't you the one who looked down on me all these years?" I continued, intentionally riling her up.

"M-Miss Penelope!"

It was a sore subject that hadn't been brought up in a while. At the reminder of her past behavior, Emily's face drained of all color.

"I—I haven't even thought of doing anything to disrespect you since then, Miss! I-I've been nothing but devoted to you. How could you think—?" Emily choked up, close to tears as she whined about the perceived injustice.

"Anyone in the manor could say the same about their recent behavior toward me," I pointed out coldly.

She immediately fell silent.

"I…I think…," Emily started to say, the tears in her eyes drying up as she fell into deep thought. Her attitude suddenly took an abrupt turn. "You know how perceptive I can be, Miss."

I marveled at the sudden 180. *That was pretty impressive, I'm not gonna lie.* Emily was definitely quicker on the uptake compared with the other NPCs in the game. Then again, that was probably how she'd succeeded in tormenting Penelope with the needle she kept hidden in her hair for so many years.

Emily continued her earnest appeal, unaware of what I was thinking. "Please remember, Miss, I haven't made a single mistake with any of the duties you've given me so far."

"…"

"Please leave this to me. After all, I'm your personal maid…"

There was a long silence, the only audible sound my finger tapping deliberately against the desktop. Emily grew more and more nervous the longer the silence stretched, shifting uncomfortably.

"Fine." I finally accepted. "I'll trust you this time."

"Miss…" Emily gazed at me with an oddly sentimental expression.

Frankly, after threatening her with the needle, I thought it unlikely that she might harbor any goodwill toward me. However, the idea that I could begin to favor one of the other maids seemed to inspire some loyalty in her.

"Thank you, Miss! I promise I won't disappoint you!"

At her effusive bows, I nodded nonchalantly and moved back to the subject at hand.

"Open the jewelry box," I said.

Perhaps afraid I would change my mind if given the chance, she

hastily did as I instructed.

"Until I'm finished with this self-imposed probation, I'd like you to go to the guilds every morning after you've served my breakfast. I need them to find someone for me."

"Find someone? Wh-who are you looking for?"

"I'll write a description down and give it to you. Show it only to the highest-ranked members of the guilds. You're free to use as many of the jewels in that box as you need to commission their services."

The box Emily had pulled out earlier was filled to the brim with shining gemstones, an obvious display of the extravagant taste of the duke's adopted daughter. Since Penelope didn't possess a large sum of gold, the only currency I had at my disposal was her collection of gems. Even if I had to use the whole box, it didn't really matter, since there were plenty more where this one came from.

"Yes! I can do that, Miss! I'm sure you'll find whoever it is you're looking for in no time," Emily assured.

"There's a catch. You can't go to the run-of-the-mill guilds that specialize in finding people."

Emily's eyes went wide. "Wh-where would you have me go, then?"

"I need establishments that deal in the most obscure of objects and information—organizations that only the high-ranking nobles would turn to. You'll have no trouble doing that for me, will you?" I asked, my voice dripping with honey.

"Of course not! Leave it to me!" Emily said in promise.

I'd learned from the game that the guild run by Winter was the largest and most well-known of the establishments that provided the services I'd specified. *It should be easy enough to find him.*

Of course, I already knew that he was both a marquis and a sorcerer, and that he secretly doubled as the head of an information guild. If my goal was simply to meet him, all I had to do was frequent the parties he'd be expected to attend.

But Winter was the next-best love interest after Eckles, and I'd decided to use the knowledge I'd gleaned from playing Normal Mode to pursue a more…dramatic meeting.

[As soon as she returns to the ducal manor, the heroine searches for the benefactor who helped her locate her real family. All she knows about him is that he is a sorcerer, and that he wears a rabbit mask.

At the party held in celebration of her debut as the "true daughter of the duke," she encounters Winter. His eye color makes it immediately obvious to her that he is the man she is looking for.]

It barely made any sense. How do you recognize a person by only their eye color?

I'd been grateful for how easy the episode had been when I'd played the game, but that wasn't relevant now. I had no intention of attending endless parties just so I could run into Winter.

I'll make him come to me.

"One more thing," I said to Emily primly. "Make it obvious you've been sent by a daughter of a noble house."

"Huh? But how do I do that?" Emily asked.

"Act secretive, like you've been tasked with finding a young lady's missed connection—a man she fell for at first sight," I told her, making my voice demure.

"Oh my! Miss!" Emily jumped out of her seat. "It might be faster to just ask *me* about this man."

I frowned at her reaction.

"All we maids do is talk about the nobility. If he's an unmarried, handsome nobleman, we're sure to know all about him—"

"Emily," I said, cutting her off. "Can you do it or not? That's all I want to hear."

"I can, Miss! I'll find out all about the man who's stolen your heart—"

"It's not like that," I protested. I could practically see the delusional fantasies she was mentally concocting.

You have no idea what's going on inside my head.

Emily didn't listen, though, her eyes glittering happily. "Our Miss Penelope has finally let springtime into her heart…"

I pulled up my sleeve and showed her the back of my hand,

forcing her back to reality.

"Be careful and discreet, Emily. The ultimate fate of your sewing needle is on the line," I warned, eliciting a gasp from the maid.

"I'm giving you a big opportunity here," I said. "Don't waste it. You wouldn't want to be kicked out of the manor for real this time because you did something I didn't want you to, would you?"

The stab marks had faded, leaving the pale skin of my hands unblemished, but Emily had no trouble remembering my threats all the same. She gathered herself, assuming a more reserved expression.

Have I…grown attached to her? I felt a little apologetic for being so harsh on the girl.

Knock, knock.

As I was contemplating my feelings, someone knocked on the door.

"It's Pennel, Miss," the butler said, announcing himself.

He hadn't thrown open the door without permission since I'd reprimanded him, but I still waited a few moments to respond.

"Come in," I said finally. I watched as the butler opened the door cautiously and bowed. "What is it?"

"An invitation has arrived for you from the Imperial Palace."

"For me?" I asked, confused. To my knowledge, there were no major events planned to follow the second prince's recent birthday celebration.

"Indeed. It seems a modest victory commemoration party is to be held on the last day of the Founding Festival."

My expression soured. *With the number of parties they're holding, it seems like Imperial Party Hall would be a more fitting name than the Imperial Palace.*

"But didn't they already have a huge banquet for the army's homecoming?"

"Yes, but this party is to be hosted by the crown prince himself," replied the butler. I felt my body tense until it was as rigid as an unoiled machine.

"The…crown…prince?"

The air in the room instantly turned ice-cold, like a tundra. The

mere mention of the crown prince was practically taboo in the manor.

All at once, I remembered his chilling crimson eyes and the fiery way they'd burned, as if reminding me he could slit my throat at any moment. My wound had healed, and I'd removed the bandages long ago, but just thinking of him made my neck throb again. *I can't ignore an invitation from the palace without serious repercussions.*

My hands quivered. Clasping them tightly, I asked, "What…what did Father have to say about this?"

"Actually…" The butler, who was usually unfailingly prompt to reply, seemed to hesitate. "The invitation was for you only, Miss… As such, His Grace is yet unaware."

"Son of a—" I slammed my fist on the table and shot to my feet, unable to contain my emotions any longer.

"M-Miss!"

Both the butler and Emily stared at me, aghast. I wasn't paying attention to them, though.

Is he out of his damn mind?! He's worse here than he was in the actual game!

That nutjob hadn't forgotten about me. In fact, I was certain he was doing this on purpose. I hadn't visited the palace since the second prince's birthday celebration, so now he'd decided to force me into the open in a bid to kill me.

—"But the next time we meet, I'll have you regale me in full detail just why, how, and when you started to fall for me."

I shuddered as his sinister words replayed in my mind.

There was never any episode like this that I played before, you stupid game! I concentrated, trying to remember the original storylines. But even if nothing came to mind, basing it on my recollections wasn't reliable—I'd never actually managed to get Penelope out of the maze garden alive, after all.

"Wh-what would you like me to do about the invitation, Miss?" the butler asked cautiously, wary of my visible rage.

“Haah… What other option do I have?” I exhaled heavily, sweeping my dark-pink hair aside. “I’m sick,” I said. Taking a seat once more, I laid backward dramatically. Letting my body melt into the chair, I went limp, as if I suddenly felt faint.

“I’m burning to death with a fever, Pennel,” I said weakly, my eyes falling half-shut. The butler stood confused for a moment before quickly catching on.

“Our young mistress has fallen ill. Oh, how terrible. Whatever shall we do?” he asked in full display of the canniness that working at Eckhart Manor for decades had taught him. “A cold, is it?”

“Probably better to add that I’m still suffering from metal poisoning caused by the sword injury.”

“Understood, Miss,” the butler said as he bowed deeply, and he hurried from the room.

“Haah.” I sighed again. Hoping to lessen the pounding in my head, I pressed a hand to my forehead. Emily peered at me in worry.

“Miss, are you all right? Do you want me to inform the duke that you need a doctor?”

“No, that’s not necessary—,” I replied reflexively before thinking better of it. “Actually, yes. Please call a doctor.”

I’d make my illness common knowledge around the estate so I could stay in my room a little longer.

I’m not leaving my bed for a while, much less the manor.

I’d stay the hell inside until the crown prince lost interest in me altogether.



Emily carried out my instructions to a T as I continued to stay confined to my room. *Good thing the jeweler finished the cuff links in a timely manner.* Because the festival was in full swing, nobody thought it conspicuous that Emily kept leaving the manor on odd errands.

"They all seemed reluctant at first, but they changed their tune when I brought out the gems," Emily reported.

She had visited the establishments of four information guilds over the past two days. I barely paid attention to most of what she had to say until she mentioned a strange place with no employees besides a single man in a white rabbit mask. The description matched what I knew of Winter from the game.

Good. The bait's been cast.

I raised a hand to stop Emily from continuing to wax on about her findings.

"Nice work. It can't have been easy, especially with the rain we've been having. Go back to your room and get some rest."

"Thank you. I'll be back at dinnertime, then!" Emily said enthusiastically, unbothered by her soaking wet clothes and dripping hair. Luckily, she didn't seem to have caught a cold while running around outside.

The door clicked shut behind her, sending the room into silence again. I turned to look out the large window. The fair weather of a few days ago was gone, the outside world overlaid in a gloomy gray.

"Why does it have to rain all day…?"

Staring out the window with my chin in my hand and watching the downpour made me feel depressed. I hated rainy days—they always revealed things I wanted to hide.

As a child, I'd envied my peers who had mothers to come pick them up after school with an umbrella. I'd always walk alone across the schoolyard with nothing to cover me, and every time someone innocently asked, "Where's your mother?" it made me feel miserable and embarrassed.

Those childish emotions changed little even as I'd grown older. The other kids would leave school in groups of three or more, attaching themselves to those who had the foresight to bring an umbrella. Then there was Asshole #2…

—"*Young Master! Over here, quickly!*"

—"*Tch, it wasn't supposed to rain today. Now I'm all wet.*

Hurry up and get me home, Secretary Kim."
—"What of the Young Miss…?"
—"What about her? She can find her own way home. C'mon, hurry!"

The car had driven away, leaving me standing alone on the empty school grounds.

"…So annoying," I muttered, the unbidden memory bringing a scowl to my face. I shook my head, trying to banish my sudden melancholy. "I'm in no position to be sitting around and watching the rain."

I stood abruptly. *That's right.* I should be doing anything I could to get out of this sucky game as soon as possible.

Umbrella in hand, I sneaked out of my room.

The grounds were enveloped in a thick layer of fog, totally silent. The persistent rain meant no one was inclined to brave the elements.

I slowly made my way through the garden. I'd come outside wanting to busy myself with something, but I couldn't think of anything to do now that I had left the manor behind.

Following wherever my feet led me, I ended up in a secluded part of the estate, somewhere the duke's sons were unlikely to find me. *Squelch, squelch.* My footsteps made a soft splatting sound as I walked along the muddy path, lost in thought.

Eventually pulling myself out of my reverie, I took note of my surroundings, realizing they were familiar.

"This place…"

I'd found myself on the wooded path that led to the training field. Having scoured the manor's surroundings for days searching for that doghole in the wall, I could recognize where I was on the manor grounds with but a glance.

"I might run into Reynold here," I muttered, hesitating.

I'd already met him once on this path, back when he'd been returning from training. And not just Reynold—there was the very

real possibility of encountering Derrick here, too.

"Dammit…"

I'd come too far. Shaking my head, I spun around. I'd wanted to do something productive, sure, but that didn't mean I had any desire to see either of them. Now that I'd established that their affection seemed to improve only when they *didn't* see me, they were better left alone.

I was making my way back to the manor when I heard a soft whistling noise and paused. *Fwoosh, whish.* It was the sound of a blade swinging repeatedly through the air.

Someone is training in this weather?

I'd heard multiple times recently that the knights were being put through much more rigorous training, a fact that left me a little disconcerted. The knights were not idiots. They would know I'd brought home a slave to be my personal guard, which had in turn inadvertently made their lives a whole lot more miserable.

I resumed walking slowly. Frankly, I was a bit curious about how the knights would react to me now. *I wonder if they curse me as they lie in bed at night.* Not that I really cared. It was Penelope they hated, not me.

I should also probably do my due diligence and make sure Eckles is settling in.

When I arrived at the training field, however, there was no one around, save for a single individual swinging a wooden sword off to the side. I almost failed to see him, since his drenched gray-brown hair nearly matched the color of the storm clouds in the sky.

Moving quietly and slowly so as not to catch his attention, I drew near to get a clearer look.

He'd removed his shirt and was repeatedly sweeping his sword in practice swings both high and low. His back and shoulders were dense with muscles that rippled with each of his movements. They were also riddled with deep scars. Rather than eliciting pity, they made him look fierce.

He must be cold…

He was so focused on his drills that he didn't notice my approach. I was directly behind him when he finally reacted. With a gust of air,

he twisted around lightning quick.

Swoosh. I heard the air parting before the blade and blinked. Before I'd even realized it, there was a wooden sword pressed against my neck.

Eckles panted as he gazed at me, shoulders heaving.

The hairs on my arms stood on end at the menace in his gaze. The simple training routine I'd witnessed shortly ago was incongruous with his ultra-swift reflexes. As recognition dawned on Eckles, the venom in his eyes faded, replaced slowly by confusion. His face fell when he fully registered who it was that he held at sword point.

"M-Mistress."

His voice is trembling… He must be really shocked.

All at once, I realized I hadn't taken a breath since he'd turned to me. My lips quivered, and I finally let go of the breath I'd been holding.

"It's…," I began, doing my best to look unconcerned and unafraid despite the sword still at my neck. "It's raining out, Eckles."

His storm-gray eyes glinted as he stared at me, the letters above his head twinkling in tandem.

[Affection: 23%]

Though his affection had gone up by 3 percent in a short period of time, I couldn't find it in me to be pleased, considering our current positions.

"What are you doing here?" Eckles asked softly.

"How about lowering your sword first, hmm?" I asked, flicking my eyes down at the weapon. "It's uncomfortable."

"Ah…!" he exclaimed.

With a movement so fast I couldn't catch it, the sword was gone from my neck. The blade whizzed through the air as he swung it upward, holding it above his head. Its long shadow fell over my face, and I flinched, closing my eyes involuntarily.

I knew it was unlikely, but I couldn't help being scared that he might use it to strike me.

The sound of something splintering forced my eyes to snap open. Before me, the sword lay on the ground, snapped in two pieces.

What the…?

My eyes slowly tracked from the sword to Eckles as he fell to his knees in the mud.

"Mistress."

"…"

"I've wronged you." He bowed his head in a kneel, begging for forgiveness. "I…I dared to…" The way his face contorted reminded me of a child about to burst into tears.

"Punish me."

The rain was beginning to come down more heavily. Droplets dripped endlessly down Eckles's face, running over the curves of his shapely nose and sharp jawline.

He looked pathetic.

But I recognized immediately where his gaze had fallen—intently focused on the red ruby that adorned my left index finger. I sighed, barely audible, glancing between Eckles and the discarded pieces of the broken wood.

He's asking me to punish him, but he looks ready to attack if I so much as raise a finger against him.

It seemed Eckles had thrown the pieces of sword aside with force, as they'd ended up half-buried in the mud, the sharp, jagged edges pointing skyward. I had a sneaking suspicion that were I unfortunate enough to trip and fall, I would end up impaled on them.

Urk… The thought alone made me tremble.

All of a sudden, I was reminded of the dialogue prompts I had turned off.

This is the type of scene where I'd have died at every turn in the real game. I'd have reset over and over until I could finally make the right choices and get out alive.

Of course, I couldn't be 100 percent certain, since I hadn't played Eckles's route in Hard Mode. But I'd spent enough time in this game world to instinctively know I'd reached a crossroads.

What does Penelope need to say to survive this?

I regarded Eckles—still kneeling at my feet—with cold eyes. His eyes were fixed pitifully on the ground as the rain poured down on

him. *I wonder what's going on inside his head.*

His home country had fallen overnight, leaving a talented swordsman at rock bottom, nothing but a slave groveling on his knees. He probably hated the arrogant woman who had bought him for an extravagant price and surely despised his current situation, which forced him to bow his head obediently if he wanted to survive.

It wasn't hard to guess how he was feeling. He'd immediately attacked when he'd realized someone was behind him, and I'd seen for myself the venomous hostility in his eyes. It told me everything I needed to know about the rage that must be simmering within him.

I knew there was only one viable solution: I had to smile innocently like the heroine of Normal Mode, who knew nothing about the way the world really worked. *I just need to tell him that it's all right, that everything is fine.*

But…I couldn't bring myself to say those empty words. *How can I when everything is the opposite of fine?*

How can I when I nearly met my death from the blow of a practice sword?

"Eckles…," I said, clenching my quivering hands into fists. If I refused to give him false platitudes, I'd need to change tactics. "Has someone been bullying you?"

Even though I'd rescued Eckles according to my plan, I was far from in the clear, constantly on my toes and thinking of different ways to survive. This wouldn't change as long as I was playing Penelope—as long as I was the villain of this story.

"As far as I'm aware, the knights who serve my family are treated very well. Why are you training in this weather?" I asked.

"…"

"And all alone, at that," I said, forcing myself to smile. All the while I was keeping a wary eye on him, just in case he suddenly shoved me toward the jagged wooden sword pieces.

"Hmm?" I pressed. Eckles's face was devoid of emotion, and he continued to stare blankly.

"Come on, you're soaking wet," I said, trying again.

I knew it was useless at this point, but I bent down, tilting my umbrella so that it shielded him from the rain.

His long lashes were heavy with dewy raindrops. I reached out and delicately wiped some of the moisture from his eyes.

"Tell me, who had the nerve to put you up to this?"

Eckles flinched when I brushed my hand against his face, as if my fingers were hot brands.

When he finally spoke, his voice was almost a sigh. "…No one."

"…"

"No one forced me to come here."

"Why are you out here, then?" I asked softly.

"It's just… I…" He trailed off. His eyes moved from my hand up to my face. "I want to become a real knight as fast as I can so I can stay by your side…"

"…"

"That's why I was training alone, Mistress."

"How admirable," I said, smiling gently.

His gray gaze focused on me, losing its watery sheen.

"I'll have to reward you for working so hard."

The letters above Eckles's head began to blink again. I did my best to tamp down my emotional turmoil so that nothing showed on my face.

"Should I have the servants set up a tent so that you can train even when it rains? Or is there something else you'd like?"

"…" Eckles shook his head silently. My eyes fell to the broken wooden sword in the ground.

"Oh, of course. Your sword's broken. I'll get you a new one," I offered.

"…"

"I'll call over a weapons dealer. Or would a blacksmith be better? A completely new weapon could be forged for you—"

"Mistress," Eckles said, cutting me off. "I want you to visit me often."

His reply baffled me. I regarded him with wide eyes as he continued.

"You haven't come to see me once since you brought me here…"

"…"

"I thought you'd forgotten about me."

There was something like blind devotion in the eyes that gazed at me, as if he was desperate for my affection.

"Ha…" A mocking laugh—it might have been directed at myself; I couldn't be sure—escaped my lips.

I get it now. I'd found the dissonance strange—a killing machine who could dispatch others as easily as he could kneel at my feet.

Just as I played the role of kind and loving master to garner affection, so, too, was Eckles acting the loyal dog to ensure his own survival.

Except I might've picked up a wolf cub instead of a lapdog.

Like a fool, I'd never once considered that pursuing Eckles would have its own dangers, but now? I wasn't so sure anymore. I hadn't gone down all possible routes in Hard Mode, something that was apparently coming back to bite me.

Be all that as it may, it was too late to stop at this point.

"…Very well. If that's what you want," I acquiesced.

[Affection: 25%]

Eckles smiled faintly at my agreement.

"You're going to catch a cold, Eckles." His lips had slowly begun to turn blue since he'd stopped his grueling training.

I'd kept my voice as gentle as I could but showed no hesitation as I straightened, taking my umbrella with me. The rain began pelting Eckles's naked upper body once more.

"Stop training for today. That's an order." I turned abruptly and was already several paces away when he called after me softly.

"Mistress."

I glanced back and found him still kneeling in the mud. His eyes were glued to me, and he wasn't bothering to try escaping the rain, as if the thought hadn't even occurred to him.

"…Won't you punish me?"

"…"

"I nearly hurt you."

No, not just hurt—you almost killed me.

My lips pursed, but I forced them into a smile.

"Punishing a loyal knight over something so trivial would make me a fool, Eckles."

"…"

"You didn't do it on purpose, did you?" I swiveled and strode away before he could answer.

I could feel his eyes watching me as I left the training field.

My one and only guardian knight… I had neither commanded him to get up, nor granted him forgiveness.

Fortunately, he didn't try to call out for me again.

I fled down the path, uncaring that my dress was getting soaked. My quick retreat through the grounds was in stark contrast to my earlier meandering, when I'd been walking carefully in order to keep my skirts dry.

There's nothing safe about Eckles's route.

This discovery left me dismayed, though it wasn't anything new, all things considered. All five main love interests started with zero or negative affection. I'd died more times than I could count at every step of the way while playing through Hard Mode. What had I been thinking, expecting an easy way out of this?

What did I ever see in him for me to approach him so fearlessly?

Just remembering the kiss of the wooden sword against my neck made me feel dizzy all over again.

"Ah…"

I came to a stop. Unaware that I was still partly exposed to the rain, I leaned against the wooden pole I had found myself standing next to. My knees felt as if they might give out at any second. I glared into the fog until the dizzy spell cleared.

And at that moment, I suddenly knew: "I need to meet with Winter as soon as possible."

Eckles had the highest affection of any of the love interests—25 percent—but there was something I felt I was overlooking that continued to bother me. Derrick's and Reynold's affection rose by only 2 to 3 percent at a time, 5 percent in very rare cases. But Eckles, whom I'd only met a few days ago, had an affection that was jumping up at unprecedented speeds.

The faster the climb, the harder the fall.

In Hard Mode, drops in affection meters had often been caused by the most unexpected things. Eckles was my first choice for getting out of the game world, but I couldn't put all my eggs in one basket.

"…I should have a backup escape plan, just in case."

The ice-cold rain fell on my exposed arm, and the sensation brought my jumbled thoughts into focus.

"Yeah, that's all. This game is predictable, so there's no need to panic," I said, trying to console myself once more. My harried breathing slowed, and my wooziness receded like a low tide.

Glancing down, I noticed that the shoulder of my dress was also soaking wet. "Emily will make a fuss," I commented absently to myself. Tutting, I began walking again.

Now that I had calmed down, I'd finally begun to feel the cold. If I didn't hurry back inside, Penelope's weak body would no doubt come down with a fever of some sort.



The information guilds Emily had visited delivered results after only two days.

"Miss, here are the merchants' replies regarding the person you're searching for," Emily said, placing the cup of black tea and the cake I'd asked for on my desk and surreptitiously setting the envelopes down next to the tray.

The guilds' insignias were stamped in wax on each of them. After putting aside my book, I opened them. Inside each envelope was a single piece of paper with many names and houses scrawled down its length. The lists were almost identical, though there were slight discrepancies in how many names each contained.

"Is this it?" I asked as I skimmed through them.

Emily straightened her posture immediately, likely afraid that I was disappointed with the results. She quickly added, "The messengers told me it would be useful if you gave them a little more

information about the man you're looking for, Miss. It would help narrow down the possibilities…" She trailed off, shooting a nervous glance at the papers in my hand.

She'd been so certain that the search wouldn't take long, but the lists of names were far from short, so I wasn't surprised by her concern. I knew it wasn't Emily's fault, though.

A nobleman who attended the second prince's birthday celebration and carried a white handkerchief.

The written memo I'd given her to take to the guilds wasn't very descriptive. Most noblemen carried handkerchiefs with them when attending a party or banquet, after all. It was a matter of etiquette.

"I-I'll inquire at another information guild, Miss," Emily tried to assuage my apparent displeasure, her expression troubled.

"No. This will do just fine." Since I hadn't actually intended for them to find him in the first place, I shook my head at her suggestion. "I meant that you only gave me three envelopes. I thought you said you went to four establishments?"

"Ah…," Emily said, her face finally relaxing. "Come to think of it, one of them still hasn't replied," she said, tilting her head to the side.

I checked the three lists in my hand again. None of them bore the white rabbit seal I was looking for.

I thought he'd reply right away…

Surprisingly, I found myself disappointed by Winter's seeming lack of enthusiasm. *Well, if he isn't going to show his face, that leaves me with only one option.* I'd have to do what the heroine of Normal Mode had done and attend every party Winter was likely to show up at.

Talk about a bummer. I sighed quietly.

"Would you like me to try again?" Emily asked cautiously, noticing my chagrin.

"No. In any case, did you pay them for their services?"

"Yes. I sent each messenger back with the gems we'd agreed upon as payment."

"Well done," I said distractedly, mind already on all the approaching parties I could remember from Normal Mode. "As a reward for your hard work, you can have all the gems that are left in the jewelry box."

"But th-that's…!" Emily's jaw dropped at the unexpectedly big reward. "I—I couldn't possibly, Miss! I'll bring the box back after tidying up the gems."

"Why not? Are jewels not your thing? Would you prefer gold instead?"

"N-no, not at all!" She shook her head emphatically. "I…I don't want anything like that, Miss."

I paused, finally turning to look at Emily and finding an unhappy expression on her face.

Wouldn't most servants jump for joy if they were offered riches?

She almost seemed distressed as she continued, "I don't need compensation. I just—"

"Oh," I said, remembering what I'd originally put on the line. "Don't worry. I'll get rid of the needle, as promised."

"Y-you don't have to do that, either! You should keep it," Emily protested.

"Huh?" I was thoroughly confused at this point. *The needle's been making her anxious, but now she insists I hold on to it?*

"Tell me what it is that you want exactly," I demanded, frowning slightly.

Emily peered timidly at me, then slowly stuttered, "I—I…I want to be your true lady-in-waiting, Miss."

"…"

I studied her without showing any emotion, trying to guess what she meant.

"You're already my personal maid. I can't grant you much more than that, I'm afraid," I said indifferently.

"Miss!" Emily exclaimed, suddenly falling to her knees. "Please forgive me!"

"…"

"For so long, I committed the most awful sins against you. I…I don't know what I was thinking! I don't know how I dared… It's only

a given that you wouldn't trust me."

"Emily."

"B-but if you give me one more chance, I can prove myself useful…and worthy of being beside you!"

I was briefly at a loss for words. "…So you're saying you want to be my loyal right-hand woman?" I asked.

"Yes!"

I couldn't make sense of it. Up until now, Emily had been one of the most enthusiastic contributors to Penelope's tortured existence. Considered the "fake daughter," Penelope had been disrespected by even the servants. Such were the consequences of her position in House Eckhart.

Does Emily think she'll receive some reward greater than gems if she aligns herself with me?

Sadly, Penelope, who prodigiously wasted money from the family coffers, did not have any money set aside for her. She would beg the duke or the butler to call a merchant over to buy gems from time to time, but she had no other personal wealth. Emily had been her maid for years now and knew this better than anyone.

What is she up to? I peered at her suspiciously.

Emily's jaw set in determination. "Keep the needle and show it to His Grace if you ever come to think I'm undeserving of your trust."

"…Do you really mean that?" Emily nodded with conviction. I studied her closely, but sincerity was written all over her face.

I considered the girl kneeling at my feet. *I never would've expected this. Emily was an unimportant side character I'd regarded as nothing more than a pawn I could use once I'd given her the proper incentives. Why is she suddenly volunteering her undying support? Is this another one of the game's twists?*

Her change of heart would've made little sense in real life, but here, now? I wasn't complaining. *Having a loyal maid can't hurt.*

I didn't have to contemplate for long.

"Go ahead and put the remaining jewels back where they were, then," I said.

"Miss!"

Emily rose to her feet, eyes misty with emotion. It was clear she

understood that I'd accepted her proposition.

"Thank you! Thank you, Miss! I'll do my absolute best to serve you, now and forever!"

"Yeah, yeah. Get to it," I said, waving her off as she repeatedly thanked me.

As soon as the door finally clicked shut behind her, the white game system window reappeared.

<SYSTEM>
Your relationship with a manor inhabitant has improved.
Reputation has increased +10 points.
(TOTAL POINTS: 15)

"Hmm. Now that's interesting," I said, reading the message. I'd given up on my reputation practically at the start, but surprisingly, it kept improving without any deliberate effort.



The huge window in my room let in a stream of dazzling sunlight. I was sitting on the floor in front of it, dozing off, the table that was usually where I was now having been shoved aside.

I would've loved to go outside for a walk, but I didn't want to risk running into the crazy assholes that were my adoptive brothers. So getting some sun inside my room was the next-best thing, and it was actually brightening my mood a little.

It's so peaceful…

If I was being honest with myself, I knew I shouldn't be wasting time like this. I'd waited two more days after the first missives Emily brought me from the information guilds, but Winter still had yet to reply. This had forced me to turn to the butler of all people.

—"*Gather all the invitations we've received to parties that*

might attract high-ranking young noblemen."

I recalled my instruction and Pennel's reaction—the implication that I was growing socially active again had made him visibly nervous. I couldn't help but wonder how much trouble Penelope had caused in the past to cause such visceral alarm.

Haah… I guess this is how my happy, peaceful life in voluntary probation ends…

I was already dreading the prospect of attending a bunch of parties in search of Winter, so much so that I felt tears in my eyes even as I dozed.

Creeeak… The soft squealing of the window interrupted my moping. I'd left it ajar, but it was forced fully open as a great gust of wind blew into the room.

"Wh-what the…?!"

Jolting up in shock, I squinted and tried to keep my eyes open. But the wind was so powerful that I was forced to squeeze them shut. My hair fluttered around wildly, falling tangled into my face.

"Ugh!"

I crouched low, confused, but the wind died down as abruptly as it had started. The room was suddenly so silent that I wondered if I'd imagined the whole thing. I raised my head cautiously to peer around and take in my environment.

"What in the world…?"

"Squee?" Hearing a strange squeaking noise, I silently turned to locate its source.

What I found was a ball of white fur on the floor, sitting on the hem of my dress.

"Squee!"

No, not a ball of fur—a rabbit.

"Huh…?"

This absurd new series of developments left me at a complete loss. *A weird gust of wind, and now a rabbit?* I rubbed my eyes, worried I was seeing things, but the baby rabbit was still there when I opened them.

"Squee, squee!"

The small animal tilted its head at me as I stared down at it in astonishment. Then it hopped to where I was still crouched and came to a rest on my knee.

"Uh… Where did you come from, little guy? This is the second floor, you know…"

"Squee?"

"The wind can't have carried you in, right?" The rabbit didn't seem to understand me, blinking at me with its red eyes, nose twitching as it tilted its head again. "Ugh, what am I thinking? The actual problem would be if you *did* understand me."

The rabbit opened its mouth suddenly, its two tiny incisors peeking out.

Then it spoke.

"Your request has been fulfilled." The cute rabbit had the husky baritone of a grown man.

I froze for a second, then— "Gyah!" I screamed, recoiling. To my horror, the rabbit was flung off my knee. Thankfully, it seemed to have good reflexes, landing softly on its feet instead of crashing to the floor. It then proceeded to peer up at me innocently, as if nothing strange had happened.

