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## **Prologue**

Before long, it was April.

The start-of-the-school-year ceremony was today, and the game's protagonist would be transferring into my second-year class. The game's timeline had officially begun. I'd hedged all my bets to achieve a happy ending by crossdressing. Everything came down to this one year.

I put on my uniform and faced my reflection in the mirror. My hair hadn't grown out much, but my bangs were now long enough to cover my forehead a bit. It wasn't much, but it was enough to distinguish myself from Robert, at least. I also looked a lot more mature now, and my face had developed a more masculine look.

Not bad, if I do say so myself.

My hair was still styled in an undercut, which made it easy to wash—a feature I appreciated. I knew that there were plenty of girls out there who liked seeing men wear their hair down, particularly when they swept their bangs up or to the side. I was hoping this hairstyle would give me the opposite appeal of Robert, who only sported side-swept bangs on formal occasions. I'd be like the inverse of him, waiting for the right opportunity to let mine *down*.

I'd even changed up my makeup to suit my new hairstyle. Honestly, I thought it looked pretty good. It made my nose look well-defined, especially when you looked at my profile from the left side.

I'd torn off a button on my uniform jacket and given it away to a girl during the graduation ceremony, and had my head maid ever been furious when I'd asked her to fix it! And, of course, I couldn't forget my leather elevator shoes.

Without clothes, I was lean and toned. My abs were looking ripped, and whenever I rolled up the sleeves of my shirts and flexed, girls would flock to me and drool over my bulging veins and muscles. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I'd stretched myself to the limit to make sure that I was in peak form

this year, but it had all been worth it. My face, body, and muscles were all a sight to behold. I had no doubt that this was the best I'd looked in the last ten years of my life.

Nicely done, Elizabeth Burton. You've worked hard for this. Now go get 'em, hotshot!

Just as I was giving myself a little internal pat on the back, I heard a shy knock at my door. I opened it to see Christopher looking up at me with a resolute expression on his face.

Naturally, he was now wearing the academy's uniform too. Seeing him in it called to mind his in-game portrait. Real-life Christopher had a different hairstyle, and he hadn't applied any personal touches to his uniform the way he did in the game, but his sweet face was still the spitting image of the Christopher I remembered from the game.

"Um...sis?"

"Yeah? What's up, Christopher?"

He drew in a deep breath, then suddenly yelled out with surprising force, "I-I'm going to call you 'Ser,' at school, okay?!"

Whoa there! I thought, taken aback by the volume. Then the significance of his declaration dawned on me. Ahh... I know what this is all about.

This was just like when a little kid starts calling his mother "mom" instead of "mommy," or when he starts referring to her in third-person as "my mother" instead of "my mom." I'd wager that pretty much every kid crosses that bridge at some point when they hit puberty.

My little brother's all grown up now...

Nah, I'm just messing. I was pretty confident that this had less to do with growing up and more to do with the game's invisible hand. No doubt the world was trying to protect itself from any deviations from the game's original narrative, forcibly retrofitting everything to match it.

In the game, Christopher introduces himself to the main character as "Chris. Just Chris." He doesn't tell her anything about his upbringing or his family. If he

went around calling the noblewoman in the main character's class "sis," it'd only interfere with that narrative framework. The narrative needed to avoid that at all costs, so it was only to be expected that Christopher would switch to a more neutral way of addressing me.

Paradoxically, the fact that Christopher was letting me know about this change meant that the game's timeline had started in earnest.

Each of the game's four love interests had already diverged significantly from their in-game counterparts. The crown prince had already traveled West for treatment, Isaac had already been bested in final exams, and Christopher had already resolved his estrangement from his biological family. Even Robert had undergone major changes to his characterization. Considering all of these huge differences from the original game's narrative, it had been entirely possible that the game's story might not have ended up playing out at all. But Christopher's declaration made it abundantly clear that the story continued to march on anyway, even if it had to make some corrections along the way.

"Sure, I get it," I replied, looking directly into his eyes. I hoped to convey my resolve to steal the main character's heart myself through my gaze.

## It's What's on the Inside That Counts

Christopher and I rode in a horse-drawn carriage to where the new students had been told to assemble. We parted ways as we exited the carriage, and I walked into campus.

Countless girls showered me with greetings as I passed. "Good day, Sir Burton."

I smiled and waved in return. The farther I walked, the fewer people I came across. Eventually, I made it to my destination: the courtyard. No one else was there.

In the game, the main character (whose default name is Lilia Douglas) has to choose between Edward's introduction event and Robert's. The story branches when you're heading to the opening ceremony and spot a kitten. At that point, you're presented with a choice: You can choose to either follow the kitten or to call out to it. Choose the former, and you meet Edward; choose the latter, and you meet Robert.

For Edward's event, the main character stumbles into the courtyard after getting lost and meets the crown prince. Flustered, she explains, "Um, I was following a cat, and...I got lost."

"Heh... What a funny girl you are," Edward replies with a chuckle. Then he offers to show her to the auditorium.

(Speaking of that scene, I was always struck by what a low bar Edward must've had for what qualified as "funny." But kids sometimes laugh at the drop of a hat. Maybe he was just at that age? I also couldn't help but wonder how such a refined, handsome character could bring himself to chuckle like that. I once tried to practice that little "heh..." myself, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. It felt downright embarrassing.)

Anyway, Edward's introduction event continues as he leads Lilia to the auditorium, where all of the students greet him.

"H-He's the student council president?!" she cries, astonished. "And not only that, he's Prince Edward, the Crown Prince!"

But back in this reality, Edward wasn't even in the country at the moment. That made stepping in and stealing his event as easy as taking candy from a baby. All I had to do was stand around in the courtyard and wait for the event to start.

Robert's introduction event was supposed to be the alternative to Edward's, but he was currently behind the auditorium stage's curtains flipping through the pages of a welcome speech and drilling it into his head.

In the event that the student council president wasn't available to give the speech himself, the obligation typically fell upon the vice president...but no otome game would ever delegate such an important task to a mere side character. And so, the powers that be must've swooped in to thrust the duty upon Robert, who was now class valedictorian after making the top grades on last year's final exams.

He'd had his moment of glory, but I had no doubt that he'd reverted back to his usual pea-brained ways. I could easily picture him wearing a big, dumb smile on his face, surrounded by teachers and student council members as they clamored to help him nail the speech.

Not only had Edward done me the favor of traipsing off to the West, leaving his introduction event wide open for me to come in and steal, but Robert had also taken his place—essentially eliminating the competing branch that the main character could pick. It was now inevitable that she'd come to the courtyard and trigger my introduction event.

(In case you're curious, Isaac and Christopher's introduction events operate the same way. *After* the opening ceremony, you're met with a decision point that sets you down the path of meeting one of them instead of the other. The love interests' baseline affection points get a nice boost depending on who you meet first, and they get priority on the map screen when you're choosing how you'd like to spend your free time on your first day.

It's especially difficult to win affection points for Edward, so if you want to do his route, you absolutely *cannot* miss his introduction event.

Of course, there was no way that the Lilia of this world would know that.)

Thanks, Edward. I hope you get well soon and come back safely...but only after spending some quality time away. I directed my gratitude to the westward skies—or so I say, but I honestly didn't have a clue which way was west.

Just as I'd completed my thought, I heard a rustling noise from the trees. A kitten emerged from them. It made its way up to me, abruptly applied the brakes, made a U-turn in front of me, and skittered away.

No surprises there. Animals hate me.

Suddenly, I remembered the dream I'd had. A sadness came over me as I reckoned with the painful truth that a cat would only ever approach me in my dreams. No real cat would ever come near me.

I turned my gaze to look at where the kitten had come from. Standing there now, in its place, was a girl wearing the academy's uniform.



Wow... She really is cute.

That was my first thought when I saw her.

In the game, Lilia's face is never clearly depicted. All you get to see of her is a glimpse of her shoulder-length red hair and her relatively short height. She describes herself as "a plain, ordinary commoner," but seeing her now, face-to-face, I couldn't even *begin* to fathom how the word "plain" might apply to her.

Do you have eyes?! I wanted to ask her. She was lovely, put-together, and delicately slender. She had an adorable smile, but you could tell that an iron will lay behind it. She was, simply put, magnetic. You just knew that she wouldn't even have to lift a finger, and she'd still have everyone around her crying, "What a remarkable young lady!"

She was a real peach, all right—the kind you only come across once in a lifetime.

It was honestly no surprise, though, that such a fact was lost on her. Otome game protagonists tended to have pretty low self-esteem about their appearance. Having played many an otome game myself, I could definitely

attest to that.

Still, that's no excuse, even if she's just being humble. If she had a single mirror in her house, she'd know that she has no right to go around calling herself "plain" and "ordinary."

If that was "plain" and "ordinary," then only a model in Paris Fashion Week would count as being "beautiful" and "extraordinary." But then, looks were everything in this world. And typically, protagonist or not, only pretty girls got special treatment.

I'd been working hard to polish my people skills (well, mostly womanizing skills) all these years, but I wasn't sure I had it in me to seduce some pasty, moon-faced girl who could've only hit it big in the Heian era. That's not to say I wouldn't have *tried*, of course—I would've gone for it, but *boy*, I would've had to psych myself up pretty hard first. So, all things considered, this was a win.

Piece of cake. Bring it on, sweetheart.

"Hm? What're you doing here?" I asked her.

I took long, leisurely strides towards her, closing in the distance between us.

For a brief second, she looked up at me. Then, she quickly averted her gaze. She looked down, touching her face nervously. If I were being ungenerous, I'd even say she was behaving quite suspiciously. A deep sense of unease washed over me.

What's going on here? Why does she seem...so familiar?

"Um, well, actually, I gost... I mean, I got *lost*. Oohoo hawww! So, um, yeah. I don't know where I am. Hee hee HORF!" she muttered quickly, her voice almost a whisper. Her speech mannerisms seemed to betray everything she was thinking.

Half of me was screaming "yikes," and the other half was wincing in recognition. I couldn't tell you why I knew this, but I did—she'd been reincarnated into this world, just like I had. But that wasn't the only thing that gave me a painful pang of recognition. Just like me, she was also a fangirl.

Why was I aware of this? The only explanation I could give you was instinct.

Honestly, I had nothing concrete to go on. But I was absolutely *certain* that I was right about this.

My next thought was, Hey, maybe this isn't a bad thing? Maybe I can use this to my advantage...

She was a real cutie...just as long as she didn't open her mouth. The way she spoke left a lot to be desired. I wasn't sure why, but talking to her was giving me serious déjà vu. Just watching her squirm filled me with sympathy and made my chest tighten. I was mortified for her.

After all, it's what's on the inside that counts. And if anyone were to look beyond her sweet face, well... There wasn't a noblewoman out there whose reputation wouldn't be utterly destroyed by an errant "hee hee HORF!" I mean, what kind of first impression is *that*? An otome game protagonist is supposed to make love interests clutch their chests from cuteness overload, not from extreme secondhand embarrassment.

In any case, even if she'd been raised as a peasant, surely there must've been some opportunity over the sixteen or seventeen years of her life to course correct? But whatever her experiences in this life were, her past-life personality seemed to be hogging the limelight.

No, what am I saying? The world of otome games is all about looks. A cute girl like that can let out as many "hee hee HORF"s as she wants! I couldn't help but wonder how the love interests were going to respond to it, though. Are you going to fall for a girl like that, boys? Her cute face won't erase the "hee hee HORF," you know.

But maybe they'd just find themselves at the mercy of otome game logic, falling in love with her because she was "not like other girls"? If that was how the cards were going to fall, then I only had one thing to say: What a bunch of morons. I didn't know if I could leave the future of the kingdom in the hands of such poor judges of character. I mean, even peasants didn't go around "hee hee HORF"ing.

Despite my misgivings, I put on a smile. I drew a deep breath in through my nose and exhaled through my mouth.

It's going to be okay. At least she looks cute, right? Everything's going to be

fine.

If the laws of this land decreed that we all close our eyes to a person's character and place importance on their looks, then as a love interest, I had no real choice but to oblige.

Besides, in the game, Lilia starts off with absolutely no knowledge of aristocratic etiquette. She only learns how to navigate the ins and outs of high society with the support of her love interest. Maybe this version would turn into a normal noblewoman over the course of my pursuing her? It was entirely possible.

At the very least, maybe I could get her to the point that she didn't leave me (and probably others) wondering, "Who'd fall in love with a girl like *that*?" or "Does she have a few screws loose or something?"

No... Don't get your hopes up, Elizabeth. Trying to change someone is a fool's errand.

That's when it hit me: I had to be the one to change. It was time to reorient my thinking. It was time to think like a *love interest*. I didn't have full confidence that I could pull it off, but I was resolved to try.

Determined, I turned around to face Lilia. "You're lost? I take it you must be new here. In that case..."

I gently took her hand and knelt down on the ground. Surely there wasn't a girl in the world who'd find *that* a turn off, right?

Anyway, I already knew from the color of her uniform's collar that she was in my year. I only said that to set myself up for success later, when I could turn to her in class and say, "So, you're a transfer student, huh?"

"May I show you to the auditorium, gorgeous?"

I kissed her fingertips and gave her a showy wink. Instantly, her face went beet red. It wouldn't have been surprising to hear a little *poof* or see a cloud of steam rise from her head. I could've sworn I saw little hearts in her eyes.

She didn't respond, so I just grabbed her arm and pulled her along with me gently. She didn't seem to put up a fight.

Now that I had some momentum going, I figured I'd push my luck a bit. "I've got an idea," I said. "While I'm at it, why don't I give you a little tour of the school? C'mon, follow me."

"Huh?! Uh... What?!"

"Oh, don't worry about the opening ceremony. I wouldn't want to get you in trouble, so I'll make sure you make it."

I gave her a mischievous smile and took her hand as we walked.

She looked around nervously. Even though she looked up at me numerous times, she never made eye contact. Everything about the way she behaved was shifty, but I couldn't help but think that the way she toddled after me was actually kind of cute.

Guess it really does pay to be pretty... I marveled.

"That's weird... I picked the 'chase after the cat' option, so I should've triggered *Edward's* introduction event," the girl muttered, talking quickly to herself. The volume of her voice was too loud for a private monologue, but too quiet for something she intended for me to hear.

I almost whipped around without thinking, but I managed to forge on ahead and pretend I hadn't heard anything.

So, she's the kind of girl who talks loudly to herself, huh? Crap...

I was really starting to worry about her.

If she was familiar with the game's story, that meant that she knew everything that was going to happen. To the average person, that'd look like she could see the future. I knew there were people out there who were so desperate to use that kind of clairvoyance to their advantage that they'd stop at nothing to get their hands on her—and I knew that there was no shortage of them in the aristocracy.

She'd better put a stop to this bad habit before someone gets the wrong idea.

Honestly, though, it offered a pretty tantalizing opportunity to get a peek inside her head. I decided I'd help her cover it up until she broke the habit...and use it to my full advantage in the meantime.

"Who is this cute guy, anyway? A hidden character? I'm pretty sure Yoh was the only hidden character, though... Oh, I know! Maybe he was added in when they ported it for a new system or something?"

She rattled off term after term—jargon that shouldn't have been familiar to anyone from this world, and yet, I recognized them all.

Seems like I'm not the only one who's played Royal LOVERS, I thought.

She clearly wasn't just your casual fan, though. No, she was a bona fide obsessive fangirl...which meant that she'd be trying to trigger all her favorite events.

I needed to get the jump on the other love interests and steal the show. Logically speaking, the best way to get ahead seemed to be to block her from gaining affection points with the others and set her down *my* route.

I rummaged through my memories, trying to extract any events that I could use to my benefit. As I led her around her school, I couldn't stifle my satisfied smile.



After parting ways with Lilia, I arrived at the classroom and was quickly surrounded by a chorus of girls greeting me. I took a look around the room, scanning my classmates' faces, and realized that I recognized all of them.

Of course, that was only to be expected. There were four classes for each year at the academy: two advanced classes and two standard education classes.

Students were divided according to both their academic capabilities and their social status. Even after beginning a new school year, movement between classes was pretty restricted. If you were in one of the advanced classes, you could switch to the other advanced class; same went for the standard education classes. But you couldn't switch from an advanced to a standard education class or vice versa.

Besides, almost everyone at the academy was a member of high society. Any noble with decent social skills enrolled with several existing social ties; there would be few students they didn't already recognize.

Imagining what it must've been like for Lilia to transfer into the academy in her second year—hailing from a commoner background, no less—made my stomach hurt.

When I had been playing the game, I hadn't thought much of it. It had seemed so natural—obvious, even—that it hadn't felt strange at all. But now that I was watching the main character from the outside, I could sympathize with her as a fish out of water. I was so worried, I thought I might develop a severe stomach ulcer.

For narrative purposes, Robert and Isaac were in the main character's class. As he laughed among some of the boys, Robert made eye contact with me and gave me a little nod of respect. Isaac was seated in his chair, reading.

After a few minutes, the classroom door was flung open. A man in a slightly disheveled suit entered. I recognized him.

"Quiet, please. Now, then...I'm Cain Fisher, and I'll be in charge of your class this year," he said. "I also have another introduction to make. A new student will be joining our class."

The classroom fell silent. Only the *clonk clonk* of loafers could be heard.

A red-haired girl entered and stood in front of the blackboard. She bowed deeply, her hair falling gently over her ears. As she looked down at the ground with a shy expression, we all fell in love with her. I could've sworn I heard a few *gulps* throughout the room.

"N-Nice to meet you, everyone. I'm L-Lilia Douglas!" she said.

Holy crap, she's adorable! I thought, losing my senses for a moment. Whoa, hey. Reel it in, Elizabeth...

Fortunately, the years I'd spent perfecting my poker face and learning all the dos and don'ts of ladies etiquette paid off, and my jaw never hit the floor...at least, I hope it didn't. I looked around me and saw that all of the boys looked every bit as smitten as I felt.

Impressive. So, this is the power of the protagonist. Looks like side characters don't stand a chance.

Only Isaac and Robert seemed immune to her charms. Their expressions remained completely unchanged.

I was hardly surprised by this. I mean, it would be a bad look for the love interests to lose their minds over the main character from the get-go. If anything, the ability to stay composed upon first meeting the main character was practically a prerequisite for being a love interest.

I braced myself and put on a carefree smile. Then, I looked straight at Lilia and gave her a little wave. I watched as she spotted me among the crowd, her mouth forming a little o-shape as surprise swept over her face.

"Oh! I remember you!"

Hook, line, and sinker.

"All right, everyone. Make sure Lilia feels welcome, won't you? Now then, the moment you've all been waiting for: new seat assignments. Everyone, come up to my desk and draw a random number, then take your newly assigned seat."

Following Mr. Fisher's instructions, everyone went up to draw a number.

(By the way, Mr. Fisher is actually a romanceable character in the fandisc, so he's pretty memorable. Considering he isn't in the main game, though, I probably didn't need to consider him a threat at this point.)

I drew a number and took my corresponding seat, which was located at the front corner of the room by the hallway. There was no way I'd be getting any naps in this year.

I heard a chair clatter and turned to look at the source of the noise. I made eye contact with Lilia, who was sitting down in the seat to my left. Making sure not to break my composure, I allowed myself a private little fist pump in my head. Sitting next to the main character was a good omen. This put me one step ahead of the other love interests.

And here I'd been lamenting my spot at the front as unlucky. Little did I know how fortunate I really was. I felt like I'd hit the jackpot. Sitting next to her made me feel like the star of the show. Things were looking up for me.

"Looks like we're seatmates, huh?" I said softly, giving her a little wink.

She blushed furiously.

"Excuse me, Mr. Fisher," Isaac said, weaving through us and walking up to Mr. Fisher's desk. "I can't see the blackboard from where I'm sitting in the back."

"Oh... All right, then. Why don't you come take a seat in the front here? Everyone in this column, please move back a row."

"Huh?"

Lilia gave me a slightly disappointed look as she stood up from her seat, then moved back as instructed. Her eyelashes looked so long and pronounced when she looked down like that, I couldn't help but stare.

In her place, an all-too-familiar bespectacled boy took a seat. Actually, his eyelashes could give Lilia's a run for their money.

"Looks like we're seatmates again, Burton," he said.

"Yep... Sure does, Isaac."

He flashed me a smug smile.

Hey, what gives? Were you trying to make sure I didn't sit next to Lilia? I thought, outraged. No...there's no way a bookworm like Isaac would be capable of that caliber of social scheming. I'm sure it doesn't mean anything.

It was a shame I wouldn't be sitting next to Lilia anymore, but at least she'd be looking at my left profile...which just so happened to be my best angle. Besides, she seemed to be pretty taken with me already. I figured I could just let her interest grow organically by giving her every opportunity to admire my profile from behind.



It was lunchtime, and everyone was eyeing Lilia with curiosity.

Part of their curiosity was obviously due to how cute she was, but it was also in part because of how unusual it was to transfer into the academy. Then, there was also the factor of her name. Rumors began to fly among the nobles as soon as word got out that her surname was Douglas.

After all, everyone had heard that Baron Douglas had adopted a saint.

No one had been quite sure how credible that rumor was, but now that Lilia had transferred into First Royal Academy, it seemed clear that there must've been *some* truth to it. At least, insofar as there was truth to the claim that baku—those tapir-like, long-nosed, dream-devouring creatures—were real. Sure, they might not really snort up our nightmares, but there *are* plenty of tapirs out there in the wild.

It was pretty much unthinkable that the child of a baron would transfer into First Royal Academy—much less into the advanced class. Of course, exceptions could be made for a *saint*.

The concept of a saint is pretty much the only fantasy element of this world. They're always women, and they're always endowed with the power of "saint's prayer"—essentially just healing magic that can cure wounds and disease. The previous saint died around fifty years ago, so people in my generation are only really familiar with her through stories.

