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Kooriame

illustrator
Nami Hidaka

Lady Rose

Just Wants
to Be a

COMMONER!

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Nicholas Cabott (Nika)

Seth's older brother,
and Fii's former future
brother-in-law. He's been
worried about Fii ever since
she became a commoner.

Archetype: the gentlemanly,
sexy older man.

Felicia Schwarose (Fii Crow)

A Savior of Nations:
Lady Rose fan who was
reincarnated into the game
as the perfect Lady Rose.

Archetype: the protagonist
who still carries memories
of her past life.



Liliana Inoce

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

Archetype: the villainess... or is she?



Nancy

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

Archetype: the sweet, clumsy girl with braids.



Seth Cabott

Fii's former fiancé.

Archetype: the Pompous Prince and main love interest.

Savior of Nations: Lady Rose

Also known as just *Lady Rose*.

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



Shade Schwarose

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

Archetype: [redacted]?!

Lady Rose
Just Wants to be
a Commoner
Characters

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Prologue

“Felicia Schwarose, I hereby annul our engagement!” Prince Seth Cabott declared, glaring right at me.

After all this time...

Not only was Seth Cabott a literal prince of the kingdom, he was also the archetypal Prince Charming—the kind that might sweep girls off their feet in children’s picture books and claim the honor of being their first love. I’d been engaged to him at five years old, and I’d spent the last nine years of my life undergoing training to prepare me for my position as the future queen. Now, at age sixteen, I felt it all flashing before my eyes.

A torrent of complex emotions swept over me, but I pushed it down and put on my usual, pleasant smile.

“If that’s what you wish, Your Highness,” I replied, accepting the annulment without complaint.

The prince was still glaring daggers right through me. But Lady Liliana, the woman at his side (most likely his next fiancée), looked on with a sweetly troubled expression. I didn’t visibly react to either of them. Instead, I turned my back to them, straightened my spine, and walked away. I didn’t want them to pity my plight.

Not yet... I thought to myself. Don’t lose your composure just yet.

Once I’d walked clear of the academy’s campus and was sure I was out of their line of sight, I gave my surroundings a quick scan to make sure no one else was around. The coast was clear. I entered the bushes and let my walls come down.

Surely I can let it all out now, right? That’s right. I don’t have to grin and bear this anymore. I’ve worked so hard all these years; I think I deserve a little moment to myself here.

“Heh...heh hah hah hah! Yes! He finally broke it off!”

Whew... I couldn't help but let it all out. The laughter welling up in me had threatened to burst me at the seams. It had taken everything I'd had to hold it in!

"Well, guess I can close the book on *that* now. I got my happy bad ending, and good riddance! I'd rather die than be queen consort! Even if I didn't, I can't *stand* pompous types like him. No way was anyone going to force me to spend my future with a guy like that! It's not like I could stand living like a noble anyway! If this plays out the way it does in the game, then my parents will disown me. I'll lose my noble title and vanish in disgrace to live alone as a peasant... But since it was *the prince* who broke things off, at least it won't impact my family too much. There's no reason for my parents or my adopted younger brother to hold anything against me! From now on, I get to live out the rest of my days as a self-sufficient, happy commoner!"

I felt totally fired up, but I had to be careful not to let my guard down. I laughed quickly under my breath, just in case anyone was around to hear.

Until now, I'd had to be *careful and ladylike in all things*. As the prince's fiancée and future queen consort, as well as Duke Schwarose's eldest daughter, I couldn't afford to embarrass myself. But very soon, I wouldn't have to worry about any of that—I'd be off totally scot-free!

I put an abrupt stop to my immodest cackling. I turned to the open sky and clasped my hands together.

"Thank you, Lily. Where would I be if you weren't here to screw me over?" I cried out, telepathically extolling the pretty girl who'd taken up her spot next to the prince like a goddess coming down to earth. Of course, I had no telepathic capabilities whatsoever. It's the thought that counts, though, right?

Liliana Inoce (whom I privately referred to as "Lily" in my head) was the daughter of an earl and the designated villainess of this world—by which I mean this *video game*. In the actual game, she loses the battle for the prince's heart to the game's protagonist: me. In a complete reversal of our current positions, he casts her out to live the rest of her life in disgrace.

"When I realized how full of himself he was, I knew I couldn't stand to even be friends with him, much less anything *more* than that. But Lily seems to actually

love the guy; I'm sure she'll make a great queen consort and eventual queen mother. Godspeed, Lily!"

I wished for her happiness in the same breath that I washed my hands of the matter entirely. I felt utterly selfish and utterly amazing. The only way I can describe it is that I'd shed all my earthly cares. It was like I'd grown wings—like I'd been living my whole life until this moment in shackles.

Once I'd given all the gratitude I could, I switched gears and began to daydream about the future that lay ahead of me. No doubt my eyes blazed with hope as my heart pounded in my chest.

"If everything goes according to the game's story, then I'll be relegated to commoner status and dumped into a rural town with only a house to my name. Liliana took it as a fate worse than death when it happened to her, but I can't imagine things working out better for me. I'll get a place to live and enough money to live comfortably for a year. What more does a girl need? I want to pick up where I left off with my old life and work at a bakery again *so bad*. I wonder if anyone's hiring?"

Yeah, my soliloquizing is getting a bit out of hand, but this is what happens when you suffer in silence for year, after year, after miserable, suffocating year. So, please...just let me have this, I thought, making excuses to no one in particular.

I let out a contented sigh.

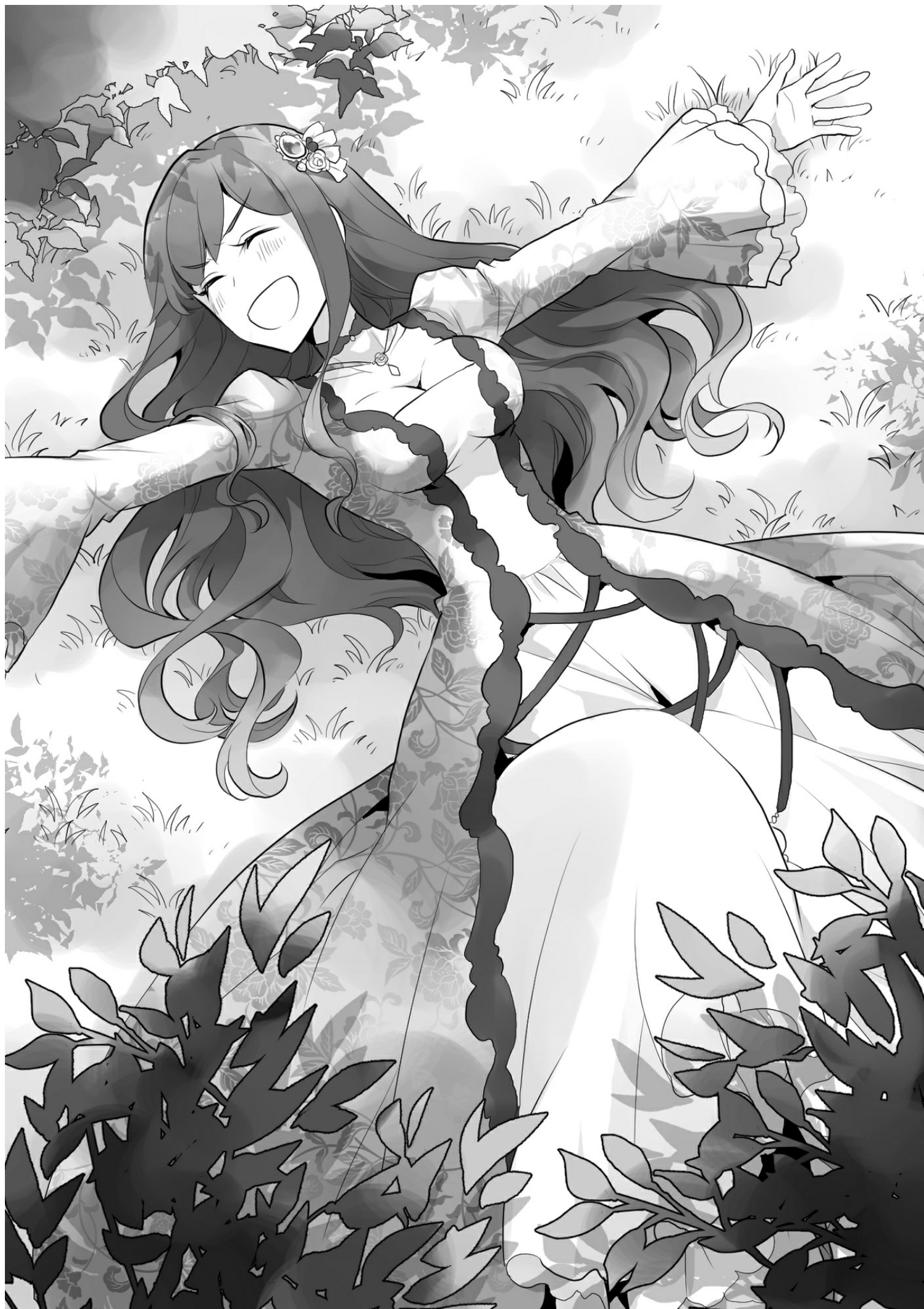
"I wonder when the engagement will be called off officially? When will I be kicked out of school and my home? It's not like the game spends a lot of time talking about it. It's really just a sentence or two in the epilogue! It's nice knowing what's in store for me and being able to get excited about it, but if they put off my banishment for too long, I might just get antsy and run away first!"

I rolled around in the grass, enraptured, and let out a final burst of excitement. Satisfied, I quickly patted down my messy hair and rumpled clothes. I then emerged with all the elegance of someone who, at a glance, you would never have guessed had just been frolicking in the bushes. Conducting myself with perfect grace, I made my way to the academy.

I was still the duke's daughter, a perfect noblewoman who'd earned the nickname "Lady Rose." The consequences were still out there in the distance, a tide bearing down on the shore.

I was painfully aware of every second of the yet undefined span that ran from now until I could live as my authentic self. The grass and dirt stains on my dress, not to mention the fraying threads that had been torn loose in the underbrush, were simply a result of a careless little "fall." Even the perfect Lady Rose took a tumble sometimes, after all.

Heh heh heh...



I, Felicia Schwarose, hold two things as points of pride. The first is my acting prowess, which I owe mostly to the second thing, so I'll refrain from going into detail just yet. Suffice to say that there aren't many people who can pull one over on folks every day like I do, and I'm only sixteen.

The second is that I've retained memories of my past life. I know that sounds crazy, but just wait. It gets crazier. The world I call home now is the world of an otome game I played in my past life. Several people in my current life, myself included, were characters in the game. What's more, I was the *protagonist*.

Now, some among you might be wondering what an *otome game* is in the first place; allow me to illuminate the matter. An otome game is a dating sim in which you, the player, direct a female protagonist through the game's story and try to win the affection of several potential male love interests.

The name of this game—one of my old favorite pastimes—was *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose* (or *Lady Rose*, for short). Of course, when I was first reincarnated, I'd had no idea which game I'd been reborn into, much less that I was now its protagonist. After all, *Lady Rose* is the kind of game where you choose the protagonist's name yourself. There isn't even a default placeholder name that's automatically prefilled for you to erase and overwrite with your own.

That being said, there were several things that struck me as strange about this world. It was weird enough that I'd been born into a foreign and incredibly wealthy family, but my surname, "Schwarose," stood out as particularly unusual. My home country's name was oddly familiar, but I wasn't exactly a fan of the game for its *world-building*. Everyone around me had Western facial features and a wide variety of skin, hair, and eye colors...but they all spoke and wrote in Japanese.

Even the technology and fashions of my current world felt as if they were based on my old world's recent history, but they were all just a little bit *off* in a way that seemed intentional. For instance, France didn't exist here, and yet French bread was still a thing. I found myself wondering if this world was connected in some way to my previous world and the life I lived there, maybe

as some sort of parallel universe.

Anyway, even at a young age, my memories of my past life had left me with some pretty conventional modern ethics. My memory of everything that happened right after I was reborn was pretty fuzzy, but I could remember realizing that my parents were power-hungry losers. Everything they did made it plain to me that they didn't love me at all; I was just a tool to them. I couldn't stand the way they showered me with luxuries I didn't even want in exchange for fulfilling the aristocratic duties my birth had foisted on me. I already knew, even as a little kid, that I wanted to run away from home.

I was five years old when I finally realized the true nature of this world. It happened when I met the boy I'd been betrothed to against my will: the Pompous Prince, His Highness Seth Cabott. Even though I was a mere five years old, it was impossible to miss that his appearance and personality were a perfect match with *Lady Rose's* main love interest.

In case you're curious, my older brother from my past life is to blame for my vehement loathing for arrogant men. He was perfect in every way—a genius who took no time at all getting everyone around him on his side. You could say it left me with a *bit of personal baggage*.

Sure, it's all in the past (you could even say it was a *lifetime* ago), but some mental scars define who you are for the rest of time. Even a literal world away, I was fighting with the ramifications. He was the whole reason I'd spent my past life getting a head start on my acting skills. Two lifetimes of lying like a rug to get by had turned me into a pretty world-class thespian.

When I'd played *Lady Rose* in my past life, I'd only played through each ending of Pompous Prince Seth's route once. Maybe that doesn't mean much to you, but let me put that into perspective: I'd played through the other characters' routes and seen each of their endings *multiple times*. We're talking double digits here. You've got to understand that I'd only read through Seth's endings out of a sense of duty as a *Lady Rose* fan.

After my betrothal to the Pompous Prince and my *Lady Rose* revelation, I did everything I could to avoid my fiancé. Unfortunately, I couldn't weasel out of it by insisting that our engagement was in name only. We were left alone

together time after time and simply told to get along.

But as I said, my parents had no love for me. The last thing I wanted to do was slight the prince somehow and incur their disciplinary wrath. Worse yet, if I didn't stick the landing getting the prince to call it quits, I could disgrace my family. They might lash out and force me into a political marriage to some creep twice my age that "likes 'em young."

Of course, the Pompous Prince didn't have a clue how I felt. He was too busy throwing his weight around and running images of his personal triumphs (real and imagined) through his head. "Be an adult about this," I'd say to myself, putting on a placid smile. He had no idea how many times I'd nearly snapped. If we'd been of the same social standing, it would've been a whole labor of Hercules on my part not to beat him senseless three times a day. But the royal family held extraordinary power and influence in this world—and he had that to thank for the fact that he was still breathing.

It's not like I had a hair-trigger temper or anything. It's just that the only thing the prince had going for him was his looks, and my revulsion toward his arrogance completely nullified any effect that might have had. Even with all the most rigorous training in the world for it, how could I have been expected to put up with a job I couldn't bear for the rest of my life?

There was no way I'd be able to support him emotionally. In fact, I was so stressed out *myself* that I felt like I might just collapse. I knew I couldn't turn to my parents for help. How was I supposed to take in anything I was learning when I was so full of anxiety and loathing? My hateful thoughts played through my head on an infinite loop. I was possessed by them. So, I made up my mind: no matter what it took, I was going to run away from it all.

I was six at the time. It's taken a decade of concerted effort to get myself here.

Once I made up my mind, the next issue at hand was how to annul the marriage peacefully, with as few negative consequences for myself as possible, and run away from my family to start a new life for myself.

Believe it or not, though, I'd had the answer to this pretty much right from the beginning. Shortly after my initial resolution, I'd run my mind in desperate

circles trying to devise a way out, to the point of tears. Then it hit me:

If the protagonist of *Lady Rose* makes it all the way to a happy ending with the Pompous Prince, the villainess Liliana Inoce is disowned by her family and forced to live the life of a commoner. Her fate was the perfect ending for me.

But that's not all! The stars were aligned perfectly, because Liliana absolutely *despises* the protagonist, thanks to the love she harbors for the Pompous Prince, and harasses her endlessly for it. Of course, the protagonist stands up for herself and denies Liliana's slander, impressing the prince and gaining his trust. Liliana, on the other hand, takes a massive fall from grace when her bullying and lies are revealed.

Anyway, that's the gist of the Pompous Prince's happy ending. If the pattern from the game held, allll I had to do was "own up to" everything Liliana accused me of instead of denying it. That would give me the perfect opportunity to trade fates with her.

I was over the moon. All this time, I'd been gritting my teeth and bearing the Pompous Prince's selfish shenanigans and the unbearable pressure (not to mention crushing boredom) of my rigorous training as queen-consort-to-be. After entering the academy and meeting my favorite villainess, the angelic Lily, I practically fell in love with her at first sight. Well, not *really*...but I *was* so happy I almost cried. After all these years of suffering, my savior had finally arrived.

Before we started school together we'd exchanged words here and there at the usual social gatherings, but it was a different matter altogether to meet her on the game's turf. My heart brimmed with hope, and my eyes brimmed with tears. Even after all the years I'd spent putting up with the Pompous Prince's BS, my acting was in fine form. But my mask—the automatic, hollow reproduction of a graceful smile I had perfected—threatened to crumble the moment we locked eyes.

In the days that followed, I considered her harassment a godsend. Each instance was a stepping stone toward my happy ending; I was *thrilled* to be the object of her torment. Lily would come up to me and proudly give me the play-by-play of each slanderous lie she'd told the prince about me. And every time she did, I had to stop myself from thanking her.

If I had any regrets, it would be that Lily probably still hates me and sees me as an obstacle even now, thanks to my status as the prince's former fiancée.

Now then...I think that's enough summarizing for one day. We'll wrap up with the flashbacks here.

Let me bring you back to the present moment. I was in a courtroom, in the defendant's seat.

"Lady Felicia Schwarose, I presume you have no objections to the annulment of your engagement?"

A silence fell over the room as the king asked the question I'd long, long waited to hear in this official capacity. Well, I guess it wasn't so much a "question," really—not with that forceful phrasing. Whatever, though. I'd never had any intention of objecting anyway.

I looked straight back at the king, meeting his gaze. He looked a lot more miserable than I did, actually. His typically gentle-yet-firm expression was twisted into an uncharacteristic frown.

He must be worried for me about my future, I thought.

Thinking back on it, I knew the king had really looked out for me. We didn't exactly see much of each other (thanks to, you know, the fact that he was the *king*), but I'd always been fond of him and appreciated his kindness. If you asked me to name the most compassionate adult I'd ever met in either of my lives, his name was probably the first that would come to mind. I hadn't exactly crossed paths with many respectable adults in either of my lifetimes, but still. My point stands.

Guess we won't be seeing much of each other anymore. I'll miss him.

Still, I had only one answer to his question: "No objections, Your Majesty."

From this moment onward, I was finally free! Free of the worst possible future I could have ever imagined for myself!

Chapter 1

Just as soon as I'd returned home from court and walked through my front door, I was thrown right back out on the doorstep. The Schwaroses had disowned me.

I'd been given only a few things to take with me...if you could call them that. They were more of a "parting gift," if you will: a symbol of our cutting ties. The whole thing played out just like it had for Liliana in the game. My family declined to see me off as I rode away in a horse-drawn carriage, but they gave me enough money to live comfortably for a year and the key to a house, at least. So, I took off in a simple dress—and, needless to say, a huge grin.

My excitement kept growing, and there were no signs of it stopping. I felt like I might start *skipping* the rest of the way to my new digs!

I'd have to go job hunting and get acquainted with the neighborhood! Boy, I was really going to have my hands full! I didn't think I'd ever been this excited about being busy before!

Oh, goodness me! I'm actually skipping now! I thought, before quickly catching myself. "*Goodness me*"? *There I go again, talking like a noblewoman! Won't be needing to do that again. That's right—I'll never have to talk like a lady again!*

Skipping isn't going to cut it—I want to dance! I couldn't stand it when it was something I had to learn, but I could cut a waltz right now! How wonderful it would be to dance the waltz by myself like a fool! Oh, but maybe that's a bit too highbrow? Should I do a Cossack dance instead?! I've never done that before, but maybe it's time to give it a whirl.

It'd been all of fifteen minutes since I'd been kicked out of the house for good, and I was already getting totally carried away. But just as I was probably about to earn myself a reputation for being a little touched in the head, someone arrived to put a damper on my delirium.

“Lady Felicia!” a voice called.

“Oh! Well, if it isn’t Lord Evan!”

Blocking my path was one of *Lady Rose*’s love interests: Evan Douglas, a handsome boy in the protagonist’s class with brown hair and green eyes. He falls in love with the protagonist at first sight when he meets her at school, and vows not to give up on her even when he learns that she’s engaged. He’s pretty pushy about pursuing her, to put it lightly, but he’s harmless—a puppy dog of a man who would do anything the protagonist asked of him.

I’m sure you don’t even need to ask why Evan gets a much longer description than the Pompous Prince. But in case you do, I’ll tell you: it’s because I like him much, *much* more.

Despite my fondness for him, though, I felt nothing but unease at running into him here unexpectedly. After all, I’d forsaken everything for the sake of my freedom—including the prospect of romance. I couldn’t let anything endanger my goal.

The cage of aristocracy might have been a luxurious one, but I’d been desperate to spread my wings and fly away. And now that I had, what could an aristocrat possibly want from me?

“I just wanted you to know...that I believe in your innocence! Please, let me help you clear your name!” he exclaimed.

Look, I’m sorry to burst your bubble and all, but that really won’t be necessary.

Evan looked so earnest. With the sunrise at his back, he might as well have been in a game CG. His brown hair looked soft and radiant in the glow of the morning sun, and his beautiful green eyes flickered with deep passion and sincerity. His youthful features were adorable yet handsomely masculine.

Unfortunately for him, my refusal to engage with all things amorous made him come across to me (however unfairly) as a doltish caricature.

“Lord Evan, I’m afraid you think too much of me,” I said. “I was indeed envious of Lady Liliana for getting close to His Highness, and I forgot myself. I committed deeds I may never undo... This is my punishment, and accepting it is the only way I can atone for the pain I’ve caused him.”

I was used to spinning yarns like this after years of getting caught up in the Pompous Prince's BS and having to make excuses to my parents to avoid their abuse. I even added one of my well-rehearsed rueful smiles to seal the deal.

"Lady Felicia... Was your love for him truly that great?"

"Yes... Why, he's the love of my life," I replied, letting the tears flow down my cheeks as I looked up at the sky mournfully.

Wow... That sunrise sure is bright.

There was a reason I kept up such a pretense of being in love with my nemesis, the prince. See, originally, Lily had been the one in my current position. There was already a real risk that, just by our switching positions, I might change the course of my fate and wind up with a bad ending.

A key part of Evan's characterization is that he falls in love with the *Lady Rose* protagonist at first sight. What this means is that, if I were to accidentally head down his route, he might expose Lily's sweet lies for what they were, all in the name of love. If my name were cleared, the Schwaroses might welcome me back with open arms.

I couldn't afford for that to happen—not under any circumstances. Even if I didn't have to marry the prince and become queen consort, I could never return to my life as a noblewoman. I didn't care if I was being selfish; the pressure and suffocation were too much to bear.

That's why I harbored so much suspicion toward Evan's offer. It felt like a trap, and I couldn't afford to fall for it. I had to be careful not to start his route.

Fortunately, declaring my undying love for the prince was a very convenient excuse to refuse him. *That's* why I had to keep up the pretense.

Prince Seth, I hate every bone in your body...but I hope you won't mind if I lean on you a bit here just to name-drop you.

"Well...I suppose I should be going now. Journeys are best started in the morning, after all. But let me thank you, Lord Evan, for coming to bid me goodbye. I cherish your kindness, my dear friend."

With a tearful but refined smile, I smashed every last hope Evan might've had

that I'd been in love with him and walked briskly past him.

Evan and I hadn't actually interacted much at all. If I'd been asked to answer honestly if we were friends, I probably would've put on an inscrutable smile and replied that we were "classmates."

Oh, Evan... I still remembered how he ignores the protagonist's request and kisses her in his happy ending. "I'll never let anyone else have you again," he says as he embraces her. It was enough to send me right over the edge.

I loved him in his normal ending too, though. The protagonist's engagement is annulled, but she never develops feelings for him. She gives him a smile and says she hopes they can stay friends, and of course, he can't refuse her. He just gives her a pained smile back and replies, "As you wish."

I even loved him in his bad ending, where the protagonist gets seriously hurt and he sobs, blaming himself for not being there to protect her. I couldn't get enough of his self-important wallowing.

In case you couldn't tell, I love *every* version of Evan.

Don't get a big head, though, Evan. You're not the only character I love.

After all, this was my *favorite game*, and it'd hardly be a good otome game if there was only *one* boy worth obsessing over.

"Lady Felicia!" he wailed.

I stopped right in my tracks. I thought I'd put on the perfect act; maybe he'd somehow heard my inner monologue about loving every version of him?

Crap... It-it's not what you think, Evan! I did love you, but only as a character in a game. It was more of a platonic love, or a fangirl's kind of love. Honestly, even if I opened my heart to love and forgot about all this stuff about wanting to run away from home and live as a commoner, your brand of romance is a little overbearing for my tastes.

"I... I love you! I don't care if you don't feel the same way right now!" he continued. "So, please...take my hand! Please, choose *me*! I can take you somewhere far away from all this! I know we could find happiness together, even if we had to live out the rest of our lives as peasants! No...consider that a

promise. I vow to make you happy!”

Without turning around, I listened to his confession.

He misunderstood me, though. He didn’t understand how much I valued living as a commoner. And what’s more, I didn’t even need him to make that happen. I’d already accomplished that goal all by myself, and I was happy as a clam about it. This was absolutely, without a doubt, the most satisfied I’d been in this life.

“I’m sorry. Forget about me, Evan,” I replied, putting on my best heartbroken act. Privately, though, I didn’t feel a thing.

This time, I ran away before he could respond.

Our encounter felt like one of those filler denouement moments that the game forced on you occasionally just to check off all the boxes. Such was the fate of being reincarnated as a protagonist instead of as a villainess, I guess.

No, what am I saying? It’s not fair to call that “filler.” I’m sorry, Evan. You’re clearly not very jaded in the romance department, if you could fall that deeply in love with me after a love-at-first-sight encounter. I’m sure you’ll find another love of your life. Don’t you worry. I’ll be cheering you on from the sidelines as I enjoy my life as a commoner. Godspeed, Evan!



A month had passed in no time since I’d become a commoner. Now that I was finally living the dream, I was surprised by how few disappointments I’d encountered. In fact, they were *vanishingly* few. It was everything I’d hoped for. I thanked God every day for blessing me with a life outside the gentry.

In Japan, I’d been strictly working-class my whole life. It hadn’t seemed like anything special then, since it was all I’d known—but now that I knew what it was like to live as a noblewoman, I finally understood how extraordinary a happy, mundane life really was.

I’m sure the life of a noblewoman must have seemed like Heaven to the poor, who struggled to put even the bare minimum of food on the table every day and shivered in the cold, or to those stricken and consumed by war. Personally, though, I didn’t feel there was any point in making comparisons. It didn’t mean

a thing to me if my life had looked happy from the outside. All that mattered to me was that I'd chosen a future for myself that held a little more happiness.

Anyway, even though Lily's future with the Pompous Prince was all based on a lie, I felt sure she must have been happy too. I was sure the prince would have preferred the Lady Rose from the game, but the fact of the matter was that the current Lady Rose wasn't really a good match for him—at least, not when she was being her true self. Lily was a much better match for him, in my opinion.

I was sure my parents were disappointed in me too, but we'd never been on the best of terms anyway. They were losers, as far as I was concerned, and I wasn't about to sacrifice myself for their sake. Of course, they were still my parents—the only ones I had in this life. I still wanted to make sure I didn't make them unhappy and give them a reason to *hate* me.

I didn't want to make Evan unhappy either, and I felt bad for rejecting him. But if I'd found myself forced down his route, I would have broken his heart. All I could do was try to make him give up on me.

Anyway, in the end, no one had wound up *especially* unhappy—and that was its own sort of happy ending, in my book.

"You certainly look like you're enjoying your work, Fii," said Ms. Michelle, the manager of the bakery where I'd started working lately. She smiled as she watched me, and I gave her a smile back.

In case you're curious, "Fii" wasn't just a nickname she'd given me. After I'd been disowned by the Schwaroses, I didn't want to keep going by the name they'd given me. I wanted a name that was close enough to my original one that I'd recognize it, though, so I went with "Fii Crow" for my new name.

I actually wasn't even sure if I should *have* a last name, since most commoners didn't (though it depended on the region). For all the research I'd done into how to be a commoner, though, I couldn't seem to shake off that vestige of my life as a noblewoman. It was hard to make a complete transformation when I'd only *just* become a commoner, and I still wasn't used to the neighborhood. So, in the end, I'd decided it'd be easier for me to just have a last name and act a little mysterious about it.

"I *am* enjoying it!" I said.

“There are plenty of young girls out there working for a living, but few are as motivated as you are. I’m so glad I hired you.”

“It means a lot to hear you say that.”

As you can see, my work—and work relationships—were going really well. And that’s not all... I got to take home leftover bread with me that day! I couldn’t even imagine a better workplace. Honestly, I still couldn’t believe how lucky I’d been to rock up at the only bakery in town and get a job all in one day.

I must be super lucky in this life. Maybe it’s a gift from God to make up for all the rotten luck I had in my past life?

“You’ve put on some weight, though. You sure you wanna take home all that bread every day? I mean, I’m glad it’s not going to waste, but it’s a lot of bread for just one person...”

“I... I’m just putting on weight because I’m happy, that’s all! I’m just riding on the high still, but I’ll settle down soon...and so will my weight! I’ll shed those pounds, don’t you worry!” I reassured her, feeling cold sweat drip down my back.

I probably just hadn’t noticed, since I didn’t have a maid to nag me about my weight or a tailor to mumble rude remarks about it under his breath anymore. *Guess I’m going on a diet, starting today...*

“You’re a beautiful girl, Fii. You’d better watch that figure if you don’t wanna lose it!” said Ms. Michelle. “You know, the day I hired you, I couldn’t believe how refined you were. I mean, your hair, your hands, your manners...they were all so ladylike, just like a *noblewoman’s*!”

“Y-You think so?” I stammered, feeling even sweatier than before.

I couldn’t believe that I might have been blowing my cover over something like that—something I couldn’t even help. I could’ve kicked myself for keeping a last name. *No doubt that raised some red flags. If I hadn’t gone and picked a last name for myself, she might never have even noticed.*

Come to think of it, though, hadn’t Ms. Michelle chided me when I’d cut my hair too short? I’d figured no one was around now to tell me off for it, so I’d been excited to cut my waist-length long hair, since it had been getting in the

way. But Ms. Michelle had told me it was a waste to cut it all off like that.

“But there’s no way any young noblewoman would be happily working away at a bakery in a little town like this, right?”

“Yeah. No way.”

Fortunately, no one in their right mind would expect an aristocrat to put in her hours at a bakery—and I took full advantage of that. *Sorry for lying to you, Ms. Michelle, but I don’t think anyone has anything to gain from me owning up to my past. Sometimes living a lie beats keeping it authentic by a country mile.*

I knew that better than anyone, having built my happiness around Lily’s lies.

As the conversation came to a natural end, I heard the sound of the door opening. I put on my front-of-house face and turned toward the bakery’s entrance with a smile.

“Wel—!” I began, enthusiastically. Then I trailed off quietly, “—come...”

Standing at the door behind two guards was a man I recognized all too well. His presence and ensemble stood out like a sore thumb in a peasant town like this one.

“Is this where I can find Lady Felicia Schwarose?”

What I wanted to say was *No one by that name here, I’m afraid. Please be on your way.*

But of course, I couldn’t...for *many* reasons.

For starters, the man at the door was none other than Nicholas Cabott (also known by his nickname, Nika), another of *Lady Rose’s* love interests.

“Oh...excuse me. I didn’t recognize you with that haircut. It’s been a while, Lady Felicia,” he said.

Nika had translucent silver hair and long, narrow, ice-blue eyes. His refined beauty and cold aura made it clear at a glance that he was far from your run-of-the-mill aristocrat. You’d probably assume that he was one of those cool, arrogant types. You’d be wrong. With Seth around, there wasn’t much room left for *another* overweening heel in the roster. And no, he wasn’t the designated “cool guy;” that, too, was already taken.

As you might have been able to infer from his ability to *formulate a respectful apology*, Nika's defining trait was his self-awareness and humility—a rare gift, especially taken in context with certain princes I could name.

Anyway, putting that aside, I'm sure you're wondering what our relationship is. Well, believe it or not, Nika was Seth's older half brother. He'd always treated me well, and up until recently he was going to be my brother-in-law.

He was older than Seth, but his mother was a concubine, whereas Seth's was the queen consort. Accordingly, he ranked lower than Seth in the line of succession. He didn't even want to be king, though. As far as I could tell, he was a capable young man who sincerely wanted to use his intellect to support the kingdom and its future king, his brother. I respected that.

But why was he here to see me now?

Huh... I've got a bad feeling about this.

"Prince Nicholas, I would have come to visit if I'd known you wanted to speak with me. Before we begin, though, please call me 'Fii Crow.' And I'm a commoner now, so there's no need to address me as 'Lady.'"

"Lady Felicia, there's no need for you to forsake your name," he protested.

"Prince Nicholas, please understand: my name is now 'Fii Crow.'"

After a moment of silence, he relented. "Very well. For now, I'll respect your wishes and call you 'Fii.' But in exchange, I ask that you drop the formalities and use the name you *used* to call me."

"As you wish. Thank you for understanding, Prince Nika," I said, bowing deeply. I let my smile drop for just a moment as I looked at the floor.

Judging from his comment about there being "no need to forsake my name," I could tell that my bad feeling had been right on the money. His visit *definitely* spelled bad news.

Even if I'd still been a noble, though, it would have been unthinkable for me to turn a prince away. Besides, Nika was still kind to me, and he was legitimately a good guy.

I suppressed a sigh and approached Michelle.

“Ms. Michelle, I’m so sorry to ask this, but would you excuse me to step out for a moment and speak with our visitor?” I asked.

“Sure. Sounds like you two have some things to sort out. Besides, he seems like a noble; I wouldn’t want to turn him away. Go talk to him.”

“Thank you. I’m really sorry for letting my personal matters intrude on my work.”

Imagining what heady business Nika must have brought with him made me anxious enough, but my anxiety was inflamed by the thought that I’d only been working here for a month, and I was already dipping out on the job. I felt bad about that, but I went back out to see him regardless.

“So sorry to keep you waiting,” I said.

“Not at all. *I’m* the one who came calling on you unannounced.”

I admired Nika’s thoughtfulness. He regarded me with respect and care regardless of the difference in our standings now.

But if you really respected me, you wouldn’t be here at all! I thought. I knew I was just being selfish, though.

Anyway, I sang Nika’s praises so much partly because of his kindness toward me, but it was mostly because he was the most popular character in *Lady Rose*. I won’t deny I got on the bandwagon a bit after hearing other fans rave about him. Still, I liked all of the love interests equally—except for the Pompous Prince, of course.

“Why don’t we find somewhere a little more private to talk?” Nika asked. “How about my carriage? Or...would that be improper, considering that you’re unmarried?”

Nika was ever the gentleman, so I was a little surprised by this somewhat ungentlemanly suggestion. When I stopped to think about it, though, I did live pretty far on the outskirts of the castle town. It was practically the countryside, really. There weren’t many places where we could have a private chat.

I didn’t really mind the thought of meeting in his carriage. My status as an unmarried woman didn’t mean much to me, and I knew Nika wouldn’t try to

make a pass at me or anything. I was just about to tell him as much, but fortunately, I managed to stop myself before I managed a syllable.

Think about this rationally, Fii. How many times have you played Lady Rose? How many times have you finished Nika's route? Don't you remember the scene where he and the protagonist share an accidental kiss in the carriage?!

Under absolutely no circumstances was I going to plunge myself into Nika's route after I'd *just* achieved my goal! An accidental kiss was dangerous precisely because it was accidental! It could happen at *any moment*! There was a very real possibility that if I got into that carriage with him, I might accidentally trigger his route!

"Prince Nika, I actually live quite close by. It's only a small peasant home, but perhaps we could be more at ease there?"

"I suppose... But wouldn't that be even *more* improper than a carriage?"

"Don't worry. If I laid a hand on you for any reason, you could have me beheaded immediately," I declared boldly.

I knew that this was exactly the opposite of what Nika feared, but I wanted to show him that I wasn't even the slightest bit worried that he'd make a move on me—barring an accident, of course.

Don't worry, Nika! I'm not worried at all!

Nika looked a little concerned, but I knew he had no intention of making a move on me and probably was just eager to talk as soon as possible. So, in the end, he agreed to meet at my house. The two of us made our way over with both his bodyguards in tow.

Are two bodyguards really enough for a member of the royal family? I wondered. I wasn't anyone they needed to worry about, but still...

Putting that aside for the moment, I should shed some light on things for you. Even though Nika was a love interest, I felt nearly certain that he wouldn't lay a hand on me—and I had good reason to. Seth was your classic romance-plot narcissist, and Evan existed to satisfy the slice of the player base that wanted a puppy in a man-shaped vessel. So, what was Nika's shtick, you ask? I'll tell you: he was the obligatory *sexy older man*.

I've emphasized repeatedly how much of a gentleman he was, so I realize that might seem contradictory, but *trust me on this*. *Lady Rose* isn't rated 18+, so there's a limit to just how sexy its characters can be. Typically, that limit is at kissing and naked torsos. So, no matter how strong Nika's pheromones were, he would never make a move on the main character.

If anything, his "older guy" routine just makes him all the more gentlemanlike! Throughout the game, he's extremely mindful of the protagonist's engagement. He doesn't even kiss her outside of that accidental one in the carriage! To make up for that, though, there are plenty of other accidental scenes—like an accidental shirtless scene, for example! He cares a lot about women's feelings and would never force a woman to do anything she didn't want to. If only Seth could learn a thing or two from him!

So I took it as pretty much a given that there wouldn't be any issue being alone with him. All I had to do was minimize the risk of any mishaps. I mean, he doesn't even show any interest in the protagonist unless *she* pursues *him*. If she doesn't, then you're essentially locked out of his route the moment she's engaged to his younger brother.

I was careful to watch my step and look in every direction, making sure not to create any mishaps. Fortunately, we made it to my house without incident. I felt like one of his bodyguards. In fact, I was probably more on alert than either of his *actual* bodyguards.

After inviting Nika into my home and offering him a chair, it suddenly occurred to me that I had no drinks or snacks in my humble peasant abode that were worthy to serve to a member of the royal family. And since all I ever ate was bread, I didn't even have a fridge. I knew it would be unthinkably rude not to offer him *anything*, though, so I stood staring at some ridiculously cheap tea leaves for a while as I thought about what to do.

"Oh, you needn't serve me anything," he said, as if he'd read my mind. "I wouldn't expect that after imposing on you out of the blue. All I wanted was to talk to you, Lady Feli—I mean, *Fii*."

I was impressed by his insight. It was hard to wrap my head around the fact

that he and the Pompous Prince were related—even if they *were* only half brothers. Prince Seth wouldn't have been able to read the room if he'd wanted to.

Now that I'd been excused from serving anything, I returned to the table and sat meekly across from him. I didn't bother leaving any seats for Nika's bodyguards. It'd only slow them down if they needed to spring into action, after all. I only had two chairs anyway.

"I hope you won't mind if I cut straight to the chase. I'd like to clear your name of these slanderous accusations and bring you home as Felicia Schwarose," said Nika.

I wanted to slam my hands on the table and yell, *Oh, God no! Perish the thought!* It took everything I had to restrain myself and stay seated. Instead, I gave him a placid, ladylike smile that I'd used many times during my stint as a noblewoman. But I still made my case.

"There's no need for that, really. I intend to live out the rest of my days as Fii Crow."

I didn't dare play dumb with him about the "slanderous accusations" he'd mentioned. If he'd come all the way here to discuss this with me, he must have had ample evidence to back up his claims. No doubt he was only here to ask my thoughts and maybe get my permission. Unlike Evan—who needed only his gut to tell him that I was innocent—Nika was a prince, and his words carried real weight. But if my name were ever to be cleared, the Pompous Prince would have to admit he was wrong.

And how are you planning to make that happen? I wanted to ask.

Despite our amicable relationship, I actually hadn't heard anything from Nika after the engagement had been annulled. I'd pretended it didn't bother me, but I'll admit I was more than a little hurt. I'd tried to cut off all my relationships, though, so it helped when I reminded myself that it was on me for not even saying goodbye.

Anyway, the fact that he was bringing this up with me was proof enough of his conviction that I hadn't done anything wrong—and that Lily had been up to all kinds of things. I knew I'd have to tread carefully. Whatever I said here could

make or break the happiness that Lily and I had found.



Nika looked surprised by the answer I'd given him.

"Why?" he asked me. "Tell me, why did you not correct me when I mentioned your innocence?"

Uh-oh...