"The hell? That voice just now…" I'd definitely heard a deep, masculine voice come from the rabbit. The creature was barely the size of my fist, but I stared at it in trepidation. It didn't speak in its strange voice again, though, and I muttered to myself, stupefied, "What was that? Am I hearing things, or—?"

"Your request has been fulfilled. If you wish to receive the information, kindly visit our guild in person," came the deep voice in response.

"Oh my god!" I freaked out once more, scrambling away quickly.

I was so desperate to get away from the rabbit that I soon felt the bedpost digging into my back. However, the animal didn't make any attempt to pursue me. In fact, it didn't move at all from where it sat on the plush carpet.

"This has been a message from the Guild of the White Rabbit. Thank you for your time," said the rabbit, and another gust of wind

blew through the room. When it had died down, and I was done fixing my bird's-nest hair, the fluffy white rabbit was nowhere to be seen.

"What was that…?"

I stared at the patch of carpet where the rabbit had been sitting moments ago, until I finally remembered that this was how Winter would contact the heroine in Normal Mode. He kept his identity a closely guarded secret and seldom did any task in person. His messages were delivered through small animals like birds, mice, or puppies.

Most common, though, were the white rabbits, in the theme of his merchant group's emblem. I vaguely recalled finding it quite romantic, but the game neglected to mention one shocking detail.

"No one ever said anything about talking creatures…"

The actual game had no voice actors. Winter's messages were written out as on-screen text, so I hadn't imagined that the animals would literally speak.

"Ha." Thinking back on the masculine voice that had come from the adorable baby rabbit's tiny mouth made me laugh. It was so silly. Why didn't he just send a letter or a messenger like a normal person?

Wait, this isn't foreshadowing that he's got some screws loose, too, is it?

The thought made me shiver, and I shook my head. I'd already been fooled by Eckles, whom I'd falsely considered to be an easy way out. Pursuing Winter was only insurance just in case Eckles's affection dropped for some unforeseeable reason. But if even Winter couldn't be trusted…

"Actually, yes. It's highly unlikely that all five of them are crazy," I muttered to myself, shooting down the possibility wholeheartedly.

I considered what I'd seen of Winter in Normal Mode and during our brief encounter at the palace. He was gentlemanly enough to offer his handkerchief without hesitation, even to the villain. Maybe he would turn out to be an even easier target than Eckles.

"I need to go see him before I decide anything."

Feeling a little calmer, I picked myself up off the floor. I had fled a

considerable distance from my original spot by the window. Looking back, I felt a little embarrassed that I'd scrambled away like a coward because of such a small, fluffy thing.

I hope he didn't see that.

In any case, Winter reaching out was great news for me. I wouldn't have to attend countless balls and festivities just for a chance at meeting him.

I'd just come to this satisfying conclusion when the white notification window popped up again.

<SYSTEM>
A new episode is available.
[The Enigmatic Sorcerer—Winter Verdandi]
Teleport to the guild?
[YES / NO]

"Crap, give me a second," I said, as if the game system could understand me.

I hurriedly began preparing. I needed to take a few precautions if I was going to leave without alerting anyone.

First, I found the cloak I'd worn when I'd rescued Eckles. I'd taken care to hide it deep in the closet despite Emily's protests and attempts to throw it away. Then I retrieved a sapphire necklace from one of the jewelry boxes, to be used as payment. I also gathered Winter's white handkerchief and a thank-you gift I thought he might like.

"Do I need to take this?" I wondered, eyeing the smiling mask Reynold had bought me at the festival.

Winter had sent the rabbit directly to my room, which meant trying to hide my identity would be redundant. On the other hand, I was trying to convincingly play the part of a noble young lady clandestinely searching for a man.

I'll stay true to that concept for now.

I put the mask on, and after a final look in the mirror, I dashed back over to the pop-up window.

"All right. Let's do this!"



There was a flash of light, and when I opened my eyes, I was standing in a quiet alleyway.

"Is this the place?"

A run-down-looking building stood in front of me, where the faint image of a rabbit was made almost invisible by the grain of its old wooden door. I recognized this as Winter's establishment, having seen it in the game art.

I approached the door, intending to knock. However, when I raised my hand to do so, the door opened by itself with a creak.

"Huh?"

A shiver went down my spine at the thought that someone was watching me. I peered into the dark interior before pushing the door open all the way and going inside.

The guild looked exactly as I remembered it. There was a desk, a bookcase, and a sofa for guests. It was just an ordinary office, and—strangely—it appeared to be totally empty.

"Where is he?"

I'd come almost immediately after receiving the rabbit's message and was disappointed to find the place vacant. *Should I go back to the manor? Hmm… There's no harm in waiting around for a bit since I'm already here.* I didn't know how to get back anyway and would have to borrow a carriage, which was basically the equivalent of a taxi in this world.

Despite this being a high-level information guild of great repute, they seemed to not have a single servant or employee. *What kind of guild doesn't have any servants? But then again, I suppose that's why he sends those nightmare rabbits with the fully grown male voices to pass on his messages…*

I pulled the door shut behind me and made my way to the sofa. *I'm a guest here, might as well make myself comfortable while I*

wait.

I was curiously examining the interior once more when— *Bang!* A loud booming noise reverberated throughout the room, the sofa vibrating beneath me.

"Wh-what the…?!" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet. The entire building seemed to shake for a moment before it returned to quiet stillness.

"Strange," I murmured, furrowing my brows in confusion. I was moving to retake my seat when the sound came again, this time accompanied by a vibration powerful enough to make me stumble and a distant rumbling sound.

"Whoa!" I yelped, grasping at the back of the sofa to hold myself steady. *I just want to see Winter, for goodness' sake! Why is nothing easy in this world?* The furniture wobbled under my grip, but once again, the shaking soon passed.

"I-is it an earthquake?" I grabbed on to the armrest, bracing myself for another tremor. I waited in tense silence, but everything remained still.

Quickly sliding off the sofa, I checked out the window. I had no knowledge of any natural disasters occurring in the game world and wanted to see how other people were reacting.

"Huh?"

The scene outside couldn't have been more peaceful. No one had run out in a panic despite the two enormous tremors. In fact, the street remained completely empty.

"I mean, even if it is a quiet alleyway… There are still other buildings here. Where are all the people?"

Because the festival was still in full swing, there would be pandemonium if an earthquake hit the capital now. I pressed my ear against the glass with a frown. *Maybe the window is soundproof and blocks all outside noise?*

At that moment, I heard a thumping noise—not from the alley, but from behind me, farther inside the building.

I turned and gasped at what I found: There were strange markings on the wall.

"What are those lines?" A large, perfect rectangle had been

drawn from the floor almost to the ceiling. *I should inspect it more closely.*

Thump! There was another loud sound, and I was now certain it was coming from behind this wall. I rushed over and ran my fingers over the lines that formed the rectangle.

"Wait…" They weren't lines, but cracks. *This is the outline of a door—probably a secret entrance!* "So you're a legit sorcerer, huh?" The idea that I'd found a secret passageway—the kind you'd usually only see in books and movies—made my heart pound with excitement.

In the game, Winter would appear whenever the heroine was feeling sad or upset, performing fancy little magic tricks for her. What the developers had been going for with Winter's character was pretty obvious—"Whenever you're feeling down, your own personal novelty key chain will appear out of nowhere and cheer you up with his cuteness!" or something fun like that. Ultimately, though, it was more style than substance.

The game was extremely easy in Normal Mode, Winter's ending especially so. Unlike the other picky love interests, he had been genuinely fond of the duke's true daughter from the moment he met her. His seemingly gentle nature was the reason I hadn't eliminated him as an option, in fact.

Well, now he's been turned into my backup man.

I laughed bitterly to myself, then frowned as I scanned the cracks in the wall once more. "How do I open it?" There was no doorknob and no indent—as one would find in a sliding door—that I could fit my fingers into. Just the thin outline to work with.

"This can't just be for decoration, can it?" I rubbed my chin, wondering what to make of it, before feeling along the cracks again. *Maybe there's a hidden button?* I was groping the wall when the game system window flashed into my vision.

<SYSTEM>
Hidden quest discovered!
[Unearth the Sorcerer's Secret]

<SYSTEM>
You have found the sorcerer's hidden space.
Enter?
(Reward: unspecified)
[YES / NO]

"What the…?" The last thing I'd been expecting to find was a quest, and I blinked at the notification with wide eyes. *This quest didn't show up in Normal Mode…*

I glanced at the reward and frowned. "Ugh!" Hidden quests, by their nature, never told you in advance what the reward would be. It was similar to the dialogue-prompts feature—both came with unknown boons.

"Should I accept?" I wondered, staring at the buttons hovering at eye level.

I only really cared about Winter's affection and had no interest in "unearthing his secret." *Everyone is entitled to their privacy, after all.* What use was it sticking my nose where it didn't belong? *It's not like I'll get an increase in affection out of it or anything. I might even end up losing more than I gain. Gah!*

I was reaching for the [NO] button when another loud banging noise made me pause. The sound was accompanied by low vibrations, and this time I was able to visibly see the wall shaking. "But then again… If this leads to a secret chamber, Winter might be inside."

Some time had passed since I'd arrived, and he had yet to appear. Maybe this was one of those mandatory Hard Mode quests I'd be forced to complete either way.

I read the hovering notification again carefully. There were no penalties for failing the quest, only the promise of a mysterious reward. I could only assume that meant everything would be okay even if I failed. Probably.

"All right. I came all this way, so I should at least try to see him before I leave." Making up my mind, I accepted the quest.

As soon as I did, the rectangular segment marked on the wall slid

aside, revealing a secret passageway. I entered without looking back.

Beyond the wall was a dark, broad corridor that stretched into the distance. Seen from the outside, this building should not have physically been able to contain such a long tunnel. I felt a surge of excitement, as if I were in a movie and going on an adventure.

The loud thumping sound and faint tremors from before returned, making me cover my ears. *What in the world is he up to?* I wondered with a frown.

The noises were coming from the end of the corridor, where a bright light was emanating from the room beyond. With my hands still clamped over my ears, I began making my way down the long passageway, then slowed to a stop when I reached the entrance.

Inside was a huge, sprawling room, probably as big as the property that stretched out behind the ducal manor. Countless bookcases lined every wall, each filled with various tomes. The duke's study housed an impressive collection of literature, but this was on par with a national library.

"Whoa…" I stared in awe at the magical expanse, which I hadn't encountered while playing the game. Besides the book-lined walls, the enormous room housed a myriad of other curiosities. Large glass display cases were scattered around, showcasing gems, accessories, and mysterious minerals I couldn't identify. I also spotted the stuffed pelts of creatures I'd never seen before and reconstructed large skeletons—perhaps once belonging to dinosaurs.

"It's…almost like a museum," I murmured dreamily. "Damn, this place is awesome." I never imagined I'd find something like this when I stepped through that secret door!

Deciding to venture deeper inside to explore, I lowered my hands from my ears. With a skip in my step, I made to look around before being promptly interrupted.

Boom! Thud!

The loud slamming noises and vibrations, momentarily forgotten, rudely pulled me out of the clouds and back down to earth.

"Hey, dummy! Aim for that spot!" a small voice cried.

"L-like this?" a different tiny voice asked.

"No, this way!" There was the sound of a small explosion, followed by a crunch.

"Eek! Watch out for the shards!"

A group of children was fleeing from one corner of the room, sharp ice fragments pouring out after them. The children all wore animal masks—there was a lion, a cat, a squirrel, a puppy, a pig…

"Dang it! Be careful! If we break the box inside, the guild master's gonna kill us!" shouted the lion-masked boy. He narrowly escaped being skewered by a spear of ice by tumble-rolling and springing back to his feet.

"Okay. I'll focus on the ice on the edges, then…," muttered another child glumly, raising the object in their hand.

A wand? Are they…young sorcerers?

A different child approached the ice and raised their wand, too. "You take the left side this time! I'll do the right!"

A total of five children now surrounded the chunk of ice that towered over them. I eyed the jagged, cold mass carefully. Something was encased within, and I had a feeling I'd seen it before. If my memory served correctly, it was…

An ancient sorcerer's artifact!

[Acquired: Ancient Sorcerer's Artifact!

Discovered by Winter in the north, this necklace is a relic once used by sorcerers of old. It changes color when toxic material is detected in its vicinity……

……All the surrounding artifacts were destroyed during its excavation from the ice, leaving only the necklace remaining. Due to its rarity, acquiring this item leads to a rise in Winter's affection of……]

I remembered the passage from the game but couldn't quite recall the exact percentage by which his affection would rise.

This is the event that leads to all artifacts save for the necklace being destroyed! My musings, however, were interrupted by chanting.

"*Nom perdanon fero thum!*" called the child in the pig mask, speaking in a strange language. A white ray of light resembling a laser beam immediately shot out of their wand. As soon as the light made contact with the ice, it erupted in a huge explosion. The children shrieked.

"Get out of the way!" one of them yelled, and they all split. When the smoke cleared, it revealed that a chunk of ice near the chest had been blasted away.

"Wow, guys, look! The corner's sticking out! We did it!"

"Whoa, we really did. Let's try that again, together this time!"

These clueless kids…! Artifacts need to be treated as gently as a newborn baby! I was horrified by the children's misplaced enthusiasm. If they continued, they would destroy the ice *and* the chest inside it.

"Kids!" I cried, rushing over to them.

"*Nom perdanon*…"

"Hey, knock it off!" I said, hastily stepping in front of the child who had been preparing to cast another spell. "What are you doing?"

Now that I was seeing them up close, the kids appeared to be maybe ten or eleven years old. And just as I finally had a good look at them, I, too, was suddenly being scrutinized by many pairs of clever little eyes.

The child with the lion mask pointed his small wand at me. "What the heck?! Who are you, old lady?!"

"'Old lady'?!" I was aghast and frankly affronted.

"Yeah, you're wearing an old noble-lady mask!" yelled the boy.

"Mm-hmm! You look like a scary noblewoman!" cried another of the children.

At their words, I was reminded of the mask I still had on. *Why are they saying it looks like an old noblewoman, though?* I wondered briefly what the children meant until it dawned on me that to them, the white smiling mask evoked the white makeup associated with women of the nobility.

"I'm not an old lady. I'm a patron of this guild," I said, forcing myself to calm down and explain like an adult. "Who are you kids?"

They all started speaking at the same time.

"We're the guild master's pupils."

"Idiot! You can't just tell her that!"

"But guests aren't allowed to come inside!"

"They aren't even *able* to! How is she here?"

I'd never been good with children, even in the real world. Watching as they shouted over each other, a memory suddenly came to me from my days in kindergarten of how our teacher used to settle a rowdy classroom.

"Kids! Stop, stop! Everyone, clap your hands!" I shouted and clapped my hands three times. None of the children followed along, no doubt finding the practice unfamiliar, but they all peered up at me quietly regardless. I spoke while I had the chance. "It doesn't really matter who I am or who you are. What matters is that you're about to destroy a precious artifact!"

The children stared blankly at me.

"Don't you have chisels and hammers? Did your guild master instruct you to destroy the ice with magic?" I was asking because I was actually curious, but the children reacted as if I was scolding them. They dropped their gazes to the ground, looking guilty.

"No…," murmured the child who'd pointed his wand at me, seeming put out. He then rummaged around in his pocket and withdrew something. "The guild master left us these, actually…"

A tiny ice pick and hammer sat in his hand. The other children produced their own sets as well.

"The ice is too thick to just use these, though!" complained one of them.

"And it's enchanted, too! The ice grows back super quick after you break it!" said another.

"We thought we could get it done fast if we used magic like the guild master would've…," murmured a third.

The children were obviously morose at the turn in conversation. With a sigh, I held out my hand.

"Give me those." After taking an ice pick and hammer from one of the kids, I approached the large mass of ice, which was nearly as tall as I was. The children, interest piqued, gathered behind me.

They were right.

The chunks of ice they'd blasted away were already re-forming. The corner of the chest that had been freed was slowly becoming encased again. I studied the growing ice carefully and realized that there seemed to be a limit to its regenerative ability. Upon closer inspection, the corner was still slightly exposed, the spread of the ice stopping before it was fully covered again.

I might be able to recover it if I do this just right.

I asked the lion-masked kid, "Do you have hot water?"

"Yes! We can conjure some with magic!"

"We don't want to damage the artifact. Can you spray it on the ice but make sure no water gets on the chest itself?"

The child nodded enthusiastically and held up his wand again. "Water Fission!"

A soft mist of water sprayed from the end of the wand, and moments later I called, "Okay, stop. Now, wait for my signal, then spray again."

"Got it!"

I'd ceased scolding them, choosing to deal with the situation myself. The hot water had melted the hard surface of the ice on contact. Careful to avoid the chest, I placed the tip of the pick into the softened ice and swung down hard on the handle with the hammer. With a cracking sound, a huge fracture formed in the ice around the chest.

Driving the pick into the crack a few more times, I soon was able to lift out a huge hunk of ice, revealing the corner of the chest in full again. I waited for a long moment, just watching, and my suspicions were confirmed. Eliminating the same area multiple times slowed the regeneration considerably.

"…I think this is the only way to remove the ice without harming the artifact."

"What do you mean?" asked a child.

"The old-fashioned way." I delivered the news without sympathy to the children staring up at me with shining eyes. "Don't try to take shortcuts with magic. You'll have to soften the ice and chip away at it piece by piece."

"Aww…" They all groaned in disappointment. *Looks like they were convinced they could take the easy way out.*

"The good news is that areas that've already been carved away seem to take longer to regenerate."

"So we chip away at the same part over and over?" one of the children asked.

"Correct," I said with a nod. "I'll work on the ice first with our little lion here. The rest of you, continue chipping away at the spot we choose right after, okay?"

"Okay!"

I was a little flattered, seeing their eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as they scrambled to obey. And feeling in my element was admittedly exciting.

With the eager children clamoring to follow my lead, I began helping to extract the artifact in earnest.

I'd read about the excavation process in books over and over, but I'd never gotten to try it before myself. *I thought I'd have plenty of opportunities once I went to college…* I smiled bitterly. I never imagined my long-awaited dream would come true for the first time after I was forced into a game world.

"Now, then. Try hammering right here. Make sure the pick doesn't come in contact with the chest—you'll scratch it."

"I want to try!"

"Me too, me too!"

Unexpectedly, the seemingly clumsy children had a more delicate touch than I did. We chipped away at the ice for a while, and by the time only half of the precious chest containing the artifact was exposed, we were all pretty wiped.

I'd expected the surrounding floor to end up soaked with water, but it was surprisingly dry, and much cleaner than it would have been if we'd been excavating dirt. This was mostly because—seemingly still enchanted—the ice flakes that fluttered to the ground didn't melt.

"Oof, my poor back…," I said, straightening from where I'd been crouched over the ice. My entire body was aching. The children were obviously feeling tired as well, grumbling and massaging their limbs.

"This is hard…"

"Too hard."

"But we're, like, halfway there!" shouted one of the children, doing their best to sound perky.

"Right, yeah!" responded another.

Surveying our work, I noticed that the chest didn't have a single scratch on it. I grinned. "Good work, everyone."

"It's all thanks to you, old lady!"

"Yep! It's 'cause the old lady taught us what to do!"

The children all rushed me at once, clapping in appreciation.

Don't make this "old lady" repeat herself—I told you not to call me that, I thought, ticked. However, since I was still wearing the mask, I begrudgingly resigned myself to the moniker and clapped along.

That was when a chilling voice rang out from behind me.

"And who might you be?"

I froze, my palms pressed together awkwardly, mid-clap. So engrossed in excavating the artifact, I'd forgotten why I'd come here in the first place.

"What are you doing here?" the voice continued.

I turned around stiffly, like my joints had suddenly rusted over. Standing a short distance away was a tall man in a white rabbit mask.

Winter Verdandi.

"I cast a spell on this place—no normal person should be able to recognize, much less enter, it." I could see navy-blue eyes glaring at me through the mask's eye holes, cold as the night sky. He slowly raised a large, heavy staff, pointing it at me. "That mask you're wearing—are you a sorcerer?"

A white light glowed at the top of the staff, and I had a sinking feeling the a spell might fly at me at any second. I gulped, trying desperately to think of what to say. "I'm here on a side quest" was very well out of the question.

What's the best way out of this predicament? Should I unmask myself while I'm ahead? Outright reveal my identity?

In my hesitation, the numbers above his head began to blink

precariously—

[Affection: 9%]

Then notification after notification popped up in rapid succession.

Affection –1%
Affection –2%
Affection –2%
Affection –1%

The flurry of small messages rolling into existence above his affection bar made my jaw drop and my heart stop.

What the…?! What's happening?!

[Affection: 3%]

No! Please, no! Stop!

His affection had dropped to 3 percent in an instant. And that clearly wasn't the end of it—the letters were still blinking threateningly, indicating they might change at any moment. I bit my quivering lower lip.

And here I thought there wouldn't be any penalty for accepting the quest. There was no warning! So why…?!

Thank goodness for small mercies. If my face hadn't been covered by the mask, I might have straight up burst into tears at this turn of events.

Winter jerked his staff, which was still aimed in my direction. "It would be in your best interest to explain how you got in here," he pressed, a threat concealed under his polite tone.

"Y-you see…," I started. I hadn't experienced such a sudden plummet in affection since waking up in this world, so my mind was drawing a blank. I couldn't think of a single excuse in my stupor. My lips opened and closed helplessly, but no words came out.

"We brought her here!" one of the children cried as they all ran in front of me, forming a barrier between us. "This old lady knows a ton about excavating artifacts, so we asked her to help us!"

"That's right!" another little voice hollered.

"We're nearly done thanks to her! See!"

They pointed at the chunk of ice behind us. Winter looked over, and his eyes widened briefly before he addressed the children.

"How many times have I told you that outsiders are never to be allowed in here?" he said sternly.

"But she said she was a patron!"

"And the task you gave us was waaay too hard…"

I hadn't expected the children to stand up for me. After all, we'd only met a few hours ago. I barely had time to sit in my appreciation, though. Winter's cold stare had changed as soon as he heard the word *patron* leave the child's lips. He glanced between the artifact and me before lowering his glowing staff and bowing politely.

"It would seem I treated you quite rudely, and after you helped the children, too. Please forgive me. This place is usually off-limits to all but a select few."

This was the first apology I'd ever received from one of the game's love interests—if you excluded Eckles begging for forgiveness. In this world, no one ever apologized to Penelope.

But I couldn't feel the slightest bit happy about it. What I *did* feel was stupid for getting excited over playing archeologist, and scared that I might die. Terror and horror that I'd meet my end in this room and there was nothing I could do to stop it—watching the affection meter drop in real time was a uniquely terrifying experience.

The game world I'd found myself in left room only for fear. I might find myself rejoicing one moment, but in the next, I could be plunged into incredible danger.

My hands were quivering from the shock, and I tucked them behind me to hide it. Despite my fright, I finally found my voice.

"I…didn't know this place was off-limits. I'm sorry." Sick with fear on the inside, I did my best to hold my head up high. I had to maintain the persona of a haughty, fearless noblewoman at all costs. *This is a nightmare.*

Winter seemed taken aback by the soft tone I'd adopted in contrast to my confident attitude. "…Please come this way," he said after a pause. "This isn't the proper venue to discuss business." He gestured politely, guiding me from the room.

Despite his unfailing courteousness, I had the feeling he wanted

me out of the secret chamber as soon as possible. I moved as slowly as I reasonably could, wondering if a game notification would appear. Despite entering the "hidden space" as the quest had directed, there was no indication from the game that I'd succeeded.

Judging by the plummet in Winter's affection, I was starting to gather that a condition of the hidden quest was getting in and out without being detected. And I'd failed spectacularly in that regard. Did all hidden quests in Hard Mode provide so little information?

Screw this game. See if I accept another one of these stupid quests… I mentally swore off them, trudging over to Winter's side. He ushered me to the passageway as soon as I reached him.

Does he think I'm some kind of monster who will hurt the kids? Irritation shot through me at the thought. I knew that sneaking in hadn't been the right thing to do, but I'd had a great time with the children and taught them something useful. I didn't deserve to be treated with such suspicion.

As if hearing my thoughts, voices suddenly called after me.

"Ms. Old Noble Lady! See you later!"

"Come play again sometime!"

I turned to find the children in their little animal masks, crowded together and waving at me. The one with the lion mask, who'd been the first to defend me, placed a finger to his lips and winked.

Cute little things. I wish I could thank them properly for helping me.

I waved at them in goodbye, breaking into a bright smile, even though the mask probably hid it from view.

Realizing the man in the rabbit mask, Winter, had stopped to stare at me, I awkwardly let my hand drop and scurried after him. In complete silence, we walked down the same tunnel I'd entered through earlier.

How did it come to this? I thought, blinking sadly at the [Affection: 3%] above his head. If the children hadn't intervened with their white lie, I would have likely been killed by whatever magic spell he'd been gearing up to throw at me.

I'd wanted to use Winter as insurance, but considering the state of things, I would be lucky to simply maintain his current affection.

Haah… I heaved a deep inward sigh. The corridor seemed much shorter on the way out. Winter stood aside when we reached the doorway, waiting for me to exit first. Though I was trembling in fear within, I held my composure as I passed him. He followed directly behind me, turned, and waved his staff at the open door. It slid shut.

Huh? The wall was back to normal, and I stared in shock. The white cracks that had allowed me to see the outline of the door were no longer visible. In fact, I didn't feel confident I'd be able to find its exact location again.

Winter didn't seem to mind that I was watching so intently as he worked. He flicked his wand several more times, as though he were double and triple locking the secret door, before finally turning to me.

"Thank you for taking care of the children."

"…"

"However, it is too late in the day for me to accept new business requests. I'll have to ask you to come back another time."

I'd expected to be questioned on how I'd gotten inside, but he was simply politely but sternly sending me away. Processing his words, I glanced out the window next to the entrance and saw that the sun was already setting. I'd been so engrossed in working with the kids that I hadn't realized how much time had passed. Emily would have definitely noticed my absence by now.

I'm done for… Another interrogation with the duke is on the horizon for sure, I thought, fighting the sudden urge to cry.

Since I was already in trouble, I decided to hell with it—why not take a more brazen approach? "I'm not here to make a request. You sent a white rabbit asking me to come, so here I am."

"Ah…," Winter murmured.

"I waited around for a while since there was nobody here. I could have just left, yes, but the fact of the matter is, I'm much too busy. I don't have time to come again," I said. Truthfully, I had more time than I knew what to do with, but I could pretend to have a busy schedule if it suited my interests. I had my pride, after all. "Then the children came out and asked me for help." I shamelessly pointed at the wall that housed the hidden door.

Do you understand what I'm saying? It wasn't my fault—it was yours. You *were late.*

Winter had appeared taken aback at the mention of the white rabbit and only grew more so as I continued speaking. *He may be a sorcerer, but that doesn't mean he's all-knowing. I guess even his abilities didn't alert him to the fact that the intruder in his secret room was the very client he'd contacted earlier that day.*

To my surprise, he bowed and apologized. "Forgive me. My clients usually come calling a day or two after I send them notification… I didn't expect you so soon—an error on my part."

I felt a blush spreading across my cheeks and thanked my lucky stars that I was still wearing the mask.

Huh? So I unknowingly broke some kind of social convention? How was I supposed to know that nobles usually waited a day or two before showing up?

Now he'd think of me as the impatient client who'd rushed over the moment his message arrived. Not only that, but the request I'd looked so desperate to get his help with…was of a girl searching for this random man she'd bumped into at a ball! Talk about embarrassing…

Winter might even have realized the moment he received my request that he was that very man I was looking for. That *had* been my intention when I'd included the hint about the handkerchief, but…

I suddenly found that I couldn't look him in the eye.

"Let's forget the request was ever made. We can call ourselves even—you made me wait, and I intruded where I shouldn't have," I said, quickly spinning away from him, not entirely sure what I was saying anymore. Plans and requests and whatever else didn't matter now. I just needed to get out.

I was rushing toward the door when he spoke.

"Wait," he called urgently. "Please wait."

"…Yes?" I said, turning reluctantly. He was staring intensely at my face with his navy-blue eyes.

"I made you wait and treated you impolitely even when you so kindly helped the children. I cannot let their savior just leave like

this."

I felt my face contorting in pure confusion. *He was in a hurry to chase me out a few moments ago. Why the sudden change?*

"*Savior* is a bit much. I didn't really do anything special…," I muttered, unwilling to take his words at face value.

"My lady, please grant me the opportunity to regain your trust," Winter implored earnestly.

My initial instinct was to refuse and insist he could worry about that some other time, since I had to get back to the manor before people realized I'd left without permission again. Not to mention the hidden quest had messed with my plans, and I needed to regroup and develop a new strategy.

But that was before the letters above his head gleamed.

[Affection: 6%]

It was enough to change my mind instantly.

"If that's the case, I'll hear what you've found regarding my query, then," I said primly, moving to sit on the guest sofa. Winter followed and sat opposite me, then waved his hand as if summoning someone.

Teacups and a pot appeared out of thin air, and I watched curiously as hot black tea poured into the cup that had landed softly in front of me all by itself. Since I was wearing a mask anyway, I didn't have to worry about hiding the wonder on my face at seeing magic from Winter.

"Please drink," he said, lowering his hand and setting the teapot down gently on the table. Obligingly, I picked up the cup and took a sip. The temperature was just right.

"…You may be unaware, my lady, but only a select few know that this guild is run by a sorcerer."

I also know you're a marquis, I thought smugly. I nodded without comment, though.

"Furthermore, no one who has entered that secret chamber has ever walked back out again."

I nearly spat out my tea. Hurriedly setting down my cup, I asked coldly, "Are you threatening to kill me?"

"I beg your pardon? Certainly not. That would be a crime," Winter

said, looking confused. "I meant that magically erasing someone's memories takes a toll on their body, causing them to fall into a deep sleep. I usually have to carry them out, you see."

"Ahem!" I cleared my throat, embarrassed to have jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"Ordinarily, I would see it fit to wipe your memory as well, my lady, but…" Thankfully, Winter ignored my faux pas and continued calmly. "I could not bring myself to follow through in light of my imprudent actions today."

"…"

"A guild's greatest virtue is the trust that exists between it and the client. If I altered your mind, you'd forget that you hired me entirely. And I have no desire to take things that far."

I frowned, realizing just how much of my memory he'd considered erasing. I could have ended up attending ball after ball in search of him had he gone through with it.

"So? What is it that you want from me?" I asked.

"Please keep what you saw today a secret. In return, I shall provide you all the information you wish about the man you are seeking, free of charge," he said.

His exceedingly generous offer took me by surprise. Why was he so desperate to hide that secret chamber?

"What's so special about those kids in there? Are they related to traitors or something?"

"They're orphans who were imprisoned and abused at the hands of the Anti-Magic Association, and then later rescued."

"The…Anti-Magic Association?"

Wait, I don't remember the game having such detailed lore. I combed through my memory, unable to recall anything about a group of people that hated magic.

"As magic became more commercialized and commonplace, there grew a religion whose devoted followers began persecuting sorcerers, claiming that magic was a dark art that went against their doctrine," Winter said bitterly.

"…"

"The sitting Imperial family links their legitimacy to the temple,

which means the mistreatment of sorcerers has been increasing." Winter paused for a moment before continuing. "Some of the heretic sects have made the absurd claim that only when all 'wicked' magic users have been expunged will the true god-ordained emperor be born."

"…"

"I'm sure you are aware, my lady, that the remnant factions of the Holy Nation of Laila, which was recently defeated by the crown prince's armies, have been causing trouble in particular."

"Of course." Of course I had no freaking clue what any of what he'd just said even meant, that is, but I pretended otherwise, nodding gravely.

"However groundless their claims may be, there are a surprising number of nobles in the empire who share their beliefs."

"Nobles…agree with them? Why would they?" I asked, frowning.

"It's mostly those who have their own businesses mass-producing magical items and tools. Though they use us, they would prefer that all sorcerers were gone in order to monopolize the market themselves."