You know those really chubby Japanese snake cryptids that can roll around like a wheel—tsuchinoko? Well, imagine that one of *those* suddenly appeared one day. Try as you might to tell everyone to ignore it or look away, their curiosity's going to get the better of them.

It seemed Lilia was painfully aware of everyone's curious stares. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her practically curling up into herself. I turned around in my chair to face her.

"Well, fancy seeing you here. So, you're a transfer student, huh? Mind if I just call you 'Lilia'?"

"Uh... What? Oh! S-Sure, uh...!"

"I'm here if you have any questions, okay? And I'll happily walk you wherever you need to go."

I gave her a big smile and watched as she turned bright red.

Her personality wasn't exactly ideal, but at least she had the default name. I wasn't sure I would've been able to call her something like "†Pitch-Black Princess Chevalz Valkyria†" or "Lilymellow" with a straight face. It was one thing to read a name like that in a game, but to say it out loud? Now, that was asking

a lot.

"Um, ah..." Lilia stammered, looking at me like she wanted to say something.

That's when I realized: She'd been the only one to introduce herself this year.

"Oh, sorry. I never told you my name, did I? I'm—"

"Ser!" a familiar voice cried out to me in a very unfamiliar address.

Christopher came bouncing down the hallway and peeked into the classroom. His mouth relaxed with relief as he saw my face.

"Hey, Christopher."

"Ch-Christopher?" Lilia repeated, incredulous.

Christopher turned to look at her with surprise. "Um...pardon me, but have we met before?"

"Uh... Huh?! N-No, sorry! I... I must have mistaken you for someone else. Ehe he he..." Lilia stuttered, looking down at her feet abruptly and twiddling her fingers.

Talking to yourself a little too loudly again, hm?

I could understand her surprise, though. Christopher looked a bit different from his in-game counterpart. He wasn't exactly recognizable at first glance.

"What're you doing all the way over here by the second-year classrooms, Christopher?" I asked.

"I was hoping we could eat lunch together, si— I mean, Ser."

"What about your classmates? Don't you have some friends you'd rather eat lunch with?"

"I'd rather have lunch with you, Ser."

Watching him puff out his cheeks in protest, something about his insistence struck me as strange. Surely he'd prefer to eat lunch with his new friends over his older sister? Was he being bullied or something?

No...he's only just enrolled. He wouldn't be getting bullied already...right?

That's when it dawned on me why he'd been so persistent in asking if I'd

made any friends last year.

"Comm—I mean, Lord Burton! Are you heading to the cafeteria too?"

"Oh. Hi. Robert."

Just as I was mulling over consulting my older brother about Christopher's mental health, another voice called out to me—this time from in front of me. Before I'd even noticed, Robert had approached my desk. His sparkling eyes pierced right through me as usual.

"R-Robert?!" Lilia shook her head in denial as she looked at him.

Robert's eyes briefly shot wide open, but he quickly composed himself and turned to greet her. "Nice to meet you, Lady Lilia. I'm Robert Diagrantz."

Lilia looked absolutely bewildered by his polite introduction.

"It can't be. They must simply share the exact same name..." she mumbled, in a voice just loud enough that someone else could've heard.

I could understand her consternation. The Robert of the game would never have introduced himself; it was wildly out of character.

"If you're going to cause a scene, then do it somewhere else, Burton."

"Sorry, Isaac."

"Isaac?!"

In shock for the third time, Lilia turned to look at Isaac.

To be fair, the love interests all had different hairstyles in this life than they did in the game. Some of them even had completely different physiques and personalities. As she'd played the game, I'm sure Lilia was floored that she hadn't been able to recognize anyone at first glance.

Isaac regarded her with a frown.

"Bold of you to use my first name like that when we've only just met. I certainly don't remember giving you permission to do so."

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"Uh, um... I-I'm sorry."
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"Hey, come on," I interjected. "You're scaring her."

It was now my turn to be on the receiving end of Isaac's glare. Then he let out a little "hmph" and averted his gaze.

"Sorry about that. He can be a little crabby," I said.

"I, um...uh... I'm sorry. I only just moved in with the baron, so I don't know anything about aristocratic manners yet," Lilia muttered quickly, looking down at the ground.

"I see."

She spoke like a fellow otome fangirl, but the impact of her words was radically different coming out of the irresistibly adorable main character. She shrank away physically as she apologized like her life depended on it. Her voice was so quiet, it threatened to disappear completely. For some strange reason, I couldn't even imagine *not* accepting her apology.

"Don't worry," I added. "You'll pick it up little by little as you go. If there's anything you're unsure of, you can always ask me."

"Th-Thank you."

She blushed furiously, the redness creeping all the way up to her ears. I was impressed that she still managed a proper "thank you."

Good girl, I thought, but then immediately berated myself for going too easy on her. This is probably just the main character's magnetism at work.

Or was it? Maybe it was just sympathy, plain and simple. Who wouldn't feel sorry for a girl from their country who was suddenly reincarnated and thrust into the lion's den of the aristocracy?

I clapped my hands together, signaling to myself that it was time for an attitude adjustment. I pushed my chair out and stood up.

"All righty, then! Why don't I show you around the cafeteria and give you the lowdown on the best menu items?" I said, taking Lilia's hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Lilia looked surprised, but she didn't rebuff me. Instead, she just toddled after me as I led her to the cafeteria.

"All of the love interests look completely different than they did in the game. What's going on?" she muttered, in another not-so-private monologue. I pretended not to hear her.

But even if I *had* heard her, well...I couldn't give her answers I didn't have, right?

## Think, Elizabeth

"Um, ah... Th-Thank you for today, um, Sir Burton."

"Don't mention it. How could I turn my back on a damsel in distress?"

It had been weeks since Lilia had transferred in. Short of anything that might've labeled me a stalker, I was doing everything I could to help her adjust. I stayed behind with her in the classroom after school, helping her as patiently as I could while she did her homework. She was a terrible dancer, but I paired up with her during dance class and let out a forgiving laugh whenever she stepped on my toes.

On this particular day, I'd managed to invite her over on the pretext of helping her practice her etiquette. Not only would this trigger an at-home date event, but it was also the perfect opportunity to show just how fabulous and noble I could be. Yes, I'd be the very image of a duke's son.

Originally, I'd simply hoped to use etiquette lessons as an excuse to share a meal with her. Once the meal was over, though, I'd found myself in a bind. There was nothing left to do but give her an actual course in etiquette. I might have been a duke's daughter, but I was a poor excuse for one. The best I could do was teach her the bare minimum.

The head maid had watched on in horror at first, under the impression that I was out to seduce more young ladies. But once she'd seen me teaching Lilia how to curtsy, she was moved to tears. Fortunately, that had been enough to get her to leave us alone in the living room.

Once we'd finished going over some of the basics, we took a break at the table for some tea. As I nibbled on a cookie, I raised a question I'd been curious about for some time now. "Did Lord Douglas never teach you any manners or etiquette?"

I'd heard that the Douglas family had always had close ties with the church, which set them apart a bit from most other noble families. Even so, they were

still nobility. At the very least, I would have expected the baron to give his adopted daughter a cursory education in etiquette. It struck me as strange that he had neglected this.

"N-No. He, um, he told me...that I didn't need to do anything."

"What?" I blurted out.

Lilia shrank back in her chair a bit in response.

"H-He wasn't the only one. E-Ever since I was little, everyone's told me that. I g-guess...it's because I'm so useless. Ehehe..." she clarified in a mumbling, almost apologetic voice. She looked down at the floor as she said this, scratching her head and laughing awkwardly.

Even a pretty girl like her—the kind that only graces this earth once every thousand years—wasn't pretty enough to make up for how awkward and forced that laugh was. I was struck yet again by the large discrepancy between her appearance and her personality.

But maybe that's part of her appeal...?

"B-But then I learned I was a saint...and that the baron was going to adopt me. I-I guess I felt like everything was going to change. I mean, being a saint sounds pretty special, you know? I guess I felt like...I was finally gonna be the main character. Heh heh... But n-now, it...really hurts to think back on how naive I was." She spoke quickly and quietly, the corners of her mouth twisting into a grimace. She was clearly trying desperately to force a smile, but it just wasn't happening. "I thought if I was a saint, then...p-people might expect more of me. B-But of course they didn't. I mean, I can't expect that when...when I haven't changed at all."

I could see how things had turned out that way, considering that this world placed a heavy emphasis on looks. The people in her life probably hadn't meant to be cruel when they told her that she didn't need to do anything or that it was okay if she couldn't. Most likely, they sincerely believed that. It was just par for the course in this world. Just as love interests were given a free pass for everything, so was the main character. As long as she was a saint—well, a beautiful one, of course—that was enough.

Maybe the problem wasn't her; it was this world.

Lilia's head drooped further and further as she looked down at the floor. Eventually, all I could see of her was the red whorl in her hair and her fingers, which she was twiddling idly on top of the desk.

"E-Even though I'm supposedly a saint, I-I can't even use my powers. I can't even heal a l-little scratch. B-But they keep telling me that's okay." Her voice came out even softer now that she was fully facing the floor. "Th-They say...it's okay if I can't do anything."

Tears began to fall from her eyes. I tore my gaze away from her and looked up at the ceiling, taking advantage of the fact that she wouldn't notice.

I always felt so awkward whenever people cried in front of me. I know that probably sounds like a recipe for disaster when I was out here trying to make myself into a playboy knight who breaks women's hearts left and right...but this was *different*. I didn't want to see a girl cry over something like *this*.

When I stopped to think about it, it did seem a little strange that Lilia would spill her guts like this to some guy (well, girl) she'd only met two weeks ago. Otome game protagonists *are* notoriously naive—they'll gladly accept an invitation to a near stranger's house, after all—but Lilia was really taking that to the extreme.

Seriously, how have you managed to survive all this time? I wondered.

I was pretty sure I already had the answer to that, though: The world of *Royal LOVERS* is nothing if not forgiving.

I'm sure Lilia's tears would've stirred feelings of protectiveness in some people, but unfortunately for her, I just felt uncomfortable. Besides, I had a feeling that my reputation would take a hit when the head maid returned to see her crying. I needed to put a stop to this immediately.

"I-I wonder why they always say that? Because I'm c-cute? It...it must just be because of my I-looks," Lilia muttered, wiping away her tears in a rather undignified fashion.

Don't do that... I thought, wincing inside. Now they're going to be all puffy tomorrow. Not only that, but they'd be red when she left today. I could

practically see the head maid glaring at me.

I briefly considered the possibility that this was all a part of some scheme, but my caution quickly subsided. Given Lilia's ugly crying, it was clear that they weren't crocodile tears.

I leaned across the table and dabbed at her cheek with my handkerchief. Wiping her tears with my finger felt like the correct choice to make here, but that would've been woefully ineffectual. She was crying way too hard for that.



"N-No one ever says that, of course. Th-They just say that I'm cute...or that I'm saintly," Lilia said, taking my handkerchief and blowing her nose on it without any hesitation.

That's...not what I gave that to you for, I thought, incredulous. Actually, who cares? I'm not the one who has to wash it.

"People only comment on my appearance. B-But I guess I'm not beautiful enough on the inside to...ask that anyone look past who I am on the outside. I mean, I've never thought about...how to improve my personality."

Classic main character problems...

It figured that her problems would be hard for others to understand, though. After all, she'd been reincarnated as a beautiful girl—and not just any old beautiful girl, but a heroine who was destined to find true love. As someone who'd crafted both my appearance and personality all for the sake of pursuing her romantically, I'd probably go my whole life completely unable to understand her plight.

I won't lie—part of me wanted to tell her to just get over it and enjoy the ride. I mean, no matter what she did, she was destined to have a happy ending. I knew my resentment wasn't justified, though. I only felt that way because I didn't understand what it was like to be her.

What's the correct thing to say here as a love interest? I wondered. I knew that this moment was make or break. I could seal the deal right here and now if I could only say the right thing and steal her heart.

Think carefully... She's played the game countless times. If she wanted to, she could even seduce Edward, who's notorious for having the most difficult route. In fact, she could have any of the love interests she wanted—and easily, at that. I have to find a way to make her throw that all away and go down my route. Think, Elizabeth. You're good at making it sound like you get people, right? What would Edward say? What about Robert, Isaac, or Christopher? And what about you, the playboy knight? What would you say?

"I had no idea being the main character was this hard..." Lilia mumbled.

I pretended not to hear her. Main characters aren't the only ones entitled to

selective hearing.

"I-I'm not even good at talking to boys..."

Well, that certainly wasn't a good foundation for an otome game protagonist. I almost found myself replying, "Yeesh. Sorry to hear that."

Although, when I gave it a little more thought, it occurred to me that most otome game protagonists don't have much experience with men. So, in a way, maybe it was a good foundation?

"I don't mind 2D boys...o-or fictional boys in general. I mean, I'm an Edward fangirl, so..."

The second half of that was clearly not something that was meant to reach my ears, so I decided to pretend it hadn't. I remained dead silent, bringing my tea cup to my lips. It had become unpalatably lukewarm.

"B-But now that I've actually met everyone, they're all just...normal boys. 3D boys. I-It's still better than real life, but..."

Hearing her reflections reminded me of my own first meeting with Robert. I'd felt the same way. As for the strangely masculine young man he'd turned into, well...two percent of that might've been my fault, but he had only himself to blame for the other ninety-eight percent.

"B-Boys in real life call me 'u-ugly' and 'gross' like it's no big deal. They think they can make fun of me just 'cause I seem quiet and reserved. S-Sometimes I wanna talk back and be like 'What gives you the right? You think *you're* special?' But...I can never get the words out. S-Still..."

I could tell she was getting revved up on some angry tangent. I was familiar with the kind of guys she was talking about, though. I'd certainly had the displeasure of encountering them myself—not in the forgiving world of *Royal LOVERS*, of course, but in my past life.

"Wh-Whether you're cute or not...it's all the same. People only care about I-looks. B-But...I don't have any *substance*. There's nothing on the i-inside that I can be proud of."

"Lilia," I interrupted, grabbing her chin in my hand. Her amber eyes looked up

at me.

When you listen to a woman's woes, there's an order you have to follow: You always give her validation, sympathy, agreement, and even more validation. Giving advice should be avoided in almost every situation. In most instances, it's just a whole lot easier to smile and nod along. But in Lilia's case, she'd never received anything but validation, so I knew I had no choice. Still, I knew I'd have to tread carefully if I didn't want to offend her.

"Personally, I think you're beautiful both inside and out. But if you want to improve, I think you have the potential to be even more captivating," I said slowly, making sure to pick my words with care. "If you think there's something you're lacking, then find a way to bring it into your life. If you feel like you're empty on the inside, then find something to fill the space with. That's just my opinion, though."

"Y-You only say that because you've *always* been handsome and gallant, Sir Burton."

"I don't know if I'd say that. You might be surprised by how much work I've put into that," I replied.

I found myself breaking into a smile. Honestly, I was delighted to hear she thought I was handsome and gallant. It meant that all my hard work was paying off. Of course, as a playboy archetype, I couldn't let anyone *know* just how hard I worked.

"Start by picturing the kind of girl you want to be. I'm sure you can think of some qualities you admire, right?" I said.

Lilia looked down at the floor, as if trying to avoid my gaze.

"It's okay if you don't embody those qualities yet, or if you feel like you're lacking in some areas. That's normal. You just have to fake it till you make it."

As I stared at the whorl in her hair, I thought about how my advice mirrored my own journey. I'd been playing the part of a love interest this whole time, and it was only this year that I'd actually *become* one. All in all, the first half of my life—well, hopefully I wasn't quite halfway through it *already*, but I digress —hadn't been so bad.

Anyway, it's better to put your goals into action than to just sit there and think about them. Even if you're only putting on an act, and even if you only *look* the part, just getting up and moving always goes a long way. If you just keep pushing, then at some point you'll realize you're not even ruminating anymore.

"Somewhere along the way, you will start embodying those qualities you admire. One day, you'll realize that you've been subconsciously making the decisions that the idealized version of yourself would make. You may feel like an empty container right now, but one day, you'll find that it's actually full—and that it didn't get that way just from empty wishes. One day, you'll be able to look at your actions and say, 'Yes, that's exactly what Lilia Douglas would do.' And you'll say that with *pride*. That's what I think." I took her hand, which had been lying on the table, in mine. Then I kissed the back of her hand, gave her a playful smile, and winked. "I'll do whatever I can to help you get there, Princess."

Lilia blushed. She lifted her head up and met my gaze. Her amber eyes were wide open, sparkling as they reflected all of the light in the room.

"Y-You're the first person who's ever said anything like that to me, S-Sir Burton." She looked so bashful as she said this, like a rosebud that had just begun to open. I was captivated by how lovely she was.

She'd taken my advice better than I'd expected. Privately, I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd managed to pass this critical juncture. Even better, I had a feeling that her opinion of me had improved even more.

Guess my older brother was right: even girls love knights.

I was particularly pleased with myself for the kiss I'd laid on the back of her hand. That was always a hit with the ladies.

"I-It's funny..." Lilia said. "Even though you're a boy, I don't feel uncomfortable around you."

"Th-That is funny!" I found myself stammering in response.

It's probably because I'm a girl! I added privately—but of course, I couldn't say that part out loud. That's weird, though. I could've sworn I told her my

name. And I'm pretty sure most people recognize "Elizabeth" as a girl's name...

But as I racked my brains, trying to remember when I'd introduced myself, I began to wonder if I'd ever actually had.

Now that I think about it, I feel like I got interrupted by Christopher and Robert...

Well, this was embarrassing. What kind of playboy forgets to introduce himself to a lady? As I was mulling over how I might tell her my name and break the news to her, I suddenly changed my mind. I had a feeling this wasn't the time for that. It certainly wasn't worth interrupting her heartfelt life story for.

For the record, there is almost *nothing* that's worth interrupting a lady for. No matter the situation, it's a bad move.

Well, that's that on that, then. I'll tell her when the time is right. Until then, I'll just let her think I'm a guy. I'm sure someone will set the record straight for her before long anyway.

"I-I actually...don't really know what kind of girl I want to be. Maybe a pprincess? I... I've always wanted to be a princess. A princess has a-a soulmate, I guess. She has a prince wh-who loves her. I've always wanted that, but I feel so uncomfortable around men."

The word "prince" immediately conjured the image of a real prince like Edward or Robert, but I banished the thought immediately. I was sure that the "prince" she was talking about was some kind of Platonic ideal—the kind from storybooks that would ride in on a white horse to save his damsel in distress. After all, that was every girl's favorite storybook archetype.

Oh, c'mon... You've been reincarnated into the world of an otome game, not a children's picture book. Dream a little bigger.

"I don't know...if I could ever actually be a princess. B-But...when you called me 'Princess,' I thought, maybe—even if I might not ever be worthy of that title —I can at least be *normal*. When I'm with you, Sir Burton, I feel like...I don't want to be a weird girl anymore," Lilia muttered, trailing off and growing quiet as she ended each sentence.

I gave her an inscrutable smile. I'd leave it up to her imagination whether or

not I'd heard everything.

"I wonder how I start his route...?" she muttered to herself as we were parting ways.

This time, I made sure to act like I hadn't heard a word.



The next day...

"E-Excuse me! Sir Burton?" Lilia called out as soon as I entered the classroom.

I was pretty sure that this was the first time that *she'd* been the one to seek *me* out, which I took to be an auspicious sign that she was trying to pursue me. *Looks like I'll be having red rice tonight*, I thought smugly. Old habits die hard, and the Japanese tradition of eating red beans and rice to celebrate was one that lived on in me even in this life.

"Th-Thanks for everything yesterday. I-If you wouldn't mind, I'd love to, um, do that again...sometime..."

"I'd love to. Oh, but next time, how about we forget about studying and just have some fun?"

As Lilia and I exchanged smiles, I could feel someone—actually, several someones—staring daggers at us. The other girls in our class were glaring at us, enraged. I could hardly blame them. Pretty bold of Lilia to declare what she had loudly enough for everyone to hear.

After all, yesterday had been a Sunday. She'd just broadcast to the entire class that we'd met up over the weekend. Not only that, but also that we might end up doing it again. No wonder all the girls who fawned over me were upset.

But I ignored their indignation, because that's what a love interest does.

I'd been spending less and less time with my fan club members lately and more and more time with Lilia. Even when I chatted with the other girls, I'd end up talking about Lilia. I wanted to maintain my reputation as a playboy knight who was kind to everyone, but I also wanted to make it clear that Lilia was *special*.

Lilia, for her part, seemed to be undergoing a transformation—albeit a slow

one. Her extreme social ineptitude had been on full display when I'd met her, but now she was starting to grow comfortable and converse like a normal person. It seemed like my efforts were starting to pay off.

Sure, she still acted a bit shifty, she could be a bit of a motormouth, and her eye contact left a lot to be desired, but those were her only real faults. They were trivial enough to overlook, especially when her beauty was more than enough to compensate. From time to time, she'd even crack a smile. Each time she did was a pleasant surprise. I was blown away by how beautiful she looked.

Never underestimate the power of the protagonist, I warned myself. If you're not careful, she'll have you wrapped around her little finger.

I knew she was interested in me too, though. Even when the other love interests were around, she'd seek *me* out. We also often seemed to "randomly" bump into each other at school—almost as if she could pull up an in-game map that showed where each character was and select my location.

But most telling of all, the way she looked at me was exactly the way the girls in the fan club looked at me. I could feel that same sparkle, that same fiery intensity...and I was certain I wasn't just imagining it.

Everything she did had a certain fangirl flavor to it (which made sense, since she'd been reincarnated into this world after playing the game). Still, for the most part, Lilia was a sweet, earnest girl.

And yet here I was, toying with her feelings all for my own gain. So, I'm sure you can imagine that my guilty conscience might've been weighing on me a bit... But shockingly, it wasn't—not even in the slightest.

You know, I could probably make it pretty big as a pick-up artist if I wanted to.