The conversation felt like it was on a knife's edge. If I didn't watch my words carefully here, I knew I'd be flirting with treason. Nika must have been aware of that too. There was a thin line, after all, between simply not rejecting my innocence and outright acknowledging that Lily had been telling outrageous lies about me to the crown prince.

I'd have to come up with a suitable reason behind my wish not to return to my old life—one that made it sound like I only had the Pompous Prince's best interests at heart.

"Well...I believe that Lady Liliana is much better suited for Prince Seth," I said with a weak smile.

Ha ha! Take that!

It wasn't even a lie. Privately, I *loathed* the prince. Everything he did and said made the veins on my forehead pop. It took everything I had to suppress my anger and put on a pleasant smile. Lily, on the other hand, loved him from the bottom of her heart. What's more, she actually *wanted* to be queen consort—and she'd girlbossed her way into the position!

There was absolutely no question about which of the two of us was better suited for the prince. Honestly, I'd be ready to pummel anyone who knew the full story and still said it was me.

"That's preposterous."

Nika, I'm sorry, but it's really not.

Don't worry, though—I wasn't about to pummel him for that. He didn't know the full story, and besides, it would have been incredibly disrespectful. His guards would kill me in three seconds flat if I tried anyway.

"I know my brother has made a mistake—and I know it isn't a mistake that can be mended with a mere apology. But that doesn't mean that he deserves a

companion like Lady Liliana Inoce. Any woman who'd resort to such shameless and pernicious lies to trample your reputation couldn't be any less suitable for the role of queen consort. How could someone who would resort to slander to oust the future queen consort ever be fit for the role herself? Besides, there's no one in this *kingdom* who would make a better queen consort than you, Lady Felicia. Lady Liliana Inoce lacks the experience, the knowledge, and the manners. But most damning of all, she lacks the *intellect*."

Whoa, hey! I won't sit here and listen to you talk about my beautiful angel Lily like that!

He had a point, though. I *was* the most suited for the role. After all, I'd been training for it for a decade. Poor Lily had only been training for a month now. At this point, only a prodigy would be able to overtake me in such a short span.

You've got this, Lily! Just keep at it!

"I believe Lady Liliana to be a beautiful woman of integrity. The behavior you're referring to is out of character for her...and I feel that she must have had no choice. But above all, she and the prince seem to truly love each other. There's still time before Prince Seth accedes to the throne, isn't there? I'm sure they'll grow into a splendid couple and build a wonderful kingdom together."

"A wonderful kingdom built on lies? Built on the slander of an innocent woman?" Nika challenged.

Yes! I wanted to scream. I'm cool with it, so who cares?! Let it go already!

Obviously Nika's commitment to clearing my name came off as earnest to me, but his hatred for Lily seemed a little excessive.

Aren't you supposed to be a gentleman? Don't you have it in you to forgive her? I thought. *You know she's not the only liar, right? I'm lying my butt off here too...*

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm finding my new life to be surprisingly enjoyable. So, you don't need to worry about me. I'm perfectly fine, see?" I said. "Oh, but please don't share that with Prince Seth. If he knows I'm not suffering here, he might think up a harsher punishment for me."

My tone was playful, but I honestly *was* worried about that. I wanted to nip

that possibility in the bud. Now that I'd *just* settled into my wonderful life as a commoner, I couldn't bear the thought of anything threatening to undo it all.

"You're a headstrong girl, Fii. Very well...but I'll be back again to visit. And do let me know if you ever find your situation untenable. I am positioned to set everything in motion should you decide to take action."

I let out a chuckle.

"I hope you'll stop by on my break next time," I teased.

At that point, I was still blissfully unaware of the incessant weekly visits that would follow.

Three weeks had passed since Nika's first visit. Michelle had apparently warmed up to him much more than I had. It gave me a headache to hear them gossiping away each time he came by the bakery.

That said, it's not like I wasn't *fond* of Nika. As my future brother-in-law, he'd always been kind to me, even when we were young. Growing up, I hadn't had many friends. I had been too busy laying the groundwork for my plans to make any, so he was probably the closest thing I had to a friend among all the *Lady Rose* love interests—maybe even among everyone in the world. I was sure I wasn't the closest thing *he* had to a friend, though.

Anyway, that's why he felt more like a confidant than a love interest. I thought very highly of him, although all of the rave reviews I'd read about his route from other Nika fans had probably colored my perspective.

I couldn't imagine him being anything other than a hindrance to my life as a commoner, though, and I knew he must have had his hands full with royal duties. I would have preferred that he didn't waste his time coming all this way to my podunk town, far away from the castle and the academy.

"That silver-haired nobleman is in love with you, isn't he, Fii?" Michelle asked one day. "Can't blame him for falling for a pretty girl like you, though."

See, that was the other problem: his visits had been giving Michelle weird ideas. I felt like this was planting the seeds for some unwelcome developments,

so I decided to clear things up as soon as possible.

“Oh, definitely not! Nika only visits so often out of obligation,” I told her.

Nika had always been kind to me, but that had only been because I’d been his brother’s fiancée. Now that the engagement was over with, his kindness came from a different place—well, several different places. For starters, he probably felt that he needed to atone for my “unjust” punishment. I imagined his contempt for Lily was probably a factor as well.

But *love* was not among these drivers...and I would have been deeply concerned if it were. As great as it was that Nika wasn’t an arrogant jerk like his brother, they were strikingly similar in many other ways. I was pretty confident that pursuing a Nika route would mean curtains for my happy life as a commoner.

“I’m sure he’s also just protective of me. I’m like a little sister to him. Sorry...I know that’s probably not the love story you were looking for.”

“Well, you don’t need to apologize for that. But...are you *sure* that’s all there is to it?” Michelle asked, with a playful smile.

I laughed awkwardly.

Sorry, Michelle, but I’m very sure that’s all there is to it.

“Oh! Speak of the devil,” she said. “You know, I like that boy. He doesn’t lord over us like some of those other nobles. He’s thoughtful too. I like that he always comes to the bakery near closing time to buy out all the bread that would go to waste and that he walks you home. Honestly, he does *all* the right things!”

I nodded, but I had mixed feelings. Nika had been trying to hide the fact that he was royalty by acting like an eccentric nobleman, forgoing all but the most basic etiquette. He was clearly being careful not to be a nuisance to Michelle or the other patrons. It was obvious he was doing his best, which made it hard to tell him not to come visit anymore.

So when I heard the out-of-place sound of a horse’s whinny and wheels on the street outside, I knew all I could do was watch in resignation as his horse-drawn carriage pulled up to the curb.

“Excuse me... I apologize if I’ve interrupted,” he said.

I knew he could probably tell that Michelle and I were more attuned to his presence today than usual. It was uncanny to see a prince look so troubled at the thought of imposing upon commoners.

How many members of the royal family could apologize to a commoner like that, like it’s nothing? I wondered.

I knew it was wrong to lump every aristocrat into the same category, of course. For better or for worse, power tended to inflate the ego, but that didn’t apply to *everyone*. Personally, I really appreciated anyone who could take accountability for their actions and be considerate toward others, regardless of their status—basically, anyone who was the *polar opposite of Seth*.

“Actually, Fii and I were just talking about how you’re *never* interrupting,” Michelle said.

Michelle! You’re not wrong, but I wish you wouldn’t tell him about that... And the way you said that, you’re going to give him the wrong idea and make him think we look forward to his visits!

“You’re too kind,” Nika replied, and I was relieved by his diplomatic, polite choice of words.

If anyone’s going to visit so often, I’m glad it’s him, at least, I thought. It was easy to imagine how quickly things could take a turn for the worse if it were that lovesick puppy Evan or any of the other love interests.

Now, if I’d been the kind of otome gamer who actually fell in love with the characters, and if those feelings had spilled over once the game had become my *life*, I might’ve thrown my life as a commoner away to marry someone like Nika. I loved all of the characters equally (except for Seth, of course), but I never felt anything more than surface-level attraction toward them. Besides, real life isn’t quite the same as a video game...

“Well, Fii—now that your boyfriend is here, you’re free to go.”

“Like I said, we don’t have that kind of relationship. And I haven’t finished my work yet.”

“Would you look at that? It’s closing time! Now that that sweet nobleman has bought the last of the bread, it won’t take more than ten minutes or so to close up the shop. Go on now! Off you pop!” said Michelle with a smile, practically pushing me out of the bakery.

Nika followed me out with his two bodyguards, who were carrying bags full of the last of the day’s bread for him. It was a strange sight to behold: a prince and his two bodyguards, carrying bags of peasant bread.

“Something the matter?” Nika asked me.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just wondering...what are you going to do with all that bread?”

He laughed. “Why, I’m going to eat it! What *else* is there to do with bread?”

“Yes, of course. What else is there to do with peasant bread other than to throw it ou— Wait...what?”

What did he say just now?

It was hard to complain when he paid for the bread, but I’ll admit I was pretty disgusted that he’d throw his money around so wastefully. Now I didn’t know *what* to think.

“You mean...you give it to your bodyguards and servants?”

“Well, I have them test it for poison first, of course. But I’m the one who eats it all. I just love those flat cheese breads.”

Your Highness?!

For a moment, I dropped the modest-lady act and spun around to give Nika’s guards a flabbergasted look that said, “What the *hell* are you two doing?! Stop him!” Their expressions changed ever so slightly, betraying a look of gracious defeat as they shook their heads.

How could you just give up like that?! This is your job! Seriously, this is turning into a real issue! It’s dangerous enough that he comes to visit me weekly! You need to man up and put a stop to this!

“Is there a problem, Fii?”

Yes—you're *the problem!* I wanted to say. But instead I slipped back into my ladylike act and gave him a gentle smile and said, "No...not at all. I'm so happy that you like our bread."

Now, some might call me a coward for that. But the way I saw it, I just knew how the world worked.

"Are you going to start baking bread soon too, Fii? I'd love to try your handiwork."

Everything he was saying was *begging* for a sarcastic retort, but I held it in and kept giving him smiles and nods instead.

Honestly, I was getting a little worried about how much he was breaking character. *You really don't need to do this goofy puppy dog shtick*, I thought. Evan had a monopoly on this whole act, and the Pompous Prince, along with a few other love interests, brought more than enough goofiness to the cast.

Nika typically held himself with the cool, regal air of a handsome monarch, and yet here he was showing a completely different side and acting like a sweet dork. *What's gotten into you, Nika? Is it the stress you're under?*

Blissfully unaware of my concern for him, Nika began to chat me up about bread.

Where in the world is your characterization headed?



I decided not to let Nika's strange behavior worry me. I couldn't suppress the sense that something was very *off*, but for now, it didn't seem to be doing any harm, at least.

More importantly, I'd recently been put in charge of baking at work, and that was pretty much all I had room in my head for. I'd been trying to do everything the way Michelle did it, but things didn't quite pan out. Everything I did, from the kneading, to the shaping, to the decorating, to the actual baking in the oven...was completely different from the way she did it. I'd never actually baked bread in my past life—only sold it—and I'd had no idea what an undertaking it was!

I hope I can learn the ropes quickly and bake all kinds of delicious bread too! I

thought. I still had a lot to learn, but I was having a blast, and I knew it was all possible because I was a commoner now. *I love my life!*

Today, though, was my day off from work.

Let me keep working...please, oh please! I'll be as diligent as a workhorse! Just let me practice baking while we're closed, pleeeease!

These thoughts ran on repeat through my head as I padded around my tiny house restlessly. I couldn't think of anything productive to do, so I wound up leaving my house to go for a walk.

Just as I stepped out the door, though, I was confronted by an unexpected acquaintance.

"It's been so long since I last saw you, sister dearest."

It was my former adoptive younger brother, Shade Schwarose.

I found myself doing a double take. Shade had even less business kicking around in this sordid little burg than Nika did, especially without an escort. While he may have been adopted, he was still the eldest son of a duke. The black hair, the golden eyes, the delicate, androgynous features, his pitiless deadpan tone—there was no mistaking him for anyone else.

Shade was a distant relative who'd been adopted into the Schwarose family when I was engaged to Prince Seth in order to ensure that there remained an heir to the family title. From what I understood, it was closer to a kidnapping than a legitimate adoption. Right after my parents had informed me of my engagement, I'd received a very *unique* brother, just a year younger than myself. The moment I met him, it hit me like a truck that I was unmistakably, beyond a shadow of a doubt, in the world of *Lady Rose*.

My surprise meeting with Shade left me feeling suddenly faint. Regret after regret swam through my head. *Why oh why did I have to leave the house? What in the world was I thinking, doing a stupid thing like that?*

"Oh...but I suppose I don't need to be so formal now, do I?" Shade added thoughtfully, his ridiculously glossy hair swishing to the side as he tilted his head.

Okay, calm down, Fii... You just need to start by finding out what he's doing here.

Shade had all the superficial trappings of one of those implacably naive, doll-like boys with the soul of a smooth operator beneath the unmoving mask. If you *bought into* that impression, you'd be setting yourself up for a surprise drop into some staggeringly murky depths of characterization. More than any other *Lady Rose* character, I knew I'd have to tread carefully with him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, after a pause.

"Hm? Why, I just wanted to see how you were doing."

Oh, stop that! Don't make my heart work any harder than it has to. I could actually feel it thumping in my chest at his surprisingly candid response. *Wait, hold on a sec. Shade is notorious for his underhanded shenanigans. There's no way that's the only reason he's here to see me.*

I was having a hard time reading both his facial expressions and his tone, and it was making me flustered. But I wasn't going to let this little encounter spell the end for my happy life as a commoner!

"And you came all the way to my house to do that? It's only about half the size of the smallest room in the Schwarose manor, you know."

"Oh? You're living in a kennel now, sister dearest? Well, that's okay. I'd still love to see it."

His insult didn't bother me in the slightest. I knew him well enough to know that he was just a lion at home and a mouse abroad. He might have been catty to those who were closest to him, but as far as I could tell, he didn't actually look down on other people or think he was better than them. I'd never have labeled him a narcissist.

Of course, the only reason I could say that with any confidence was because I'd played the game. If I hadn't, I probably would have thought he was a total jerk.

Anyway, it wasn't his sharp tongue that I was afraid of.

"You've come an awfully long way to visit your ex-adoptive sister," I said.

“Especially considering that we never spoke much.”

I loved Shade—just as I loved almost every romanceable character in my favorite game—but he scared me. I avoided interacting with him any more than was strictly necessary both at school and at home, so our relationship was pretty threadbare. I’d probably spoken to my classmates more than I’d ever spoken to him.

Would any normal person come all this way to visit a distant, disowned adoptive sister who’s now nothing but a random woman to him? No. The answer to that is “no.”

“I’m on summer break, so I’ve had some time on my hands. Besides...” he said, letting the rest of the sentence hang unfinished.

I watched him as he walked. He was, as usual, completely expressionless. His eyes looked so dead that I wouldn’t blame you for wondering if he was even alive. He looked almost alien. Of course, he wasn’t an *actual* alien. *Lady Rose* was a little more down-to-earth than that.

His silence continued for three whole minutes.

Hello?! I thought. What’s the deal here?! Are you gonna finish that sentence or what?!

He had a bad habit of leaving his sentences hanging like this. No matter how much you raised your eyebrows at him, silently pressing him to continue, he’d just ignore you.

Don’t think you can play it off like you’re just too ditzy to notice! I know you can see me waiting!

But whether or not Shade was aware of my impatience, he didn’t speak another word until we entered my house.

I might have to retract that earlier statement about him not being a jerk...

“It’s even smaller than a kennel.”

Those were the first words out of his mouth upon entering my home.

I made some of the expensive tea Nika had given me and brought out the expensive tea cakes and biscuits he’d also unloaded on me. They were certainly

out of place now in my life as a commoner, and I had mixed feelings about receiving them, but I'd appreciated the gesture. I'd never expected to actually put them to use, though...and I found myself wishing that the opportunity had never presented itself.

"Mm... Delicious. These biscuits taste expensive. What is a peasant doing serving something like this?" Shade asked.

"They were a gift from Nika."

"Nika? Oh... You mean Nicholas Cabott? What is he doing giving you gifts?"

"He feels sorry for me, I think. I guess he feels my punishment was too heavy for the crime."

"Huh..." replied Shade, seemingly satisfied with my explanation.

For all intents and purposes, the only thing the Pompous Prince had actually done to me was to call off our engagement—and there was no harm in that. Of course, that ignores the inconvenient little fact that it would have been almost impossible for me to ever find a suitable husband if I'd continued my life as a noblewoman, but we'll just put that aside for now...

The real punishment (if you could call it that) was that my parents had disowned me and cast me out. If I'd been a normal noblewoman, that punishment would have been tantamount to a death sentence.

Most aristocrats, who only knew life in the upper echelons of society, would never survive being cast out into the peasant world below, damned to make a living alone in an unfamiliar, parochial town. A big part of that was pride, but even if they *could* stomach such a fall from grace, there were still so many things that came naturally to commoners which would be completely outside of the realm of their experience.

There were plenty of people who, faced with such a sudden, dramatic decline in their quality of life, would probably choose to just end it all. Others might struggle to change their aristocratic behavior and would find themselves ostracized by their village. The point is that there were all kinds of terrible ways a fate like mine could play out for a noble, but for brevity's sake, we'll leave it at that.

Although the world of my past life had been pretty different from this one, I'd already experienced life as a commoner, which played a big part in my ability to enjoy my new status (or lack thereof). What's more, I'd been pining for this lifestyle for the past ten years and had secretly devoted a lot of time to studying up on how to thrive in exile.

What I'm getting at here is that, despite how I was abiding, it wasn't *odd* that Nika pitied me. I didn't even need to tell Shade the *whole* story. It would have been wholly unnecessary—not to mention downright foolish—to add that Nika had discovered I had been framed.

"Do you see Prince Nicholas often?"

"Just now and then."

I knew that if I didn't specify a number, I could just handwave his question away with a purely subjective answer. In my past life, I'd often been warned that subjective answers like this, which were completely up to interpretation, could cause misunderstandings at work. But here and now, the smartest thing I could do was be as deniably weaselly with my words as I could manage.

As Shade and I talked, I brought over two teacups and placed them down in front of us. They were letting off a nice, gentle steam.

"There's a spring in your step, sister dearest."

"I suppose there is. I guess this lifestyle just suits me better than a noble one."

"Oh? Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am."

From the outside, our conversation probably made us seem like we were close—but that couldn't have been farther from the truth. We'd hardly ever spoken at all. What's more, Shade was like a ticking time bomb. Just having an idle chat with him was fraying my nerves.

"Hmm. Maybe I should cause a scandal and get myself disowned too? Would you live with me if I did?"

Abso-frickin'-lutely not!

Despite a complete lack of emotion in his expression, Shade was clearly trying

to give me bedroom eyes. I wasn't even the least bit taken in by him, though. Every fiber of my being rejected him. I knew what would happen if we lived together: my happy life as a commoner would end. I was ready to do everything in my power to make sure that didn't happen.

"You shouldn't joke like that, Shade. You have a responsibility to uphold as the heir to the Schwarose name."

"That's rich, coming from someone who ran away herself."

I cocked my head, giving him a puzzled look. I didn't want him to know he'd gotten under my skin.

Is he just trying to get me to slip and reveal something? I wondered. *I really don't like where this conversation is heading, though...*

As if to confirm my suspicions, Shade gave me an emotionless smile. Goose bumps covered my skin in an instant. It seemed the bad feeling I'd had was right on point.

"You've always been like this, haven't you, sister dearest? No wonder everyone calls you 'perfect Lady Rose;' you can handle anything they throw at you with a graceful smile. But you're always avoiding me... I'm sure you must accept all kinds of difficult things. Say, why won't you accept me too?"

Oh... Oh god... I've heard those lines before...

I recognized them instantly. Shade drops that line about halfway through his route, just before he completely destroys the image players have of him as a cold-on-the-outside, Casanova-on-the-inside character. It's the only clue in an otherwise completely out-of-left-field series of events that he's about to ensnare the protagonist in a diabolical trap.

"You know, sister dearest, I've always—"

Nope! I do not want to hear the rest of that sentence.

I immediately went on autopilot and grabbed what I had at hand, then flung it right at his face.

"Oof! Wha... B-Bread?"

Shade looked at the piece of bread I'd flung at him with bewilderment.

That's right: bread. Bread was soft enough to fling at his face without fear of causing him any injury. It was the leftover bread I'd taken home with me yesterday from work. I felt bad for using Michelle's beautiful bread like that, but my future was at stake. If I'd let him finish that sentence, it would have all been over for me. So, as guilty as I felt, at least I'd succeeded in bringing Shade's tongue to a screeching halt.

"Let's have some bread!" I blurted out.

"Huh? Wh-What?"

"You're not acting like yourself today, Shade. And I think I know just what's gotten into you: you must be hungry!"

"No, I—"

"Nothing like a delicious bite to bring a smile to our faces! Michelle's bread is so good, it even makes Nika's stomach rumble in anticipation! Come on now, don't be shy! Try it!"

"Um..."

"Okay! Let's eat!"

Whew! I knew how ridiculous that must have sounded, but when you're painted into a corner like that, your one way out is to lean in and ham it up. *Who needs diplomacy when you can just steamroll right through?*

I watched Shade as he ate the bread in resignation, without even insisting on having it tested for poison first. Feeling victorious, I took a bite of bread too. Now that I was a commoner, I didn't need to delicately tear pieces off to eat them—I could just sink my teeth in and go nuts.

Mmm! Delicious!

I'm sure you're curious about what Shade was going to say next, right? I can tell what you're thinking; it would have been really cute if he was going to say something like "I've always loved you!" I mean, that would certainly be appropriate for an otome game! But Shade Schwarose wasn't the kind of sweet little adoptive brother who dropped lines like that.

What he was *actually* about to say was: "I've always wanted to keep you as a

pet.”

Now, how was I supposed to accept *that*?!

You little yandere punk... Your bad endings are the only ones where the protagonist winds up locked away somewhere or following through on a suicide pact. You'd better watch yourself, because I won't ever let you finish that sentence, Shade! No matter what!

After eating bread in silence with my former adoptive brother, now as a duke's heir and a mere peasant rather than two fellow nobles, I stood up forcefully from my seat before either of us could say anything like “Wow! Great bread!”

“Well, Shade, it's getting pretty late. Now that we've had this heartwarming little check-in, don't you think you should be on your way?”

“Yeah...”

Honestly, I was struggling to see how any part of the whole affair had been “heartwarming,” but who cares? I'd say anything to get the creepy little snot to go home quietly.

Shade walked all the way to the front door, then turned around as if he wanted to say something.

“Yes?” I asked.

You may speak...as long as you're not about to get out of pocket with me again.

“Um... Do you...like bread, sister dearest?”

“I sure do. I'm all about baking bread right now.”

“I... I see...”

I had a feeling that Shade was treading carefully with me now, probably because he didn't want to deal with any more projectile baked goods. He was being oddly meek. I was pretty sure that wasn't what he'd *actually* wanted to ask me. But hey, maybe he was just overwhelmed by my peasant power?

“Uh... I'll stop by and visit again,” he said.

I really wish you wouldn't.

Despite his flat affect, the way he glanced back at me made him look like a puppy dog who'd just been scolded.

Sorry, Shade, but you can't fool me. I already know your whole human-pet guy routine front to back. A baguette upside the head's not gonna be enough to cow you, I'm sure.

"Sure. See you again sometime."

I gave him a carefree smile, watching as he walked away. Every few steps, he'd turn around to glance at me. He really was a cute kid...on the outside, at least. After about half a minute of watching him leave, I decided to call it a day and head back in, even though I could still see him.

Oh, oops... I totally forgot to tell him I'm going by "Fii" now, I thought. Oh well, it's not a big deal.

As I reflected on my day off, I realized that I hadn't had much of a break at all.

It's weird, though... Why am I getting these flags for Shade's route?

It made sense that Evan would be pursuing me, since he falls in love with Lady Rose at first sight. And it made sense that Nika would be hanging around too, since he felt guilty about his brother breaking off our engagement. But why had Shade shown up like this out of nowhere? It felt...off.

No, what am I thinking? How can I expect to ever understand what a yandere thinks?

Still...we'd barely even spoken to each other until now. It was weird enough that he'd shown up here alone, which meant that he'd probably snuck off to come see me without any guards. But weirder still, I shouldn't have been able to trigger his yandere outburst without raising his affection points. It just didn't add up, no matter how you figured it.

But it wasn't just Shade that was acting weird—Nika was acting weird too. I mean, sure, he was just getting really into rustic baking; as weird as it was, he wasn't really doing any harm...

Surely I haven't done anything that's screwed with my commoner plans in any

big way? I haven't somehow made all of the love interests glitch out or something. Right?

...

Yeah, surely not! This world may be the spitting image of my favorite otome game, but everyone here is actually a living, breathing person. Real people don't just "glitch out." Duh!

Truth be told, the annulment thing wasn't the only way I'd screwed with the game's plans for me. There'd been one other thing—one major plot point that I'd veered away from (okay, I give, *ruined*) in my childhood. But surely that couldn't be having an impact *now*, right?

Don't worry, Fii. I'm sure this was all just a coincidence, and you'll return to your peaceful, blissful life as a commoner tomorrow. Yeah... There's no way that was a flag.

Scene from a Castle Hall

“Excuse me, guards. My brother-in-law-to-be has already taken his leave. Are you sure you don’t need to follow him?” Liliana Inoce asked without a trace of real concern in her voice, sweeping her beautiful strawberry blonde hair to the side in a polished, graceful gesture.

In unison, Nicholas’s two guards gave her thin, emotionless smiles.

“Y’know, I’m thinkin’ Prince Nicholas was right. You don’t stand a chance against that oblivious broad,” one of the guards said.

It was unthinkable for a lowly guard to speak to a noblewoman—and the crown prince’s fiancée, at that—like that. But as he spoke, the other guard simply shrugged his shoulders. Liliana took no notice of his flagrant disrespect. Even her maid offered no rebuke.

“*Prince Nicholas* can say what he likes. *You two*, on the other hand, have no right,” Liliana said in a bold voice, straightening her spine.

Privately, though, she was conjuring the unpleasant memory of something Nicholas had said to her: “*Why don’t you just give up?*”

His cold words had pierced her right to the core—all the more so because they’d come from *him*.

Liliana was fully aware that she was no match for Lady Rose, the woman whose fall from grace she’d orchestrated and whose position she’d shamelessly stolen. There would have been no way to win against her fair and square, which was precisely why she’d opted for a more underhanded approach. After all, what other choice did she have?

She didn’t need anyone telling her how horrid and in the wrong she was, or that she ought to just give up and stop resisting. She already knew all of that perfectly well.

“Hey, don’t be like that. Prince Nicholas might hate your guts, but *we* don’t. If you’d like, we might even lend you a helping hand,” said one of the guards.

“Could you please *think* a little before you speak?” said the other. “You’re gonna get us in real trouble, you know that?”

“Huh? Aw, what’s the harm? Look at ‘er! She’s cute as a button, don’tcha think?”

“Well...I suppose I can’t argue with you there.”

“See?”

Even as the two guards talked about her like she wasn’t there, Liliana didn’t bat an eye.

“I don’t recall ever asking for your help,” she said, making her thoughts known.

She really meant it too. She’d never once asked for help, nor had she even thought about it. And no matter how strong these guards were, they would never be able to fulfill her one wish.

“Besides, I don’t trust you. Now, enough of the schemes and innuendo. I don’t have the time or the energy to play your games.”

She turned around, as if to make it clear that the conversation was over. The two guards made no move to follow her. They simply watched her go.

Once she’d finally disappeared into the distance, one of the guards spoke up sullenly.

“I’m not doin’ any scheming! Sure, I may be a busybody, but I’ve got *nothin’* but good intentions!”

“You can’t just try to sweet-talk yourself through someone’s defenses when they’re *that* guarded, you know. What did you think was going to happen? Besides, you were acting fishy.”

“Huh? I was just tryin’ to give her a heads-up that Lady Rose is still alive, that’s all! I was sure she’d be happy to hear it.”

“Look...that’s a conversation that needs to be handled with tact. A lout like you ought to just leave it alone.”

“Sheesh! Thanks a *lot*!”

Off duty, the rough-around-the-edges guard dropped his professional blank look, becoming wildly expressive...and a little annoying. The straitlaced guard rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Do me a favor and don’t say anything to Lady Rose either, will you? You really shouldn’t go butting into messy political affairs.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know: I only serve one master.”

In unison, the two guards’ expressions fell. Stone-faced, they walked side by side to Nicholas’s room.

Chapter 2

I'd put aside my concerns recently about Nika and Shade. There was something *else* that had been bothering me.

When I'd first moved to the royal capital's outskirts, my little town had been abuzz with rumors of the Pompous Prince's annulment. A few days later, all anyone could talk about had been the altogether unexpected announcement of his romantic *new* engagement. I'd just smiled and nodded along.

Lately, though, I'd been hearing a new brand of rumors: rumors of *trouble in paradise* between the prince and his new fiancée.

Sure, they were probably just rumors, but it put me a little on edge to hear them only a month after their engagement. Even if I tried not to put too much stock in them, I couldn't help but wonder where in the world they'd come from—and I was not finding many answers.

All I knew was that they must have been putting on a lovey-dovey front in public while things must have seemed strained in private. In all likelihood, high society had caught wind of seeds of discord, and that wind had apparently carried them all the way to the sticks.

It was impossible to tell how much truth there was to the rumors, but it was hard to imagine they were completely unfounded.

This certainly doesn't bode well for the kingdom's future. There's no stopping a rumor once it gets started, but if it's managed to catch fire so easily like this, I can't help but think there might be some kind of conspiracy behind it... I mean, this could easily hurt the dignity of both the prince and the royal family at large.

At this point, it was hard to tell if the rumor would be the prince and Liliana's alone to contend with or if it would become *my* problem too.

In the game, though, the Pompous Prince and Liliana conveniently end up together if the protagonist chooses another love interest—and by all indications, their relationship is pretty smooth sailing.

Things can't be all that different now just because the prince broke off our engagement first...right?

If I'd just thrown away my dreams of being a commoner and had pursued a romance with a different love interest (out of a sense of duty rather than any real feelings), that probably would've led to the happiest ending for everyone.

But I wanted so badly to be a commoner. I was willing to sacrifice everything for it. After all, it was the whole reason I'd come this far.

I'd suffered for it, sure. But it was *way* better than having everything about my life decided for me all because I'd been born a noble. I couldn't bear to have responsibilities forced on me that I hadn't even chosen for myself. Maybe things would have been different if there'd been anything worthwhile about my rank—anything I could leverage it toward—but not a single thing came to mind.

It hadn't even once occurred to me that I should have been looking for some sort of happiness on this path that had already been laid out for me. And why should it have, when I'd already found happiness veering off of that path?

If I'd never recovered my memories of my past life, maybe I would have been content to just do as my parents and everyone around me told me to. But I *had* recovered my memories, and they had shown me a future where I could run away from it all. I wasn't enough of a saint to sacrifice that happiness.

I hoped that whatever was going on between the Pompous Prince and Lily was just a misunderstanding, like the kind that had occurred in the game between him and Lady Rose. But even if it was all just a misunderstanding, I knew I'd be in trouble if it somehow led to Lily's lies being exposed. We were in the same boat, after all.

Despite all my worrying, though, I knew there was nothing I could do—not directly, at least. It wasn't like I could just show up at Lily's house or the academy and tell her I wanted to give her some advice. There was no way she'd see that as anything other than an attempt at sabotage. She'd think I was out for revenge.

And so I tried a different tactic.

Nika was waiting to walk me home from the bakery today, so I took

advantage of his front-row seat to the drama and asked him what was going on.

“Is His Majesty doing well?” I asked him.

I knew it would be inappropriate to ask directly how Lily was holding up, so I took a roundabout approach instead.

“He’s in good spirits, as always. He seemed pleased to hear you were doing well, Fii. I think he’s jealous that I can come meet you like this, though. He must be missing his chats and naps with you.”

“Is he...? Well, I’m...happy to hear that.”

I’d been trying to beat around the bush by asking that, but I’d accidentally taken things in a very different direction. I missed the king too, and it was sad to think I’d never see him again.

Mmgh... Thinking about that makes me feel like I’m gonna cry! I’ll never forget the time we spent together. His Majesty is so kind and gentle...nothing like his windbag son! Just being around him makes me feel at ease. If you didn’t know better, you’d never imagine that he ruled a kingdom!

Okay, enough of that. Time to switch gears. It’s not like I pulled away from the king intentionally—it’s just what had to happen for me to chase my dreams of living as a commoner.

After asking about the king, it was only logical to ask about the crown prince. Right?

Wait...am I sure that’s the right move? I don’t want Nika to think I’m still hung up on him or something.

I’d made a big show of still being in love with Seth to Evan, since 1) he didn’t know the prince personally, and 2) I’d had to make a tactical commitment to make sure I didn’t trigger Evan’s route. Nika was too close to the Pompous Prince, though. The last thing I wanted was for him to get the wrong idea and say something to Seth about it. Whatever chaos might fall out from that, I wanted no part of it.

Ultimately, I decided that the best course of action was to skip right over the Pompous Prince and ask about Lily. I could suss out what was going on between

them that way.

“And is Lady Liliana doing well?”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I froze. Coming from me, that question would undoubtedly sound laced with spite—even if I really was rooting for the gal.

I put on a calm, gentle smile, but I made sure to correct course.

“I know better than anyone how much work it is to train for the role of queen consort, and I’ve been training ever since I was a child. I can only imagine how difficult it must be for her to be thrust into it all *now*, without the benefit of that upbringing.”

Crap...

No matter how much I tried to run to her defense (and no matter how much I *meant* it), I knew it would only sound backhanded coming from me. There was no winning. I’d always dreamed of making up with Lily and becoming friends, but I knew the chances of that were roughly zero.

On the inside, I was honestly distraught. But I’d worked so hard to perfect my poker face that I knew none of my genuine affection could float to the surface. I’d been crafting it since my past life, after all; it wasn’t just for show. Honestly, I couldn’t even find it in myself to be proud of it.

Just as I’d expected, Nika didn’t seem to have any idea what I was really feeling.

“I’m sure she’s doing just fine...*physically*,” he said bluntly.

I was a bit taken aback by his coldhearted reply, but I took it to mean that *psychologically*, she wasn’t doing so hot. This worried me, but I knew that I was in no position right now to ask how things were between her and the Pompous Prince.

If only I could somehow guide Nika to offer Lily some support... It’d be the perfect opportunity to get him away from me too. Two birds, one stone! I thought, optimistically. I knew it was a lost cause, though. I wasn’t Machiavellian enough to pull that off.

Nika furrowed his brow, probably reading all kinds of things into my silence.

“I’ve been feeling for Lady Liliana myself, lately,” he said. “She may have stolen your role, but she’ll never be able to play the part the way you can. I suppose I must commend her for her tenacity, at the very least...but it’s only a matter of time before she finds her spirit broken.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa... You think that’s going to happen in the near future?! I thought, horrified. Now hold on a minute. I’d been training for the role of queen consort since I was a toddler. Of course Lily can’t compete! She doesn’t have all the connections I had, or the years to learn all the ins and outs of aristocratic etiquette. Anyone in her position would be facing an uphill battle, but she’ll make up for it with time and effort, okay?!

I wished Nika would help her out. I’d had the benefit of his help from a young age, and it had made a world of difference. I knew I’d have to put aside my assumptions about his willingness (or lack thereof) to help and make a case for Lily’s potential.

“Lady Liliana is a quick study by nature. I’m sure that with a little effort, she’ll grow to be every bit as capable as I was of conducting herself as a future queen.”

Nika went silent.

I was stunned. I was hoping for agreement, not loaded silence! Do you really hate Lily that much? Well, whatever... I’ll just have to lay it on a little thicker.

“I may have been known as ‘the perfect Lady Rose’ up until just recently, but I think you and I both know I hardly deserved that lavish praise. My skills are barely above average. I certainly don’t possess any special talent for it.”

I’d actually made a point of only working as hard as it took to be slightly above average and covered up for what I lacked by playing up my modesty. Until recently, I’d been doing the bare minimum in my roles as a young noblewoman and as the prince’s fiancée. I’d had no intention of living the rest of my life in either of those roles, and so I was free to slack off, knowing I’d never *actually* have to navigate the aristocracy or royal court.

The moniker “Lady Rose” seemed to me to suggest a mannequin adorned in

beautiful fake flowers. Whenever I had the time on my hands to turn the facade into reality, I spent it instead on learning how to abide among the peasantry. After all, that's what I'd *really* be doing with my future.

Nika and I had been childhood friends, so he'd known me before I'd learned how to feign modesty. Still, even if he couldn't see through most of my acting, he'd probably surmised that my capabilities weren't all that people believed them to be.

I'd better make sure I didn't just shoot myself in the foot, though...

"You...*did* know that, didn't you?"

After a brief pause, he conceded. "I'm aware, yes. I won't argue with you on that, but...give me a moment."

I was glad that he seemed to genuinely agree, but it worried me that he was suddenly pausing like this. *What's going on? I wondered. You agree, right? What more is there to say? Let's keep things moving, please! This is the part where we naturally transition to concluding that Lily will make do just fine. What's the holdup?*

Of course, these private complaints were lost on Nika. His expression turned grave as he ruminated in silence.

Then, after about a minute, his eyes suddenly widened in surprise, as if he'd realized something of *dire importance*.

Care to share with the class?

"I must say, I find this difficult to believe, but...Fii, don't tell me you don't *know*? Surely you're more self-aware than that?" said Nika.

Look, I'm sorry to interrupt your apparently new and oh-so-important announcement, but can we rewind a bit? For starters, what exactly do you think I know or don't know? I'm not going to have the slightest clue what you're going on about unless we set the record straight on that, so can you knock it off with the useless foreshadowing?

I cocked my head in confusion, hoping to convey some of my complaints to him. Nika looked back at me, dead serious. I was starting to get a little nervous.

Wh-What's the deal? I don't have any idea what's going on. I'm not going to be able to figure it out myself either, so would you please enlighten me? I'm not a genius like you, so I won't know unless you come out and tell me!

"I...think I've gravely misjudged things," he said.

"Whatever do you mean?"

Honestly, there's nothing worse than when someone starts going on about something in vague terms that only *they* can understand. I was getting really fed up with this. *Just spit it out already!* I wanted to say.

Nika fell silent again, seemingly lost in thought and apparently completely unaware of how much he was *driving me up the wall*.

Aaand...of course you're not going to just spit it out. Figures.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I can tell you. If your lack of awareness has led you to misunderstand, then perhaps it's for the best."

This was the worst possible way this could have gone, but I wasn't exactly shocked that he refused to tell me after all that waffling.

Seriously, though...not only was it not clear *what* the misunderstanding was, it wasn't even apparent *who* was doing the misunderstanding. Was it him? Me? I'd totally lost the plot.

Could you knock it off with your self-absorbed monologue, please? See, this is the problem with designated Smart Guys in these plots...

I had to make my discontent known, but I'd sugarcoat it, at least.

"If it's something to do with me, then I feel I ought to know. Please, won't you tell me?" I tried.

"I'm sorry," he said, beaming at me. It felt like an odd expression for someone to wear when giving an apology.

"I believe that Lady Liliana is capable of anything. I began this conversation in hopes that you'd support her, Nika—not only for her sake but for Prince Seth's sake, as well," I said.

"Well...I suppose Lady Liliana must have *some* redeeming qualities, if you're

this determined to support her, Fii. I have my doubts about her after what happened to you, but I can try to put aside my bias and see her from a fresh perspective.”

I was shocked. I’d only chosen to take a different tack because we were getting close to my place and all his blathering was really starting to get on my nerves. I hadn’t expected my honesty to provoke such an encouraging response.

I knew I shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, but I couldn’t help but wonder: *why is he being agreeable now, all of a sudden?* The thought that his confidence in me might have been shaken dismayed me. I couldn’t help but wonder if his new agreeableness had something to do with his sense that he and I had been working from whatever false premises he’d figured out.

Why must I be so unsettled by the exact words I was hoping to hear out of his mouth? I wondered.

No matter how kind Nika was, he posed a real threat to my blissful life as a commoner. I wanted him out of the picture, as far away from me as possible. I’d tried to convince him it wasn’t appropriate for him to keep coming out all this way to visit some peasant, but he turned it around with his silver tongue, spinning a yarn about how he was just “visiting a childhood friend,” and “getting acquainted with the people of the kingdom,” and “checking in on the state of the local market.”

Will you stop letting him drag you around and do your damn job already? I wanted to ask his two guards. To be fair, though, they *were* escorting him...so I guess that counted for something.

After I arrived back home and said goodbye to Nika, I climbed into bed and thought about what he’d said. It didn’t take long to realize that I’d never figure it out on my own, though. I just didn’t have all the pieces. I made the wise decision to set a three-minute time limit on my ruminations. I was nothing if not adaptable.

Not only could I think whatever I wanted on the inside and still keep up appearances on the outside, I could also set firm boundaries on my train of thought. I was very comfortable accepting that there were some things I’d just

never know.