When I'd played the game, I hadn't known why Winter hid that he was a sorcerer. *I thought it was just a random tidbit added by the developers… Who knew there was such a complex reason behind it?* The background details of the game seemed to all have some sort of underlying reason for being included, as I'd come to find out after learning the crown prince's backstory.

I couldn't shake the feeling that this world seemed to be rapidly departing from the game I thought I knew.

"Please, my lady," Winter said, bowing his head. "The children's lives depend on it."

Noticing that the letters [Affection: 6%] began to shimmer as he pleaded for the children, I realized my answer would greatly affect his affection. As I opened my mouth to reassure him that I'd be careful, something suddenly occurred to me.

Wait a second… This doesn't feel right. Why would his affection be so tied up in my response?

Everything that had happened today had managed to take me by

surprise, especially the hidden quest.

In the game, Penelope didn't go to the information guilds to look for Winter, did she…?

My eyes widened, and the mistake I'd made dawned on me. My game knowledge was based entirely on my experience playing Normal Mode.

…I don't have the faintest clue what Winter's route or personality is like in Hard Mode.

In the game, Winter had been a kind man who regularly took in orphans from the streets and helped the poverty-stricken.

[The sorcerer was patrolling a slum, intending to help those in need, when he discovered the true daughter of the duke, who'd been taken in and raised by a poor commoner.

The kindhearted heroine was able to return to the manor thanks to the sorcerer's help. She began to join him in aiding the impoverished children, donating her time and wealth generously.]

Mentally reviewing the sorcerer's backstory, I wondered, *If Winter is such a benevolent and gentle person, why did he bring the heroine back right on the day of Penelope's coming-of-age ceremony? That's a very calculated time to choose to reveal her…*

All eyes had been on the fake daughter, and I couldn't help but think, *Isn't that one big obvious "FU" to Penelope?*

"…My lady?" prompted Winter at my lack of response.

A sneaking suspicion washed over me. The hidden quest, which had appeared without warning. Winter's affection, which had plummeted abruptly. Clueless to the details of the plot in Hard Mode, I had firmly believed I was on the correct path—that I'd changed things and avoided death.

But what if…what if all of this is just part of the predetermined story route?

Clenching my trembling hands, I summoned the multiple-choice options I'd kept turned off for so long. *Dialogue prompts ON*, I instructed in my mind.

I had to see for myself.

A white box appeared immediately.

<SYSTEM>
Turn dialogue prompts [ON]?
[YES / NO]

I pressed [YES], and the options materialized on-screen.

1. Why should I do that?
2. I don't know… What's in it for me if I keep your secret? You got any rare gems?
3. And if I do go around talking about the children? What happens then?

Ah…

I groaned inwardly. Why were my bad feelings always right?

Penelope had apparently made her bed during the events of Hard Mode in just this fashion, and being despised by all the male protagonists in Normal Mode was her lying in it.

My finger quivering, I made my choice.

"…And if I do go around talking about the children? What happens then?" For the first time in a while, I experienced the unnatural sensation of my mouth moving on its own.

Winter's eyes hardened frighteningly at my response, and when he spoke, his tone had iced over. "In that case, you'd best consider the meager status you're currently managing to hold on to to be at risk." Even though his head was bowed, there was nothing polite about his words. They were a threat, plain and clear.

So he does know who I am.

It didn't come as a surprise, since he had known where to send the white rabbit to deliver his message. *From what I can gather, Penelope must've ignored his warning and spread rumors about the children anyway in Normal Mode.*

Having gotten what I needed, I recited in my head, *Dialogue*

prompts OFF.

With the feature disabled, I was able to speak freely once more. "I'll be careful, then," I promised, and Winter's threatening aura vanished almost instantly. The meter above his head also began to blink again.

[Affection: 8%]

His affection was now almost back to to where it had started that day, and the relief that came with its restoration in turn made me feel miserable.

I stood without further delay.

"Are we done here? It's getting late, and I should be heading back." This one-sided masquerade had left me tired. Had I known things would turn out like this, I'd have left the useless mask in my room.

Winter stood as well, eyes wide with surprise behind his own mask.

"I still haven't told you about the man you were—"

"It's fine," I said quickly, holding up a hand. Having made up my mind, the words tumbled out of me without much thought, almost robotic. "I already found who I was searching for. Another information guild provided the name."

He flinched, obviously not expecting my answer. Turning him down didn't make me feel any better, though. Compared with the other male love interests, Winter was perfectly sane but also now perfectly useless as insurance. The damn side quest meant I now knew his secret whether I liked it or not, and that had ruined everything.

Besides, Winter would soon come across the Normal Mode heroine. He'd have to make a choice between the beautiful young girl he met regularly in the slums and the "mad dog" who now carried a bomb in her mouth. His gentle nature I'd been putting my hope in was a double-edged sword, a fact I had sorely overlooked.

I'm better off focusing on those who haven't met the heroine yet, I resolved, deciding to no longer care what he thought of me and resolutely ignoring the [Affection: 8%] above his head.

"Right." I suddenly recalled the objects I'd hastily gathered and

brought with me. "You said you'd give me information as payment for keeping my mouth shut."

I returned to stand in front of him and retrieved several things from my cloak pocket. "Since I don't need it anymore, can you just give these to the person I was looking for? The reason I came here today was actually to ask you for this additional request." I set the white handkerchief and antique velvet box down next to my teacup.

"Do you have a message I should pass on when I deliver them?" Winter asked.

"Tell him it's a thank-you for last time… He'll understand what it means."

The pupils in Winter's navy-blue eyes dilated a little, his affection meter shimmering.

[Affection: 13%]

It was a sizable increase, but I turned my cheek without a second glance.

"I'll leave you to it, then," I said. With that, my debt to him was paid.

I'm going home and drawing a big fat X *over his name.* I wrenched the door open, only to feel the handle slip from my hand as the door was forced back shut.

Huh?

I twisted the knob again, and when it failed, I looked up in surprise to see an arm above my head, holding the door shut. Winter was standing right behind me.

Swiveling around, I found myself nose to nose with his rabbit mask, trapped against the door beneath his towering form.

"…My lady." His deep voice seemed to rumble through me, leaving me visibly flustered by the position we were in.

"Y-yes? Do you have something else you need to say?"

Winter spoke after a heavy pause. "I…would like to offer you something as a thank-you for looking after the children today," he murmured.

"No need. I'm the one who was trespassing, so—"

"It's not in my nature to leave a debt standing," he interrupted, slowly lowering his head with his words.

Our masks were almost touching.

Is this some scare tactic to make sure my lips are sealed?

My throat abruptly felt as dry as a desert. He didn't have to intimidate me—I'd already fully intended on keeping my mouth shut since I wanted nothing more to do with him.

I pressed myself farther into the door, shrugging and feigning nonchalance. "I don't need anything from you."

I don't care about your hang-up with debts. You're off my list the moment I can get pen to paper.

Winter was silent for a moment before replying, "I'm a sorcerer. That means I can do what the ordinary person cannot."

I didn't understand where he was going with this. *Are you trying to say you could kill me and get away with it?* I didn't know how to respond to this type of indirect threat.

"Please come back if you are ever in need of my help."

Suddenly, a white system window slid into view behind Winter, who was still leaning over me.

<SYSTEM>
Hidden quest complete!
[Unearth the Sorcerer's Secret]

<SYSTEM>
You safely learned the secret hidden inside the sorcerer's hidden space.
Reward Acquired: [Sorcerer's Aid x1]

<SYSTEM>
Accept the reward?
[YES / NO]

"Ha!" I huffed, affronted by the contents of the reward. It was too little, too late, considering the fear and anxiety I'd gone through to complete the unexpected quest. I was already running away, determined not to get involved with him ever again. The reward was

practically useless to me.

"That…that's just not fair," I muttered under my breath.

"I'm sorry?" Winter said, bewildered.

I shook my head and put my hand on his chest to nudge him away. Though I didn't exert much force, he backed off without resisting, in stark contrast to earlier when he'd obstinately prevented me from leaving.

When I'd pushed him far enough to reach the notification window, I removed my hand and pressed [YES] in one smooth motion.

"I'll come back if I need you," I said, not in a position to refuse the ridiculous reward. Who knew? It could be useful to me later, seeing as my life seemed to be in constant danger. "Though I don't think that'll happen," I added begrudgingly.

More like "that better not happen," but still.

<SYSTEM>
Item acquired!
[Sorcerer's Aid x1]
To use, yell out (HELP).

I read the last system message before turning and throwing the door open.

By now, the alleyway was filled with the long shadows cast by the setting sun.

"Oh, dammit…" I felt my heart sink as I trudged down the last of the steps. "You idiot! You forgot to ask him to call a carriage…"

It had completely slipped my mind that I wouldn't be able to teleport home.

Should I go back and ask for help?

I thought for a moment, looking over my shoulder at the door I'd slammed behind me. I didn't need long to deliberate. I'd stomped out, claiming I didn't need his help. How ridiculous would I seem, crawling back to him to ask for a ride? No thanks. I was done embarrassing myself for the day.

It's going to take me forever to get home… I hope the duke's still wrapped up with work when I arrive.

I gazed in desolation at the alley that stretched before me. Thankfully, it seemed to lead to a wide street that was brightly lit. I could hear the sounds of the festival, which had yet to end.

I should get to the main road first. I'm sure I'll be able to flag down a carriage there. Grateful that the alley didn't lead to a maze of backstreets like when I'd rescued Eckles, I hurried along.

As soon as I reached the end of the short lane, I found myself on the main road, as expected. The scene that greeted me was similar to the time I'd visited the festival with the duke's sons, filled with stalls and shops. What I needed was a carriage, but what I got was a street overflowing with people instead.

Scowling deeply, I scanned my surroundings. That was when I noticed men wearing silver armor that bore a familiar insignia. Not far away from where I stood, two knights were questioning a suspicious-looking man.

"Your identification card, please," said one of the knights.

"Wh-what do you want my ID for?"

"We've been ordered to keep an eye out for any criminals that might have infiltrated the capital during the festival. Your identification, now."

"W-well…" The man seemed unwilling to comply.

I've seen that armor somewhere, I swear, I thought. My eyes widened as it suddenly came to me. *Holy crap! That's the Eckhart coat of arms!*

Glancing around once more, I realized the duke's knights lined the street in small groups.

Why are they here? Wait—Did the duke notice I was gone and send them out to find me?!

A wave of terror washed over me at the possibility. This was not good. Derrick was in charge of the knights, which meant he could very well be nearby.

If they find out I sneaked out again, I'm as good as dead.

I'd volunteered to stay in my room as a sign of remorse, sure, but the duke hadn't permitted me to leave the estate yet. I cast my gaze

about frantically. *I have to get home before Derrick has a chance of seeing me.*

That was when I heard a familiar voice coming from where the two knights stood nearby.

"Is there a problem here?"

"Captain!" The knights greeted someone who was angled away from me, and I looked closer, praying to any higher power that it wasn't him.

Black hair, armor with the Eckhart coat of arms engraved in pure silver, an ornate black cape billowing in the wind—it was undeniably Derrick. He was *right there*.

My heart was racing. The silver lining was that I was still wearing my cloak and mask, which should make me impossible to identify. *He won't recognize the mask, will he?* It had already been a week since Reynold had bought it. Derrick hated the very sight of me, so surely, he wouldn't remember such a tiny detail, right?

There was a crowd shuffling past him, so he hadn't spotted me yet. I hunched over as best I could, planning to let the crowd carry me to safety.

There! That's my ticket out of here!

I noticed a group of people wearing masks similar to mine. Stealing glances at Derrick, I waited for the right time to make my move. He was listening to the knight speak when he suddenly looked up, staring right at me.

I flinched, stumbling backward. Our eyes had met, and his questioning expression quickly twisted into a scowl.

"You…"

Oh, shit.

I whirled around before he could know for sure it was me and dashed back down the alley, which turned out to be a dead end. There were only a few buildings, including Winter's establishment. In other words, I had nowhere to run if Derrick gave chase.

I climbed the stairs, tears of shame stinging my eyes. Without further delay, I threw myself against the door, shoving it open.

"Help!"

Though it hadn't been more than five minutes since I'd left the

building, confident I wouldn't need his assistance, I screamed the word that would activate the quest reward.

I gasped for air, huffing after my panicked escape.

"…"

Cold silence met my cry. Surprisingly, Winter was still standing right where I'd left him, in front of the doorway. His murky-sea blue eyes were wide, and my face reddened like a tomato under my mask.

Thank goodness I didn't remove it yet. I'd lamented how useless it had ultimately been but now felt relieved.

"…Please close the door and come inside," Winter said, breaking the stunned silence, then stepping aside to let me through. I cleared my throat awkwardly. *Ugh, I'm not going to live this down.* Fighting the wave of embarrassment I felt, I hurried to follow his instructions.

As I pushed the door shut, I scanned the dark alleyway outside for any sign of Derrick, but he was nowhere in sight. *Did I lose him?* Even if I had, I wasn't out of the woods yet. If he returned home and found that I wasn't in my room, I was done for.

Turning back to Winter, I got right to the point. "Sorry to suddenly change my mind, but is the favor you offered still on the table?"

"Of course," Winter replied easily.

"I'd like to take you up on it, then. Please bring me to Hamilton Street. Like, immediately." The words tumbled out of my mouth all at once. I was in a rush—I had to get back before Derrick. Since Winter could use magic, I was sure he must have some method of instant transportation.

"Hamilton Street…" Winter seemed to mull the address over in his mind.

Where else? Hamilton Street was one block away from Eckhart Manor. Since Winter already knew my identity, I could have asked him to take me directly to my room. It would certainly have been more convenient.

But I decided to just continue pretending I was clueless. After today, I would hopefully never see him again anyway.

"I can't seem to find a carriage, since there are so many festival

goers out and about," I mumbled stiffly after a moment's pause.

"You didn't bring an escort with you?" His eyes peered at me through the rabbit mask, deeply serious.

I considered my only personal knight, whom I'd left back at the estate. Though I'd told him he was to be my guard, I had no intention of having him perform those duties. *He's my "all-in" love interest. I need to treat him like he's made of fine china.*

I wasn't going to tell Winter any of what was going through my mind, though, so I shrugged and demurred.

"Can't a lady have her secrets?"

Winter cast one last suspicious glance my way but accepted my answer without further comment. He produced his wand from the folds of his coat and held his hand out to me.

"Your hand, if you would?"

As I'd hoped, he seemed to be readying himself to perform a spell.

What a relief.

I placed my hand in his, and he gripped it firmly. At the same time, a system window popped up in my vision.

<SYSTEM>
You used [Sorcerer's Aid x1].

<SYSTEM>
You will be teleported to [Hamilton Street].

"You may experience some dizziness," he warned gently, and then all I saw was white.

When I opened my eyes, Winter and I were standing in a quiet but familiar alleyway. He'd teleported us to Hamilton Street. *Good. That*

should give me a head start on Derrick. I smiled, satisfied.

Then an odd thought struck me. We'd been transported by Winter's magic, but it felt identical to when I'd used the game's teleportation feature. A puzzling sense of déjà vu came over me.

"You can let go now," Winter murmured from where he stood beside me.

"Huh? Of what—?"

"My hand. You're still holding it," he clarified.

At his words, I glanced down and realized I was gripping his hand tightly, our fingers interlaced. "Oh, gosh!" I dropped his hand like a hot potato and backed away several paces.

Wait. How did our hands even end up so entwined? Seeing as I'd practically thrown his away from mine, I suddenly felt sorry, wondering if I'd been rude. Either way, he'd helped me in my time of need, so I expressed my gratitude sincerely.

"Thank you for helping me."

"Don't mention it. I'm glad I was able to repay the debt I owe, my lady," Winter said, shaking his head modestly.

"I suppose we can consider our trust restored," I said, letting a small laugh slip out at how seriously he was taking this. Considering he was a marquis, it was surprising that he would defer so politely to his customers for the sake of his business. He really was living up to the stereotype of an eccentric sorcerer character.

Winter gave me an odd look at my little joke. "Does that mean you'll come seek out the guild in the future?"

"…I'm not sure about that," I said, the smile dropping from my face at this question. "What reason would we have to cross paths again?"

The cold night air blew through the alleyway as we stood regarding each other, both of us hiding our identities behind a mask.

He probably hasn't the slightest idea that I know who he is.

It was for the best that I didn't disabuse him of this notion, both for my sake as well as his. He'd soon discover the heroine, after all. Letting our secrets out into the open would do neither of us any good.

"Bye," I murmured, turning away. I was about to leave the

alleyway when his soft voice reached my ears, carried by the wind.

"If…I deliver the items you gave me…"

I stopped in my tracks.

"…and receive a message for you in return…may I pass it on?"

I glanced back at him. There was something eerie about the rabbit mask, its white facade seeming to float in the darkness.

"No," I said simply. I didn't know what expression he was making beneath the mask, but I could see his affection.

[Affection: 15%]

I was surprised to see it grow despite my firm rejection.

CHAPTER 4





After parting ways with Winter, I immediately rounded the corner and hurried toward the manor. Or to be more precise, I rushed to the high wall that surrounded it.

"I'm sure it was around here somewhere…," I murmured, frantically searching the wall with wide-open eyes. I was looking for the doghole near the training field. Because the wall was so enormous and the lighting so dim, it was hard to make anything out. I'd broken into an anxious sweat by this point, worried that Derrick would return soon.

"There you are!" I exclaimed, finally finding it.

I hurriedly crouched in front of the hole, which was so narrow that I almost had to crawl on my belly to pass through it. After lowering myself as best as I could, I was about to shove my head through when I heard heavy footsteps approaching.

"Penelope Eckhart," said an icy-cold voice. "I knew it was you."

I froze where I lay on the ground. *Please…* I mentally prayed to every deity I could remember, begging for an escape from the reality that was crashing down on me. *Please tell me I'm hallucinating.*

But there were no gods to be found in this damned game.

"Get up *now*," demanded the voice, and I could almost hear the grinding of his teeth.

Bolting up, I turned and met piercing blue eyes set in a death glare, their shine cutting through the darkness even brighter than the [Affection: 13%] hovering above his head. I was left thunderstruck in the wake of his unlucky timing.

"H-how…?"

"You're the only girl who'd parade around wearing such a ludicrous mask. Of course I recognized you," Derrick barked with an unamused laugh.

He had immediately understood the questions I'd been unable to put to words: *How were you so certain it was me? Why did you know to chase me back here?*

Still, "ludicrous"?! My temper flared, but I forced myself to bow

my head quietly. The glowing numbers shimmering above his black head of hair were enough incentive to bite my tongue.

"Why are you like this?" Derrick demanded, a fierce scowl on his face. "Explain yourself. I indulged you when you insisted on prancing about the festival in the dead of night. I also kept my mouth shut when you brought home a slave from who knows where because you were so adamant about keeping him as a guard."

"…"

"What can you possibly be so dissatisfied with that you're sneaking out again?" Derrick said, reminding me of my last attempt to slip away without an escort. Sadly, I could provide no explanation for him even as he pressed for answers.

"…I'm sorry." Another apology, as if I were a parrot that only knew how to grovel.

Of course I wasn't happy to be put in this position again, but there wasn't really anything to be done about it. I couldn't speak honestly—this repentant act was like armor I put on to keep myself safe from both him and Reynold. "Whatever punishment you see fit, I'll accept it without a word of complaint, Young Lord."

"'Punish me,' 'give me a punishment'? What is it with you and your blasted punishments?" My strategy no longer seemed to work on Derrick. His temper flared, a glower marring his face. "All you ever do is ask me for punishments."

"I…"

"Do you enjoy being punished? Is that it?" he snapped.

I was taken aback. *Who in the world enjoys being punished? No, duh, I don't want to be constantly chastised.*

Before I could say anything, he grabbed my hand.

"Come."

"H-huh? What?"

He dragged me along behind him, giving me no chance to protest. *Wait, what's happening? What is he planning to do with me this time?!*

His sudden outburst honestly frightened me. I never would've expected him to initiate physical contact like this, not when he hated Penelope so much.

"…Where are we going?"

"…"

"Young Lord?" I asked, my eyes glued to his affection meter.

He gave no answer.

Haah… This day is getting worse and worse… Should I throw myself at his feet and beg? Nothing seemed to be going according to plan, and I was getting sick of it.

Wait. No matter how much the sight of his fake sister disgusts him, he probably won't slash me down like a certain crown prince over me sneaking out. I tried to look at the positive side of things—I needed to right now.

A chilling thought occurred to me, though.

He might not run me through with his sword, but he could bring about my demise in other ways. For example, he could drag me into the manor and put me and my "ludicrous mask" on blast. He could magnify any minor mistake I'd ever made, causing everyone else to hate me. Notably, he could manipulate Penelope to be on the bad side of the duke, the very person who'd adopted her.

That was what had always happened when I'd selected the wrong choice in the game.

Ugh. Whatever. Do your worst, I thought, quickly resigning myself to my fate. Pleading wouldn't help me anymore.

Honestly, having plenty of experience with being kicked around and bullied in the real world, I knew better than to resist. I wasn't like the real Penelope, who'd screamed and fought back every inch of the way, only causing her to reach her unfortunate demise sooner.

I completely surrendered and followed wherever Derrick led me.

He was headed toward the manor's front gate, just as I'd expected. The guards stationed in front recognized him and bowed deferentially.

"Huh…?"

Up until that point, I had assumed he was leading me inside. Derrick walked right past the gate, however.

Where the hell is he taking me? I gaped at the back of his head, my eyes wide. The anxiety I'd barely managed to suppress exploded back up.

Derrick led us down the main street a good distance, then veered off onto a smaller, less populated road.

A few buildings dotted the sides of the path, and we passed them before coming to an incline, beyond which there was a thicket of trees and shrubbery. It was no wild pathway, though, since I could see small, delicate lanterns lighting the trail at regular intervals. They lined the path, shimmering lights blinking like fireflies. The trees and shrubbery were neat and arranged beautifully, as well—it was clear someone was tending to them lovingly.

I frowned when my eyes found a small sign at the beginning of the path that clearly marked it as East Hill.

Why did he suddenly bring me here? I knew this place. It was a small walking trail that ran along one of the hills on the duke's estate, a popular date spot for the heroine to take a stroll with the male leads in Normal Mode.

I hadn't gone on a date with any of the love interests in the time since I'd arrived in this world, of course, so this was my first time visiting and seeing the trail. The park was kept in splendid condition and was private to the estate. That meant the public wasn't allowed access.

Wait, does he mean to stab me to death in there, since there won't be any witnesses? The terrifying thought caused me to freeze in my tracks just as I passed the sign.

"H-hold on!" I said. Derrick turned his chilly gaze on me.

"What?"

"Wh-why are we going up there?"

"Didn't you say you wished to be punished? Just keep quiet and follow me."

He resumed walking, expecting me to follow. We passed through the gated entrance and onto the path going up the hill at a steady incline.

I couldn't change my mind now, not after I'd said I would accept any punishment without complaint earlier. Besides, I had no desire to learn what he would do if I refused to comply.

And so, I forced myself to continue.

"Huff… Huff…" The weak, sickly body of the fake daughter I was in soon grew tired. Even though we hadn't gone all that far, I was already out of breath.

I had to follow at almost a run to keep up with Derrick, who was walking much too fast. Gasping for air, I struggled to breathe through the mask and wondered, *Is he making me atone by way of hiking?!* If that was the case, he truly was a cruel, heartless man.

He didn't even look back once, the cold bastard, as he charged ahead with no consideration for the lady he was leaving in his dust. Soon, I stopped again, unable to keep going.

"P-please, wait!" I gasped out.

"What now?" he demanded irritably, not slowing even a little. His bad mood frightened me, but I couldn't continue at this pace. The hem of my cloak was already stained brown from being dragged through the dirt.

"I…can't keep up if you walk so fast," I protested weakly. To be honest, I expected him to ignore me altogether, or snap something nasty at me in reply like he always did.

To my surprise, his steps started to slow, and as we continued up the hill, the distance between us stayed consistent. He had slowed his stride to keep pace with me.

…Is he okay? I kept glancing up to check his meter. The [Affection: 13%] continued to glow brightly, reassuringly, through the darkness.

We trudged on in silence, and eventually, a beautiful gazebo came into view in the distance.

We'd finally reached the top of the hill.

Once we arrived at the gazebo, I peered inside and frowned at the cozy but empty little space I found.

What the…? I thought this was a popular spot for couples! I was sure the game had described it as a place for secret trysts, but there wasn't anyone to be seen at that moment. *I don't want to be alone with him…*

Filled with despair, I plodded over to one of the benches that sat atop the peak. I was completely spent, and I desperately needed a break.

"This way," Derrick said, dragging me away before I could sit down.

It was only when we'd reached the very edge of the hill that he came to a halt. "Look down."

I did as I was told, half ready to just do anything to get this whole thing over with.

"Oh…!" I gasped, my eyes growing wider and wider at the view that met my eyes.

The hill we'd climbed was deceptively simple in appearance but hosted a perfect view of the entire capital, including the beautiful lights of the festival. The streets were lit with colorful lanterns, and large crowds ebbed and flowed between the old buildings like waves. Normal Mode's timeline hadn't included any festivals, and in Hard Mode, I hadn't been allowed anywhere near any festivities. Therefore, the magnificent scene before me was entirely new.

"Wow…," I murmured, dazzled. I'd been oblivious to how beautiful it was when I'd been down there myself, walking the streets. Busy as I was planning for any contingency and always looking over my shoulder, I didn't have the capacity to take notice of such things. The same could be said about my life in the real world. I'd never had the time to stop, take a breath, and smell the roses.

But taking a step back and looking at the world in front of me like this…

…Why does it feel so real?

It was a strange feeling. My heart pounded inside my chest.

This is just a background shot from a video game, and yet…

I was pulled from my racing thoughts when Derrick raised his hand, pointing.

"Look over there, Penelope."

I followed his finger to a scene not far from the hill. It was a large street bustling with people, and I could see two knights in silver armor running.

"That's…" A man was fleeing from them frantically, but before long, he was caught. He couldn't dodge through the crowd with half as much skill as the knights could, and they pinned him down easily. He was probably a pickpocket—they were common at crowded

events like this.

The places people live—whether a game or the real world—are all the same, huh?

Derrick, who was also watching the knights, commented, "Those petty thieves are the least of it. The capital becomes a hotbed of crime during the festival."

"…"

"The worst incidents are no doubt arising out of sight. There was a murder at a pub on Hamilton Street just yesterday, though I don't suppose you heard about it from inside the walls of your cushy room."

Is he insulting me right to my face?

I stared up at Derrick suspiciously, wondering why he was bringing this up all of a sudden.

"That's what's happening here, in the area under jurisdiction of the duke. Can you imagine how much worse it is in the merchant district, which is frequented almost entirely by criminals and mercenaries?" he said. I realized he was continuing the conversation we'd been having at the manor wall.

So is he lecturing me or making fun of me? All that was left was to figure out what his goal was, dragging me out here.

"Are you planning on mingling with those scumbags now? Is that it?" he asked.

I had my answer. He was mocking me. *Ugh. I shouldn't have expected anything different from him.*

I sighed and spoke after a long pause. "I swear… I've done nothing that would tarnish the family name."

"Our reputation isn't something you can control. Each and every action you take has consequences, and those consequences affect our reputation."

"That's why I wore the mask," I said with a shrug.

Derrick's eyes were like shards of ice as he glared at me. "And if someone had been able to recognize you immediately, as I did? More importantly, do you think those sorts of people wouldn't snatch it off your face after they find out you're a girl?"

"I'm not a child, Young Lord," I interrupted firmly. "I've acted like

a fool in the past, it's true, but I'm not stupid enough to throw myself headfirst into danger."

I was nervous about how he'd respond, but I wagered I'd have had to address this sooner or later anyway. Most of my conversations had been with the duke thus far, so I hadn't really had occasion to speak with Derrick properly. Just as I had with Reynold, I would use this opportunity to draw a line in the sand.

"Not stupid, you say? You're the daughter of a duke, and yet you let yourself be seen crawling around in the dirt and sneaking out."

"The reason I left without telling anyone today was…" I trailed off, trying to think of an excuse he would accept. I needed something that wasn't overly complicated, and reasonable enough to satisfy Derrick, who was more finicky than his father. "I said I'd avoid causing you concern and make myself scarce from now on. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"…"

"I was only coming and going through the doghole so I could do just that." There. It was perfect. *If you want scarce, I'll give you scarce.*

However, maybe I'd misspoken, since Derrick's eyes only grew colder.

"And why did you visit the merchant district?" There was no end to his questioning. I felt a sudden wave of fatigue rush over me.

"Do I have to report every single little thing?"

"I advise you answer the question," Derrick said in lieu of a direct response.

"I needed to find someone, so I commissioned an information guild." I knew that insisting a lady be allowed her secrets wasn't going to work on anyone but Winter. Resisting the urge to sigh, I mentally concocted an appropriate mix of fact and fiction. It was how I always handled Derrick. "Someone helped me at the palace. He lent me something, and I lost it, so I wanted to send my apologies."

Derrick's persistent questioning ceased abruptly, and I felt a rush of triumph. He knew I was talking about Winter's handkerchief—the one he'd instructed Emily to throw away.

Silence stretched between us, and when Derrick finally spoke, his tone was heavy. "If that was truly necessary, wouldn't it have been better to have a servant do it for you?"

"I would think that rumors of a young noble lady not even of marriageable age searching for a man are precisely the type of thing that would be fatal to our family's honor. Don't you agree?" I countered smoothly.

I decided then and there that I needed Derrick to perceive Penelope in a different light—from a self-centered parasite who threw tantrums and made absurd demands every other day to a microbe with a thought or two of her own, at least.

This is the only way I can force you to leave me alone.

I shot a frosty glare at the [Affection: 13%] above his head. I'd been as polite as I could be, to prevent the percentage from dropping. I didn't particularly want it to rise, though.

"…Penelope." For some reason, Derrick sighed deeply. "You'll soon come of age, so I won't stop you if you want to go out without telling anyone where you're headed."

"…"

"But if you must do so, stop using that hole like some heathen. Leave through the front door—unapologetically. I'll inform the butler of this arrangement."

[Affection: 17%]

"Or at least take that tramp you dragged into the manor with you on your outings."

Derrick's affection had risen. I was perplexed by both this fact and his words. *Wouldn't he welcome it if I went and died in some ditch? Why is he showing me kindness?*

Considering Penelope's past, he was justified in being upset with my sneaking out of the manor on mysterious errands, since previously it had always fallen on him to deal with the consequences of her maniacal behavior. It made his permission for me to come and go freely all the more strange.

"…You're not punishing me?" I asked, bewilderment obvious on my face.

Derrick frowned. "You didn't walk around the manor in that

asinine mask, did you?"

"Huh?"

He reached out and took hold of my mask. "For the crime of tarnishing the Eckhart name, I will confiscate it."

"Ah…"

He removed the mask before I could react. The cool night air danced pleasantly across my face, finally free of the stifling disguise I'd been wearing all day.

Derrick had appeared cold and angry through the mask's narrow eyeholes, but now that I could see him properly, he seemed…

"That's your punishment for today."

Is it a trick of the light, or does he look like he's enjoying himself?

"Reynold bought me that…," I muttered absentmindedly, glancing between his face and my mask.

"Here," he said, holding something out to me. "I've had the gems imbued with magic. As long as you're wearing it, you'll be protected, and a glamour spell will also activate."

"…"

"The sorcerer who enchanted it tells me that, to others, you'll appear as a boy your own age." In his sprawling, gauntleted palm lay a platinum bracelet with dark-pink gems, glimmering in the dim light. "The original gems were cheap and kept on breaking during the enchantment process, so I replaced them with garnets of the highest quality," Derrick added, a put-out affect to his voice.

I stared down at his large hand. It was the bracelet Derrick had chosen on the day I'd sneaked out to save Eckles. I remember thinking that the color of the gems—like that of ripe plums—resembled the hue of my own hair. But I'd never imagined he'd bought it for me.

The gems could certainly be considered pink, so I'd assumed he would eventually gift it to the heroine at a later point in the story. And yet…

Come to think of it, this is the second present I've gotten from him. He'd gifted me the expensive-looking scarf before, and now a magicked bracelet.