I couldn't remember when he'd said it exactly, but I remembered Isaac accusing me of being a lady-killer. As the word echoed in the back of my mind, I thought to myself how different things might've been if I were a man. *Good thing I'm not, or the girls would* really *be in trouble*.

(To give myself a bit more credit here, I suspect that my lack of a guilty conscience had more to do with the fact that I knew Lilia saw me as a love interest. As far as she was concerned, I was just playing my role. Why would I

feel guilty about that?)

Of course, no matter how infatuated the love interest may seem, you don't get to see the romantic ending unless you fulfill all the conditions. That's just how otome games work. Every player knows that. You can enjoy the oh-so-romantic date events to your heart's content, but if you're one single affection point off, you can kiss that fated scene under the cherry blossom trees goodbye.

Lilia knew that, which was why she was pursuing me so aggressively. It was obvious from the way that she talked about my route and her earnest efforts to accompany me whenever possible that she saw me as a love interest. That was why I had no problem whatsoever in taking a very businesslike approach to my role. I had a job, and I was there to do it.

But if circumstances allowed, I would aim for a friendship ending. As long as she went down my route, my happiness was guaranteed, and that was all I could ask for. In games like this, though, getting a romantic ending with the main character entailed making a lifelong commitment to her. Was I prepared to do that? Absolutely not.

I already had my hands full living my own life. No way was I about to take on someone *else's* as an additional responsibility. Besides, we'd never be able to get married in any legal sense. Surely she'd see that as a major drawback?

So, that left one, simple solution: a friendship ending.

Friendship endings have no epilogues and no postgame CGs with the love int —uh, *friend* interest. No matter which friendship ending you get, there's always a suggestion that something *more* might come of it, but it still ends on a platonic note. For my purposes, that was perfect. Maybe not so much for Lilia, but I had a feeling that she would find it to be just barely acceptable. It left her options open for the future, at least.

I was a love interest that didn't want love. I know how weird that sounds, but I was motivated to make it work. At the very end of my route, I could drop a line like, "I hope we can continue to be good friends" and give her a smile that suggested she just didn't have enough affection points to seal the deal.

I knew I had to tread carefully, though. This was my golden opportunity to

really reel her in, and if I didn't lavish her with enough attention now, it was possible she'd switch to a different route. I needed to be one-hundred-percent focused on getting her committed to doing my route. I'd have plenty of time to switch gears on her at the very end and launch her into a friendship ending.

No matter how unconventional she was, I was dealing with an otome game protagonist. The only way to win her heart was to go all out.

"Sir Burton!" one of the girls in class called out, interrupting my conversation with Lilia (and my scheming).

I turned around to face a group of glaring girls who were evidently very unhappy with me. I could see where this was going. No doubt they were about to dish out a classic mean girl line like, "What is a member of the *duke's* family doing cavorting with a mere *peasant*?"

In fact, I was pretty sure that things play out exactly like that in one of Christopher's events in the game. The girls' jealousy serves to highlight the special place that Lilia has in his life, so, from the player's perspective, it's a pretty juicy event.

There was just one thing about this that seemed a bit...off. If memory served, these scenes usually ended in the girls chiding *Lilia* for getting too close. Yet *I* was on the receiving end of their ire.

Weird... Oh, well. Nothing to do but take it in stride.

If I were to put myself in Lilia's shoes, though, it seemed a bit unfair for the other girls to target her—she really hadn't done anything to invite the girls' jealousy. I couldn't help but worry that things were going to be awkward for her after this confrontation, particularly since these girls were her classmates.

I stole a quick glance to check on her. Even though she was cowering behind me, there was a hopeful glint in her eye that seemed to be saying, "Ooh! Have I triggered an event?!"

Well...she seems to be handling this okay, at least.

"What's the matter, kittens?" I asked the girls.

"You don't seem to have the time of day for anyone but Miss Douglas

anymore!" the girl in front objected. If memory served, she was the daughter of a marquis.

The other girls all chimed in to agree. "Yes! What she said!"

Everything was going according to plan.

You know...this actually feels pretty good. Do Royal LOVERS love interests get to bask in this kind of glory on the regular? Unbelievable. Those idiots don't know how good they've got it.

The girls' fiery adoration felt like a special privilege that I'd earned as a playboy knight. But just as I was letting it wash over me, my reverie was cut short.

"How do you think that makes Lord Isaac feel?!" one of the girls cried.

"Come again?"

"Hey! S-Stop this!" a familiar voice interjected.

I looked to where it had come from, and sure enough, Isaac was fidgeting behind the gaggle of angry girls. But what exactly he had to do with the whole situation was still a complete mystery to me.

Why the heck are they talking about Isaac?

"Just what do you think you're doing?!" he cried.

"Why, we're stepping in to lend you a hand! Forgive my frankness, Lord Isaac, but it appears as though you're too cowardly to speak up for yourself on this matter."

Ouch, buddy. When the girls are calling you a sissy, that's when you know you're in trouble.

Isaac pushed his way through the girls, making his way to me with a flustered expression.

He'd apparently been swept up into all of this against his will, at least partly because he was too much of a gentleman to forcibly put a stop to their confrontation. The other part of the equation, of course, was that he simply had absolutely no clue how to deal with women. But the panicked, pained look on

his face told me that he had a pretty good idea of why they'd just called him a coward.

"I ask you again, Sir Burton! How do you think it makes Lord Isaac feel when he sees the two of you together?!"

"What?" I blurted out, without thinking.

"How do you think he feels watching the two of you waltz off to go study together? When he's trailing after you with all the notes he's prepared in his hands, looking on with a forlorn expression and waiting for you to turn around and call to him?!" the girl continued.

"And how do you think he feels during dance class, watching you dance with Miss Douglas and desperately wishing you'd ask *him* to dance again?!" another added.

"Ngh! S-Stop this at once!" Isaac cried.

"I refuse!"

"Be quiet, please, Lord Isaac!"

Isaac groaned, burying his head in his hands. He was outnumbered. The girls flat out ignored his protests.

"We understand your concern for Miss Douglas, of course. Certainly, she'll need someone to guide her now that she's suddenly become a saint. And surely there is much for her to learn now that she's the adopted daughter of a baron."

"But we simply cannot bear to see Lord Isaac despair like this any longer!"

"Sir Burton, please. Lord Isaac is your bosom friend, is he not? We beg of you, you *must* find a way to include him!"

One of the girls gave Isaac a thump on the back, propelling him forwards several steps closer to me.

Once, he'd had a reputation for being hostile and cold. The girls had kept him at a distance in dance class for fear of their toes' safety. And yet, here he was, surrounded by a crowd of those same girls cheering him on and encouraging him (if a bit forcefully) to pluck up some courage. Even some of the boys seemed to be watching on from a distance, nervously wishing the best for him.

Before I knew it, the ever-unapproachable Isaac had somehow found a place in everyone's hearts as a lovable character.

I found myself smirking at him as he approached me. He was desperately trying to hide his beet-red face. Seeing him like this, I remembered forcing him to do a twirl last year in dance class. I knew, of course, that this was probably hell for Isaac. No doubt he was absolutely mortified. But as his friend? I was kind of savoring the moment. Okay, I'll admit it—I was cackling inside.

"I-I...!" he stammered, desperately. "I'm the best student in our grade!" "I know."

"So...what I mean is...I could help you and Douglas study more efficiently." Starting strong with a sales pitch, huh? Classic Issac.

It was getting harder and harder to hold back my laughter...not that I was all that intent on stifling it anyway.

"And...I've been practicing dancing the men's part. I think I've almost perfected it." After a long pause, he continued. "You were my first dance partner, Burton. I want to keep dancing with you. You're good at dancing, and...you're my dance tutor."

He gave me a shy, sidelong glance.

I knew I was technically within my rights to turn him down, but how could I? After he'd put himself out there like this, turning him down would've absolutely destroyed my image in the eyes of all the girls in our class. I couldn't let that happen. Not to mention that Lilia would have suffered too—whatever daggers the girls stared at her now would seem like butter knives in comparison.

Besides, I felt like Lilia and I had had our fill of private studying and dancing events for the time being. Having Isaac tag along wouldn't really be an issue at this point. Spending time alone together was now less of a priority than demonstrating what a good friend I was. I had a feeling that it would be a much better move to make a grand, openhearted gesture—both to increase my favor with the girls in my class *and* with Lilia.

After all, any guy without male friends is going to have a hard time attracting

the ladies.

"Aw, sorry, Isaac. I had no idea you were feeling so left out," I teased.

Immediately, I felt him glare at me in response. If he hadn't been surrounded by a huge group of girls, he probably would've made a run for it by now.

"You know, I was actually just thinking we could use an extra person in our study group. Lilia's a really fast learner. I think she could use a tutor with a little more brainpower than what I've got to offer. It'd be a huge help if we could lean on you for some support. And hey, I'll dance with you any time—just say the word. Come on, Isaac. We're friends, aren't we? No need to be shy about it."

Lilia looked confused, but she nodded along timidly at my words.

I flashed him a suggestive smile, as if to say, "Well? What do you say?" and reached my hand out to him. He glared up at me discontentedly, a furious blush lighting up his cheeks, and finally took my hand with an air of resignation.

A round of applause erupted throughout the classroom. As Isaac turned his head away in a huff, I raised my free hand to receive it.

While Lilia joined in the applause, her expression made her look like she was a million miles away—like one of those space cat memes.

Yep, I thought. Figured that would happen.

## Being a Love Interest's Not a Bad Gig

It was a sunny afternoon just a little after lunch. Lilia and I were sitting on a bench in the garden behind the academy, enjoying the peaceful sight of the sunlight filtering through the trees.

After morning classes had ended, Lilia had approached me with a question.

"Can we talk?" she'd asked.

For once, we'd found a brief moment to be alone. Isaac had joined the student council this year, and he already had his hands full attending to his new duties. Robert, who'd recently become Edward's standin, had been escorted back to the castle.

Lilia had led me to a bench in the rear garden, and as soon as I'd laid eyes on it, I clapped my hands together internally.

Ah, yes...the Homemade Sweets event.

In the game, Edward introduces the main character to his "secret spot" behind the school campus. Over the course of the game, they occasionally meet there to chat. First Royal Academy prides itself on fostering equality between the students, but the rules are a bit different for a *crown prince*. In his case, having a mere conversation with someone who hails from a lowly lineage is still considered nothing short of a scandal.

And so, over the course of several secret rendezvous, the Homemade Sweets event is triggered. The main character offers Edward cookies she's baked, which he accepts with surprise. Naturally, as a prince, his lips have never touched such unrefined, amateur baked goods until this event. But as he takes a bite, he's overcome with their gentle sweetness.

"I do hope you'll make these for me again," he says.

And the main character, of course, promises that she will.

Anyway, that's the gist of the event...but now that Edward wasn't here to

participate in it (or any of his other events, for that matter), it didn't belong to anyone. It was ripe for the picking, and who was I to turn down perfectly good fruit? Or...sweets, I guess. Whatever.

What's yours is mine, I guess. Thanks, Edward.

It seemed pretty clear that Lilia was on the same page, since she was trying to trigger his event with me instead. This was pretty much all the evidence I needed to confirm my theory that Lilia was trying to use the game's events to raise my affection points. I would gladly play along. I'd ham up my reaction no matter what options she picked. I wanted her to think she'd scored big, getting a massive boost to affection points at every attempt she made.

As I waited to see what she'd do next, she turned towards me with an air of resolution.

"Um, I... I-I don't know if you have much of a sweet tooth, Sir Burton, but...I-I made some cookies. W-Would you like to try them?!"

She recited the main character's lines almost word for word as she offered me a bundle wrapped in parchment paper. Then she turned to face the ground.

I took the package from her and opened it. Inside, an assortment of cookies gave off a delicious, buttery smell that wafted up into my nose.

Once she'd told me they were handmade, I'd been prepared to lay into whatever had been inside—even if it had been nothing but charcoal. I had the confidence that I could not only polish it off, but that I could also do so with a smile. I'd even tell her it was delicious.

And sure enough, not once did my smile falter...not even when I saw the familiar logo on the parchment paper.

Wow, I thought. I gotta hand it to you, that's pretty bold.

Of course, I wasn't about to *tell* her that I recognized the little downtown bakery's logo. What was I going to say? "Oh! I love this bakery's freshly baked, rustic cookies!" Fat chance.

If I were being completely honest, I didn't have any particular affinity for homemade goods in the first place. The food's taste was far more important

than its creator, in my eyes.

Though personally, I thought she would've been better off being honest about the whole thing. All she had to do was say, "I bought you some of my favorite cookies." That would've been more than enough to surprise and delight any noble love interest. I knew I was glad that she'd made the effort to give me something tasty.

That being said, homemade goods held a special place in otome games. Whether that was because men actually enjoyed them or because it was a good opportunity for wish fulfillment, though, I couldn't say.

Events like this tended to work out pretty well for otome game protagonists, since they're generally pretty good at cooking and baking by default.

But Lilia, who'd been told all her life that she didn't need to lift a finger, probably hadn't been blessed with these narrative cheats. What's more, this world didn't even have ovens or microwaves, much less easy-bake kits or something as handy as the internet with its endless list of recipes. And if we were to *really* get into the weeds here, the seasonings and flour that were available here probably weren't nearly as unadulterated as the stuff we'd been used to in our past lives. Even if we'd retained some muscle memory of how to bake from our previous lives, it would take more than a little practice to make something edible. But *without* that muscle memory? Forget it.

(If you're curious, my signature dish in this life was baked fish. Essentially, I took a bunch of river fish, bundled them together, and wrapped them in big, locally sourced leaves. Then I salted them, placed them in a covered pan, and baked them over an open fire. Whenever I whipped this up at faraway training expeditions, I'd get feedback like:

"I just have to remember to count my blessings. At least it's edible..."

"If you think this tastes good, get help. It's a surefire sign that you've completely lost it."

"I never knew war could be this horrible."

I didn't appreciate my cooking being used as a litmus test for sanity, but there you have it...)

I could only imagine that Lilia didn't know her way around a kitchen either. No doubt she'd resorted to buying the cookies after trying and failing to make them herself. It seemed that presenting them as her own handmade cookies was her last-ditch effort at reenacting the event as best she could.

I couldn't fault her for that. Honestly, I was a little relieved. This was a hell of a lot better than having to choke down charcoal with a smile. Besides, most dukes' sons wouldn't have been familiar with the downtown bakery she'd gotten these from.

And so, as a noble and fabulous love interest, I knew that the correct choice here was to feign blissful ignorance.

"Thank you. I'm excited to give these a try."

I took a bite out of one of the cookies, savoring its buttery-soft texture as it melted in my mouth. It was sweet, but subtly so, and somehow nostalgic in its simplicity.

"Delicious! I could eat a million of these," I said with a chuckle.

"Uh, I... Th-There are plenty, so—! Please, have as many as you like!"

"Really? Wow, thank you! I can't believe I get all of these to myself."

I smiled at her as I said this, and she blushed in response.

You know, being a love interest's not a bad gig. Who knew a smile was all it took to make the boss happy? And I even get to eat delicious cookies... Most jobs don't come with perks like this.

Suddenly, I felt a presence behind us.

"Wow, those look delicious! Did you make them, Miss Lilia?" a familiar voice asked, interrupting my time alone with Lilia.

"Christopher..."

"L-Lord Christopher! How do you do?" Lilia greeted him politely.

He gave her a friendly smile in return. "Hello, Miss Lilia."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I noticed you here while I was out on a walk. Hey, can I have a bite too?"

He opened his mouth with an "ahh!" and waited for his bite like a baby chick.

Good grief... I thought. He always pouted when I treated him like a kid, but it was hard not to when he acted like one.

With a strained smile, I tossed a cookie into his open mouth.

"Mmgh... Mm, yummy! I love how buttery it is!"

Christopher's eyes lit up as I looked at him with a pleasant smile.

"Um, ah...!" Lilia stammered, putting her hands up awkwardly.

Crap... I always split my snacks with Christopher like this, but I didn't stop to think about how weird it must look.

I sneaked an anxious glance at her, but she didn't seem put off. Instead, she was just looking back and forth between Christopher and me with a mystified expression on her face.

"Wh-What exactly...is your relationship?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Um! S-Sorry, I don't mean to be invasive. It's just...you s-seem so close, I couldn't help but wonder..."

As Lilia struggled to get her question out, I found myself at a loss for words. I could hardly blame her for being baffled by that display. I mean, it wasn't exactly normal for upperclassmen to go around tossing food into underclassmen's mouths... But I wasn't sure if this was the right time to tell her that Christopher was my younger brother.

Besides, the powers that be had pressed Christopher to change the way he addressed me from "sis" to "Ser." Presumably, this had been to keep his characterization consistent. What would happen if I ruined the pretense? Was it even my place to spill the beans?

"Huh? Did you not tell her, Ser?" Christopher asked, eyes wide as he looked at me.

I gave him a wry smile, as if to say, "Oops! Sorry."

He turned to Lilia and smiled. With an inexplicable tone of pride in his voice,

he explained, "I'm Ser Burton's little brother."

"What?!"

"Well...adopted brother."

"l... I see..."

For a few moments, Lilia just looked back and forth between us in disbelief. Then, dropping her gaze to the ground, she muttered something to herself. This time, it was too quiet for me to hear.

Suddenly, she lifted her head up and said, "I'm an o-only child, but I wish I had a sibling. I-It must be wonderful having a brother!"

I was gobsmacked. That was the line the main character uses on Edward. I was impressed by how smoothly she'd shifted gears, using Edward's events and story points on me.

(Incidentally, in the game, Edward's response to this line is muted. His expression darkens, and he replies, "'Wonderful,' hm? I'm not so sure about that.")

No wonder the main character's able to beat Isaac's exam scores if she studies hard enough... With her potential, she could achieve things that are only possible through cheats.

An image of my older brother flashed in my mind. I looked over at my little brother, who was standing right there. If I didn't want to incur the wrath of the Heavens, I knew I couldn't repeat Edward's line.

"It sure is," I said instead. And from the bottom of my heart, I meant it.



After that, Lilia and I would occasionally hang out at the bench in the rear garden. I was extremely grateful for the privacy that it afforded us. It was nice to know we wouldn't be bothered by Isaac or Robert...and that the crown prince wasn't here to star in his own scenes. Sure, Christopher had burst in on us that one time, but hey, the occasional mistake here and there was only to be expected.

On this particular day, as Lilia and I were talking, I felt a strange presence

behind us. Then I heard the distinct *crunch* of footsteps on gravel. Immediately, I leaped to my feet, on guard.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lilia looking up at me with a strange expression on her face.

"Lizzie...?" a familiar voice called.

Oh, God. I know that voice...

"Lizzie!" it called again.

As I turned around, I was greeted by a pair of outstretched arms ready to wrap around me in a big hug.

In the blink of an eye, my body was moving on its own. I ducked, swerved behind the would-be hugger, and prepared to twist their arms behind their back. That's when I realized who the arms belonged to—the crown prince.

*Crap...* I thought, the full weight of this realization dawning on me. *I'm not going to come away from this with just a telling-off.* 

Fortunately, I was able to stop just in time. I slipped back in front of him, clasping both of his hands in mine and giving him a smile.

"Well, if it isn't Your Highness! It's been ages."

"Hm? That's strange... I just experienced a deep sense of dread, like something terrible was about to happen. Was it just my imagination?"

"Can't think of what else it'd be!" I replied, feeling my mouth stretching into an unnecessarily wide smile.

I gave him a meaningful look, silently warning him not to pursue his line of questioning any further. He smiled back at me, but I couldn't tell if I'd actually dodged the bullet.

It was like I'd looked away for a minute, and he'd turned into a completely different person. I was pretty sure he'd only been away in the West for about four months, but he seemed to have grown a whole lot taller. Without my elevator shoes, I was probably the shorter one now.

The last time I'd seen him, he'd lopped off his hair right in front of me.

Naturally, though, he hadn't left it in that messy state. The ends of his hair were looking fresh, lightweight, and neatly trimmed. In fact, his lustrous silver hair was now cut in a rather familiar style—one that emphasized its translucency. I found myself wanting to ask if it was the same hairstyle he'd worn in the game.

But it was only his face that looked familiar. Looking at him from head to toe, I felt a strange dissonance. Sure, it was strange that he was wearing his formal attire instead of his uniform, but it wasn't just that. He was looking a little...heartier than usual. I guess you could call it a "healthy glow." He had been born beautiful, so of course his delicate facial features weren't going anywhere. Still, it seemed like they'd lost a bit of their ephemeral quality.

Honestly, I was a little surprised to see such a difference in him.

Huh... Who knew recovering from a mysterious illness could change a person's vibe so dramatically?

"Lizzie..."

Hearing him call my name, I focused my gaze on his face again. He was wearing a strange expression that suggested he was equally likely to smile or burst into tears.

I could've sworn I'd been clasping his hands in mine, but without my noticing, it seemed he'd reversed it.

I could only assume that he must've been touched to see a familiar face after such a long absence from the academy. Maybe it reminded him of the joy of being alive...or something. To be fair, when he'd journeyed to the West for his surgery, he hadn't known what I had—that his procedure had a hundred-percent chance of success.

"I'm home. I've come back to you."

"Right..."

"Is that all you have to say? Come now. I know you can do better than that."

Oh, for God's sake... Here we go with the unreasonable demands again. It's like he never left!

After a bit of brainstorming, I managed to come up with a welcome more

befitting of a knight. "Welcome home, Your Highness. Your loyal subjects have been eagerly awaiting your return."

"Thirty points."

"Thirty points...out of thirty?"

"Out of a hundred."

Tough crowd. Pretty harsh rubric for something you made me come up with on the spot, I thought bitterly. I found myself wishing he'd stayed out West for a few more months.

"By the way..." he said, clearing his throat in a way that sounded strangely affected. He peered behind me. "Who is that young lady behind you? It's unusual to see you with company."