It wasn't like being reincarnated had changed my thought patterns or anything. I certainly wasn't a mental health guru now. It was just that I'd imported some of the wisdom I'd gained from my previous life, which had given me a bit of a head start.

I knew better than to get a big head about stuff like this, though. When you get the chance to start a new life, the buffs from your past life only make you stand out as a kid. If you get all high and mighty about it, all your shortcomings will emerge in adulthood and you'll wind up disappointing everyone in your life who had high expectations of you. Happens all the time.

My life might have looked hopeless from the outside, but it wasn't at all. I was living the dream—well, *my* dream, at least.

The next day, I set about my work day as usual, ready to head out and buy the milk and butter that we needed for the bakery. There were no cars in this world, but the nobles did use horse-drawn carriages, and shops often used carts to transport goods.

I'd apparently developed a reputation for myself as the face of the bakery, since it seemed everyone in town recognized me. As such, Michelle put me to work as an errand girl, going out and about to pick up ingredients. The kitchen was where I *really* wanted to be, but I knew it'd take some time before I was allowed to start honing my skills as a baker.

I was rushing to the dairy store on the outskirts of town by the farm when someone called out to me.

"Out on an ingredient run, Fii?"

"Sure am! I'm headed to the dairy."

It wasn't unusual for the townspeople to chat me up like this, since they all knew my name and recognized my face. I secretly felt a bit satisfied that I was adapting so well to my new life as a commoner.

"Where's your high-society boyfriend today?"

I laughed. “I’m sure he wouldn’t appreciate you calling him that.”

Unfortunately, everyone now recognized Nika too—and that worried me. To be fair, though, in a world without TV and photos, I wouldn’t have to worry about anyone knowing who he really was. If it were Prince Seth we were talking about, it was entirely possible that someone might head into the heart of the royal capital and chance upon him (or a portrait of him), but Nika was too much of a homebody for that to be an issue. Plus, he wasn’t the *crown* prince. As things stood, the locals just thought he was a run-of-the-mill aristocrat here to sweep me off my feet into a fairy-tale romance that would break the class barrier.

I made my way to the dairy, fielding people’s small talk as I went. I knew I was getting close when I saw a cross up ahead. It was one of the major landmarks on my route, since the dairy was right next to the church.

Lady Rose was just a game, so it didn’t have the space to describe every detail of the world’s universe. For example, this church was the largest in the capital, but it only showed up in the game as a background for weddings. It was only from my studies that I’d learned about the god they worshipped here.

From what I’d read, the local religion was monotheistic. And apparently, no one was all that religious—by which I mean, most people *believed* in God, but no one was a zealous believer or extremist.

While the people here seemed more readily accepting of the notion of God than the people of my past life in Japan, they weren’t exactly the type to raise their hands and “give everything to God.” They were more into giving thanks to him for the happiness they believed he brought to their lives, like their spouses and children.

It might be easier to wrap your head around if you think of this world’s religion through the lens of its church. Their church was not a quiet place of worship and reflection but a place where families could stop by every once and a while to offer thanks with cheerful smiles on their faces. The religious laws were fairly lax, and even the clergy often married. Overall, it was a pretty *laissez-faire* religion.

Unsurprisingly, I didn’t have much to do with the church. The closest I’d ever

come to stopping by was when I'd think to myself, every once in a while, that it might be nice to go and give thanks for my new life as a commoner.

Just as I was passing by, thinking deeply about my connection to it (or lack thereof), I spotted a girl in a nun's dress and habit emerging from inside. She looked about my age.

Oh, right, I thought. I think I remember monks and nuns being a part of the clergy from my past life too. They don't take vows of celibacy in this world, though, so I guess they're pretty different from the ones I knew. Probably best to think of them bearing a resemblance in name only.

As I was thinking about all of this, I found myself unconsciously staring at the girl in the nun's garb. She must have noticed, because she looked back at me and met my gaze. Unfortunately, in her distraction, she lost her footing and took a massive tumble.

It was only three steps long, but I panicked when I saw her heading for the stairs that descended onto the road.

"W-Watch out!" I cried, turning around and opening my arms out wide to catch her.



She fell into my arms, but the force of her fall sent us both backward. We landed with a *thud*.

Ow... My butt's gonna be nice and bruised tomorrow.

"Huh?! Ah, um, ahhh...! I'm so sorry!" the girl sputtered the minute she'd realized what had happened.

She lifted herself off of my chest, slid down to the bottom of the stairs, and knelt into a deep bow.

Huh... I didn't know they bowed like that in this world too.

"Please, no need to abase yourself. Are you hurt?" I asked.

"N-N-No! I'm okay! A-Are you?!"

"I'm okay too."

Actually, my keister stung like the dickens...but some things were better left unsaid. I had no intention of drawing anyone's attention to my butt. Besides, if I'd broken my tailbone or something, that was all on me for being a klutz. I didn't want her feeling responsible for that.

As I stood up, the girl hesitantly rose as well. She wasn't kneeling on the ground anymore, but she kept nodding her head at me in slight bows.

"Th-Thank you so much for saving me!"

"It was nothing, really."

It was cute how flustered she was. The sight of her milk tea-colored braids swaying gently each time she bowed her head was oddly comforting. Their vibrant color made a nice contrast to the black nun's garb.

After bowing her head deeply one last time, she lifted it, and I could finally see her beautiful maroon eyes. Just as I was looking into her face, though, I noticed that she seemed to be deeply engrossed in studying *mine*.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Oh! Um, n-no! I'm sorry for staring! I was just...surprised. You're as beautiful as the saint!"

She started shaking her head and bowing again as she said this. I couldn't believe how contrite she was.

You don't have to apologize for admiring my face, you know!

The mention of a "saint" gave me pause, though. I didn't remember ever hearing that title. Was it a rank? A holy profession? Had I overlooked something in my studies? I'd studied to death to learn everything a commoner could ever need to know, but maybe it hadn't been enough...

"That's very flattering. Thank you," I said.

"N-No, I'm so sorry!" she repeated.

"My name is Fii Crow. May I ask yours?"

"Y-Yes, um, of *course*! I'm Nancy!"

"Nancy," huh? Got it. Hmm, but I think you need a nickname. "Nan"? No, "Nana"! Nodding Nana with the braids!

"I'm in the middle of running some errands, so I should be on my way. If you wouldn't mind, though, I'd love to chat with you some more another time," I said.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind at all! I'd *love* to!"

"Wonderful. Be seeing you, then."

I gave Nana a little wave, smiling to myself as I entered the dairy with a wholly unnecessary display of grace.

I did it! I just know she's going to be the first friend I make in this world. That had to be a friendship flag, right?!

Thanks to all the aristocratic infighting, status discrepancies, and family affairs, I'd yet to make a single friend in this life. But that wasn't all—once I'd been disowned and sent off to live as a commoner, all of my classmates had turned on me, probably not wanting anyone to associate them with someone who'd had such a massive fall from grace.

As if any of that mattered anymore!

Well, well, well...looks like my life as a commoner is going just swimmingly!



It had been three days since my fateful encounter with Nana, the nun, and I had the day off work. Typically, the townsfolk had a good chuckle at how down in the dumps I'd get whenever I was free for the day...but today was different. Today, I was *anything but* down and as far removed from the dumps as you could imagine being.

Why, you ask? Because I was off to see Nana!

But before I dive into that, I should acquaint you with how the whole nun thing works around here. I wasn't exactly intimately familiar with the ladies of the cloth back in my past life, but in this world, a "nun" is just any woman who lives in the church and dedicates her time both to studying the word of God and to church service (e.g., cooking, cleaning, garden work, etc.). A man who does all of that is a "monk." There's also an exam that they can take, and anyone who passes it can become a pastor, adding teaching to their duties.

Anyway, all that's to say that I had pretty good odds of running into Nana if I stopped by the church. I had the whole day off, so I'd be happy to wait around until she finished her work. If she seemed like she had her hands full, I'd just ask if we could plan to meet up whenever our days off overlapped.

Wait... Is it just me, or does that kinda make me sound like a stalker? I thought. *Nah... We're both girls, so it's all good! I'm just desperate for a gal pal, that's all! Nothing weird about it!*

I puffed out my chest and walked churchward as I tried to rationalize my plan for the day. As I was heading over, I spotted a horse-drawn carriage that seemed awfully out of place in the outskirts of town...

Is that...Nika?! I thought, but a second later, I realized that it was just a random carriage passing by. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Come to think of it, the last time we spoke, Nika did sound like he was going to rethink his opinion of Lily. Maybe that explains why he hasn't come by nearly so often lately? Boy, things are really going my way!

I arrived at the church just as I'd finished my thought. I took a deep breath and placed my hand on the door.

“Excuse me,” I said.

As I entered the church, I was taken aback to see two people inside whip around forcefully to look my way. When I met their gazes, they looked every bit as surprised as I was.

One of them seemed to be a pastor (based on his attire), and the other was Nana.

“*Oh! Oh, Father! It’s her! It’s the saintlike woman who saved me the other day! The noblewoman!*” Nana exclaimed, pointing at me. Her braids swayed vigorously from side to side as she spoke, just like they had when I’d met her.

She’s so cute... I thought. But one thing she’d said had me a little worried.

“Sister Nancy, please keep your voice down,” the pastor chided her gently. “And please don’t point.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

In direct contrast to Nana’s excitement, the pastor seemed completely calm. I couldn’t help but think that they made a good pair. Treading carefully, so as not to make too much noise, I approached them and gave them a bow.

“My name is Fii Crow. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Father. And it’s lovely to see you again, Nancy. I should have told you this yesterday, but I’m actually not a noblewoman.”

“Huh?! Wait, what?! You’re not a noblewoman? That can’t be!”

“Sister Nancy...” the pastor warned.

“I’m sorry! I’ll be quiet...”

“That would be much appreciated, but it was your choice of words I took issue with,” he said. “It isn’t godly behavior to accuse someone of lying.”

“Yes, Father...”

Nana’s shoulders slumped pitifully. I couldn’t help thinking she resembled a puppy who’d just been told off. I just wished she’d see me as a commoner—that everyone could recognize me that way.

This *did* explain why she’d been so self-deprecating and humble when I’d first

met her, though. If she'd been under the impression that I was a noble, I could hardly blame her. I was so used to putting on the ladylike act that I practically slipped into it as a reflex (even if I wasn't much of a lady in my *head*), and I knew my mannerisms and speech patterns still carried a whiff of my aristocratic upbringing.

"Apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Jack Gunnhorse, the pastor of this church. Thank you for taking care of Sister Nancy the other day," the pastor said, giving me a dignified bow.

His poise suggested a hint of nobility of his own. I had a feeling that I didn't want to get on his bad side.

"It was nothing at all, really. It's only natural to step in if it looks like a girl is in peril," I replied.

"W-Wow, Fii! You're so cool!" said Nana.

This is great! I can practically hear the affection points filling up her meter!

"By the way, Ms. Crow, I'm afraid you just missed a visit from the saint. If you'd only stopped by sooner, you might have seen her."

Jack looked sorry for me as he said this, and even Nancy wore a look of regret. In fact, she looked so regretful that you'd have thought *she'd* missed the saint's visit.

What, is she some kind of angel or something? I wondered. *Seriously, though, what's all this about a "saint"?*

"Pardon my ignorance, but...who is this saint you speak of? Is a 'saint' a church ranking, like 'pastor' or 'nun'?" I asked.

"No, there's no official 'saint' ranking in the church. It's simply what we call her," the pastor answered.

"That's right! We just gave her the title ourselves!"

I had a hard time imagining what kind of person could earn a nickname like that from a nun and a pastor. It felt even more out-there than if it had simply been a rank within the clergy.

Whoever she is, she must be insanely virtuous.

“But why do you call her that...?”

“She’s been coming to the church to give thanks once a month, without fail, every month since she was just a young child,” the pastor explained.

That’s...that’s it?

I mean, it’s impressive that she’s never missed a visit...but I’m pretty sure there were lots of people who could make that claim to fame in my past life. Not that I knew anyone like that personally, but...I feel confident they were out there. What’s the big deal?

I get that most people in this world don’t get up to much godbothering unless there’s something big coming up in their lives, but it can’t be that unusual, right? Even if it were, then surely Jack and Nancy, who give thanks every single day at the church, are more deserving of praise than this “saint”?

“I’ve always looked up to her. It’s actually because of *her* that I decided to become a nun! It was...thirteen years ago now, I think, that I first saw her. I noticed a girl my age getting out of a carriage, and I couldn’t help but follow her out of curiosity. I’ll never forget how she looked, standing alone in front of the cross with her eyes closed and her hands clasped in prayer.”

Nana teared up as she relayed this story to me, looking absolutely enraptured. It was kind of hard to tell, since she had a bit of a baby face, but I was pretty sure she was around my age...which meant this “saint” had to have been about the same. And if the saint had been riding around in a horse-drawn carriage, then it was safe to say that she came from a noble family. Since I was sixteen now, she probably would’ve been only three years old when Nancy first saw her.

Why in all the worlds would a three-year-old from a noble family visit the church all alone to give thanks...?

I didn’t know her circumstances, but it was hard to imagine a girl like that coming all the way to the outskirts of town in her pretty dress—undoubtedly spotless—all by herself to praise God.

Fair enough... Maybe that is weird enough to warrant labeling her a saint. There probably aren’t many kids that young who’d take the initiative to

patronize the church every month, and certainly not by themselves—they'd at least be with their parents.

Wait... Why am I getting so hung up on this? I didn't come here to ask about this "saint."

"My...! I had no idea there was such a pious young woman in the kingdom," I said, trying to wrap things up. "I hate to change the topic, but I actually came here today to ask a favor of you, Nancy."

"Huh?! S-So you *were* hurt! I-I don't have the funds to pay for your treatment, though... Father, I'm sorry to ask this, but please cover for me! I promise I'll pay you back!"

"Sister Nancy, why don't you wait and see what the young lady has to say?" the pastor said, scolding her gently.

Watching the two of them together made me want to smile. I had a feeling they were probably always like this.

If my family—my family in this world, anyway—were this warm and loving, maybe I never would have wanted to be a commoner, I thought. On second thought, nah. The moment I realized that I was the protagonist of Lady Rose, I knew I had to run away from it all. Nothing could have changed that, no matter how blessed I was.

If the game somehow forced me back into its regular timeline—call it "fate" or whatever silly thing you like—I wouldn't hesitate to flee the kingdom. I'd rather not, since untold dangers lay beyond the kingdom's borders, but if push came to shove, I would. I'd do everything within my power to escape my fate, even if that meant facing my own death.

If I couldn't live as a commoner—that is to say, if I couldn't live as *myself*—then there was just no point. Life itself would lose all meaning.

"Nancy, would you please be my friend?" I asked.

"Huh?!" she replied. Then, after a short pause, she went on: "Yes!"

For the time being, at least, things hadn't gotten to the point where I'd have to brave any dire threats. I was free to celebrate the joy of making my first

friend! On the outside, I just gave Nancy a pleasant smile...but on the inside, I was on the edge of my seat!

Yes! This sweet girl with the bouncing braids is all mine! No need to rush things, now. All I have to do is win her over slowly through dates and gifts, and before long, she'll be falling head over heels for me! I'm not gonna let anyone get in my way!

Scene from a Church

There was no such thing in this world as a “saint.” And yet, there was a girl who bore the title. Regardless of the girl’s true intentions, mass consensus in public and private had stuck her with it. She had no idea why they would do such a thing.

Every month, the girl stood in front of the cross, clasping her hands and whispering a prayer in a voice too soft to be intelligible to any mortal ear. In fact, she had offered up such a prayer just recently.

The church she visited was in the farthest outskirts of the city—in the countryside, almost. And today, she had gone all the way to this remote little neighborhood alone, traveling as discreetly as she could, to pray as usual in front of the cross.

With a vacant look in her eyes, shaking, she opened her mouth to let out a little voice so faint that it threatened to disappear at any moment. She whispered, quietly enough so that no one could hear: “Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me, Father, for I know this is all my fault. So, please... Please...”

She moved her lips, but no sound came out.

A pitiful excuse for a prayer, she thought. They call me a saint, but I can’t even manage a confession.

The girl closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Once she’d let it out, she opened her eyes again.

“Thank you, Father in Heaven, for blessing me again on this joyous day,” she said, in a normal volume, as if nothing she’d whispered before had even been real. It seemed she was trying to drown out the pain, but there was still anguish in her voice.

Finally, she smiled and left the church with a bow.

She was uncomfortably aware of the pastor and the nun watching her with adoration in their eyes, knowing that they might not adore her so much if they'd actually heard what she'd said. She ran back to her carriage as fast as she could and climbed in.

It was time to go home.

She knew better than anyone that the "home" she would return to wouldn't welcome her and that no one there would be waiting to see her. She went all the same.

On the way, she passed by a commoner with uncommonly good looks and an impressive air about her. But she didn't notice, because she hadn't been looking out the window. And thanks to the privacy blinds in the carriage, the commoner couldn't see her either.

And so, the two young women passed by like ships in the night, the threads of fate that bound them intertwining and twisting.

Chapter 3

I'd never been under the happy-go-lucky illusion that everything would be just dandy once I became a commoner.

The first stage had been to lay the groundwork. The second had entailed the engagement annulment and my estrangement. And of course, until now, I'd been happier than ever. I was over the moon.

The third stage, though, was to protect my new life at all costs. If I couldn't manage that, then it would all have been for nothing. So it wasn't like I never put any thought into that.

It had been twelve days since Nika had stopped his weekly visits. I'd befriended cute little Nana and was working happily away at the bakery today as usual. Things had turned to pretty smooth sailing.

But just when I was thinking it was probably about time to close shop, I heard a carriage stop out front.

A week and five days... Sure, I guess you could say I'd miscalculated, but I felt all this business with Nika reassessing his opinion of Lily probably had *something* to do with his absence, at least.

"Well, look who's here, Fii! I'll close up the shop, so you go have fun with Nika, all right?" said Michelle.

Before I could even utter a word of protest, she hurried me out the door. I knew Nika actually liked our bread, so I felt kind of bad for him. He probably would have preferred to visit before we closed shop.

It felt weird to hear Michelle call him "Nika" too. Sure, he might have been pretending to be just some run-of-the-mill aristocrat, but he *was* royalty. But, hey, if Nika was cool with it, who was I to say anything? It *did* feel a little overly familiar, though...

“Now listen, hon. If you keep trying to play it cool with that boy, he might lose his patience and give up on you. Don’t do anything you’ll regret!” Michelle called after me before she retreated back into the bakery.

Honestly, I wish he would, I thought, grimacing as I looked over at his carriage.

It struck me then that something felt *off* about the carriage. When I took a closer look, I realized that it wasn’t his usual one.

The moment I’d realized that, someone alighted from the carriage...someone who *wasn’t Nika*. And by “alighted from,” what I really mean is “hopped down from.” It looked wholly undignified, totally unlike anything you might call noble behavior. Once he landed, he looked at me, and his face relaxed into a smile.

He had ridiculously bright blond hair—so bright, it was more like platinum. But the metallic coiffure wasn’t the only unusual thing about him; he also had deep-crimson eyes and pale white skin.

If you’d asked past-life me to explain his strange pigmentation, I would have said he had albinism. But in this world, there were actually plenty of people with red eyes, and many had features totally at odds with albinism, like black hair or tan skin. There wasn’t any sort of consistency to hair, eye, and skin colors like there had been in my previous world. His resemblance to someone with albinism was pretty much a complete coincidence.

I can only assume that DNA must have worked differently here. Just like how the nuns of this world only dressed the same as those of my previous one, you couldn’t tell much of anything about a person in this world just from the way they looked. It didn’t seem like much research had been done in this world on the human body except for medical purposes, and even if there *had* been, I wouldn’t have known anything about it.

Besides, once I’d realized that I was living in the world of a video game, I’d kind of given up on trying to understand things like this. I was literally living in a different dimension, so I figured it was probably best to just roll with the nonsense as it arose.

Even though everyone in this world looked European and had a European-sounding name, they spoke and wrote in Japanese. The culture was a strange mishmash of Japanese, medieval European, and utter poppycock. If you went

looking for anomalies, you'd never stop finding them.

Okay, time to stop dissecting this world before I drive myself crazy. Gotta take a deep breath and switch gears.

This red-eyed bishie dreamboat was the one and only Melvin Crabitt. Up until two months ago, he'd been in my class at school, but we'd only ever exchanged brief pleasantries out of courtesy.

There was just one sticking point: he was also a *Lady Rose* love interest. The fans called him "Mel."

"Good evening, Lady Rose," he said.

"Good evening, Lord Melvin."

We exchanged polite, aristocratic greetings. I might have been a commoner now, but I knew it would be unthinkable rude to dismiss the formalities.

I didn't want to cause a scene in front of the bakery, so I suggested that we walk and talk, like I always did with Nika. Mel readily agreed, walking alongside me as three of his guards took up the rear.

I took a quick look behind me and noticed that, unlike Nika's negligent guards, these three seemed to be keeping a close eye on me. *Good*, I thought. *That's what guards are supposed to do.*

"I could hardly believe my ears when I heard the perfect Lady Rose was living as a peasant. I'll admit it: I sensed a scintillating story and came running to get the scoop."

"Well, my goodness... And I see you've dragged your driver and guards along for the ride?"

"You've got me there," Mel said, letting out a laugh. "I can see how you earned your reputation for your composure before you left the peerage. Nothing ruffles your feathers, does it?"

"The minute you break your composure, you may as well be handing the reins over."

Despite my lofty comeback, the truth was that I actually wasn't all that surprised that Mel had come to pay me a visit. I'd actually accounted for this

eventuality from the tender age of six, when I'd started planning for my future as a commoner.

If anything, it would be more accurate to say that I'd been *waiting* for this.

I'd known that if I stayed put here in the outskirts, my adoptive younger brother Shade would eventually manage to find me, and I'd had no doubt that my childhood friend Nika would use every resource available to him as a prince to find me too. It makes sense that they'd wanna track me down, right? But even though I'd barely ever had anything to do with Mel, I'd had full confidence that he'd come looking for me too.

Melvin Crabitt was the heir to Duke Crabitt, who had a major hand in the kingdom's coffers. Thanks to his army of spies, he had ears all around not just the kingdom but the lands beyond its borders. He was, to put it bluntly, a gossip hound. He couldn't resist the temptation of a good story, *especially* when it came to interpersonal drama. At the mere suggestion of some torrid new relationship, he'd get a twinkle in his eye and a hop in his step. He also had a particular fondness for frivolity. Outside of school and his duties as the son of a duke, he dedicated most of his time to leisure.

Once he'd caught wind of the rumors that the "perfect Lady Rose's" engagement had been called off due to her bullying her classmates, and that her whereabouts were now unknown, there'd been no way his interest wouldn't be piqued. It was inevitable that he'd investigate and discover that I was living as a commoner and that he'd be beside himself until he could come and see what had become of me firsthand.

"Hey, let me in on your secret. You were practically under house arrest before, and now you're living it up as a peasant? How're you managing that? I know you haven't even touched a cent of that compensation your estranged parents left you."

"You looked into my personal bank account?"

"What can I say? I was curious."

I see you've done your homework, I thought. It didn't bother me, though. It made no difference whether or not he had that information.

He was right, though. I never stopped by Crabitt Bank to withdraw those funds. I didn't *need* to. To be fair, though, that was only because I'd been lucky enough to get this job.

Thanks to Michelle's generous employment conditions, under which she paid me for my work at the end of each day, I'd been able to make a modest living. At the beginning of my new life, I'd planned to withdraw the money and return it later with interest, but it was just as well that I'd never needed to. The only thing I'd accepted from my former parents, in the end, was the house I lived in—and I liked it that way. I didn't want to be racking up a debt that would come to bite me in the butt later.

Anyway, ideally, I would have liked to have built up assets of my own from a young age that I could have drawn on later...but a strategy like that was pretty risky, so I'd ultimately decided against it. I didn't want to do anything that might attract attention or get misconstrued by my parents as some kind of asset they could leverage, since that easily could have jeopardized the annulment and my estrangement.

Money hadn't been the only concern, though; there was also the issue of the family register. Such things didn't exist in this world, so if anyone needed to verify their identity for some reason, they'd have to count on their relatives to vouch for them. Fortunately, this meant that I didn't have to officially change my name or any other records; unfortunately, it meant that I was starting from square one in terms of building a reputation and earning anyone's trust. *That* wasn't an easy thing to do, no matter what world you lived in.

Figuring out whom to put your trust in is always a bit of a gamble, especially when, in my case, I didn't have any support network that I could fall back on. I'd been really lucky that I'd only ever crossed paths with real do-gooders like Michelle pretty much from the jump since I'd joined the peasantry. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if me and my nice noble clothes had tipped off every cutthroat, swindler, and brigand around to my background on my first foray into town. If the wrong people thought I had money, I could have easily been murdered for it—either by those who wanted it for themselves or by those who simply hated me for having it.

“Would've been easier if I could have just *bought* the intel, but alas. Oh, hey!

Maybe I should just buy *you*, now that you're a peasant?"

"That would be human trafficking, which would put you in violation of the antislavery laws. I'm aware that some nobles slip under the radar with that, but I'm sure you wouldn't want to jeopardize the trust you've built up, would you? I hear trust is *everything* in finance. Am I really worth risking your inheritance?"

"Wow. You're good," Mel conceded with a laugh. "Guess intimidation tactics aren't worth much against someone who knows their way around high society and the law. And you've got the guts to fight back too."

Mel looked legitimately entertained. The carefree, innocent smile he wore was a big hit among *Lady Rose* fans.

I knew I didn't need to be particularly on guard around him. There was no ill will behind his nosiness; he was just a busybody, plain and simple. Besides, I had a feeling his intel might come in handy.

"You know, this whole song and dance I've been hearing about you 'bullying' Liliana Inoce just doesn't sit right with me. I mean, you were on *top*. You had her beat in pretty much every arena. But hey, maybe that's just who you are? You look like you've got it all together, but maybe you don't?"

"Well, you know what they say: you should never judge a book by its cover."

"Yes, exactly! It's like we're in sync or something. This is why I get such a kick out of picking people's brains."

Careful not to get reeled in by Mel's excitement, I maintained my calm, placid smile as we walked. I couldn't help but notice how unusual his attire was, though. He wore a cotton V-neck shirt and baggy pants that cinched at his ankles—peasant garb, essentially. It was strange to see him wearing such a casual look.

After Mel realized I wasn't about to get swept away in his excitement, his spirits seemed to suddenly dampen.

"You just don't budge, do you?" he said with a sigh. "I've never met anyone like you before. Honestly, you've got me really intrigued. And here I was, all excited to grill you, but you're not giving me *anything*!"

“My! It’s an honor to hear that from someone as esteemed as you, Lord Melvin.”

“Hey...don’t patronize me. I did my research before coming here, you know. I looked into your beef with Lady Liliana. Just when I thought I’d stumbled upon something good, though, I wound up with more questions than answers. And when I tried to solve those new puzzles, I dug up some pretty interesting dirt...but I still didn’t solve anything. If anything, I’m even more puzzled than I was when I started. I can tell there’s a good story here, but this mystery’s got me beat. I’m done!”

It seemed Mel was done putting on a show. He completely dropped his affable-yet-calculating tone as he launched into his spiel, looking up to the sky dejectedly.

When Mel had tracked down my current location in hopes of getting to the bottom of things, he’d probably found himself even *more* confused to learn that I was getting on just fine as I was. That was probably reason enough for him to come see for himself. But judging from the way he spoke, it seemed there was more to it than that.

I had no idea how much he’d figured out about me, or how much he was still in the dark, but honestly, I didn’t feel that I led a particularly out-of-the-ordinary life. Either way, it didn’t matter. My response to him was the same regardless.

“You must be tired of all these wild-goose chases. If you want to hear the unvarnished truth directly from the source, all you need to know is how to *ask* for it,” I said, giving him my brightest, most elegant smile. I felt it take shape on my lips like a resplendent rose in full bloom.

I wasn’t an aristocrat anymore, and I had no intention of ever going back to that life. But it was still as effortless as it always had been to tap into my Lady Rose persona.

Shade had thrown way too many surprises my way, so I’d had to resort to real meathead tactics. When I had the time to mentally prepare myself, though, I could handle situations like this much better. I was used to putting on an act, after all.

“Lord Melvin, might I propose a trade?” I continued, a threatening edge in my voice even as I smiled gently at him.

This is it: make or break. Everything is riding on whether I can pull this off. Can I make this work, or will fate have the upper hand?

Mel’s eyes widened. His guards went on high alert at my bluff, reaching for their weapons. I watched them from the corner of my eye, but I didn’t feel even the slightest bit afraid. I knew they weren’t stupid enough to come at me without a signal from Mel. I had at least *that* much faith in them.

The conversation unfolding between Mel and me was of much greater importance than whatever the guards were doing. I continued, undeterred.

“I’m simply proposing a deal that would benefit us both—nothing illegal, mind you. Nothing more than information for information. I tell you what I know, and in exchange, you tell me what *you* know.”

“Information...?” Mel asked, frowning.

Seizing the opportunity, I went on to explain, “Yes, information. We’ll trade it one question at a time. For every question I answer, I get one in return. And let’s agree in advance not to play coy and give little single-syllable answers, yes? We wouldn’t want an endless back-and-forth, after all. Naturally, we’re each allowed to hold our tongues if we *can’t* answer. We’ll just own up from the start that we don’t know, and the questioner may choose a different question instead. Once one of us has run out of questions, the other will have one last question to ask before the exchange is over. What do you say?”

I knew I had to keep this simple. If I didn’t, Mel might see through my act and realize that I wasn’t as smart as I hoped he’d believe, leaving myself wide open for him to outmaneuver me. My simple proposal was a nice cover for my lack of confidence. If anything, it made it look like *I* was making concessions and generously offering a fair trade deal.

“Sounds like a good deal for *me*, but I’m finding it hard to believe that *you* have any questions you’re itching to ask,” Mel said.

“Why, of course I do. I have just *gobs*, and all my future plans hang on the answers,” I replied honestly. “I won’t fault you if you don’t have anything to

offer, but you'll put me in quite a bind if you lie. How about we sign a contract agreeing to the conditions?"

"You'd really go that far?"

"If you won't agree to my terms, then this conversation is over."

"Hey, wait! I'll do it, okay?! I'll sign the contract!" he cried. "Guards, get me a piece of—"

"Oh, there's no need for that," I said, interrupting him.

I pulled two sheets of high-quality hemp paper (something no commoner would reasonably have on hand) out of my bag and presented them to Mel, who looked them over with a visibly aghast expression. I watched him take them out of the corner of my eye as I retrieved two more sheets of paper for my own use.

"Do you need a quill and ink?" I asked.

"No... I always carry them on me."

"Of course. It was foolish for me to expect anything less of you, Lord Melvin."

I took out my own quill and dipped it in ink, laying the paper out on my hand to quickly scribble a janky-looking signature. I was used to using a quill now, but I did sometimes miss ballpoint pens and pencils. And while I appreciated the high-quality hemp paper of this world, it didn't even compare to the ease of writing on the printer paper of my previous world.

But Mel probably had no idea about the subtle longing I felt for these things, especially since I didn't let it show on my face. He glared at me, his mind clearly in overdrive. I could sense how grave a matter this was to him.

"Wait," he said. "You only just proposed this idea. Why do you have contracts with both the conditions and our names already prepared?"

"Oh my. You're already asking questions? But we haven't even decided who gets the first move..."

"W-Wait! I don't want to waste this opportunity. Don't answer that question, okay? It doesn't count!"

“It’s always ‘wait, wait, wait’ with you, isn’t it? What am I, a dog?”

“Well, if you are, you’re an awfully *sly* one,” Mel replied, looking at me warily.

He glowered at me one last time, then dropped his gaze to the contract, poring over it word by word. Once he was done, he stuck his hand out. One of his guards took my nice quill pen (*Hey! When did he swipe that?!*) and dipped it into a pot of ink before placing it in Mel’s open hand.

Wait...is this guy even a guard? Seems more like a secretary, if you ask me. He definitely looks more aristocratic than the other two. Well, I guess it’s probably not unusual for someone of Mel’s status to have a secretary accompany him everywhere...

The gist of the contract was that Mel and I (and any present third parties, such as Mel’s escort) would be bound to tell each other the truth and not to speak a word of our conversation to anyone else. Signing the contract meant that we both agreed to the terms, and if either of us broke the terms, then we became indebted to the other as their servant...or something to that effect, anyway.

I was hoping Mel wouldn’t break the contract, but even if he was willing to put his family’s good name on the line by going back on his word and trying to cover it up, I was still a little floored that he’d just casually sign something with a clause that stipulated he could become someone’s servant.

“There. I’ve signed your contract,” he said. “Can’t believe you even prepared extra copies for us each to keep...”

“Great, thank you! Oh, perfect timing—we’ve just arrived at my house. Why don’t we continue this conversation inside? I’ll even let you ask the first question.”

“How generous of you.”

After we’d both exchanged our copies of the contract, we hurried into the house. Mel was now the third nobleman I’d hosted.

I thought about offering him some tea, but then Mel pulled out the chair on my side of the table and gave me a look that said, *Let’s dispense with the formalities and get to it already.* So, I politely took the seat he offered. Mel

followed suit and took a seat at the opposite end of the table.

He closed his eyes for several seconds, his arms crossed. Then he opened them and, with a serious look on his face, he began the trade with a question of his own.

“What were you thinking, not objecting to Prince Seth annulling your engagement after that scandal between you and Lady Liliana?” he asked.

“A fair question,” I replied, smiling and nodding.

I’d had a feeling that would be at the top of his list of questions for me. Whether or not he believed Lily’s accusations had any truth to them, I was sure it must have seemed odd either way that I hadn’t protested the annulment. After all, I had everything to lose. Even if Lily had been telling the truth, then the only sensible course of action would have been for me to put on a bold front and tell every lie I needed to in order to fight the annulment. It was practically my duty as an aristocrat—both to my family and to myself.

“I had no reason to object,” I said. I didn’t—and had never had—any intention of lying, hence the contract’s terms. “To put it another way, you could say that it was exactly the conclusion I was hoping for. As far as I’m concerned, the annulment was a happy ending for everyone involved.”

I didn’t want to give him *too* much detail, but I also didn’t want to say so little that he’d be inclined to pay me back in kind with a similarly tight-lipped answer. This seemed like an appropriate compromise.

For a moment, Mel fell silent. It seemed like he was thinking deeply.

“Honestly?” he said, speaking up again. “I’m at a real loss here. Looks like all my guesses were way off the mark.”

“Oh?”

It was only fair that he should be surprised by that. I was sure he never could’ve guessed, from the way I carried myself, that I’d *wanted* the engagement to be annulled. It would probably seem absurd to think that anyone might be so desperate not to marry the crown prince. But people’s subjective experiences often veer far astray from what objective truths might lead you to expect.

“May I ask what exactly you were imagining?” I asked him. “Oh, but I’m just asking out of curiosity, so please don’t feel obligated to answer that as an official question.”

“I don’t mind. Unlike *you*, I’m happy to throw in a freebie,” he shot back.

Yes!

I really wanted to know how my actions had looked from the outside, so that was actually going to be my first official question. But now I got to ask it for free! I couldn’t help but wonder if my gambit was worth it, though. It was starting to feel like Mel liked me less and less each time I opened my mouth.

Weird...

Protecting my happy life as a commoner was my number one priority, and I’d been acting accordingly, but I still loved Mel from when I’d played the game. I was a little afraid of how he might feel toward me once this conversation was over.

I have a bad feeling I’m going to cry myself to sleep tonight.

“From what I’d learned about the situation, I thought you’d accepted the annulment as some sort of strategic move against either the kingdom or your family.”

Okay, didn’t see that one coming! Wow... Is that what it looked like from the outside? Did people really think I was laying the groundwork for some sort of uprising?!

It seemed insane...but it *did* explain some things, like why Nika had always been checking up on me. Maybe he thought I was entertaining dangerous ideas, and he’d wanted to keep an eye on me?

It all makes sense now...

Was *that* the “misunderstanding” Nika had referred to before, when he’d implied we’d both been mistaken about something? Maybe he’d been realizing that his fears of me plotting something had all just been a misunderstanding? No...that couldn’t be it. He’d suggested that he’d overestimated me, which wouldn’t fit with this theory at all. Plus, it didn’t explain what he thought *I’d*

misunderstood. And more than anything, the timing just didn't make sense.

Huh... I don't get it. Guess I'll just put that to the side for now.

"Now it's my turn to ask a question. Lord Mel, with the way things are currently unfolding, do you believe that Lady Liliana will be able to take on the role of queen consort?"

"With the way things are currently unfolding?" he repeated, as if seeking confirmation.

"Yes."

I wished he wouldn't parrot me like that. It felt like a signal that I'd triggered something.

"Yes. I think she will," he finally replied.

Those words were music to my ears. In fact, I could've sworn they'd been accompanied by the celebratory *doot doo doo!* of an angel playing his trumpet. The future seemed awfully bright now that I had Mel's assurances.

"It was certainly *strange* how Prince Seth dumped you and took Lady Liliana for his new fiancée so quickly, but she's no slouch herself. It's no easy feat to climb the ranks at school to the fifth from the top. She's talented, and she works hard too. If it weren't for this mystifying conflict the two of you are tied up in, I'd have no complaints whatsoever about her being queen."

It was the first time I'd heard anyone speak highly of Lily. *Well said, Mel! That's right!* I wanted to say. *Lily's amazing!*

She was adorable, of course, but that went without saying. She was smart—as evidenced by her grades—and she was always on the grind. She had lots of connections and always went out of her way to maintain them, and she seemed to genuinely love the Pompous Prince. By any measure, she was *way* more cut out to be queen than I was!

I mean, sure, she *did* glare at me every time our eyes met... And whenever we had the chance to chat, she'd tell me how much she hated me. There was also the little issue of her whole web of lies implicating me as her perennial bully...

It was a little devastating how much she seemed to despise me, especially

because she didn't seem to harbor such hatred for anyone else. But Lily had only hatched her scheme against me to get to her one true love, the Pompous Prince—and I hated him all the more for it. That said, distance makes the heart grow fonder; being away from him *did* dampen my enmity.

Anyway, *so far*, it seemed I'd been managing to exchange questions with Mel without letting him see me sweat.

Now, you might be wondering, "why the emphasis on 'so far'?" Well, I have some sad news for you: unfortunately, I'm not nearly as skilled at negotiating as I pretend to be. Mel might not have been a genius like Nika, but he was *sharp*, and what he lacked in intellect, he made up for in curiosity. The truth was, I didn't stand a chance against him.

"All right. My turn next," he said, his red eyes glaring at me. "You've been misrepresenting your capabilities. Why?"

As soon as he said that, my pulse quickened. But as my nerves began to fray, I actually felt my head becoming clearer. I gave him my usual placid smile. Whenever you find yourself in a bind, it's crucial that you stay calm. As soon as you get caught off guard and let the other party dictate the direction of conversation, it's all over...especially when they're your intellectual and social superior.

It's okay. If that's all he's got, then there's no cause for concern. Besides, there's no way he'd ever know about my past life. Come on, Fii...don't let him catch you on the back foot.

"I'm afraid I don't quite catch your drift. Could you be more specific?" I asked.

"All right. I spoke to all of your former tutors, and from what I've heard, you appeared more gifted as a young child than you did as you got older. I also learned something rather strange."

He paused, watching me carefully with a squint to see how I'd react.

Crap... I thought it'd be a lot harder to find any dirt on me without a family register, but apparently, I've severely underestimated how well information travels in this world. And here I was, priding myself on making a clean cut from my past... I guess it wasn't so clean after all. I just never thought anyone would

spare no expense to inquire about my early childhood...

“Apparently, you were *unusually* gifted as a child. Your numeracy and literacy skills far surpassed the norm for your age—and even for *adults*. Your tutor was supposed to give you a child’s education, but she couldn’t even keep up with you. Your parents had to hire special tutors for each subject, all experts in their fields. But that’s when things took a turn, and you started struggling.”

“Isn’t it normal to struggle in one’s education?” I challenged him.

“Sure it is,” he agreed. Then he gave me a piercing look and continued, “But you know what I think? I think you overheard the adults talking about your unusual capabilities, and you tried to correct your course. You put on a show of struggling so you’d *seem* normal.”

I was starting to grow very uncomfortable with where this was heading. I’d clearly underestimated him.

“Your first tutor was very frank with me. She told me that she gave you a test during your first class together to assess your capabilities. I’m sure that must’ve put you on the spot, since you had no idea at that point what level of knowledge was ‘normal.’ According to your tutor, you made mistakes on that first test that actually indicated an abnormally high level of knowledge in several fields. You only started to ‘struggle’ after you learned what an average level of knowledge looked like and adjusted your answers to make you seem ‘normal.’”