An odd feeling overcame me as I gazed up into his blue eyes.

Which was why the question left my lips before I'd thought it through properly.

"Why?"

"Why…what?"

"Why are you giving this to me?" I asked, glancing down at the piece of jewelry again. True to their supposed high quality, the tiny dark-pink gems glittered even in the dark. The bracelet was so beautiful that I felt drawn to it, even though I wasn't normally interested in trinkets.

But rather than feeling thankful, my mind was filled with questions and suspicion, since Penelope's history with both Derrick and Reynold was sullied.

—"*Vile scum.*"

Even if I didn't, this body viscerally remembered the scathing way Derrick had looked at Penelope.

"You've always hated any of my shows of extravagance."

"…I thought you liked jewelry." Derrick looked taken aback.

"I do," I said simply. In the game, Penelope was infatuated with fancy accessories, but only because it was all she had to combat her loneliness and sadness. "I like gems that are mine and truly mine—ones that no one can say I stole or tell me I'm not worthy of."

I have no idea why you're giving me something this nice. You despise me.

I wasn't sure how much Derrick had understood what I was trying to say, but my words seemed to bring a memory to mind. His expression hardened.

"If you don't want it…throw it away." He turned the gauntlet the bracelet was sat on, allowing the glittering platinum jewelry to slip from his hand. With a faint clink, it landed in the dirt.

As I struggled to process his sudden mood swing, Derrick whipped around and promptly stormed back down the hill.

I was trying to decide if I should follow when a notification popped up.

<SYSTEM>
Event quest cleared!
[Check Out the Festival] with [Derrick]

<SYSTEM>
Accept the reward?
[YES / NO]

"What…?" I gave an incredulous laugh. "I didn't even know that quest was active."

In fact, I remembered selecting [NO] after being prompted a second time to attempt it. *Did the system just decide these things on its own?!*

With a scowl, I mashed my finger into the [YES] button, and the letters on-screen immediately shifted.

<SYSTEM>
You have acquired [Affection: +3%] for [Derrick] and a [Magic Bracelet] as your reward.

"Huh? So the 'other benefits' it listed was this bracelet?" I did remember that the quest had promised rewards in both affection and some unspecified category, but I hadn't paid any attention to the latter since my sole interest was the reward that would help me stay alive.

I stared numbly at the bracelet lying in the dirt. "…Jerkass." Squatting down, I picked up the fallen trinket. "Did he really have to throw it on the ground like that?"

As I blew gently on the surface of the jewels to remove the grime, a wave of deep sadness suddenly washed over me. How miserable I was, forced to crouch in filth to retrieve something that was supposed to be a present for me.

"Would it really have killed him to say it was a gift?" I muttered grumpily, watching the small white letters that indicated his feelings bob out of view.

[Affection: 20%]



The festival had stretched on for nearly a month, and finally, today was the last day.

Emily had made a big fuss about it, chattering about the parades, circus troupes, fireworks, and everything else and how it would all be larger and grander than ever before. She wanted us to go together, but I had no interest in leaving my room, choosing to ignore her and sleep in.

I got up late in the morning and ate a simple sandwich for breakfast, then seated myself at my desk for the first time in a while.

Quite some time had passed since I'd woken up in this world. I'd had run-ins with all the game's male leads throughout the festival period—willingly or otherwise—so it felt safe to assume I'd completed one of the game's overarching episodes.

"Well…I'm still alive, somehow." In the beginning, every single day had felt like a close brush with death. That wasn't to say I was entirely safe now, either. The end of the road was still a ways off, and I had no room to be complacent.

I need to assess where I'm at.

I tugged a drawer open and pulled out the piece of paper I'd hidden deep inside. When I'd first arrived, in case I forgot over time, I'd written down all the love interests' basic backgrounds.

Retrieving a fresh piece of paper, I began noting the changes in their affection.

Derrick Eckhart 0%→20%

Reynold Eckhart -10%→10%

Callisto Regulus 0%→2%

Eckles 0%→25%

Winter Verdandi 0%→15%

Having it all laid out like this, it suddenly hit me how much things had changed. "That's unexpected," I murmured, goggling at Derrick's and Reynold's affection.

I was especially surprised to note the progress I'd made with Reynold. His affection was low compared with the others, but it had risen out of the negatives and grown a whopping 20 percent. Derrick's had gone up by the same amount.

"Is it because I encountered them the most often?" I wondered, puzzled by their numbers. On the first set of notes I'd made about them, I'd confidently and vehemently crossed out their names.

Still, I couldn't find it in myself to be happy that their affection for me had gotten stronger.

"It continued to rise when I *didn't* meet them, so…" Rather than their *affection* increasing, it would probably be more accurate to say their hatred for Penelope had evolved into a general dislike in light of the fact that her frequent tantrums had fizzled out. "I can probably maintain these numbers if I avoid them as much as I can."

Taking into account that the starting affection in Normal Mode was 30 percent, neither of them was particularly fond of me in the grand scheme of things. However, with no reset button to fall back on, I had no intention of taking risks to try to increase their scores.

I drew a big fat *X* through their names once again.

"Next, the crown prince." This bastard wasn't even worth considering. I crossed his name out without a second thought and moved down the list. My hand that held the pen hovered uncertainly.

"Eckles…" As I had planned, Eckles's affection was the highest. I could reach the base level from Normal Mode if I gained only an additional 5 percent, a much more feasible task than accomplishing the same with any of the others. This was especially true since Eckles's affection often experienced large jumps. At this rate, I could probably even complete his storyline in a relatively timely manner.

"Come to think of it, I've been so busy lately that I haven't gone to see him again…" The sharp nib of the pen scratched noisily at the

paper as I circled Eckles's name repeatedly. I could make all the excuses I wanted to myself, but the truth was I'd had plenty of time to go see Eckles before visiting Winter.

So why hadn't I? *Why do I feel so uncomfortable around him?* Disregarding his affection, I couldn't be sure what he actually thought of me. Not to mention the memory was still crystal clear in my mind: his silent, baleful eyes peering along the length of the wooden blade he held to my neck.

Ugh. I shuddered. The ruby ring glinted on my left hand, and as I ran my fingers over the smooth stone, I tried to approach the situation more cynically. "The moment a dog tries to bite its master, the master needs to pull back on the leash."

The problem was that if I did that, it would surely cause his affection to plummet. *I thought he was my only real option, so why do I get the feeling I'm taking a big risk by throwing my lot in with him?*

Shaking my head, I tried to ignore my anxiety. Then I cast my eyes to the final name on my list.

"Winter Verdandi." He was the first to give me a taste of the terrifying experience that was watching a love interest's affection bleed away. I'd already made up my mind that I wanted nothing more to do with him, but seeing 15 percent gave me pause.

Winter's major drawback was that he would be the first to discover the heroine. On the other hand, he was also the most normal of the five men.

I tapped my pen against the desk, beating out a steadily more agitated rhythm the more I thought about it.

Unable to come to a decision, I flung the pen aside. "Why is nothing ever easy?" I grumbled to myself.

Knock, knock.

Suddenly, there were two firm raps at the door. I was immediately on high alert—nobody could ever be allowed to find these notes.

My voice came out harsher than usual as I asked, "Who's there?"

"Pennel, Miss."

"One moment." With a chagrined smile, I gathered the papers

strewn across my desk and hid them away deep inside the drawer, taking my time. Only after replacing the pen neatly in its holder did I allow him to enter.

"Come in," I called. The door handle clicked as the butler opened the door cautiously, before walking inside. "What is it?"

"His Grace says it has been too long since you took lunch together and has invited you to dine with him."

"…Lunch?" I repeated.

A lunch invitation was a completely foreign concept to me. I always ate by myself in my room, ever since I'd found myself here. Compared with what I knew about what nobles were typically served in this world, the food I got was frankly laughable, but I was okay with doing things my own way. It was better than eating rotten food or starving as I had in the beginning, and I wasn't required to speak with the duke or his sons if I took my meals alone. And Emily, who had stabbed me over and over with her needle, now served me with all her heart.

It suits me perfectly fine to hole up here and eat alone, I thought.

I had no desire to go down to the dining room on the first floor and share a meal with people I didn't feel comfortable with. Besides, the thought of eating while the servants watched made me feel ill—these were the same people who hated me out of some misplaced belief that I'd usurped the place of the duke's true daughter.

"I…don't mind eating alone in my room like I have been," I said evasively, wanting to avoid going if at all possible. "I'm still self-reflecting on my past behavior anyway."

"His Grace made it clear that your presence is required. He has something he wishes to discuss with you all."

"'You all'? Does that mean my brothers will be there, too?"

"Of course."

Screw me.

With some difficulty, I resisted the urge to scowl. It would be stupid to show any distaste for the idea in front of the duke and Derrick's closest manservant.

Deep breaths. I can handle this.

"Pennel. Before I go down to lunch, I have a task for you."

"I am at your service, Miss," the old butler replied, attentive.

"If we have any medicine to aid digestion, would you bring it to my room after the meal?"

"Come again? Digestive medicine?" The butler seemed puzzled that I would ask for an antacid before I'd even eaten.

"Yes," I said, nodding vehemently.

I can already tell I'm going to have a hard time keeping the food down.

Following the butler, I made my way out of my room. Since he had informed me that the meal was ready and everyone was already waiting for me to join them, I couldn't stall or insist I needed time to get ready.

As we traversed the corridor in silence, the butler sped up to walk beside me.

"His Grace appears to be rather busy with affairs at the palace as of late, Miss," he commented.

Busy? I hadn't been paying much attention. Although the duke had been returning home late these days, his comings and goings weren't exactly a high-priority interest of mine.

"Super busy, by the looks of it," I agreed, lying through my teeth. I could feel the butler's eyes on me as he cautiously studied my expression.

"In the past, you always took part in family meals when His Grace was home."

"…"

"Did…did something unpleasant happen in the dining room, perchance?"

I frowned briefly at his question. *Penelope religiously attended family meals?* She must have had nerves of steel. What did she stand to gain from eating with them so stubbornly? The only thing she would've gotten back was being snubbed or looked down on.

This girl certainly was something else, I thought with a sigh.

But since I had an inkling as to why she'd made sure not to miss meals together, I refrained from criticizing her any further.

I, on the other hand, was nothing like Penelope, always quick to

give up. Not that it had made my life any less miserable, though.

I could still hear the clink of cutlery on fine china as my father and half brothers ate in the kitchen and talked about their days—the spitting image of a perfect family, as long as I stayed out of the picture.

"…lope. Miss Penelope?"

I blinked, realizing the butler had been calling my name. We'd arrived at the stairs, and the old man was shooting me a quizzical look.

"Nothing happened," I finally replied, quickly descending the steps before he jumped to any strange conclusions. "I was under probation because of my own behavior, so it seemed only right that I take my meals alone."

"I hadn't realized you thought so deeply about— Ah, forgive me. I've spoken out of turn." Hearing Penelope self-reflect seemed to have shaken the butler to his very core, his eyes wide like saucers. He was normally the epitome of composure, and a slip of the tongue like that was rare.

He hurried to change the subject. "His Grace has been quite lonely ever since you began keeping to your room. I do not think he would fault you for taking part in a meal."

The butler's words made me want to laugh. This sudden concern on the duke's part was not a sign of affection—if a dog started behaving out of character, it stands to reason that it would elicit curiosity.

The duke might claim to be lonely, but he obviously didn't care enough to check on his youngest child—the girl he'd taken responsibility for by adopting her—to see if she was being fed properly.

"I don't know about that. I doubt my eldest brother would agree," I said bitterly.

"He—" The butler tried to comment on my self-deprecating statement, but I was faster.

"Open the door," I ordered, my head held high as I addressed the servants waiting politely in front of the dining room. We had arrived in the time we were talking. They bowed and obeyed my command,

but something unpleasant glinted in their eyes.

I didn't care. I had no desire to waste time concerning myself with every nameless NPC in the game.

The door opened to the faces of my *true* targets. The aloof middle-aged duke was at the head of the table, and to his right sat his two sons, letters glowing above their heads—[Affection: 10%] and [Affection: 20%].

"Is the concept of being on time too difficult for you to understand? Why are you so late?" [Affection: 10%] snarled as soon as he saw me, a glower marring his face.

I was taking a meal in hell, and it was only just getting started.

As the brothers were seated to the duke's right, I naturally moved to his left. The butler followed and pulled out my chair for me, then retreated after I was seated.

Even though I'd walked here on my own two feet, I felt like a prisoner who had been dragged to a cell.

"Lunch" doesn't begin to do this spread justice, I thought as I surveyed the meal in front of me. *There's enough food to buckle the table legs!*

The table was filled with luxurious foods I hadn't seen since coming to this world. Granted, it was probably difficult to bring this kind of food to my room on the second floor, but the disparity still served as a reminder of how low Penelope's standing in the house was.

I was busying myself trying to count just how many dishes were on the table when the duke spoke in his usual grave voice. "Let us eat."

And so the meal began.

I didn't really know how to navigate the many different types of tableware like a noble is supposed to, but Penelope had never been a stickler for etiquette in the first place. Because of this, I wouldn't invite any suspicion even if my manners were far from perfect. *Lucky for me, her reputation is already at rock bottom.*

With a surreptitious glance, I saw that everyone had picked up their spoon. Making to follow suit, I looked down at the cutlery set in front of me, only for a bitter laugh to escape my lips.

The tableware at my place setting looked practically shrunken. It was the sort of thing used by children still learning how to eat with cutlery.

"What's the matter?" the duke asked, his sharp gaze landing on my face.

"It's nothing," I said with a quick shake of my head, picking up my utensils as if nothing were wrong.

When it came down to it, these men did not give a flying fig about what kind of spoon I used to eat my food anyway. *If they possessed any real concern, they would have already noticed something amiss. Especially the duke, considering he's sitting right next to me.*

The fact of the matter was, someone in the kitchen was pulling a flagrant prank on the daughter of the duke.

Feeling as if I were having a tea party with dolls, I selected the biggest spoon. Though it was the best option available to me, it was still smaller than a teaspoon. I tried scooping up some soup, but it could scarcely fit more than a few droplets. The tiny fork couldn't keep a single lettuce leaf on it, and the knife, which actually seemed to be the proper size, was so blunt that I couldn't even pierce the soft meat.

This is fun. I tried all the different utensils, making a game of it. One by one, I poked at the steaming, fresh food that had been served. If I couldn't eat any of it, I might as well play with it.

If the situation regarding me in the kitchen is this bad, how in the world has Emily brought me edible meals every day? I was curious.

After all, none of the kitchen staff had suffered repercussions when it was discovered I'd been served rotten food, which was further evidence of just how little respect Penelope got from everyone.

Still, after I threatened Emily, she'd consistently ensured I stayed fed. When I'd make requests for specific foods, she would do her best to get them to me, even if the results weren't always the most delicious. *I should probably reward her, huh?* I decided, starting to feel a little sorry for being so harsh on her.

As I glared at the useless utensils scattered around my plate, one

thought became abundantly clear. *I can't let whoever is treating me like this off the hook.*

In the end, I wasn't able to eat a single bite. And as expected, the duke and my two brothers failed to notice a thing.

This was Penelope's place in the family.

"The festival is nearly over already," the duke said, initiating small talk. While the brothers continued to eat, the duke took a sip of his wine. He was clearly addressing me. "It's the last day. Are you not going to attend?"

"No," I replied stiffly, intensely annoyed.

I surmised that in the past, Penelope must have always gone to the last day of the festival. But I had no intention of doing so, and my mood was already completely soured by the realization I couldn't actually eat any of the delicious-looking food in front of me. Which meant I was in no mood to make polite conversation with the duke.

The two brothers turned angry glares on me, no doubt reacting to my blunt tone. Their affection meters were blinking, warning me of change. *Ugh, these overly sensitive assholes.*

I threw on my best fake smile, turning back to the duke. "I'm still keeping to my room and reflecting on my actions, I mean."

"Tsk. Again with that blasted excuse," said the duke, obviously displeased.

"Only this idiot would volunteer to put herself in probation over a slave boy," Reynold sneered. As usual, no one reacted to his nasty comment. I hadn't expected anyone to call him out anyway, so I didn't deign to acknowledge him…though I did flip him the middle finger inside my head.

"There is a reason I called a luncheon today," the duke said, finally addressing why even I had been summoned to the dining room. "The hunting tournament will soon be upon us."

The hunting tournament? I thought carefully, mentally combing through what I knew of the game. I vaguely remembered something like this, but the details weren't immediately coming to mind.

"It's to be held in the forest north of the palace once again," the duke said, placing his fork and knife down gracefully. "As I'm sure you are all well aware, this term's tournament bears great

significance. Royalty and nobility from the nations newly subjugated in the crown prince's military campaign will be taking part in the event. Rare animals representative of each of these nations will be released in the area.

"The families who support the crown prince do not look kindly on our house, since we took no part in the war. At times like these, we must cement our position. Thus, at yesterday's convening of the nobles' council, I announced House Eckhart's intention to participate in this coming hunt."

I couldn't care less about the house's political position. Frankly, none of what he was saying actually had anything to do with me. He droned on, and I ignored most of his words, finally recalling what I knew of the hunting tournament from the game.

[The Eorka empire holds a hunting tournament every quarter. The purpose of these events is to indirectly apply pressure to conquered nations while hunting their rare animals or slaves.]

I'd read something along those lines during my time playing Normal Mode, but the heroine hadn't actually been able to take part in the hunt. Penelope had secretly poisoned her, jealous that the love interests only had eyes for the "real daughter" now that she had returned.

Thanks to her close shave with death, the heroine had missed the hunt but had been able to gain the affection of Eckles—who had been left alone at the manor with her—thus stealing Penelope's last remaining hope.

Later, the sweet, angelic heroine had found it impossible to condone the empire's cruel brutality and convinced the crown prince to abolish the hunting tournament altogether.

In the crown prince's Normal Mode ending, every atrocious act Penelope had inflicted upon the heroine was revealed, and she was viciously tortured as comeuppance. After magically freezing her heart to prevent her from dying, her torture continued, and she was fed every poison she'd given to the heroine, one by one. The mix of

poisons ultimately caused Penelope's face to melt.

Urk! I shuddered just thinking of that particular death and its accompanying gruesome illustration, which I could remember all too vividly.

Suddenly, the duke, who'd still been talking about his meeting with the other nobles, turned to me.

"Penelope."

"Y-yes?" I stammered, flustered. I hadn't been paying attention to what he was saying at all. Much to my relief, the duke didn't make a fuss about my distraction.

"A vote was taken among the council, and your ban has been lifted."

"My…ban?"

"Yes. What do you intend to do?" the duke asked.

I had no idea how to answer his question. *What does he mean by my ban being lifted?* Without any clue as to what Penelope had done, I was completely in the dark, a fact that made me very anxious.

Seeing my hesitation, the duke spoke again. "If you plan on taking part, I'll have your hunting equipment fixed back up."

Bang!

"Father!" shouted my pink-haired brother, his palms slamming down on the table. "How could you even offer that after what that psycho—I mean, what she did last year?!"

"Reynold," said the duke, tutting.

"Do you not remember?! Every other girl in the nobility went around pleading at every opportunity for that 'hellion of a girl' to be thrown in prison and for the key to be thrown away!" Reynold said, ignoring the duke's chiding. He glared at me with venomous eyes that promised violence.

I needed to find out what he was talking about, so I decided to act as shamelessly as the real Penelope would have.

"What do you mean?" I asked innocently.

"Like you don't know!" he shot back, incredulous.

I don't, actually. Would I be asking if I did? I thought, biting back a retort. The only way to learn what had made him so upset was to

keep my mouth shut.

The information I was fishing for came from an unexpected source, however.

"You begged for a crossbow—a thing that no other young aristocratic lady would ever have anything to do with," came a voice much calmer than Reynold's. Derrick's blue eyes were pinned to my face, his words quiet and measured. "We told you to leave it behind since it was dangerous, but you brought it with you anyway…only to brandish it at the tea party, raving about killing Count Kellen's daughter and her friends. The guards had to pin you down like you were a wild beast—though it seems you've already forgotten."

"After that, rumors spread that House Eckhart was training a crazy chimpanzee to wield a crossbow," added Reynold with a cruel smile, jumping in as soon as Derrick had said his piece.

Dammit… I had nothing to say in defense. That was undeniably pretty dang bad. Still, it wasn't as shocking as what I'd prepared myself to hear. *Penelope's meant to be the most villainous character in the game. This type of thing is kind of par for the course.*

I felt confident I could deal with this somehow. I mean, I'd seen worse behavior from the students who'd slink around drunk at every beginning-of-semester party.

"That's enough, both of you. I believe she has reflected on her mistakes plenty," the duke scolded them, as I stayed silent. His intervention was welcome, even though the brothers had both already raked me over the coals.

The duke turned to me with a serious expression. "I'm sure you still remember what I told you about the weight of an Eckhart's word, Penelope, don't you?"

"Of course, Father. I won't give you a reason to be disappointed this time," I answered immediately. I could hear one of the brothers grinding his teeth, probably pissed.

"Good. That's enough about that for now." The duke gently rang a bell that had been sitting on the table, apparently done with the conversation. The dining room door opened, and one of the manor's staff members appeared with a cart carrying dessert.

How am I supposed to have dessert when I didn't even get to eat

lunch?

I watched glumly as the staff member placed a different dessert in front of each of us. Mrs. Dona was her name, and she had been in charge of kitchen affairs for a very long time. As such, she understood each of her masters' tastes.

The duke and Derrick both received a cup of black tea, while Reynold was given a plate of homemade cookies. Then it was my turn. As a big sweets fan, I wasn't picky about what she gave me. But when she set a dish of jiggly milk pudding in front of me, I couldn't help but frown.

"…Pfft." A laugh escaped Mrs. Dona as she set it down, so quiet that only I could hear. She was staring at the untouched food in front of me, an obvious sign that I hadn't been able to eat anything. It left no doubt about what was so "funny" to her.

Our gazes met, and she didn't even try to hide the mirth glimmering in her eyes. *So you want to play, huh? Let's play.*

I nudged the smallest spoon off the table before she had the chance to leave. It hit the marble floor, the metal clinking loudly. Naturally, the attention of everyone in the dining room turned to me.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry. My hand slipped," I said with exaggerated sincerity, glancing down at the fallen utensil. "Would you pick that up on your way out?"

Mrs. Dona didn't seem concerned with my uncharacteristic behavior. She seemed way too comfortable, as if she was certain there was nothing I could do to her. "Of course. Please don't worry about it, Miss."

What would Penelope have done? Hurled the cutlery at Dona's head and stormed off? *No. There's no question about it.* The butler said so himself—Penelope came to eat with the duke no matter what, even if she wasn't invited. In other words, this was the only time anyone ever gave her the time of day.

She was the interloper at these family gatherings full of warm conversation, but she'd forced her way in regardless, even if it made her feel alienated and miserable. Causing an uproar over some "unsatisfactory" cutlery would make the duke disinclined to sharing a meal with her again—a risk she wasn't willing to take.

And so, no matter how hungry or angry she got, she would hold it in if it meant she could keep taking part in these meals. Because she would be robbed of the opportunity to see her family otherwise.

But I'm not her.

I looked coldly down at Mrs. Dona, who was crouched on the floor and completely unbothered. I couldn't help but want to give her hell.

Clink!

Again, the loud rattle of metal on marble rang out.

"Whoops! My mistake. My hand slipped again." The second-smallest spoon had clattered to the floor in front of the woman just as she was rising to her feet with the first one. All eyes were on me once more.

The duke clicked his tongue, displeased. "What has gotten into you? Don't be so slovenly."

"I'm sorry. The pudding is so slippery, my spoon keeps bouncing right off," I said with a shrug. Derrick's cold blue eyes were fixed on me, as were Reynold's.

"It's fine, Miss," the woman said, retrieving the second spoon as well. "Please enjoy the rest of your—"

As she rose to her feet a second time and moved to bow, my last spoon fell to the ground where I threw it.

Clink!

"Penelope Eckhart!" the duke said, eyebrows furrowed and frost in his voice.

"What the hell are you doing?" Reynold asked, scoffing in disbelief. Derrick, though silent, frowned and glared. The letters above both their heads began to blink ominously.

I shoved my chair back noisily and stood. "I don't have any more spoons, so I won't be able to eat dessert. Too bad."

"Sit down," the duke demanded.

"If you've said everything you needed to say, I think I'll return to my room now."

The duke's face twisted in rising fury. "We haven't sat down for a meal together like this in so long. Why must you ruin it with your impertinence?"

"I'm just too hungry, Father," I said, putting on the theatrics and gripping my stomach. The duke's and his sons' expressions instantly turned from furious to flummoxed.

"…What?"

"A three-year-old could use tableware better. I couldn't eat a single bite of my lunch," I said, peering glumly down at the meal in front of me like a disappointed child. Having been left untouched, it was still warm and fresh. If I retired to my room now, the food would be given to the servants to eat. Penelope, the fool, must have always starved, while her share of the meal filled the bellies of the people meant to be serving her.

With an innocent smile, I drove the nail into the coffin. "Isn't that right, Mrs. Dona?"

"M-Miss…," she said, all color draining from her face. Her confident, mocking air was suddenly nowhere to be found.

A chilling quiet fell over the table. Tiny, toylike cutlery, an untouched plate, unseasoned food—it was painstakingly clear I hadn't served myself anything.

I didn't have to turn to know everyone was now studying my place setting.

"I'll return to my room and ask Emily to bring me a sandwich. At least I can use my hands to eat that." I made to leave, the silence in the room deafening. "Enjoy the rest of your meal, Father, brothers."

No one stopped me this time.

"Ha…" As the dining room door closed behind me, a hollow laugh escaped my lips. *This is the same girl who threatened to shoot people with a crossbow. It's almost silly that Penelope didn't have the courage to retaliate against this kind of bullying.*

Even so, I was the one person who had no room to laugh at Penelope for that.

Picturing her sitting there, patiently waiting while the others ate and she starved, filled me with a sense of pity.

Poor girl.

I went up to my room and retrieved the book I was reading from

the bookcase before taking a seat at the desk. I'd walked out of there clutching my stomach, but really, I didn't have much of an appetite.

In fact, I was more concerned with how the brothers' affections had been impacted by my little outburst. *The last time I was able to see their meters there was no change, but still…* It bothered me that I hadn't been able to study their reactions since all my attention had been on the duke and Mrs. Dona. *Their percentages won't drop because I threw the spoon, will they?*

Stuck in those thoughts, I willed myself to stay calm. "There's nothing I can do about it now." Maybe I was being too laid-back, but the Eckhart brothers had long since been crossed out on my list of potential endings to pursue. I could live with a little fluctuation in their affection. *As long as it doesn't reach kill-me levels.*

Knock, knock.

Just as I turned to focus on my book, there came two soft knocks on the door. "Miss, it's me."

"Come in," I said easily, recognizing Emily's voice.

She opened the door and entered cautiously, a cloche-covered tray in her hands. "Are you reading?"

"What's that?" I responded with a question of my own, staring at the tray. She placed it on the table and lifted the lid, revealing a steaming bowl of soup, a steak, and a sandwich arranged neatly. I scowled. The steak was the same one I had been served at lunch.

"It's all freshly made. The duke ordered us to prepare your meal again, Miss." Emily had obviously heard what happened. She studied me carefully and added, "Oh, and Mr. Pennel told me to give you this…"

It was a small brown bottle—the digestive medicine I had requested. "It's fine. I'm not in the mood to eat. Take it away." For better or for worse, at least going hungry meant there was nothing in my stomach to upset.

Emily looked distressed at my dismissal. "But you said you wanted a sandwich… You must be hungry. Won't you please eat something, Miss?"

"I'm fine," I repeated. "Besides, I ate earlier."

"You haven't had a proper meal all day long. Just a bite—"

"Not 'all day long.' *Ever*," I interrupted, snapping my book shut. "Was any of the food you brought me a 'proper meal' fit to be served to a lady of the nobility?"

"M-Miss…" Emily clearly had no idea how to respond to my icy-hot fury.

I knew I was unfairly taking my anger out on the wrong person. After all, she'd worked hard, doing all that was in her power to serve me, and I hadn't actually been unhappy with the meals and desserts she'd been bringing me. Really, I was grateful to have her, since she was the very reason I wasn't starving.

But these circumstances, this setting that I'm—I mean, that Penelope is faced with…they're enough to drive a person mad.

"Take the food and leave. I don't want to look at you right now." Emily grabbed the tray and left with a dejected expression on her face.

I went too far, didn't I? She had obviously been worried about me. Still, I couldn't find it in me to be all that sorry.

Ignoring the simmering emotions that had been threatening to boil over since I left the dining room, I picked up my book again.

Only to toss it aside mere moments later. "This sucks." I abandoned the desk and flopped onto my bed, staring mindlessly at the ceiling—luxurious and ornate. *Ironic, isn't it? Beautiful on the outside, but the person living on the inside can't even get a damn meal.*

"Why did I have to come all the way here to put up with this scummy treatment?" I muttered. I was at my wits' end trying to understand. If it had been anyone but me who had been thrown into this game world, they might have at least been pleased with how swanky their new home was. But luxury did nothing for me, since my real-life father's house had been just as large and lavish.

And the ironic part was that despite living in such a fancy room back then, I'd always had to worry about my next meal. The bullying had reached its peak after Asshole #2 graduated. Students kept cutting in front of me, causing me to constantly be too late for mealtime, and they'd often purposely shoulder-check me to make

me drop my food.

And even after starving all day at school, going home was no guarantee I'd get food. I couldn't force myself to take part in family meals, where I was so obviously unwelcome.

Me and my stupid pride…

In hindsight, I'd been a fool. I should have at least made sure I had a full stomach, considering I was struggling to survive all other aspects of that house. And unlike Penelope, I'd had no maid making sure I ate, as the housekeeper always went home right after washing the dishes.

I'd force myself to wait, my stomach growling, until the others were done eating and everyone was in their rooms. Then I'd sneak into the kitchen to eat some cold soup with rice or mix the leftover *banchan* together in a large bowl.

More often than not, however, even that was inedible to me.

—Blech!

The leftover soup and side dishes tasted horrible, since vinegar, sugar, salt, salted seafood, fish sauce, and other horrid things had been mixed into it. Unable to stomach even a bite, I'd inevitably throw it up.

Asshole #2 was the culprit, of course.

—"Just like scum. Why are you sneaking into the kitchen to eat? You're like a rat stuffing its face in a trash bin."

He'd pop out of hiding to snicker and mock me. I'd suffered from malnutrition and chronic gastritis all the way up until I finally escaped from that hellhole.

"…Just like scum, seriously," I murmured to myself, laughing weakly at the memory. Remembering what my life had been like, I began to think that maybe my current position as the fake daughter of the duke might be better.

Getting out of bed, I told myself, "That's enough wallowing for

today."

I needed to get up and move around whenever my mental state got like this—sitting still would only make me ruminate in my depressing thoughts. After finding a shawl, I left my room to go for a stroll.

I was walking down the hallway and making my way toward the staircase when I came across the butler, who was descending from upstairs.

"Miss…" He seemed surprised. "Where might you be headed?"

"Outside."

"Outside…? Going to watch the fireworks from the East Hill, then?"

"The East Hill?" I asked, taking a second to remember the place he was referring to. It was the hill Derrick had dragged me to not that long ago, then promptly abandoned me to return home on my own.

I could only assume that Penelope made a thing of leaving the manor to see the fireworks on the last day of the festival each year. *That explains why the duke asked if I would be attending.*

I wasn't the sentimental romanticist type, so going all that way just to see some light show didn't appeal to me. Shaking my head, I answered, "No."

"Why not, Miss?"

"I'm not exactly feeling up to it this year."

He seemed troubled by my lack of enthusiasm. Missing the fireworks was probably out of character for Penelope, judging by his surprise. Either way, I didn't care. *A villain is supposed to be capricious, isn't she?*

"Miss, they'll be celebrating the empire's military victory as well, so the finale for this year's festival should be even grander than previous years."