I was a bit offended by his characterization. It wasn't like I was some lonely loser; I just had a lot of things I had to take care of at school...*alone*.

"Oh. Allow me to introduce you..." I began, looking at Lilia.

She was sitting on the garden bench, frozen in place, and gawking stupidly at Edward.

Come to think of it, didn't she say something before about being an Edward fan?

Things were looking bad. *Real* bad. Edward was, unfortunately, a knockout beauty in a *very literal* sense. No matter how much I waved my hand in front of Lilia's face, I got no response—it seemed clear that she was out cold.

Did you really have to come back so soon, Edward? I thought, irritably. Couldn't you have savored your time away for a little longer?

To make matters worse, he'd chosen today, of all days, to dress up in his showy formal attire.

Seriously, read the room...

"Lilia? Li-li-aaa?" I called, shaking her by the shoulders.

"Bwuh-huh?! Wh-What is it?!" she answered, finally coming to her senses and looking at me. For a moment there, it seemed like she'd stopped breathing.

A deep blush blossomed across her cheeks.

As I looked into her eyes, I could've sworn I saw little hearts. There was no mistaking it: I was in deep, deep trouble.

Well, time for Plan B, I thought. (What was Plan A, you ask? Beats me.)

"Allow me to introduce you, Your Highness. This is Lilia—my girlfriend," I declared, beaming.

For a good minute, silence fell over the three of us.

"Guhh-wha—?!" Lilia shrieked, her voice somewhere between a cry and a yell.

I chuckled, then added with a teasing smile, "Just kidding."

"Mm... You tell such amusing jokes, Lizzie."

Edward ripped his gaze from Lilia and looked suddenly at me as he said this, giving me a cold smile. I recognized it immediately as his fake one.

(In case you haven't caught on, I'll translate his aristocratic euphemisms for you. "You tell such amusing jokes" means, in the language of laypeople, "Stop screwing around.")

Honestly, though, I hadn't been trying to pull one over on him. I'd just wanted to refocus Lilia's attention on me—and it seemed I'd succeeded.

I shrugged my shoulders and reintroduced her properly.

"Lilia has just awoken to her powers as a saint. She transferred into the academy this spring. Lilia, this is His Highness Prince Edward...although I'm sure he requires no introduction."

"Y-Your Highness!" Lilia squeaked, greeting him politely with a curtsy.

I found myself oddly touched by the display. Not too long ago, I wouldn't have put it past her to dive headfirst into a kowtow. I was pleased to see how much she'd improved from our one-on-one lessons.

"I-It's such an honor to meet you, Your Highness. M-My name is L-Lilia Douglas, and I've just been allowed to transfer into First Royal Academy as a saint."

"I... I see."

Minus the stutter, it was a great introduction. I'd have easily given it a passing mark. Privately, I gave Lilia a standing ovation for her efforts.

Edward, who had clearly been completely distracted, seemed to suddenly return to the present moment. He turned to face Lilia as she hung her head before him. "Yes, I've heard of you... You're Baron Douglas's adopted daughter, aren't you?"

"Y-Yesl"

"How astonishing. You were a commoner until just recently, yes? It seems your noble *friend* has given you quite a thorough education."

I puffed out my chest with pride. "Not bad, huh?"

As a duke's daughter, I wasn't exactly a key player in the world of the nobility, but my manners were a point of pride. I'd had them drilled into me from a young age, after all. And it wasn't just a lady's etiquette that I'd absorbed either—I knew how to conduct myself as a royal subject and a knight too.

But of course, Edward's praise wasn't really for me; it was for Lilia, who had worked so hard to commit each stuffy rule to memory during our private lessons.

I turned to her with a smile, and she looked up at me nervously. I knew that she'd missed the point of Edward's words. He'd been so roundabout in his compliment, it was hard to blame her.

"That was an excellent introduction, Lilia. His Highness was just admiring your manners too," I clarified for her.

"Huh? Um... H-He was...?"

I gave her a little pat on the head as she peered up at Edward timidly.

"But of course," he agreed after a few moments of silence.

He gave her his usual fake, formal smile, and I felt Lilia jolt beside me in response.

Uh-oh...she's getting lost in his gorgeous face again. Better do something,

quick.

I wrapped my hand around her back and put it on her shoulder, gently redirecting her attention towards me.

"Looks like all our private lessons paid off, hmm?" I said.

Lilia blushed. She looked up at me bashfully, a weak smile on her face.

She's so cute...

"Private lessons?" Edward repeated, interrupting my reverie. It seemed my emphasis had piqued his interest.

"That's right. I invited her over for some private lessons. Lady Lilia's zeal for learning really inspired me as her tutor."

"You gave her lessons at your house?"

"Yes."

After a moment of silence, Edward pressed: "In your room?"

"Hmm? No. We did our lessons in the living room."

Why? I wanted to add. Who cares?

Edward looked oddly pleased to hear that, though. He let out a triumphant little snort.

"Yes, I suppose that's only sensible. Your room is far too austere for company."

Excuse me? I thought, incredulous. What kind of nobleman insults a young lady's room out of nowhere like that? Besides, it hardly warranted that descriptor—especially now that I had all the handmade crafts he'd dumped on me to spruce it up.

"What can I say? I'm a minimalist," I shot back with a smirk.

Edward continued to meet my gaze, his smile unfaltering. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lilia growing flustered. She probably thought some kind of event had been triggered now that sparks had begun to fly between two of her love interests.

"Well!" I exclaimed, breaking the silence. "We wouldn't want to keep you, Your Highness. I'm sure you have places to be. Shall we go, Lilia?"

"O-Oh! Okay!"

I gave Edward a bow and, with my hand still wrapped around Lilia's shoulder, I turned around to leave.

"Wait!" Edward called, grabbing me by the arm. "You're free now, aren't you? Perhaps you could assist me with something."

"Huh?"

"I was actually just thinking I could use some help."

He smiled at me again—his fake, formal smile—and I was struck by a sense of dread.

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

Lilia and I followed Edward to the student council room. I'd seen it from the outside during my pilgrimage—uh, my tour of the school—but this was the first time I'd stepped inside. I noticed Lilia looking around the room, taking it all in, and realized she was probably thinking the exact same thing.

In the corner, a familiar blue-haired boy sat behind a mountain of ledgers.

"Hey, Isaac," I called.

He lifted his head to look at me, and I gave him a little wave. He was practically drowning under all the paperwork that towered over him on the desk.

"Is that you, Burton? And Prince Edward... Or have I pushed myself so hard that I'm seeing things?" he mumbled, squinting through his glasses as he stared at me.

"I enlisted a little extra support. Fortunately, they seemed to have some time on their hands, so I thought, why not put that time to good use?" Edward explained with a smile.

"Well...I guess that's better than nothing," Isaac grumbled quietly.

Hey, show some respect.

Upon closer inspection, I could see how exhausted Isaac was. The paper he held in his hand was littered with countless rows of numbers. In fact, the whole scene was completely different to what I'd pictured the student council room to look like. In the game, it was mostly just another location for romantic events between the main character and her love interests. There was no depiction of how much the members actually toiled away.

"Working hard, huh?" I asked Isaac.

"Of course I am."

"We'll be hosting the swordsmanship tournament soon, so we have to get all the necessary preparations in order. On top of that, we need to decide on the school festival budget for this fall," Edward added.

"Isn't that still half a year away?" I asked.

"Already half a year away, you mean."

I felt myself frowning reflexively at Edward's reframing. They say there's no point in talking about anything a year away, but I felt that way about anything that was even *six months* in the future. In half a year, the fateful dance during which the game's routes would branch would've already come and gone. I couldn't stomach thinking about it as "already" half a year away.

"May I ask why you're in your formal attire, Your Highness?" Isaac asked. "I hadn't even been notified of your return."

"Yes, I only just made it back to the kingdom. I came straight here after I gave my regards to His Majesty."

It seemed Isaac shared my skepticism. Without thinking, I turned to look at Edward again.

Did he seriously come straight to the academy just to do student council work? I wondered. It was pretty hard to imagine. No matter how well he'd recovered, this was a strange way to make the most of it.

Maybe he's the real workaholic...

"Well, I'm glad to see you've returned safely," Isaac concluded.

"Thank you. Apologies for leaving you with all this work to take care of in my

absence."

I tried to communicate with Isaac telepathically, begging him to ask for a greeting score. I had a funny feeling he'd also get thirty points out of a hundred.

As I listened to Isaac and Edward exchange a few more words, I remembered that they'd been dubbed "the student council boys" by the fandom.

"Lady Lilia, could you take these ledgers to the archive room next door? And bring back the files listed on this note too, please. Everything in the archive room is organized by date, so you shouldn't have trouble finding anything."

"Y-Yes, Your Highness!"

Edward handed her a stack of ledgers, placing a little note on top. It wasn't a large stack by any means, but it looked absolutely enormous in Lilia's tiny arms. I knew I couldn't let her carry them, not unless I wanted to bring shame upon playboys everywhere.

"I'll go with her."

As I leaped up to follow Lilia, who was tottering unsteadily towards the door, Edward grabbed me firmly by the shoulder.

"You stay here," he said.

He pushed me down into a chair facing the mountain of ledgers.

"These are comparisons of the budget estimates and actual costs that we incurred last year and the one prior. And here we have this year's budget estimates, along with a price list for..."

I eyed the documents in front of me, scanning the rows upon rows of numbers. Just looking at it made my head hurt, and I was already exhausted. *God, I had no idea that school festivals were this complicated...* I thought, suddenly armed with a new appreciation for Isaac's weariness.

Edward, on the other hand, seemed to be in high spirits for some reason. Turning to Isaac, he said, "You can go with Lady Lilia to the archive room. Help her find those files, will you?"

"Wait, what?" I sputtered.

"I'm in the middle of some calculations. How about you help her, Your Highness?" Isaac replied.

"What?!" I repeated.

I found myself turning to look between the two of them repeatedly, trying to make sense of the situation. If someone needed to help Lilia in the archive room, why couldn't it have just been me? If this were a comedy routine, I would've jumped in to announce, "I'll do it!" to which Edward would've replied, "Oh, well, why didn't you say so?"

But as I stood up to volunteer, I felt Edward's hand grow even heavier on my shoulder. I got the feeling he wasn't exactly in the mood for joking around. No doubt this was payback for almost twisting his arms behind his back earlier. I hadn't exactly apologized (since I hadn't actually done anything), but hey, I did feel bad about it.

Fair payback or not, though, I wasn't going to let Edward or Isaac get some alone time with her.

They both had special Student Council events that might trigger. Edward's event involved helping Lilia grab a book that was too high up for her to reach. Isaac's involved saving her from a falling bookshelf and pinning her down in the process. Both events involved a lot of heart-pounding physical proximity and teemed with suggestiveness. Basically, I was done for if either of them were triggered.

"You stay here and make out with some math, Isaac! I mean, you're practically married to it, right?" I cried, whipping out a crude, childish taunt for impact. It was a trick I'd learned at the training grounds.

"What?!"

Both Isaac and Edward turned to look at me, their faces and bodies stiff with astonishment.

Got 'em! Nothing like a little crass humor to shock the senses.

Now that they were both caught off guard, it was time to take advantage of it. I grabbed Edward's hand—the one he'd placed on my shoulder—gently removed it, and stood up.

"Where did you learn that?!" Edward cried.

"Thanks, guys! I'm counting on you!" I yelled.

I ducked under Edward's arm and made a run for the archive room, slapping Isaac on the back affectionately as I passed by him.

"Lizzie!" Edward cried after me, but he was too slow. His angry voice reached my ears as I slipped into the archive room...

...just in time to spot Lilia stretching, trying to reach a file on the top shelf.

Perfect timing, I thought as I stepped forwards to grab it for her.

"Is this the one you're after?" I asked, looking down at her with the gentlest smile I could muster.

Her face was just centimeters away from mine. She blushed so intensely, it was like watching an electric kettle rattle as it instantly reached a boil.

"Th-Thank!" she sputtered, forgetting the "s."

She glanced around, flustered, before realizing that there was nowhere for her gaze to land. Resigned to her fate, she looked at me as I placed a ledger in her hand.

"Which one do you need now?" I asked.

"Huh?! O-Oh, um..."

I leaned over her, taking a peek at the note in her hands. I knew perfectly well that it would have been more efficient to just *take* the note and bring it closer to my face, but efficiency wasn't my priority. My goal at the moment was simply to get as close to her as possible—I was a love interest, after all.

Lilia's blush had spread all the way to her ears. At this point, she seemed ready to burst.

"Lizzie!"

The door flew open with a loud thud.

"Your behavior is *hardly* befitting of a noble!" Edward cried, his face beet red. As he stomped over to me, his shoulder hit a ladder that had been propped up against one of the shelves.

Lilia let out a yelp as the ladder came crashing down towards us. It hit the bookshelf and sent files and ledgers flying down from above us.

That's when I realized why Lilia had let out a yelp—an event had been triggered.

"Watch out!"

"Eek!"

I leaped up, acting like I was in a hurry to protect Lilia from the files. To tell you the truth, I didn't need to be in any particular rush to fend them off. I could've handled them just as well at a leisurely pace, but that wouldn't have quite the same effect. As a love interest, I needed to maximize impact.

A flurry of files and books hit my back, but it didn't hurt. It was certainly a lot less painful than being hit by a sparring sword, at least.

Once the racket of falling objects had quieted down, I opened my eyes with a blink and asked, "Are you all right?"

Just centimeters from my face were Lilia's wide, amber eyes peering back at me.

That was when I realized that I was on top of her. I'd pushed her down to the floor, covering her with my body to protect her. Privately, I breathed a sigh of relief that I'd successfully replicated Isaac's event.

Lilia opened and closed her mouth repeatedly, as if she were about to say something.

I gave her a carefree smile and teasingly murmured, "Well, fancy seeing you here."

"Uh...Gmmgh..."

It seemed Lilia had completely lost her ability to comprehend—much less replicate—human speech.

As I gave her a wry smile, I felt a rough grip tugging at the back of my collar, forcing me up. I twisted around to see Edward, who was wearing an unusually ill-tempered expression.

"I thought I told you to help tidy up, not to make an even bigger mess!"

"Uh, you're the one who knocked down the ladder, Your Highness," I retorted, looking down at him as I stood.

Awfully bold of you to chew me out for problems you created. Who do you think you are, some kind of prince? I thought, realizing my mistake only a second later. Oh...right.

Edward remained silent, glaring at me. We stared each other down for a moment before he turned towards Lilia.

Almost instantaneously, his voice softened. "Lady Lilia, I wouldn't want to keep you. You should head home before it gets late. Why don't I call for a carriage for you?"

"I should head off too," I chimed in.

"No. You stay here and help me tidy up."

His rebuttal was swift and merciless—a complete one-eighty from the tone he'd taken with Lilia.

As much as I would've liked to go home, there wasn't much point putting up a fight. I'd already accomplished what I'd set out to do by triggering the archive room's event.

Besides, Edward had unwittingly played my wingman—the least I could do was help him clean up. I shrugged my shoulders and put my hands up in a show of resignation.



We actually finished tidying up pretty quickly, in no small part because Isaac came to assist. It soon became clear that he'd had an ulterior motive to join, though—he seemed to expect me to help him with budgeting afterwards.

"Why don't we just cap everything at three percent so we don't have to do too much guesswork and analysis?" I offered.

He looked at me like I was the devil and booted me out of the student council room.

That's weird... I thought every company exec used that strategy? Apparently, though, I'd been sorely mistaken.

After returning home, I retreated to my room and did my daily dragon flag reps.

Just as I was in the middle of one, I heard a frantic knocking at my door. Almost immediately, the head maid flung it open and burst into my room with uncharacteristic forcefulness.

"Lady Elizabeth!" she gasped between pants.

"What's wrong? Did Christopher take a tumble in the garden?"

"No!"

Seeing how panicked she was, I stood up from the couch to prepare myself for whatever came next.

"H-His Highness has sent you a dress!" she said.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time Robert's done that... Is it really that big of a deal?"

Incidentally, the Pea-Brained Prince had actually personally paid me a visit for my most recent birthday (since he finally knew who I was). He'd presented me with a sword belt and an IOU coupon.

I appreciated the sword belt. It was practical—something I'd actually use every day. The coupon, on the other hand? Absolutely baffling. I mean, what was I, his mother? Childishness aside, it didn't seem like a great idea for a member of the royal family to give anyone that kind of power.

It just so happened that the head maid—and, unfortunately, Christopher—had been there to witness the event, and I hadn't heard the end of it. I guess they'd considered it strange that Robert had deigned to pay me a visit at home for the first time only *after* our engagement had been broken off. Their incessant questioning and prying had been enough to drive me crazy.

Honestly, though, I just didn't have any answers for them. Who was I to know the inner machinations of Robert's mind? *Ask him yourself*, I wanted to say.

"But it isn't from Prince Robert—it's from Prince Edward!" the head maid

clarified in a near shriek.

"Wait... What?"

A dreadful sense of déjà vu washed over me. I thought ruefully back to some of the hints he'd dropped. Why did I have the funny feeling that something like this had happened before?

The head maid brought me the package he'd sent, which I opened cautiously. Sure enough, a dress was packed neatly inside.

The lustrous gown shone in a color somewhere between white and silver. The fabric was clearly of very high quality—silk, probably?—and soft to the touch. Even a lout like me could tell just from running my hand along it that it was crafted with high-quality materials. What's more, it was inlaid with glittering lace embroidery that was so intricate, I could've sworn it was machine-made. Upon closer inspection, the lace was dotted with dozens of tiny beads.

Wait...I don't think these are beads. Are they gemstones?

I was stunned. It was an absolutely gorgeous dress.

As I spread it out in front of me, I realized what an unusual shape it was. It hung straight down in something like an I-line. Just like the lacework, I couldn't imagine anyone sewing a silhouette like this without a pattern—it was so intricate and perfect that it seemed impossible to do.

Impressed as I was, though, I wished this wasn't happening.

The head maid looked pale as a ghost. "What is the meaning of this? You've only just had your engagement to Prince Robert called off, and Prince Edward is already sending you dresses?! How in the world will I explain this to Duke Burton?"

I could certainly understand her consternation. Generally, such gifts were tantamount to courting a woman—and if *I* knew that, then Prince Edward did too. By comparison, this made even the *curtains* he'd gifted me seem appropriate. Apparently, his desire to show off his sewing had won out against his common sense.

Could you get any more over-the-top, though? I thought dejectedly, gazing

into the distance.

To really rub salt in the wound, he'd even gone through the trouble of sending the present to *my house*. I could only assume that he'd figured I'd find some reason to refuse it if he'd tried to give it to me in person (which was probably true, actually).

Seeing that the head maid was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack, I did my best to respond to this in a cheerful, nonchalant manner.

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"No big deal," I said. "We'll just send it back."
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"We'll what?"

"We'll send it back. We can include a little note that he must have sent it to the wrong address."

"H-He'll be mortified! We couldn't possibly!"

I thought she'd hop on board with my suggestion, but unfortunately, my plan seemed to have backfired. Just when I thought she couldn't get any paler, the color somehow drained even further from her face.

"It was delivered directly by a royal carriage! There's simply no way this was sent here by mistake!"

"Hey, everyone makes mistakes. Even His Highness is still only human," I said, placing a hand on her shoulder. I gave her the most seductive smile I could muster, knowing full well it would have absolutely no effect. "As loyal subjects of the crown, it's our duty to intervene when a member of the royal family is making a mistake. Our loyalty calls on us to summon our courage...wouldn't you agree?"

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"Lady Elizabeth..."

"Yes?"

"This is hardly the time for tomfoolery!"

"I know, I know..."

Ah, what did I expect?
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I should've known my father's words wouldn't carry the same weight coming

out of my mouth.

"All right. I'll go to the castle and return it to him personally, then."

"That would be even worse!" she cried.

"Okay, then why don't we have my older brother send it back? Prince Edward should've known better than to nonchalantly send such a misleading present over. We can just have my brother say something like, 'Could you kindly stop seducing my little sister?'"

"Do you really think the earl would ever say something like that?"

"No," I replied, then burst out into laughter.

I might've been the one to suggest it, but picturing my brother saying that was downright absurd. It was, admittedly, wildly out of character for him. The Honorable Duke's son would never find fault with a gift.

Still...this was classic Edward behavior. Why couldn't he just send me a *normal* souvenir from his travels out West? Something inoffensive, like food?

Then, it hit me.

"Ah-haaah—this dress is a souvenir."

"Pardon?" The head maid looked at me with a dumbfounded look on her face, mouth agape.

I did my best to make an expression that said, "It all makes sense now!" Folding my arms across my chest, I nodded contentedly.

"His Highness just came back from his trip, right? This may come as a surprise to you, but we actually talk sometimes at school. He probably sent this souvenir to cheer me up after the engagement was annulled. Yep, that's gotta be it!"

"Huh? Wait... What?"

"Mm-hmm, yep... Now that I'm taking a closer look at it, it's definitely got that 'Western' feel to it. You don't see dresses like this *here*."

"Well, now that you mention it..."

She seemed to be warming up to the idea.

Okay, just gotta sell it a little harder and I should be in the clear...

"Actually, I've heard that it's common in the West to send clothing as consolation gifts. Seems like His Highness has been studying up on his foreign culture! Not that I'm surprised, of course."

"Really ...?"

"Really!" I insisted emphatically, lying through my teeth. That was my secret: Anytime I told a lie, I said it with my whole chest. "Let's tell father that he's sent me a souvenir."

The head maid was clearly deeply confused by the tale I'd spun, but she seemed to accept it in the end.

Whew... That was a close one.

I quickly returned the dress to its box. While the head maid was still coming to her senses, I tried my luck and thrust it at her.

"I don't have any need for something like this, though! Of course, I wouldn't want to spurn a gift, so please store it carefully," I said. "Somewhere safe, with the rest of the gifts...like, deep in the back of the closet, where I'll never see it again."