Mel sounded just like some trench-coat-clad TV detective, ready to catch me out at the last minute. I couldn’t see where he was going with this just yet, but so far, everything he’d said had been true. If he’d only figured out my motives, I would’ve given him a gold star.

Come on, though. How was I supposed to know that the people in this world had a much poorer understanding of the world across several subjects? The point of *Lady Rose* was romance, not world-building. There was no reason for it to go into any detail about something like that.

But that wasn’t the only reason I’d excelled in my schooling. I’d known that if I did too poorly, my parents would order me to be physically disciplined. I’d fallen back on the knowledge I’d gained from my past life and tried to modulate it to

what I judged to be a “normal” aptitude for my age.

But just as Mel had surmised, I’d missed the mark a bit. From my tutor’s reactions, I’d realized that I needed to appear even *less* competent in order to seem normal, and I’d made sure that I adjusted accordingly. I’d done this slowly—*very* slowly—because I hadn’t wanted anyone to notice what I’d been doing.

“That’s why all of your grades at the academy were only slightly above average. You took pains to keep them there—not so low that you’d get scolded, and not so high that you’d draw attention to yourself.”

How’d you snoop into my grades? I wondered. Unlike in my previous life, there were no class rankings posted to the wall. *You must have splashed out hardcore and pulled some serious strings to get that intel.*

Even Nika hadn’t argued when I’d said that my capabilities were only slightly above average. I was a little terrified to see how far Mel’s penchant for gossip had gotten him. I’ll admit it: my calm and collected front had taken a real hit. I knew I was going to be exhausted by the end of the day. I’d probably sleep like a log.

“Let me ask you one more question. Why did you go to so much effort to make yourself seem normal?”

I racked my brains, and in a matter of seconds, I was able to pick an answer that didn’t warp the truth.

“Because I didn’t want my parents to have high expectations of me,” I said, and every word was true. “They only ever saw me as their means to claim more power. If they thought I couldn’t serve my purpose, they would have kicked me out or destroyed me. But conversely, if I’d exceeded their expectations, they would have used me until I had nothing left. To protect myself, I had to seem like I was only capable of the bare minimum.”

I’d looked to Liliana (from the game, that is) to help me judge exactly how I should be measuring up.

“I probably would have been capable of great things if I’d tried to cultivate my talents, instead of hiding them. But that’s never been the life I wanted for myself.”

All I'd ever wanted to be was a commoner—and now I was.

"Hmm. That's mostly what I expected," Mel said. "But there's a contradiction in what you just said. I'm sure you know what I'm referring to."

"I do. We're trading each question for a question, but I'll deviate from the format this once so you don't think I'm feeding you any lies. I wouldn't want you breaking our contract, after all."

I knew he was talking about the part where I'd said that I didn't want to be kicked out. I could see how it would seem to contradict my earlier statement about how the annulment of the engagement had been a happy ending for everyone, which implied that I was pleased to be kicked out of my family home.

"I wasn't trying to avoid being kicked out of my home, per se, but...there are all manner of ways you can dispose of something, wouldn't you agree? There's burnable trash, nonburnable trash, illegal dumping, donations... It was *how* I might be kicked out that I was worried about. I didn't want to be abandoned and left to die. That's why I was so pleased that my annulment estranged me *safely*. So you see, I haven't told any lies."

Mel nodded gravely, seeming to understand.

"Just out of curiosity, how would you say they disposed of you, then?" he asked.

"How did they dispose of me...? *Oh*. Well, let's see... I'm not exactly 'nonburnable,' right? But I wasn't burned, nor was I illegally dumped somewhere, since they paid money to dispose of me. I wouldn't say they donated me either. I'm sure my parents didn't expect their trash to skip right past the dump and keep on living, though."

If anything, since they'd paid to dispose of me, that probably made me bulk trash. But there was no concept of "bulk trash" in this world.

Well, that probably closes the book on Mel's second question, right? Whew! I was starting to get a little nervous there.

For my part, I'd already finished asking everything I'd wanted to know. I'd assumed that Mel would come knocking after the engagement was annulled to ask some questions, so I'd prepared my own to ask, but there were only two

things I'd felt obliged to find out. The first was how my actions looked from the outside, and the second was how Lily seemed to be faring. That was it.

The answers to those two questions alone told me pretty much all I needed to know about how much of a splash I'd made in *Lady Rose's* storyline. If I'd deviated too much from the original status quo, I'd have been left with no option but to run far away.

Fortunately, it seemed the little waves I'd caused hadn't turned into a tsunami. The way things were going, Lily seemed to be on the right path to ascend to and excel at her future role as queen, just as she does in the game if the protagonist picks any route but Seth's.

It bothered me a bit that I might have been suspected of plotting an insurrection, but I knew any such suspicions would blow over in due time. As long as I kept up my whole "honest peasant life" routine, there wouldn't be any issues. And if Nika was determined to keep an eye on me, he could stand as a witness to my innocence.

But just in case, I figured it'd be a good idea to stick to big, bright, well-populated streets...

Anyway, despite all that big talk earlier about being satisfied with just two questions, I have a bad habit of not being able to leave things alone. There was one more question that, while wholly unnecessary, I was just dying to ask.

"I have just one final question. Maybe I shouldn't ask you this, but...could you tell me what my brother, Shade, is doing with his life these days?"

"Huh?"

Mel looked at me suspiciously, apparently unsure of what to make of this sudden lighthearted question. But after the bizarre transformation from cute little brother to total creep Shade had undergone, I really wanted to know what he was getting up to.

"You...don't want to ask about *Prince Nicholas*?" Mel pressed.

Huh?

This time, it was my turn to be confused. I definitely hadn't been expecting

that.

Nika? Why would I ask about him? Is there any reason that Mel would be thinking about him?

I could see why he might've thought I'd be interested in hearing about him, though. After all, Nika was incredibly intelligent, and he was a member of the royal family—plus, he despised Lily. So, if I cared about how Lily was doing, it only made sense that I'd want to know about what Nika was up to.

But since Nika had promised to reassess his opinion of Lily, I didn't feel any need to check up on him. Any friend of Lily was a friend of mine, after all. And even discounting my acquaintance with him from the game, I'd known him for over ten years now. I knew he kept his promises.

Mel wore a skeptical look on his face, but I sensed that he was willing to answer my question when he began to slowly open his mouth.

"Shade Schwarose... I looked into him a bit during my investigation of you. He has a wicked inferiority complex when it comes to you, but he also seems to worship you," Mel said.

Yep...that tracks, I thought. That was pretty much exactly how he felt toward the protagonist in the game. It made sense that Shade would feel inferior to his adoptive older sister when everyone called her "the perfect Lady Rose." I'm sure it didn't help that Shade was neither related to her (uh, me) by blood nor particularly prodigious himself. His emotionless face and voice were just a front he put on to hide his complicated feelings toward me.

"He's toned down the Casanova act lately," Mel continued. "I hear he's been wearing a strange look on his face too. It looks like he's lost in thought, but sometimes his face contorts into a look of contempt, or he breaks into a blush. I hear it drives the girls crazy."

Right, which means... Uh, what does that mean, exactly?

I racked my brains, trying to come up with an explanation.

Okay, I've got it. My rash (but oh-so-successful, if I may say so myself) decision to chuck that baguette at his face the other day must have shattered his image of me. Maybe he's realized that I'm not worth idolizing or feeling inferior to, and

he's embarrassed and disgusted by himself for ever thinking I was. He's probably found a new sense of confidence and security in being the heir to the family title, and he can walk with his head held high now.

Or...is that a little too optimistic? Seems like a pretty solid theory to me, though.

"Doesn't seem like he's causing any waves at school or with his friends, at least. I've never spoken to him, but if I had to guess, I'd say he was doing just fine."

That's it? Nothing else seems off about him?

I was floored. Had it really been that easy to shut the door to his route? All I'd needed to do was throw that bread at him?!

Behold, the power of the almighty baguette!

"You seem awfully pleased to hear that," Mel said.

"Familial love is a beautiful thing, isn't it? I won't think less of you if you find yourself moved to tears," I replied.

"Fat chance."

Mel was having none of it. It would have been nice if his guards had at least cracked a smile, but no...

I knew a lost cause when I saw one, so I gave up on the sentimental angle and returned to my brainstorming.

I'd prefaced my previous question by declaring that it was my last. This automatically left Mel with one final question. I was pretty exhausted already, but at least it seemed that our exchange was going to end without any major issues.

"I was hoping to ask *two* more questions, but whatever... I've got no choice but to honor the contract, huh? So, this'll be it for me," Mel said, clearly dissatisfied.

He let out a big sigh. It was refreshing how honest he was. *Such a cute kid*, I thought.

“If I’m going to take your word for it, then you’ve got no skeletons in your closet. You’re just enjoying your current lifestyle. And if I follow that thread of reasoning, you must have deliberately pulled some strings to make sure that you wound up living as a peasant instead of being killed or married off to another man.”

I would have given him a standing ovation—but that wasn’t appropriate, so I kept it in my head. *Bingo! Well done, Mel!* I thought. In a world where being demoted to the peasantry was tantamount to suicide, it took some real thinking outside the box to come to the answer he’d landed on.

“But...someone of your talents surely could have found a way to live an easy life as a noblewoman. If anything, keeping your status should have only afforded you even *more* opportunities to attain happiness. Why would you deliberately pick the path of most resistance? Are you *that* witless?”

Aaand now he’s just making fun of me. Great.

I couldn’t blame him for thinking that, though. In this world, *any* noble would think wanting to be a peasant was moronic. It went against all common sense. No one would ever even dream of throwing away their status unless they had a very compelling reason—like falling so head over heels in love with a peasant that you were willing to elope and lose it all just to marry them.

Things were a little different for me, though...because I had memories from *before* I’d lived in this world.

“Forgive my candor, but your very premise is flawed,” I said. “Everyone has a different vision of what it means to be happy. In fact, there are *infinitely* diverse concepts of ‘happiness,’” I began to explain, with easy eloquence.

I felt a familiar sensation take a hold of me—one that I hadn’t experienced in a long time. It was like my smile had been forged into my face and wouldn’t budge no matter what happened.

I’d been expecting Mel to use his final question on something entirely different, but I figured that was probably the *other* question he’d wanted to ask.

At any rate, I was impressed that he’d chosen to try to get at the heart of who I was with this final question. But still...after questions that posed a threat to

my future plans, which I wanted to avoid for obvious reasons, *this* was the kind of question I dreaded the most on an emotional level. Putting my dreams into words always brought up bad memories and soured my mood.

I felt a little sick, but I braced myself and took in a deep breath.

“Happiness, for me, doesn’t entail riches, fame, or passionate love affairs,” I said resolutely.

I don’t need—nor do I want—any of those things. None of them will make my dreams come true.

“No matter what incredible doors might open if I were to live a noblewoman’s life as Lady Rose...I’d rather die a dog’s death on the side of the road as a peasant.”

“But...why?” Mel asked, looking absolutely mystified.

I smiled a genuine smile back at him.

“Because it’s the path I’ve chosen for myself. If being a noblewoman is my fate, then choosing a peasant’s life for myself feels like freedom.”

Telling anyone about my hopes and dreams felt like a double-edged sword. So much for sleeping like a log; I doubted I’d catch any Z’s at all now. My chest felt tight around my pounding, restless heart, and the sick feeling in my stomach didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

I had a feeling that if I turned my head, I might very well see the Grim Reaper behind me, laughing. I straightened my back and looked into Mel’s eyes, focusing all of my attention on him.

“I don’t get it,” he said, frowning. He looked absolutely bewildered. “I just don’t get it...and I don’t get *you*. You wanted to be a peasant so you could experience ‘freedom’? That’s insane. You sound like a dim-witted, self-centered princess who’s been sheltered all her life.”

“Oh my. But don’t you see? That’s *exactly* what I was.”

I let out a carefree laugh, agreeing with every insult he’d hurled at me. I put my own desires first and had values that were pretty out of sync with this world’s. I also wasn’t particularly smart, and, at least in this life, I’d lived as a

sheltered princess.

The only thing he'd gotten wrong in his characterization of me was how *seriously* I took my choice. It wasn't just some frivolous, thoughtless decision; it was everything to me.

"I hope you don't find me too bizarre to satisfy your curiosity, Lord Melvin."

"You *are* bizarre. I'll give you that," he said, cracking a bitter smile. He looked miserable.

Poor Mel... You look so dejected. It's not your fault that you can't wrap your head around all of this—it doesn't make you a dimwit, I promise. I mean, there's no way you'd ever be able to wrap your head around the biggest reason for all of this: that I was reincarnated. But if you knew about my past life, and the game I played, all of these puzzle pieces would slot into place for you.

"Well, I should go. Sorry for taking up your time."

"Oh, please, don't be. I'm ever so grateful for the valuable information you've shared with me. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy day to meet with me."

I stood up from my chair and gave him an elegant bow.

I wanted to give him some bread from the bakery to take home with him, but unfortunately, Michelle had kicked me out before I'd had the chance to take any of the leftovers home with me today. It would probably have been a little disrespectful to give leftover bread to a nobleman anyway, but...it was just so delicious! Besides, Nika liked it, and I figured it must have had some sort of magical properties if it was powerful enough to thwart Shade's advances.

The guards opened the door for Mel. He stopped abruptly at the threshold and turned.

"I can't put my finger on it...but I feel like you're fighting for something bigger than the kingdom or the royal family. You probably won't appreciate hearing this from the guy who poked his nose in your business to satisfy his own curiosity, but...whatever it is you're up to, good luck," he said, scratching his cheek and turning away so I couldn't see his face.

Oh? What's this...? I wondered. *Shifting gears from ice queen to sweetheart right as you walk out the door, huh?*

I found myself a little worked up over how cute he was, but more than that, I was moved by his words of encouragement. I'd never told anyone about the battle I was fighting before, and even if I had, they probably wouldn't have believed me. Worse yet, they probably would've thought I was crazy. It felt really good to have him cheering me on.

But I held back my joy and gave him a calm smile.

"Thank you. I'll keep fighting—and I'll win, mark my words," I said.

Mel whispered something that looked like "good" or "right," then left in a hurry.

I don't remember Mel being a hot-and-cold character? I thought he was a lot more earnest than that. I mean, isn't the Pompous Prince the hot-and-cold one?

Either way, Mel was adorable—and that was all that mattered. Even if he was the hot-and-cold type, it didn't make a difference to me.

If I can keep going like this, I think I'll find my happiness. As long as nothing new comes up, I'll be declaring my victory over fate before I even know it! There's no need to worry. Everything's gonna be fine.

Now that I was alone, I let my smiling facade drop and burst into a fit of tears and laughter. It felt like all the discomfort and pain that I'd been bottling up inside of me had suddenly burst out. Flustered, I ran to the bathroom.

And then I threw up.

Phew... I'm exhausted. I am completely and utterly worn out.

I'd assumed from the start that Mel would visit. And just as I'd planned, I'd managed to pry some gossip out of his tight lips. The evening had been a huge success...but it had also been extremely draining.

Honestly, I would've been happiest if I'd just been able to live out my peaceful life as a commoner *without* any aristocratic visitors. But it was becoming increasingly clear to me how much of a pipe dream that was...for now, at least.

The worst part about all of this, though, had been having to give voice to my

dreams. Each time I'd done that in my past life, they'd all been stolen from me or trampled underfoot and shattered. I'd never been so helpless, so full of despair, as I'd been back then. I still felt sick thinking back on it.

I spread my cheap, paper-thin bedroll across the floor and climbed inside. I hugged myself tightly, as if to protect myself and swear I'd never leave my side, and closed my eyes.

Just keep at it a little longer, I told myself.

I wanted so badly—no, *needed*—to become a commoner.

Scene from a Carriage

Nicholas Cabott climbed into a carriage again for the first time in two weeks.

Well, technically, he'd gone through this routine several times in these last two weeks—but that had all been for official royal business. But it had been a fortnight since he'd last climbed into his *private* carriage, which he used to travel incognito. Naturally, it was all to see the same woman yet again.

If he left that night, he'd be able to see her in the morning. He'd never seen her in the morning before, and that seemed like reason enough to take off in the dark in his lit carriage. He had the distinct feeling that he had to go to see her at once, no matter the cost.

He didn't have prominent political enemies within the kingdom, and even if a passing band of highwaymen were to try their luck with him, he was accompanied by two guards fit to take on ten men at a time—each. Even if Nicholas directed them to protect someone or something that he felt was more important than his own safety, they would refuse with their dying breaths. They would never abandon their duty. But the guards weren't the only swordsmen on board; the prince was rather adept himself.

"I wonder how Fii is faring?" Nicholas muttered to himself. "Perfectly well, I'm sure. In fact, she seems to carry on *just fine* without me."

This pained him, even though it was all in his head. Neither of his guards spoke up to comfort him.

It wasn't the only thing that pained him. Once he'd learned about the whole "bullying" business with Liliana that was at the heart of the annulment, he'd been rather hurt that Fii hadn't ever come to talk to him about it. And after she was disowned, she had disappeared without so much as a word. He had finally plucked up the courage to go and see how she was doing a whole month later, and it had turned out she was doing *great*. Nicholas had thought himself something of a brother to her, and this revelation had absolutely shattered his pride.

But while it seemed quite strange to him that she would be thriving in her new life—and in fact, something about it seemed a little *artificial*, even—as her childhood friend and brother figure, he was happy for her. Still...he couldn't help but wish that she cared just a *little* more about him.

He'd started to think as much after a conversation with his father. After he'd learned from the king what had become of her, he'd made up his mind. His Majesty's words had set him free.

Between his kingdom, his brother, Liliana, Fii, and himself, his own well-being fell dead last last on his list of priorities. It didn't matter what His Majesty said, even as the man spoke as his father rather than his king.

But even if Nicholas were to disregard his own wants and needs, he couldn't ignore the expectations *others* had of him that might run counter to his priorities, forcing him to take sides. He couldn't make everyone happy. Unfortunately, every society was like this; the higher your social standing, the more unavoidable that was.

Nicholas sighed, suddenly remembering the conversation he'd had with Liliana before he'd departed for his trip.

"Do you think it's possible to change your fate?" she'd asked, pleadingly, tears brimming in her eyes.

Nicholas had felt that it was a wholly improper look to be giving one's soon-to-be brother-in-law, but he hadn't chided or warned her for it. He knew that she had eyes only for Seth. And besides, he didn't see her as a woman.

Instead, he'd simply brushed her off with a curt "How should I know?"

Now, though, her question swam in his mind insistently.

Isn't "fate" just a name we give things after the fact, in the absence of a better explanation? If our hopes are realized, we smile and say it must have been fate. And if they're dashed, then we lament that it must have been fate. Fate is only a contrivance to enshrine happy fortunes and write off our tragedies as if we had no hand in them.

Nicholas nodded at his musings. To believe in "fate," after all, was the height of arrogance. Or perhaps... Perhaps it was...

Then he cut off his train of thought and refocused his attention.

“I know... I’ll ask *Fii* what she thinks.”

But, unwittingly, he could not fully dispel his thoughts of fate from the back of his mind. The two guards flanking Nicholas made eye contact, still wearing lifeless looks in their eyes.

Nicholas had yet again run from the chance that he might make everyone happy.

A Story About Dreams and Reality

I had an older brother. He was so cool and so smart. He was the best at everything he did, and everyone loved him. He was the center of the universe.

I ****ed him.

Every time people met my brother, they told me how jealous they were of me. I'd smile and say bashfully, "Yes, I'm so glad he's my brother."

Because that's how I was **** to reply.

My brother was so *special* and *amazing*. He was the center of the universe, and I was always in his shadow. I always had to make sure I wasn't getting in his way or inconveniencing him. I'd do anything to avoid upsetting him, and I always had to be so, so, so careful. I *lived* for my brother.

I was his ****.

When I entered high school, I started to live alone. I told my parents that having a sister like me around would only inconvenience my brother, and they readily agreed to let me go.

But my brother still came to my school all the time. He came by my house too—the house where I now lived alone. No one saw what happened there. I started to **** him even more.

Once I started university, I was finally able to get **** from him. I did everything in my power to lay the groundwork and make sure that I couldn't be found. And for a while, I was happy. For the first time in a long time, I was *myself*.

But one day—one fateful day—everything fell apart.

I ran into him again by chance. I thought I'd changed, that I was different now. I thought I'd broken the habit and that when he ****ed, I'd be able to **** him.

That's what I thought...but when I saw him, I regressed. I was back to being

the *old me*.

I ran and ran...all because of him.

And then I got hit by a car. All because I was in such a rush to ****. Like a *fool*.

I couldn't **** his ****, because I was still his puppet, doing exactly what he told me to.

I— I was—

—after that, I can't remember anything.

I hated the girl I'd been in my past life.

I hated how full of regret I'd been, how I couldn't claim a single victory right until the end. I hadn't even managed to retaliate before I'd died, and I hated myself for it. I hated that I'd just let myself be jerked around by fate.

I was sick of being a puppet.

I was good at putting up a facade. I'd been doing it for years with my brother, my family, my friends...*everyone*. Whenever people talked about my brother or asked about him, I put on an act. It was as natural to me as breathing.

I lived in a different universe now, and I'd never have another chance to triumph over him. But I could forge myself into someone who chooses her *own* path. I could triumph over *fate*.

I was going to fight harder this time—and I was going to kick fate's ass.

Chapter 4

I woke up early and threw up again. Bad dreams, old memories, you know the drill. I'd been trying not to dig up my trauma, but unfortunately, it felt like it was all coming to the surface now, leaving me in an even worse state today than I'd been in yesterday.

When I stopped to reflect, it occurred to me just how much I'd been avoiding thinking too deeply about my brother, even as I was constantly reminded of him through my dealings with Seth. Every time I thought about my "past life," I became keenly aware of the fact that I'd died, but strangely, I had completely forgotten about the actual *moment* of my death. I'd pushed forward like a madwoman in my fight to become a commoner, but at some point, I'd lost sight of why I wanted this life for myself in the first place.

I was in pretty rough shape, but I couldn't take the day off work. It wasn't like I was injured or sick—physically, that is; it was just my mental health that had taken a hit.

Finding reemployment in this world was a lot harder than you might imagine. Think of it this way: the moment you slipped up on the job, you pretty much destroyed any chance of finding other work in the village. Sure, you could claim you were sick, but even that was just shooting yourself in the foot. Employers wouldn't find that sympathetic; in fact, they'd label you "feeble."

Since there were few means of transportation, your employment prospects were also a lot more limited by your location. Sure, in theory you could travel to a workplace far from your home and just work shorter hours...but making a livable wage off of those hours was basically impossible. Besides, a commoner like me, with barely any work experience and no special commendations to speak of, would be laughed out the door of most workplaces looking to hire.

Even if I moved away, I'd have to pay to rent a new home—and I certainly couldn't afford that on the savings I'd managed to scrape together after a mere two months of working. I wasn't enough of an idiot to think I could find work as

a live-in employee in some distant land either.

This world didn't even have phones, so it wasn't like I could just call in sick anyway. Even if I *was* gravely ill, I'd still have to go in to work to let my employer know.

My complexion was looking beyond just "pale," though; I looked like I was dying. Even commoners wore blush sometimes, so I put a little on my cheeks—just enough to look natural—before leaving home. The streets were quiet as usual, though, which made me feel a bit silly for getting all worried.

Even though my past life was long over, I couldn't seem to put it behind me. I was going about my current life as if the whole point were to overwrite my last. When I'd been deep into my obsession of chasing this dream to live as a commoner, I'd thought it had been a really positive dream...but apparently that wasn't the case.

When everything settles down a bit more, I'd like to find a different dream—one with a bit more to it.

"Good morning!" I said to Michelle as I came in, beaming. I was used to putting on an act, so it was easy to cover up that I wasn't feeling well.

Or, well...it *should* have been. But when Michelle took one look at my face, her smile dropped. She looked concerned.

"Are you feeling all right, Fii?" she asked me, coming in closer to get a better look at me.

I found myself at a complete loss. I couldn't even smooth things over by feigning ignorance—*that's* how shocked I was. I couldn't believe she'd seen right through me, when my defenses should have been ironclad.

How did she know? I wondered. I was pretty sure I'd done a good job applying the blush, and it should have covered up how pale I was. I couldn't imagine that my face or my voice was betraying me either.

"Now, don't get me wrong, hon. It's a big help having you here, but I want you here for the long run, so I need you coming into work happy and healthy.

As much as I appreciate your passion for the job, you need to go home and rest. You can come back when you're feeling better, all right?" she said, pushing me right back out the door.

I twisted around and desperately grabbed her by the arm. I felt tears welling in my eyes as I focused my gaze on her, looking straight into her eyes to discern her true intentions.

"How did you know?" I asked.

I had to know. If there was a chink in my armor, I needed to fix it.

"Oh, come on now. You're like a daughter to me. How could I *not* notice that there was something going on?" Michelle said, with a puzzled look, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Now, now. Be a good girl and go straight home. You need to warm yourself up and get some rest!"

Michelle then gave me a final push and closed the door behind me. But I couldn't even do as she'd said. I just stood there, staring blankly. I don't know how much time passed, but eventually, I managed to start wobbling home.

I don't know why, but I guess I should go home today. I don't get what Michelle was saying, though, I thought. It felt like my brain wasn't working...which was probably a sign that Michelle had been right to turn me away. *I'll come back tomorrow and work hard to make up for it. I'm too weak today.*

I was just a short distance from home when I spotted something in the distance: it was a horse-drawn carriage coming in from a neighboring town. It was a strange sight at this hour in the morning. But as it came closer, I realized that I recognized it. I stopped in my tracks.

Just as I'd feared, the carriage continued my way until it was right next to me...and then it stopped. I squinted as the passenger inside stepped down onto the road, the sun's rays reflecting off of his silver hair.

It was the first time I'd seen Nika in two weeks. He took one look at me and said, before we'd even traded greetings, "You look unwell."

Before I even realized what I was doing, I'd taken a step back, as if to run away. I knew that Nika came to visit me in order to keep an eye on me, and

knowing what I was dealing with should have been more of a relief than anything. So, why did I have to go and act so suspiciously? What was *wrong* with me?

But he'd caught me off guard. *How does he know I'm not doing well?* I wondered, my thoughts racing. *What tipped him off?*

"Let me escort you home. You can ride in my carriage— No, that's right...you'd prefer to avoid that, wouldn't you? Here. Let me help."

Did I say something before about not wanting to ride in his carriage? I wondered. *I feel like I suggested a different location for our discussion before, when he first came to see me, since I wanted to avoid that accidental kiss event, but...*

As I was racking my brains, Nika swiftly took my hand. He led me, pulling with a force that was neither too strong nor too gentle, and my steps felt a bit lighter.

Even if he feared for her health and safety, it would be unusual for a proper gentleman like Nika to take a woman's hand. But I supposed he must not have seen me as a woman. Besides, he was only here to keep an eye on me. It seemed unlikely that this would trigger any romance.

For a while, we walked in silence, neither of us saying a word. I figured that Nika must have been staying quiet so that I wouldn't feel obliged to talk either. And, sure enough, I *didn't* feel like talking. All I wanted to do was to look at how his silver hair reflected the sunlight. Because the moment we started talking, it would ruin the mood.

By the time we made it back to my house, my nausea had mostly dissipated. Nika walked me inside and watched over me as I climbed into my bedroll. Then, like the gentleman he was, he quickly made to leave.

Unthinkingly, I grabbed the hem of his pants. Then I gasped and let go. It had only been for a second, so it was possible he hadn't noticed... *Please, don't let him have noticed!* I prayed, desperately.

But my prayers must have fallen on deaf ears, because Nika's eyes shot wide open as he turned to look at me. Then, after darting his eyes around the room,

as if unsure where to look, he sat down right where he was.

A silence fell over us, and I knew it was my responsibility to break it.

I'd been making a point all this time of keeping a careful distance from him, and yet now I'd gone and reached for him as he was trying to leave. It didn't make any sense, and I owed him an explanation—especially because I knew why I'd done it.

With great effort, I opened my mouth to speak.

"I've...always been jealous of Prince Seth," I said.

"Of Seth?"

Nika raised an eyebrow quizzically. I could hardly blame him for being confused. Anyone would have been confused about why I was suddenly bringing up the Pompous Prince.

"He doesn't realize how lucky he is to have a kind, talented older brother who never uses his brilliance as an excuse to look down on people or treat them poorly. I'm...so jealous of him for that. I always have been."

Some of my past-life memories were still pretty hazy, but it was clear to me now that I'd envied Seth. He had no idea how desperately I wanted a brother like Nika. And, even if he hadn't been *trying* to flaunt how lucky he was, it still felt that way to me. I'd never felt like this when I was playing the game, but now that I was living in the same world as them, I could see their brotherly bond and the love that they shared.

My brother was obviously way worse than Seth, but still...seeing a man whose personality resembled my brother's take what I wanted most in life for granted drove me insane.

"I...wanted a brother like that too."

It was a stupid wish, of course. It's not as if you could *choose* your siblings—everyone knew that. It was a pointless, ridiculous thing to long for.

All I could do was try to accept reality and make a better life for myself now. After all, didn't I want to overcome my trauma and claim my victory against fate? Wasn't that why I'd wanted to become a commoner? Even if I'd been

missing a portion of my memories, they were part of what drove me, subconsciously, in my obsession.

Nothing would change for me if I let myself stay a prisoner to my delusions, no matter how enticing they were. I couldn't keep pretending that someone else's brother was my own.

"Must siblings always be tied by bloodlines?" asked Nika. "I confess, I've...always thought of you as a sister, Fii. Is that so wrong?"

I smiled. I felt like he was spoiling me, telling me exactly what I wanted to hear.

I love him. Even if I didn't think of him as the perfect older brother that I longed for, I would still love him. He's always so kind to me, always watching over me. But that's exactly why I have to say what I'm about to.

"Yes, it is. You're Nika, and my brother is..." I trailed off. "It can never be."

Despite being just one person, my brother occupied a lot of space in my head. It was an uphill battle to try to erase the mark he'd left on me.

Nika wasn't my brother. *One* was more than enough.

"Fii... Do you believe that we can change our fate?" Nika asked me, suddenly changing topics. He looked down at me as I lay on my bedroll with a lost look on his face.

No...it may have seemed to me like he was changing topics, but from his perspective, I'm sure this question seems somehow relevant.

Under normal circumstances, I would have assumed there was some religious undertone to this question, or that it was a setup for some kind of cheesy pick-up line, and I would have given an appropriately people-pleasing response. But right now, I didn't have the wherewithal for that.

So, instead, I looked into Nika's earnest eyes and blurted out, "Yes."

I would never accept that we couldn't fight our fates. The thought of being just a pawn to some overwhelming force, of having to reluctantly bend to its will even as my tears and regrets overflowed, was too horrible. I would rather have died. I hated the word "fate," but I'd let my life be dictated by it. That's

why I had to change it. I wasn't going to subject myself to the whims of this story.

"It's just like you to say that," Nika said, smiling as if the dark clouds over his heart had lifted. I didn't really understand what was happening, but I smiled back at him.

Tomorrow, I'll have to be strong again. But I'll let myself be weak, just for today.

I clasped Nika's hand in mine and closed my eyes. I had a feeling I wouldn't have any nightmares this time.

Tomorrow, I'll pick up the fight again.

As I roused from my sleep, I realized that I must have been having another ridiculous dream again. Hot on the heels of my nightmare about my past life, I had been dreaming about being a blushing damsel in distress. In fact, I still felt the soft warmth of Nika's hand in mine as I opened my eyes, and the bashful delight of our exchange.

"Good morning," I said slowly.

"Ah, you're awake. Good morning."

The familiar man who looked back at me had ice-blue eyes—cold at first glance but full of a gentle warmth beneath the surface. His hair was a beautiful, translucent silver. When it hit me who he was, I felt the blood drain from my face almost immediately.

I wish I could pass out again and make this all go away...

I averted my gaze from him as I sat up, slowly trying to wrest my hand from his as nonchalantly as possible.

There were too many things I wanted to ask—and too many things I wanted to apologize for—swimming in my head. I didn't even know where to start.

Someone, help me, I thought.

But just thinking about it wasn't going to get me anywhere. There was a part

of me that just wanted to escape from reality and fall back into a deep sleep so I could avoid all of this, but the rational part of me won out. Even though my brain was still partly asleep, my body wasn't.

"I'm terribly sorry for keeping you like this against your will. You could have shaken me off and left, but you graciously chose to stay. I owe my peaceful slumber all to your magnanimity," I said. "But in the future, I'd appreciate it if you could please ignore any foolish requests I make in such a delirious state."

My first move was to prostrate myself. Apologizing and begging for mercy was basically my only choice, since I couldn't go and say something like "I'll accept any punishment you deem appropriate." After all, what would I have done if he'd ordered me to tell Seth the truth about Lily?

"What are you apologizing for?"

Nika's question sounded like he was looking for an admission of guilt—like he wanted to know if I was fully aware of the gravity of what I'd done.

"For wasting the precious time of a prince with my frivolous requests," I said, not looking up at him. My lips quivered as I spoke.

"*Wasting...*?" he repeated, sounding somehow unsatisfied with this response.

Then I heard two sighs from the corner of the room. I poked my head up a little to see Nika's two guards watching us with exasperated looks on their faces.

You guys were here the whole time? I thought irritably. *I may deserve those looks, but why are you looking at Nika like that too?*

"Lift your head. I came here to see you because I *wanted* to, and I stayed because I wanted to. I cannot imagine a better use of my time," Nika said benevolently.

His thoughtfulness only hurt more. I wanted nothing more than to crawl into a hole or to run out of my house and into the nearest building with a second-floor window to defenestrate myself.

Feeling extremely uncomfortable, I reluctantly got up off of the floor. I looked up at Nika; there was a strangely pleased smile on his face.

Huh...? What's he so happy for? I thought. I didn't remember him having a sadistic streak in the game.



Startled out of his reverie—probably because he’d surmised why I looked so confused—Nika cleared his throat and adopted a serious expression. There was still the faintest hint of a smile on his lips, though.

“In any case,” he said. “You don’t think of me as a brother, you said?”

Oh, god... I did say that, I thought, horrified. It had seemed like the logical thing to say at the time, but now...

Why is he asking me that now that I’ve returned to my senses? Is he trying to punish me by mortifying me so badly that I crave my own end?

I nodded reluctantly, and Nika’s face grew smug. I knew I had only myself to blame for that idiotic misstep, but he was being a real bully about it.

“I suppose that makes us *friends*, then, doesn’t it?” he said cheerfully.

I fixed my face into a smile and pondered his words. *Does it...?*

It felt awfully disrespectful for a commoner like me to claim to be a friend of the *prince*. But I’d already made a point of saying he wasn’t like a brother to me (even though he was), so settling on “acquaintance” felt like it would be a slap in the face.

Friends, huh? Well, I guess we are friends. Nika’s probably never thought of me this way before, but I’d consider him the person I’m closest to in this world, so...I guess I can’t say the label doesn’t fit.

“If it pleases you, yes,” I said.

He broke into a grin. I couldn’t for the life of me understand what he was so happy about.

The power imbalance between us was starting to feel deeply uncomfortable. It felt like he had the upper hand, even though we were here in *my* home. I straightened my spine, even though I knew it was a pointless gesture.

“Fii,” he said.

“Yes?”

“My father gave me his blessing.”

Oh, come on! His blessing for what? You couldn’t be more vague if you tried!

Even without knowing what Nika was talking about, it didn't take much imagination to guess that this conversation between a king and his son held grave implications. All kinds of foreboding possibilities came to mind. *Why are you telling me this?* I wondered. *You're not alluding to some succession dispute, are you?*

"So, I've decided...if I want something, I'm going to fight for it," he continued.

Why the hell are you making proclamations like that? Knock it off! You're scaring me!

I listened to him with a serious expression on my face, but inside, I felt like a puppy trembling in fear. I wished he'd have chosen someone *else* to share that with—someone who had nothing to do with me.

Stop foreshadowing things! I don't want any part in your fight for the throne!

Nika looked like he'd just gotten a big weight off his chest. I, on the other hand, was crying on the inside as I smiled and replied, "I wish you the best of luck."

And with that, Nika left. His only parting words to me after that terrifying declaration were "Get some good rest."

I saw him off with a smile, and a mere five minutes later, I was heading out of the house, completely disregarding his parting message.

I was off to see Nana.

I knew her calming presence was just what I needed right now.

I headed to the church, hoping that some time with Nana would cheer me up. But the moment she saw my face, she exclaimed, "Oh, I know that look! Boy troubles, right?!"

I was taken aback by how far off the mark she was, but I rolled with it. Jack, the kindly pastor, gave me permission to steal Nana away for a while for juice at the plaza and some "girl talk."

I honestly had no idea what had given her the impression I was having "boy troubles," though.

"Rumor has it you've got a noble boyfriend! So?! Is it the status difference

that's causing problems?!" Nana asked excitedly. "I've never dated anyone before, but I'm more than happy to give some advice! You can count on me!"

Privately, I resolved to never come to Nana for romantic advice if the occasion ever *did* arise—unless it was just for fun. I had a feeling (a *strong* feeling) that coming to her for anything serious wouldn't end well.

"Allow me to clear up any misunderstandings. There's no 'boyfriend' to speak of. Those rumors are probably about my friend. Neither of us has feelings for each other."

"Aw... Are you *sure*, though? Maybe *you* don't have any feelings, but you don't know how *he* feels!"

"I know you mean well, Nancy, but let's not presume how he feels. It's incredibly disrespectful."

"O-Oh! Of course!" she exclaimed, swiftly covering her mouth with shaking hands.

She's so cute. What a good girl.

I cleared my throat purposefully, as if to signal we were moving on, and gave her a smile.

"What about you, Nancy? Have you got a special place in your heart for anyone?"

"My heart belongs to the saint!"

Ah, of course, I thought, as I looked into her sparkly-eyed face. Once again, though, I was struck by how mysterious this "saint" was.

If you were a girl born into a noble family, then you were basically destined to wage a war against the other girls to win the affection of a high-ranking man. Any young noblewoman who made a habit of visiting church was surely just trying to show off her tenderhearted and pious nature. It was just one of many ways to make a statement that she wasn't "like other girls."

And yet, this saint seemed to have deliberately picked a church that no one would see her visit. From my perspective as a former noblewoman, it didn't make any sense. Even if she was trying to make a show of being above the

battle for a desirable man, it still seemed pointless if no one was there to see it.

“You remind me a lot of her, Fii! That’s probably why I like you so much!” Nana said, her braids bouncing as she spoke.

People don’t usually appreciate the insinuation that you only like them because they remind you of someone else, Nana, I thought. But honestly, I was just delighted that she’d said she liked me, so who cared?

It did make me wonder, though... Was I really that much like her?

“What is it about me that reminds you of her?” I asked. “Do we look alike?”

“Huh? Oh, no! You’re both *gorgeous*, but, well...in different ways. She’s more ‘cute,’ and you’re more ‘beautiful.’ So...it’s not the way you *look*...” Nana explained, looking deep in thought.

It was a treat to just drink with her like this and chat. Even though the juice here was at least fifty percent artificial flavoring, it was a million times tastier than the pure fruit juice I used to drink as a noble. Context really changes how something tastes.

Just as I was feeling relaxed, Nana clapped her hands suddenly and pointed up to the sky.

“It’s like...you’re both shooting for the stars!” she said.

“Shooting...for the stars?”

If anything, wasn’t I settling for *less*? After all, my whole master plan was to go from being a noble to being a peasant...

“Hmm... How should I put this? You both seem so dignified and ambitious, like you’re aiming really high. That’s how it feels, anyway... But it’s more like you both won’t stop until you fulfill your goals. Yes! I’ve got it now! You’ve got the strength and the noble spirit to set your sights high—*that’s* it!”

Nana puffed out her chest, seeming pleased with herself for saying something deep. I looked away.

It didn’t feel right to label my goal “setting my sights high” or indicative of my “noble spirit,” considering that it was rooted in trauma from my past life. Unfortunately, I wasn’t surprised that she’d get that idea. Even if I wasn’t *trying*

to deceive anyone, my own deeply ingrained actor's instincts often led people to overestimate me and see strengths that weren't really there.

"I'm sure you'd be good friends if you ever met!" Nana added dreamily.

Nana seemed to be prone to flights of fancy like this, where she'd become absolutely *convinced* of something for no discernible reason and carry on confidently, as if she hadn't said something insane.

Truthfully, I had a feeling that this saint and I probably wouldn't get along. Noblewomen and I didn't really see eye to eye on even the basic tenets of life. I'd never forget how they fell for my "perfect Lady Rose" act and idolized me, or how they'd look at the Pompous Prince and say, "I wish I could have a man like that!" They saw the prince and me standing side by side and thought we were a match made in Heaven. Hearing them talk about what a "perfect couple" we were made me feel like my head was on the verge of imploding.