"Fireworks are fireworks. You've seen one show, you've seen them all." I had no idea why he was so insistent on hashing this out with me. And since he'd been present at lunch earlier, I had no desire to linger in his presence.

Thoroughly done with this encounter, I began walking away,

clearly dismissing him. “As you were.”

“Miss Penelope,” he called urgently, halting my beeline for the stairs.

“…What?” I paused at the top of the steps to turn and regard him once more.

The old man seemed to hesitate, which was very unlike him. “I’ve just cleaned up the attic, at His Grace’s instruction. I was on my way to inform you of this.”

“Inform me?” I couldn’t imagine why he would want to notify me of anything regarding the attic. The entrance to it was at the end of the hallway on the third floor, so I’d never been there before. “Why?”

“You…went there often as a child, did you not? You liked to watch the fireworks from there when you were first brought to the manor, Miss. In my humble opinion, it was recalling this fact that led His Grace to ask me to clean it for you to use—”

“Let’s keep things straight.” I cut him off coldly with a laugh, a cruel smile on my face. “Even if I wanted to go up there, I haven’t been allowed to in a very long time. Because *someone* took issue with me being on the third floor, it was boarded up, and I was prohibited from going anywhere near the attic.”

The butler was silent. I usually wouldn’t have been so aggressive, but he had caught me in a foul mood. The odd similarities between my old life and this current one had ignited a white-hot rage in me that I was struggling to tamp down.

“Mrs. Dona…was fired on the spot, Miss,” he said cautiously, a solemn expression painting his face. His brow furrowed. “The duke was furious, and she was dismissed from the manor with only the clothes on her back. She did not even receive her severance pay. As she has been working here for quite some time and hails from the house of a viscount—albeit one on the decline—no further punishment could be given to her.”

I felt my eyes widen at this news. I stared at the butler in surprise, and he continued levelly, “However, because Young Lord Derrick burned her employment contract and letter of recommendation himself, she will no longer be able to find work in

any noble household."

"So? What, should I raise a toast?" Though the news of her dismissal was unexpected, it only made me more upset. If the problem was so easy to deal with, why had nothing been done sooner?

They never did anything to help before. On the contrary, I was threatened and told not to complain, since Emily has worked here for such a long time.

Thinking of what Derrick had said while he knew full well I'd been made to eat rotten food worsened my mood. "You don't need to report things like that to me. Issues with the staff are none of my business anyway."

"His Grace was most troubled by this afternoon's affair. He seems to be concerned that you still have yet to eat anything."

What do you expect me to do about it? I swallowed the urge to spit those words at him and forced myself to smile. "Would he feel better, then, if I went down and ate something now?"

"Miss, what happened today is entirely due to my own negligence," the butler said, suddenly giving a deep bow. I blinked, taken aback, "Under the pretense that I was too busy, I failed to ensure that proper care was provided to you; thus, the fault is mine. I will accept whatever punishment you deem necessary. But, Miss…if nothing else, could you please accept His Grace's sincerity?"

I watched aghast as the butler continued to bow and plead. "After you left the dining room so upset, he agonized over how he could make it up to you. In doing so, he remembered that you used to like playing in the attic as a child. You must know that once he issues a command, His Grace seldom rescinds it."

He was right. It had been six years since the incident—which occurred not long after Penelope's adoption—that had caused him to order all the doors on the third floor locked and the rooms prohibited from use. For him to withdraw that order after all this time meant he had been deeply unsettled by the neglect of his adopted daughter.

The butler must have felt there was some hope of changing my mind since I had listened without comment. He bowed again and said, "I have unlocked the door to the third floor and set the attic

back in order as best this humble old man could. Please let go of your anger, Miss."

I stared at him expressionlessly. If I were the real Penelope, I'd have been overjoyed at his words. One of the main instigators of her harassment had been fired, and her family was paying her some interest. Her father's trusted servant, whom she hated, was even pleading and bowing before her—she would have been intensely satisfied by this turn of events.

However…

It's too late.

And I wasn't Penelope.

You should've helped her at least once before I came to be in this body. Penelope, that stupid, pitiful child, would have forgiven them for everything.

But it's already far too late.

The butler caught sight of the crestfallen expression on my face, his pupils dilating in shock. "M-Miss?" He straightened up, panicked.

"…Right. How could I ignore such a sincere gesture from my father? I was going out for a change of scenery anyway, so it wouldn't hurt to visit the attic after so many years," I said, rearranging my face so I was donning the arrogant mask of Penelope again, betraying no hint that I'd been on the verge of tears. "Lead the way."

Not all the doors on the third floor had been unlocked. There was a set of large double doors in the corridor still sealed away, chains wrapped around the knobs. *That must be the heroine's room.* Penelope's room was very nice, but *her* room must have been on an entirely different level, judging by the size of the door alone.

I didn't find this overly upsetting. *How could his adopted daughter expect to be treated the same as his real daughter? It would be silly to want for more than you're due.*

The butler seemed especially cautious as we passed in front of the doors, glancing behind to gauge my reaction warily. I gave no indication that I'd noticed, of course.

Once we reached the end of the third-floor hallway, he opened a small door, revealing a stone spiral staircase. It led to a turret that was probably built for wartime, but it wasn't as well maintained as the rest of the manor, as it hadn't been used for a long while.

"Watch your step, Miss," the butler said, ascending first. I hiked my skirt up and followed carefully. An attic at the top of a rustic, narrow turret? *It's just the kind of secret hiding spot small kids love to play around in.*

The staircase seemed to have no end. When we finally reached the top, there was a musty door. It swung open easily at the butler's touch, and I followed him inside, not expecting much. *It's probably nothing more than dust-filled storage space.*

Instead, I quickly ate my words.

I was met with a fairly impressive room. It was like a small study, one wall lined with bookcases. The far wall housed a fireplace with a cozy couch in front of it, and the closer one held a large, round window. The window was open, and I felt a cool breeze sweep in, tickling my nose.

"Is it to your liking, Miss?" the older man asked with a pleased expression as he watched me peer around the room.

"It's not bad."

"Shall I bring you some refreshments?"

"No thank you. But I do want to stay here for the rest of the evening."

"As you wish. His Grace has already given you permission to use this room however you like."

That made me happy to hear. Feeling a little better, I said in a gentle tone, "Thank you for showing me here, Pennel."

"Think nothing of it. Please do have a relaxing evening, then."

With one last polite bow he left the attic.

I cast another glance over the quiet interior, slowly wandering inside. "No wonder Penelope came here so often." It was cozy and tucked away, the perfect hiding place for a girl who'd just been adopted and didn't understand why everyone seemed to hate her so much.

Walking over to the large open window, I looked outside. The

ducal estate was vast, which meant I couldn't see the city streets as I had been able to at the hill with Derrick. But there were no buildings to block the view, the broad sky stretching into the distance and over the peaceful scenery below.

I sat down, opting for the floor in front of the window instead of the blanketed couch. The sun was setting outside, and I gazed out over the horizon as it was slowly bathed in a scarlet glow.

Only for my daze to be rudely interrupted.

Chak.

The sound of a door opening, and then a noise—a voice—from behind.

"Huh?"

I turned to find my pink-haired brother passing through the entryway, and our eyes met.

"What are you doing here?" Reynold said with a frown, having paused when he realized he wasn't alone.

You think I'm happy to see you, either? I glanced at the gauge looming above his head and replied matter-of-factly, "The butler brought me up."

"That's not what I meant…," he started, looking me up and down with a mocking sneer. "You're banned from the third floor, aren't you?"

Come on! We both know whose fault that is. Feeling resentful, I shot back primly, "That's no longer true as of today. Father gave me permission to come here."

"Ugh! So that's why he was asking about this old place."

"What are you doing here?"

"Unlike a certain idiot, I was never banned," he said, moving farther inside. I scowled seeing him get closer to where I sat. I didn't want my precious alone time interrupted by an unwelcome visitor.

"I was here first," I said, irritated. The underlying message was clear: *So get out.* He wasn't the sort to make anything easy, though.

"Who said you weren't?" Reynold approached the fireplace and flopped onto the plush couch, my words not giving him any pause. His eyes drooped sleepily as he peered down at me. "You stay right

there on the floor. It suits you."

"Why do you have to come up here? You have your own room."

"The second young master does as he pleases."

Ugh, you jerk! My fists trembled with barely contained rage. I so badly wanted to smash one into his stupid face, but I held myself back through sheer willpower. *Affection ten percent. Affection ten percent…*, I chanted inwardly. It had been so hard to gain those percentage points, and like hell was I going to lose them.

Ignoring Reynold with all the self-control I had left in me, I turned my attention back to the world outside the window. Of course, he couldn't leave well enough alone.

"Why are you sitting there like a statue?"

"I'm watching the fireworks, then getting out of here. So leave me alone."

"Pity you can't see the training field from here," he said, snickering to himself. "Today being the last day of the festival and all, everyone retired early. Everyone but that slave you dragged in. He's probably still there, grinding away."

"Huh?" My mind went blank. I turned my head to regard him, slowly. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. The bastard's probably out there alone, training himself to death," Reynold said with a mean laugh.

I was speechless for a long moment before I finally stammered out, "B-but why?"

"Because I told him to."

You lunatic! I could almost see Eckles's affection plummeting. What other antics had been going on while I'd been preoccupied?

No! He's my only hope!

I scrambled to my feet—I needed to check his meter.

Preparing to rush down the stairs, I was prevented from doing so when Reynold grabbed me.

"Going to see him?" he sneered. He was holding my wrist roughly, having gotten up so fast I failed to notice he'd moved at all. His cotton-candy pink hair swished inches away from my eyes.

I frowned, nervous. "Let go."

"You're too late. The moment you brought him here, he became

my prey," he said mischievously with a wink.

I felt a disconcerted dismay well up inside me. With a deep sigh, I wrenched my hand out of his grasp. "Why do you have to be so immature? Can't you find it in you to be kind?"

"Hearing that come out of your mouth makes my skin crawl," he said, rubbing his arms with great exaggeration.

I glanced at the [Affection: 10%] floating above his head. *Who pissed in his cereal?* I was the only one who had been unable to have lunch, but it had looked excellent—he'd eaten his fill. There was no reason why he should be trying to pick a fight. Reynold was the combative type, sure, but today he seemed to be in top form.

"Haah… If you don't like me being here, just say so. I'll leave." I decided to drop it since I was the one who stood to lose from a confrontation. With Reynold, avoidance was the best policy. *Just tell me to get lost already. I'll go without a word of complaint.*

I was quietly waiting when Reynold suddenly spoke again with a total non sequitur.

"Have you no conscience?" His eyes were locked on my face, staring me down.

"…What?"

"What makes you think you can just waltz in here?"

"Ha…!" A laugh escaped me involuntarily. *He sounds like the abusive mother-in-law in some K-drama.* I hadn't meant to laugh at Reynold, but he'd heard regardless, causing rage to flash in his blue eyes. I shifted my gaze to the floor, keeping my tone docile. "What are you talking about?"

"You've been different lately, keeping to your room and doing things you normally wouldn't… I thought you might have finally come to your senses, but obviously, I was a fool."

"…"

"A fool for thinking a girl as shameless as you could ever change."

I bit back another sigh. *Why do I have to be subjected to his temper tantrums when I came up here to lift my mood?* My anger was spent after my earlier conversation with the butler, so the current situation honestly only made me feel tired and overwhelmed. The crown prince and Reynold were walking time bombs best left

alone.

I cajoled him in a weary voice. "Reynold, please don't beat around the bush. If you have something you want to say, just say it. Why are you suddenly—"

"You were going to re-up your wish when the fireworks started, weren't you?" he said viciously, cutting me off. "Your wish that Ivonne would never return to the manor."

"…"

"Wait, no—that she would disappear forever or die."

"…"

"You prayed for that six years ago today in this very attic. It was the last day of the festival, and you knew it was also the anniversary of the day Ivonne had gone missing." Reynold had gotten so up in my space that our noses were practically touching. His face was painted a sinister red thanks to the setting sun, his mouth stretched in a feral smile and his eyes promising violence.

Penelope did something like that? I stared at him, stunned.

I hadn't known the heroine had gone missing during the festival. Now that he mentioned it, I could vaguely recall that the game's prologue might have glossed over that detail, but I'd promptly forgotten about it since it hadn't impacted the plot significantly.

She was literally whisked from rags to riches. I suppose it's to be expected that she didn't want the duke's real daughter to return.

In any case, I could understand Penelope's actions, walking in her shoes as I was. It was probably easier for me since I'd had my own overnight Cinderella story, so I knew what it was like. However, Reynold—as the heroine's elder brother—apparently couldn't live with seeing Penelope return to the attic after what she'd done.

"So how does it feel? You've taken Ivonne's place for six years now, just like you wanted." Reynold was so furious that I could practically see the red flags all around me, afraid we were headed straight for one of the game's dead endings.

He glared daggers at me so sharp that it felt like he wanted nothing more than to kill me, and I knew I needed to choose my next words with extreme caution.

What can I say to fix this mess and avoid triggering that nasty

temper of his? Today was the anniversary of the day he'd lost his beloved sister, and before him was none other than the evil girl who had replaced her. *Acting like Penelope usually does will only invite trouble.*

Instinctively, I cast my eyes around the room, checking if there was anything that could be used as a weapon. I couldn't see anything sharp, but that didn't mean I was safe. If he hit his breaking point, Reynold could simply push me out the window or choke me, and I'd be done for.

"I…I was young and immature," I forced myself to reply, the words struggling up my throat. Moved by fear, I took small, faltering steps away from the window. "I'm sorry. It might be too late, but I apologize. I've reflected a lot on my mistakes. Please forgive me."

"Reflected? Ha!" My cautious apology didn't seem to placate him in the slightest. "Fine. Since it's all in the past anyway, let me ask you something. Why take it so far? Even if Ivonne had returned, it's not like you'd be thrown out on the spot."

This was the hardest situation Reynold had ever put me in. Even apologizing sincerely wasn't getting me anywhere! *What do I say? It wasn't my wish, so how am I supposed to defend it?* Sweat trickled down my face.

"Answer me," he demanded.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come up here. It was stupid of me."

"Do you seriously think this is something a simple "sorry" will make disappear?"

"Reynold…"

"You know, you never told me how you managed to reel my father in. Tell me—how does a child sweet-talk a duke into bringing her home? Maybe I could learn a thing or two from you."

This was spiraling out of control, Reynold's affection gauge flickering threateningly. His eyes were turning red as he glared at me, though I couldn't tell whether it was because of the sunset glow or because they were bloodshot.

This whole situation was unfair, and I felt my mood souring again, but I did my best to remain calm.

Things had the potential to be very dangerous, and if I couldn't

get this under control, I'd need to run. I spoke carefully. "I'm truly sorry for what I did back when I didn't know any better. From the bottom of my heart, I apologize. But your sister's disappearance has nothing to do with me."

After taking a deep breath, I continued. "I came up here today because the butler suggested I watch the fireworks. He said Father had agreed, and it had been so long, so I just wanted to take a quick—"

"Shut up."

Reynold shoved a finger in his ear and wiggled it around, as if he found our conversation boring. "Since you were supposed to be Ivonne's replacement, I expected you to at least do a decent job of acting like her." I'd apologized as genuinely as I knew how, but he continued like a bulldozer. "Instead we have a chimpanzee threatening people with a crossbow and inviting some worthless slave into the manor. As if you hadn't damaged our reputation enough already."

All I ever got in return for my efforts was contempt and derision.

"How much longer do I have to put up with watching you strut around the manor like you own the place?" Reynold asked with a twisted grin, his face overlapping with someone else's in my mind.

—"Do I really have to put up with watching scum wander about my home?"

A flashback of a voice from another lifetime came to me unbidden. I'd never been able to retaliate or point out that I didn't want to see *their* faces, either. It might have gotten me kicked out, after all.

"…Her replacement?" Why did he have to drag up memories of the past I'd only just managed to push down to the recesses of my mind? "When did you ever treat me even as well as you would a replacement?"

My tongue was moving on its own, as though the words *chimpanzee* had lit a raging fire in me.

Reynold—who hadn't even pretended to consider my apology—immediately growled back, "We fished nameless scum out of the gutter and made her a duke's daughter. How much better do you want us to treat you? Like a princess? A freaking empress?"

"Sure. Why don't we give that a try?"

"…Excuse me?"

"Who knows? Maybe if you please me, I'll show you my best impression of your dear little sister," I said, my teeth gritted and my emotional state a flaming dumpster fire of a mess.

Reynold's mocking smile slowly slipped from his face, and I could practically feel the temperature dropping. We'd been at each other's throats before, but now he looked seconds away from tearing me to shreds.

"Oy…," he said, his voice deep and disquietingly subdued.

Then the thing I feared the most happened.

Affection −2%

"You better watch that mouth of yours. How dare you—"

"Why should I? I have every right to say what I please," I interrupted.

"What?"

"Do you think you're the only one of us filled with hate?" I could picture a twelve-year-old Penelope in my mind. I knew I should quit while I was still ahead, but I couldn't stop. "Well, I feel the same way. If I'd known that I'd end up starving in this oh-so-grand house of the duke, I would have refused to follow him back here, no matter how much he tried convincing me."

"Penelope Eckhart," Reynold said with a snarl.

"How I reeled your father in, you ask? There was nothing to it, really. I acted like the nameless scum you accused me of being."

"That's enough," he threatened.

Affection −1%

His affection dropped again. He appeared both angry and stunned at the same time. It had always been their privilege to use sarcasm and mockery as a weapon against me, after all, not the other way around.

Considering Penelope had always screamed and lashed out at

people the moment she lost her cool, I wasn't surprised that he was dumbstruck. Maybe doubly so because I'd transformed so suddenly, abandoning my cautious apologies from minutes ago.

I was sick and tired of his nonsense.

"I was so poor that I couldn't even hold a funeral for my mom. I went without food for days on end. Then one day, your father appeared and asked me to go with him while calling me his daughter." Reynold stayed silent, so I continued. "Have you ever drunk rainwater while sitting next to a decaying corpse?"

Slowly, the mental image of Penelope at twelve years old transformed, and all I could see was myself at fourteen. "Or had to eat stone-cold, half-eaten leftovers out of the trash? What about forcing yourself to choke down something so rotten it barely looks like food at all, just to stay alive? You haven't, have you? Not even once."

"…Oy."

"You want to know why I wished your sister would never return?"

Affection –1%

[Affection: 6%]

His affection had almost completely disappeared in the blink of an eye. I should have shut up and pleaded for forgiveness if I wanted to live. "I was scared of going back." But instead of begging for my life, I chose to let the fear and desperation I'd kept hidden away out of necessity come pouring out.

Because I knew that Penelope must have felt that same fear and desperation when she had prayed to the gods, wishing for the duke's real daughter to never return. "A scummy life where I spent all day looking down, hoping to find someone's leftovers in the dirt. I was scared of returning to that life."

"Penelope…" Reynold's voice cut off before he could say anything more.

"Speak. I'm listening."

My quiet outpouring of emotion was over. I stared at him, chest heaving. I was no longer afraid of what would happen if his affection plummeted into the negatives. *I won't regret it, even if I die where I stand.* For the sake of a young and foolish Penelope, who'd grown

up drowning in misplaced rage and hatred. And also for—

"I…" Reynold finally opened his mouth.

I said nothing and waited quietly for the end to come. The numbers above his head blinked rapidly.

[Affection: 7%]

"I didn't…" Reynold, his expression rigid, couldn't seem to find words. I could understand why. The abject experiences I'd described were something from a world light years away from Reynold's own noble upbringing. He wouldn't have been exposed to that sort of thing.

He continued to hesitate for a long time before he spoke. "I didn't know you went through something so horrible."

The tables had turned very quickly. It was now Reynold who was sweating, at a loss for what to say.

"Of course you didn't."

"Penelope…" Reynold's voice sounded choked.

"You never so much as acknowledged me, thinking I was some evil, master manipulator child who'd plotted to win over the duke and took your sister's place."

"That's…"

"So it's time you learned the truth." I stared at him with cold, dead eyes. "When you accused me of stealing that necklace, I was just a twelve-year-old commoner who didn't even know how to read."

Reynold, who'd been about to speak, slowly closed his mouth. I could see the disbelief blooming in his eyes, but it didn't satisfy me in the least.

Boom!

At that moment, a whizzing, crackling sound exploded through the quiet. The roar of noise filled the air, coming from the window behind Reynold. While I'd wasted time on this meaningless exchange, the sun had set, the sky swathed in black. With loud popping sounds, the fireworks had begun.

We stared at each other in silence as the fireworks filled the sky with beautiful splashes of light. The different colors lit the planes of Reynold's face briefly before vanishing again with each explosion.

Perhaps it was the play of light that made his face appear twisted in some kind of complicated emotion as he gazed upon me.

The numbers hovering above his pink hair blinked again.

[Affection: 14%]

His affection for me had risen tremendously, and with it, a white dialogue window appeared.

<SYSTEM>
Event quest cleared!
[Check Out the Festival] with [Reynold]

<SYSTEM>
Accept the rewards?
[YES / NO]

"…Ha." I laughed bitterly to myself, the unwelcome notification bringing a hollow smile to my face. *So all that matters is meeting the quest conditions, regardless of affection fluctuations?*

In the end, I had no choice but to press [YES] despite quivering with rage at the idea.

<SYSTEM>
You have acquired [Affection: +3%] for [Reynold] and a [Crossbow] as your reward.

Seeing his affection increase again, I felt any urge to fight die like a candle flickering out.

Fweee! Boom!

The picturesque fireworks continued to whiz and pop, the world outside the window uncaring of my inner turmoil.

"…Even if I'm kicked out now, I'll just go back to being a poor commoner, so it's strange," I muttered half to myself between the crackling of the fireworks. "You always make me feel miserable, like some kind of disgusting vermin no better than a slave."

Reynold's hesitant expression contorted into a grimace. It was probably at this precise moment that I began to imagine what life would be like after I left the manor. I stared at him with eyes as crushed as ash before turning away.

"Penelope—!" he called, quickly reaching out to try to stop me from leaving.

I left the attic without giving him so much as a glance.

Descending the dark stone stairs, I contemplated Reynold's increased affection and the conversation I'd impulsively initiated with him.

[Affection: 17%]

The reward was very generous, considering I'd been prepared to die for confronting him.

Of course, what I'd told him about Penelope's past was a web of excellent lies. *How am I supposed to know anything about her past when the game never told me a damn thing?* Drinking rainwater next to a corpse, subsisting off garbage—those wretched stories were only stabs in the dark based on what I thought her life must have been like.

……It certainly wasn't my own story.



It didn't take long before the reward promised for completing Reynold's festival quest arrived.

CHAPTER 5





The next morning, Emily brought me breakfast, and I ate it at the table in front of my wide bedroom windows.

"How do you like your meal, Miss?" Emily asked cautiously. The quality of the food had improved significantly, probably as a consequence of the previous day's events. "I was told the head chef got up at dawn to make it himself."

"I take that to mean the chef has *not* been making my breakfast up until now."

"…"

Emily took in a small breath and fell into a tense silence at my pointed observation. I continued, "I'm not saying you're to blame. You can relax."

I put down my fork and looked at her. "I know how much you've done for me so far."

"M-Miss…"

"And I take care of my people. I'll reward you for all your hard work—don't you worry."

Tears welled up in Emily's eyes at my words. "I—I never hoped for any reward from—"

"Hush. Don't be modest. Let your actions do the talking."

After finishing my meal, I was consoling a sniffling Emily until we we interrupted by the butler's arrival. "Miss, you called for me?" he asked, bowing politely in the doorway.

I nodded easily. "Come in."

"If you'll excuse me," he said, tentatively entering the room and coming to a stop in front of me.

"I enjoyed the attic and wanted to thank you."

"I am delighted to hear that." The older man was obviously very nervous, so I smiled at him. He visibly brightened in response. "Did you have a nice time watching the fireworks? They started early this year, I noticed."

"Yes, sure…" I hadn't really seen much of the fireworks, as I'd been busy fighting with Reynold, but I couldn't tell the butler that,

since he was eyeing me with such naked anticipation.

"His Grace has instructed us to open the attic for you whenever you so wish."

"Really? That's great news," I said without any enthusiasm, since I doubted I'd ever go back up there. But the butler wasn't done—he had more surprising news to deliver.

"Young Master Derrick also instructed me to inform you that luncheon together can be arranged whenever you like—"

"That won't be necessary. I called for you because I have a question," I interrupted hurriedly. *That* was also something that would never be happening again, not if I had any say in it.

"What is it, Miss?" he asked, his gaze questioning. Something had been on my mind ever since my encounter with Reynold the previous day.

"How is Eckles doing? I remember asking you to provide a room for him…"

"Eckles… Do you mean that slave you purchased, Miss?"

"'That slave'?" I repeated, my expression going rigid at the butler's natural use of the words. Coldly, I asked, "Have you been referring to him that way in front of other people?"

"N-no, certainly not. I momentarily misspoke, Miss. My apologies," the man scrambled to say at my icy tone.

Knowing that he'd done his best to please me the day before, I decided to be generous and overlook his slip of the tongue. "Where is Eckles staying right now?"

"He's living in the barracks assigned to the knights-in-training, next to the training field."

"And who has been appointed as his teacher?" All knights-in-training who entered the Eckhart family's service were assigned an instructor to serve under. Judging by what Reynold had said the day before, my guess was that he was Eckles's. The butler's response took me by surprise, however.

"He cannot study under a teacher, Miss."

"What? Why?"

"He…he is a slave, is he not?" the older man said hesitantly, no doubt recalling my earlier frigidness. "You were quite firm that you

wanted him as your personal guard, and so the young lord did register him as an apprentice, but…"

The butler was basically saying that anything more than that was too much to ask. Feeling drained, I slumped against the back of my chair.

He was right. I'd only bought Eckles from the slave auction, not freed him from his status. "How can we grant him freedom?"

The butler looked troubled. "A new rank can be purchased for the right price, or he could perform a heroic deed and receive recognition for it by way of status elevation. Neither of those methods would be easy, though."

"Why is that?"

"He hails from a conquered enemy nation."

Troubled, I wondered how we could navigate the vast gap in social status between us.

How did Eckles become an ordained knight in the game again? I thought, trying to remember.

[Eckles, through intense training, reaches the level of swordmaster. However, his low status forces him to hide this and rise no further in the ranks than serving as the personal guard to the duke's fake daughter.

After the heroine appears, though, he grows to dislike Penelope, who relentlessly torments her. In the end, he thwarts the villain's plans to kill the heroine and provides evidence of her crime, an achievement that elevates him out of slave status.]

The highlight episode of the Eckles route was when he swore allegiance to the heroine in a secret ceremony, just the two of them, the heroine gifting him the "Sword of Ages."

[After killing the villain, he reveals he was actually a swordmaster, and with the full support of the duke, he is knighted by the emperor himself.]

Contemplating Eckles's road to success in Normal Mode, I suddenly frowned. *When did he become a swordmaster, then?* In the game, it had been the duke who'd brought him to the manor after seeing his talent with a sword at the slave auction. No matter how naturally talented Eckles was, he could not have become a master of his field without someone to teach him.

That means the duke recognized his potential and made sure he was trained properly… A sickening realization washed over me, my jaw dropping in dismay. *I screwed myself over.* I'd brought him here to be my personal guard but had then ignored him without ever confirming that he had been assigned a teacher. *Not only that, but it's on my account that lunatic Reynold has been bullying him…*

"Oh, dammit," I said, unable to hide my consternation. If I were in Eckles's shoes, I'd have already imagined a dozen ways to kill the mistress who had bought and abandoned me to suffer.

"M-Miss?" stammered the butler, eyeing me strangely since my face had no doubt drained of all color.

"Pennel," I said, fighting down my rising anxiety. "In your opinion, how has Eckles been doing lately?"

"Pardon? In what regard?"

"Generally speaking. Has he been training well? Adjusted to living with the other knights-in-training? Seemed angry or upset?"

The butler thought for a moment. "He is the rather inexpressive sort, so I cannot speak on his feelings. But it seems to me that he is doing just fine."

"Really?"

"If I were to guess, the manor is no doubt much more comfortable than the cages slaves are ordinarily kept in. I would imagine he is truly grateful to you."

I was visibly relieved to hear this. The old man finally had something to say that I was pleased to hear. I'd seen firsthand the way the slaves had been kept at the auction house, trapped behind bars like animals. *Right. Surely the manor is preferable to his previous accomodations*, I thought, nodding to myself.

My happiness was short-lived, however.

"But I *have* heard some complaints lodged by the other knights-

in-training…”

“What complaints?”

“From what I was able to gather, they refused to share quarters with a slave, so there was friction when rooms were assigned.”

“What?!” I very nearly shrieked.

“Unfortunately, that’s unavoidable given his origins, Miss. The other apprentices were handpicked from vassal houses in service of the Eckhart family, after all,” he explained calmly. But his words went in one ear and right out the other.

I stared into space, eyes unfocused. *Shit.* I’d been so busy with my own affairs lately that I’d had no clue Eckles was having such a hard time. At this rate, it would be a miracle if he didn’t kill me, never mind successfully unlocking his ending. “Prepare things for an outing right away,” I decisively commanded.

“Pardon? What type of outing, Miss?”

“I’m going shopping.”

“Ah,” Pennel breathed, clearly confused by the sudden request. My tone must have sounded too grave for the situation. Still, he bowed and said “Understood” before leaving the room.

One thing I liked about the old man was that he was quick to react, if nothing else. I hurriedly called for Emily so I could get ready to go out.

“Yes, Miss?”

“Please gather the other maids—I want my makeup done as nicely as possible.”

“…Huh?”

“Hurry.”

“O-on it!” Emily was also clearly bewildered, but she hastily departed to fetch the maids most skilled in makeup.

I couldn’t remain a negligent mistress.

Left alone in my room, I glared into the distance with fiery determination, channeling my best stereotypical villain voice.

“Today’s operation: Who Hurt My Baby is a go!”



"You look so beautiful, Miss!"

"Just like a goddess descended from heaven itself!"

Having finished dolling me up, the maids were all aflutter. They might have hated Penelope, but they couldn't hate her pretty face. And this time I'd let them go all out.

Weary, I asked, "Are you done yet?"

"No! We're still working on your hair. Please stay seated just a little longer!" Emily gently pushed me back into place by the shoulders.

It was a long time before I was finally able to escape their clutches.

"What do you think, Miss?" The maids' expressions were eager as they bustled me to stand in front of a tall mirror.

I looked over their handiwork attentively. When asked if I had any requests for my little makeover, my response had been to make me as alluring as humanly possible. And the maids had certainly delivered.

My makeup was done to look natural and light, and my hair was intricately braided in a half-up style. I was adorned with a ruby necklace and earrings that were the same dark pink as my hair. The white dress I wore was covered with golden embroidery, and I had to admit I looked as perfect as a doll.

I let out a small laugh, embarrassed to catch myself thinking such things. Behind me, I heard the maids gasp. With a smile on my face, my normally cold, severe demeanor was nowhere to be seen, replaced by that of an enchanting lady.

"I like it." Those simple words caused the maids to all tear up simultaneously. I laughed quietly again, finding their reactions amusing.

The maids began to fuss over me once more, but I dismissed them and turned to Emily. "Good work."

"Where are you going looking so beautiful, Miss?" asked Emily

with a pout, perhaps hoping I would take her along.

"The training field" was my upbeat response.

Time to go cheer on my baby.

The weather was clear outside, perfect for luring my all-in love interest out for an excursion.

Once I arrived at the training field, I stood and watched from afar rather than approaching, gently fluttering the fan Emily had given me. House Eckhart—as one might expect from those referred to as the "blade of the empire"—regarded the knights' training as sacred. They would not tolerate interruptions for just any trivial reason.

I don't want to have my head almost lopped off like last time, either.

To my relief, I was correct to wait—training was in full swing. I hid among a nearby cluster of trees, peeking through the branches to spectate. Some of the knights were sparring in pairs, while others did laps dragging heavy metal balls behind them. There were also those who were attacking training dummies with wooden swords.

I recalled that, usually, only the knights-in-training used wooden weapons. Focusing on that general area, I cast my eyes over the men, searching for Eckles.