## **Banned**

As May began, all the school could talk about was the upcoming swordsmanship tournament. It was basically this world's version of a field day—a mandatory sports event in which all male students were required to participate. Ostensibly, it would be a chance for them to put the swordsmanship skills they'd learned in class to use against each other. And, as you might expect, it meant that everyone was putting at least a little more effort than usual into practicing their skills.

By rights, I should've been busy preparing for it too...at least, that's what you'd expect, right?

Believe it or not, I'd been *banned* from the tournament. Why, you ask? Great question! *Apparently*, my sword fighting prowess, and I quote, "needed no proving." Since I'd received an exemption from swordsmanship classes at the academy, they'd reasoned that my skills required no further assessment. It was all very convenient. *Too convenient*.

But when they'd reminded me that I'd sought an exemption on the basis that I posed a danger to the other students, I could hardly argue. Still, it seemed like such a waste to let this opportunity pass me by. It would've been the perfect chance to show off to Lilia.

"What if we turned it into a shot-put tournament instead?" I suggested to Isaac, hoping I could use his authority as a student council member to make it happen.

"Not a chance," he said, shooting me down without a second thought.

No shot-put, huh? Guess there's no point suggesting a triathlon either...

"I feel your pain, Commander. I'm bummed I can't participate either."

In the game, Robert wins the tournament. But since in our world he'd earned his swordsmanship license last year, he was also banned from participating in the tournament.

Wonder who's going to win it now? I thought to myself. It seemed safe to bet that one of the knight cadets would probably claim victory.

Now that Robert had joined in the conversation, I thought I'd float my idea by him.

"I bet you'd be interested in a shot-put tournament?" I tried.

"Shot-put? That's a great idea! I think I'd be pretty good at that!"

"Seriously, it's not going to happen," Isaac interjected, seeing that Robert and I were starting to get carried away with the idea. "I'm sure you two have all the time in the world, but *some of us* have to change for our swordsmanship classes."

As he said this, I looked around the classroom. There was no one else but the three of us. Naturally, the girls had left some time ago (since they took a while to get ready), but even the rest of the boys had already headed to the changing rooms.

"No one's here. Just do it while we're talking," I said.

"I can't just *change here*!" Isaac grumbled, already heading out of the classroom in a huff with his bag in hand.

Well, so much for the art of persuasion...

Robert sat down in the seat next to me. As usual, the intensity of his sparkling eyes practically bored right through me.

"Hey, how do you spend your free time, Commander?"

"Mostly strength training."

"Oh! Same here!" he exclaimed with excitement.

As he leaned forwards, I could've sworn that he'd turned the sparkles up a notch.

"Edward brought back a book of military tactics from the West as a souvenir. The section on training methods is fascinating. I've been thinking of adding some of their practices to my own training regimen."

Oh, so you can give Robert an appropriate souvenir? Wish you'd given me a

book on military tactics, I thought, cursing Edward privately. Maybe I could exchange that dress for one...

Robert, probably noticing my envy, peered at me thoughtfully. "Want me to bring it to school some time?"

"That'd be great. I'd love to take a look at it."

"Awesome! We can look over it together!"

I found myself breaking into a smile at his strange enthusiasm.

From there, we went on to ramble about our individual training plans, how to switch up our regimens at the training grounds, and the best jogging routes around town. Robert seemed to be having a blast talking about it all, and his joy was infectious. I couldn't help smiling with him.

"You know...I think this is the first time we've had a real conversation," he noted suddenly, bringing the conversation to an abrupt halt.

"Is it?" I asked, cocking my head.

"Yeah. It is." He let out a bittersweet laugh. "Weird, right? I mean, we were engaged and everything... Hard to believe we're only having conversations like this *now*."

"Well, sure, but that was just a political engagement. So, it's actually not that unusual."

"I— Yeah. Yeah, I guess you're right."

It was strange to hear him stumble over his words like that. He looked around the room restlessly, avoiding my gaze, before casting his eyes downwards.

Come to think of it, he doesn't make eye contact in most of his in-game portraits either.

"I've just... I've been thinking. What if I'd talked to you like this sooner?" he began hesitantly. The words tumbled out slowly, as if he wasn't quite sure himself of what he was saying. "What if we'd spent more time together like this, you know? Would things...be different?"

Now it was my turn to laugh. I snorted through my nose as I let out a little

chuckle. "And here I thought you were gearing up to say something profound. In the half a lifetime I've lived so far, I've spent most of my time with either my family or *you*, Robert. No one else even comes close."

Robert drew in a sharp breath, his eyes growing wide.

"I mean, come on, you're a member of the self-proclaimed 'Burton Battalion,' aren't you? I saw you practically every day at the training grounds before we even started school here. And we still see each other there once a week, don't we?"

"Then..." he began, looking into my eyes. There was an unusual earnestness in his gaze—a different twinkle than the one I usually saw. "Maybe...I'm not too late."

I didn't really know what he meant by that, but it didn't stop me from pretending I did. I nodded magnanimously, as if to say, "It's never too late."

After all, the boy was only sixteen. At his age, there were few things that were too late for him to try. Besides, despite what they say, a dog is never too old to learn a few new tricks.



"Hey, what if we wore masks?"

"Wouldn't they catch on immediately, though?"

"Well, what if we just hijacked the tournament's headquarters?"

"Now there's an idea. If it's the same as last year, then the tournament will be taking place over here. And the headquarters...will be over here, right?"

"That's right. We can go around the building behind it and distract them."

"Wouldn't it be better to surround them out front so they can't run away?"

"No, it's not the students we need to be worried about—it's the knights who are refereeing."

"What the hell are you two scheming?"

Having found some time on our hands waiting for everyone to finish up with swordsmanship class, Robert and I were cooking up a plan to participate in the

upcoming tournament. Just as we were feverishly strategizing, Isaac returned from class to interrupt us. We couldn't afford to have the savvy Isaac catch wind of our plans, so we exchanged meaningful looks and burst into laughter in an effort to distract him.

"Welcome back Isaac," I said. "Sheesh, you look like you've taken a real beating!"

Isaac frowned deeply. He'd gotten a lot better at dancing, but his swordsmanship still had a long way to go. As his tutor, I was really hoping he'd at least make it through the first round of the tournament.

"Want to practice with me, Guildford?" Robert offered.

"That won't be necessary. I've got Burton."

"Commander? You're his tutor?"

"Yep," I answered. "We practice together from time to time."

Robert's eyes went wide with shock. He reached out and clung to me pitifully. Even though he was the taller of the two of us, moments like these always made it feel as if he were looking *up* to me.

"How could you?!" he cried. "I thought I was your favorite pupil, Commander?!"

"Since when have you been my pupil?" I asked.

To be fair, our relationship was certainly closest to that of a master and his pupil...but I didn't recall ever telling him that I'd take him under my wing. Furthermore, despite his insistence on calling me "Commander," I had absolutely no intention of leading anyone to battle.

As Isaac watched my attempt to pry Robert off of me, his frown deepened further.

He let out a very affected-sounding sigh. "Maybe if I didn't have to spend so much time helping *a certain someone* study, I could devote more time to my swordsmanship."

"Hey, I'm sorry, okay? C'mon, don't be like that."

As he turned to glare at me, I clapped my hands together in a praying gesture.

The swordsmanship tournament was swiftly approaching, but midterms would follow right on its heels. If I wanted Lilia to be surprised (and, more importantly, impressed) by my grades, then I couldn't afford to have Isaac sulk and ignore our study sessions.

My humble appeal must've worked, because Isaac's frown softened. Then, turning to face Robert and me, he said, "You may be interested to hear that the swordsmanship tournament will now include an exhibition match."

"What?"

"You and Robert will face off before the tournament to generate some excitement."

Robert and I turned to face each other as we took in the news. Robert's eyes were aflame with excitement; no doubt I had the same fire in mine.

We both turned to face Isaac hopefully. Isaac pushed up his glasses, averting his gaze somewhat bashfully.

"We knew you'd probably get up to trouble if you weren't allowed to participate. We figured it would be best to give you an outlet...somewhere to blow off steam."

Busted.

Not that I was complaining. Exhibition match or not, I was happy just to have the opportunity to show off my skills.

Nothing like a good friend...no, a best friend!

"Thank you, Isaac!" I cried. "If you were a girl, I'd kiss you!"

"What?!"

"Yeah, thanks, Guildford! Want me to kiss you too?" Robert chimed in.

"I didn't do it for you, all r— Ow! Don't hit me! You lay off too, Burton! Gah?! If you don't stop this at once, I'm going to get very cross!"

Isaac seemed to be getting legitimately pissed off at us slapping him on the back, so we hurriedly withdrew our hands. Without any girls around to see us,

the scene had quickly devolved into something you'd see in a boys' locker room.

I wonder if Lilia's coming back from the changing room soon?

"Well! If that's the plan, then I've gotta get going!" Robert announced as he stood. "I'm heading off to learn the ways of the warrior on the road!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he was rushing out of the classroom, leaving Isaac and me behind to sit in blank amazement. I'd never seen someone so eager to pack their bags and leave before in my life.

"'On the road'...? But what about classes?"

"How's he going to find the time to study for midterms?"



After he left that day, Robert didn't return. It seemed he'd stopped coming to school altogether.

How can he just skip school so casually? I wondered. Doesn't he know that attending classes is kind of our job as students?

It was strange: Last year, I'd been perfectly content to kill all the free time I had—you know, since I didn't have to take swordsmanship classes—on my own. Now that I'd gotten used to having someone to talk to, though, it suddenly felt mind-numbingly boring to go back to that.

Partly, this was exacerbated by the additional swordsmanship classes that had been added to our schedules in preparation for the tournament. The sheer volume of free time I now had was a bit overkill.

I couldn't be bothered to study on my own, so I took my textbooks to swordsmanship class and decided to spectate.

The minute the instructor saw me, he came rushing over with a panicked expression on his face. He took a stick and drew a circle on the ground.

"Don't you dare leave that circle, all right? And don't even *think* about touching the sparring swords. I'm begging you, behave yourself," he warned.

Humans really are such strange creatures. Even if there's something we have

no interest in whatsoever, the moment we're told it's forbidden, it suddenly becomes *deeply* tempting.

Of course, I wasn't about to go and pick up a sword—even if the instructor hadn't warned me not to. (I do tend to behave myself...most of the time.)

So, I complied. Just as I sat down in the circle he'd drawn and began to look over my textbook's practice problems, the other students finished their laps. An exhausted-looking Isaac returned with a wobble in his step.

"Good hustle, Isaac!" I yelled.

He glared back at me with a look that said, "Must be nice sitting there on the sidelines." But we both knew I would've given anything to trade places with him.

While he was catching his breath, I found myself broaching a topic that had been on my mind lately. "Hey, what do you think Robert's up to during his absence? You don't think he's really out there meditating under waterfalls and holing himself up in the mountains, do you?"

"Who knows? Actually, who cares?"

Maybe he was just tired, but he didn't seem to share even an ounce of my concern.

"Midterms are coming up soon. He's gonna have a hard time if he doesn't show up to any classes," I continued.

Isaac scoffed. "Well, he didn't seem to have any problem beating me last year. I don't think we need to worry about him."

So that was at the root of it—Isaac still held a grudge against Robert for getting a higher score last year. No wonder his mood soured whenever I tried to talk about Robert.

Isaac probably thought that Robert was just secretly a genius, but I had my doubts. Robert had practically been a different person during final exams last year. He'd been completely in the zone.

His performance on the final exams certainly couldn't have been chalked up to sheer luck—you didn't get those results just from closing your eyes and

randomly circling answers. But I had a feeling that his grades were more a product of his temporarily heightened senses than of any latent book smarts.

Basically, I felt pretty confident in my estimation that his final exam performance had been a fluke. His true academic capabilities were probably closer to what we'd seen from him throughout the rest of the year: on the lower end of average.

I knew it wouldn't look that way to Isaac, though. He was still smarting from last year's loss. I might have been notorious for my insensitivity, but even I knew better than to clap him on the back and say, "Hey, don't worry about it. It was just a fluke!"

Instead, I ended up just giving him some noncommittal response.

"Well, I dunno about that..."

Unlike final exams, which featured a practical section in subjects like dance and swordsmanship, midterms were purely academic tests. That left Robert and me at a real disadvantage.

When finals approached, we all still had our practical classes to attend—which took away from time that could be spent studying our academic subjects. Teachers knew that this resulted in lower test scores overall, so they lowered the pass threshold, making it a lot harder to fail. Midterms, on the other hand, weren't graded so generously. If you let your focus slip even a little bit, you were at a real risk of failing.

"Maybe you should be worrying about your own grades," Isaac said.

"Oh, believe me, I am. Why do you think I've got this textbook here?"

"You got that answer wrong."

"Aw, come on. Why didn't you say so sooner?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

I took another look at the answer. When I realized that I hadn't even made it through my initial calculations without making a mistake, I felt a wave of disappointment wash over me. I didn't feel like attempting the problem again, so I turned to the next page instead.

Too many numbers... Think I'll skip this page too.

After he'd watched me for a while in silence, Isaac finally muttered, "And here I thought you'd be worried about Douglas."

"Nah, Lilia will be fine. She can do anything she puts her mind to."

A pregnant pause fell over us as I realized that, for Isaac, there was no reason to think that she'd be fine. He had no idea that Lilia had main character powers (which is to say, that her potential was absolutely through the roof).

To be fair, in many respects Lilia was *not* "fine." But when it came to midterms? I wasn't worried.

"And you don't think you need to worry about me?" Isaac asked, breaking the silence.

"Please. I need you to worry about me."

At this, a smile spread across his face. "All I ever do is worry about you. I worry more than you know."

His words seemed to be laden with some hidden meaning. A loud silence followed, which seemed to carry the forceful suggestion: "That's why you need to hit the books."



"G-G-Good luck, Sir Burton!"

"Thank you, Lilia."

It was the day I'd been waiting for: the tournament.

I turned to give Lilia a carefree smile as she cheered for me. It felt like the stars had aligned, giving me *just* the right coming-of-age scene that I needed to turn up the charm.

"If I win, my victory is all yours," I declared.

I turned my head so she could see my best angle and gave her a wink.

"E-Eek!" she squealed with delight. I could see hearts in her eyes.

After parting ways with Lilia, I made my way through the temporary spectator

seating to the middle of the field. As I looked around at the audience, I noticed several girls carrying pom-poms the color of my hair. Unlike the plastic pompoms of my previous world, these were made of ribbons. Other girls were holding banners or signs that displayed my name proudly.

Many of the boys, on the other hand, were wearing bright-green headbands—the color of Robert's eyes—or waving flags of the same color and yelling, "Let's go, Robert!"

Wow. Who knew you were so popular with the boys, Robert?

I wouldn't have been surprised if some of them were cheering for him out of sheer spite, though—my popularity with the girls inspired a lot of envy.

In any case, everyone was as fired up for the exhibition match as they were for the actual tournament.

As I walked by, I noticed a group of boys unfurling a banner emblazoned with Robert's name. Their faces seemed familiar...and sure enough, as I got a little closer, it became clear that they were cadets from the training grounds.

"You're not gonna root for me?" I teased.

They looked at me blankly. "Huh? But you don't need anyone to root for you, Commander. It's obvious you're gonna win."

"Fair enough."

That was enough to placate me. Their support wouldn't sway the outcome, after all—or should I say, it would be wasted on me. Still, I would need to let Lilia and the other girls know how grateful I was for their cheering.

"But I guess if Robert were here, he'd tell us to cheer for you, Commander," said one of the cadets.

That *did* seem like something he'd say. I laughed along awkwardly with the cadets at this.

"Even if he loses, though...at least he'll know we were rooting for him, right?"

The cadets all looked at each other for confirmation. As I watched them, my gaze fell on one of the banners they were holding. "Go out in a blaze of glory!" it said.

That's your idea of support?

"He's a good guy...even if he is kind of an idiot."

"He works really hard too. He is a moron, though."

"That's why we can't root for you, Commander! Please accept our apology!"

When I saw their bright smiles as they sang Robert's praises (well, if you could call it that), I couldn't help but grin too. Not one cadet mentioned the fact that he was the second prince as a reason to support him. His royal status wasn't even an afterthought; these were the words of real friends.

"If *this* is your idea of cheering someone on, then thank God you're not my cheerleaders," I said with a laugh.

Their offended protests retreated into the background as I walked past. As I continued making my way through the spectator seating, I made a point to offer the ladies a little fan service.

Finally, I made it to the center of the field and down into the arena...just as Robert was also walking over. He looked a little grimy. Maybe he *had* been meditating under waterfalls and holing himself up in the mountains.

Yeesh. I really feel for his personal guard.

But wherever he'd been all this time, he was here now, and he'd made it on time. That was all that mattered. If he'd shown up late, I might've assumed that he was going for a Ganryu Island strategy. Of course, Robert didn't know anything about Ganryu Island, nor the battle that took place there between Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojirou. He didn't have a clue that Miyamoto had famously arrived late to throw Sasaki off his guard, sending the other man into such a rage that he'd thrown his sword into the ocean. But I digress...

I took the sparring sword that had been prepared for me. The blade had been dulled, of course, but it was still made of metal. Most likely, this was to emulate the effect of a real battle—metal clanking and all. Nothing thrills an audience more than the illusion of deadly stakes, right?

I took a few steps to my designated spot in the arena, prepared myself, and looked at Robert. Although he was gazing at me, the usual sparkle in his eyes

was muted. He carried himself instead with a solemn air as he stood at the ready.

The cheering grew louder. The audience seemed to be getting pumped up with us.

Robert remained silent and stock-still. I, on the other hand, waved at the crowd to thank them for their support. I reveled in the shrieking and the kisses the girls blew at me in return.

Once I'd finished giving them a little fan service, I turned back around to face Robert. As our eyes met, we bowed to each other. Just as we lowered our heads, the arena fell silent.

The knight who was refereeing the match raised both of his hands. Recognizing the signal, Robert and I took our positions, readying our swords.

"Begin!" the referee yelled.

His voice echoed all the louder in the silence that had descended upon us. The loud cheering from earlier seemed like just a dream now.

As the referee's call began to fade, Robert and I simultaneously kicked off into a running start, closing the distance between us.

I blocked Robert's first blow, taking in the full force with my sword. As soon as he saw me block his blow, he swept his sword upwards and held it above his head. Then, he swung it back down. Noticing that he'd changed the angle of his sword, I managed to dodge attack after attack deftly.

I would've been happy with an instantaneous victory, but I felt that I ought to respect that this was an exhibition match. I decided to have a bit of fun with it—the whole point was to give the audience a show, after all.

Robert's sword handling was unusually straightforward and direct. It was a pleasure to watch. Thanks to his height, he had a long reach, and he put everything he had into each blow. Even his heavy sword didn't slow him down.

His stamina was impressive. I could tell that he wouldn't lose even a fraction of force even after repeated rounds. We could probably keep at it for a long time before the audience grew bored.

He swung at my feet with a horizontal blow, and I leaped up quickly to dodge it. He'd been aiming at the ground beneath me, but I'd been able to read his movements and spring up, landing just a step behind my original position.

Harnessing the power of my abs, I quickly changed direction and stepped onto his sword, launching myself into the air and somersaulting above his head as the crowd cried out in amazement. On the way down, I used my momentum to bring my sword down in a vertical strike.

The clash of metal rang throughout the arena.

I landed in a squat and was extremely tempted to hit him with a foot sweep...but I knew that wasn't appropriate behavior for a sword fighting tournament. Instead, I swept upwards with my sword.

Now it was Robert's turn to take a step back and dodge. Then, as I closed the distance between us, he took a step towards me too.

Well, well... Looks like your time on the road has paid off.

His line of attack was direct, but he'd managed to come straight for my vitals. I had a feeling he really *had* been up in the mountains, fending off wild boars for practice. Sometimes, animalistic greed was exactly what you needed to win a battle.

As the high-pitched clang of metal rang out, we exchanged blow after blow. Robert would mount an attack, which I would defend against. I'd press forwards, and Robert would dodge. As far as I could tell, we could've been at it for seconds or hours.

This is probably a good point to wrap things up.

I held my sword above my head and brought it down over Robert. He tried to block it with his sword, but seconds before our swords met, I relaxed and let the tension fall from my shoulders. I closed my eyes and drew in a quiet breath.

There was a flash of light. Then, without a single sound, Robert's sword split in two. Or, to be more precise... split his sword in two.

Robert hadn't been the only one training for this match—I'd been honing my skills in preparation for today too. The cleaving technique I'd just used was the

secret move I'd been keeping in my pocket to show off when the time was right.

You know what they say: "A master craftsman never blames his tools." I certainly wasn't in the position to choose my tools for this match, but I'd made sure that I was prepared for whatever I was given. If I wanted to prove myself a master craftsman, I needed to be ready to slice through steel with a mere sparring sword.

And if I may say so myself, I think I've more than proven myself now.

(That being said, steel was one thing, but I probably wouldn't have been able to cut through konjac jelly.)

As Robert gawked in shock, I swiftly thrust the tip of my blade at his throat. His eyes widened, and for a few moments, he just stood there motionless.

Finally, he let out a sigh. "You win."

His voice echoed throughout the silent arena. After a second's delay, the crowd erupted.

Robert and I exchanged bows, then I gripped his hand in a firm handshake. When I met his gaze, I saw him smiling back at me, looking genuinely happy. This time, we both waved at the crowd, taking in the applause.

The exhibition match had ended pretty much as predicted: with my victory. But what I *hadn't* predicted was the audience's overwhelming excitement—and that felt like the real win.



Back in the antechamber, Robert and I clapped each other on the back for a match well fought.

We'd just started diving into a postmatch analysis when, suddenly, the swordsmanship instructor and the principal burst in to directly deliver the news that I was *unconditionally banned* from participating in next year's tournament. According to their reasoning, it was too dangerous to allow anyone who could cleave steel with a sparring sword to participate.