Now, if I'd been a noblewoman with no horse in this race, there was no way in hell I would've idolized Lady Rose. I would have seen Lily, the most obviously smitten and more committed to winning Seth's heart out of the two of us, as far more deserving of my admiration.

Besides, back when I was the duke's daughter, Felicia Schwarose, I hadn't exactly been approachable. I may have been good at *acting* like I was, but that didn't mean anything. I'd worn a gentle smile but never let on what I was really thinking. I'd been like a beast of prey, keeping my distance from everyone and lying in wait for my chance to scurry to freedom. Who'd want to be friends with someone like *that*?

I also had to question the other noblewomen's tastes. Personally, I much preferred the seemingly unapproachable, honest gentleman Nika to his arrogant little brother. I couldn't for the life of me understand why they were so willing to just let him visit me over and over without raising a fuss. *You ought to be getting your claws out and ready to fight for a man like that!*

"But you two might just leave me behind if you became friends...and I don't think I'd like that much at all. I'd probably get *really* jealous...of *both* of you."

Nana blushed, puffing her cheeks out a bit as she thought this over. Immediately, all of that stuff about noblewomen seemed totally unimportant.

Barely able to contain myself, I let out an internal roar of delight. As long as I had Nana, I'd be perfectly content without even a hint of romance in my life for the next decade. I felt like one of those single career women who'd fallen head over heels for her new puppy.

"You're the first friend I've ever had, Nancy. I'd never leave you behind," I reassured her. "Um, how would you feel if I called you 'Nana'?"

"O-Of course! I'd love that!"

She blushed, giving me a radiant smile.

And just like that, the power of love set the whole world right.

You'd make a far better Savior of Nations than I ever would, Nana. You could save any kingdom from ruin just being your cute-as-a-button self.

Oh, wait... Didn't I already save the kingdom from behind the scenes as a kid? If I'd known there was a secret weapon like her, though, I probably wouldn't have had to come up with that silly "prophecy."

Fantasies aside, I'd gotten just what I'd come for: Nana had lifted my spirits.



A day had passed since I'd shown weakness—something so rare for me that I could count the times I'd succumbed on one hand—in front of Nika. Thanks to my new friend Nana, my new private guardian angel, I'd made a full recovery. Reenergized, I threw myself into my work at the bakery. I was ecstatic when Michelle praised the beautiful golden glow my recent batch of loaves possessed.

The next day, Nana came into the bakery to buy some bread. To my delight, we had a great conversation about our favorite varieties. The day after that, I managed to buy some fruit on sale from the greengrocer, who was in high spirits and willing to share the cheer with lower prices.

For a whole week, I had nothing but good days. I couldn't believe my luck...and I couldn't help but feel like it was about to run out. When things take a sudden turn for the better, it's only natural to wonder how long that'll last.

Still...what happened next seemed a little bit like *overkill*, if you ask me.

I was on my way home from work when I noticed two familiar characters walking the other direction—two guys with absolutely no reason to be here. They were a pretty unmistakable combo, since one had red hair and the other navy. But since I first spotted them from a distance in the dim glow of the town's spare streetlights, I was convinced that I was just imagining things. For a moment, my mind went blank.

I'd accounted for a lot of "surprise meetings," but this one was wholly out of the blue. Unfortunately, the closer they got, the less I could cling to my denial. And instead of switching into crisis management mode, I panicked. I seriously considered pretending I didn't know them and rushing past as quickly as possible, but...

"Well, look who it is! Check it out, Zero. Looks like our dirt was legit: little Lady Rose is wearin' rags now!"

"So it seems, Prince Nolan. It's good to know we weren't fed a false bill of goods."

It seemed I wasn't getting out of this so easily.

But that was to be expected. The moment I saw them on foot instead of in a carriage, I knew this little "surprise meeting" was no coincidence.

I reluctantly looked over at them. First I locked eyes with Nolan. His gray eyes had a notable slant; they narrowed and crinkled at the corners, as if he were smiling. A sliver of the white of his eyes shone around his irises. Then I made eye contact with Zero past his glasses. His heavily lidded eyes were deep blue, with a penetrating glint that suggested nothing escaped his notice.

At this point, I still hadn't pinpointed what exactly they wanted with me.

"My...if it isn't Prince Nolan and his trusted aide, Lord Zero. To what do I owe the honor of a visit from two men of such prestige from the kingdom next door?"

Nolan laughed. "Ain't it obvious? We snuck out for a bit of fun. Who knew we'd run into the disgraced Lady Rose during our night out on the town? What a coincidence! Guess today's our lucky day!"

"Coincidence" my foot.

The chances of them sneaking over the border into our kingdom, having a night out on the town here in the outskirts as far away from the castle as they could get, and running into me were close to zero. It seemed safe to say they were lying to my face. And knowing their personalities—no, their *natures*—I knew that our meeting spelled trouble. But I had no idea how they'd found out I was alive and learned my whereabouts.

“But you know why we just *happened* to find ourselves here, right?” Nolan asked. He wore a friendly smile, but there was a threat in his tone.

I gave him a cryptic smile back.

I didn't know anything for certain about what they were up to...but I might have had an idea. *Surely not, though, right? I mean, there's no way what I did as a kid would have somehow gotten out after all this time...right?*

It seemed unlikely, but I couldn't deny the possibility. I wasn't about to dig my own grave by admitting to anything here and now, though, so I decided to assume it wasn't about that.

“As inscrutable as ever, I see. A pity your talents weren't put to good use as queen. I'm sure you would have served your kingdom well,” said Zero, shrugging his shoulders. As expected, he seemed to be paying close attention to my every move.

He overestimated me, but I wasn't surprised by that. He and Nolan seemed to think quite highly of Lady Rose in the game too, after all.

I'm sure this will come as no surprise to you, but both Zero and Nolan are also romanceable characters in the game. Zero is actually a hidden love interest, though, so you can only romance him after you've completed Nolan's route.

Just as I'd mentioned before, Nolan is the prince of a bordering kingdom. He has short red hair and bulging gray eyes. He's a master of silent intimidation and prone to violence, but he's got a big heart. He's kind to everyone—man, woman, young, old—and reliable too. He seems like one of those harmless older brother types...or maybe more of a bratty little brother? But if that was all he really was, then I wouldn't be trembling like this.

Zero, Nolan's aide, has hair that's just a bit longer than the standard for men,

which he wears in a ponytail. The frameless glasses he wears over his deep blue eyes give him the appearance of an intellectual—and he *is*, in fact, quite intelligent. After Nika, he’s probably the smartest character in the game. But unlike Nika, he doesn’t use his wits to help build a flourishing kingdom; he simply uses them to support Nolan in all of the man’s ambitions—even if they’re objectively disastrous.

My meeting with the two of them marked a milestone for me: Since becoming a commoner, I’d unintentionally managed to encounter almost every love interest from the game. Needless to say, this wasn’t exactly a milestone worth celebrating.

“I know you get off on these mind games, Zero, but I hate that crap. I’m not just gonna stand here and beat around the bush all night, yeah? So let’s get to the point.”

“Just a moment,” I interrupted quickly.

Nolan’s lips curled into an indignant pout, while Zero’s twisted up into an intrigued smile.

Even if the two of them didn’t mind someone overhearing our conversation, that didn’t mean I was okay with it. Rest assured, whatever they wanted to talk about, it was bad news for me.

“Why don’t we chat somewhere a little more private?” I suggested. “I’m sure you wouldn’t want to draw attention to yourselves and blow your cover.”

I smiled, knowing they could see right through my “thoughtfulness.” Clearly perturbed, Nolan looked to Zero for advice.

“Indeed. Our kingdoms may be allied, but it wouldn’t be prudent to do anything that might invite trouble while we’re away from home. And I’m sure you’d get *quite* a scolding if we were discovered sneaking around.”

“Oh, *fine*! Take us to your house, then, Lady Rose. We’ll chat there,” Nolan conceded, giving me a push to the back.

We were only about five minutes from my house, so it wouldn’t be long before we got there.

Admittedly, though, I was feeling pretty on edge now, and I could tell I must have looked tense. I knew Nolan and Zero's true intentions, thanks to my knowledge from the game. Nolan hadn't been the only one to pick up on the double meaning behind Zero's words.

"You know, Lady Rose, I didn't remember you bein' this shrimpy. Pretty sure you were taller when I last saw you two years ago. Guess the peasant life's taken its toll, huh?" laughed Nolan.

I don't think that's how height works, Nolan...

The last time I'd met him had been at some high society get-together when I was still the Pompous Prince's fiancée, putting on an act as the "perfect Lady Rose." Of course, Lady Rose was dazzling and proud, so it was no surprise that he might have added a few centimeters to my height in his head.

"That's probably because I don't wear heels now," I said.

"Oh, true. You must hate those little peasant shoes you've got on now, huh? They aren't nearly as flashy."

"Not really. I appreciate that these shoes are easy to walk in once you get used to them. They're practical, and as far as I'm concerned, that's the most important thing."

"Yeah. Guess they're probably loads better than those gussied-up stilts they used to make you strut around in," Nolan said, laughing.

I appreciated that he'd taken me seriously. For a moment, I completely forgot about the trials that lay ahead and broke into a smile.

Nolan didn't ever sugarcoat things, but for all his bluntness, he was exceptionally open-minded. He was definitely one of my favorite *Lady Rose* characters—in the game, anyway.

"Hey, did you cut your hair?" he asked.

I couldn't help but be amused by how casual he was, especially for a prince. If he were trying to be a flirt, it'd be an obnoxious question, but I could tell he was genuinely curious. Although it was a potentially sensitive question, he had no qualms whatsoever about cutting straight to the point and asking. I admired

him for being bold enough to rush into a field of land mines.

If I'd had no memories of my past life and I'd been just a normal aristocrat who'd been disgraced to live as a peasant, I probably would've been incredibly insulted. But there wasn't really any such thing as a "normal aristocrat" in my position. And since I *did* have my past-life memories, my hair didn't feel especially significant. It was just hair. If my long hair had been a symbol of anything, then it was a symbol of Lady Rose's beauty and pride—and I wasn't Lady Rose anymore.

"I did. Does it suit me?"

"Sure does. All these noblewomen grow out their hair 'cause of 'tradition' and 'appearances' or whatever, but I'm much more into short-haired women," he said, narrowing his eyes as he looked at my hair approvingly.

If Nolan had lived in my past world, he *definitely* would've been into tomboys. Unlike me, though, the Felicia Schwarose of the game never got to be much of a tomboy in any respect.

"Y'know...you're smart, and just my type too. Whaddya say I make you my woman?"

And with that, I felt myself sour on his previously endearing familiarity. If I'd had an affection meter, it would have plummeted fast and *hard*. It was all well and good for him to joke around and try to get a rise out of me, but he'd crossed a line the moment he'd started sounding like Seth.

I'll let you off easy this time with a yellow card, but next time, you're out.

Hotshot types like Nolan liked to push boundaries, but I tended to draw a line whenever their arrogant behavior impacted *me*. They could be as full of it as they wanted for all I cared, but the minute they started treating me like their property or hemming me in in any way, I had a knee-jerk reaction to push back.

But that was only on the inside. On the outside, I just smiled and laughed it off as usual.

"Oh, Prince Nolan, you make me laugh. I think we both know you're in no position to take a commoner wife from another kingdom?"

“Maybe not...unless she was the former Lady Rose?” he teased. Then he said dejectedly, “Sheesh, though, what’s a guy gotta do to get a blush out of you? I’m not seein’ even a hint of pink!”

“In case you didn’t notice, Prince Nolan, that was a rejection. And, might I add, a comically brutal one,” said Zero.

“Oh, shaddup!”

“I’m afraid pursuing a romance with Lady Rose is a waste of your time. I hear she’s already devoted to another.”

I am? I wondered. *Well, that’s news to me. Who is this mystery suitor? Nana? Or...wait...is it Lily?!*

As much as I loved Nolan and Zero’s banter in the game, reality kind of ruined it. It was hard to enjoy it now that *I* was the topic of conversation.

Why, oh why did I have to be reincarnated into the world of my favorite game? I wish there was at least someone else who’d been reincarnated here with me so we could fangirl over stuff!

As far as I could tell, though, no one else had done anything particularly out of the ordinary or interfered with the game’s timeline. I’d given up on the possibility.

Anyway, my house was within view now, so it was time to cut the pleasantries and brace myself for what was to come.

“Yikes, *this* is your house? Looks more like a *kennel* if you ask me!” Nolan exclaimed with a smirk the minute we arrived.

Hate to break it to you, but Shade beat you to that joke, I thought. Outwardly, of course, I just apologized for the cramped conditions.

Nolan pulled out a chair for himself, while Zero politely declined one, choosing instead to stand next to the prince. I took the seat across the table from Nolan.

I seem to be landing in this situation a lot, I thought vacantly. I could feel my own escapist tendencies starting to beckon to me.

I knew the two of them had something they wanted to talk to me about, so I felt no need to attempt any small talk. Besides, it was best not to risk stirring up the hornet's nest. Not that it would stop a horde of them from flying out anyway, but whatever...

"You can take it from here, Zero," said Nolan.

"Yes, Your Highness."

And with that, Nolan rested his chin in his hands and scanned his eyes around my house. I was a little appalled that a prince could have such bad manners, but I knew that his no-frills nature was just part of his charm. And since it seemed he could behave himself in public (when he wanted to), there didn't seem to be any issue.

Nolan wasn't the one I was worried about right now, though; it was the man standing beside him. He seemed to tower over me. His navy blue eyes flickered behind his glasses as he looked down on me.

"Lady Felicia, are you familiar with the story of a little girl whose brief glimpse into the tapestry of fate saved our kingdom?" he asked.

Crap... I had a feeling that's what they wanted to talk about. But seriously, how did word only get out after all these years?

I put on my best blank and uncomprehending expression. Then I stroked my chin and cocked my head, as if I were deep in thought.

"I'm afraid not, but I've heard that there have been some very rare cases where churchgoers have received divine revelations that predicted the future. Is that what you're referring to?"

"That's correct. It's quite common for children to tell tall tales about such 'prophecies.' Usually it ends with a scolding, and nothing more comes of it."

Just as Zero suggested, prophecies and the like weren't exactly *credible*. If Nana's beloved saint carried a high-ranking title, then maybe any oracular claims she might make would be taken seriously. A random nobleman's daughter, on the other hand, would never get much traction. That was just the way it was.

“However, the prophet in question was hardly some mischief-making little rascal. She truly did save our kingdom, all thanks to the prophecy she shared with your king, His Majesty Edward Cabott.”

Zero shot me a probing glare as he said this.

If he was name-dropping the king here, then odds were good that he was the source of the leak. But why talk about all of this *now*? I know I probably sound like a broken record, but this should have been ancient history. It’d all gone down a decade ago—ancient history in terms of noble gossip.

Since Nolan never transferred into my school like he does in the game, and Zero never joined the school’s staff as a teacher, I’d thought I’d managed to part ways with them cleanly without raising any suspicions or creating any ill will. It really did seem bizarre that they’d pay me a house call to ask me about this now.

“The prophecy wasn’t a big affair by any means. The little girl didn’t make any passionate declarations or spur the king into taking direct action. From the sounds of it, she brought it up with the king quite casually, as if it were nothing more than idle chatter. But her words made him concerned for our kingdom, and when he looked into our affairs, he sensed danger and sent us aid.”

He’d hit the bull’s-eye with his assessment. I’d had no choice but to play off my prophecy as if it were just silly, childish prattle. I’d thought it would be hard to pull it off in such a way that the king actually did anything about it, but my strategy had paid off big-time.

With that one prophecy, I’d already fulfilled my role as “Savior of Nations: Lady Rose.”

Allow me to explain.

Just as the name *Savior of Nations* suggests, every happy ending in the game involves the titular character saving the kingdom. In most cases, the love interest whose route you’re following is directly involved, but we don’t need to get into that here.

“And what exactly does she save the kingdom from?” you ask? Great question. The answer is the neighboring kingdom, from which Prince Nolan and

Zero hail. About ninety percent of the way through the game, a war breaks out between the two kingdoms. The game's heroine sees the writing on the wall before all hell breaks loose and uses everything in her power to save the kingdom—diplomacy, the military, etc., *etc.* The method depends on your route, but the result is the same: she succeeds and earns the title “Lady Rose: Savior of Nations.” Aaand...that's basically the gist of the game, really.

So, as you might imagine, I couldn't just step down from my role and cross my fingers that a war wouldn't break out. I'd known that the consequences could be dire, and I couldn't just sit back and watch as war ravaged the kingdom. If I didn't intervene, I'd known it would drag on for much longer. Worst-case scenario, our kingdom might have even fallen to the bordering one.

That's why I'd had to lean on an old isekai cliché and use my past-life knowledge to nip the problem in the bud. If I could stop the war before it even began, then I'd be free to live my life as I pleased.

“If it hadn't been for that little girl, our kingdom would most likely have been driven by desperation to war with yours. Of course, we can't be *certain* about that. It's simply a likely hypothetical.”

“With all due respect, Lord Zero, this is hardly an appropriate topic of conversation—hypothetical or not,” I said.

“Indeed. My apologies.”

He was quick to offer a lighthearted apology, but I really didn't like where this was going...because what he was insinuating was exactly what happened in the game.

But fortunately, because it's a video game, your enemies politely give you a pretty in-depth account about the tragedy that befell them and left them with no choice but to wage war. I'll spare you the gory details, but the bordering kingdom was hit hard by famine and plague.

Our king was pretty magnanimous, so I was certain he would have offered them aid if they'd only asked. The frustrating thing, though, was that they'd had no way of knowing—and they also didn't know that he wouldn't see their plight as an opening and launch an invasion. The game's events were basically all thanks to a tragic misunderstanding.

So, I figured I could just give the king a little heads-up before anything happened so that we could just avoid—or resolve—the tragedy I’d seen play out in the game.

I’d spent a lot of time trying to figure out exactly how I’d do that. When Zero said that I (well, the *prophet*) had mentioned the prophecy almost in passing, he’d probably been imagining I’d been all “Hey, Your Majesty! I heard the voice of God recently, tee-hee!” and, uh...he was right. But that hadn’t been anywhere near the top of my list of solutions. I’d been coming up with much more...*cerebral* plans.

I’d known that I’d probably need at least *some* evidence to convince the king, so I’d tried to leverage my connections to gather intel on the bordering kingdom. Still, I’d been just a kid, so those connections had been pretty useless. It hadn’t helped that the flow of information between our two states was tightly controlled, and it had been basically impossible to conduct any kind of investigation.

I’d come up with a lot of other ideas, like expanding my network, hiring skilled diplomats or spies, and even taking a little trip across the border myself...but no matter how I’d looked at it, all of those ideas put my future life as a commoner in jeopardy.

The biggest problem was that, even if I didn’t directly save our kingdom, my reputation would have received a big, unwanted boost were I to openly hint about the goings-on of the bordering kingdom. I’d really wanted to avoid that if possible. But I’d been well aware that becoming a commoner was a selfish wish, and I hadn’t been ready to sacrifice the kingdom for it.

I’d spent days and days racking my brains for a loophole. Nothing I’d studied in my past life and no amount of conventional wisdom that I’d picked up had prepared me for this. I’d just turned seven years old, and all the going around in circles I’d been doing had been starting to drive me crazy. So, finally, I’d landed on a crazy answer: I’d make an off the cuff comment about a “prophecy” I’d received from God.

They weren’t much more pious in this world—or this kingdom, even—than they were in the Japan of my past life, but I’d had a feeling it just might work. I

mean, who *wouldn't* think it was kind of weird if some seven-year-old girl dropped a suspiciously specific spiel out of nowhere detailing exactly when and where an epidemic would break out in a bordering kingdom and what exactly she thought should be done about it?

I'd take "weird." All I had to do was leave an impression, and if that's the impression I left, so be it, as long as I'd at least caught the king's attention. Even if I couldn't slip that into conversation with the king himself, it'd be enough to tell someone who could pass it on to him.

So, once I'd picked my method, I'd made sure to tell as many people as possible. I'd slipped it into conversations with the king, on the rare instances that I got to chat with him, as well as Nika and the Pompous Prince.

And fortunately, my crazy plan had actually *worked*. It had gone so smoothly that I hadn't even needed to follow it up with any of my more conventional backup plans. Just as I'd hoped, the king had caught on to current affairs in the bordering kingdom and sent them aid. There would be no more reason for a war, and I'd be able to live the life I'd dreamed of guilt-free.

The whole thing was done and dusted almost a decade ago now.

"I'm rather inclined to think that *you're* that girl," said Zero, with a slight smile.

I gave him an uncomfortable look.

You know, if you keep wearing that sadistic smile, you're going to earn yourself a nickname like "the Blackhearted Brute." You may have a heart as black as night, but you're not a brute...are you? Well, I don't think you are. Not yet, at least.

There was no way in hell I was going to admit to being the prophet, though. If it had been anyone else from the bordering kingdom making this suggestion, I might've just played it off with an awkward laugh. "I'm flattered you think so, but I'm afraid I don't remember much of my childhood," I'd say noncommittally, and that would probably be the end of it.

But Nolan and Zero were dangerous. They were probably the last two people I'd ever wanted to encounter in real life, since one wrong move with them

could easily end with my head on the chopping block.

Who cares how much I liked these characters in the game? The only thing I care about now is being safe, I thought bitterly.

“By the way, Lady Felicia...are you in contact with Lady Liliana?”

“Oh, no. It would be unthinkable for a commoner like me to still occupy Lady Liliana’s time, especially now that she’s engaged to His Highness.”

“I see,” Zero replied, giving me a single nod.

I pulled an uncomfortable-looking expression.

What kind of question is that? There’s no reason for him to think that Lily and I would be in contact. As much as I love her, she’s got no love for me...

“Well, in case you’re curious, the intel I have on you is all thanks to her,” he added.

For a moment, I was at a complete loss. *What intel?* I wondered. It didn’t take long, though, for me to reach the conclusion that he must have been talking about his theory that I was the prophet. But that only bewildered me more.

What does Lily have to do with my oracular stint? I didn’t even think she knew about that. How does it have anything to do with her?

No, wait... Lily could have found out about that if she’d pried into my past like Mel did. Maybe she thought that if anyone learned I’d been responsible for that prophecy, they might prop me up and try to restore my standing? No, she might’ve sensed that it could threaten her position, and now she’s conspired with Nolan and Zero to take me out.

Unfortunately, it all added up. It would certainly explain why anyone was still interested in all this prophecy stuff, how these two had found me in the first place, and why they’d indicate Lily’s interest in the first place.

His expression graver than ever, Zero suddenly straightened his (already pretty long) spine. I felt myself tense up.

Worst-case scenario, they might try to kill me right here and now. The only martial arts I knew were for basic self-defense. If they wanted to, they could kill me before I even had the chance to run.

Even without their potential connection to Lily, if they knew I was the one responsible for the prophecy, they might have very well seen me as a thorn in their side—one that needed to be *removed*.

“I’ll let Prince Nolan ask the next question,” said Zero.

I knew what this meant: he was letting Nolan strike the final blow. Whether I lived or died would probably depend on the answer I gave him.

Nolan flashed me an innocent smile, but gradually, it twisted into the grin of a bloodthirsty beast, revealing his true vicious character.

“Lady Rose...will you wage a war against your kingdom with me?” he asked.

Oh boy... There it is: the second-worst thing he could have said.

Let me give you a little background on Nolan’s route from the game. Despite being a prince of the bordering kingdom, he’s surprisingly friendly and approachable. But he keeps people at a distance, and if you want to get close to him, then you have to be really aggressive about frequenting his favorite haunts.

Through repeated encounters, you become friends with him by the middle of his route. Throughout this midgame stage, in between all his carefree banter and shenanigans, you occasionally see flashes of his sharp intuition and passion for swordplay. And by the end of the midgame stage, it becomes abundantly clear what that’s all about.

As casually as if he were talking about tomorrow’s weather, he suddenly says, “There’s gonna be a war soon, so stick close to me, ’kay?”

The question Nolan had just asked me now was basically just another flavor of that line...even though we were nothing *near* friends in reality.

“I have no idea where you’d get a wild idea like that, but I’ll do us both a favor and pretend I didn’t hear—”

“Nah, sorry, but that ain’t gonna work for me,” Nolan said. Then, turning to Zero: “Guess this means she wasn’t waiting for us, huh?”

“So it seems. I was under the impression that she’d foreseen this and was using Lady Liliana to lead us to her...but it seems she must have other plans.”

Now I was lost. What in the world were they talking about? They thought I'd been *waiting* for them?

Wait...did they think I was plotting an insurrection against the kingdom too? I wondered.

But if they thought *I* was using *Lily*, then that kind of poked some holes in my theory that Lily had led them to me so they could assassinate me. Or...did it? Depending on what Zero had meant when he said I'd "used" Lily, maybe they thought I'd deliberately provoked her into telling them about me so they'd come looking for me? Either way, I couldn't rule out the possibility that she wanted me dead.

"Okay, let me try a different approach. Anything you want, it's yours...as long as you join forces with us. So? You in?" asked Nolan, with a confrontational smile.

It was a fair gamble; he *was* a prince, after all, which gave him the power to fulfill almost any request.

Hey, doesn't he say that in the game too? Hmm, how does the protagonist reply again...?

If memory served, I was pretty sure she looks him straight in the eye and says, "There *is* something I long for dearly. But the way you're acting right now, Nolan, I wouldn't dare reach for your hand."

Sooo cheesy. Such a classic otome game line. I could squeal over it from the other side of the screen, but there was no way in hell I could say it myself. I'd probably die of shame before I even got a word out.

Besides, even a prince has his limits; there were plenty of requests that were beyond his scope. The protagonist wishes for true love—and she gets it eventually—but Nolan couldn't grant *my* wish.

If I refused him, though...he'd probably just kill me. Nolan and the Lady Rose of the game may have a foundation of trust to fall back on, but I'd only met him a few times at social gatherings. This was basically the first time we'd ever met in private, so we hardly knew each other. And now that I knew their plan, it seemed pretty likely they wouldn't let me live.

Oh god... What am I supposed to do now?

It seemed like my only valid escape plan was to try to talk my way out. But I knew Nolan couldn't be convinced to change his mind through words alone, and Zero was there to affirm and act on his every ambition. Besides, who was I to convince him of anything? I was just a commoner who'd gotten a bit too genre savvy for her own good in the long run.

Crap... Is this it for me? Is there where I die?

"Awfully tight-lipped all of a sudden, aren't you? How unfortunate," said Zero. Then he tried making his own appeal. "Were you to join forces with Prince Nolan, you could exact revenge on the prince and the kingdom who so cruelly abandoned you to your fate here. Untold fame and riches could all be yours."

Ugh, no thanks. I'm not after any of those things. Hmm, what if I just made a show of happily accepting his proposal, though? Could I just follow them back to their kingdom and make a break for it?

No...that might get rid of Nolan and Zero, but no doubt Nika would have some questions if I disappeared out of the blue. And if he looked into my disappearance and discovered that I was in the next kingdom over, he'd definitely think I was plotting treason. The minute he found me, it'd be Bad End time for sure.

For a few moments, I said nothing. Then I took out some bread.

"What? Why...why in God's name have you chosen this moment to *eat*?"

"Man, I'm hungry too. I could go for some of that."

"Prince Nolan, have you forgotten why we're here?" Zero asked. "And didn't you *just* eat?"

"Well, yeah, but all that walking made me hungry. Hey, Lady Rose, break some off for me!"

"Gladly, Your Highness. But please, I no longer go by 'Lady Rose.' I'm 'Fii Crow' now."

"Oh, cool. Noted."

Since we weren't in public, Nolan bit straight into the bread I'd given him

instead of politely tearing off each bite.

Congrats, Nolan. You're now the third aristocrat to sample my wares.

Zero froze as he watched Nolan chow down on the bread without any hesitation or concern for his own safety.

"Damn. This is some good stuff," Nolan said.

"Isn't it? I sell this at the bakery. I'm really proud to work there."

"Yeah? So, you don't make it yourself?"

"I'm still in training. The bread we bake doesn't have decorative flourishes or strong flavors, but it's so good you never get tired of eating it. It's hard to replicate that taste!"

"Wow. Well, hey, good luck," Nolan said, laughing. It was like our previous conversation had never happened.

Honestly, Nolan was really easy to talk to. If he weren't such an amoral war hawk, we probably could've been good friends. As much as I (privately) gave him grief for that, though, I'll admit that I loved that one CG of him standing on the battlefield with a fierce gaze, bloodied sword in his hand. I enjoyed dangerous characters like him—in the safe context of video games, that is.

"I hate to interrupt, but I'd really appreciate it if you could give us an answer..." Zero spoke up, trying to put a stop to our amiable conversation.

I glanced up at Zero, who looked beyond flustered now, and gnawed off another big bite of bread. I chewed slowly, savoring the taste. Then, once I'd swallowed, I opened my mouth to reply.

"I'd like to defer my decision."

"I beg your pardon?"

"As you can see, despite the challenges I've come up against, I'm quite enjoying my current lifestyle. I don't foresee myself picking up any new material desires in the future, so I'd like to give your offer some time."

I may not even come up with something in a whole lifetime. Besides, I don't want to go to war.

“Hey, Zero?” said Nolan.

“Yes, Your Highness? And before you say anything, *please* don’t make things any more difficult than they are already.”

“I have a feeling we’re not gonna win her over.”

Zero looked at him quizzically, and so did I. He wasn’t wrong, of course, but I couldn’t help but wonder how’d he come to that conclusion.

Nolan stood up. Then, for some reason, he approached me.

Is he gonna kill me now that he knows I won’t join forces?! I thought, horrified, as I eyed the sword at his side. Hopefully I can at least dodge the first blow... I watched his hand move, bracing myself to jump into action.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he said to me. “I can tell you’re having a blast at that bakery.”

Instead of reaching for his sword, Nolan brought his hand to my head. He ruffled my hair, not taking any care whatsoever not to mess it up. I could tell I must have looked like a lion with bedhead now. I looked up at him; he wore a bemused smile.

Whoa. My heart just skipped a beat. Granted, I was pretty convinced he was gonna lop my head off a minute ago.

“Y’know, back when you were Lady Rose, I thought you were kind of a bore. I mean, sure, you were crazy smart...but you were almost *too* perfect. You’re pretty cool now, though. I like you, Fii,” said Nolan. “So, let’s just forget about that war for a while! I’m sure I’ll keep myself plenty entertained just comin’ to stop by your neck of the woods.”

“If that is what you wish, Your Highness, then I will support your decision,” Zero reluctantly said.

Huh? How’d this go over so well for me? I wondered. Wait...is this actually a good outcome for me?

I didn’t like how frequently Nolan seemed to imply he’d be “stopping by my neck of the woods.” If Nika caught on, he’d have a hard time drawing any conclusion other than that I might be plotting an insurrection. I mean, you’d

have a hard time convincing anyone I was just having a friend over for tea.

I also had a bad feeling that I was somehow racking up affection points with Nolan and successfully passing checkpoints for his route. I really hoped that was all just in my head.

“Well, that settles it! From today on, we’re friends! No more stuffy honorifics or flowery pleasantries, okay?”

“That’s going to pose some problems—no, a *lot* of problems...” I protested.

“Hey, I know... How ’bout you call me ‘Nolls’? That can be your special nickname for me!”

He didn’t seem to be listening to a word I’d said.

I combed my hair back into place with my fingers as I shot Zero a worried glance. He shrugged, smiling.

Figures...he can’t stop Nolan. I don’t know what I was expecting.

“Nolls” was actually the fan nickname for him, but it felt weird for me to call him that when I was living in the same world as him...as a commoner, no less.

“What, you don’t like it? C’mon, speak your—”

“W-Wow! Thanks, Nolls! I look forward to seeing more of you,” I interrupted, projecting as much enthusiasm as I could. I figured I’d better make a show of accepting his gesture before things took a turn for the worse.

“Yeah! Same!”

As we shook hands, I could feel that my smile was probably twitching. *That* didn’t happen often.

“Well, you heard His Highness. The previous conversation never took place, understood? I’m sure you’re well aware of the consequences you’d face if word of it were ever to find its way out of these four walls...” said Zero, a serious look on his face.

I gave him a nod, smiling.

Despite his threat, though, I considered myself lucky that this situation had actually been resolved so civilly, in the grand scheme of things. At least, that

was the impression I was under. And yet again, I had bread to thank for that.

Behold, the almighty power of the loaf!

Rest assured that bread would be the first thing I turned to if any other such situation arose in the future.

After Nolls and Zero left, I climbed straight into bed, utterly exhausted. I'd managed to survive with my peasanthood intact, but I couldn't help feeling that ghosts of my past were swiftly closing in on me.

At this point, I was really starting to suspect that powerful forces were at work—as if fate were trying to steer the plot back on script. Whatever it was, it didn't seem likely that some first-time reincarnated person like me stood a chance against it. I was a jack of all trades, master of none. My brother, on the other hand, had been an actual prodigy...and I'd never once claimed a victory against him.

Just as I was starting to dwell on it, a very aggressive knock at my door broke me out of my reverie. Reluctantly, I climbed out of my bedroll and went to answer it.

Who the heck would pound at my door like that? Is it Nolls? Maybe he forgot something...

I couldn't imagine that anyone other than Nolls would be visiting me right now. The only other person I could think of, if I had to think of someone, was a ruffian on the prowl for women who lived alone.

I unceremoniously kicked my bedroll to the corner of the room and yelled, "Coming!" Still in a stupor, I opened the door.

"Wow... You didn't even check who was on the other side before you flung it wide open. Your survival instincts have all but dried up, haven't they?"

There was only one person who spoke to me in such an openly rude and sarcastic manner: the pale, red-eyed, white-haired Mel. My eyes shot wide open.

His scowl of outright disdain looked wholly out of place on that baby face of

his. He gave me a quick once-over from my head to my toes and let out a sigh.

"I came here to give you a heads-up about our 'guests from out of town,' but judging by the disheveled state of your whole deal, I'm guessing I missed my window," he said.

Great. If you've figured that much out, then leave is what I should have said...but my neurons weren't firing properly yet. Instead, I grabbed him by the arm and yanked him inside, shutting the door behind him. I was impressed to see his three guards slip in effortlessly before the door closed.

Okay... I think I'm feeling a little more composed now.

"Good evening, Lord Melvin," I finally answered.

"I have no further business with you."

"I assume the 'guests from out of town' you came to warn me about were the two men from the bordering kingdom," I said. "Considering your connections, I'm hardly surprised you'd hear about their visit."

"Yeah, exactly. And it seems no warning is needed now, so I'm going to leave."

As he turned to leave, I clung to his arm with a smile and cooed, "Already?"

He shot me a disgusted look and yanked my arm loose.

Sheesh, he really does hate me.

I was a little surprised by how strong his reaction had been. Not to toot my own horn, but whatever he thought of my personality, I *was* gorgeous. I mean, I looked like an otome game protagonist, so... Even though I hadn't meant anything by it, I'd pressed my chest against his arm when I was clinging to it, but still...that was no reason for him to freak out like that.

Well, whatever.

I cleared my throat and looked at Mel, half forcing him to meet my eyes.

"Why did you come to warn me? I thought you were done doing business with me," I said.

"Well, you thought right. I didn't come here on business, though. Call me a

busybody, but I was *trying* to look out for you.”

Huh? Now I was at a total loss. That made even *less* sense than the possibility that he’d come here on business. His approach was so blunt that I couldn’t imagine he was lying. But why would he do that? It just didn’t make any sense. We weren’t on good enough terms for him to be looking out for me.

“Why...are you being so kind to me?”

“Why do *you* think?”

Well, if I knew the answer to that, I wouldn’t have to ask...

“I’m afraid I don’t have the faintest idea...”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. And don’t you dare say it’s because you’re in love with me, because the moment those words leave your mouth, I’ll stuff every loaf of bread I have into it until you suffocate.”

“What the hell?! Don’t put words in my mouth—or anything *else*, for that matter!”

Mel took a few steps back. He’d probably seen the bread I’d set out on the table for tomorrow’s breakfast and was afraid that I might actually follow through.

Don’t worry, Mel. Those guards you’ve got seem like real professionals. I’m sure they’d slice my head off before I had the chance to lift a finger.

He seemed to be extra vigilant, like a small animal alert for predators. I felt myself breathe a sigh of relief. I’d only been joking, but it would’ve actually really sucked if he’d had romantic feelings for me.

“Well, you see, I’ve been *terrible* to you, Mel. If after all I put you through, you *still* said that you were in love with me, then I’d have no choice but to accept my fate.”

Mel looked absolutely mystified. I could hardly blame him. After all, he had no idea that there was any possibility I might trigger a romance with him if I just made every “correct” choice from his route in the game. He was blissfully ignorant that he might not have any control over his past, present, or future.

In fact, without any memories from a past life, *no one* in this world could possibly understand what it was like to be me. Even though I'd done everything I could to run away from the game's canon timelines, I was gripped by the fear that I was still bound by them.

"Uh, sure...okay. I don't know what you're on about, but let me put your fears to rest. I don't care how beautiful you are; there's no way anyone would fall for a terrifying woman like you."

"Really? What a relief!"

"God, you look genuinely happy to hear that... Wipe that smile off your face already. It's pissing me off. And what's with calling me 'Mel'? Are you trying to make fun of me?"

He frowned as he reached for the door. Flustered, I grabbed his arm again to stop him.

"I'm sorry, really. I'll make some tea for us, so stay a little longer, will you?"

I tugged on his sleeve. Once I'd led him all the way to the table, he reluctantly took a seat, looking altogether fed up with my business. It was fortunate that I knew Mel was a tea drinker, because if I'd offered coffee, he probably would have kept walking right out my door. My knowledge from the game finally seemed to be coming in handy for more than just avoiding romances.

Relieved, I turned my back to Mel and brewed some tea in the kitchen. It takes time to steep black tea, so you can't just whip up a couple cups of it out of nowhere.

"You seem awfully reluctant to let me leave," Mel said.

I said nothing in reply, hoping it would look like I was too absorbed in brewing a nice pot of tea to hear his accusation.

Several minutes later, I returned to the table with two cups of tea. I presented Mel with his, which had three sugar cubes in it, and put my own sugarless one down in front of me as I sat down across from him.

I watched Mel take a sip from his cup and relax slightly into his chair, which I took to be a sign that I'd prepared it well. I did a celebratory little fist pump

under the table.

“It’s nothing but secrets and lies with you, isn’t it?” he said. “But I know enough about human behavior to sense that something’s off. Contract or no contract, it’s weird that you’ve placed so much trust in me—come to rely on me, even—when we’ve only really spoken once.”

I immediately loosened my fist. *Whoops. This is no time for fist pumps.*

It seemed he’d caught on to the reason I’d been so desperate to keep him here with me. I felt a wave of discomfort.

It’s no surprise he’d realize there was something weird going on, though. He’s pretty sharp. What do I do now, though? I thought I was being sweet and casual enough that he wouldn’t figure out what I was really up to.

I was honestly mortified. It might not have been an awkward situation for him, but it was *extremely* awkward for me.

I don’t wanna get fat or have to go without breakfast tomorrow, but maybe I should just shove some bread in my mouth...? I mean, I’m not sure what else to do...

“Seriously, though. Why couldn’t you just talk to Prince Nicholas?” Mel asked.

Thank God he’d spared me by changing the topic, because otherwise I would have been down a loaf. I was baffled by where he’d taken the conversation, though.

Why is he asking about Nika? I wondered.

I didn’t try to painstakingly control my facial expressions with Mel the way I did with everyone else, so he’d probably noticed the clueless look on my face.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to talk to him instead of me?” he clarified. “I’m sure he’d respect your wishes and help you out with whatever you need.”

Now that I’d caught his drift, I averted my gaze. He was right—and that was the problem. It would have made a *lot* more sense for me to turn to the man I’d always adored as an ideal older brother, who had now become my friend. I knew that, but...

“You’re...probably right,” I conceded.

He’d driven me into a corner, so it seemed only sensible to admit it. I had no intention of talking to Nika about my problems, though.

“Well, it’s your choice. Do what you want,” Mel said.

There was a hint of kindness in his voice even as he washed his hands of the situation. This was exactly why I’d turned to him. I couldn’t allow myself to be vulnerable and turn to anyone but him, precisely because I knew he would only go so far to help me. The way I’d indulged in Nika’s doting back when I’d been having a mental health day had embarrassed me so badly that I would have done anything to erase it from my memory.

I couldn’t let anything get in the way of my goal. More than anything in the world, I wanted to claim my victory over fate.

Oh, Fii... You’ve got a real hang-up about this, huh? I thought, laughing at myself.

I realized I was getting a little lost in my thoughts, but thanks to Mel, they were a lot less cynical than they would have been otherwise.

I could see he was looking ready to make another attempt to leave, but I wanted to keep chatting with him for a little longer. I’d let him leave once one or the other of us had lifted my spirits. I knew I was being really selfish, but I also knew that he’d find it in his heart to forgive me.