When I finally found him, my face immediately fell into a terrible scowl. *Why is he training alone and off to the side? Poor thing looks like a complete outsider…*

Unlike his fellow knights-in-training who had formed a neat row, Eckles was standing a distance away all by himself. I'd been told that the others had rejected him, yes, but seeing it with my own eyes left a bitter taste in my mouth.

As I watched him train, however, that feeling was soon beaten away by the loud cracks reverberating from Eckles's sword.

The fresh-faced apprentices practiced whacking the dummies and stabbing critical points. Unlike them, Eckles didn't just stab and strike at his target—he was practically destroying it. Each stroke of his blade was audible as it sliced through the air. When he swung his wooden sword, the life-size dummy was cut down as easily as dry

grass, hay erupting in all directions. He wasn't just slicing at it with the blade, but attacking with his pure, brute strength—which the dummy simply wasn't made to handle.

Whoa. Is that what it takes to become a swordmaster? I wondered, though I didn't know much about swordsmanship at all.

Only moments later, I realized I was greatly mistaken to be so impressed. The hay had come clean off the wooden rod at the center of the dummy, and Eckles's wooden sword made a loud cracking sound as it smacked against it. His sword promptly snapped in two, and Eckles stood stunned, staring at the now separate pieces of his weapon.

"Hey!" someone shouted. "Dammit, how many swords do you think you can break? You planning on paying for these, you bastard?!" The man yelling rushed at Eckles and, without warning, kicked him in the stomach.

Gah, what is that asshole doing?! That's my lifeline he's pummeling! I almost rushed out of hiding but caught myself at the last moment. It was probably better to observe a little longer and get a good sense of the situation, rather than reveal myself right away.

Eckles didn't hit the ground at the force of the kick, as was to be expected from someone cast as a main character. He simply stumbled a few steps back before righting himself.

However, the man who'd attacked him only seemed more angered by this. "Get on the ground!" he shouted.

"…I apologize. I'll try to be more careful—"

"You've already broken more swords than I can count. Do you know how bad it makes me look to tell the vice-captain we need to order more swords *again*? I'm sick of this. Get on your knees." When Eckles didn't respond, the man shouted again, "On your knees, you bastard!"

"…I'm in the middle of training. I will accept my punishment after drills are finished," Eckles said, bowing his head. From the looks of it, the man who was starting a fight with Eckles was the knight in charge of managing the training equipment.

Eckles was not being unreasonable. It was commonplace for

training equipment to break, which was why they were purchased inexpensively in large quantities. It was incredibly unfair to embarrass him over a cheap practice sword and threaten to punish him like this.

At the same time, this treatment seemed like nothing new to Eckles, based on how he responded. Seeing his expressionless face, I realized I was in deep shit.

"Well, well, look at you, acting all brave! You're a damn slave. What do you need to train for? Get down right now!"

"…"

"Think you can get away with being cocky 'cause you got someone in your corner?" The man's anger seemed to grow as Eckles made no move to obey. He stopped shoving at Eckles's shoulder and moved on to prodding Eckles in the cheek. "You grabbed on to the wrong lifeline, poor sod. The rope you're holding is already frayed, you understand? She can't help you!"

"…"

"Once our Lady Ivonne returns, that fake will be out on the street. You think she'll have a thought to spare for a *slave*? She can't even keep her own head above water."

"Don't insult my mistress." Eckles, who'd been looking at the ground until now, lifted his gaze at the man's sneered words.

The knight laughed meanly. "Why not? There's no danger in bad-mouthing a master who's not here. Your little mistress dropped you off here and hasn't been back since. What's to stop me from talking a bit of shit?"

"A knight should not insult a lady."

"Yeah, yeah. Touching words, slave. Now shut up and get down already."

"…"

"Dammit, stubborn until the end, are you? Grab him, boys!" he shouted to the other knights who had gathered around. It seemed they were all of one mind and had been watching with amusement.

They rushed at Eckles, who did not resist. He simply stared into the distance with dead eyes.

I understood why Eckles was behaving this way. *I told him it was*

his duty to make everyone at the duke's manor accept him. He probably feared that if he fought back, news of him causing trouble might reach my ears, which then could lead me to send him back to the slave auction.

Thud!

The knights shoved Eckles to the ground, a few of them bringing out a straw mat from somewhere and throwing it over him. "Come on! Step on him! Kick—," shouted the main instigator with glee, but I'd seen enough.

Approaching him silently from behind, I slapped him in the back of the head with the only weapon available to me, my fan.

"The hell…?! Which one of you assholes—?"

"Hello there." Although I had not raised my voice, it carried across the din of the training field.

"Th-the daughter of the duke!" the man gasped, his nasty snickering cut short as his eyes bulged out of his head. The knights who'd been holding Eckles down froze in place at his stuttered exclamation. Only just now noticing me, some of them stared, slack-jawed.

I surveyed the scene in front of me, dragging my gaze across the ridiculous-looking knights over to Eckles, whose face was shoved in the dirt. We locked eyes, and his own widened; he was obviously surprised to see me.

[Affection: 27%]

It was a relief to see his affection had risen. Apparently, I'd chosen the correct moment to appear.

I slowly, deliberately, met the gaze of every knight present and adopted a nonchalant tone. "Having a little fun with my personal guard, are we? Would anyone care to explain?"

No one volunteered, of course. The usually clamorous training field was awash with a deafening silence, and even those not involved in the confrontation had paused, staring in our direction.

I pointed my fan at the man I'd smacked. "You. What is your name?"

"M-me?"

"Yes. What regiment are you under? The First Division?" I asked

impatiently.

"I-I'm Mark Alvert from the Second Platoon, Third Division."

I couldn't hold back the scoff that escaped me. *And here I was thinking he must be in the upper ranks, based on how harshly he was riding Eckles.* In the capital, where there was no risk of war, the Third and Fourth Divisions were little more than security guards—meaning this man was a nobody.

"Go on, then. Explain what's happening here," I demanded.

"I b-beg your pardon?"

"I've been watching, and it seems to me that you were the one who instigated things."

"I—I…," he stammered, going white as a sheet hearing that I'd witnessed at least part of the confrontation. The confident man who'd been mocking me and throwing around the word *fake* was nowhere to be found.

Seeing the knights frozen in dread, I realized everyone in the manor had likely heard about what had become of Mrs. Dona the day before. "Cat got your tongue? You're not going to continue making me wait, are you?"

"No-no! Th-that slave—er, I mean, Eckles…made trouble during training," the man said, launching into an explanation at my prompting.

"What sort of trouble?"

"Well…he, uh, broke a practice sword… Not for the first time, at that. And those things aren't cheap these days, you see…"

"And?"

"A-as his superior, I saw it fit to scold him, but the kid started mouthing off, so…"

"Is that so?" I said demurely.

"Y-yes!" He seemed hopeful that I believed his explanation, grinning and nodding rapidly.

"But what if she's here?"

"…Come again?"

"'There's no danger in bad-mouthing a master who's not here.' But what if she was?"

His expression went blank. The corners of my lips curled upward

in turn, a pleasant smile settling on my face.

"I'd be well within my rights to have you killed on the spot for maligning nobility, don't you think?" The hush that had fallen over the field turned frigid.

"Uh…I…," he stammered, his mouth wide open.

"L-Lady Penelope," intervened a different knight, stepping forward. He wasn't as dirty as the others, making me think he had to be a rank or two above the rest. "P-please calm down. I'll go get the captain, and we can discuss punishment—"

"Eckles," I called, ignoring the newcomer.

Eckles was still sitting on the ground, gaze fixed on me. The look in his eyes flickered and changed at the sound of his name.

I pointed my fan at the man who'd introduced himself as Mark. "Kill this bastard."

Eckles shot to his feet.

"L-Lady Penelope!" Mark screamed in panic. When I gave him no answer, he turned to Eckles instead. "L-l-listen, Eckles!"

He looked terrified as Eckles stalked toward him, silently pleading for help from his comrades with his eyes. The higher-ranked knight moved to help, this time with the loud vocal support of the other knights. "Eckles, stop! That's an order!"

"That's right! I—I admit I took it too far. Let me apologize, and—" Mark wasn't able to finish his sentence.

Eckles's hand darted out and seized a fistful of the knight's hair as he tried to escape, yanking him back. He gurgled and tried to kick out, but Eckles already had his arm around Mark's throat, locking him in a chokehold with unrelenting strength. Mark's eyes seemed to pop out of his head as his air supply was slowly cut off.

"Eckles! What are you doing? Stop it!" The other knights cried out, shocked, but Eckles did not react to any of their commands. None of the men seemed capable of physically intervening as Eckles slowly strangled their peer to death. Maybe they didn't step in because I had personally given Eckles the kill order, or maybe it was because the slave they'd made fun of was suddenly radiating an aura of hostility they'd had no idea he was capable of.

Mark gasped for air, his tongue lolling out, saliva dribbling down

his chin. The spit dripped onto Eckles's arm, but he gave no mercy.

"L-Lady Penelope! Y-you can't do this!" Realizing their companion was about to die, the knights fell to their knees at my feet. "Please forgive us. We were in the wrong. We will report everything that happened to the captain, excluding no detail, and all of us will accept whatever punishment is our due."

"…"

"Please, murder is strictly forbidden among the Eckhart knights!"

I put my finger in my ear and wiggled it around as if bored, staring into the distance. It was a trick I'd learned from Reynold only the day before.

"L-Lady Penelope!" the knights begged as the whites of Mark's eyes began to show.

"Enough," I said, raising my hand. Eckles, who had been intently focused on choking his fellow knight, immediately loosened his hold.

Mark flopped to the ground, hacking and gasping for air. Wrapping both hands around his throat, he continued to cough and wheeze.

I stared down at him apathetically, but internally I was actually slightly surprised. *I didn't expect Eckles to carry out my commands with so little hesitation. I thought he'd ignore me and really try to kill the man.*

I hadn't actually intended to have this Mark guy killed, of course, so I'd been at the ready with the ruby ring that still sat on my left hand. By my logic, he wouldn't resent me too badly for using the ring if I allowed him to choke his torturer a little first. However, Eckles had let go at a single word from me. That meant he held my orders at a higher priority than his own feelings. A fact that I found incredibly satisfying.

"What was it you called me? A fake who can't even keep her own head above water, who will be out on the street when the duke's real daughter returns?" I looked around at the knights, all of them frozen in place. My words caused them to go even more tense.

"Which do you think will happen first? My getting thrown out of the manor, or all of you being relieved of your posts? I wonder…" I said in a playful tone, flashing them a saccharine smile.

That was when a system notification popped up.

<SYSTEM>
Your relationship with the manor inhabitants has deteriorated.
Reputation has decreased -5 points.
(TOTAL POINTS: 10)

Sadly, my reputation had taken a hit. But the knights were not love interests I was trying to woo, so frankly, it was no skin off my nose.

I turned to the person who did matter—the only male protagonist present. "Come here, Eckles." He came straight to my side. "Let's go."

With the hand that wasn't holding my fan, I took his wrist and led him from the training field.

[Affection: 32%]

Though his face showed little emotion, his rising affection felt like the wagging of a puppy's tail.

As Eckles and I arrived at the main gate, Pennel was waiting to greet me with a carriage. "Miss, you look dazzling today."

"Are the preparations for our outing complete?"

"Yes. We've prepared a carriage equipped with protection and tracking spells. And you already have someone to guard you…" The old butler glanced at Eckles, who stood behind me, and continued. "We've selected a sorcerer employed by the house to be your horseman. Should you find yourself in any danger, he will teleport you directly back to the manor."

As was the case with Winter, sorcerers did not often or easily reveal their identities, and thus hiring their services was very expensive. It was rare for even the Imperial family to call on a sorcerer to serve as a horseman.

So this is what the duke's house is capable of. I was pleased to be treated so well but acted unmoved.

"Well done, Pennel."

"Ah, one more thing…" The older man retrieved something from his jacket and handed it to me. "His Grace says that since you haven't gone out in a while, he wants you to enjoy yourself."

It was a blank check. I looked at it with surprise, not expecting the duke to still be so concerned with the events of the day before. *He wouldn't be so generous if he knew I just lit a powder keg over at the training field…* I hesitated, unsure if I should accept.

"Please take it, Miss," the butler encouraged. "You haven't even called any merchants to the manor lately."

"Well…all right." I supposed there would be no harm in accepting a gift. Pushing aside my concerns, I took the check. "Tell my father I'm extremely grateful."

"Certainly."

I turned to the carriage. Eckles, who'd been waiting quietly, followed immediately. When I reached its open door, I paused and held my hand out to him. He stared at it silently, unmoving.

Was Eckles reacting like this because I'd neglected him for too long after bringing him here? He clearly didn't seem to think he needed to help, like a real guard would.

"Silly. In situations like this, you should offer your hand to help the lady up," I chided him, crinkling my nose playfully. There was the faint gleam of a strange emotion in his ash-colored eyes.

"But…I'm a slave."

"No," I corrected him immediately. "Right now, you're my personal knight."

"…"

"What do you think you should do, then?" I asked, wiggling my hand gently before him. It was the hand with the ruby ring.

Eckles gave a faint smile, taking my hand and going down slowly on one knee. His manners were so perfect that even the butler seemed taken aback.

He stared deeply into my eyes. "Please step on me, Mistress. I'll help you up."

"Miss, shall we head to the dressmaker first?" asked the

horseman once Eckles had joined me in the carriage.

"No. Take us to the weapons dealer," I said offhandedly, resting my chin on the windowsill.

Before long, we were off. Since the carriage was enchanted, it drove almost as smoothly as a car. I was watching with interest as the scenery whizzed by when I heard Eckles speak softly from the opposite seat.

"Why…" I turned and found that he was staring at me. His eyes were unreadable as he said again, "Why…didn't you come to see me all this time?"

It was an unexpected question. I studied his face, wondering if he resented me for letting the knights harass him as they'd done today, but I could glean nothing of what he was feeling.

"Were you upset?" I asked him directly. I intended to just apologize if he said so, but his reply didn't go in the direction I anticipated.

"You promised."

"What do you mean?"

"You said you would come to see me often as my reward for training hard."

Ah. I bit back a groan. I'd briefly forgotten the reason I'd avoided him. The frightful memory of that rainy day came rushing back to me all at once.

"I waited for you every day," Eckles murmured, almost in a whisper, unaware of what was going through my mind.

Am I mistaken, or does his usual blank expression seem slightly despondent? I tapped my finger rhythmically on the windowsill, searching for an excuse.

"You let me down," I settled on saying. Seeing the confusion on his face, I clarified, "You lied to me, Eckles."

"What?" His eyes grew wide. He was so handsome that I'd say he was almost doll-like, if not for his constantly dead, emotionless expression.

"You told me no one was harassing you, and yet the marks they left on your pretty face say otherwise." I reached out and caressed his cheek.

He immediately flinched and backed away. I laughed when I saw his gray eyes dart around—I'd obviously flustered him.

"Back then…"

"…"

"There really wasn't anyone harassing me back then," Eckles insisted.

Like hell there wasn't, I thought. When he'd swung at me that day on the training field, he'd been aiming to deliver a killing blow. How could I believe him? *Still, he's turning out to be quite cheeky.*

"Either way, you didn't inform me that anything like the events of today was happening, so that reward is null and void."

"But—"

"Shh." I interrupted. "I intend to give you a different reward, so no whining. Just be patient."

Eckles blushed lightly, perhaps embarrassed that I was scolding him.

But then his affection rose once more.

[Affection: 33%]

It had increased by only 1 percent, so small I could have easily missed it. It took me by surprise.

How old is Eckles again? He looked so young and innocent.

I thought back to any details from the game that might have been relevant. Since I hadn't memorized all the characters' profiles, I couldn't recall his exact age, but…

The events of Normal Mode took place over a year, from the point of the heroine's return to when each of the male protagonists' endings occured. Immediately after the player unlocked his ending, Eckles had his coming-of-age ceremony during his route's epilogue before marrying Ivonne. In the game, eighteen was the age of maturity. So…

Eckles must be seventeen. In the real world, I was twenty years old, which meant I was technically seducing a boy much younger than I was. *Why do I get the feeling I'm the one being seduced, though?*

The blush had faded from Eckles's cheeks, but I was still examining his face closely when the carriage came to a stop.

“Miss, we’ve arrived at the merchant district.”

It was time to reward my cheeky slave.



“Welcome! Welcome!” The owner of the weapon shop, who’d dashed out to greet us as soon as he saw the Eckhart insignia on the carriage, bowed as deeply as he could.

“Is it true that this is where the best magical swords in the empire are sold?” I asked.

“That’s right! We also sell all kinds of rare weapons. You name it, and we’re likely to have it.”

“Eckles, let’s go,” I said, calling him over from where he was waiting silently next to the carriage, blinking. He hesitated to follow as if convinced he wasn’t allowed to go inside. “Hurry up,” I urged, and he came to stand behind me with no further ado.

“Do you have any wooden swords enhanced with magic?” I decided to address the most pressing need first. The merchant looked puzzled by the request.

“Wooden swords? We have some, but enchanted ones on the other hand…”

“You don’t have any?” I asked, frowning. The butler had recommended this weapon shop because it was renowned, but apparently, I had wasted my time seeking them out.

“I-if you so desire, they can be custom made!” The man rushed to reassure me, no doubt noticing my displeased expression. “It’s very rare that someone would go to such lengths for a mere practice sword. Most people only use real swords once they reach a certain skill level…”

I cleared my throat awkwardly, embarrassed. I’d made it too obvious that I didn’t know the first thing about weapons.

“We don’t have any enchanted wooden swords at the moment, but we do have weapons made from centuries-old trees that will never break,” he continued.

"Let's go inside, then," I said.

We entered a room filled with only practice swords. I tuned out the merchant's constant chatter, instead looking around curiously. If I was honest, they all looked the same to me other than some minor differences in color.

"Do any of them catch your eye?" I asked Eckles, leaving the choice to him. He shook his head, though.

"I'm…not sure."

"You don't like them?"

"It's not that… It's just that they look no different from the ones we have at the training field. I can keep using those, Mistress."

"Impossible!" shouted the arms dealer urgently. "All the wooden swords we have are so sturdy, their durability is comparable to real swords! Made from the royal foxglove trees grown in the fairy forest, they are sharp enough to cut clean through hay—"

No matter how good they were, it was of no use if the person they were meant to be a gift for didn't feel strongly enough to choose any. "It can't be helped, I guess," I said with a sigh. The dealer—who'd been producing and waxing poetic about various wooden swords—paused, seeming to think I liked none of them.

"M-may I suggest you peruse some of our real swords instead, then?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Pardon?"

"I want everything from there to here," I said, indicating the entire length of the room with my pointer finger. "Have all of them sent to Eckhart Manor."

We were already here, so I might as well buy the lot. It would be nice to have a stockpile of extras, just in case any of them broke.

Next on my shopping list was training attire. Perhaps owing to his tall height and handsome face, Eckles looked exceedingly attractive in his new outfit.

"Not bad," I said with feigned nonchalance, circling him.

The excited merchant simpered and flattered. "Of course! You won't find anything better in the entirety of the capital!"

"Do you like them?" I'd belatedly realized I hadn't really asked

Eckles for his opinion.

He stared at me for a long moment, then questioned me with a voice devoid of emotion, "Do *you* like them, Mistress?"

"Huh?"

"Are they merely 'not bad' in your eyes?"

I had a feeling he'd refuse the clothes if I told him that was the case. "I picked out things that were to my taste. Of course I like them. But I'm asking how you feel, Eckles." I laughed softly and added, "It's not as if I'll be wearing them."

"If you like them, Mistress, then so do I."

"Really? In that case…," I started, pleased by his cute response. I turned toward the merchant and said, "Then send all of these as well, three of each piece."

The arms dealer's jaw dropped. "Y-yes! Of course! Right away."

"Now, then. Our final order of business. Shall we go and buy a real sword?" I asked, clapping my hands lightly before swiveling on my heel. The weapons dealer hurried after me.

"Mistress, this is already enough," Eckles said, quickly moving to stand in front of me.

"Nonsense! A sword is a knight's most important piece of equipment!" The dealer stole the words from my mouth, fired up with greed.

Nodding, I turned back to Eckles. "You'll need a sword. Does my buying you so much stuff make you uncomfortable?"

"No, that's not it…" He trailed off, which was odd in and of itself. Eckles usually didn't hesitate to answer me. "I don't think I'd get to use a real sword. I would hate for a gift from you to go to waste."

"What do you mean? You'll use a real sword in sparring once your basic training is over, won't you?"

"That's right! The good lady is absolutely correct," the arms dealer piped in, nodding with too much enthusiasm.

Eckles remained unmoved. He spoke as though stating an obvious truth. "A slave…cannot be made a true knight. So…the wooden practice swords are enough."

I was speechless for a moment. He had known it was impossible for him to become a proper knight—it was I alone who'd been

laboring under the assumption it would happen one day.

Come to think of it, Eckles was only knighted after Penelope's death. I'd been so preoccupied with improving his situation that I hadn't taken the time to closely analyze the events of the game. *It might be essential that Eckles never becomes a real knight if I'm to survive.*

The arms dealer, seeing me so deep in thought, seemed to think I was reconsidering the purchase. "D-don't be silly! You'll need a real sword if you're to guard your mistress."

"I need nothing more than my own body to protect her."

The man fell into a frightened silence. Eckles was right, and there was little I could say to the contrary. Considering his extraordinary abilities, he was practically a walking weapon.

"Hmm… All right. If that's how you feel," I conceded, nodding. There was no use putting pressure on someone who'd already given up. "I want to look around a bit more, though. Can you wait outside for me?"

Eckles spun around and left immediately. I clucked my tongue, watching him disappear without saying a single word to me. *Who's the master here, me or him?* I'd noticed this about him before, that Eckles did not follow the rules of etiquette unless expressly told to do so. It was very disrespectful for someone who was supposed to be a slave.

"Um…do you need anything else? Please name it, whatever it is, and I'll aim to provide," the arms dealer said, eyeing me cautiously.

"I came all this way, so I might as well take a look at the magical swords."

"Certainly. Follow me, please!" The man's expression brightened at my words. It was to be expected, as magical swords were the main items offered by this particular weapons dealer.

The space allocated for their display was certainly much bigger and wider than the other rooms, and there was an astounding quantity of enchanted weapons.

I looked them over slowly. There were a variety of different kinds, ranging from small daggers to great swords as tall as I. However, the decorations on the blades, sheathes, and handles were all too

fancy and over-the-top.

"They're too flashy. Do you have anything more subtle?"

"More subtle, you say…? Please give me one moment." The merchant turned strangely serious as he searched through one of the display cases. "How about this?" he asked, returning with what looked to be a tiny dusty box of some kind—definitely too small to hold a sword.

"What is it?"

"It is an ancient sorcerer's sword." He produced a bundle of keys and stuck one of them in the lock.

I'd felt slightly offended that he was presenting me with this musty old thing, but the mention of an "ancient sorcerer" piqued my curiosity.

The arms dealer opened the lid, the rusty hinges creaking noisily.

"What the…?" I muttered. There, inside the box, was a roughly finished metal necklace with a sword-shaped ornament the size of my index finger. "Is this some kind of joke?"

I asked for a weapon, not an accessory. The tiny sword wasn't adorned with even a single gem, either, making it ugly to boot. I scowled at the man.

He recoiled and waved his hands urgently in denial. "N-no, not at all! I would never!"

"What is it, then?"

"If you hold it by the handle and imbue it with magic, the pendant will transform into a real sword!"

He gripped the tiny sword between his index finger and thumb and held it out to me. It looked like a children's toy, and I was having a hard time believing it could actually turn into a lethal weapon. I eyed him with deep suspicion.

"That means people with no magic are unable to use it, doesn't it?"

"Any knight who has trained for long enough can harness at least a little magic. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to use magical swords…"

I'd let my ignorance show again. Clearing my throat, I quickly changed the subject. "I'm…not certain if Eckles has any."

"Don't you worry. I've been selling weapons in the capital for decades, and I can guarantee you, that slave—" He had begun suavely but faltered when he saw the glare I set on him. "Ahem, I mean, your guard exuded an incredibly powerful aura. In fact, I could count on one hand how few like him I've seen in all the thirty years I've operated my shop."

"Really?"

"Of course!"

I felt the sudden urge to brag that he'd be a swordmaster one day but held myself back.

"This sword is very rare, and truthfully, I paid a hefty price to rescue it from the black market. And price aside, knights always prefer the flashier items…" The man sniffled, cradling the accessory as if it were his baby.

"It hasn't been enchanted with any additional magic, but its base material is the rarest of ores. I have no idea how anyone managed to get their hands on it, but the sword is made of steel mined by the long-extinct dwarves."

"Is that a good thing?"

"There's no longer any way to mine this type of steel, as it remains a secret the dwarves took to their graves."

Definitely a good thing, then. I nodded along quietly, not really following half of what he was saying.

"In addition, any magic inside the blade becomes undetectable when it is shrunken down, making it impossible for anyone to sense its true form as a magical weapon. Comes in handy when you're someplace where a such a thing is prohibited."

"Like the palace, for example?"

The arms dealer nodded, looking around him furtively. He then whispered, "It's perfect for assassinating someone."

He was exaggerating. Who would assassinate someone with a magical shape-changing sword, when they could use poison or a dagger? I didn't bother pointing this out, though. I liked the sword quite a bit.

A weapon others won't be able to see, but that you can keep on your person at all times. I'd been thinking about getting him a small

dagger, but perhaps this was better for Eckles. In his hands, anything was a weapon anyway, whether it was a magical sword or a child's toy.

"I'll take it."

"You have my deepest gratitude! Thanks to you, my precious baby has finally found a suitable owner!" The man looked almost teary-eyed. "Would you like me to send this to the manor with the other items?"

"No. I'll take it with me."

A bit later, after I'd finished paying for the goods and was about to leave, something glimmering in the candlelight caught my eye.

"What is this?" I asked about the object too fancy and elegant to look at home in a weapon shop. It was a tiny circular token filled with writing, glittering jewels embedded in the middle. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Ah. That's an amulet," the arms dealer informed me.

"An amulet?"

"Yes. The hunting tournament is coming up, is it not? This type of thing is popular among the ladies these days. They buy it as a token for family members or lovers taking part in the hunt."

"Really? What does it do?"

"The round disk is imbued with a spell, and the gems are also magic stones. The spell will activate automatically should its wearer be in any danger."

"What kind of spell?"

"That depends on the amulet. Most are equipped with defensive spells, but some will teleport the wearer to a safe location."

"Well, that sounds convenient."

"Amulets generally have adhesive magic, so you can attach it anywhere you like on your body." The dealer was attempting to reel me in, having immediately latched on to my interest. "Would you like a closer look?"

I nodded. When I left the building a while later, it was with three fancy new amulets in hand, colored gold, silver, and bronze, in

addition to the necklace meant for Eckles.

"Did you have a good time, Miss?" the horseman asked, rushing to relieve me of my shopping bag, despite it technically being the reticent Eckles's duty. The bag contained the amulets, while the gift for Eckles was hidden in my breast pocket. "Where to now?"

"There's a quiet lake to the west of here, isn't there?"

"Ah, that would be Lake Kalia. We'll depart at once, then."

The carriage began to move silently. I'd planned to buy some new dresses and accessories, too, but I hadn't been out in a while, and I was already tired.

If it were up to me, I'd go back to the manor right away, but I had to give my knight his gift first. *And if I'm going to give it to him, I should make a show of it.* I wanted to clear up any misunderstandings and soothe any resentment that might have built up in him so far.

"We've arrived, Miss."

The lake must have been close to the weapon shop, since before long the horseman was pulling us to a stop.

I got down from the carriage with Eckles's help. He then naturally fell a few paces behind, in line with his duty to protect me.

"Walk together with me? It's lonely walking alone, don't you think?" I said, gracefully extending a hand.

He hesitated, then softly grasped only the very tips of my fingers. I could barely feel his hand in mine. Tutting, I grabbed his hand tightly and felt him flinch. With a glance sideways, I caught him ducking his head.

Unfortunately, his affection didn't change.

Holding hands, we walked silently along the well-worn path for some time, before finally arriving at an observation deck built above the lake.

It was obviously a popular spot for couples, but perhaps because it was a weekday afternoon, there weren't many people around.

I rested both my arms on the railing and gazed out over the lake. A soft breeze carried the refreshing smell of the water to my nose. We stood there, but he neither admired the scenery nor attempted to make conversation with me. *Okay, I'll take matters into my own*

hands.

"Do you feel a little better?" I asked gently.

His ash-gray eyes, which had been staring into space, slid to my face. He looked puzzled.

"You had a bad morning," I reminded him.

Eckles didn't reply right away. I urged him to answer with a small noise of my throat, and he reluctantly spoke. "…It was nothing."

I knew I had erred in this whole situation, so I carefully approached my next question. "How often does something like that happen?"

"Today was the first time."

"Eckles," I said reproachfully, with a sigh. "Don't think I'll be fooled by such obvious lies. I told you, didn't I, that you should make everyone at the manor accept you?"

"…"

"I'm not scolding you for not being able to do so right away. I just want to help, because this problem is something beyond your control."

"…"

"Is it Reynold? Is he inciting the bullying?"

Eckles was silent, an odd look on his face. I began to grow anxious.

"Tell me how Reynold has been treating you. I can try to make things better."

"How?" Eckles said, tilting his head.

"Wh…what?"

"What power do you have within the knights' order?"

Words failed me. His question sounded like a dig, but his bright eyes betrayed nothing.

"Nothing will change as long as I am a slave, Mistress. If you truly want to help, you should turn the other way. I'm doing just fine."

I was taken aback, but I wasn't so dumb that I failed to understand what he was really saying. *I'll stay by your side, so let sleeping dogs lie. Don't make any trouble that could get me thrown out.*

Perhaps he'd acclimatized to life at the manor faster than I'd thought. That meant he had to have figured out his mistress's position within the household as well.

[Affection: 33%]

I glanced above his head. Only 33 percent. I'd barely managed to surpass the base affection awarded in Normal Mode.

Even in the easier mode, Eckles had been a tough nut to crack. I'd been under the impression that it was because of his loyalty to Penelope, but now that I'd come to understand his personality a bit better, I realized that maybe this wasn't the case.

So from the very beginning, he was playing a calculated game of tug-of-war for his own survival?

I had subconsciously let myself get excited after seeing his affection rise above 30 percent. To be honest, the events of the morning had filled me with hope—how blissfully unaware I was. The ending had seemed closer than ever before, and it was with great joy that I'd dragged Eckles to the weapons dealer.

It felt silly looking back on it.

"Yes… You're right."

I should have known nothing was ever that easy.

My voice sounded dispirited even to my own ears. "You must know now how people see me at the manor."

Why hadn't it occurred to me, while I was busy placing all my bets on Eckles, that he might have been measuring my own strength as a lifeline?

"I don't have the power to elevate your status at the moment," I continued. "And there's no perfect solution to stop the harassment while you remain a slave."

As Eckles had said, there was little I could feasibly do. I could go to the duke and tell him that the knights' order had a bullying problem, but it would ultimately be a fruitless endeavor. *The duke isn't the slightest bit happy that I bought a slave. There's no way he'd concern himself with Eckles's suffering…*

Thus, I gave up on trying to feed Eckles sugarcoated placations.

"But I'm going to keep you with the other knights," I said, putting on my usual arrogant tone. My face belied no emotion. "You need a

place to grow and show your swordsmanship if you want the duke to pay attention to you, don't you agree?"

"…"

"So even if you're sad, push through. Endure whatever is thrown at you and hone your skills. I'll drop by and mess with the knights every now and then like I did today."

I could grind the small fries into the ground, but I couldn't do anything about Reynold, the instigator of all the bullying. *I won't pretend I'm capable of fixing the situation any longer.*

The fact of the matter was I too was struggling through life day by day, trying to stay afloat in this stormy sea of harassment and derision.

"We're leading pretty pathetic lives, you and I both." I laughed hollowly, the sound lacking any real mirth.

Why had I gone all-in on such a downtrodden character? Thinking back on it, it was because we were both trapped in grim circumstances. I'd also known from the beginning that it would be easier to ingratiate myself with someone who had little, as opposed to someone who wanted for nothing.