Honestly, I couldn't argue with that.

With that trick up my sleeve, I might as well have been fighting with a real

sword. Besides, I was more than satisfied with the concession they'd made for me to participate in this exhibition match. What really mattered to me was that I'd had the chance to show off in one of the game's most important events. It was no skin off my back if I wasn't allowed to participate next year.

So I just nodded along and accepted the news...but it seemed Robert wasn't going to go down without a fight.

"How could you ban Comm—Lord Burton?! I'm telling you as her opponent that I don't mind! Why aren't you listening to me?!"

"Even if you feel comfortable going up against her, that doesn't change the fact that it could put you in serious danger, Your Highness."

"Fine! Then go ahead and ban me too!"

"Your Highness, please. You put on such a splendid show this year. The students were all so impressed, they're saying they want to see you participate in future tournaments. I hope you'll—"

"This is ridiculous!"

Robert looked ready to snap at any moment. Seeing him like this, it suddenly hit me how similar he was to his in-game counterpart. But the current Robert, who was so much brawnier than the one in the game, was even more imposing.

But it wasn't just his height and muscle strength that inspired fear—it was his royal status. Put that all together, and it was hard to argue with his threats. Even the swordsmanship instructor flinched at his outburst.

Oh, good grief, I thought, shrugging my shoulders. I approached Robert in an effort to calm him down.

"Easy, Robert. It's fine by me. *Really*. Getting to fight you this year was enough fun to last me a lifetime."

Robert bit his lip, looking frustrated, but he eventually resigned.

The principal looked on in astonishment, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. I guess he didn't expect me to ever back down.

What, you think I'll just bulldoze my way through everything? I thought, offended. I pick my battles, thank you.

"F-Fine," Robert said. "Then I'll learn how to cut through steel with a sparring sword before next year's tournament too! Then you'll have to ban me too, right?!"

Where in the world did that come from?

It didn't seem like Robert was going to back down anytime soon, so I curled my finger and beckoned him over for a timeout. He obediently came over.

"Here's a thought: We'll be adding more assistant instructors next year at the training camp, so maybe we can have a tournament between those of us who have swordsmanship licenses? Secretly, of course..." I glanced over at the principal. For just a moment, he seemed to sense that I was helping out and backed off. "We could even take over the arena."

Robert's eyes flew wide open in shock. He peered at me as I gave him a bold smirk. Then I felt the sparkle light up in his eyes, hitting me like laser beams.

Please, turn those off... I begged him silently.

"Well, we should probably head back to the arena. Right, Robert? The first match is about to begin, and we wouldn't want to miss Isaac's. We've gotta be there to cheer him on."

"Yes, sir! I'm coming with you! I'd follow you anywhere!"

As Robert tagged along happily, I smiled to myself.

What a goofball...



For some reason, I'd been asked to join the girls from class in cheering Isaac on, so I made my way to the audience where they were seated. I noticed that Lilia was there with them.

I yelled some supportive jeers as Isaac made his way to the arena, and he whipped back and furiously glared at me.

Just as I'd expected, Isaac was out in the first round. Christopher made it to the second round, but his success was cut short when he faced off against one of the most promising cadets from the training grounds. And so, unfortunately, he did not progress to the third round.

"He's really improved, huh?" Robert said.

"Who, Frank? I guess he has. He's moving with a certain decisiveness today."

"Everyone's saying he's the best bet for the championship title this year," one of the girls sitting near us offered.

Frank was a third-year, which meant that this would be his last tournament. That would certainly explain his determination.

"I hear that there's someone he likes, and that he's going to ask her to go steady if he wins," one of the girls added.

The girls around her squealed with delight.

"Oh, how romantic!"

I guess girls in every world love a good amorous rumor...

It was tradition for the winner of the tournament to make one request. The request was different every year, but some winners took it in a romantic direction, like the girls had been discussing. Others were more in line with a fiery shonen manga, like, "I wanna face off against you next year in the final match!" And, of course, there was also the crowd-pleaser: "Please make the test easy!"

(I'd heard rumors that the test was even *harder* in the year that the winner requested an easy one. Apparently, everyone had given the winner a good beating for it. It sounded plausible enough, but who knew if there was actually any truth to it?)

Of course, it wasn't as if there was any guarantee that the request would be *honored*. All the custom afforded victors was the chance to make their request publicly.

Anyway, as I said before, Robert wins the tournament in the game. His reply is something along the lines of "I get to make a request? Tch! That's ridiculous. I don't have any need for that."

If you've got a lot of affection points, though, the scene changes a bit. You get a hidden event in which he not only says a different line, but also has a different portrait.

"Be my woman!" he yells at the main character, who's sitting in the audience, as he thrusts the tip of his sword in her direction (which you're required to do when making a request, according to custom).

Without thinking, I found myself looking up at Robert, who was sitting next to me. Laughter welled up inside of me just picturing him doing any of that, but I desperately stifled it under my poker face.

It didn't suit him at all. In fact, it'd been ages since I'd remembered his whole arrogant prick characterization in the game.

I knew I was just recalling his character from the game—that it was just a memory—but it felt kind of weird that he'd crossed my mind out of the blue like that. Honestly, I was kind of creeping myself out.

"Eeeek!" the girls in the crowd cried out. I looked towards the arena to see the crown prince. It seemed the match had just ended, and Edward had won.

Ahh... I see where this is going, I thought. We lived in the world of an otome game, and we had to play by its rules. I recalled how things had gone with the opening ceremony this year. Just like then, there was no way that some nameless side character would step up to claim glory and victory for himself. (Actually, all of the side characters do, in fact, have names. But I digress.) Glory and victory belonged exclusively to the love interests.

Privately, I prayed for poor Frank. Dear God, please let Frank and his sweetheart find happiness...even if he doesn't win.



As predicted, the tournament concluded with a victory for Edward.

No surprises there.

The only other time I'd seen Edward fight had been years ago, back when he'd faced Robert during the exhibition match. He seemed to have improved considerably since then. Of course, if the two brothers were to fight again now, it seemed highly unlikely that Edward would beat him, but it'd probably be a reasonably close match.

Now that Edward had recovered from his illness, he seemed poised to get

back in the game and explore his full potential as a love interest.

"Frank kind of dropped off there at the end, huh? I could tell he was losing his focus. He probably could've won if he'd just pushed forwards and made sure he wasn't leaving himself open to a counterattack, though."

"I wonder why he started keeping my brother at a distance in the middle of the match. I feel like it would've been better to close the distance and apply some pressure. I think Frank's strong enough to easily intimidate him."

"He probably wanted to play it safe so His Highness wouldn't charge in return. It was a fair choice, but...it certainly shows a lack of commitment."

"Hey! Comm— I mean, Lord Burton! Robert! I can hear you!" Frank cried, interrupting my postgame analysis with Robert. "I was cheering you on during the exhibition match, you know! The least you could do is cheer me on in return!"

"We were. We were watching the match closely—that's why we're analyzing it."

"Ugh! You're incorrigible!" Frank yelled, pointing angrily at Robert.

Of course, he was really angry at *himself*. He was just frustrated that he'd lost by a hair and was taking it out on us.

Oh, Frank... Seems like your swordsmanship skills aren't the only thing that needs polishing. You could probably afford to work on your mental fortitude too.

"You just need more discipline," I told him.

"Can't you at least show a little sympathy?!"

"I have no sympathy for losers."

"Y-You're the worst..."

Seeing poor, dejected Frank slump his shoulders in despair, I turned to look at Robert. We both burst out in hysterics. Just as Frank began to laugh bitterly with us, the tournament announcer began to speak.

Edward, who held his trophy in one arm, unsheathed his sword.

Hmm?

Inexplicably, our eyes met for just a moment.

I couldn't help but think that it was a little ridiculous for Edward to be going along with the tournament's custom of making a public request. He was the *crown prince*, for God's sake. It wasn't as if anyone was in a position to *refuse* a request from him, and the whole reward was just meant to be a lighthearted affair. And yet, here he was taking advantage of the tournament's custom.

Absolutely baffling... If you asked me, it even seemed a little inappropriate.

Edward held his sword up high, then pointed the tip in the direction I was sitting. To my left was Robert, and to my right was Lilia. But following the line of his sword...it was pointing directly and specifically at *me*. I looked back at his amethyst eyes.

Ahh, right. He's just missed the mark a bit.

The victory stand was a fair distance from the audience seating, so it was a perfectly understandable mistake.

"Your Highness," I spoke up.

I didn't want his blunder to go down in history and leave a dark stain on the both of us. So, instead of delighting in it, I figured I'd show him some mercy. But I won't lie—the temptation to throw him off in the wrong direction, towards Robert, was *very* strong.

"Might want to adjust your angle a bit."

"What?"

"Lady Lilia is a little to the right."

At this, Edward's smile suddenly tightened. I could certainly understand how awkward this must've been for him. This was supposed to be his shining moment, and he'd ruined it by just a centimeter. Anyone's smile would strain under the embarrassment.

Can he tell I'm just trying to do him a solid here? I wondered. Or does he think I have some ulterior motive?

With his tight, fake smile firmly in place, Edward carried on. "When you are in my presence, I expressly forbid you from lying about being in a relationship with

someone."

A silence fell over the arena.

Well, guess that explains it. My bad for assuming he was pointing his sword in the wrong direction...

He must've still been pretty pissed about me calling Lilia my girlfriend.

Honestly, though, I had a feeling that he'd meant to point his sword at Lilia. Surely the only reason he'd come up with that line was to play it off like he'd been meaning to direct it at me all along. I wasn't going to call him out on that, though—I'd already embarrassed him enough.

(Anyway, his so-called "request" sounded a whole lot more like a *demand* to me.)

"I wasn't lying, though," I protested.

"Jokes are forbidden too."

"Oh, all right..."

I glanced over at Lilia. She seemed to be staring at me too, because our eyes met. But the look we exchanged lasted only a moment. Just as soon as I made eye contact, she turned her gaze to the ground.

God, she's adorable...

I casually brushed my hand against hers and smoothly wrapped it around her fingers. Her head whipped up to look at me. Our hands were positioned in a very convenient blind spot, so it would have been pretty difficult for anyone else to notice them.

"I'll just save the news for when I'm *really* dating someone, then," I said, with the most nonchalant expression I could muster.

All of the girls in the arena let out a squeal.



Now, if this were the game, the tournament event would've already ended. Unfortunately, this was reality, and the show had to go on.

First Royal Academy might have been a school for children of nobility, but in

spite of its student body's status—or perhaps because of it?—we students were responsible for cleaning up our own messes.

And so, Lilia, Robert, and I found ourselves busy tidying up after the event and taking things back to the storeroom. Of course, I wasn't about to let Lilia carry anything heavy.

"S-Sir Burton... Y-You fought so well in the match today," Lilia said as we walked.

I recognized the line—those were the exact words the main character used to compliment Robert in his route.

"Thank y—"

"Yeah! You were amazing out there, Comm—Lord Burton! And your 'Steel Slicer' move was so cool..." Robert added breathlessly, interrupting my reply.

Why do you sound so proud about that? I wondered, baffled. Also, could you not name my moves, please?

"Your strength and your dedication to your craft are such an inspiration to us. Seriously, we couldn't ask for a better instructor," he continued. Then, turning to Lilia, he said, "Lady Lilia, you should come watch Lord Burton in action some time at the training grounds!"

"O-Oh! I'd love to!"

Lilia seemed a little scared of how strong Robert was coming on, but she still managed an appropriately main character-y reply.

Honestly, I didn't *hate* the idea. What better place to show off my strength than the training grounds? Maybe Lilia could even play a team manager role, bringing us towels and honey lemon teas. As I pictured it, though, a terrifying thought ruined the fantasy.

Oh, crap... I forgot I'm the "Demon Drill Sergeant."

Well, so much for *that* idea. I'd put everything I'd had into establishing a reputation for myself at school as the playboy knight, and it was working for me. I wasn't about to let my alter ego nip any feelings Lilia had for me in the bud before they'd even blossomed.

I gave a little laugh and replied, "Sure. We'll make it happen sometime."

(For reference, that's noble-speak for "over my dead body.")

Robert looked between Lilia and me, then suddenly turned to Lilia with a question. "By the way, I've been wondering about this for a while now...what martial art do you practice, Lady Lilia?"

"Huh?"

"From the looks of it, you don't seem to have a particularly muscular build. Do you practice aikido? Or maybe something long-distance, like archery?"

"Huh? Um, I-I don't really...do any martial arts...?" Lilia replied, tilting her head.

Robert looked quizzically back at her.

Where in the world did that come from? I wondered.

It seemed all three of us were on very different wavelengths. I could practically see the question marks floating above our heads.

Then Robert stopped in his tracks. He looked from Lilia to me, a strange expression playing across his face.

"C-Commander...I thought you were spending all this time with Lady Lilia so you could help her get stronger. W-Was I wrong?!" he asked.

"Huh? Uh, yeah, I think you're a little confused."

"What?" "Wait, what?" Robert and I spoke at the same time, our questions overlapping.

Good God...you really are a meathead.

"Th-Then...why *are* you spending so much time with her?" he asked, sounding genuinely mystified. There was almost a panicked edge to his voice.

It was a tactless question, but it gave me a good opening to turn up the charm. Typically, the task of providing these openings fell upon a game's villainess...but since she was already otherwise occupied, I appreciated Robert stepping up to the plate.

I glanced at Lilia out of the corner of my eye. She was looking up at me

expectantly.

"Hmm, that's a good question. I can't really explain it well myself, but..." I trailed off and stroked my chin for effect, as if I were thinking deeply about it. Then I looked straight at Lilia and smiled. "For some reason, I just can't seem to leave her alone. I guess her hardworking and earnest personality has captivated me."

Perfect. That sounds like I'm professing my love for her without even realizing it.

"I just want to see her smile," I added.

Lilia blushed deeply, and her eyes lit up.

To be fair, nothing I'd said was a lie. I *couldn't* bring myself to leave her alone, which was why I was always checking up on her. Besides, why *wouldn't* I want to see a fellow reincarnated girl from my home country smile and enjoy her new life here? (Well...as long as it didn't interfere with *me* enjoying my life.)

Anyway, whether or not I'd meant any of that was besides the point. All that mattered was that it *sounded* like I was professing my love for her.

"Commander..."

In a stark contrast to Lilia, Robert's expression had darkened. He took a step back as he looked at me. There was a pleading, lost look in his eyes.

"Y-You...value the weak over the strong?" he asked.

"That's what being a knight's all about, isn't it?" I retorted.

If Lilia hadn't been there, I would've added, "Shouldn't you know that?" I had no idea what he was on about. The answer to his question could be found in the most foundational principles of the Code of Chivalry. Surely he didn't even need to ask by now?

"It's a knight's duty to protect the weak. I thought that's what I've been teaching you cadets this whole time."

"But this whole time, I've... I thought I needed to be *strong* to stand by your side—"

"Robert," I cut him off.

He usually stood with a dignified, upright posture. But right now, he was hunched over dejectedly.

"You do stand at my side. You and I are comrades. We fight to protect the king, the kingdom, and all its subjects. That's what knights do: We protect those who can't protect themselves. That's why I trust you and the other cadets to have my back."

Robert's chartreuse eyes flickered with uncertainty. I could see myself in their reflection as he fixed his gaze on me.

"Lilia is a subject of the kingdom. Not only that, but she also possesses the power of a saint. That's why she needs our protection."

Robert stayed quiet. Eventually, he averted his gaze with a pained look on his face.

I found myself perplexed by his sudden shift in mood. He was always so cheerful and hyper. What the hell happened? I wondered.

"I can spend time with Lilia, you, and the cadets. There's no reason those things should be mutually exclusive. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah... You're right..." he said.

He nodded, but I got the sense that he didn't really mean it.

"They shouldn't be, but..." he whispered, but he never finished the sentence.

## **Committing to the Route**

"Um! S-Sir Burton! This, um, is for you!"

As I looked over the invitation Lilia had just handed me, I did a little fist pump internally.

It was an invitation to the church's big charity event: the Star-Charting Festival. The festival (or the Church event, as it's known in the fandom) is an opportunity for the player to invite her favorite love interest and gain some affection points with him. Which meant, essentially, that Lilia wanted to raise affection points with *me*.

Everything was going just as planned. She was committing to my route in earnest.

Midterms had come and gone by now, and I was pleased enough with my performance. Isaac had also made a comeback, settling comfortably back into his position as valedictorian. His top scores had probably come as no surprise to Lilia, who had no doubt expected nothing less from him, but I know it had been a big deal to Isaac himself.

While Robert hadn't stolen the top scores this round, he'd still done remarkably well for someone who'd holed himself up in the mountains prior to the exam. I couldn't even *begin* to imagine how he'd managed that.

He'd been acting pretty strangely ever since the swordsmanship tournament though, so it was entirely possible that he'd just gotten into the zone again...but it felt weird to me. As swimmingly as everything else seemed to be going, that was the one thing that bothered me.

"Th-The choir will be performing, and there will be an orchestra too. W-We'll even have a market. Several of the kingdom's aristocramen—aristomen—gah!—noblemen will be in attendance."

I magnanimously ignored her slip of the tongue, but I couldn't help clinging to the mention of "ramen." Why'd you have to mention that? I thought, bitterly. God, I would kill for a bowl right now...

"A-And I'll be offering up a prayer. It's... It's nothing, really. I'll just be clapping my hands together and looking down at the ground. B-B-But...if you'd like to come..." Lilia stammered, sneaking a peek at my face.

"Of course I would. How could I ever say 'no' to you?" I replied and took the invitation from her hand.

Lilia gave me a relieved smile.

Honestly, every time I looked at her, I felt overwhelmed by how adorable she was. It was cute watching her struggle to act like a proper main character, but it was these moments when she let her true nature show that really tugged at my heartstrings. If I wasn't careful, I had a feeling she might actually melt my heart.

As I looked down at the invitation, I thought back to how the event played out in the game. I pictured Robert romping around with the kids from the orphanage, Edward playing the pipe organ, Christopher helping out at the marketplace, and Isaac dressed as a priest...

Actually, wait...maybe that last one is just a trope from fanart?

"I'm looking forward to it," I said, smiling at Lilia, as I secretly schemed. Now, whose event am I going to steal?

As soon as I pictured myself playing the pipe organ, though, the words "expensive damages" flashed in my mind.

I think we can rule that one out...



The day of the festival was upon us.

As I walked over to the church, I noticed how busy it was for the morning. It seemed I'd arrived during the breakfast rush when volunteers handed out food. I felt my stomach rumble as a delicious scent wafted past my nose.

Does this count as a soup kitchen? I wondered. Or do they call it something else in this world?

"Hey, Lilia. Thanks for inviting me."

"D-Don't mention it! Um, ah...thank you for coming."

"That's a beautiful dress you're wearing."

Lilia blushed furiously, looking down at the ground.

It was customary for a nobleman to greet a lady with a compliment, and the appropriate response was simply to accept it with a smile. Part of me wished Lilia could do the same and save us both the awkwardness, but another part of me was a bit pleased by her stark, earnest response. After all, I was doing everything in my power here to seduce her. At least this was a good indicator that it was working.

Lilia was wearing a white, A-line dress with a hem that swayed gently around her knees. If she'd been anyone else, it might have been a bold choice—I mean, only ghosts and the most beautiful girls can get away with white dresses.

As she showed me around, we took a look inside the church and wandered around the market stalls. We admired the stained glass and listened to the choir. Since Lilia frequented the church, she seemed at home here. It was nice to see her more relaxed than usual. All in all, our date seemed to be going pretty smoothly.

In fact, it was going a little *too* smoothly. No one asked us to help out with the market. The orphanage kids were running amok and seemed completely uninterested in our company.

Here's what I'm getting at—there wasn't even a *hint* of anything resembling an event.

Lilia seemed to notice this too, and she started to look antsy.

I looked over nervously at the pipe organ, already picturing myself breaking it. I didn't dare approach it, but I was beginning to realize that I might not have a choice.

Suddenly, I felt a wave of trepidation wash over me. What if the date goes on without ever triggering an event? Maybe the universe won't give me any events because it doesn't recognize me as a proper love interest?

But I dismissed the fears as soon as they popped up. If the universe wasn't

going to give me any events, then I'd just have to make them up myself. That's how I'd gotten this far, right? I just had to keep at it. If I let the powers that be dictate my life, I'd just wind up right back where I started: as a two-bit baddie.

Now then... I thought. How exactly does one start an event?

Suddenly, a man cried out and interrupted my thoughts. "Miss Saint! I'm so glad I found you."

As he ran over to us, I guessed—based on his attire—that he was a priest.

"Wh-What do you need, Father?" Lilia asked.

"Sorry to interrupt. You see, I'll need to step away for a while, and...I was wondering if I might trouble you to look after the confessional while I'm gone?"

"The confessional?"

"Yes. I'm sure the lost lambs who visit would be so relieved to have the saint ease them of their burdens. You'll find the rite's instructions on a note in the confessional."

Lilia and I looked at each other, processing the priest's request.



The two of us slipped inside the confessional. Lilia had hesitated to let me join her, but I'd managed to win over with the line, "I can't just let you take this on alone."

Lilia must've assumed this was an event, because she'd let herself be talked into it pretty easily...a little *too* easily, actually. I was starting to worry about her astonishing naivete.

Please don't let anyone talk you into buying some "high-tech" pan. I don't want you ending up like that poor sap from the prank show I watched in my past life, I begged her silently.

Since the confessional was really only intended to seat one person per side, it was a little cramped, but Lilia's slender frame made it possible for me to squeeze in next to her. If anything, the tight quarters were a blessing. It gave me an excuse to sidle up close enough that we were touching.