But if I wanted to keep him longer, I’d have to find something else to talk about... Fortunately, there *was* something burning a hole in my brain.

“Hey, why are you like this? The Mel I know was craftier, but in a cute, amiable way. He seemed so excited about delving into people’s minds, but it was like he lived in his own little world, totally removed from everyday life. You’re *different*, though...”

The Mel I knew now had chilled out considerably—he was happy to be blunt or glib with others when the mood took him. He seemed like a real softie too. It was like he’d transformed into a completely different character. I really liked the Mel from *Lady Rose*, but obviously I loved the Mel I knew now too. The dramatic shift in his persona didn’t so much *bother* me as it did pique my

interest.

Mel lowered his gaze, blushing. Then he glared up at me with a pained look in his eyes.

“C-Crafty...?” Mel muttered, sulking. “What the hell? Were you keeping tabs on me all this time or something? Also, I’ll have you know that I’m a lot more ‘amiable’ when I’m not talking to *you*.”

I gave him a smile. Privately, I was clasping my hands and singing “Hallelujah.” I might not have had any romantic feelings for him, but I loved him dearly as a character from my favorite game.

He’s so frickin’ cute, I just can’t get enough of him. Thank god for Mel!



“You’re one to talk, though. Where’d your ladylike, flowery language go, huh?”

“I got tired of it.”

“That’s a pitiful reason. Seriously, though, if you’re going to drop the act with me, why not drop it with Prince Nicholas?”

I tried to laugh him off, but I couldn’t fake a convincing smile the way I usually could. I knew I was probably just letting my guard down because Mel would forgive me, though.

Mel let out a long, pained sigh. But just as I’d expected, he didn’t pry any further.

“Well, seems like you’re feeling better now. I’m going to go home,” he said.

“Okay. Thanks for staying for a bit.”

Without a moment’s delay, Mel’s guards were opening the door for him and watching his back the whole way through. No sooner than Mel had taken a single step outside, though, than I realized something.

“Hey...” I called out.

He turned around to look at me, suspicion and irritation written all over his face. Thanks to his red eyes, it was kind of a scary expression. If it wasn’t for how kindhearted (and how short) he was, he would have been dangerously close to usurping Nolls’s shtick. Blessedly, he didn’t have half the leeway or personal strength Nolls could sling around.

“Are you going to answer my question, or are you just going to leave me hanging?” I asked.

“Huh? What question?”

“I asked you before why you’re being so kind to me, remember?”

A look of recognition flashed across his face. But instead of giving me a proper answer, he grumbled, “You’re asking a *lot* of questions, considering you’re the one who said we only get to ask one question for every answer we give.”

“Those rules were for business conversations,” I retorted. “Right now, we’re

just two friends having a chat, so this doesn't count."

Mel gave me an exasperated look, but the corners of his mouth turned up into an amused smile. *He didn't deny that we're friends!* I thought happily. I couldn't drop the act and just be myself around my other friends like Nika, Nolls, or even Nana...but with Mel, I could. Out of everyone, I felt like he was kind of my closest friend.

"Well...I still think we should drop this. I don't think you'd like my answer," Mel said.

"Why?" I asked, tilting my head in confusion. What reason could he have for being nice to me that I wouldn't like?

Wait... Surely not?!

"S-So you *are* in love with me?!"

"Oh, *please!* Are you *asking* for a thrashing?"

I was just kidding around, but Mel seemed seriously pissed now. I saw him clench his fist tight and threw both of my hands up into the air in a show of surrender. He clicked his tongue and unfurled his fist.

I had a feeling that I was becoming a bad influence on him, transforming him from a proper duke's heir into a common ruffian.

M-Maybe that's just in my head, though...? I privately hoped.

I didn't know what I'd do if his parents told him to never see me again, though. I had a feeling he'd probably cave to them, and that made me kind of sad.

Once he was about three meters from my house, the last of the three guards to leave grabbed the door to close it. I hurriedly grabbed his arm to stop him.

"Hey!" I called out again.

And yet again, Mel turned around, a tired look on his face.

"*What?*" he asked. "Can't you just let me leave already?"

It was a fair question. I couldn't just keep stopping him like this until I was satisfied. But...

“Come by again, okay?” I said.

“Don’t you have any friends?”

“Sure I do. But I don’t have anyone else I can be myself around. So? Will you come by again?” I asked in a sweet tone that hopefully wasn’t too flirtatious. I tried to turn my head so he’d get my best angle.

Mel didn’t even blush, but I guess that was kind of a good thing. It probably would’ve been a bad sign if he’d been charmed by that.

“If I feel like it,” he replied with an awkward smile. It was like he was talking to a needy little kid or a little sister who begged for his attention.

As he started quickly walking away again, I yelled after him, not taking any care to modulate my voice. The houses next to mine were abandoned, anyway.

“I hope you do!”

Scene from a Church (Part 2)

The saint was back at the church on the outskirts of town today, clasping her hands in prayer as she closed her eyes.

She was done making apologies. With each passing day, it was as if her vision clouded over a little further, like she was being enveloped in a deep fog. She no longer knew if apologizing was even the right thing to do.

She went about her days quietly and carefully, as if there were an invisible rope around her neck. She walked forward meekly, not daring to resist even to the bitter end.

“Why did my brother-in-law say all of that yesterday? Why *now*?”

The saint let out a mournful laugh. Even she herself couldn’t plumb the depth of feeling behind it, the chaotic interplay of sentiments. It was bittersweet—joyful, tragic, hopeful, and despairing all at once. Just like her life.

“Thank you, Father on high...for blessing me again today,” she said with a smile, as she always did right as she was leaving.

But although the saint had intended to leave as soon as she’d spoken those words, just like she had every time, something different happened today. She looked over at the pastor and the nun who always watched her during her visits, and she stopped.

The nun had always assumed that the saint couldn’t see them, since she’d never so much as glanced in their direction before. And so, the saint’s attention threw the purehearted and emotional young nun into a panic. As far as she was concerned, it was only natural that the saint would never have noticed her—and in fact, she felt that was the way it *ought* to be.

The nun’s eyes darted about in every direction, unsure of where to look. She was so flustered, she could hardly contain herself.

“How would you like to chat for a bit?” the saint asked her, smiling calmly.

“Huh?! U-Um...! Are you talking to *me*?!” the nun cried.

“Why, yes.”

The nun blushed fiercely. As the saint approached her, she flapped her arms about like a bird, as if trying to release some of her anxiety.

“Wh-Why...?!”

“‘Why’? Well, I feel that there are forces at work in our world—something akin to fate, perhaps—that a mere viscount’s daughter such as myself could never dare to fight. As far as I can tell, only a handful of brilliant minds can influence them. But I’m just so tired of being swept up in their schemes, unable to make my own choices. I suppose...I simply wanted to talk to someone who *doesn’t* have that influence—someone who isn’t involved.”

At this, the nun’s childlike expression contorted into a frown. But it was impossible to say whether she was frowning because the saint’s explanation had been so long-winded, because it had been too abstract and complicated to follow, or because of some secret third thing. Not even the pastor at her side, who had known her for many years, would have been able to guess.

“I’m...not really sure what you’re talking about. I’m kind of stupid,” she said.

The saint chuckled. “I’m sorry. I see I’ve made things needlessly complicated. All I meant to say was that I simply wished to talk to you. Would that be all right?”

At the sight of the saint’s sweet, gentle smile, the nun’s face lit up. In an instant, she reverted to the innocent, childlike expression that she’d been wearing before—one that made her look several years younger than she really was.

“I’d love that!” she exclaimed.

What else could she have possibly said? After all, she adored the saint.

“We’ve crossed paths so many times, but we’ve never properly introduced ourselves, have we?” said the saint. “I know it’s a little late, but please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Liliana Inoce.”

“I-I’m Nancy! You can call me Nana!” replied the nun.

Lady Liliana, the saint and future queen consort of the kingdom, had no idea just how fateful this encounter would be. She had never once doubted the choices she'd made in her life, and she didn't doubt this one either.

It didn't occur to her that fate might have been playing a cruel joke on her even now. And at this point, it remained to be seen whether this fateful meeting was God smiling down on her...or the devil dragging her under.

Chapter 5

I'd found myself in some pretty dicey situations recently, and each time I'd had bread to thank for saving me in the clutch. It felt only natural that I'd have developed an even deeper appreciation for it and that I'd become even more dedicated to the baker's craft.

"You make the most incredible bread, Michelle," I said, wiping the sweat from my brow with a hand towel.

There was still some time before the bread would be ready to come out of the furnace, so Michelle and I were chatting as we waited. The bakery wasn't closing for at least another hour, so we weren't in any rush to finish up.

My baking skills still had a ways to go, but I'd picked up the customer service side of things quickly, and my front-of-house skills were impeccable now. Fortunately, this meant that Michelle didn't have to rush to bake every product on offer right before closing. Instead, she could entrust minding the counter to me while she baked any additional bread and tended to other matters.

"Oh? Is that your way of sayin' it tastes good?" she asked me.

"It's more than just tasty. Your bread has saved me multiple times. It's *miracle bread*," I replied reverently, totally in earnest and without hyperbole.

"Miracle bread, huh...?"

But despite my earnest passion for her bread, Michelle didn't look at all pleased to hear this. If anything, she actually looked pained.

"Um... Did I say something to offend you?" I asked, flustered.

"Oh, no, dear. It's just that...I don't bake bread to work miracles, so I'm just not sure how to feel about that."

She gave me an awkward smile, and I felt my mood dampen a bit.

That's fair. I guess anyone would be a little freaked out to hear praise like that.

“My bread is too mundane for that sort of business. I’ve got my hands full just trying to bake something that’ll bring a smile to the locals’ faces,” Michelle added, shrugging.

You say that like it’s nothing, but you have no idea how amazing that is, I thought.

Most people long for the kind of happiness that only a miracle can bring, but only a small handful actually experience it. For most people, it’s all of the little moments of happiness that add up into a full life.

“Well, I think that’s amazing. I’d rather be the kind of person who can put smiles on people’s faces every day than a miracle worker,” I said.

I thought about what Michelle had said. I didn’t want to become queen or live a lavish lifestyle full of riches. I didn’t want to go down in history for any exemplary deeds either. Personally, I would have much preferred to live a quiet, peaceful life. All I wanted was to help create those little moments of happiness for people and to enjoy those moments for myself too.

I peered into the furnace to check on the bread.

Hmm, it’s probably got just a little bit longer to go. Maybe about five more minutes... Could be a bit less.

“I reckon you could be both, Fii. You’re much better at navigating the world than I think you realize.”

As I focused on the bread in the furnace, I simply smiled at her warm words without saying anything in reply.

Both, huh? I’ve never really wanted to have both, though. It’s never been my mission to work any miracles. No matter how you look at it, I’m way too selfish for that. All I’ve ever done is think about what I want. Besides, I’m not talented enough to maintain a side gig achieving anything earthshaking for folks. I’m too busy just trying to make my deepest wish come true.

I removed the bread from the furnace and assessed it proudly. It looked baked to perfection. Michelle took a loaf and tore off a small bite while it was still hot, bringing it to her mouth for a taste. I watched her chew on it without a word. I could feel my pulse quicken.

“You pass,” she announced with a gentle smile. “This bread is good enough to sell to our customers.”

My eyes went wide as I looked at her. I felt a rush of elation well up inside of me, and I couldn’t contain myself.

“Y-You really mean that?!”

“Of course I do. Would I lie to you?”

I let out a childish celebratory cheer. I hadn’t been this happy since my engagement to the Pompous Prince had been called off.

Speaking of which, how’s he doing, anyway? Come to think of it, I’ve only been thinking about how Lily’s been. I basically forgot that he existed after our engagement was annulled.

Now that I’d acknowledged that my hatred for him was rooted in his similarity to my brother from my past life and my jealousy toward him for having the older brother that I wished I had, I was able to regard him with a little more kindness and care.

Wait, why am I thinking about that right now? I should be focused on celebrating my successful loaves! Michelle even gave me the go-ahead to sell them to customers! Woo-hoo!

“Why don’t you take some time off, hon? You can have a break starting tomorrow.”

Wait... What?

My uncontainable excitement had rendered her words completely incomprehensible. But after a few moments, they finally sank in. Almost immediately, my elation vanished, and I could feel my face blanching.

“Are... Are you firing me?” I asked hesitantly.

Oh, god... What did I do wrong?

I racked my brains, trying to find an answer. Had I offended her by calling her bread “miracle bread”? Or...had I made a grave error at work that I hadn’t even noticed, and a customer had complained? Maybe she’d realized that she could run the bakery just fine without me—no, that it would actually be *easier*

without me—and she’d decided she didn’t need me anymore? I mean, she’d never really *needed* to hire me in the first place, as far as I could tell... It was entirely possible that she thought she’d make more of a profit if I were a customer, thanks to my insane obsession with bread.

In five seconds, I’d gone over every possible explanation—from the absolutely bonkers theories to the most likely ones.

Michelle looked stunned as she watched me spiral. Then she burst out laughing, breaking me out of my ruminations.

“Oh, hon, I’m not *firing* you! I just think a weeklong break would do you some good. I can tell you’ve been goin’ through a tough time lately, and you’re at a critical juncture here now. Why don’t you get some rest and save up your strength?”

“Huh? I... I’m not fired? Oh, thank god...”

I was so relieved, I felt a couple of tears well up. Honestly, I couldn’t have even told you whether they were tears of joy or trace reserves of my fleeting despair on the way out of my system.

Once I’d calmed down, I started to wonder what she’d meant.

“What...makes you think that?” I asked her bluntly. “And why a whole week?”

It seemed like an awfully specific amount of time, which struck me as strange.

“It’s just my intuition talkin’. Don’t worry, hon. You’ll be welcome back at the bakery when the week is over,” she reassured me, smiling.

Your “intuition”?! So...you have no basis for thinking that? I was floored that she’d make me take a whole week off for no real reason at all. *I can’t believe this...*

Thinking back on it, though, Michelle *was* always a woman of strong convictions, and I’d never known her to tell a lie. If anything, all I had were reasons to take her word for it. If she was telling me to take a week off, I’d do it. I had one hundred percent confidence that this mandatory break was coming from a good place and that she was only foisting it on me because she cared about me. How could I refuse her?

“You promise? I’m going to burst into tears if I come back and see that some new kid’s taken my place,” I warned her.

“I promise,” she replied, a warm smile on her face.

I glanced at the clock and realized that it was time to start closing the bakery. Flustered, I jumped into action.

I could have never imagined what this next week had in store for me and how it would shake the very foundations of my life.



The next day, I found myself with only one place to go now that I wasn’t heading to the bakery for a shift.

“I’ve been wondering, Fii...are you sure *I’m* the one you want to see on your days off? Wouldn’t you prefer to go on a date with that handsome silver-haired nobleman that you’re, um, ‘not dating’?”

Nana looked at me quizzically. Apparently, she still hadn’t gotten the memo that *she* was the one who’d captured my heart.

I’d much rather spend time with you, Nana! I wanted to shout. But our friendship wasn’t at that level yet, so I knew it wasn’t the right moment. I was well aware that my love for her was a little...*intense*. I’d have to wait until we were close enough that it wouldn’t creep her out. But rest assured, when that moment came, I wasn’t going to hold back.

As I pondered my silly little game plan, though, something occurred to me. To my knowledge, Nika and Nana had never met. It was easy to imagine that she might’ve picked up details like his hair color, his good looks, and his noble status from the gossiping locals, but the way she said “*that* handsome silver-haired nobleman” conveyed a sense of familiarity, as if she’d met him before. It would’ve been one thing if I’d talked about him with her regularly, but I’d barely ever mentioned him.

Hmm... Maybe I’m just reading too much into this?

“Oh, by the way, Father Jack wanted to see you. He said he had something to apologize for?” Nana said, abruptly switching topics.

The strange dissonance I'd just felt about the way she spoke about Nika was immediately overwritten by a different question: just how did the pastor think he'd wronged me?

"Huh? Oh... Well, I might have *some* idea what that could be about, but...why now?"

I had a feeling that I might know exactly what he meant, and I had no doubt that it had influenced his decision to let Nana join me in the plaza today for juice and a chat. Nana was supposed to devote her life to her work as a nun, and the fact that Jack had let me take her out and away from her duties like this in the first place was kind of a red flag. It seemed clear to me that he was trying to atone for *something*. Of course, I wouldn't have expected Nana to have caught on to any of that.

The first time I'd met Jack, I'd gotten the distinct impression that he hailed from a noble family. The timing of Mel's visits seemed like awfully big coincidences, but it would all make sense if Jack was one of Mel's "ears," feeding him intel on my whereabouts. That would also have explained Jack's guilt and his sense of indebtedness to me.

What it didn't explain, though, was why he'd picked *now* to make a whole thing of it.

"Well... Remember how I stopped by the bakery recently?" Nana said.

"I do."

"I gave him some bread I'd brought back, and when I was telling him about visiting you at the bakery, he suddenly went kind of blue in the face."

Now I was *really* confused. How could a conversation about the bakery amplify Jack's guilt? Was this the miraculous, problem-solving power of bread at work again? Was it somehow exerting some interdimensional influence over him?

"That's *all*?" I asked.

"Super weird, right? I don't get it!"

"I'm not sure I understand it either..."

We shook our heads, both at a loss.

“Hmm... I’m not sure why that would make him feel at fault for anything, so this whole thing makes me a little uncomfortable. Could you please just tell him I don’t require any apologies? Besides, I’m more than satisfied with the privilege of whisking you away to the plaza with me, if permitting me that’s his way of dealing with his guilty conscience.”

“Yes, ma’am! Leave it to me!” Nana said without a moment’s hesitation, giving me an enthusiastic salute.

So cute...

Honestly, I just really didn’t want to screw anything up and sour the relationship I had with Jack. He seemed to be something like a father to Nana, and I knew he was well aware how much I adored her. He had all the power here, and I didn’t want to give him any reason to leverage it.

Wait... Maybe he didn’t go blue in the face out of guilt? Maybe he was scared?

If Jack was a noble, then it wouldn’t have been a surprise if he was aware that I used to be the duke’s daughter—in which case, he probably would have also known that I was the prince’s former fiancée and that I’d been on track to be queen of the kingdom. Mel might’ve even told him as much directly.

Even though I wasn’t any of those things *anymore*, I could see how he might still be intimidated by the possible connections and authority that I might have maintained. A commoner might not have cared about any of that, but a low-ranking noble certainly would.

Whatever his fears were, though, they were unfounded.

“I think I *might* know the reason, though!” Nana piped up again. “I mean, I don’t really get it...but I think I know what it is, at least!”

“You ‘might’ know?”

“Um...yes.”

I couldn’t imagine that anyone would have been trying to listen in on our conversation, but Nana dropped her voice and put her hand up to cover the side of her mouth as she said this, as if she were telling me a big secret. Her face

reflected absolute certainty, although I had a feeling that her confidence wasn't exactly warranted. It was cute, though, so I had no complaints.

Never change, Nana...

"Your boss at the bakery is *the* Michelle, right? I think that's probably what this is all about! He's probably scared 'cause she's taken a liking to you."

Once again, I was mystified. What did Michelle being my employer have to do with Jack wanting to apologize to me? I didn't see any possible connection.

I loved how conspiratorial Nana was being about this, though, so I figured I'd play along. I adopted a serious expression too and urged her to continue.

"*The* Michelle?"

"I don't get it either..."

"I'm...confused."

"But from the sounds of it, Michelle is a pretty big deal. At least...I think she is. I'm pretty sure no one in the neighborhood would dare cross her."

"Oh... Yes, I think I know exactly what you mean."

Michelle was one of the nicest people I'd ever met, but I wouldn't dream of ever going against her. She might not have had money, political power, or physical strength, but she was the type of person you *knew* not to cross. She was kind of like a mother that way, I guess.

In any case, that was probably what Nana was picking up on. I was a little tickled by how much she'd misread Michelle's matronly authority.

"I've heard that Michelle knows *everything*!" Nana continued. "I bet she's a secret agent of the kingdom or something!"

Nana was so animated now as she rattled off bizarre new theories that the hush-hush way our conversation had started felt like a distant memory. As amused as I was, though, I didn't want Nana to get the wrong idea about Michelle.

"I think it might be a little hard for her to lead a double life like that, considering she's at the bakery day and night," I said, pointing out the obvious.

Then, trying to steer her away from this line of thinking, I added, “Besides, if she knew *everything*, then I doubt she would have hired me.”

Michelle had made a point of how impressed she was that Nika was so respectful *in spite* of his noble status. From the way she spoke about him, it seemed likely that she didn’t hold most nobles in high esteem. It wasn’t unusual for commoners to be wary of the aristocracy, and I had a sense that Michelle shared that wariness. So, if she’d known that I used to be a duke’s daughter, that would have been reason enough not to hire me. Up until I signed on, the bakery had essentially been a one-woman enterprise, so she’d really only hired me the day we met because I’d made a good impression.

Furthermore, I had a pretty scandalous past even for a noble. No one in their right mind would have employed me if they’d known who I was before I’d become “Fii Crow.” It was understandable that they wouldn’t want to get wrapped up in whatever scandal might still be clinging to me.

Wait, why am I spending so much time entertaining Nana’s crazy theory? This really isn’t necessary.

Then Nana spoke up again and snapped me right out of my thoughts.

“She must have her reasons,” she said.

I was struck by the way she said this, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world—as if she were simply stating something that was common sense. There wasn’t a trace of the excitement she’d had before either. She said it so dispassionately, like she was reading from a script. It almost sounded like she’d figured everything out.

Without thinking, I closed my mouth. I was speechless.

“Everyone has their own reasons for doing things, and motivations that drive them. That’s just the way the world works. So, that’s why you can’t let your guard down and just blindly trust people, Fii!”

I guess she’s right...but that’s kind of a random truth bomb to drop on me after all that tinfoil hat talk. Wait, why am I sitting here getting lectured by Nana again? And what’s with that smug look on her face?

“Even you?” I asked her hesitantly.

I was even more confused now than I had been before our conversation, but I wanted to at least know if I could trust her—my dear, my doll, my refuge. I fully expected—and hoped—that she’d say, “Of course not! You don’t need any reason to trust *me*! I’m different!”

But with her next words, she dashed those hopes.

“That’s right. I’m no different. I’m here right now for my own reasons, with my own motivations.”

As I looked at the big, innocent smile on her face, I could tell that she wasn’t lying. But I couldn’t help but think that words like “reasons” and “motivations” didn’t suit her at all.



After that weird blip, Nana and I ended up having a pretty normal, pleasant conversation—so normal and pleasant that I almost forgot how tense things had gotten for a moment there. Or maybe I was just making an effort to repress it.

When I came home, someone was at my door waiting for me.

“Goodness me... I thought my heart was going to stop for a moment there,” I said.

“Huh? ‘Goodness me’? Why’re you talking like that?”

“I wish you wouldn’t show up out of the blue like this.”

Only two days had passed since I’d last seen him, and already the prince from the neighboring country was darkening my door again, playing it off like it was only natural for him to be there.

You must have a whole lot of time on your hands, I thought, but I knew better. Nolan—excuse me, *Nolls*—was a lot more capable than his devil-may-care persona would suggest. It probably wasn’t so much that he didn’t have any duties to attend to as much as it was that he’d finished them up in a flash like always. I, on the other hand, had to put in a lot of work if I wanted to produce any results that were better than just “acceptable.” I had to admit, I envied his efficiency.

As I ruminated on this, Nolls let out a carefree laugh.

“What, am I s’posed to send you a letter announcing myself? You want me to dispatch a messenger next time? ’Cause I don’t do that crap for personal visits,” he said.

It seemed like kind of a weird thing to take offense at, considering that it was standard practice among the aristocracy to schedule visits—even between the closest of friends. It was only polite to be considerate of what timing would be convenient.

I knew I shouldn’t have been surprised by his behavior, though. What else could I possibly expect, when the person closest to him—the guy who’d basically raised him—catered to his every whim? Of course he’d turn into a bit of a brat who thought the world revolved around him.

As I swallowed my complaints, I noticed Zero was there with him too, just standing next to him silently. I glanced over at him. Thanks to his height, he was looking down on me. He gave me a pleasant smile.

Yeah, I don’t wanna mess with him... I don’t think I’m gonna win this one.

“Hey, at least I didn’t try to pry your door open or anything. Give me some credit for waiting patiently, will ya?” said Nolls.

“...”

It was nigh impossible for me to listen to selfish drivel like that without breaking into hives, so I just let it go in one ear and out the other.

“Well, you’re welcome to come in, but I don’t have much to offer in the way of hospitality.”

“Huh? All I’m after is your company. I don’t need anything else.”

How can you drop cheesy lines like that so nonchalantly? Don’t you have any shame? I wished he’d knock it off, but honestly, that was mostly because it was going to make me blush. I had a real weak spot for guys with kind of menacing looks in their eyes.

I figured Nolls had no idea how much that sounded like he was trying to seduce me, though, so I just let it go. There’d be no point in replying. Instead, I

just cleared my throat and unlocked the door to let them in.

“Hey, it smells kinda good in here,” said Nolls, sniffing the air like a dog. It was abundantly clear that he’d blurted that out without a moment’s thought as to how inappropriate it was.

“Stop sniffing like that. You’re embarrassing me,” I replied, cutting him off.

I didn’t just cut him off verbally either—I waved a loaf of bread that had been sitting on the table in front of his face. I’d found a new optimism lately in the marvelous powers of bread. It legitimately felt like the solution to every problem I encountered.

“Yeah, that’s it! That’s what I was smelling!” Nolls said.

Hearing him clarify that it was the smell of bread that filled my house, rather than some lovely girly smell, was somehow too much to take. I felt like I was losing my credibility a bit as a young woman... But to be fair, it also seemed like a completely appropriate scent for a commoner who worked at a bakery.

Maybe I should spruce my place up a bit, though? Make it a bit less drab? F-Flowers could make a difference... Should I go pick some local flowers tomorrow?

As I fretted over my femininity, which seemed to be vanishing by the day, Nolls sat down at the table and immediately began digging into the bread I’d thrust at him. Zero, for his part, stood silently.

Come to think of it, he actually hadn’t said a single word this whole time. I was starting to feel a bit awkward about that, so I tried to chat him up.

“You seem rather quiet today, Lord Zero. I hope you’re not feeling unwell?” I asked him.

“No, nothing of the sort,” he replied. “But, Lady Felicia, I’d appreciate it if you could speak to me as plainly as you do to Prince Nolan. It doesn’t do for you to speak so politely to me alone.”

“I...guess you’re right. I’m just a commoner, though, so I’d feel more comfortable if you spoke casually to me as well.”

“My formal way of speaking is a habit I picked up in childhood, so I’m afraid

it's not such a simple matter to change it. I speak this way to everyone, so I hope you can forgive me. Also, please feel free to drop my title. 'Zero' will do."

You speak that way to everyone, huh? Yeah, right.

I knew that was a lie from the game. He says the same line there, but in a later event, you see that he actually speaks down to anyone of a lower rank, and he certainly doesn't dress it up with stiff formalities. Of course, that's only as long as he isn't around the protagonist or Nolls. I figured that side of him was probably closer to who he really was.

It felt like a glimpse of that true self was showing itself now as he made an additional request of me, hot on the heels of rejecting mine. Honestly, he and Nolls deserved each other...

"Incidentally, Lady Felicia, I was wondering if you'd heard that Lady Liliana collapsed?"

"What?"

It was such a sudden announcement—with absolutely no lead-in whatsoever—that my brain went completely blank for a second. Then the worry started to kick in.

"Sh-She did? Is she okay? Is she sick?"

"I can only relay what I've heard secondhand, but it doesn't appear to be anything that serious. They're saying she collapsed from exhaustion. I hear she'll be taking a week to recover."

A week of recovery didn't sound like no big deal to me. Besides, exhaustion wasn't something to be taken lightly. If she was working herself to the point of collapse, I had real cause for concern. And where was Nika in all of this?

No... I have no right to judge him. I'm sure he's been busy with his own stuff, which is probably why he hasn't come to visit lately. Besides, I can hardly point fingers at him when I'm the one who ran away from that world.

I'm really worried about Lily, though... I wonder if Seth is treating her right? I'm glad she's taking a self-care week, but...

Then it hit me: A week? Wait... Something about that feels significant.

“Um... When did this all happen?” I asked.

“Two days ago, when Prince Nolan and I came to pay you a visit. Why do you ask?”

“So... Her week of rest started then?”

“No. I believe it began the following day.”

She started taking her week off yesterday... That's the same as me, I thought. No, wait... Today is the first day of my week off, so it doesn't line up perfectly. Still...it's only a day's difference. That's nothing. Is this all just a coincidence? It seems a little too perfect to all just be a coincidence, though.

Then I remembered what Nana had said about everyone having their own reasons and motivations, and what Michelle had said about this week being a “critical juncture” for me. I had an eerie feeling that the stage was being set for Lily and me somehow. It all felt contrived, like someone was using us for something.

But what? And who? Who could possibly benefit from Lily and me meeting? Who would find that amusing?

I know I always make a big fuss about fighting fate, but...who was really responsible for spinning the wheel of fate anyway? Was it God...or someone else?

“Yeesh. You guys just had to go and make things all serious while I was scarfing down this bread, huh? How 'bout a lighter topic of conversation?” said Nolls.

“Yeah... Good idea.”

I put on a pleasant expression, trying to hide the anxiety that was welling up inside of me. It was disturbing to think that this world might have a human hand manipulating fate. I couldn't help but wonder if I wasn't alone in being reincarnated here. Maybe someone else had been reincarnated into this world too and was messing around with it for fun? It was only a hunch, but it would have certainly explained all the weird stuff that had been going on...stuff that was clearly beyond the realm of “coincidence.”

And whoever this other reincarnated person was, they must have been a real piece of work. There was no way that anyone with a conscience would get off on manipulating people from the shadows and tugging the strings of fate like this. I knew I'd have to spend some more time thinking about this once Zero and Nolls left. If I wanted to fight my fate, that probably entailed an honest-to-goodness brawl with whoever this jerk was.

For the record, it's not like I'd never considered the possibility that I wasn't the only person who'd reincarnated into this world. But until I'd totally deviated from the canon timelines, I'd never once had a sense that something was "off," and I'd never felt that anything other than my own actions had resulted in any changes from the game.

That's why I'd been pretty convinced that I was probably the only reincarnated person here. I mean, if there was someone else here with me, then I really hoped they were friendly. It would've been great to have some someone to talk to and laugh with about all of this.

Anyway, I was getting ahead of myself thinking about all of this. Nolls still hadn't left yet.

"Y'know, this place may be as cramped as a dog kennel, but it's actually kinda cozy. Mind if I stay the night?" he asked.

"I do mind, actually."

I had absolutely no intention of letting anyone stay over at my house, so I'd only ever bought one bedroll. It felt like a waste to buy another, considering I didn't even want overnight guests. And there was no way I was letting a prince stay the night...for a lot of reasons.

Thanks to Nolls's refusal to leave, I found myself deeply distracted by thoughts and yet unable to properly concentrate on them.

What a pain in the rear, I thought. I love him, but seriously...

"Prince Nolan, we should take our leave. You won't make it in time to attend to your duties tomorrow at noon otherwise. As it is, you'll have to get most of your sleep for the night in the carriage."

"Damn, seriously?"

“I believe I warned you before we left to come here that this little visit would crowd your schedule?”

“Oh, please. Don’t act like you didn’t wanna come too! You seemed pretty interested to see what Fii would think of that news about Liliana.”

“Prince Nolan,” Zero said again firmly.

I was glad that it was starting to feel like they might actually leave, but I was disturbed by what Nolls seemed to have implied.

Did Zero come here just to see how I’d react? I wondered.

Putting aside my naked concern for Lily—which probably seemed plenty unusual already—I knew I’d gotten a little lost in my thoughts about a potential second reincarnated person. I couldn’t help but wonder what that must have looked like from Zero’s perspective. If he had any connection to this hypothetical other reincarnated person, then it was deeply concerning to think that he might tip them off about me before I could even do anything. What if that led the other reincarnated person to take some sort of drastic measures?

Maybe it’s my turn to do some investigating. I’m no match against Zero, but maybe I can get something out of Nolls...

“Hey, Nolls?” I asked him. “Do you know anyone who acts like they can see the future?”

“Uh, yeah...you.”

“No, I mean, *other* than me. Wait...you think I can?”

Huh? Did I ever do anything that would make him think that? I wondered for a moment, before I remembered my whole “brief stint as a prophet” thing. Still, that didn’t matter right now.

“Never mind, forget about me. Anyone else?”

“If I had to think of someone else, obviously it’d be El.”

“El? Wh-Who is this ‘El’? Tell me all about them!”

“Huh? You don’t know who El is?”

I suddenly had a feeling that I’d hit on something big.

I leaned over the table, nodding enthusiastically as I pressed him to tell me more. Then I felt someone grab me gently by the shoulders and pull me back.

Obviously, it wasn't Nolls; it was Zero. Nolls couldn't act that gentle.

"Prince Nolan, you're touching on a state secret. We were only told about the person in question as a special favor, thanks to our allied status with the kingdom. If Lady Felicia wasn't given that information, then we ought to act with discretion."

"Sure, but maybe we'll piss someone off if we spill the beans. If we're lucky, maybe it'll even start a war."

Startled, I sat up a bit straighter. This "El" person was clearly a much bigger deal than I'd thought.

It kinda freaked me out to hear Nolls talk about the possibility of war so calmly too. I knew he was just killing time visiting me, but it seemed that he still hadn't given up on the idea. It hit me now how much of a loose cannon he was. I had to tread carefully when talking about myself with Shade so I didn't step on any land mines, but Nolls's field seemed a whole lot bigger. It wasn't just me that could set him off but a whole host of other things. Not that I wanted to compare which of them was easier to deal with... Honestly, I'd have preferred not to have to deal with either of them.

"That isn't going to happen. Angering El would have consequences far greater than war. There wouldn't even be anything left to war over," Zero said.

Seems like this "El" is a nuclear missile. They've got to be a real piece of work if Zero is this afraid of them. Even just dancing around the topic of them like this is enough to freak me out. But if I don't keep pushing, I won't learn anything...

If El was another reincarnated person, like I theorized, then I couldn't imagine they'd have that much power. But maybe they weren't a reincarnated person? Maybe they were just really powerful? If that was a possibility, then it would be just plain stupid to keep probing about them for nothing and set the bordering kingdom on a path to ruin.

I know... I'll ask Mel about them next time I see him, I thought. He's got plenty of powerful connections, so I'm sure he must know something about them.

“Is there nothing you can tell me about them? Not even their age or their gender?” I asked.

“No clue. I couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to.”

“Huh? Wait, so...you’ve never actually met them?”

“Nope. El operates from the shadows, so we’ve never seen their face. The only person who has seen them—let alone actually knows for sure that they even exist—is your king. Hell, I couldn’t even tell you if they’ve been around for hundreds of years or if they only popped up sixteen years ago. I’ve heard people say both.”

“Wait... Sixteen years ago? Why would people say that?”

Okay, I take back what I said before about talking to Mel about all of this. The moment Nolls said the words “sixteen years ago,” that suddenly seemed like a pretty bad idea. “Why?” you ask? Because that’s when Lily, the love interests, and I were all born. With that in mind, “sixteen years ago” seemed like far too specific a time frame to just be a coincidence.

“Cause sixteen years ago, El prophesized that some aristocrat’s baby would —”

“Prince Nolan,” Zero interrupted. “If you’re still hoping to die a glorious death on the battlefield, then I suggest you rethink finishing that sentence.”

“Whoops. Guess I’ve been runnin’ my mouth a bit. But hey, that’s just what men do around women they’ve got a thing for, y’know?” Nolls said, laughing.

I fell silent.

A prophecy about a noble baby, sixteen years ago...? That couldn’t have just been a coincidence...right?

It wasn’t clear from El’s prophecy whom exactly they were talking about. But maybe it had only come to pass because they’d known it was going to happen from the beginning? At the very least, if it was sixteen years ago, then it seemed unlikely that El would have been a child at the time they’d made the prophecy. That being said, prophecies were generally just childish pranks...so maybe it wouldn’t have been all that strange if El had been a child at the time?

Even if El's prophecy hadn't been taken all that seriously at first, all they'd had to do was prophesize things that they knew would happen from the game, and they could rest assured that they would eventually be proven trustworthy. Even if they didn't want the attention, people would start attaching a lot of importance to anything they said. And if they'd been a child at the time, then it made even more sense that they would hide their identity—they could just use the pretense that people would never believe them if they didn't.

But the king was the only one who knew El's identity...which meant that there was a good chance they must have come from a high-ranking background.

It was strange to consider that I might have come across them at some point, at some aristocratic social event maybe, without even knowing. They might have even known who I was but pretended not to. It was...a startlingly likely possibility.

"Well, Fii, I think we're gonna take off now. Keep it up with your entertaining shenanigans, yeah? You wouldn't want me to get *bored*," Nolls said, leaning to whisper into my ear.

A chill ran down my spine. I sometimes almost forgot what a threat he was at his core, but he always took care to remind me.

As I watched him turn away and leave, I was struck by his swaggering gait. He was wearing inconspicuous clothing, since he was traveling incognito, but apparently the quiet streets had made him complacent. His princely demeanor was plainly evident just from looking at him. I had a renewed appreciation for why Zero wanted to accompany him on these outings.

His carefree nature only made it all the more disturbing that he'd held his tongue about El. I could only imagine that El must've been a pretty imposing figure to inspire that kind of discretion from Nolls of all people.

I'm beating fate, right? I have to... If I don't, my dream will never come true.

After Nolls and Zero left, I spread out my bedroll and dove inside to start my usual ruminating. I felt like being physically relaxed gave me extra room mentally and emotionally, and it felt like the thoughts could flow more

smoothly that way.

Now, the first topic on the agenda: who could be reincarnated?

El seemed like a pretty obvious candidate. The timing of their name coming up seemed a little too perfect, but to be fair, they'd only come up because I'd asked Nolls about them.

So, just who is this "El" then?

I knew that they were probably older than sixteen, at least. If they were a reincarnated person, they wouldn't have any problems speaking, even at the tender age of one year old. So...they were probably at least seventeen.

Nolls had said that only the king knew their face, which meant that El was probably from this kingdom rather than the neighboring one. And this was just a hunch, but I suspected that they were probably in a good position to observe me and the other *Lady Rose* main characters. It was hard to imagine that they wouldn't want to watch their prophecies unfold. Surely they'd want to see what would happen?

It had occurred to me earlier, when Nolls was visiting, that El was likely a noble. Taking that into account, I could narrow down the suspects to just a small handful. Most nobles (Shade being a notable exception) didn't have the freedom to go wherever they pleased without a coterie of guards to escort them. And even if they could slip past their guards and wander around now and again, they certainly wouldn't be able to do it all the time. People would take notice of a noble wandering around, after all.

That narrows things down even more...

The only two possible suspects that remained were Nika and Pastor Jack. But Pastor Jack seemed pretty unlikely. He might've been keeping an eye on me recently, but it was hard to imagine that he could've done that before I'd become a commoner. Besides, he didn't have any relation to the main setting in the game: the academy.

If El were Nika, though...everything would fit into place. He was only three years older than me, and if he were a reincarnated person, then he would've had no problems revealing the prophecy about me at that age. Besides, his

characterization had always been that he was a prodigy, so it wouldn't have seemed out of place at all to me if he were more mature than most kids his age growing up.

His attachment to me could also easily be explained away by the fact that I'd been reincarnated as the game's protagonist, even if it wasn't really about that. Likewise, his frequent visits to check up on me, which I'd chalked up to suspicion about a potential uprising, were probably actually inspired by the choices I'd made that had led me to stray from the game's branches.

Nika was also in a perfect position to keep an eye on Lily. Maybe he'd been in her ear all along, turning her against me and driving her to suspect me? He could've even used his position as my future brother-in-law as an excuse to meet with Shade and drive him to mess up the game's timeline.

At this point, Nika seemed so likely, I couldn't even think of any other possible suspect. But fortunately, I caught myself before I'd become dead set on my newfound answer.

Hold on, Fii... You can't just discard other possibilities because this one seems so convincing. There might still be something you're overlooking.

...

I tried to think of anything I could have missed, darting my eyes around the room aimlessly. Then my eyes landed on the calendar. It was still only the first day of my weeklong break.

Am I really going to have to go six more days without baking a single loaf of bread? Maybe I could just buy some ingredients and bake something at home... No, what am I thinking? I don't even have a furnace. And even if I wanted to buy one, that money would be better committed to my savings.

Oh, but...Nika's birthday is coming up soon, right? He hasn't been coming around as much lately, but I feel like I should get him something—even if it's just a trifling commoner present.

"Wait... Birthdays?"

That's it! Birthdays!