For someone like me, battered by life's hardships, handing Eckles a surprise gift with a lovely smile—as the heroine would have done—had never been a legitimate option. I realized that now.

Relaxing the tight grip I had on the necklace, I held it out to him. "Here. Take this."

"This is…"

"It may look like a toy, but it's real. Just hold it by the handle and imbue it with your magic."

Eckles gazed at the necklace I was dangling in front of his face, perplexed.

"Go on," I encouraged, and he reluctantly took the tiny object between his fingers.

Whoosh!

With a great flash of light, Eckles was suddenly holding a longsword in his hand.

"Ah!" His eyes were wide as he stared at the weapon that had appeared practically from nowhere.

It was a simple sword with no unnecessary gems or decoration, but the way the light glinted off the blade was peculiar and hinted that it was no ordinary weapon. *I threatened to get my money back tenfold if the arms dealer had scammed me, but it's the real deal, huh?*

Eckles looked the part of the perfect male protagonist—dashingly handsome in his new clothes and standing there with an enormous steel sword in hand. Nobody would take him for a slave like this. I could see people glancing at him curiously as they passed by.

"Why give me this?" Eckles asked, staring down at the sword clenched in his fist. His voice sounded oddly tight.

Eyeing the imposing blade nonchalantly, I said, "A slave hailing from a conquered enemy nation wielding a magical sword would be inconceivable here in Eorka."

"…"

"But if your resolve to serve me hasn't faltered, then you will be the one and only knight I keep at my side."

Eckles appeared more stunned by this admission than he had been by the magically transforming sword.

"So what will you do?" I hadn't intended to deliver the present as if it were some thinly veiled threat. My plan had been to say something touching in the vein of Normal Mode's heroine: "You'll always be a knight to me, regardless of your station." *Ha! Any sentimentality I once had is cold and dead.*

I'd felt off-kilter ever since the conversation had drifted to bullying, and I ended up blinking tears from my eyes as I gave him an ultimatum. "Will you accept the sword I'm giving you, or will you remain a slave? Make your choice."

Eckles stared at me silently. I'd half given up on him already. If he didn't accept the sword, I'd just gift it to the duke or Derrick.

Without warning, Eckles raised the blade above his head, then brought the tip crashing down on the wood-paneled floor.

Crack!

It made a brittle crunching sound.

"Wh-wh-what are you doing?" I stammered.

He slowly went down on one knee. Snatching up one of my

hands, he proceeded to grip it in his own.

"I swear eternal obedience and loyalty to you as your one and only sword," he murmured, lowering his head until his soft lips were pressed against the back of my hand.

It was the very first time a love interest had touched me, but it felt neither remarkably hot nor cold; it simply left me feeling lukewarm.

However, at that moment in time I didn't have the presence of mind to notice as such, the words he'd spoken to the heroine ringing in my head.

—"I swear eternal obedience and love to you as your one and only sword."

Had I somehow forced an oath from him too early? It wasn't the same vow Eckles had made in Normal Mode.

I felt a rush of anxiety at the realization.

[Affection: 40%]

But watching his affection soar quieted some of my fears. *Things are just unfolding differently*, I reassured myself as I looked down at Eckles, his lips still pressed in a gentle kiss against my hand.

I could only see the crown of his neat gray-brown head.

"…Don't betray me, Eckles." This was the first truly sincere thing I'd ever said to my all-in love interest. "Betrayal…"

Betrayal means I'm destined to die.



The items I'd purchased from the weapons dealer were delivered to the manor the following day. As the delivery men piled crate after crate at the front gates, the servants watched, completely appalled.

"Miss Penelope! Wh-what is all this?" By the time the shocked butler stumbled into my room, I'd gotten out of bed and just finished

washing my face.

"What's all what?"

"I know you haven't gone out for a while, but…" The butler trailed off, flabbergasted. "Why did you buy such a great number of weapons? Over sixty crates of wooden swords have been delivered."

"Well, we didn't seem to have enough," I said with a shrug, a pointed nod to the sour events of the morning before.

The butler was silent for a moment. He looked at me as he would a silly child and sighed. "I think your concern for the knights is laudable, Miss. However, there is an expansive budget set aside for them already. That includes money for practice swords. We still have quite a few left, so you certainly did not need to purchase any more."

My concern…for the knights? I tilted my head, confused.

The butler went on, sounding exasperated. "Miss, it has been so long since you went shopping. You should have bought gems for yourself, or perhaps some new dresses—"

"There seems to have been a misunderstanding," I said, correcting him with a frown. "The swords are not for the knights' use."

"Excuse me? Then why…?"

"They're gifts for my personal guard."

The butler stammered, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Th-then everything out there is…"

"Don't tell me you didn't hear what happened yesterday," I said.

The older man's face, previously red with panic, became shrouded in a grim darkness. *Why would I spend money on men who insulted me?* I scoffed inwardly at his reaction.

Wanting to make sure no one misconstrued my intentions, I stressed, "I bought equipment Eckles needs for training since it seemed there wasn't enough to go around. Do we have a problem? Is there no storage space?"

"O-of course there is no problem, Miss," he said, shaking his head with gusto.

It would be ridiculous to claim there was no space for the new items considering how large the estate was. I knew that the butler

hadn’t been asking about storage, but I pretended to misunderstand on purpose. My true meaning lay in insinuation—a warning not to ask any more questions.

“I am sure you had your reasons,” the butler said finally, slowly nodding.

I’m surprised he didn’t have a few more words of protest. Though I’d reminded him of my position several times, he still seemed to regard Penelope as ignorant and unsophisticated. I was pleasantly surprised by how much his attitude had changed since apologizing to me only two days ago.

“Don’t worry yourself with Eckles. I know you’re busy. I’ll take care of that.”

“Then what would you like me to do, Miss?”

“Just continue to keep an eye on him. And tell me if anything like yesterday’s incident happens again.”

“Understood. I’ll have the items you bought placed in a storage room for your personal knight’s exclusive use,” he said politely.

“Thank you,” I replied, then gave him a brief smile.

My mood had greatly improved since it felt as though communication was going smoothly for the first time in forever.

Soon after the butler left, Emily arrived with breakfast.

“Miss! The things that were delivered this morning are for your guard, right?” She chattered excitedly as she set the table.

“Gossip spreads quickly, I see.”

“You should’ve taken me with you…,” Emily said, expression forlorn.

A personal maid was an indispensable helper to the average young noble lady. Holding the trust of one’s master empowered the servants, so I understood why she might be upset. She was set on becoming my loyal right hand, after all.

“Here,” I said, holding out to her the object I’d retrieved before her arrival.

“Th-this is…”

It was the copper amulet I’d bought at the weapons dealer. Emily hesitated, staring down at it with wide eyes.

“Well? Aren’t you going to take it?”

"What…is this, Miss?"

"A gift for you," I told her, grinning.

"A…gift?"

"It's supposed to protect you from any hidden danger as long as you keep it somewhere on your person." The magic imbued in the specific amulet I'd bought for Emily was too vague to be of much value, but such amulets were apparently often given as a token of favor. "I've got my fair share of enemies. Since you're one of my people now, there's no telling when something bad might happen. Make sure you wear it at all times, okay?"

I'd felt sorry for taking my anger out on Emily ever since the other day. She'd also refused that one time I'd offered her expensive gems, so this functioned doubly as a test. If she refused this as well, I would suspect she might have an ulterior motive in wanting to serve me.

"Miss…" Emily, however, was looking up at me with large, teary eyes. "I-I've never received a gift like this in all the time I've worked here."

"Yeah?"

"It's so beautiful. I'll treasure it dearly!" Emily gushed.

"Good."

"I'll work even harder from now on! I really will!" she said, swearing her loyalty up and down, her face set in zealous determination.

Seeing her expression, I couldn't help thinking back to when I'd first come here. The memory of her stabbing me with a needle felt so far away now.

Just then, a notification appeared.

<SYSTEM>
Your relationship with a manor inhabitant has improved.
Reputation has increased +5 points.
(TOTAL POINTS: 15)

The white window informed me that the reputation points I'd lost

the day previous had been recovered.

"Thank you, Miss! Thank you so much!" As Emily bowed over and over, repeatedly thanking me, I considered a wish that had no doubt been made many times, by many people.

I hope things stay like this.



The butler, who'd already visited my room once that day, came again in the afternoon with a summons from the duke.

"My father…?"

"Yes, Miss."

I was momentarily overcome with anxiety. Not because I didn't know why he was asking to see me, but because I'd made so much trouble recently that I wasn't sure which grievance I needed to prepare myself to deal with.

My fight with Reynold? Wreaking havoc at the training field? Or… buying a bunch of weapons for Eckles with the blank check?

The second was the most likely candidate. I couldn't imagine someone of Reynold's age tattling to his father after a fight with his younger sister. And as for the check, he'd given it to me to use as I liked. Surely he wouldn't care that much about what I'd spent it on.

"He did not look to be in a bad mood," the butler informed me quietly, no doubt reading my silence as concern.

"Let's go, then," I said, his attempt to comfort me helping me to put aside my worries.

"Father. You wanted to see me?" I greeted the duke upon entering his office. By now, I was only slightly nervous.

The older man was sitting on the sofa, lost in thought. Upon my arrival, he welcomed me easily. "Yes. Come sit," he said, gesturing to the seat opposite him.

One very noticeable change that had occurred after waking up in this world was that the duke no longer looked right through me. This

meant my default reaction of falling on my knees and begging for forgiveness was outdated.

I didn't hesitate to go to the sofa and take a seat as the duke ground the cigar he'd been smoking into a nearby ashtray, putting it out.

"Shall we have some tea?"

"Yes, please."

The duke rang a bell, and it wasn't long before a maid arrived with refreshments, including a pot of tea that emitted soft, lazy trails of steam.

"That is all. You may leave now," the duke said.

The maid, who'd been poised to fill two teacups from the kettle, bowed politely and exited through the door. An awkward silence settled over the room once more.

Come to think of it, this is my first time having tea with any of the characters.

I'd always had a very clear objective when I'd visited this office previously: beg for forgiveness, save my neck, and beat a hasty retreat.

But despite how desperate and scared I always was on the inside, nobody had ever really given me the time of day. Now that people were finally treating me as more of an equal, I felt a confusing mix of emotions—relieved, but bitter at the same time.

As I mused on my sordid circumstances, the owner of the manor poured the tea.

"Thank you…," I mumbled but didn't take the cup.

The duke took a sip of the fragrant peppermint tea and savored the taste for a moment before speaking. "Penelope."

"Yes, Father?"

"I hear there was an incident at the training field."

The mess with the knights was the reason he'd wanted to see me, as I'd expected. *Should I be relieved that this isn't about my fight with Reynold?*

"Yes…I had a bit of a confrontation with the knights. I'm sorry," I said, nodding docilely as I asked for forgiveness, following the now long familiar pattern.

The duke's cup clinked loudly as he set it down, eyes glinting. "Explain to me what happened."

"It no doubt happened exactly as you heard," I said, not wanting to waste my breath describing small details when they didn't concern my survival.

The duke's eyebrows twitched, however, indicating he was displeased with my answer. "And what do you think I heard?"

"That I showed up at the training field without warning and made Eckles choke out one of the knights," I recited offhandedly.

It was obvious to me that they would have left out any mention of their own misbehavior when describing what had happened to the duke. I mean, why wouldn't they? I might have been adopted, but they wouldn't dare confess to the duke that they'd been caught bad-mouthing me.

"If you called me here to check if it's true, I can confirm it is," I said confidently, maintaining eye contact with the duke. "If you wish to confine me to my room for failing to behave in a manner befitting a dignified lady, I'll accept that judgment. I'll also abstain from attending the hunting tournament."

I didn't admit to misconduct as I usually did, since I had no regrets for the way I'd acted and honestly didn't believe I was in the wrong. Instead of apologizing, I was subtly making moves toward my future goal. *I want to avoid going to the hunting tournament if at all possible.*

Having decided for certain to bet all my chips on Eckles, I would follow the example set by the heroine in Normal Mode and not attend the hunt. Instead, I'd focus entirely on grinding my knight's affection.

Thanks to the unpleasant circumstances of our family lunch, it hadn't occurred to me when we'd first discussed it, but every self-respecting nobleman took part in the tournament. Which meant all my potential love interests would be there—with the exception of Eckles, who was denied entry on account of being a slave.

No matter how careful I was, entering the forest for the hunt was akin to entering enemy territory. *It's the perfect episode setup for getting myself murdered, no one the wiser.*

Not to mention it was being held at the palace, so there was a good chance I'd end up running into the crown prince again. I'd sparked his curiosity enough to warrant a private invitation before. If I went, even just to spectate, and happened to catch his interest after I'd only barely managed to escape from him…

Nooo! I shuddered internally.

"That being said, I don't think I actually did anything wrong, Father!"

Silence swept through the office like an icy breeze. The duke's voice was cold and low when he replied. "You nearly had a knight charged with protecting our house killed. And yet you say you did nothing wrong?"

"That's right," I replied without hesitation.

The duke exhaled. "All right. Why was it that you ordered your guard to attack him?"

Why is he being so persistent today? The duke trusted the knights implicitly and held them in great esteem. Slighting a knight of Eckhart was akin to slighting the family itself. I was fully expecting to be punished given that I'd nearly had one of them strangled to death.

I thought he'd be livid if I maintained that I was not at fault. Since I was counting on him putting me under house arrest, his reaction left me stumped, not happy.

"But surely you find your knights' account more trustworthy than mine?"

"Penelope Eckhart," the duke warned sharply. "I am asking you why you behaved in this manner as a member of House Eckhart. Consider your next words carefully."

"…"

"You aren't going to try to tell me that you had no special reason to visit the training field, are you? That you were simply bored? You've never bothered with setting foot there before."

I understood why the duke was so suspicious. After all, even a crazy villain like Penelope wouldn't pick a fight at random with the knights while they were in the middle of training.

"Furthermore, I was told that before you went out, you

interrogated the butler regarding how your guard was being treated."

"W-well…" My head shot up in surprise. I almost asked how he knew, but I caught myself just in time. The butler had been the one I'd had that conversation with, so of course he'd sung like a canary to the duke.

Ugh, that old bigmouth… So he was to blame for making this a bigger deal than it had to be.

Seeing my hesitation, the duke struck. "Do you have anything you wish to tell me now?"

"It's all my fault, Father. I was just walking by the training field on a whim. I didn't like the way they greeted me, and one thing led to another…"

"The knights have already testified that the whole thing was related to your slave being disciplined."

"…"

"If you refuse to tell me the truth, I'll have that insolent, troublemaking slave demoted from apprentice knight and expelled from the estate!"

The duke's escalating anger depressed me. He clearly didn't believe I'd visited the knights on an impulse and had somehow guessed that there was a deeper reason for my being there.

"Tell me what happened that day in full detail, or I'll hold your insubordinate slave responsible for the entire incident."

Since it had come to threatening Eckles, I had no choice but to confess. "I wanted to leave the estate, so…I went to the training field to collect my personal guard."

"…"

"There was a knight—Mark, I believe his name was—who was punishing Eckles excessively for an absurd reason: because he broke his wooden sword."

I knew it sounded like a childish complaint. The duke seemed to agree, his face falling into a fierce scowl. Assuming that was all there was to it, he lectured me. "It is common for knights to be punished strictly by their superiors. It's standard military discipline practice. Surely you're old enough to know that by now."

"While doing so, the knight slandered me, Eckles's mistress."

"Wh-what?" The duke froze, eyes wide, mouth open in an aborted attempt to continue scolding me.

Of course the knights had left out the part that made them look bad when sharing their version of events.

"My guard got angry on my behalf and argued back, so Mark rallied the others and tried to beat him."

"…"

"And so I ordered Eckles to duel the man for sullying a lady's honor."

I'd actually told Eckles to kill him, but that was semantics. I wasn't stupid enough to admit such a thing in front of the duke.

The older man was silent for a long moment, and I stared at my cup still sitting untouched on the table. The formerly steaming tea had quickly cooled. Neither I nor the duke moved to pour a fresh serving.

I'm tired of this. The thought suddenly occurred to me as I threw a sidelong glance at where the duke sat rigidly. How many times would these interrogations repeat before I could finally escape this world?

"The knight…," said the duke after what felt like an eternity, his voice subdued. "The knights. What did they say about you?"

"That I was a fake, and that I would be abandoned and driven out."

"…"

"They told Eckles he should come to his senses and realize the master he clung to was a rapidly fraying rope."

I recited what they'd said without exaggeration. I didn't feel the need to exact revenge on the knights for intentionally omitting their own wrongdoing—I just wanted the duke to stop paying close attention to my affairs.

What I wasn't expecting, however, was the way his face slowly contorted with emotion.

"Why did you not come to me or Derrick right away?" he asked, breathing slowly as if trying to remain calm.

The real Penelope would have run to the duke's office screaming

that the knights had snubbed her, starting the whole thing off on the wrong foot.

I thought for a moment, then decided to go with the truth.

"I figured he'd been punished, so there was no worth in doing so."

"No worth?!" hollered the duke. "How is there no worth in reporting a knight who had the gall to denigrate you?!"

Unable to understand why he was suddenly so upset, I stared at him with wide eyes. "The knights are loyal to you and House Eckhart, not to me."

I thought that had been accepted as truth the moment I'd sought out my own guard. I did not expect any allegiance from men who refused to acknowledge me as the duke's daughter. In fact, I felt this way about all the servants in the manor, not just the knights. Compared with starving because I literally couldn't eat the food on my plate, the knights' insults really meant nothing to me. Frankly, if Eckles hadn't been involved, I wouldn't have done anything at all.

"Penelope, you…" The duke didn't seem to see things my way. He stared at me with a look of profound frustration, as though he didn't know where to begin. "The knights of this house… They are also your knights. And that will always be the case so long as you are an Eckhart."

"Eckles is enough for me."

"I'm not just talking about who guards you!"

"Me neither. I'm talking about all of the knights, Father," I said, not giving in. "As I've already said before, I have no desire to leave my safety in the hands of those who don't care about protecting me."

Nothing had changed after that conversation, though, other than Eckles taking up lodgings in the apprentice knights' dorms rather than the servants' quarters.

"Yesterday and on the first day of the festival as well, Eckles was the only one who protected me." I wasn't making any special effort to defend him—it was the truth. Men who couldn't even pretend to stop their peers from throwing insults my way would never serve as my knights. They had no right.

The duke sighed deeply, unable to find the words to change my mind when I appeared so resolute. Looking tired, he rubbed at his eyes and asked quietly, "So…yesterday's events are what inspired you to purchase six hundred practice swords?"

I bought six hundred? Since I obviously hadn't counted them, I'd had no idea there were so many. Amused, I started to get why the butler had been so appalled that morning.

If I was going to be scolded anyway, I decided I'd make the duke understand that I intended on keeping Eckles around for good.

"I felt bad for him, so I bought him a magical sword, too."

"Penelope Eckhart. I didn't give you that blank check so you could buy things for your—"

"Please don't be too mad, Father. You saaaid it was to cheer me up…didn't you?" I asked coyly, cutting him off with a pout. Not wanting to listen to him nag anymore, I put on an affect so he would be weakened at the sight of his lovely, adorable daughter.

I took a sip of my cold tea, my mouth dry from nerves. *He won't get upset because I interrupted him, will he?* I'd never been good at the whole cutesy shtick. My original plan had been to offer him a gift and pout here and there if he got angry, but things had spiraled out of control.

Why do I always find myself in this position? Swallowing down tears that suddenly threatened to surface, I kept a nervous eye on the older man from behind my cup.

"Tsk… Why are you drinking lukewarm tea? You'll catch a cold. Wait for some hot water to be brought."

Thankfully, the duke seemed more upset that I was drinking cooled tea than because I'd complained about his nagging. He summoned a maid and instructed her to heat the water in the kettle.

I guess acting cute gets the job done, too, I thought, relieved. I was glad to have found a fallback strategy since just apologizing hadn't worked out for me during my attic run-in with Reynold. I always referenced my experience playing the heroine in Normal Mode, but begging for forgiveness like a pushover was wearing on me.

As the events of Hard Mode unfolded, the difficulty was slowly

escalating. *I have to switch up my plays depending on the situation to keep pace.*

As I contemplated this, the duke's voice suddenly pulled me from my thoughts.

"Penelope."

"Yes, Father?"

"Not that you would, I'm certain, but…," the duke said darkly. "A slave is out of the question."

"…I'm sorry?"

"Even if he were to regain status, he is still from a fallen enemy nation."

"I—I don't…," I stammered, unsure of what he was trying to say. Whatever it was, the duke seemed extremely serious about the topic.

"Don't let his pretty face fool you. There's no knowing what greedy plots hide behind it. I do not doubt that there are many men out there seeking to snare the Eckhart family's only daughter—"

"Father, Father!" I interrupted, embarrassed by the turn the conversation had taken. *Wait a minute, does he think I want to keep Eckles as a lover?* If so, he was hugely mistaken. This was the man who could kill me at any moment.

Who cares about his pretty face?! I'm too busy having a heart attack every time I even think about his affection dropping!

My flustered protests came out in a messy tumble of words. "I know I may not be as refined as other young ladies, but it's not like I don't have a brain."

"It was just a thought. He has that gentle, attractive sort of face, is all."

"This isn't a romance novel, Father. Why would I want to become lovers with my guard? And besides all that, I'm not into younger men."

The love interests would all belong to the heroine in the end anyway. Regardless, I planned on completing the game before Eckles even came of age, and then I would get the hell out of here without a second look back.

The duke cleared his throat with an embarrassed air, sensing my

irritation. “All right, then. If you say so, I will take you at your word.”

“Don’t worry, Father. That sort of thing can never and will never happen.”

Useless emotions and hopeless expectations of others would only hinder my escape.

Not wanting to miss this opportunity, I pushed on with the conversation. “If you’re that worried, I’ll keep to my room for a while and refle—”

“That will be quite enough self-probation out of you. You’re to participate in the upcoming hunting tournament.”

“Huh? But…”

“It’s time you stopped cooping up in your room and started taking the opportunity to mingle with girls your age. And do something about that temper of yours!” the duke chided, clicking his tongue.

A surge of resentment filled me. He seemed to think I stayed at home all the time because I enjoyed it. Unable to let it go just yet, I argued, “But, Father, I caused a lot of trouble yesterday, didn’t I?”

“Trouble? My word! I could just throttle— Ah, never mind. Enough about all that,” the duke said, grinding his teeth together. He seemed to be resisting the urge to curse.

Oh, come on. I know I told my knight to choke one of his, but there’s no need to threaten violence, is there? Seems a bit much! I pouted.

Nevertheless, I felt sad that I had to be grateful to the duke for reining his temper in. It also meant that I’d been handed a terrible punishment—I would have to take part in the hunting tournament.

“Take this,” he said, retrieving something from where it was sitting on the floor.

It was a large, expensive-looking wooden box. I hadn’t seen it there since it had been hidden behind the table.

Thud!

He set the heavy box down on the table. Upon closer inspection, I realized it must be some kind of case, since there were handles and a lock on the top. The duke undid the latch, opened the case, and turned it toward me.

“This is…” I was stunned by its contents.

Inside was a beautiful silver crossbow sitting on a soft cushion, the sort of weapon you'd usually only see in a movie set in the Middle Ages. It glistened as if it was brand-new. Elaborate designs were engraved on its surface, and gems studded its body, all indicative of its great expense.

"It's your crossbow. I had it cleaned and repaired."

There was a bright flash before my eyes.

<SYSTEM>
Reward item acquired: [Magical Crossbow x1]

A reward? For what? I was confused for a moment, then remembered the notification I'd gotten several days earlier.

You have acquired [Affection: +3%] for [Reynold] and a [Crossbow] as your reward.

This must be the crossbow I'd been given for completing that stupid quest with Reynold.

"Ah…," I sighed, bemused by the whole thing.

The duke appeared triumphant, interpreting my reaction as positive. "I've had some modifications made so it's safer for you to use."

I peered down at the wooden case again. It looked more like an expensive ornament that should be hung up on the wall rather than used as a weapon.

Safer? Don't tell me he made it so I can't shoot it at all!

I was almost immediately proved wrong when the duke reached out and picked something up. I'd somehow failed to notice the black pouch resting next to the crossbow.

"Look here, Penelope." He tugged the top of the pouch open and showed me its contents. It was full of round metal pellets the size of my thumbnail.

I stared at him uncomprehendingly. "What is this, Father?"

"These are enchanted pellets, meant to be used as a replacement

for bolts."

"Enchanted? What do you mean—?"

"The pellets explode on impact and emit an electric shock, leaving your quarry unconscious for some time. It's not strong enough to kill, so you needn't worry about lethal injuries, even if a human were struck."

"I see," I said indifferently, before it dawned on me that I should probably sound a little more grateful given how enthusiastic he was about explaining the weapon's features. I couldn't help it, though. I'd lost all interest in everything after realizing I'd have to attend the tournament.

Forget hunting… I'll be lucky if I can avoid catching the crown prince's eye.

The duke frowned slightly upon noticing how uninterested I seemed. "There's one more thing," he said, more gravely than before. "The pellets have been magicked to, upon impact, erase any memories of the moments preceding."

"Huh? They…erase memories?" What business did a crossbow have carrying that sort of spell?

I continued to stare at him in open confusion.

The duke spoke, almost reluctantly. "If you really must shoot someone, lure them away somewhere isolated."

"Wh…what?!"

My jaw dropped. What was that even supposed to mean? It almost seemed as if he was permitting me to shoot another human being if I wanted.

"F-Father. I don't think I understand…," I said, carefully trying to confirm if I'd heard correctly.

The duke clucked his tongue loudly. "I'm telling you not to charge headfirst in front of everyone and bring shame to our family name like last year! Anyone you choose to shoot will not remember what happened so long as the bullet makes contact, so there's no excuse for any witnesses. Do you understand now?"

It seemed as if he was trying to head off his immature daughter before she could cause too much chaos. *But I thought I was banned from participating in the first place for trying to shoot someone.*

Instead of telling me to not attack people, the duke had replaced the crossbow's bolts with enchanted pellets that caused people to pass out and lose their memories.

I mean…come on. Should I be more impressed at just how much this family can get away with, or how out of control Penelope was?

"Have you nothing to say?" the duke chided, watching my face dubiously.

"Ah. Yes…," I murmured, dazed. I couldn't bring myself to tell him I would, in no uncertain terms, not be hunting another human. And unfortunately, this seemed to be the nail in the coffin on any hopes I had of avoiding the hunting tournament.

Glumly, I said, "I understand, Father… I appreciate this."

"Good." He cleared his throat, then unexpectedly added, as if to console me, "I summoned you because I wanted to hear about what happened yesterday in your own words and give you the crossbow. It was not to rebuke you."

I stared at the duke with wide eyes.

He coughed awkwardly. "If you have nothing further to discuss, you may take that and go. This conversation has dragged on long enough." As though surprised by his own candidness, he chuckled awkwardly and shifted in his seat.

After calling for a maid, the older man instructed her to take the crossbow up to my room. The contents of the table were cleared away in an instant, and I hesitated as I stared at it.

"Oh, I…"

I hadn't stood to leave yet, so the duke eyed me with curiosity. "Hmm?"

Agh, screw it. I'd just give it to him since I'd brought it with me anyway.

"I have something for you, too, Father." I retrieved the small item I'd held hidden in the folds of my dress.

The jewelry box was made with expensive velvet, unlike the one I'd given to Emily. I opened it and held the box out carefully for my adoptive father to see.

I could see the glistening silver reflected in his suddenly wide, dark eyes. My unexpected gift had obviously thrown him for a loop.

"Why…it's an amulet, isn't it?" he asked.

"It's been imbued with an emergency teleportation spell."

"For me? Why would you…?"

I guess I was right. It was made clear by the duke's reaction—his daughter had never so much as offered him a rose from the garden.

Shaking my head imperceptibly at Penelope's foolishness, I explained in a genial tone, "I heard it's popular to gift one of these to any noble who is to take part in the hunting tournament, Father."

"Gift…?"

"Yes. Didn't you say that the foreign visitors in attendance will be bringing and releasing rare animals from their home countries?"

"Yes, I did."

"Since there's no knowing what might happen, I'd like you to keep it on you during the event."

"No one in the entirety of this empire would dare attack me," he protested.

"Maybe not attack, but we don't know who might approach you in hopes of damaging or gaining the political power our family possesses." The duke stared at me as if I were some kind of alien.

The ornate silver amulet I'd gifted him was quite pricey due to the emergency teleportation spell it contained. I'd had a hard time choosing between teleportation and another amulet imbued with defensive magic, but in the end, I had decided this one was better.

House Eckhart had refused to take part in the war, maintaining a neutral stance. Attacking or even killing the duke would be like declaring war on House Eckhart and reigniting the fighting; nobody would be stupid enough to do such a thing.

But people could very well try to kidnap him in order to extort the Eckharts.

"If anything were to happen to you, there's bound to be groups who take advantage of the situation and force us to pick a side in the ongoing conflict between factions."

"Wh-why are you thinking about that all of a sudden?" the duke said, taken aback. Then with a jerky glance at me, he muttered to himself, "No, never mind." He cleared his throat. "All right, I'll make sure to keep it on me at all times."

He looked as equally bewildered as I had felt upon receiving a crossbow that erased people's memories. It seemed he'd never expected to receive such a meaningful gift from his troublemaker adopted daughter.

"I'll be going back to my room, then," I said.

I'd brought the gift with me as means to soothe his inevitable ire. I didn't get to use it for its original purpose, but regardless, I'd delivered it to him.

Feeling rather embarrassed over the whole thing, I quickly got to my feet and made for the door. The duke spoke again before I could exit, though.

"Penelope," he called softly.

"Father?"

"…You've become quite mature as of late."

The duke's eyes were unreadable as he said this. I should have been happy to hear such a nice compliment, but instead, I felt my throat tighten unpleasantly. I had no idea why.

My tongue seemed to move all by itself. "Your Grace…"

The duke's blue eyes expanded slowly as he heard me address him this way for the first time in a while.

"I can't say I've never resented you. However…" Was I saying this on behalf of poor Penelope, or out of some kind of miserable pity for myself, who had never been important enough to my family to warrant even the small allowances the Eckharts had granted the wild and unruly Penelope? "I've never once not been grateful to you for taking me in."

In the next moment, a notification appeared.

<SYSTEM>
Your relationship with Duke Eckhart has improved.
Reputation has increased +15 points.
(TOTAL POINTS: 30)

Whichever it was, I felt a little like crying.



The hunting tournament was only a few days away. I summoned the butler in the morning and had him bring me some blunt wooden bolts I could use to practice the crossbow with, since I didn't want to waste the expensive pellets, which had each been enchanted with two spells.

After delivering the crossbow bolts, the butler lingered hesitantly.

"Miss, I have something for you…," he said, holding an envelope out to me uncertainly.

"Huh?" I murmured, puzzled. I'd explicitly ordered the butler to burn any and all invitations addressed to me after I'd successfully met with Winter.

"It's a letter from the palace, so I am unable to discard it."

"The…palace?" I repeated. I could feel the muscles in my face twitching.

Why had a letter been sent to me from the palace? The sight of the dragon stamped into the golden wax seal sent a chill of ominous foreboding down my spine. *I don't want to read it…*

But if I was to be prepared for all eventualities, I had to. With a heavy sigh, I grudgingly opened the envelope with a letter opener and began to scan its contents.

To my dear Lady Penelope Eckhart, daughter of the duke.

Several moons have already waxed and waned since our meeting in the maze garden.

Though I instructed that invitations be sent to you for any and all banquets and events held here at the palace, not once have you come.

Are you still bedridden with metal poisoning?

How fortuitous, then, that the hunting tournament quickly approaches—and with it, the day I may see you again.

I'm sure you have heard by now that your ban was lifted.

I myself was very vocal in support of this, for the sake of my lady who has taken ill.

I hope you recover soon so that we may meet once more in good health.

P.S. You haven't forgotten your promise, have you?

You'd do well to remember it, daughter of the duke.