Just as the priest had told us, there was a note inside explaining how the confessional process worked. The instructions were pretty minimal, but they did the job. Essentially, all Lilia had to do was quietly listen to the laypeople's confessions. She only needed to respond if she was asked a question. Finally, she would tell them, "The Lord God forgives you. Let us pray. Please, make your way to the chapel."

And...that was pretty much the long and short of it.

The only part that struck me as a little different was the procedure for confessions of criminal acts. If anyone confessed to some grave criminal act, she was to silently slip out and call for a guard.

I guess that's just how they do things here...

It was heartwarming to see how pleased Lilia was to have been entrusted with something. She had accepted the priest's request eagerly.

In all honesty, though, I couldn't imagine that all that many people would come clamoring to the confessional today. I mean, who'd go out of their way during a festival? Still, for Lilia's sake, I hoped at least one person would show up.

After we'd waited around a bit, someone finally did. I heard the door on the other side rattle lightly as someone opened it.

There was a wall dividing the confessional, so I couldn't see the person on the other side. Still, through the square, curtain-covered window, I could clearly *hear* them.

"This really isn't big enough for the two of us. I'll wait outside," a voice said.

"No, don't! The guards will make a fuss if they see we're separated. Please, brother...come with me?"

"Well, I'm going to make a fuss if you drag me in here with you..."

Judging from the voices, there were two people on the other side. Both of them sounded like young men. It seemed safe to assume from the way one addressed the other that they were brothers, and the mention of guards suggested that they were from a well-to-do family—probably either wealthy

merchants or aristocrats.

If the other side of the confessional was the same size as this one, then it would be *very* cramped for two men.

"All right, all right...don't make that face. Just get this over with quickly, will you?"

"I will! Thank you!"

For a moment, silence descended...until Lilia broke it with a loud *gulp*. She looked exceedingly nervous.

Then, from the other side of the wall, one of the men began their confession.

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"O God, please hear my confession.

I was engaged to a woman...a strong, noble woman who's respected by all. As for me, well...I used to be arrogant and utterly worthless.

All I ever did was compete with my older brother and run away from all my problems. But *she* changed me. It's all thanks to her that I can look to the future and make something of myself. That's why I looked up to her so much.

And that's exactly why I broke off our engagement—because I knew that I was too weak to be worthy of standing at her side. I knew that I wasn't good enough to earn her respect.

I wanted to better myself and get stronger, so that one day I would be worthy. I wanted to become the kind of man she could count on so that we could support each other. I thought that was all I needed to be happy.

But lately, I've been spending more time with her—just the two of us. I feel so happy and comfortable with her, I find myself wishing our time together would never end. I even find myself wishing that I could stand at her side *now*, instead of sometime in the future. I'm...getting greedy.

Recently, she told me that I do stand at her side, but as a 'comrade.' But even though I've earned her respect now, I don't feel happy. If anything, hearing her say that made me feel like I'd lost sight of something.

I've worked so hard all this time for her respect, and now I have it. It should've been everything I'd ever wanted.

But that's when I realized something—it's not enough for her to respect me. I won't be satisfied just standing at her side as one of her many comrades. I realized that I want to be the *only* one at her side.

Unfortunately, I'm only realizing that now, after I've already relinquished the right to be that person.

And now, there's someone else who's taken that spot—someone who's even weaker than I am. They've known her for barely any time at all, but they've accomplished what I never could...and they did it so *easily*. They're the one that she's chosen to have at her side...and I've become so jealous of them.

I find myself wishing that I'd made her mine when I'd still had the chance, even if it would've only been a union our parents had chosen for us. Even if it would've been loveless. When those feelings come over me, I feel powerless to stop them. I don't even know what to call them..."

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"It sounds like love," said Lilia.

I turned to look at her, concerned. She let out a little gasp and clapped her hands over her mouth, apparently just as shocked as I was at the words that had tumbled out of it.

Not sure the confessional is the best place to give your two cents, I thought, astonished. For all my brashness, sometimes even I was floored by her audacity. Honestly, the things that come out of this girl's mouth...

Unfortunately, it was too late to take it back now. We'd just have to power through it.

I pointed to the note on the confessional's wall, calling her attention to the stock phrases it offered—in particular, the ones she was supposed to say at the end.

Sorry, pal, but we need to wrap this up and send you on your merry way.

Lilia gave me a little nod, finally seeming to get on the same wavelength.

"Love? This is...love...?" the confessor whispered, dumbfounded.

Ignoring this, Lilia simply cleared her throat and spoke the words on the note. "The Lord God forgives you. Let us pray. Please, make your way to the chapel."

"Excuse me," a different voice—presumably belonging to the confessor's older brother—spoke up. "If I may, there's something I'd like to confess as well."

Lilia turned to look at me with a flustered look on her face. I made an "OK" sign with my index finger and thumb. This was a church confessional, after all. We weren't really in any position to be turning anyone away. At least...that's what I assumed. But hey, what did I know?

Lilia gave me a nod, and in an almost comically serious voice, she said, "Go on, my child."

"Thank you."

Now that he had Lilia's permission, the second man launched into his confession.

"O God, forgive me my sins. I...fell in love with my younger brother's fiancée."

Two voices—one Lila's whisper, the other an exclamation from the other side —blurted out, "What?"

It was hard to blame Lilia for that one. If anything, I felt like I deserved a medal for holding it in myself. Apparently, we weren't the only ones surprised to hear this. It seemed it was the first time the little brother was hearing about it too. This confession was quickly turning ugly.

Please don't make a scene in here, I silently begged. We hadn't received any instructions on the note for how to deal with heated family disputes.

The older brother, for his part, ignored the exclamations of surprise and continued his confession.

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"I kept my distance at first, out of respect for my brother.

Looking back on the day we met, I can see now what a sullen child I was. I

thought I saw the world for what it was: trifling and full of disappointment. Yes...I was nothing but an ignorant nihilist.

But she laughed at my worries like they were nothing. She dragged me out into the world and showed me things I'd never seen before. Thanks to her, I know now what a beautiful, wonderful place this world can be. She gave me a reason to *live*.

It took no time at all for me to fall in love with her. But I concealed my feelings and did everything I could to pretend they weren't there. I told myself over and over again that what I felt for her couldn't possibly be love.

And yet, those feelings never went away. Day by day, she grew to mean more and more to me.

One day, I learned that she wished to annul her engagement to my brother, and...forgive me, Lord. With wickedness in my heart, I spoke to my father and counseled him. I know it was what she wanted, but my willingness to help her came from a place of pure self-interest.

I ventured off on a trip recently that I wasn't confident I'd return from. For several months, we were separated. But in spite of that—no, perhaps *because* of it—my feelings for her only deepened.

Once I'd returned, I learned that her engagement had been annulled. It felt like a sign from the heavens, as if God himself had willed it.

No longer must I conceal my feelings. There's nothing to become between us now...and even if there were, I've resolved to deal with them however I must to capture her attention.

Today is the day I make my declaration. From here on, I swear on God's name to do whatever it takes to win her heart."

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"B-Brother ... ?!"

I heard the sounds of a scramble from beyond the wall.

This is bad... What're we going to do if a fight breaks out? Are there any instructions other than this little note on the wall? Like, a troubleshooting

manual or an FAQ?

It seemed to me that the priest's instructions could've used several addendums.

"Um, the..." Lilia began. Desperation dripped from her voice. Then, in a forceful exclamation, she exclaimed, "The Lord God forgives you. Let us pray. Please, make your way to the chapel!"

Nice one, Lilia.

The force in her voice was what really sold it. An imposing tone like that was all that was needed to smooth over a surprisingly large number of awkward situations—especially messy ones like this.

The two men behind the wall fell silent. Then, a rattling noise suggested that they'd left.

Oh, thank God...

Any brawls that broke out now were the guards' responsibility.

"Great job handling that, Lilia. You know, you might just be a natural at this," I said. I really meant it too.

"Huh? Oh, um...ehe... M-Maybe I am! I was *so* nervous, though. I guess it must've been m-my broadcast club experience that got me through that. Hee hee!"

Lilia covered her face with her hands as she laughed, looking bashful. I had a feeling that her "hee hee" might've easily warped into another "hee hee HORF" if I'd given her another compliment, but she'd worked so hard today that I didn't have it in me to hold it against her.

"It's strange, though. I feel like...I've heard those voices somewhere before..." Lilia mumbled. She was clearly talking to herself, but as usual, the volume was a little too loud for that.

Okay, I think it's time we put this bad habit of yours to bed.

"Hm? Did you say something?" Instead of pretending I didn't hear—the way I usually did—I called her out on it with a question. I even tilted my head slightly for effect.

Lilia gasped and covered her mouth. "Um, no, I-I was just...talking to myself. Hee hee."

Guess you really didn't mean for anyone to hear you, huh?

"Care to share your thoughts with me too, then? Since we're here together, I'd love to hear them."

I took her hand in mine and drew closer to her as I smiled. Her cheeks burned bright red.

Hopefully bringing that habit to her attention will change something, I thought optimistically.

I'd asked her to repeat herself, but I was kind of hoping she wouldn't. If we did know those men, that would make for an unbelievably awkward situation. Best to just forget about the whole thing.

Just then, I heard the rattle of the confessional door again. It seemed a new confessor had arrived.

"Um... May I, um, share a confession?" a timid voice asked.

It sounded like it belonged to a young man—no, probably a young *boy*. I could sense that this confessor was alone. (Yes, I know how obvious that sounds, since the *vast majority* of confessors come in alone. But, as you just saw, there are some unfortunate exceptions.)

"Go on, my child," Lilia replied, in a voice that was even more self-assured than last time.

I heard the sound of a chair being pulled out from the other side of the wall. Then, the confessor began, "O Father, O God, please hear my confession."

After a short pause, the boy continued, "I'm in love with my older sister."

I heard a little *thunk* next to me. When I turned to look at Lilia, I saw that she'd fallen forwards and hit her forehead on the wall.

Honestly, I sympathized. These confessions were turning into soap opera episodes.

What in the world is wrong with this kingdom? I wondered. If this was a

normal day at the confessional, then I worried for the kingdom's future (not to mention the priest's sanity). Hopefully we were just getting a different slice of the churchgoing population today due to the festival.

But there was no time to dwell on it, because the boy continued his confession.

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"I'm adopted, but that doesn't help my case. I know this love can never be.

My older brother is the heir to the family title, so my sister and I will eventually leave home one day and probably drift apart.

My sister's a little...different. She doesn't even have a fiancé at her age. But she's nice, strong, and really cool. She's amazing, and I'm really proud to have her as a sister.

No one ever made me feel loved or needed when I was a kid. My biological family treated me like I was just some *thing* and abandoned me. I was on the brink of losing all sense of self-worth...

But my new family—my adoptive family—saved me. They told me I mattered...that I was *special*. They're the ones who showed me *love*.

So, I want to return their kindness. I really mean that. I want my father, mother, brother, and sister to all be happy. I'll do anything I can to make that happen. And I know it's wrong for me to want to marry my sister. I know that won't make any of them happy.

But I've been thinking...maybe I could help my family if I show the world just how amazing my sister is? I've been trying to help her act more like a lady—a normal lady—so she can find someone to marry. But then I wonder, What if she never finds a man who'll want to marry her? And then I...feel a spark of hope. I find myself wishing that she won't.

I don't want to just be 'family' anymore. I don't want to just be her brother. It hurts now to think of her falling for someone else—or worse, *marrying* them. I couldn't bear to see that happen.

I know it's not right for me to wish for her heart. I know I'm not doing right by

the noble family who adopted me, including my sister. But...I can't stop loving her."

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"The Lord God forgives you. Let us pray. Please, make your way to the chapel."

This time, I could hear the exhaustion in Lilia's voice. Honestly, I was feeling pretty exhausted myself.

Hearing about people's sordid affairs was really starting to take a toll on me mentally. I felt a burning sensation in my chest—heartburn, maybe?

I'd bet tending to the confessional would feel like a dream come true for gossipmongers, but it sure wasn't for me. Although, maybe a gossipmonger wasn't the best person to be listening to everyone's deep, dark secrets...

In any case, I was surprised by how many visitors the confessional was getting. Personally, I couldn't imagine what the appeal was. But then again, I hadn't committed any sins worth repenting for, so I had no need for confessions.

But if I were to successfully trick Lilia into following my route all the way to the end, well...then I'd probably have something to confess.

That poor priest... When that day comes, an anxiety-induced stomach ulcer will probably be the least of his problems.

A rattle sounded again on the other side of the confessional. It seemed we had another lost lamb to tend to.

"Just so we're clear, I don't believe in any higher power," the voice on the other side said.

Then what the hell are you doing here? I wondered. All these lost lambs we're getting today seem more like black sheep than anything.

I had no idea how we were supposed to administer the rites of confession to a nonbeliever. Surely we could just kick him out of the confessional, right?

Someone really needs to update the confessional manual, or that priest is going to wind up with a stomach full of holes.

"I just want to sort out my feelings, and a third party sworn to confidentiality seems like an appropriate outlet. I'll be sure to compensate for your time with a donation, of course."

Well, can't argue with that.

I'd been rising in my seat to deal with this heathen, but that last sentence convinced me to sit back down. Any religion that unconditionally barred nonbelievers from its sacred halls was doomed to die out, after all. Besides, who'd turn away a paying customer?

The least we could do was hear him out. I shot Lilia a look.

She looked back at me and let out a little gulp as she nodded. "Go on, my child."

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"I'll admit it: I was pleased when my best friend's engagement was annulled. I'm aware she didn't even *want* the engagement, but it's hardly an appropriate event to rejoice over. I won't make excuses for myself. I knew it was wrong for me to be happy about the news, but I was.

It felt like I finally had a chance—as though I could finally make a move without reservation.

I call her my 'best friend,' but that's a joke. To me, she is—and always will be—my first love.

My happiness was short-lived, though. She'd always talked about finding her 'soulmate.' And while I always dismissed it as just a pipe dream...it wasn't.

She's found her soulmate now, and she looks truly happy with them. When I see the love in her eyes as she looks at them, I realize just how hopeless my feelings for her are. I feel like an absolute, utter fool.

And maybe I am a fool, but I can't help how I feel. No, I wouldn't change my feelings even if I could. I refuse to give up on her. I had no intention of doing so back when she was engaged, so why should it be any different now that her 'soulmate' is in the picture?

She said I was tough, so I became tough. She's the one who made me this

strong. Her words are the reason I continue to push myself so hard. Even when I'm on the verge of breaking, I just get back up again. The man I am now is all thanks to her.

So, no matter who she chooses, no matter who she pursues...I'm going to keep chasing after her. I'm not the kind of man who bends over after a failure or two. If there's one thing I'm good at, it's persistence. And I'm not giving up until she takes responsibility for these seeds she's planted in me.

This isn't a confession, but a declaration of war—I'm ready to fight against my fate, and I'll continue until I win."

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After saying his piece, the confessor quickly took his leave.

An awkward silence followed; Lilia and I were speechless. I'm sure the same thought must have been going through both of our heads: What the hell was that?

Someone help me out here...how in the world are we supposed to handle all of this?

We hadn't received a single confession today that could conceivably be classed as beginner-level. All I wanted was a cut-and-dried, simple confession—something that could've been at home in a *Confessions for Dummies* book. Was that really too much to ask?

And here I was, all excited to create my own event. So much for that. Where's my compensation?

Just as a heavy pall was descending upon the confessional, the door opened yet again.

"Hello. Um, may I make a confession?" a familiar voice asked.

I almost jolted right up out of my seat.

"Go on, my child," Lilia prompted him, just as she had with the others.

"Thank you. I...don't really have anything to confess, but I guess I'm just looking for a sympathetic ear."

"That's all right."

I listened closely, in case my ears had deceived me. Again, the voice sounded *incredibly* familiar. Just hearing it put my mind at ease and instantly relieved all of the mental stress that'd just built up.

No, there's still a chance it's someone else, I thought. The sound from the other side had a bit of an echo to it, so it was hard to tell for sure. It could've just been someone with a similar voice.

"I'll be twenty-two this year, and I'm still not engaged to anyone. There've been talks about what would happen if I took over the family title as a bachelor. To be honest, I'm starting to think I might not mind getting married after my little brother and sister..."

I buried my face in my hands and looked down at the floor. Then I let out a long, drawn-out sigh that was loud enough to block out the voice on the other side of the wall.

Lilia must have noticed something was wrong, because she glanced over at me with worry in her eyes.

I whispered, as quietly as I could, "He's my older brother."

Lilia's eyes shot wide open.

There was no mistaking it now. The man on the other side of the confessional wall was none other than my brother. Even if I couldn't quite place someone else's voice, there was no mistaking his.

"Sorry, but I'm gonna feel a little weird listening to this. I'll just go wait outside," I mumbled.

I did my best to get up without making any noise and carefully left the confessional, leaving no trace of my presence.



Shortly after, the priest returned to take over for us.

Lilia and I were completely exhausted from all the dramatic confessions. Once she'd finished giving the formal prayer, we decided to cut our date short and head home to recover.

What a disaster...

By the way—when the priest had returned to relieve us of confessional duty, Lilia had taken the time to give him some acupuncture tips. I guess getting a taste of his daily duties must've made her worried for him. What a sweetheart, right?

The next day at breakfast, I felt a little awkward around my older brother. It was weighing heavy on my conscience that I knew about his worries, even though I'd barely heard the prelude of his confession.

"Hey..." I said.

"Hm? What's up, Lizzie?"

"Christopher and I are doing our best to find families to marry into, so..."

"Right, um... I'm not sure Christopher will be marrying into another family, though," my brother said with a confused smile.

Christopher stared at me so intently that he dropped his bread. He exclaimed, "Have you found a fiancé, sis?!"

"Well...no," I admitted.

No need to act so surprised by the idea, though... Sheesh. Have some respect.

As payback, I picked up the bread he'd dropped and ate it myself. I ignored the dirty looks he and the head maid threw my way.

"O-Oh, that reminds me! You went to the Star-Charting Festival yesterday too, right, Lizzie? Christopher and I went together on Father's behalf. Ed— I mean, Prince Edward was there too."

Now that my brother had made such a point of changing the topic, it seemed I had no choice but to go along with it.

Oh well. I tried.

I was a lot more interested in my brother's slip of the tongue than the Star-Charting Festival, though.

"Since when have you been calling His Highness by his name?" I asked.

"What?"

My brother's blue eyes grew wide. They looked incredibly radiant on his plump cheeks, as if they contained the whole sky.

"Um, I'm not sure, actually. Some time ago now, I think... Maybe it was when Father and His Highness suggested I become his friend, rather than just his advisor."

It seemed my brother and Edward were closer than I'd thought. It made me a little uneasy to consider that. I couldn't help worrying that Edward might be a bad influence on him.

Don't let his pretty face and aristocratic good manners fool you, I silently implored my brother. His Highness can be a royal pain.

Even if Edward didn't give my brother the run-around he liked to give me, there was still the issue of my brother's romantic life. If he got used to seeing Edward's gorgeous face up close, it'd make all the young ladies' beauty pale in comparison.

"Speaking of friends, please give my thanks to the Guildford boy."

"Who, Isaac?"

What does he want me to thank Isaac for? I wondered. What's Isaac ever done for him?

As I tilted my head in confusion, my older brother picked up the bottle of jam on the table to show me.

"For the past year, he's been sending us local specialties from his family's earldom—like this jam here. He says it's a token of gratitude for all you do for him."

He *did* seem like the type to send gifts to his friends' houses, I guess. Then again, he wasn't particularly good at socializing. It probably made more sense that we had his father to thank for the gifts, considering the earl's position as an up-and-coming prime minister.

"Mother said the tea leaves he sent a while back were absolutely delicious. Personally, I'm a big fan of this jam."

My brother beamed as he spread a heap of jam over his bread. His smile was

always infectious. Before I knew it, I found myself perking up and completely forgetting about the awkwardness from earlier.

I'd have to remember to give Isaac my heartfelt thanks.

## **Put Those Beautiful Eyelashes Away**

"I-It's really coming down now..."

"Sure is. Guess those heavy-looking rain clouds have been hanging pretty low since this morning, huh?"

I released my umbrella as I exited the school building. Lilia, who had brought her own, stood next to me and did the same.

"I'll get a carriage to take us home."

"Really?! Yes!" Lilia blurted out. She then let out a gasp and quickly covered her mouth.

I was a little surprised that was all it took to make her happy.

Looks like the carriage was a surprisingly good call...

"Th-Thank you," Lilia added. She peered down at the ground and blushed.

She'd started acting pretty normal around me lately, but her habit of hanging her head hadn't changed a bit.

As we headed towards the school gate together, I remembered that there was a specific event for leaving school in the game. Thinking about it now, it seemed a little absurd that going home together would warrant a whole event. But I guess when you're an otome game heartthrob, there's no such thing as mundane.

Weirder still was that *Royal LOVERS*, unlike most otome games, didn't feature an event for *going* to school. Then again, it didn't really make sense to have one in a world where all of the love interests arrived in carriages. That made it a *little* challenging to cross paths. If the game had tried to replicate the classic ohno-I've-bumped-into-my-crush-while-eating-toast-on-the-go! scene, it would've ended in a horrific traffic accident in which the main character gets run over.

I heard the *splish-splash* of wet footsteps approaching from behind us. When I turned around, I saw Isaac running over...sans umbrella.

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"Sorry, can I get under your umbrella?" he asked me.
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"Sure. Where's yours, though?"
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Isaac joined me under my umbrella and took his glasses off to wipe the lenses, which were covered in raindrops.

Lilia and I both made faces that said, "Shoot! Why didn't I think of that?!"

Honestly, what were we thinking, both bringing umbrellas? Way to miss out on an opportunity to share one!

"Y-You can use my umbrella, Lord Isaac! I'm sure it's a tight fit for both of you under Sir Burton's!" Lilia suggested.