I didn't know which noble baby's birth El had prophesized, but maybe it was possible that El could actually be sixteen now. They could have had almost a whole year to make the prophecy and still be the same age as the baby if their birthdays were just far apart. It wasn't like only newborns were called "babies," after all.

Crap... Now the pool of suspects has gotten larger. Now I can't rule out sixteen-year-olds. Wait, how old do you have to be until people stop calling you a baby anyway? I'm getting this all second-or thirdhand anyway, so it kind of depends on where the people who are relaying this draw the line. They might have very different definitions of what counts as a "baby" than the textbook definition. They might even think a toddler two years old or older counts...

Sixteen years was just an approximation anyway, so if this was fifteen and a half years ago, then they may have even been fifteen...

"Now all of the love interests seem suspicious..."

All this thinking had worn me out.

I had never once suspected any of the romanceable characters of being reincarnated, much less Lily. I was realizing now what a giant blind spot this had been. Everyone seemed plausible now. I felt like I was surrounded by enemies.

Prince Seth was certainly less suspicious, since I hadn't run into him even once since our engagement had been annulled. I also hadn't noticed even one thing off about him in all the time I'd known him (and I'd known him since we were kids, so that was saying something). The earnest puppy dog Evan didn't strike me as all that suspicious either. I'd only met him once since the engagement annulment too, and it'd been right as I'd been leaving my family home. He was pretty much exactly the character I knew from the game.

But those two aside, thinking back on it now, there was actually a lot that was kind of fishy about the love interests.

Might wanna start by reassessing what I know about Nika...

He had been oddly supportive of me. Even if he'd just been keeping an eye on me, it was just plain weird for someone in such an important position to make the trip over here once every week to come see me. You'd think that he would

have just sent a low-ranking guard to spy on me. There was no way that the king would have ever assigned a job like that to Nika.

Next there was Shade. We'd never been especially close, but he'd still come to visit me out of the blue. What if he'd just wanted to mess with me because I didn't know he had memories of his past life? Maybe the sudden switch he'd made into creep mode was all just to get a rise out of me and have a laugh at my expense? Shade didn't seem to have any connection to Lily, so I hoped I was wrong, but I couldn't let go of his weird visit.

Then there was Mel. I trusted him like a friend, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that he was in a pretty ideal position to wreak havoc if he wanted to. He was the keeper of dozens upon dozens of secrets, and a skilled tactician when it came to information wars. If he wanted to sow chaos, he could probably do it in a heartbeat.

I hadn't asked him anything about himself during our question-trading deal. I'd blabbed a lot about myself, though...on the assumption that he'd have no idea I'd been reincarnated. What if he'd just been putting on an act this whole time?

Even Nolls was a bit suspicious. He could have been lying when he was talking about how the king knew El. And maybe he'd only told me about El to toy with me? Maybe he just wanted to freak me out? We'd never gone to the same school in this world, and yet he seemed a lot more fixated on me than he ever did on Lady Rose in the game. I mean, he had to be, if he'd made a point of coming all the way here to try to cajole me into starting a war with him. And he'd brought up Lily, so he must have had some kind of connection with her too. Zero might not have been on the same page as him, but I knew he'd follow Nolls wherever he went. Status was everything to Zero, after all.

As for Lily...she didn't seem to be a likely candidate. She'd had plenty of opportunities to reach out to me, but we'd barely ever had any real contact. Even now, I never saw her. For my part, I kept my distance because of her bullying. If she were reincarnated, though, then wouldn't she reach out to me more if she knew I was the game's protagonist?

But weirder still, if she were reincarnated, she would have known that it

wouldn't make any sense to bully me. I mean, it would have been plain as day to her what would happen if she did that: she'd wind up with a "gentle" death sentence in the form of being cast out to live as a commoner.

There was a chance that she'd had the same goal as me and that she'd wanted to be a commoner, but if that were the case, she would've had a much bigger reaction when I'd just let the annulment stand. Even if she'd been too floored to do much, and even if she hadn't realized that I was reincarnated too, she would have at least realized that there was something off about me—a glitch in the system, if you will. And if she'd caught on to that, I couldn't imagine she would've just looked the other way.

The most frightening possibility was that someone had seen through my act this whole time and knew that I was doing everything I could to become a commoner. What if they'd been biding their time until I succeeded, and then they were going to set off a giant trap that I'd unwittingly walked right into? But if they were a reincarnated person, then surely all the steps I'd taken to become a commoner would have tipped them off to the fact that I was one too? I wasn't exactly bad at acting, though. For as long as I could remember—including in my past life—I'd been nearly single-mindedly maintaining my persona. So...maybe they wouldn't have noticed.

Just who was this "El"? This was starting to feel a lot more like a mystery game than an otome game—at least for me.

El's identity wasn't even the most important question, though. What mattered more was what they had up their sleeve next.

Ah, shoot... I'm starting to drift off.

Nolls had left awfully late. By the time he was gone, the clock had probably already passed midnight. I'd been living a pretty rigid, by-the-book life ever since my rebirth, so I'd lost my ability to stay up late.

Mm... Maybe I'll just go to sleep? I'm still in the middle of a brainstorming sesh, though...

Okay, so: what's El's next move? Lily's conveniently got a week off right when I do, so...if I were El, I'd probably try to put Lily and me in contact. Even I can't imagine how that'd go, so I'm sure a third party like El would find it endlessly

entertaining to watch that meeting unfold.

When I considered the difference in status between Lily and me, though, it seemed like a pretty Herculean task to make us cross paths. It certainly didn't help that Lily was recuperating, and likely wouldn't be up and about. Unless El planned to kidnap her, a meeting between us seemed pretty out of the question. And no matter how high-ranking El was, there was no way they'd evade punishment for a crime as serious as kidnapping the future queen of the kingdom.

Okay, I thought, I'm not getting anywhere with this. I'm too sleepy to think straight. I think it's time to call it a night. I'll have another day off tomorrow anyway, so I can just keep brainstorming then.

Good night.



I woke up early the next day out of habit, but I didn't feel like resuming my brainstorming sesh. All my motivation seemed to have disappeared. Part of that was probably because I was still groggy from burning the midnight oil, but mostly I think it was because pondering the whole El situation was starting to feel like a huge waste of time.

I just had too little to go on. I couldn't decide if everyone was suspicious or if no one was. At this point, it felt like no amount of thinking was going to get me anywhere.

Ugh... Why'd Nolls have to drop a bomb like that on me now? God must have really hated me.

I was starting to get a pretty good picture of El's personality, though, at least. They were the kind of person who only ever worked from the shadows, and they clearly enjoyed toying with Lily, the love interests, and me. But for all their scheming, they made sure to cover their tracks carefully so they'd never get caught. Clearly, I was either dealing with a thorough and malign adult or an innocently cruel child.

I grumbled about this to myself internally as I prepared to go out and get some cheering up from Nana. I didn't even care that it'd only been a day since

I'd last seen her.

But just then, I heard my doorbell ring. It seemed I had a visitor.

I straightened up, wondering for a brief moment if it might be El at my door. But then I remembered that I wouldn't even know if it was.

When I stopped to think about it rationally, it seemed likely that Mel was my visitor. I hadn't given Nana my address yet, and I didn't know many people who'd just show up at my house unannounced. Other than Mel, it could only have been Nolls and Zero or Shade. But Nolls had already visited me last night, and besides, Zero had said that his schedule was packed today. It couldn't be Shade either, since it was unlikely that he'd be able to ditch his guards to visit me so soon. Even if he did, he probably wouldn't choose to visit in the early morning, when dozens of eyes could be on him. So...it was probably Mel.

I had my misgivings about Mel, since he was one of my prime suspects. But he was also my friend, and I felt like I could relax around him. So, despite the fact that he was visiting in the wee hours of the morning, I felt pretty happy to see him. I was in a generous enough mood to split my morning bread with him—and that wasn't a privilege I gave to just anyone.

Smiling, I opened the door.

"Me—!" I started to yell.

Then I saw a flash of silver hair, and my voice cut out. My body froze, and the gears in my brain came to a screeching halt. My heart seemed to skip a beat and then just...forget to start again.

"Meh...?" my visitor repeated.

I took another look at him and found myself struck by his mature, cool demeanor. He had a touch of otherworldliness about him.

I made a desperate effort to get the gears turning in my brain again. This was no time for my heart to be pounding like this!

No matter how I spun it, I had a feeling it wouldn't look good if I let it slip that Mel and I were in contact. I'd have to cover up my mistake somehow.

Think, Fii! Think!

“Me-Merci! Thank you so very much for coming, Nika! Please, come in!”

“A-All right...?”

He cocked his head slightly, giving me an uncomfortable smile. Fortunately, it seemed he was too busy honoring my forceful invitation to think too deeply about how strange it was.

His two guards looked at me suspiciously as they entered, though. And I couldn't help but notice that they seemed to be carrying an *awful* lot with them today. *Maybe they're on their way back to the castle from somewhere?* I wondered. I was impressed with how easily they were handling it all, though. The load they were carrying was way more than two normal people would ever be able to manage, but like true professionals, they carried it like it was nothing.

I offered Nika a chair and quickly took my seat across from him. I cleared my throat to help clear the air (well, internally, that is), and spoke up.

“I believe this is the first time you've come straight to my house, instead of the bakery. To what do I owe this visit...?” I asked him.

“Yes. I'm afraid I don't have much time today, but there was something I was hoping to discuss with you,” he replied, wearing an inscrutable expression. “Oh, but before that...there was just one other thing I wanted to ask.”

I straightened my spine and put on an inscrutable expression of my own.

“Yes? What is it?”

Nika pointed his bony yet long and beautiful index finger at the table (or rather, at what sat atop it). I turned my gaze to look where he was pointing.

Bread. *That's* what he was pointing at—the bread on my table.

“Is that your breakfast?” he asked me.

“Yes. To be honest, it's also my lunch... But if you'd like, I'm happy to part with it.”

“I'm all too familiar with how delicious the bakery's products are, but that's not why I ask.”

He made a strange expression, as if struggling to put what he wanted to say

into words. I gave him an awkward look back.

What's going on here...?

Maybe he'd noticed how much my house smelled like bread, just like Nolls had? Maybe he was trying to delicately hint that I ought to take a little more care in how I presented myself and my home as a young woman? That *would* certainly be hard to say...especially because, unlike Nolls, Nika took care to be tactful with his words.

"Fii... Perhaps this is all just my imagination, but it seems to me that you eat bread every single day. And not just for one meal...but for almost *every* meal."

"I... I wouldn't say *that*..."

"You deny it, but I can see you looking shiftily around the room."

Urk!

Even after Michelle had warned me that I might get fat from all the bread I was eating, I hadn't stopped. I just kept chowing away...and it seemed that Nika had picked up on that somehow.

For reference, though, I wasn't exactly doing my best to hide it. I obviously wasn't making bank working at the bakery, and it would be stupid to lie about something I was clearly doing. If anything, putting my heart and soul into faking something so trivial would only make it that much harder for people to believe me when I really needed them to.

"Do you struggle with cooking?" Nika asked. "Forgive me, that was a foolish question. It's only natural that you would, considering that you came from a noble background."

"W-Well, not exactly! It's just...this bread is *free*. And it's such a shame to let something so tasty go to waste."

It was a little mortifying for him to think that, so I hurriedly tried to set him straight.

I'm not bad at cooking! In my past life, I lived on my own ever since high school, so I basically perfected all my housework skills! It's just that bread is so tasty and so economical that it's hard to pass up! Plus, it tastes delicious!

Of course, Nika had no idea that I'd have any skills I'd brought over from my past life, and I couldn't exactly tell him. Fortunately, though, he somehow seemed convinced.

"I see. Well, that's good," he said, nodding kindly. "I'm glad I brought all of this, then."

All of...what, exactly?

Nika motioned with his hand, and his guards placed the pile of paper bags they were carrying on the table with all the grace of professionals, softly and without making a sound. Their expressions, on the other hand, were anything *but* professional. They looked thoroughly miffed.

I peered into a paper bag and blinked, confused.

"Um... Are these...ingredients?"

"Yes. I've become quite concerned about your diet. I also noticed that you didn't seem to have a refrigerator in your home, so I've brought one for you as well."

"What...?"

Bringing ingredients was one thing...but bringing a whole refrigerator was another thing entirely. A fridge was a pretty...*unusual* present, in more ways than one.

Nika's two guards emerged from outside carrying the fridge, with no regard for my practical concerns. It was on the smaller side, as far as such things went, but it was still a fully-fledged fridge.

Hold on... Just hold on a sec, everyone. Let's all just take a moment to breathe, okay?

"And since I'm here, I thought maybe I could whip something up for you," said Nika.

"I beg your pardon?! P-Please, just hold on a moment! I couldn't possibly make you *cook* for me, Nika!"

"There's no need to worry. I'm doing this because I *want* to."

It seemed my protests had fallen on deaf ears. Nika rolled up his sleeves and stood up, then took a few steps toward the kitchen, brimming with confidence.

What in the world is going on? W-Well...I just hope this doesn't end in him taste testing the food and giving himself food poisoning or something.

"Um... Pardon my asking, but have you ever cooked before?" I asked him.

"I've observed chefs before, so I have a theoretical knowledge of the process."

"..."

Sooo...that sounds like a "no."

As I watched Nika take full control of the kitchen, I remembered what he'd said when he first came in. *Wait a minute... Didn't he say he didn't have much time?*

That wasn't the only problem, though. It would have been one thing if I'd had a nice, big kitchen, but he seemed wildly out of place cooking in my tiny peasant digs. I mean, he *was* the most elegant and refined love interest in the game. Thank heavens he'd brought along all the cookware he needed, at least.

While I was retreating into my own thoughts, though, I tried to calmly appraise the ingredients he'd bought. I knew I was overthinking things, but I wanted to suss out if he was using anything that had gone bad or required special skills to cook.

"All done!"

Nika brought over the dishes he'd made, looking quite pleased with himself. I felt a headache come on from the eye strain of trying to surreptitiously figure out what I was in for, but in the end, it seemed there'd been no need to worry. There was nothing on the plates he brought over that looked suspicious, and even if there *was* something off, he hadn't taste tested it.

Whew!

Now that the food he'd gone to all that effort to prepare was in front of me and ready to eat, I looked up at Nika with bewilderment.

"Is something the matter? I hope there's nothing in there that isn't to your

tastes.”

“No, that’s...that’s not it...”

Let me give you an honest, no-frills account of what I saw in front of me. The first dish that caught my eye was a gelatin with diced vegetables, served in a cocktail glass (I didn’t have anything that stylish in my house, so he must’ve brought it with him). I assumed it was some sort of appetizer.

Next was a pumpkin consommé soup (judging by the smell, at least) with thinly sliced vegetables. There was also steamed icefish that smelled faintly of white wine, which appeared to be the main dish. The parsley on top made it look downright gourmet. Accompanying the fish were stir-fried noodles, which were so light and simple that they were more like pasta. Finally, there was dessert: peach jelly. It even came with a compote.

What the heck is he doing, coming over to someone’s house in his spare time and cooking up a full five-course French/Italian meal? It looks a lot like what the professional chef my family hired would make for us when I was a duke’s daughter... Is this really his first time cooking? That’s gotta be a joke, right?

“Oh, of course—poison testing! Mind taking a taste to test it?” Nika asked, calling to his guards.

That’s not why I was hesitating!

That being said, I was worried that this might end up being one of those clichéd “looks perfect on the outside but tastes terrible” situations. It was certainly possible...

Nika’s guards looked at each other.

“Not gonna happen.”

“I’m afraid I must refuse.”

Huh?! You’re his guards! You rank way lower than Nika, don’t you? Why’re you refusing his orders with straight faces like that?! Nika, tell them off!

“No? Very well, then... I suppose I’ll test it.”

“Wow!” I interjected, panicked. “This looks delicious, Nika! I’m sorry, but I’m not going to part with even a single bite of it! Hope you don’t mind if I start

eating!”

I felt like I was on the brink of disaster. I couldn't let a member of the royal family test my food for poison! I had no idea how we'd gotten here, but this was literally a worst-case scenario. So, I hurriedly set to work on the dishes in front of me.

I took a bite and, without thinking, my face contorted itself into a deep frown.

“How can this taste so good...? It's not fair that you're this naturally talented!”

I hurriedly tried a bite of each dish, not even thinking about the correct order I should be eating them in. I was desperate to ensure that Nika didn't have the chance to test any of them for poison. Each dish I tried was just as delicious as the last.

Jeez... This guy really can do everything!

Nika watched me eat with a smile on his face.

“Well, now that I can see you're eating, I'll be on my way.”

“It's delicious, Nika. Thank you,” I said. “Wait... Huh? You're leaving? But I thought you had something important you wanted to talk to me about?”

All he'd done was bring me ingredients and a fridge...and make a full-course meal for me. Whatever happened to the important thing he had to talk to me about despite being so short on time?

“There is, but your nutrition takes priority. We can discuss the important matter next time.”

“A-All right. I've been given a week off that started yesterday, so please feel free to come by again any time.”

“That's perfect. I'll come by again soon,” Nika said, his tone pleasant.

Then he left, his two guards in tow.

Nika, you idiot... I think you're placing a little too much importance on my diet.

“If Nika is El, then maybe he was using this as an opportunity to spy?” I whispered, trying to think things through logically and dispassionately.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I heard a knock at my door. It opened before I could even move to answer it myself. I felt myself jump as Nika, who had literally just left, apologized as he came barging back in.

Huh? What's going on? Did he leave something here? I don't see anything, though... Wait, he didn't hear what I just said, did he? Is this gonna be okay?

Completely unaware of my concerns, Nika walked straight toward me—and then right past me to grab the bag of bread on the table.

“I forgot to pick up the bread you offered,” he said.

“Oh... Um, are you taking it with you?”

“I’m not going to turn down free bread either.”

“Right... Of course not.”

That's kind of my lifeline, though...like, in a very literal sense!

I must have been making a pretty devastated expression, because Nika gave me a concerned look, then reached into the bag to pull out just three loaves of the five that were in there, leaving the rest to me.

“Let’s try to cut your bread intake down to one meal a day,” he said.

“Right!”

After he left, I sat down to eat more of the food that Nika had made for me and reflected that our interaction had an uncanny resemblance to one between an owner and his dog.

This really is delicious, I thought, although I still don't understand how that's possible.

Scene from the Outskirts of Town

Prince Nicholas swiftly departed the home of former noblewoman Felicia Schwarose, now known as the commoner Fii Crow, making to board his carriage. When he realized that one of his two guards had stopped abruptly, he stopped with him.

The guard wore a bored expression as usual. *What gave him pause?* Nicholas wondered.

As you can probably tell from the way Prince Nicholas paid close attention to them, these two men were no ordinary guards. The prince might have dragged them along with him wherever he pleased, but it would be no exaggeration to call them the strongest swordsmen in the kingdom. In fact, you could even say that they were the kingdom's "secret weapon."

And so, while they could sometimes be willful or snide, they were easily forgiven.

"Prince Nicholas, I've been thinkin'... You know how Fii said it would be a waste to leave bread uneaten? Well, I think she's gonna end up scarfing it all down in spite of your intervention."

Nicholas paused for a moment. Then, turning right around, he said, "Let's go."

The other guard, who was standing next to him, looked at his wristwatch and let out a big sigh. But if Nicholas had taken notice, he'd pretended not to. He was undeterred in his quest to return to Fii's house.

"Have fun! We'll be waitin' right here when you get back," said the laid-back guard plainly, to indicate he would not be joining him.

The other guard looked shocked at this.

"Don't you think we ought to accompany him, as his guards?"

"Nah, he'll be fine. Lady Rose ain't gonna do him any harm. Besides, the prince knows how to wield a sword just fine. Plus, I'm hungry. I could really go

for some bread right now.”

“You’re *hungry*? You didn’t think to eat any of Prince Nicholas’s cooking earlier?”

“Yeah, right. That noble food is too rich for my blood.”

“Well, I suppose I have to concur,” the serious guard replied. “Are you tired?”

“Yeah. Tired of this *work*, I mean. You too, right?”

“...”

The formal guard averted his gaze and fell silent. The casual guard hadn’t even expected a reply—his question had been purely rhetorical. He knew the answer without even asking. He snorted out a little laugh through his nose.

There was no one around to hear their conversation. In fact, it seemed there was no pedestrian traffic around them at all. They’d specifically picked a road for carriages with few people wandering around on foot.

“What’s gonna happen to our jobs once this week is over?”

“Good question. I suppose it might be nice to take a long break and live here in the outskirts for a while?”

“Hey, I like the sound of that! Damn, why don’t we just quit right here, right now? This place reminds me of home, even though we haven’t actually been able to *see* much of it, seein’ as we’ve just been followin’ Prince Nicholas around. Seems like a pretty nice place to live, though.”

“It does indeed,” agreed the other guard. “Are you not planning on returning home?”

“You ain’t either, are you? It’s practically a ghost town now. I don’t think we know a soul there now. There’d be no point in goin’ back. I can only think of one place we could call ‘home,’ and it sure as hell ain’t there.”

This time, it was the formal guard’s turn to break into a smile. He turned to the casual guard and presented his fist. The casual guard reached out and gave him a fist bump.

It was exactly what they used to do back when they were kids from the same

village. It was a greeting saved only for happy moments when they were playing together.

“You say the wisest things sometimes.”

“I guess I do, huh? Hey, can’t you knock it off with the formality when it’s just the two of us? We’ve known each other since the moment we left the womb, y’know? That’s gotta be somethin’ like twenty-eight years now, right?”

“Well, how about *you* learn to talk to our superiors with a modicum of respect?”

Just as things seemed to be going so well between the two of them, they were glaring at each other again. To anyone who didn’t know, it would be hard to believe that they were two respectable men pushing thirty, much less the best swordsmen in the kingdom. As it turned out, their policy of barely exchanging a word or two while they were on the clock was probably the way to go after all—even if the only reason for that was that they just annoyed each other too much.

“...”

“...”

As if in sync, the two of them suddenly glared at each other and let out a sigh. They’d had this sort of tacit connection since childhood.

“We’re going to get a scolding, aren’t we?”

“Probably, yeah. You-know-who has a pretty short fuse. A thousand times scarier than those punks over there... Let’s both try not to step on any land mines.”

“Sometimes there’s no way around it, hm?”

The two guards grimaced, again at the same time. You could attribute their strange synchronicity to the ups and downs they’d shared throughout their whole lives, ever since childhood.

“Oh. If we’re gonna rent a place, let’s find one near the bakery. I’m crap when it comes to cooking.”

“Let’s figure out how we’re going to quit our jobs without causing a fuss first...

Actually, that's just going to fall on me, isn't it? All right, all right. I see how it is."

As they watched Nicholas return from a distance, the two guards promptly closed their mouths, their faces falling into emotionless and bored expressions.

Today, as always, I'll do whatever it takes to help El, they both thought in unison.

As always, they were right on the same page.

Chapter 6

After I'd finished eating the ridiculously lavish meal Nika had made for me, I washed the dishes and found myself lost in my thoughts. I knew that once I started doubting everyone, there'd be no end to it...so it seemed like a better bet to try to figure out who might pose the *least* risk.

Even if someone else *was* reincarnated, there was no way they'd know I'd move to this particular outlying town. Even *I* hadn't known where I'd be moving until my father (from this life, that is) had told me where he'd bought a house for me and banished me there. And I couldn't imagine that El had ordered him to buy a house for me *here specifically*. My father was far too stubborn to follow orders like that, or orders of any kind, really.

In any case, that made Nana and Michelle seem safe, right? I mean, I'd met both of them here, and they were both commoners. Even if El wasn't an aristocrat, they sure seemed to be important. It seemed really unlikely that they'd just be living out here in the boonies without causing a fuss.

Wait... But maybe Nana wasn't trustworthy? What if she'd been making Pastor Jack wait on her hand and foot? And what if that had all just been an act when she fell down those stairs when we first met? What if her whole sweet and innocent persona was an elaborate ruse?

I don't know, though... Even I find it hard to play innocent, and I'm a pretty good actress.

As for Michelle, she seemed to know all of the locals, and she'd clearly been living here for a long time. There wasn't any deeper meaning behind my decision to seek employment at her bakery, so it wasn't like El could've seen that coming. And would El really spend their whole life selling bread?

No way...

I was at a complete loss. I had no idea what to make of El's prophecy or how to figure out how it might connect to me or the other main characters from the

game.

But one thing I knew was that I would totally open up the waterworks if Nana or Michelle ever told me, “Surprise! I’m El, and I’ve been deceiving you this whole time!” I’d lose all hope in the world if their kindness was all just a lie.

Okay, that does it... I’m going to trust them. If either of them is lying to me, then there’s nothing I can do about it anyway. And in the one in a million chance that one of them reveals that they’re El, I’ll pull a shojo manga protagonist move and tell them that I still love them, no matter what.

And with that tidy little conclusion (well, as tidy as it could have been, considering the circumstances), I left my house.

I knew that I’d be breaking my promise to Nika hot on the heels of making it if I traipsed over to the bakery to see Michelle. There was no way I could stop myself from buying bread. That left me with only one real alternative: I could go see my beloved Nana at the church.

“Oh, hey, Fii!” Nana called. “Wait... What’s going on? You look tired.”

“You can tell?”

“Uh-huh! From those dark bags under your eyes! You’re too pretty to be dragging those around, Fii! You need to make sure you’re getting your beauty sleep!”

I almost tripped over myself on my way over to her, and it was obvious from the sound of my footsteps. I was just so overwhelmed by how cute she was when she looked at me with that worried face that I’d lost my balance.

“You’re too pretty to be dragging those around”? I swear to God, she’s just too cute!

For the first time, I found myself really grateful that everyone spoke Japanese in this world, despite all the Western-style clothing they wore and their Western names. It would have been devastating to miss Nana’s (probably unintentional) wordplay.

I couldn’t exactly tell Nana the real reason I was tired, though. What was I going to say? “Oh, a prince from the neighboring kingdom invited himself over

yesterday and wouldn't leave, so I stayed up most of the night"? Yeah, right. I'd just have to whip up a more believable lie.

"I just had a little situation come up, so I stayed up pretty late ruminating," I said.

"Oh?"

Nana cocked her head.

Don't you worry your pretty little head about my troubles, Nana, I thought. You don't need to know a thing. All I'm after is a little cheering up.

"Well... If you say so, but it seems to me like you're overthinking things! But I know just the thing for it: let's kick back and have a little fun today! Pastor Jack's always telling me off for thinking too *little*, though, so maybe you don't want to follow my example... Heh heh!" Nana said.

I'm sure most people who were legitimately down in the dumps might've bristled at her unwavering positivity, but I found it reassuring.

It's all well and good to sit down and try to come up with real solutions, but the way I see it, sometimes you just need to tune out and have a little fun. And who better to lift my spirits than Nana?

"Is it okay for you to be taking time away from the church right now, Nana?"

"Yep! I'm on my break! I always get a break when Pastor Jack goes out," Nana replied, puffing out her chest proudly.

Uh-huh... Sounds to me like you're just playing hooky!

"So! That means we can take our time chatting until he gets back!" she continued. "Isn't that great?"

Her braids bounced as she spoke. Every time I saw them do that, I felt my worries ebb away.

Nana was always so sweet and cheerful. Honestly, it was starting to feel a little bit miraculous that she was even real. *Maybe God is punishing me for taking advantage of her kindness like this?* I wondered. That was a pretty dark thought even for me, though...so I decided to just take Nana up on her offer and come up with some choice small talk.

The bakery's probably closing right now, though... Hmm, what else is there to make hay about? Then it hit me: Wait, I know! Maybe I can talk about what's been on my mind lately! If I just shift my perspective a bit and frame it like I've just got some weird philosophical hang-up, that could be fun, right?

"Hey, Nana? This is just a crazy hypothetical, but...if you were reincarnated into a world you knew really well—say, a world from a picture book—and you knew everything that was going to happen, how would you live your life?"

"Re-in-what?" she repeated, looking confused.

Right... Of course she wouldn't know what that meant, huh?

I knew I shouldn't have been surprised. Even in my past life, it hadn't been a word people encountered much unless they read a lot of fantasy. And it didn't seem likely that any Buddhist or Hindu ideas (or otherworldly equivalents) had any traction in this world, or at least this part of it... That said, what did I know about religion?

"Um... Well, let's say you were *born again*. Does that make sense? It's like where you die and are born again as a different person, with a new life."

"Oooh, okay! I get it now! That's a handy word!"

Sorry, Nana... I don't actually know how helpful that is. I don't think you'll find it in any dictionary around here. It certainly never came up in the game. And if it's not a real word, then I've basically just taught you a made-up one...

"I love kicking around stuff like this! It's kind of like a game!" Nana continued excitedly. "Um, let's see... If I were born into another world, I'd...um... Oh! I know! I'd probably try to get the lay of the land first, you know? Like, just sit back and watch for a bit!"

I blinked, surprised by how practical her answer was. I'd assumed that she would come up with something wacky, although I'd had no idea what.

"I mean, I wouldn't know for *sure* that it was a world I knew unless I saw it with my own eyes, right? I'd need to check that everything actually works the way I think it should," she continued, looking proud of herself for being so pragmatic.

I guess you're right... I was reincarnated as the protagonist of this world, and I was engaged to Prince Seth, so it was pretty obvious to me kind of early on. But if I'd been reincarnated into this world as some no-name side character, I'd probably have taken a whole lot longer to figure out I was in the world of the game. Depending on my status, I might've figured it out from learning the names of the king and the queen, but it's possible I could've gone my entire life without ever knowing where I was.

That put things into perspective for me. Considering that El had probably realized pretty early on where they'd been reincarnated, it would make the most sense if they were one of the love interests.

"Once I knew for sure where I was, I'd try to see if I could do anything to change the story's future," Nana added.

That makes sense... I'd been determined from the beginning to change my fate, but it makes sense that she'd want to test if she even could. There's always a chance that the powers that be might be too strong to fight, I guess. Huh. Her perspective on this is actually super neat.

"If I couldn't, then... Hmm. I guess I'd probably move. I'd wanna go live somewhere that I *didn't* know from the story and just try to scrape by. 'Cause I think it'd be kinda scary if you couldn't decide the way your life would go!"

Wow... Talk about realistic!

I was impressed, but I knew better than anyone that there was more to it than that. After all, if not for my carefully laid plans, I probably couldn't have moved away without being dragged right back to my old life.

"But if I *could* change things...then I'd just do whatever made things more fun! Secretly, of course—I wouldn't tell anyone!" Nana said, then paused thoughtfully. "Yep, that's it! That's my answer!"

Nana smiled as she tied it all together in a neat little bow.

I was pleasantly surprised by what a fun conversation this had become. *Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if Nana was El?* I found myself thinking. *I have a feeling she'd just try to make the world a better place for everyone. Or maybe I'm kidding myself? Yeah...pretty sure I am.*

“I really get a kick out of thought experiments like this! Sometimes it feels like there’s just too much that’s out of my control in real life. Oh well! I’ve just gotta keep trying!”

“Well, I think you’re giving it a good effort, Nana. I see how hard you work every day.”

Or so I say...knowing full well that you’re skipping work right now. Tending to lost sheep like me is technically a part of your work, though, right? So, I think you’re an exemplary nun!

“It’s not enough, though. I need to keep trying even harder! Like, a *lot* harder!”

“A lot harder to do...what, exactly?”

“To make everyone happy!” she said, putting on a thousand-watt smile.

She’s too radiant. What an angel, I thought. A real, live angel...

Who the hell would ever think about spoiling her rotten and making her fall for them until she couldn’t live without them? Who would ever do something like that to a sweet angel like her? As far as I’m concerned, they can go straight to Hell.

“I wanna make *you* happy too, Fii! You’re my friend, so you get special treatment!”

“How about we both talk to each other casually from now on, then? No more being polite.”

“Huh? *That’s* what would make you happy?”

“Yes, absolutely. Being closer to you would definitely make me happy.”

“Really? Well, that’s easy then! I’d be more than happy to— No, scratch that. What I mean is *heck yes!*”

And so, Nana and I gabbed all the way into the afternoon, until Pastor Jack returned. I tried to smooth things over so Nana wouldn’t get in trouble for slacking off on the job and left with a warm, fuzzy feeling. It was enough to keep me going even without lunch, so I decided to skip it (*sorry, Nika*) and start planning what I’d have for dinner.

I went home and did all my chores, still riding on the high of talking to Nana. I didn't live the kind of lavish lifestyle where I could just hop into the bath every night after dinner, so instead I just wiped myself off with hot water. Eventually, the high wore off and I felt a placid mood wash over me as I tucked into bed.

I had a feeling I'd sleep well tonight.

Thank you, my angel.

Little did I know that was the last day that I'd spend in blissful ignorance.



Three days into my forced break, I was still waking up bright and early—no closer to breaking that habit. I got up and used some of the ingredients Nika had left me to whip up a little breakfast for myself.

I was feeling pretty carefree this morning, so I figured I might as well make something of my time off and take a little walk. I stuffed a bit of bread for lunch and a few coins into a cheap jute bag and slung it over my shoulder as I walked out the door.

The minute I left the house, I felt my brow furrow.

A *letter* had been dropped on my doorstep.

Well, okay...maybe “dropped” isn't quite the right word. Someone had clearly been quite intentional about leaving it there, since there was a stone placed atop it so the wind wouldn't carry it away, and the envelope was much too nice to have come from anyone who lived *here*.

“I... I've never seen anything more suspicious in my *life*...”

The envelope might as well have had “TRAP!” written all over it.

I crouched down to take a look at it, not daring to touch it. At the very least, it didn't seem to have any family crest stamped on it, and it was barely big enough to hold a postcard. It didn't look particularly thick or heavy either. The natural assumption was that there was nothing more in there than a letter, plain and simple. It would've been practically impossible to fit anything dangerous into a little envelope like this one, and as long as I took care to watch

out for any thin knives that might be hiding inside, I figured it'd be safe enough to open.

Just to go out on a limb, I supposed it was possible the envelope itself had been coated in poison. That was certainly a frightening thought, but I knew I'd probably be safe just as long as I didn't touch any mucous membranes like my eyes or mouth after handling it.

My resolve hardened, I grabbed up the envelope and opened it.

Inside was a letter, just as I'd expected. It was handwritten on the most standard-issue paper you could buy. The letter instructed me to meet the writer at a location I'd never been to, about thirty minutes away from home, and said that they'd be waiting for me.

My eyes went wide with shock.

"What is this? Are you challenging me to a duel?" I said to thin air. "Pass. *Hard* pass."

You seriously think I'm just gonna waltz right into your obvious trap? Who do you take me for?

Unless someone gave me a *very* compelling reason—say, one that I couldn't refuse—there wasn't a chance in hell that I was about to go meet this mysterious letter writer. I'd read enough shojo manga to know how this played out. Whenever a shojo manga protagonist gets a letter like this, there's nothing she can do right. Whether or not she goes to meet the bully who wrote it, the bully's posse will find her and hurl insults and accusations her way regardless of her reasons or methods.

If a confrontation will come find me regardless, why would I ever waste my own time going to seek one out?



I shoved the letter into my bag and started on my walk, undeterred from my original plans. It was a pleasantly cool, crisp morning.

What if that letter was from El, though? I wondered. What if the real El is waiting for me at the location they gave me? No... There's no way El would be there. If they felt like having a proper, face-to-face conversation with me, then they probably wouldn't make a whole song and dance of it like this. I'm sure they'd just show up at my doorstep.

But if El had been behind the letter, I had a weird feeling that they'd *know* I'd never meet them where they asked me to. Why would they go to the trouble of something so pointless? Was I just overestimating them?

As these uneasy thoughts took hold of me, I heard the sound of hooves in my periphery.

"A horse? Wait...maybe it's a carriage?"

I turned to look, and sure enough, there was a carriage approaching—one I recognized well. It was Nika's. It was impressive looking, though certainly on the small side for royalty. But since Nika only ever shared it with his two guards, I supposed it must have done the job just fine.

What's he doing here again so soon, after visiting me only yesterday?

I found myself taking a step back without thinking. Alarm bells were ringing in my head. Before the gears could start spinning in my brain, though, I turned and ran from the carriage at full tilt. I couldn't explain it, except that the wheels of Nika's carriage sounded a lot like the dreaded wheels of fate.

But of course, I couldn't outrun a horse-drawn carriage on foot. I'd been a pretty good runner in my past life, but the carriage caught up with me in mere minutes. I knew I was going to be in hot water, though, so I didn't stop. Instead, I banked hard down a narrow alley I'd rarely ever taken.

The moment I turned my back to the carriage, I felt someone grab my arm.

"Why're you running, Lady Rose?"

My eyes flew open. I could hear my heart pounding in my chest as I slowly turned to look at who'd just spoken to me. Still holding on to my arm was one

of Nika's guards, who looked at me with a steely expression.

Then I looked over at the carriage. The door was wide open, even though it was still moving at a rapid clip.

Don't tell me he jumped? I thought, incredulous. But the door had been closed until just moments ago. The only moment he could've jumped was when I'd turned around to go down the alley, which would mean that he must have jumped out at exactly that moment and immediately grabbed onto my arm...

But his grip was too gentle for that. No matter how much of an acrobat he might have been, there was no way he'd have been able to get hold of me that gently immediately after such a high-energy dismount.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! You don't have to look so scared, all right? Aren't you always perfectly unfazed by everything?" said the guard. "Or, wait...have I just misjudged you? Anyway, don't run! It's my job to make sure you stay put, okay?"

What in the world is he talking about? He's misjudged me as always unfazed by everything? Is that because I put on such a good show of being the "perfect Lady Rose"? Or is he thinking of the actual protagonist from the game?

"And *you're* being awfully chatty today... I thought you never said a word?"

"Well...yeah. But I just wanted to talk to you about something."

"Then let's cut straight to the chase. Are you EI? Or—"

But I couldn't finish my sentence. The guard's demeanor had suddenly shifted dramatically, and I was too taken aback by the threatening look he gave me.

I'd always regarded him as a background character with no real discernible traits, but right now, he was staring daggers at me. I felt like he might lunge out and attack me.

"How do you know about that? *Nobody's* supposed to know about EI," the guard said. "Aw, crap... What now? Thinkin' ain't my strong suit. Why couldn't that stodgy ol' bastard have jumped outta the carriage with me? Stupid egghead..."

The guard had left me trembling with just a look moments ago, and yet here

he was doling out childish insults. I had absolutely no idea how to respond.

The guard suddenly whipped around and let out a big sigh—a complete one-eighty from all his beastly snarling.

“Tch! Seems like our time’s up. Well, whatever. We’ll pick this up again another time. Don’t you dare tell anyone about El, got it?”

I followed his gaze and saw the carriage parked on the side of the road, so as not to bother any of the locals passing through. Descending from the carriage were Nika and the other guard, headed our way. Even though I’d just been trying to run away, I felt relieved to see them.

I nodded at the guard, who was still giving me a threatening glare.

Nika came running over to me, looking flustered. He looked down at me with concern as I crouched on the ground, still pretty petrified. Then his glittering silver hair obscured my vision.

“I’m sorry, did he scare you? I thought I still had some time, but it appears I’m racing against the clock even more than I knew.”

I was taken aback by his hurried apology and the worried look on his face. I suddenly felt bad that I’d tried to run away from him earlier.

I’m sorry, Nika... I just bolted out of pure gut feeling. But you must have a good reason to come to visit me again so soon. Does this mean you’re not El, though?

But if his guard had come to shut me up about El, then it would only make sense for Nika to be El... He *was* the guards’ master, so wouldn’t it track if they were just trying to protect him?

Judging by the fact that the guard had suddenly clammed up about El when Nika approached, though, maybe Nika had nothing to do with it? Or maybe the guard just wanted to warn me that El (that is to say, Nika) was trying to get rid of me, and didn’t want him to overhear?

Argh! This is all way too complicated! Either could be possible, so there’s no point even thinking about it right now!

“Um... Did you come here to talk to me about the ‘important matter’ you

mentioned yesterday?”

“That’s right.”

Maybe I don’t need to have my guard up so high? I can at least hear him out and make a decision once I have more information.

I discreetly glanced over at the guard who’d just grabbed my arm earlier. He’d receded to the background as usual and was standing quietly and alertly behind Nika. He and the other guard might as well have been invisible now.

Maybe they’re more cut out for being assassins than guards...

Now that the guard had returned to normal, I decided to ignore him and focus on Nika.

I looked at him, waiting expectantly for him to start spilling his guts, and was struck yet again by his beautiful ice blue eyes. I had to make a conscious effort not to get lost in them.

Nika hesitated for a moment, averting his gaze before he spoke.

“Fii... I’d like you to meet with Liliana. Would you?” he finally said.

I was stunned. There was an earnestness in his eyes that told me he was dead serious. I looked away and began to rack my brains.

Wait... If Nika were El, he wouldn’t be this direct, would he?

I’d figured that El wanted Liliana and me to meet, but I’d never expected that they’d just come right out and *say* so. What’s more, Nika wasn’t ordering me around or trying to manipulate me—he was making a *request*.