For I have feverishly anticipated your response to my question while waiting for that forsaken metal to work itself out of your system.

- Callisto Regulus

"Crazy bastard!" Shuddering at the sight of the bold cursive signature, I crumpled the letter into a ball angrily.

Why can't he just forget about me already?! His persistence sent shivers through my body. *I've been sucked into a freaking dating sim. Why am I being subjected to threatening letters?*

"M-Miss?" the butler said, taken aback. "May I inquire as to the nature of the letter?"

How does blackmail from a raging lunatic with too much time on his damn hands sound?

"Pennel?" I said, biting back the urge to respond thusly. "How long will the knights be training today?"

"Until six in the evening, I believe… But why do you ask, Miss?"

I'd intended to practice once or twice with the crossbow when I found the time so that I could gauge just how good this body's muscle memory was. I assumed Penelope must have been quite skilled with the thing if she'd caused such a ruckus last year.

However, I'd changed my mind.

"I need to use the training field."

I suddenly had very good incentive to make sure I was a crossbow expert.



Since the butler confirmed there would be no one using the training field in the evening, I read and waited for the sun to set.

"Haah…" I had been sucked into a game, and now I had to practice wielding a weapon of all things. It was bothersome to say the least, and totally unfair, but what could a girl do? If I wanted to survive, I needed to be able to defend myself in the face of a threat —namely, one psycho crown prince and his threatening letter.

I suppose I should be thankful the duke gave me this nice crossbow. I wouldn't attack any of the other young noble ladies who got on my nerves, as the duke seemed to worry I would. Instead, if any of the love interests tried to kill me, I would shoot them down.

Especially the crown prince, who was easily the most dangerous and difficult to deal with of them all. Because if I screwed up a shot on him, I'd be accused of attempted regicide, which would be a one-way ticket to a dead ending.

Or, well, it should be. However, to my great relief, the enchanted pellet shocked its victim, wiping their memory and leaving no evidence.

"Perfect." I performed a small standing ovation at just the idea— the crown prince foaming at the mouth as he fell unconscious to the ground. *But this is for the sake of self-defense, nothing more. I'm definitely not letting personal grudges get mixed in*, I told myself, trying to tamp down my excitement.

Eventually, the sun set outside my bedroom window, and I prepared to go out, changing into my hunting outfit. Ladies in Eorka only rarely participated in the hunt, if at all, so there was no specialized hunting attire for women. Instead, they wore thick tights and shorts with suspenders, which were also commonly worn by young boys.

After pulling on my leather jacket and a tie, I studied my reflection. I expected to look silly, but a glance at the mirror told me

otherwise.

"No way… I look fantastic in this." Apparently, people with crazy-good looks were immune to debuffs by way of ugly outfits. With my hair done up in a bun, I looked like some kind of hunting goddess.

With a grin, I hefted the crossbow up, completing the look. Though it appeared heavy, it was surprisingly easy to lift, no doubt having been magicked to make it more lightweight.

Penelope had used the crossbow a lot around this time last year, and I somehow found the feeling of it in my hands familiar.

My inspection complete, I snatched up my quiver of bolts and left the room.

Each servant I encountered on my way out gasped and avoided eye contact as I passed them. I could feel their glares stabbing me from behind as I walked down the corridor; apparently, the servants didn't enjoy seeing me armed with a weapon.

Looks like I'll have to prance around like this every once in a while to remind them who's boss.

Thanks to the crossbow, I was able to leave the manor undisturbed, no one daring to approach me.

The path leading to the training field was empty and quiet, though that was to be expected, since I'd purposely timed my visit for after the knights had all left.

Or at least, I thought it was empty.

I was soon proven wrong when a silhouette appeared coming from the opposite direction.

His pink hair was dyed with the crimson red light of the setting sun, almost dark enough to resemble my own hair. I knew who it was even before I saw his hair, though, thanks to what floated above his head: [Affection: 17%]. I tried to turn back, but at that very moment, we made eye contact.

I lurched to a stop. *Dammit…* I was dismayed to find myself staring at him awkwardly, a stretch of road between us. Why was it him of all people—the person I wanted to avoid the absolute most? I marveled at my bad luck.

What do I do? It didn't feel right to just give a friendly hello after the intense fight we'd had not that long ago. However, it would be even more strange to turn around and leave.

Trusting in my thick skin, I decided to meet him head-on.

Ugh, whatever. He'll ignore me if he has even a smidgen of decency.

Reynold, however, had far fewer scruples than I'd expected.

"You look like a country bumpkin out on her first hunt," he mocked as I walked past him. "Don't tell me you're going to the training field dressed in that embarrassing outfit?"

I gave a cursory glance at my surroundings and was relieved to see there were no rocks that I might end up cracking my head open on should things go south. Choosing to disregard him, I kept moving, but he was nothing if not a persistent bastard.

"So you're flat out ignoring me now?" he said, sidestepping hastily in front of me and blocking my way.

I sighed quietly and peered up at him. "Do you have something to say?"

His piercing gaze told me the answer to that question was a resounding yes.

Fine, then. Let's hear what bone you have to pick with me this time.

I stared, waiting patiently for him to speak. But he simply stared back, mum. "If you have nothing to say, then don't talk to me." I attempted to step around him again as I spoke.

This time Reynold's words came out in a rush. "The knights… They're not done training yet. They've been doing some additional drills for a few days now. You'll run into them if you go now."

I had no desire to converse with Reynold any more, but if he was right, it might be a smart idea to wait. Evidently, even he'd heard of my altercation with the knights.

What does it matter, though? They're the ones who should be avoiding me. They were the ones who did the trash talking.

"I don't care," I said petulantly. "I'm sure there will be a spare target I can use. If that's all, I'll be leaving now."

As I moved past him, Reynold said softly, "You can go up to the

attic if you want. I won't interfere anymore."

The unexpected words caused me to freeze in place.

"…Ha!" Once I'd processed what he was trying to say, I burst into laughter. *What is this, some charitable donation?* Penelope might have had some kind of emotional attachment to that attic, but I certainly didn't.

If I were to go again, there was no way of knowing when I'd be accused of making some kind of cruel wish on a damn firework. It wasn't worth the trouble.

Without a second thought, I turned and replied, "Yeah, no."

"…Why not?"

"I'd hate to run into you up there."

The pupils in his blue eyes dilated, and the white letters above his head blinked threateningly. I watched, impassive.

[Affection: 17%]

I could afford to lose a few percentage points. Instead of worrying about the trivial matter of Reynold's affection, I thought of the knights who were apparently still outside training.

Does that mean Eckles is still there, too? My plan to work on Eckles's affection during the hunting tournament had been foiled. *I need to make some headway before leaving for the hunt instead.*

My musings were interrupted when Reynold finally managed to get out whatever words he'd been struggling to speak.

"I…harsh."

"What?" Distracted by my thoughts, I failed to catch what he had said.

His lips moved minutely as he repeated himself. "I…was…a bit… sh."

I still couldn't make out his words, since his voice was barely audible. I instinctively knew what he was trying to say, though. *If you're going to apologize, be a man about it.* Internally clicking my tongue, I gave him another chance.

"What?"

"I…that day."

"I can't hear you," I said, my tone automatically slipping into one of glee. Seeing him so embarrassed was a rare sight. I knew I

wasn't being very gracious, but I was unable to resist, considering everything he'd made me suffer.

"I said I'm sorry! I was too harsh on you that day!" the pink-haired man suddenly shouted, throwing his head back.

"Caw! Caw!"

I could hear birds in the nearby bushes fleeing into the sky, no doubt startled by the noise. *Holy crap, is he part megaphone?* I frowned, rubbing my ringing ears.

His cheeks a fiery red, Reynold grumbled, "You're always the first to come find me. Why are you moping around for so long this time? Girls can be so stupid…"

I stared at Reynold. Though he was just griping at this point, I could glean a lot about the dynamic between him and Penelope from his words.

How would things go in this situation if I followed the intended route laid out by the game?

I suppose I would accept his apology and thank him for saying sorry to me first.

But why? Why was it that I was always forced to thank people even when I didn't actually feel grateful to them?

"…Reynold."

He glared in my direction and said sulkily, "What?"

"I accept your apology. It's not like I was particularly well-behaved, either."

"Well, I'm glad you realize that much," he said, his expression immediately regaining its usual smug confidence. I could only assume it had deeply hurt his pride having to be the bigger person. He was already acting as though it was only right that I accept his "sorry."

"But I want you to know something."

"Huh?"

"This is the first time you've ever apologized to me." I wouldn't waste my thanks on a righteously delivered admission of wrongdoing. "You've hurt me more times than I can count with your words, and I've forgiven you just as many times without so much as hearing a 'sorry.' So…"

"…"

"…I'll forgive you this time as well," I said, smiling broadly, making it clear that I was the one being generous here, not him.

I had passed him and was standing closer to the training field now, so the fiery light of the sunset washed over my face, my hair fluttering in the breeze. I brushed the wayward strands aside, tucking them behind one ear as I gazed up at him.

Huh? There was something odd about the expression on Reynold's face. He seemed almost mesmerized, and when our eyes met, a blush spread across his cheeks.

"I…," he stammered, his face bright red. "I don't need forgiveness from the likes of you. I said what I needed to say. I'm leaving!"

Before I could respond, he spun and strode away.

"What's his problem?" I said, frowning, alone on the forest path.

The letters bobbing atop his head shone suddenly.

[Affection: 22%]

I checked multiple times to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, fixated on the numbers until he was too far away for me to make anything out.

Reynold had been right. When I arrived at the training field, the knights were just finishing their training. Thankfully, the target range, which was situated a distance from the sparring area, seemed to be vacant. There was probably no shooting practice today.

Avoiding the knights, I sneaked around the edges of the training field and made my way toward the range. It would have been faster to go across, but I'd only just met with the duke—for the time being, it was safer to lie low and avoid stirring up trouble.

When I finally arrived, I loaded the crossbow and pulled the string back until it was hooked on the latch. Turning the crank, I got in position to shoot. I trusted Penelope's body to know what to do—she'd apparently already been using a crossbow for a year, after all.

"Huh?" I couldn't seem to hold the tip of the bolt steady on the target. Though the crossbow had felt light when I was carrying it, it

felt heavy as I tried to aim it. My arms quivered as I attempted to hold it in place.

"Don't tell me Penelope's never actually done this before," I grumbled, letting my already fatigued arms fall. I'd managed to load the crossbow somehow, but I had no idea how I was supposed to handle or shoot it.

"Hya!" I let out a grunt, shaking my aching wrists and hefting the crossbow up again. I intended to pull the trigger before my arms started trembling from the strain this time.

"You won't be able to aim if you hold it like that."

I felt the warmth of someone's body against my back. A hand stretched out in my peripheral vision and easily supported the weight of the shaking crossbow.

Jolting in shock, I tried to turn.

"Mistress." The muscular body behind me prevented me from moving, however.

"Eckles?" Only then did I realize I was trapped in his arms. "What are you doing—?"

He shushed me gently. "You need to keep your eyes straight ahead, Mistress," Eckles whispered in my ear.

I squirmed in his embrace, flustered.

"Or else your prey will get away."

At the quiet murmur of his words, I froze, my back flush with a firm chest. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly inexplicably dry.

"Let go with your left hand. Use your right hand to grip the trigger and pull it toward your chest." The hand he'd been using to support the crossbow glided along the shaft of the weapon until it rested on top of mine.

The back of my hand was bathed in warmth, but it was his breath ghosting over the nape of my neck that I was acutely aware of.

"Support the tiller with your left hand and fix your eyes on the target."

His left hand took mine and gently guided it into position. The pose he'd coaxed me into already considerably improved the stability of my aim.

"Breathe, Mistress," he whispered, laughing softly in my ear.

Just as I was beginning to feel as if the red center circle on the target was growing hazy, I pulled the trigger, launching the bolt with a loud whistling sound. Moments later, I realized it was buried in the center of the target.

"Well done."

His warm hands slowly retreated from mine, the muscular arms that held me firmly in place releasing me. Eckles withdrew from my back and stepped aside, but the backs of my hands burned as if he were still holding them.

I breathed out slowly, lowering the crossbow.

"Is training over?" I asked.

When I turned to look at him, I made sure that the flutter of strange emotions in my stomach wasn't visible on my face.

Eckles peered at me curiously. "How long have you been here?"

"Not very long."

"And you didn't come looking for me?" He sounded unhappy that I hadn't immediately called for him.

"Are you upset?" I asked with a faint smile, amused that he could say such things with so little expression. "The knights already don't like us. If I popped up during training again, I wouldn't be doing you any favors."

"Were you worried about me?"

"Of course. I'm always worried when it comes to you."

His lips twitched slightly, and his affection rose in tandem.

[Affection: 44%]

The increase immediately made my mood soar. I felt the smile on my lips grow wider.

"You look like quite the proper knight now. Do you like your new training clothes?"

The money I'd spent had certainly been worth it—he no longer looked shabby. Instead, the new outfit lent him an elegant air.

He nodded minutely in answer to my question.

"Glad to hear it," I murmured, turning away.

Even if his answer had been negative, it wasn't my problem. After all, I'd done everything in my power to help him.

I hoisted the crossbow again, this time positioning myself in the

same way he'd held me. Though it was a huge improvement, I still found it hard to aim accurately.

My arms began to ache, maybe because I was exercising muscles I'd never used before. He could have helped, but in his usual tactless manner, he just watched as I struggled.

"Is this because of the hunting tournament?" he asked.

I huffed with exertion. Unable to support the crossbow any longer, I lowered it with a nod.

"Yep…" Slightly out of breath, I muttered, "I'm going to bag me first place, get that prize money, and set you up for a life of luxury."

There was no chance I would actually win, of course. I was practicing solely to ensure my survival.

Hearing a soft chuckle escape his lips, I spun around. His expression was as dry as ever, but I could see the faint shimmer of amusement in his eyes.

I was a little surprised since I'd never seen him laugh for real before.

"Are you laughing at me?" I asked, and he shook his head vigorously.

"I think you'll find it hard to wield the crossbow, Mistress."

"Why's that?"

"Because," he said, "…too…ttle." He lowered his eyes to the ground and mumbled something I couldn't understand.

"Huh? Because I'm a 'little' something?" I asked.

He ignored my question. "You won't be able to control the recoil if you don't have proper posture. You might even sprain your wrist or cause the bone to fracture if you're not careful."

"Really?" I didn't hate the sound of that. "That would work nicely, actually…" At least then I'd have a good excuse for skipping the stupid hunting tournament.

I'd accidentally let my true feelings slip out. Noticing Eckles's eyes go round, I quickly changed the subject.

"But how do you know so much about crossbows?"

As far as I knew, Eckles didn't get any formal training with weapons until later in the game. It puzzled me how well he was able to handle the crossbow.

"In Delman—," he said, then hesitated. Eventually, he corrected himself. "In my home country, archery is considered a basic skill."

So Eckles's nation is called Delman. That information had appeared nowhere in the game. I tucked it away in my brain for future reference.

I found it interesting, though, that the future swordmaster had learned to use a bow before the sword.

"Not swordsmanship?"

"No."

"I see…," I said, nodding. "That's good. Then you can help me correct my stance so I can get first place."

He was silent for a moment. Then in a low, husky voice, he asked, "Like I did just now?"

"Yep," I said innocently.

The letters above his head blinked.

[Affection: 49%]

Hell yeah! I grinned at the surge in affection, mentally patting myself on the back for the ingenious idea of visiting the training field that night.

Hesitation gone, Eckles came to stand behind me once more. His arms wrapped around me, and his hands enveloped mine again, ostensibly to help me aim the crossbow.

All of a sudden, a frosty voice pierced the warm atmosphere. "What do you think you're doing?"

My body was jerked around roughly, but not of my own accord. Eckles had spun, taking me with him. Sensing an intruder, he instinctively aimed the crossbow with me still cradled in his arms.

A dark-haired man stood stiffly in my line of sight.

"…Young Lord?" I said.

I was mortified.

What is he doing here? In the game, there were virtually no events where two love interests appeared at the same time, with the exception of Reynold and Derrick.

Despite the fact that my mind was still elsewhere, as I was completely flustered by this development, Derrick continued uncaringly in a low growl, "Penelope Eckhart."

This is very, very *bad*, I thought, a chill running down my spine. I had to defuse this situation somehow, and quickly at that.

I moved to extract myself from Eckles's arms, but his large hands just clung all the more fiercely to my own.

"…Eckles?" I said carefully, trying to twist free. But the more I struggled, the stronger his grip seemed to grow. Tilting my head back to look up at him, I eventually said, "Let go, Eckles. You're hurting me."

His ashen gaze slid down to my face. Our eyes met for a moment before he finally, reluctantly, released me. I immediately felt cold where he withdrew his touch.

Hurriedly, I pulled away from Eckles and bowed to Derrick.

"I asked you what you were doing." His piercing gaze was still ice-cold.

Why is he so upset? My recent quarrel with the knights had been smoothed over with the duke, and Derrick hadn't made a peep about it in the last few days anyway. *I didn't do anything to make him angry during that time, either.*

Confounded by his bad mood, I tilted my head to the side and replied as gently as possible. "I'm practicing shooting with my guard."

"Forgoing the archers the Eckhart house employs, you mean?" His frigid gaze shifted to Eckles, who was still beside me.

"I can't bother them when they're training," I said, stepping in front of Eckles protectively. "And my guard is skilled with the crossbow, so he's more than fit to teach me."

"Teach you?" Derrick's eyes flashed a furious blue, like a blue-hot flame. He was deeply offended, but by what, I didn't know.

The score above his head began to flicker dangerously. However, it was the vicious look on his face that scared me more than the affection meter.

He alternated glances between me and Eckles as he spat derisively, "You proved your lack of sense when you brandished your weapon at ladies your own age. What would you possibly be able to learn?"

"That's the point, Young Lord. I'd like to make up for what I'm

lacking and learn what I can before the hunt." Though his words didn't bother me much—I hadn't been the one to threaten those girls, after all—I couldn't stop an angry sigh from escaping my lips. "But if my using the training field offends you, I can go somewhere else."

"…"

"Come on, Eckles."

I tried to escape with my knight in tow as quickly as possible. As I was about to pass Derrick, he grabbed me.

"Where do you think you're going?" He prevented me from retreating any farther, holding on to my arm with a viselike grip. I whirled around to regard him with surprise, and he glared at me menacingly. "If you need a tutor that badly, I'll teach you myself."

"…Sorry?"

"You," he said suddenly, turning to Eckles. "If you have no further training to attend to, return to your quarters."

His imperious command, given with an arrogant jerk of his chin, left me unable to say a thing in retort. Even though it had been I who'd wanted Eckles as my personal guard, it was because Derrick—the captain of the knights' order—permitted it that he was allowed to take part in training at all. As was the case in any army, the Eckhart knights had a strict top-down hierarchy. All this to say, I thought Eckles wouldn't hesitate to obey.

Instead of leaving, however, he gently wrapped his hand around my other wrist, which still clutched the crossbow. "But…my mistress wants me to teach her," he said, tilting his head upward defiantly.

What has gotten into them? With both of my arms held captive, I stared at the two love interests in confused fear.

Derrick's expression twisted into something ferocious when he saw Eckles ignoring his order. "You're nothing but a slave. Who are you to teach anyone?"

"Even the Imperial Army was brutally routed by the archers of Delman at the Battle of Livius," Eckles shot back.

My jaw dropped. He was clearly picking a fight, and in response to his defiance, the air became thick with a cloying hostility. There was no way of knowing which of them the oppressive feeling was

radiating off more strongly.

How about you guys hash this out after *letting me go…* I struggled to free both of my wrists, but neither man seemed willing to let go.

"Delman?" Derrick said with a mocking smile after a prolonged moment of just silently glaring. "Ah… You mean the vulgar, savage nation that pillaged many smaller countries, only to be betrayed by those very same countries and erased from the map altogether?"

Eckles's grip on my wrist tightened.

Dammit, they'll fight for real at this rate!

I was scared and unable to make a sound, and my eyes darted between them fearfully.

Honestly, I wished Eckles would bite his tongue. In this empire at least, he was of a far lower station than Derrick, so there was no winning against him. *Please, Eckles. Please stop…*

Contrary to my desperate prayer, however, Eckles glared back at the young lord.

"Why don't I show you, then?"

"What?" Derrick snapped.

"How a vulgar savage teaches a daughter of the empire the way of the bow."

"You impudent little…!" Derrick's expression grew somehow fiercer at Eckles's taunting tone.

I noticed that both of their affection meters were blinking ominously, and anxiety spiked inside me. If a fight between them was a predetermined episode in the game, I felt certain I would be the unlucky one who got caught in the middle and wound up dead.

I'd remained silent thus far, afraid a single wrong move would get me killed, but I couldn't take this any longer.

"Enough! Enough already!" I shouted as loudly as I could, pushing both of them away. They'd been glowering intensely at each other, as if they were going to throw hands at any second, and it was only because I'd taken them by surprise that I was able to free myself from their clutches.

I drew both arms to my chest just in case they tried to snatch them back, then quickly said, "I'm leaving. I don't really feel like

practicing anymore."

I need to get the hell away from here! I made to exit the archery range, leaving them behind.

Perhaps rattled by my reaction, they both hastened to stop me.

"Penelope."

"Mistress."

Even Eckles, whom I had expected to behave better than this, had rushed forward, plastering himself to my side. Brow furrowing deeply, I coolly pushed him away. "Don't follow me. I'm going back to my room. *Alone.*"

Though it sounded as though I was speaking to Eckles, this was mostly directed at Derrick. He could attempt to follow me all the way back to the manor, claiming it was his right as my older brother.

If you're going to fight, do it after I leave, please!

"Goodbye." I fled from the training field, afraid they might come after me, and felt eyes pinned on my back as I disappeared. Picking up my already hurried pace until I was practically running, I got farther and farther away from them.

"Huff, huff…" When I reached a forest path, I glanced behind me, panting hard. No one was following, to my great relief. I finally felt safe enough to slow down a little. "Phew… I nearly died back there, caught between those two."

You should always trust your gut feelings. I shivered to remember the foreboding chill that had run down my spine earlier.

Finding amusement in the fact that I'd managed to take my crossbow with me despite my chaotic escape, I muttered hollowly, "Thank goodness I managed to get away safely…"

I had no way of knowing whether they'd started throwing punches at each other after I'd left. Neither did it matter much to me, since I'd already gotten the hell out of dodge. There should be no reason for their affections to be impacted based on a fight that happened strictly between the two of them.

I'll have to ask the duke to get me an archery tutor and just practice alone behind the manor.

Repeating to myself like a mantra that I should stay away from the training field for the foreseeable future, I resumed my walk back.



And then, the damn hunting tournament was only a day away.

The maids forced me out of bed and into a bath in the wee hours of the morning to make me squeaky clean. All the fuss was because of the celebration marking the eve of the tournament, to be held on the palace hunting grounds. Because royal families and nobles from other kingdoms would be in attendance this year, the tournament was apparently supposed to be even grander than usual.

As I was doused in scented oil for the second time that morning, other maids simultaneously dealing with my damp hair, I complained sleepily, "Is all this really necessary? I'll be tying my hair in a bun and wearing pants for the hunt tomorrow."

"That's why you need to look prettier than anyone else today! So all the men's eyes will be on you!" Emily replied enthusiastically. The other maids who'd joined the early-morning invasion on my room also chimed in.

"That's right, Miss!"

"You'll be the queen of the Eve party this year!"

"Yes! Miss Kellen took first place last year due to *that* incident, and her maids have been so arrogant ever since—" The last maid to speak abruptly clammed up.

I could see Emily glaring at her in the mirror, the atmosphere suddenly turning awkward. It was obvious they feared I would be upset at the mention of one of my past blunders.

Meh, that wasn't me anyway. I decided to be generous and ignore her slip of the tongue.

Instead, I thought about the hunt they seemed so excited for. Though it wasn't really relevant in Normal Mode, the tournament was open to all genders. The amount of game caught by each contestant would be counted on the last day and used to determine the winner; however, it wasn't as straightforward as a pure numbers game.

The twist was that animals hunted and gifted by another also

counted toward a person's total score. Of course, beasts that were more difficult quarries, such as bears and tigers, were worth more. Because of this system, most men would give the game they caught to the woman they liked to help her win. It was basically a way of flirting.

The hunting tournament's just another plot device used by the game to appeal to female audiences, huh? What is this, some kind of romantic Secret Santa?

Count Kellen's daughter had won last year's event, thanks mostly to Penelope, who'd threatened to kill her. People had felt immensely sorry for the girl, who'd been nearly shot by the Mad Dog of Eckhart—or "chimpanzee," as people began to refer to Penelope—and all the men had dedicated their game to her.

The count's household must have made fun of the duke's servants over the incident… Sadly for the maids' winning aspirations, I wasn't interested in anything but protecting my own hide.

"Ow." One of the maids tugged at my hair a little too hard, pulling me out of my reverie.

"Oh! Did that hurt, Miss? Please forgive me." The maid had been twisting my dry hair into an updo and fixing it in place, but she retreated as soon as I complained.

"It's fine. Go on," I said, nodding to her. Then I muttered under my breath, "Don't worry, girls. I've got a plan."

"Pardon?" replied one of the maids.

"I won't hesitate if the opportunity arises."

They looked puzzled by my words. "What do you mean, Miss?"

"I'll keep an eye on the woman with the greatest amount of game, I mean."

"…?"

"And on the last day, I'll shoot her with my crossbow and steal her points—"

"M-Miss!"

I'd meant it as a joke to ease the tension, but the maids all looked horrified instead. Emily, clearly appalled, quickly changed the subject. "Please don't let such scary thoughts slip, Miss! Now, then! You're all done. You just need makeup now."

"That means I'm far from done," I grumbled.

Despite my complaints, I closed my eyes as they requested. I did like looking pretty, after all.

The pampering and polishing had begun early in the morning and did not end until late in the afternoon.

The bloodred dress the maids picked out had a plunging neckline. I obediently wore it and the white pearl accessories they'd laid out for me.

This type of look really does suit her.

Evil things are often very beautiful, aren't they? Penelope's reflection in the mirror was dangerously seductive, the deliberate opposite of the heroine from Normal Mode.

There was something suggestive about the way the outer corners of her eyes turned upward like those of a cat. She was like an apple that looked red and enticing on the outside but was actually full of poison.

The maids brought black leather shoes for me to wear that went with my dress nicely. The heels were quite tall, though, and I was having a hard time adjusting to them. Seeing me wobble, Emily rushed over to help keep my balance and said, "Miss, would you like me to help you to the ground floor?"

"No, call for Eckles."

"Huh?" Emily said, confused. "Why would you want—"

"He's my personal guard. Of course he should escort me," I responded casually.

"R-right! Please wait just one moment, Miss. I'll call for him right away." Emily nodded along at my words reluctantly before rushing from the room.

I could understand her hesitance since slaves were not allowed in the palace. I'd actually asked for him not because I wanted an escort, but to find out whether he and Derrick had fought after I left the other day.

And also…since the maids worked so hard to make me look good, I might as well try to raise his affection a little more.

Knock, knock.

It wasn't long before the door opened again.

"Miss, I've brought him."

"Come in," I said.

Emily entered first, followed by Eckles.

"Mistress—" He froze when his eyes met mine, drinking in the sight of me lounging forward, my chin cupped in my hands. His ash-colored eyes reminded me of a violent storm. And I was certain it was thanks to how gorgeous I looked.

[Affection: 50%]

I smiled widely seeing the affection climb so easily, unlike before.

"Emily, please take my crossbow case and wait for me downstairs."

"You're bringing it with you today, Miss?"

"I think it's a good idea to take it to the cabana early."

"Right. Will do!" She left the room, case in hand.

"Come closer, Eckles." I tapped the table leisurely with one finger. As if he'd suddenly been shaken from a trance, he slowly approached me, stopping a few steps away from the table.

"Closer," I ordered, nodding at the space directly in front of me. He complied silently. "On your knees."

Though the command was delivered abruptly and forcefully, Eckles immediately did as he was told.

I reached out and lightly gripped his chin. Because I hadn't seen him since the confrontation with Derrick a few days ago, I needed to make sure he was okay. Thankfully, I couldn't see a single blemish on his smooth skin.

"Are you hurt?" I asked gently, though the way I was grasping his face contradicted the concern.

Derrick might have only hit him where the bruises wouldn't show.

Eckles stared at me, then shook his head softly once I was finished examining his face.

"So you didn't fight, then. Good."

"…The captain left immediately after you did, Mistress," he said, understanding what it was I wanted to know. "Were you worried about me?"

It was the same question he'd asked me not too long ago. At that time, I'd said I was, and he appeared to like hearing those words.

Now his gray eyes carried an air of great devotion as he gazed up at me as if he was willing me to say yes. However, recalling all the times he'd sent my heart pounding with his unexpected hostility, I chose the stick instead of the carrot.

"Don't interfere like that again," I snapped in a tight, strict tone, as if I were disciplining a puppy. "I thought you said you could manage just fine on your own. Do you want to be thrown out before you even manage to prove your presence here?"

"But that man grabbed your wrist—"

"'That man'? Not captain?" I let go of his chin and warned him coldly, "Does my eldest brother strike you as the type to overlook your rude posturing as I so generously do?"

"…"

Eckles's gaze turned sullen, as if he were being scolded for doing something he didn't do wrong. He was as expressionless as always, but there was an oddly glum air about him. I could just as well have been misreading him, though.

I glanced at the white letters above his head and assumed a softer tone. "I want you to stay by my side for a long time." I couldn't allow Eckles to be kicked out of the manor until his affection gauge was full. That was the only way I could escape. "And for that to happen, you'll have to keep me out of your personal vendettas."

"…"

"What I'm saying is, don't take out your resentment for the empire on me."

I hadn't just been afraid of dying when I was caught in the fight between Derrick and Eckles.

—"How a vulgar savage teaches a daughter of the empire the way of the bow."

I was taken right back to *that* rainy day when he'd said those words. Memories of a wooden sword slicing through the air and

coming to rest at my throat had come rushing back.

Though he may have revered me for taking him into my care, Eckles also held an intense hatred for the empire and its role in forcing him under its thumb. And if I wanted to escape successfully, I couldn't let those mixed feelings fester.

I need him to feel nothing but goodwill for me. I had to remind him of this.

"Do you detest me for buying you? Do you think your life would be better back at the auction house, rather than having to withstand the disdain from everyone here?"

"…"

"I need someone who's going to be useful to me. If you hate it here and feel like I'm forcing you to stay, I'll give you this ring. You're free to leave at any time."

I reached for the ruby ring, pretending that I intended to remove it from my finger. It was an aggressive tactic, and one I'd be forced immediately to regret and apologize for if he actually tried to leave.

I'd played Normal Mode, though, so I knew how he'd endured Penelope's rampages and fits of temper and remained at the manor regardless.

As a slave from a fallen nation, he had nowhere to go that would offer him more security and safety than this manor.

"Mistress…" Eckles's eyes showed nothing but distress as I held the ring out to him.

As I expected, he made no move to take it. Instead, he spoke.

"I… I was wrong."

To be continued in Volume 2…

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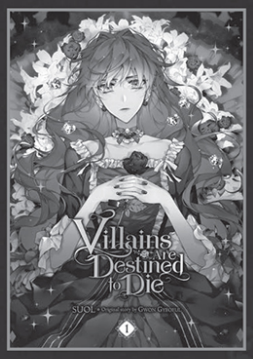


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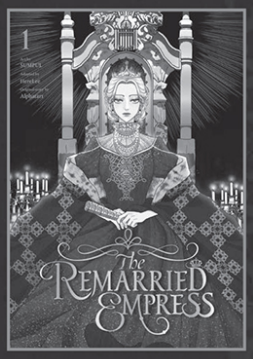
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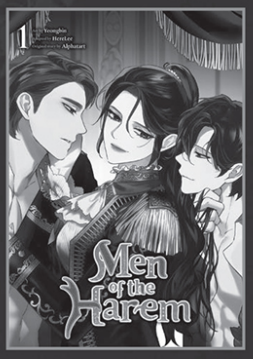
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