“I, uh...”

“I can understand this must come as a surprise, but her life is in danger. Of course, I won’t force you if you refuse...”

What the heck? Did his conscience compel him to come here or something?

If I hadn’t known anything about El, I never would’ve doubted Nika’s motivations. I would’ve just gone along with his request without giving it much thought beyond *I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’ll do anything for Lily!*

That wasn’t quite so easy to do now, though. Too much just didn’t add up.

“I imagine the difference in our statuses will make it rather difficult for us to meet,” I said.

“I’ve prepared a place for you to meet in private.”

“I also heard that Lady Liliana is currently recuperating.”

“Right now, I believe she’ll be in more danger if she isn’t able to meet you.”

“I don’t understand... All of this is a lot for me to take in all of a sudden. Why is she—”

“She’s...bound by *you*. And the strings that bind her are ever tightening around her neck.”

“Well, that’s...*macabre*. Are you referring to my engagement being annulled? Did it really have such an impact on her?”

“That certainly plays a role, but it’s about more than that—about things that happened much further in the past. I don’t think even you yourself understand the full situation. But I can understand her feelings.”

I was completely lost now. Lily was “bound” to me? I could understand what he meant if he was referring to my engagement being called off, but she was bound to me *before* that? And what was Nika doing, getting involved in all of this?

It was baffling. For starters, Lily and I had barely ever spoken a word to each other. If Lily had known that I was a reincarnated person or that I was the protagonist from the game, she would have sensed that something was off when the engagement was annulled...but she hadn’t seemed to. And if that’s what this was all about, then there was no way Nika would understand her feelings around that...

I mean, if Lily were El, then she probably would never have taken center stage like this. And from what I’d been hearing, she wasn’t especially happy... No matter how I thought about it, that theory seemed off base. In all likelihood, she was just another puppet under El’s control—like me.

“But I must say, Nika, I don’t recall you ever being this *fond* of Lady Liliana...?”

Nika grimaced, looking like I’d just touched on a sore spot.

“I’ve...developed a bit of a soft spot for her,” he said slowly, as if struggling to get the words out. “As it turns out, she and I have more in common than I thought.”

“All right. Let’s go, then,” I blurted out.

Before I knew it, I’d agreed to go with him.

Even if I was dancing to El or Nika’s drum, I couldn’t just let Lily die. If there was any chance that what Nika was saying was true, then I wasn’t going to risk it. And if I was being honest with myself, there’d really never been any question in my mind about that. I’d only asked him those questions because I’d seen the opportunity to, but they weren’t going to impact my decision.

True as that may be, though, it’s also an excuse...

I knew from playing the game in my past life that Nika was a softie, but I’d also seen that side of him plenty in my current life. I just didn’t have it in me to say no to him.

Sigh...

Wait a sec... Wasn’t I avoiding getting in Nika’s carriage so I wouldn’t get that accidental kiss event?

A brief flash of the CG from the game popped into my head, but I knew the time for raising objections had come and gone. I mean, I’d already agreed to come, hadn’t I? I obediently took the chivalrous hand Nika offered and climbed into his carriage.

Never thought I’d find myself in a carriage again...and certainly not of my own accord.

Nika’s guards squished themselves in between us, so it was a little cramped. The carriage had been built to accommodate only three people per seating area, after all.

I was feeling a little nervous about our seating arrangements, since the guard sitting next to me was the one who’d jumped out of the carriage earlier and threatened me about El. But when I glanced up at him, he was just staring

straight ahead. It didn't even seem like he was *trying* to avoid meeting my eyes. If anything, he looked like he didn't have a single thought in his head. It made sense that he'd be a good actor, if he had ties to El.

Just so you know, Mr. Guard, I'm probably older than you if we count my past life. I've got way more years of acting experience on you, so don't think you've got me beat!

"I'm a little afraid to find out where exactly we're going, so I won't ask. But while we're on our way, could you at least tell me a little more about what's going on with Lady Liliana and why you think I need to talk to her?"

"Right, of course. But before I tell you about that, I should tell you how she and I viewed you—back when you were Felicia. We—"

I was very curious to hear what came next, but he stopped there abruptly. Confused, I turned to look at the guard next to me for clues. He was staring wide-eyed straight past me at the carriage door—no, at what lay *past* it. I followed his gaze to the church.

I looked back at Nika, trying to figure out what was so astonishing about the church, but then I realized that Nika's gaze was actually fixed just a slight distance from it. This time, I tried to take a closer look, following the line of his sight. It led not to the church but to...a carriage stopped in front of it?

What's another carriage doing in the outskirts? Wait... I think I've seen that carriage several times before.

"Stop the carriage!" Nika yelled suddenly.

I jumped in my seat.

Then the carriage came to an abrupt halt, shaking violently. I found myself desperately missing seat belts. I let out a little cry, and for several moments after the carriage had stopped, I sat clutching my chest. My heart wouldn't stop pounding.

Then I looked up again at Nika, hoping to find out what in the world was going on. His eyes were darting around, as if something was demanding all his mental faculties.

“...”

“Nika?”

He didn’t answer me, so I took another look at the carriage I assumed he’d been looking at.

Looks like a noble’s carriage, but there doesn’t seem to be anything special about it. It probably belongs to a family ranked even lower than the Schwaroses. It must belong to a duke or an even lesser noble.

It was a little strange that it was stopped in front of the church. But I had a feeling Pastor Jack came from a noble background, so maybe it wasn’t so strange after all?

“That carriage belongs to the Inoces. It’s Liliana’s.”

“What?”

My eyes went wide in shock. I practically pushed the guard next to me aside to take a look, all but forgetting the fear I’d felt for him not long ago.

Lily’s carriage...? What? But what would it be doing in front of the church? Why would a noblewoman like Lily be here? And wait...isn’t she supposed to be convalescing right now?

“Didn’t you arrange for us to meet somewhere?” I asked Nika.

“Yes. So why is she here...?”

Based on his expression, I’d had a feeling Nika hadn’t expected Lily to turn up here, but his words confirmed my suspicion. It seemed he hadn’t had any hand in this—which meant that it must have been El’s doing.

“I’m going to go check on her!” I said, rushing to get out of the carriage before anyone could argue.

“I’m coming too,” said Nika.

Honestly, I was a little relieved that he was joining me. If this was going to turn into a face-to-face confrontation with El (which, at this point, it very well might have been heading that direction), then I’d be grateful to have him there with me.

Nika's two guards descended from the carriage effortlessly, and Nika and I followed. It seemed obvious from where the carriage was parked that Lily must have been in the church, so I took a step forward in that direction.

But just then—

“Miss Saint! No!”

I heard Nana's heartbroken cry sound from inside the church, and my mind went blank. Under normal circumstances, I would've come back to my senses immediately and rushed in to save Nana.

But my confusion was too great for that. I was paralyzed.

Then a church window shattered as a man in a mask leaped through it, with a familiar figure slung over his shoulder—one that I hadn't seen in a long time. It was Lily, with her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

“Lady Liliana! Dammit!” called an irritated voice.

Before I could figure out what was going on, my beloved Mel emerged from the church doors.

Huh? Wait... Beg pardon?

Shock can paralyze you both physically and mentally. I was experiencing that firsthand, and it seemed that Nika was too.

“Seize him!”

Nika seemed to regain his wits a bit quicker than I did, though, because he called after his guards to apprehend the masked man. But just as he pointed in their direction, Lily's kidnapper quickened his pace and shoved Lily into the carriage.

I knew Nika had no intention of blaming me for the masked man's escape, since I'd been all but petrified from the confusion of it all. But more than that, only a mere ten seconds had passed between the masked man breaking the window and climbing into the carriage with Lily. He'd been impossibly fast. Even if I *hadn't* been too shocked to react, it was hard to imagine I could've done anything to stop him.

“Sorry, but we're no horses. We can't catch up to a horse-drawn carriage,”

said one of the guards.

“That masked man certainly seemed to know what he was doing. I can only imagine he’s a real professional, in the employ of someone with ample means to provide commensurate compensation. If I may, I’d advise ascertaining who exactly hired him and launching an attack on them directly,” said the other.

They spoke bluntly, without a trace of urgency or concern. It was almost like they were mocking their master.

Surely these two could put a stop to the masked man if they made a move now? I thought. But I didn’t actually know that for sure, and I was well aware that I was conveniently ignoring the fact that I was utterly useless in this situation. Basically, I was just lashing out. Still...I couldn’t help but glare at the guards for their callousness.

Besides, it was entirely possible that they’d just gotten a sign from El—and *that* was the real reason they weren’t chasing the masked man.

I looked down at the ground and closed my eyes, taking in a deep breath to steady myself and calm the waves of emotion threatening to capsize me. I needed a clear head if I was going to figure out what I ought to do next.

“Felicia? Prince Nicholas? No, forget it... This isn’t the time to stand around talking. Prince Nicholas, I’ll leave Lady Liliana to you. I need to tend to the guards who were injured and to look after Nana. I’m also going to see if I can get the man we captured to cough up some information.”

Is Nana hurt? How hurt? I hope it’s nothing serious... Wait, did Mel just call her “Nana” too? Do they know each other? No, who cares about that... I need to focus my energy on thinking about what to do next.

I waited for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts.

Okay. My head’s clear now. I don’t care if it was El or someone else entirely, but I’m not going to let whoever did this get away with it.

I opened my eyes. Then, in my peripheral vision, I saw a familiar face.

“Oh, hey! If it isn’t Fii! Did you see that carriage that just went by? Kinda looked like things were goin’ off the rails... Wait, hm? Huh? Prince Nicholas

Cabott? And wait, you're..."

"That would be Mel Crabitt, the future heir to the Crabitt family. They're highly regarded for their financial savvy. Hmm... It seems there's some tension in the air."

"Prince Nolan Gallion and Lord Zero Wolf? What would a prince and duke of the neighboring country be doing here...?"

Aaaand now Nolls and Zero have shown up. This whole situation is so contrived, it's almost comical.

This was plainly no coincidence. It occurred to me just how easy it would be for the mastermind to blend in here without raising any alarms, but I didn't have time to dwell on that now.

"Nolls! Where did the carriage go after turning down that road up there?!" I asked.

"That way!"

"Thanks!"

In classic Nolls fashion, he didn't even think before answering me. After giving him my thanks, I immediately set off into a run in the direction he'd indicated.

Thank God I'm a commoner. There's no way I'd be able to run fast or for long enough in my noblewoman's shoes.

"Fii, wait! At least take a carria—"

"I want to run so I can ask any witnesses for directions! A carriage will stand out like a sore thumb here, so I'm sure the sight of one will be fresh in everyone's memories. And since I'm a local now, I'm sure they'll help me out! Nika, you have your own methods—use them!"

I didn't even turn around to shout my response. I just kept running as fast as I could.



I didn't know if the driver of the Inoce family's carriage was working for the kidnapper or if he'd just been threatened into compliance. But if it had only taken a short while for Lily to take the carriage from the castle to the church, then the horse must have been worn out from sustaining a full gallop for so long. Even if the driver was forcing it, its performance was bound to take a hit. They'd have to either switch out the horse or take a break eventually...unless they were taking Lily somewhere nearby?

If the mastermind had planned to have a conspirator standing by with another horse and carriage at a predetermined meeting point, then I didn't stand a chance. But if they were planning on just taking a break or if they were going to switch out horses somewhere nearby, then maybe I could still catch them.

I actually *really* wanted to take Nika up on his offer to take a carriage, but I knew that few people were likely to answer my questions if I yelled out at them from inside of one, not even bothering to stop. Besides, it'd just make me look like a noble—and many locals weren't too keen on nobles. I had no choice.

Thanks to all the running around my brother had made me do in my past life ever since I was a kid, I was actually a pretty good runner. No matter how fast I was, though, the *reason* I was so fast made me kind of hate running. But also, I'd been running just before I died in my past life. Instead of rebelling against my brother, I'd found myself running toward him in a state of total distraction...and then it was all over.

Just to put a figure to it, I'm pretty sure that I could run a 1500 meter race in about 4 minutes and 32 seconds. I'd been the fastest female runner in high school. I didn't run much in my current life, though, and my muscle mass wasn't what it used to be. My odds of catching up to a horse were honestly pretty poor. But if said horse was slowing down, well...that changed everything.

It had taken Nika's carriage several minutes to catch up with the Inoce family's carriage, but I was hopeful that it hadn't gotten far away enough for people to forget seeing it.

I won't let you get away!

I'd never had much interest in being the story's heroine, but I was down to

become the savior of the future queen...so long as I could quickly fade into the obscurity of my peaceful commoner life again!

Anyway, I ran for about twenty minutes, asking passersby if they'd seen the carriage that had hauled Lily off. As you might expect from running that far, I eventually stopped recognizing my surroundings. Even if I could find an opening to save Lily, I had a bad feeling that we might not be able to get very far in this unfamiliar corner of town. And that wasn't the only problem either. I'd been so single-minded in asking around about the carriage's whereabouts that I hadn't really paid attention to the route I was taking. I wasn't even sure if I was going to be able to find my way home.

As I puffed and panted, I spied out of the corner of my eye a poster with an address on it. And then, almost automatically, I stopped in my tracks.

"Is this...what I think it is?"

I felt like someone had clubbed me in the head from behind. I found myself breaking into forced laughter.

Right. I get it now. So this is what the author of that letter meant when they said they were waiting for me. They created a situation where I'd have to come meet them and then gave me the address. Is that it? Ugh. That's just beyond dumb.

I reached into my bag for the letter, taking a deep breath in to avoid crushing it in anger. Then I pulled it out and compared the addresses. Just as I feared, my little pen pal's meetup spot wasn't far from here. I wasn't very familiar with the area, but I was pretty confident that I'd arrive at the address soon if I kept going this way.

Maybe I should have just taken the carriage after all? ...Nah.

"I can't trust anyone, so I think it was for the best that I went by myself."

There was actually a pretty good chance that someone among the group of people gathered back at the church was behind all of this and was laughing at me internally.

I didn't have a map to go by, so I wasn't totally sure that I was headed in the right direction, but if I kept looking at addresses as I ran and asked some of the

locals for directions, I felt pretty sure I'd arrive at my destination without too much trouble.

I took in one more deep breath and broke into a run again. I couldn't imagine that El would let this opportunity go to waste by letting any harm come to Lily—not after they'd gotten all their ducks in a row. Still...if Lily was conscious, then there was no question that she'd be deeply unsettled by the kidnapping. I didn't know if she'd feel especially reassured if I rocked up to save her, considering that we didn't exactly have the most amicable relationship (and that she, uh, kinda hated me), but at the very least, it was probably better to have *someone* there by her side who wasn't an enemy, right?

Ah, jeez... I just can't help having a soft spot for her.

I knew that wasn't really why I was going after her, though. I'd known from the beginning that there was a better path to her happiness, but I hadn't chosen it. Instead, I'd just foisted everything on her and run away. I felt a bit indebted to her because of that, and admittedly, that was a key motivator right now.

I started thinking about all kinds of things—whatever I could to keep my mind off of how exhausted I was feeling.

Come to think of it, I just so happen to have some bread on me at the moment. At least, I'm pretty sure I put some in my bag before I left today. And thank god, because that stuff is magic—it's got the power to change fate. I mean, I know that's probably just in my head, but the thought does make me feel a bit better.

Upon reflection, I realized bread had saved me several times. Honestly, I never would've expected that it would become such a vital part of my life.

How many times is this now? Maybe I should light a couple candles and offer some words of devotion to the Bread Gods when I get home or someth—

And that's when it hit me: I'd only seen it a few times, but I was pretty sure I *recognized* the handwriting in the letter.

I was no forensic linguist, so I might have been off base. But that was okay. To be honest, I *hoped* I was off base. Because if the person I was thinking of really

was El, and they'd really kidnapped Lily...I didn't know what the hell I was going to do.

Finally, I arrived at the address indicated in the letter. It was a large, three-story manor that resembled an aristocrat's vacation home. Oddly enough, the front gate was left wide open.

I don't think they're just stopping here to give the horse a break. From the looks of it, I'm pretty sure this is the mastermind's stronghold. And if I'm to believe what was in that letter, then they're in there waiting for me...fully prepared for whatever might go down.

By contrast, I didn't have a single weapon on hand. All I had going for me were my track skills, and thanks to all the sprinting I'd been doing for the last thirty minutes, I'd pretty much used those up.

Is there any way for me to win this? I wondered.

Not that it mattered. From the very beginning, there'd never been any real option except to go in.

I stared at the manor. Then I fixed my expression into one befitting Lady Rose and crossed the threshold.

That's right... I'm the "perfect Lady Rose." Even among the aristocracy, I stand above everyone as an exemplary young noblewoman. I am strong, noble, and beautiful. I'm a rose, and I don't bend easily.

Enough whining. I'm going to win this thing and make my own fate.

Unsurprisingly, the manor's front door wasn't locked. It was a little heavy, but I was able to open it without too much trouble.

As I entered the main hall, I took in what awaited me at the far side of the foyer: a door flanked on both sides by columns. Wide hallways branched out from both the left and right sides of the room, and just in front of them were diagonal stairways to the second floor.

That's a lot of options... Which way should I go? I wondered.

If I were thinking about this from a video game perspective, then the boss would be waiting through the innermost door on the highest floor...or maybe

on the *lowest* floor. But this wasn't an RPG; it was an otome game.

Well, guess I'll try going up first. I doubt El is waiting in some small room on the first floor.

Now that I'd made a decision, I headed toward the stairs. But just as I was on my way, I heard a soft *clatter*. Then I heard a rhythmic *cling cling cling* as something rolled up to my feet. It seemed it had fallen from the stairs.

I eyed the object warily, trying to figure out what exactly I was looking at. The moment I realized what it was, my eyes went wide in surprise.

"A...golden cat?"

It was a glass golden cat, about the size of my thumb.

All of the characters in Lady Rose have surnames that sound like animals. The Cabotts, for example, are supposed to be reminiscent of cats. There were two Cabotts in the main cast, and so their merch featured gold and silver cats.

Back when I was a kid, I'd gifted this golden cat as a good luck charm to one of the Cabotts. You could say my gift came from a sadistic place, or that I simply thought it made sense...but really, I just hadn't put that much thought into it. Dwelling on stuff had seemed like a waste of time back then.

I looked up to the stairs above and, just as expected, I saw the golden-haired prince who was the main love interest from *Savior of Nations: Lady Rose*.

"Feli...cia..." he said, looking down at me with a dismayed expression on his face.

"I haven't seen you for a long time, Prince...Seth Cabott?"

I can say with some certainty I wasn't prepared for this outcome. Even putting aside the whole El thing, I'd never have expected to see the prince here.

A long time ago—well, before our engagement had been annulled—Seth would have just stayed put and yelled at me from his perch upstairs like he was some kind of prince (which, well, he was...but you know what I mean). But now, he was actually descending the staircase to speak to me on *my level*.

Maybe he's had a change of heart too, thanks to the distance? I wondered. *Maybe Lily's helped him grow emotionally.*

“Felicia... No, it’s *Fii* now, isn’t it? I hear you’re going by your nickname now.”

For a moment, I was silent.

“How do you know that?”

I hadn’t seen him even once since I’d changed my name, but maybe he’d heard about it from Nika? Or...

Just like he had on the staircase, he made another pained expression at my question. It was like he was hiding something—or that I’d probed into something he didn’t want to talk about.

“What does that matter? Is there a problem?” he replied.

“No, not at all...”

Never mind... Seems like he hasn’t changed a bit. He’s still the same old Pompous Prince, always judging things by his own standards and expecting everyone else to fall in line.

Nolls’s puffery was just banter, and I could respond in kind. Seth was dead serious, though, and he expected me to agree with whatever inane twaddle came out of his face hole. It left a bad taste in my mouth...

I didn’t even *want* to be talking to him. Every time I did, our “conversations” just left me frustrated and annoyed. I just wanted to hurry up and get him to tell me what he was doing here, but it seemed he was in just as bad a mood as I was. It seemed like I’d have to play slow-pitch for a bit to help lighten the mood first.

Obviously, I was worried about Lily, but I knew I couldn’t just ignore Seth and forge ahead—not when there was clearly some deeper meaning to him being here.

“Prince Seth, you still have that good luck charm I gave you?”

I figured talking about the glass golden cat that had just fallen down the stairs would be a safe, pleasant topic. But to my surprise, Seth made a pained expression again.

What’s the deal with all the grimacing? Whatever happened to the Pompous Prince I knew?

“I only brought it with me so I could return it to you,” he said.

Now, *that* was weird. *You’d go through all that trouble just to return a random gift someone gave you when you were a kid?* I thought. Looking at it from another perspective, though, maybe he was suggesting that he’d come here because he’d known *I* was going to be here?

As much as I didn’t care for it, the brusque way he’d been speaking to me did make sense when I considered the difference in our standings now. It wouldn’t have been surprising for him to be even *colder* to me.

But...I still couldn’t help but sense that there was something *off* about the way he was responding to me.

“I just need to ask: are you El?” I asked him.

“El? The prophet? Why would you think I’m... Wait, have you been in touch with them?”

Huh, okay... Maybe he’s not El then.

Wait... What? I’m pretty sure Nolls said that only the king had seen El’s face, but it kind of seems like Seth knows El pretty well. I guess it would make sense for him to be in the know, though... He is the heir to the throne and all.

If I took that to be true, though, and if Seth’s confusion hadn’t just been an act...then at the very least, wouldn’t that mean that El and I had probably never had any contact with each other while Prince Seth and I had been engaged?

In that case, it can’t be Nika either.

“As far as I can tell, only indirectly. I suspect that El was the one who called me here and probably also the one who kidnapped Lady Lilia—”

“Wait,” Seth interrupted, clearly suspicious of something.

I clammed up, waiting for him to continue. Even in this life-or-death situation, I couldn’t help but remember that this was always the way things had been between us. Whatever Seth had to say had always taken priority.

“El *called* you here?”

“I can’t be *certain* it was El...but I found this letter at my doorstep that

directed me to come to this address. And when I was chasing after Lady Liliana's kidnapper, I found myself in the vicinity. That's why I think the odds are good that El led me here."

I handed the letter to Seth, whose face only darkened further after he read it.

"Liliana is supposed to be resting in her bedroom," he said.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't speak to that... But the carriage parked outside the church was hers. So, whether or not El summoned her there, I believe she went there of her own accord."

If I was going to take Seth's confusion at face value, then it seemed he didn't even know that Lily had been heading to the church...which was surprising, considering that he was her *fiancé*. And no matter the circumstances, he was also the crown prince. If nothing else, I'd just assumed that Lily would at least tell him where she was going out of deference to him and that that was why he was here now. But apparently that wasn't the case.

Actually, I just remembered: weren't there rumors going around that their relationship was on the rocks? Maybe there was some truth to those after all.

"I'll never understand what women are thinking," grumbled Seth, shoving the letter back at me with a sigh.

I just shrugged.

"With all due respect, I'm not sure men are much more predictable..."

"No. Men are straightforward and easy to read."

"I'm afraid I have to disagree. Why, even at this moment, I'm really struggling to figure out what you're thinking, Prince Seth."

That's when I realized what exactly it was that felt so dissonant. The way Seth had been talking to me was unusually familiar...almost *friendly*. I mean, hadn't he annulled our engagement because he thought I was a wicked bully? Plus, his current fiancée was the alleged *target* of my bullying.

With all that in mind, I would have expected him to be a lot more hostile. If he *did* actually know the full truth, I would have expected him to take some sort of action, even if he couldn't directly apologize to me because of his royal

standing. Either way, his attitude didn't make any sense. I couldn't for the life of me figure out what was going through his head right now.

Seth made another pained expression. Once again, I had no idea what *that* was all about.

"You... Never mind. If you don't know, then you're better off living your whole life in ignorance."

It seemed he'd decided to shut the conversation down. I knew it wasn't my place to push it—not when I was talking to a *prince*—so I reluctantly let it go.

"So, you say Liliana's been kidnapped? Then I don't have a minute to waste. I need to go save her."

"Of course," I said. Then, after a moment's pause, I added, "Um, but may I ask what brought you here, Your Highness? And I noticed you haven't brought any of your guards..."

"Just someone's idea of a prank," he said dismissively, as if to close the book on that question entirely. Of course, that didn't tell me *anything*...

Seth seemed completely unwilling to shed any light on things for me and, instead, just stared straight ahead. I let out a little sigh—quietly, so he wouldn't hear—and decided to refocus my attention on coming up with a strategy to get Lily back. I figured I could try asking him again once all of this was over.

Will I ever get a straight answer out of this obstinate schmuck?

"Perhaps the top floor might be a good place for us to start looking?" I offered.

"Right. I'm going to find her as quickly as possible."

As irritated as I was that Seth had refused to engage with my questions at all, I *was* impressed by how steadfast he seemed in pursuit of this goal. *Maybe he's turned into a pretty dependable guy after all?* I thought. *Well, he looks so much like a prince that I guess he was bound to start acting like one eventually.*

I knew he was actually pretty strong too. I couldn't let the crown prince get hurt, though...and that could pose a challenge if we were going to work together on this.

“I don’t care what their motive is. Anyone who’d dare kidnap my fiancée deserves a death sentence,” said Seth, climbing the stairs with a deadly serious expression on his face.

As I followed him up, watching him from behind, I couldn’t help thinking that he actually seemed pretty cool right now. That felt a little weird, but to be fair, he *was* the main love interest in *Lady Rose*. His face took up prime real estate right in the center of the game’s packaging, and his route had a lot of material. I knew a big reason for my overblown hatred of him probably just stemmed from my contempt for arrogant men. He was happy to bring people into his orbit and take them along for the ride, though, so I imagined he made a good partner...as long as you could forgive his selfishness and strike a balance between supporting him and calling him out on his BS.

He cares deeply—I’ll give him that. He’s not my cup of tea, though.

And so, Seth and I climbed the stairs to the manor’s second story and were greeted by another large hall. We didn’t have to look around for long before finding a staircase to the third floor right next to us.

I wasn’t ready to climb that staircase just yet, though...because sitting on a sofa in the second floor’s grand hall was someone all too familiar to me, staring straight at me.

“I thought you might be behind this. The flourishes in your handwriting felt vaguely familiar,” I said.

His eyes widened slightly. I couldn’t blame him for his surprise. Honestly, even I was a little surprised that I’d recognized his handwriting. Despite living under the same roof, I’d gone out of my way to avoid him, so we’d barely ever exchanged words.

“But I really hoped it wasn’t you, Shade,” I continued, glaring at him.

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



Scene from a Carriage (Part 2)

The townsfolk were quite surprised to see two horse-drawn carriages driven down the streets, one after another. They furrowed their brows as they passed by, trying to parse what was going on. But their frowns softened as they heard a voice call out from one of the carriages.

“Excuse me, miss greengrocer! Have you, um, seen a carriage go by?! It would’ve been about ten minutes ago! Did you see where it went?!”

“Yes! That way!”

“Thank you!”

“I don’t know what kind of mischief you’re getting up to, but don’t hurt yourself, Nana!”

“I won’t!”

All of the townsfolk were delighted to hear the voice of Nancy, the local nun, call out from the open window of the carriage. Melvin, who rode in the carriage in front, was astonished by how cooperative they were all being.

“You sure are popular...” he said. “Everyone’s being so helpful, even though you’re calling out to them from my carriage.”

“That’s because I try to be nice to everyone I meet! It’s still not enough to get me to Heaven, but...I’m working on it! Oh! Mister merchant!”

Nancy’s answer tugged on Melvin’s heartstrings, but right now, this was their best bet of finding Liliana without wasting too much time. Nancy had lived in these outskirts longer than Fii, and her pious career had earned her an almost unshakable trust from the locals. That meant that she could pull off what Fii couldn’t: hassling the locals for directions from the window of a moving vehicle.

As Nancy began to call out to another townsfolk, sounds of laughter emanated from the carriage. They belonged to someone who was even more out of place in Melvin’s carriage than her: Prince Nolan, of the neighboring

kingdom. Another unusual passenger—the prince’s aide, Zero—gave him a puzzled look as he inquired about the reason for his laughter.

“Looks like Fii’s not the only interesting broad; all of this country’s peasants are piquing my interest. I mean, you’d never guess this nun chick only just came around from getting coldcocked. She’s tough as nails!”

“I highly doubt that either woman is typical for a woman of their class.”

“Damn, though...this carriage sure is cramped.”

“It certainly is. It’s hardly appropriate for someone of your standing, Prince Nolan.”

Then get out. You don’t have to ride in it, you know, thought Melvin. Of course, considering the difference in their status, he could hardly say so aloud.

What’s more, the circumstances of how they’d come to join in on the carriage ride had hardly been pleasant, to say the least. Nolan wasn’t able to call on his carriage, since he’d already arranged for it to pick him up later, and so he’d made the bold declaration that he’d run after Fii on foot if he couldn’t catch another. He had been clearly dead serious, but there had been no way that Zero was going to allow that. A withering glare shot Melvin’s way was all it had taken to convey the mortal risks involved in withholding the use of his own carriage.

Melvin’s family might have wielded an unusual amount of influence for a duke’s family, but it wouldn’t save him from Zero’s silent threats. He’d had no choice but to concede and “invite” them into his carriage. Thanks to his two new passengers, space in the carriage had suddenly become a bit limited. This meant that he could only have *one* of his guards join on the ride, so he’d really gotten the short end of the stick.

Nolan and Zero claimed to be Fii’s friends who were just in town to hang out, which was altogether wholly unimpressive to Melvin.

Honestly, none of the company she keeps is the least bit respectable, he thought. *If they’re gonna be riding with me, though, I may as well make the most of it. There’s something I’ve been wondering about, and Nancy isn’t going to be able to shed any light on it.*

Melvin leaned against his seat and turned to face Nolan and Zero, narrowing

his eyes as he looked at the carriage traveling behind them.

“Prince Nolan, what do you make of Prince Nicholas’s two guards?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Personally, I think it’s a little *odd* that guards employed by the kingdom would seem so unfazed after the future queen consort was kidnapped right under their noses. It’s almost like they knew this was going to happen...”

“Yeah? I dunno, seems to me like they just don’t give a shit. All I care about is that they seem pretty skilled. I’d love to cross swords with ’em sometime.”

“If I may, Lord Melvin, I’m afraid you may have asked the wrong person,” Zero chimed in.

“I’m sorry to say I’ve come to the same conclusion.”

Nolan’s answer provided a brief glimpse into his MO, and Melvin was starting to get the sense that the foreign prince was a bloodthirsty young man with little room in his head for thoughts of what might go on behind the scenes. Instead, he just took things at face value and let himself be driven by impulse.

Melvin slumped dejectedly in his seat, then turned to face Zero, who shrugged and gave him a nod.

“I’ve had my suspicions about them as well,” Zero said. “It seems they’re perfectly capable of finding Lady Liliana and bringing her back, yet they refuse, claiming that it falls outside the scope of their duties. They even refuse orders from a member of the royal family. Frankly, their behavior is downright baffling. And what’s even *more* baffling is that it didn’t arouse *your* suspicions, Prince Nolan.”

“Hey. Watch it, Zero.”

“I learned who they were a while ago. They’re the kingdom’s secret weapon, the ‘Peerless Death Gods.’ I’ve been wondering for a while now what they’re doing working as Prince Nicholas’s personal guards. I can’t help but wonder if there’s something more than meets the eye going on here.”

“Death Gods? Well, shit... I had a feeling they weren’t just a couple of run-of-the-mill guards, but that’s crazy. The kingdom’s secret weapon, huh? Kinda

sounds like El, actually,” Nolan blurted out.

Zero felt a cold sweat dripping down his back. Nolan was being awfully loose-lipped with state secrets. Zero silently begged Melvin not to ask any questions, but Melvin paid him no mind.

“El?” he repeated plainly, as if to prompt Nolan to elaborate.

“Please, ignore him. That’s just a verbal tic of his,” said Zero.

“For cryin’ out loud, Zero, is that the best you’ve got? If you’re gonna try to cover that up, at least try a little harder. There’s no way he’s gonna buy that.”

Melvin was starting to get the feeling that maybe he didn’t want any part of this conversation, but he couldn’t suppress his hunger for gossip. He was too much of a busybody for his own good. He *had* to know what made people tick, and in this case, that meant getting to the bottom of why Zero seemed so flustered at the mention of this “El.” Naturally, he was also curious to find out who exactly “El” was.

But before Melvin could ask any further questions, he found himself interrupted by someone rather unexpected.

“Excuse me, Mr. Mel, handsome guy, and handsome guy’s aide. Could you all keep it down, please? It’s hard to hear what the townsfolk are saying,” Nancy said, puffing out one of her cheeks in a pout.

It was hard to argue with that, but Melvin felt the muscles in his face tense up as he considered what she’d said. It wasn’t because she’d stamped out his chance at satisfying his curiosity, though. No—it was because of how she’d addressed Nolan and Zero. His old acquaintance had no idea who they were; in fact, she probably didn’t even know their names. He couldn’t help but worry about how Nolan and Zero would respond to her rude manner of addressing them.

Nolan might have been a foreign prince, but he was still a prince—and princes could have peasants’ heads for the slightest of offenses. In fact, a prince didn’t even *need* a reason.

“Hey... I don’t care what you call me, but do you have any idea who they a—”

“Actually, it’s kinda refreshing to get cheek like that from a peasant. Besides, how can a guy complain about being called ‘handsome’?”

“If he has no complaints, then neither do I.”

“Oh... Well, all right...”

Melvin was relieved to hear that Nolan was taking it in stride. At least Nolan’s face had been the first one that Nancy had seen when she’d regained consciousness, and the words that she’d yelled instinctively were “Wow! What a handsome guy!” If she’d conjured some other less flattering descriptor, things might not have ended so well for her. Even if Nolan had forgiven her, Zero might not have.

Melvin discreetly looked over at Nolan, taking in his red hair and the menacing look in his wide eyes. He couldn’t help but think that he probably would’ve yelled something quite different...

Scene from a Carriage (Part 3)

A carriage followed behind Melvin's from a short distance, with Nicholas riding inside. The prince was currently absorbed in an effort to sort out his discordant feelings. But a voice called out to him, as if intentionally trying to interrupt his thought process.

"Prince Nicholas?" said the casual guard.

Nicholas turned to look at him. He was convinced that what he'd just been pondering had been of the utmost importance, but he knew it wasn't an option to just ignore his guard.

"If you're gonna tell her how you feel about her, then you'd better do it soon."

"What makes you say that?" Nicholas asked, surprised.

In all the time they'd spent together, the guards had never offered their opinions on Nicholas's personal life. And what's more, the guard wasn't giving advice on some trivial matter either; this was a matter of great importance to Nicholas.

The casual guard shrugged.

"I dunno... I guess my conscience was just tuggin' at me to speak up."

The guard's devil-may-care way of speaking irritated most who heard it, but Nicholas regarded his answer with an earnest expression on his face.

"Are you suggesting that something may be about to happen which would make me wish I'd spoken up sooner?" he asked.

"Beats me."

I mean, I know the broad strokes, but I couldn't tell you all the details, the guard privately added. No one—not El, nor anyone else—had *specifically* told him what was going to happen next. But judging from what he'd seen so far, he felt like he'd kinda pieced it together, and he was just doing his best to make

sure that things went El's way. And of course his partner, the formal guard, was doing just the same.

"I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean, though. Tell her 'how I feel'?"

"You're in love with her, right? C'mon. I'm doin' you a solid here and givin' you this advice straight, unlike Mr. Goody Two-shoes over there who'd just beat around the bush so hard that you'd never get the message."

Nicholas blinked at the guard, who had a suspicious look in his eyes.

"You two have figured out whom I'm in love with?" he asked.

"Are you insane?"

"How could we possibly *not* notice, when you've all but got it written on your forehead? Truthfully, I'm insulted. How dense do you think we are?" the formal guard chimed in.

Seeing that the casual guard seemed genuinely concerned for him, and hearing the formal guard—who'd been quiet all this time—suddenly say his piece, it finally dawned on Nicholas that they were serious.

"Well, I don't think *she's* realized how I feel about her."

"Yeah, but she's kinda dense, y'know?"

"I have to disagree. I think it's less that she hasn't realized, and more that—" the formal guard began, before suddenly clamming up.

Seeing the wide-eyed expressions that the casual guard and Nicholas were giving him, he realized that he must have been the only one who'd noticed. The truth was, the formal guard knew more about Fii Crow than most people did—and not just a *little* more but a *lot* more.

Back when Fii was still going by Felicia and was only seven years old, the formal guard had done a little bit of his own research into her. Without going into detail about his motivations, he now had more dirt on her than most would ever care to accumulate. He knew all sorts of things, including things that even she herself wasn't aware of (but that everyone around her knew) and things that no one but he himself had realized.

As a result, even if he didn't have any particular desire to, he saw right

through the way that she acted toward Nicholas, the way she thought about him, and the way she tried to fool him. He knew how she *really* felt, and he knew why she was putting up a front.

He was pretty sure that she wasn't actually dense enough not to realize Nicholas's feelings for her, but he could tell from the way she acted around him that she was never going to figure it out. Putting two and two together, he realized the reason for this contradiction: wishful thinking.

Fii wasn't just trying to deceive the people around her; she was also trying to deceive *herself*. She was subconsciously pretending that she didn't notice how Nicholas felt. Clearly, she'd tried very hard to convince herself of this. It was almost like a defense mechanism that she'd developed in response to some deep trauma from her past. Of course, even after all the digging he'd done into her background, the guard had never found any trace of such an event.

If he'd had to hazard a guess, he might've assumed that it had something to do with her terrible parents, but it seemed like she'd lived in relative harmony with them until the day she'd been estranged. So *that* didn't really explain the defense mechanism.

For all the guard's insight, though, he wasn't really the type to go around doling it out for free. That kind of generosity just wasn't in his nature.

"No, it's nothing. Love affairs are best handled *internally*, so I'll let the two of you sort it out," he said to Nicholas. "*You* ought to stay out of this too," he went on, turning to the other guard.

"All right, all right."

Unlike the formal guard, the casual one was a softie at heart. The formal guard didn't label him that out of admiration but simply as a matter of fact. Objectively speaking, the casual guard was more than happy to give out advice to Nicholas—or to anyone—but the formal guard held his cards close to his chest.

The formal guard would never have gone and said it out loud, but he agreed that Nicholas would be better off telling Fii how he felt *before* he figured out what was going on with this kidnapping and the role that he'd been forced into. Maybe he could even get his happy ending, if Fii's mistakes and various

inconvenient truths were never revealed.

After all, no matter how much anyone struggled against their fate, it wouldn't change. There was no real choice but to accept that they'd live their whole life enslaved to it. And, as far as he was concerned, it was better not to know the truth.

The two carriages continued down the street. Shortly, they would come upon the manor.

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Lady Rose Just Wants to be a Commoner*. I'm the author, Kooriame. The mishmash of romance, comedy, and mystery in *Lady Rose* might be an overpowering combination, but I hope that you enjoy it.

I don't want to just give you some bland story in the afterword, so since I've got some space here, I figure I'll give you a bit of an inside scoop on the series. If you're the kind of person who reads afterwords before starting on the actual story, don't worry; I won't spoil anything beyond what you'll read in the first chapter's opening scene.

As I was preparing to write this novel, the first thing I decided upon was who the main character would be. I wanted to write about a main character whose inner and outer lives couldn't be more different. So, I came up with a character who is perfect, beautiful, and completely inscrutable on the outside, with an easygoing, cheerful, sporty personality. I also gave her an uncanny talent for acting, so that she'd make all these mismatching elements seem cohesive.

And, in the end, I also decided that she'd worship bread. Why did I decide on this, you ask? Honestly, I'm kind of asking myself the same question.

Now that I've filled up some space, we'll leave that little anecdote off there.

I apologize for always teasing you with the promise that all of the mysteries will soon be revealed, but it'd make me really happy if you tried to predict what's going to happen next.

I'd like to end this afterword by taking another opportunity to thank everyone who helped make this book a reality. Thank you to Hidaka Nami-san, the head illustrator. The moment I saw your character sketches, I was an instant fan. I didn't know what the cover and illustrations would look like when I was writing this story, but they're absolutely beautiful and they breathe so much life into the story. I'm so grateful for how you've captured the characters and for how you brought out the best in them.

I didn't know much about books or publishing, but my editor was so nice to walk me through the process. So, to my editor, please let me say how grateful I am for all your help. From the bottom of my heart, I'm so glad that I had you as my editor.

Thank you to everyone at Beans Bunko for deciding to publish my story, and thank you to everyone else who had a hand in its making. And most of all, thank you to all my readers who have this book in your hands now.

I hope I'll see you all again soon.

Kooriame

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Kooriame

illustrator
Nami Hidaka

Lady Rose

Just Wants
to Be a

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Lady Rose Just Wants to Be a Commoner: Volume 1

by Kooriame

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