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"How will you stay dry then?"
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"W-Well, I-I'll share Sir Burton's umbrella..."
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Isaac frowned at her with unconcealed suspicion. "That won't be necessary.

Burton and I are both roughly the same height, so it makes more sense for us to share an umbrella. It's simply more efficient that way."

"Oh, come on, Isaac," I said, butting in. "It's not always about efficiency, you know."

As we grappled with the umbrella, Isaac dropped his glasses. They fell right in front of our feet.

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"Lilia, watch ou—"
"Huh?"

Crunch!
"Oh."

"Ah!"
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The awful noise stopped all of us in our tracks. Lilia lifted her foot hesitantly, revealing a completely crushed pair of glasses. Even the lenses had been shattered. Lilia had stepped on Isaac's glasses. There was no going back now.

"O-Oh my God! I-I-I'm so sorry, Lord Isaac! I...!" Lilia stammered at the glasses

<sup>&</sup>quot;I forgot to bring one when I left today."

as she picked them up, as if they contained Isaac's very soul.

Maybe you should be apologizing to the man himself, rather than his glasses? I thought, amused. Then I reassured her, "It's not your fault, Lilia. I should've warned you sooner."

"I'll pay for them! I'll pay whatever it costs to replace them!" Lilia offered desperately.

Isaac bent down and leaned in as he glared at her—probably because he couldn't see otherwise.

"Can you afford them?" he asked. "They're not cheap, you know."

Lilia gulped. That's when I realized where things were headed. If I didn't put a stop to this—and soon—I was going to be in hot water.

The moment my realization hit me, blood spurted out of Lilia's nose.



"L-Lilia! Your nose!" I cried.

"Huh?"

I frantically pulled out a handkerchief and brought it to her face, hoping to distract her from Isaac. Isaac, probably completely in the dark about what was happening without his glasses, tilted his head in confusion.

See, Isaac was a very good-looking young man with his glasses, of course, but without them? His good looks were deadly. Even I couldn't help feeling a little bit enthralled, and I'd seen him sans glasses plenty.

Honestly, he seemed to have just been blessed with fantastic genetics. His nose was just the right height, his eyebrows were beautifully sculpted, and his jaw was perfectly chiseled. Put it all together, and you had a work of art.

It was no wonder that Lilia, who had been shot at point-blank range, was suffering from a nosebleed.

What do you think you're doing, baring those beautiful eyelashes in front of your friends? Put those away! Actually, is it normal for girls to spurt blood out of their noses at the sight of handsome men? I'm gonna have a tough time smoothing this one over...

I'd heard that some fans absolutely despised it when their favorite glasseswearing character removed (or lost) his glasses, but Lilia, apparently, was decidedly *not* in that camp.

I casually inserted myself in between Isaac and Lilia in an attempt to put some distance between them.

"Don't glare at her like that, Isaac. You're scaring her. Look, I'll pay for the glasses, okay?" I said.

"No, I—" he began.

"Seriously, don't worry about it," I interrupted him before he could grumble anything else at Lilia. With that, I gave him a forceful smile that said, "Drop it."

By the way—although the lead-up is a little different, there's an event in the game that unfolds almost exactly like this. The main character breaks his glasses and offers to take responsibility by looking after him, since he's essentially

rendered blind by her blunder. It turns into an event in which she looks after him attentively, guiding him everywhere and helping him navigate the world as his eyes.

Needless to say, I couldn't risk Lilia triggering that event.

All otome game protagonists of the land, take note—a lady should never, ever offer to "take responsibility" for a man. Nor should she ever tell him that she'll "do anything he wants."

"Actually, my brother was just saying that we owe you our thanks," I said to Isaac.

"What?"

"C'mon, you can join us in the carriage."

And with that, I walked towards the carriage with Lilia, who was dazed out of her mind, and Isaac, who I practically had to drag over.



I would've preferred to drop Isaac off so I could've gotten some alone time with Lilia, but alas...ladies first. And so, reluctantly, I dropped off Lilia before him.

When we arrived at Isaac's house, I escorted him to the door, where I was greeted yet again by his snippy butler. Interestingly, he was a lot humbler today than he'd been last time—probably because I had Isaac with me. He insisted that I stay for tea, and I couldn't refuse him.

As he showed us to the living room, I recalled my meeting with Isaac's brothers. It seemed they had an awful lot of time on their hands, especially considering that last I'd seen them, they'd been lounging around in the early afternoon. I found myself wondering if I'd have the misfortune of running into them again.

If they pulled that crap again—especially with Isaac right there—I might really end up losing it.

If they lay the taunts on too thick, I'll just have to throw them out the window and offer whatever's left of them to Isaac, I thought as I sipped my tea, looking

around for any sign of them.

"What's with the frown?" Isaac asked.

"What? Wait...you can see my face?"

We were sitting across from each other. Judging from the way he'd leaned in close to get a look at Lilia's face earlier, it seemed pretty implausible that he'd be able to see my expression from this distance.

"I don't need to see your face to know what expression you're wearing."

"Huh... Didn't know I was that predictable," I said, letting out a bitter chuckle at his confident assessment. I was actually pretty proud of my poker face, but maybe it was my voice or my general vibe that gave me away? I bluntly cut to the chase. "Where are your brothers?"

"Ah, so that's what's on your mind. They're off in the earldom, working their way back up the ladder from the bottom rung," he replied, as if they were hardly worth remarking upon.

"What?"

"Didn't you hear from their ex-fiancées?"

I laughed this off as I thought back to the mountain of letters from the graduation ceremony I'd stashed away somewhere at home. I still hadn't opened all of them. Reading anything longer than a few sentences always put me right to sleep. Besides, I wasn't likely to see much of the graduating class going forwards. As a matter of practicality, I'd decided to prioritize reading the letters from girls I expected to see more of in the future.

I had a feeling that Isaac's brothers' fiancées had given me letters too, but I couldn't remember having read them.

By the way Isaac had said "ex-fiancées," though, it sounded like things had played out just as they had in the game—the two women had successfully annulled their engagements.

"My father picked my brothers' partners for them based on their families. He wanted my brothers to marry into families whose influence would catapult ours to success. And as daughters of earls, those girls could hardly have imagined

better partners than the sons of a prime minister."

Isaac shot me a glance.

"Unfortunately, however, it seems some *salacious rumors* prompted the girls to request annulments. While my father put the engagements on hold, I took the opportunity to advise him of my brothers' numerous misdeeds...in *great detail*."

"Wow..."

I was shocked. It felt like I was hearing about a soap opera rather than a friend's family affairs (much less one I had personally meddled in). Sure, I had been following along for a while, and sure, I knew the girls had been serious about calling off the engagements...but despite my vague sense of their resolve, I hadn't had a clue that they'd really gone and sealed the deal.

In the game, Isaac goes on to inherit his father's title of Earl Guildford, and eventually becomes the next prime minister. *Maybe the forces that be are trying to revert our universe to the original timeline again?* I wondered.

"After everything I told him, my father couldn't bear to look at them anymore. He carted them off to the earldom to reflect on their actions through menial labor."

"Think they've had any breakthroughs?" I teased.

"I wonder..." Isaac replied, his voice deadpan, as he took a sip of tea. After a brief silence, Isaac spoke up again in an even more serious tone. "I finally beat my brothers' scores on the exams the other day. I even beat my *father's* scores."

"Hey, that's awesome!"

My father and brother were always talking about the prime minister's genius. Even in the game, his accomplishments always seemed to represent walls for Isaac to surmount. Apparently, he was just as hard on himself as he was on everyone around him. He had a reputation for never once losing his spot as valedictorian. In short, he was basically perfect. He probably *had* to be in order to have climbed all the way to the rank of prime minister from his (relatively) lowly status as an earl.

"Your dad's really into the merits of hard work, right? Maybe you've got a chance at inheriting his title," I suggested.

"Actually, he's been dancing around the idea with me. I guess he must have realized it would be more advantageous to him to bequeath the title to me than wait for my brothers to return."

Isaac tried to set his teacup back down on the table, but it wasn't looking like he was going to make it. I swooped in to take it from him and set it down myself. I had a feeling we were using the guest teacups, which meant that breaking one would likely halve the family's supply. I didn't want to leave the servants in tears over the loss. Besides, it probably would've been a real pain in the butt to clean tea off of that long pile rug.

"So?" I asked, after a brief lull. "What're you gonna do?"

"Well, I told him I could cut ties and still make a life for myself. I just wanted to see what would happen if I said that."

My eyes flew open in shock. *Isaac? Cutting ties with his family? That* definitely didn't happen in the game. Dumbstruck, I searched his face for an answer. He looked oddly cheerful about this.

Without his glasses, his brow was completely wrinkle-free, and whenever he looked down, the obscene length of his eyelashes was on full display. It was enough to make me jealous.

"A mine I invested in has struck big and paid off a sizable dividend. Even if I were to cut ties, I'm set up financially for life. I've been thinking for a long time now that I'd like to work at a research institution once I graduate."

There was no debating that Isaac was exceptionally intelligent, but his people skills were...lacking, to say the least. Pursuing a career as prime minister required a certain cunning and a willingness to deal under the table with aristocrats. The straitlaced, introverted Isaac was probably much more cut out for a research-oriented career.

Every Royal LOVERS love interest had to be noble and fabulous. Without a legitimate claim to either of those descriptors, Isaac might end up having no choice but to drop out of the race. I certainly wasn't about to protest having

one less rival to compete with. If anything, this was a real win for me.

"When I said that, my father bowed his head. I suppose he must have realized I meant it," Isaac said, breaking into a smile.

It was obvious how pleased he was. But it wasn't a smile of pure delight— there was a tinge of malice to it too. It was a completely different expression to the ones I'd seen him make in the game, far removed from his usual sneer or the gentle smile he gave the main character. I might've even called it conspiratorial.

"You know what he said? 'You win, Isaac.'"

At this, I broke into a big smile too. "I bet that felt good."

I take it all back. Isaac will have no problems whatsoever making it as prime minister.

"I don't have any particular attachment to my family. Well, on a personal level, that is. But the family title is a real asset. So, I accepted my father's proposal."

"I'm surprised. I would've thought you'd have no interest in titles."

"Hypothetically, if I were to become the next prime minister, I could potentially ascend to the rank of marquis. And if I could do that..." he said, trailing off as he looked at me.

Without his glasses, he shouldn't have been able to see what expression I was wearing. And yet...

What is he doing, searching my face like that? I wondered. I wasn't aware that I was even making any particular face right now.

"What expression am I wearing?" I asked him.

"A completely neutral one," he replied with a sigh.

Thought so.



"Isaac, watch out! You're walking straight into the bushes!"

"Ngh!"

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"Watch your step, Isaac! There's an irrigation ditch right next to you!"

"Gah!"

"Isaac!"

Oh, for God's sake!
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I'd picked Isaac up this morning—the morning after "the incident"—in order to avoid Lilia triggering his event. He hadn't even made it three steps out of the carriage before stomping into shrubs and heading straight for a ditch. We'd barely started the day, and we were both at the end of our ropes.

I'd been exercising a lot of restraint lately looking after Lilia, but patience didn't come naturally to me.

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"All right, that's it. I'm carrying you. Stand still for a moment, will you?" "What?!"
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I reached behind his knees and scooped him up, cradling him in my arms. He might have been tall, but he was also extraordinarily slender. Fortunately, he was every bit as light as he looked—maybe even more than Edward.

"Excuse me?! What's going on here?!" he protested.

"No complaining. This is going to be a hell of a lot faster."

Despite the fact that he probably couldn't see much of anything, Isaac looked back and forth between my face and our surroundings before letting out a "hmph!"

Look, pal... If I let you walk all the way to the classroom on your own two feet, the sun would set before you got there.

"Don't worry. I carry Prince Edward like this on the regular," I said.

"And how exactly do you find yourself in the position of needing to carry His Highness in your arms?" he shot back, frowning.

I stayed silent. *Good question,* I thought.

As we made it down the hallway, the throngs of students parted for us. Once again, I felt like Moses parting the Red Sea.

Is it part of school policy to clear the path for anyone carrying someone in their arms? I wondered.

There was still some time before classes began, but several students were already gathered in the halls and the classrooms. They stopped their conversations to look at us and broke into whispers.

"I'm going to kill you," Isaac muttered, covering his face with his hands. His blush had crept all the way to his ears.

His gesture seemed pretty pointless by the time we made it to the classroom. No matter how much he covered his face, our classmates weren't exactly going to have any trouble guessing who he was.

"Sorry, but this was just the most efficient way to get you here. You like efficiency, don't you?"

"That isn't the issue here..." he mumbled.

"You're only embarrassed because you're *letting* yourself feel that way. If you just think of this as perfectly normal, then it won't bother you at all."

"I can't think of a man in the world who wouldn't be embarrassed by this!" he shot back emphatically.

I couldn't hold it against him. He was at that delicate age, after all. It probably would feel awkward to be carried around the halls like a princess.

Even my older brother had eventually asked me to stop giving him piggybacks. "If anyone sees me like that, I have a feeling it's going to set me back several years in the marriage market..." he'd said. After that, I only gave him piggyback rides in emergencies.

"All right, I hear you. How 'bout this, then?" I asked, putting him down on the ground and taking his hand in mine.

"Huh?"

"I'll just lead you by hand. This'll be better than being carried around in my arms, right?"

"F-Fine."

"Stick close, okay? If you wander into another bush, I'll just have to pick you up again."

I can only assume the embarrassment hadn't yet faded, because Isaac's cheeks were still flushed. His hand was warm in mine...and a little bit damp.

"That's one sweaty hand you've got there," I teased.

"This isn't the time for your jokes," he hissed back.

When we arrived at the classroom, the girls who'd arrived before us took one look at us and gasped. No one spoke to us, but they all looked at Isaac with an indescribable warmth in their eyes.

I don't know the details, but it seemed Isaac had somehow become the class's beloved introvert. Apparently, they were all rooting for his friendship with me.

Isaac took his seat and hung his head to avoid the stares. It struck me then that holding hands probably wasn't much less embarrassing than being carried in my arms. As I pondered this, I took my seat next to him.

Well, all that matters is that we got this all sorted out before Lilia arrived.



"Why are you carrying Guildford like that, Commander?"

"Because he almost accidentally launched himself out the window earlier when he went to get his stuff from his locker."

"W-Wow, Sir Burton! You're so strong..."

Isaac had behaved himself in class since he could just bring his notebook up to his face to look at it, but things had changed by the time lunch rolled around. As soon as he'd left the classroom, he'd started wandering off into dangerous directions again. I'd had no choice but to pick him up and carry him again.

Isaac was always looking after *me*, and it was only now that our positions had been reversed that I realized how much I appreciated it. He was good at taking care of people. I, on the other hand, wasn't sure if I could even last the day.

"Comm— I mean, Lord Burton! May I join you for lunch?" Robert asked.

"Sure, I don't mind. Let's go find a table, Lilia."

"A-All right!"

Lilia walked alongside me to the cafeteria, glancing up every once and a while at Isaac. Robert walked next to me on the other side, so that the three of us—well, four if you counted Isaac on my back—formed a line. It felt like he'd been hanging out around us a lot lately.

Maybe he's just got too much time on his hands now that Edward has relieved him of his duties as a stand-in?

I could practically feel Isaac's despair radiating from him as he sat atop my shoulders. Honestly, though, it felt a little unfair—he'd been just one step away from tumbling right out the window before I'd intervened.

Ungrateful much?

When we arrived at the cafeteria, I set him back down on the ground.

"Grab onto my sleeve, okay, Isaac?"

"Fine," he replied after a sulky pause. I'd figured he'd prefer that to being carried, but he didn't seem too pleased about that idea either.

Of course, the minute I let him out of my sight, he'd grabbed onto another girl's uniform sleeve.

"Go collect him, Robert," I instructed.

"Yes, sir! I'm on it!"

"Huh?" Isaac blurted out, finally realizing his mistake. "Who're you?"

Isaac leaned into the girl's face, peering down at her. She froze, her face immediately lighting up with a deep red blush.

Unlike Edward, Isaac had absolutely no idea how handsome he was. He didn't realize the power it had over people, particularly (although the glasses fanatics may disagree with me on this) when he wasn't wearing his glasses.

Trusting Robert to fetch him for me, I went to look for a table with Lilia.

Finally alone... I thought. For now, at least.

But before I could even take a breath, I heard Christopher's voice call, "Oh! Ser Burton!" and saw him running towards us.

Come on, Christopher... Read the room, will you?

"Can I join you for lunch?" he asked, not even waiting for an answer before plopping his tray down next to mine.

Then Robert returned, Isaac in tow.

"I see you went for lunch A, Lord Burton! Excellent choice!" he said, boring through me as usual with his sparkling laser eyes.

Of course, he'd probably have said the same thing even if I'd picked lunch B. You'll fawn over anything, won't you? I thought.

Lilia, who seemed to suffer from some sort of social anxiety, seemed to be shrinking into her seat as our company increased. But just as I was about to reach out to her, I felt a hand clap me on the back.

"Quite a crowd you've got here," Edward remarked. He looked down at us with a sweet, gentle smile.

Looks like the gang's all here.

It was probably the first time that all of the major characters—including Lilia—had gathered in one place. I felt like we were on the game's cover right now. Looking at everyone again, all gathered together like this, it hit me just how ridiculously handsome they really were.

As I looked out of the corner of my eye at Lilia, who was practically fading away with anxiety, a thought struck me—until last year, the love interests had never gathered together like this.

Then again, it seemed only obvious why that would be the case. The main character, around whom their lives revolved, hadn't made an appearance until just recently. And as soon as she had, they'd gathered around her like bees to honey. Or rather...like love interests in an otome game.

I looked back on recent events, recalling what happened during the student council room, the swordsmanship tournament, and the leaving school events. Every opportunity I'd had to be alone with Lilia had been systematically interrupted by at least one of the love interests. It didn't seem like any one of them had particularly high affection points with her, but maybe they simply

weren't aware of their affection for her.

In any case, one thing seemed clear: The powers that be were doing everything they could to prevent an outsider like me from forming ties with her. They were trying to force our lives to conform to the game's original script, quickly reverting any deviations.

Is this the power of otome games? I wondered, trying to wrap my head around the invisible forces at play. Well, no matter. I don't intend to lose to anyone or anything...even if that "anything" is the invisible forces that drive the universe.

## Got You, My Little Rabbit

As I was double-checking the saddle and stirrups on Lady, my beloved horse, I saw Christopher emerge from the manor.

"Where are you going, sis?" he asked.

"Hey, Christopher. I'm just about to head out for a picnic with Lilia."

"A picnic?" he tilted his head as he watched me adjust the stirrups. "Is Lilia a skilled equestrian?"

"I don't think so? I'm pretty sure she'd never ridden a horse until enrolling at the academy. Oh, but she'll be riding on my horse today, so that won't be a problem."

"Huh? On your horse?" Christopher asked, wide-eyed.

Since the game was set in medieval Europe, it would've been out of the question to arrive at the date in any other way. It didn't matter if she rode up front or behind me as long as we were on the same horse. Either way, it was sure to be a heart-pounding, intimate experience.

In fact, there was not one, but *several* horse-riding dates in *Royal LOVERS*. It was impossible to miss them.

Besides, if a girl has to pick between a guy who could ride and a guy who couldn't, well...I think the answer's obvious. Doesn't matter if it's a horse, a motorbike, or a car we're talking about, but a man has to have at least *one*. In the world of otome games, riding on a train to a date is only acceptable if you're in high school.

"Two people might put a heavy burden on your horse. Are you sure that's going to work okay?"

"It'll be fine. Lilia's light as a feather," I reassured him, then looked to Lady for backup. "Right?"

She let out a little whinny in response.

I'd ridden on her with Edward before, so I knew she could handle it. He'd grown since then, though, so we now took two horses whenever we sneaked out together.

"B-But..." Christopher protested, glancing at me.

I didn't know what he was going to say next, but the look he gave me told me everything I needed to know.

"Christopher, come on. I may be brawny, but I'm not *nearly* as heavy as a full grown man," I said.

"Th-That's not what I was thinking! It's just, um...don't you think a horse-drawn carriage might be better?"

"I prefer being on the horse myself. I just feel more in touch with the earth that way, when I can feel that the horse has its feet on the ground."

"Aren't its feet still on the ground when you're riding in a carriage, though...?" Christopher mumbled, flustered. Then he lit up and announced, "I'm going with you! I'm going to worry about you otherwise!"

"Huh?!"

"If I go with you, you'll have a backup horse. If Lady gets tired, you can ride back on my horse."

"Well, I guess that makes sense. I wouldn't want to ask that of you, though."

"Oh, I don't mind! Really! I just want to help!" he exclaimed, then grew silent. "Or...do you not want my help?"

Looking at him now, I felt the past and present overlap. He'd grown so much, but here he was looking up at me with that same expression he'd had back when he first joined the family. Tears welled up in his honey-colored eyes, and I felt an overwhelming urge to protect him come over me. A maternal urge that I'd thought I didn't have (or maybe it was just a sisterly urge?) was suddenly spurred to life.

We argued back and forth for a bit, but in the end, I let him come along. Somehow, I just didn't have it in me to say no to my strangely persistent little brother.

Little brother or not, though, Christopher was still a love interest. Through that lens, it made perfect sense that he'd want to come between Lilia and me when we had the opportunity to be alone together.

I would've certainly preferred to be alone with her, but there was no point calling it quits just because there were now three of us. I'd never get anywhere with her if I started thinking like that, or if I got dejected or discouraged from a minor setback. Besides, I'd probably lived out half of my life by now, and (so far) I'd managed not to fall into despair.

In any case, I was Christopher's older sister, and I'd sworn to follow the knights' Code of Chivalry. It was my duty to look after him, and yet it seemed all I did was make him worry. Our older brother wasn't home as much anymore, so he'd probably tasked Christopher with looking after me on his behalf. I could picture that conversation perfectly.

No matter how old Christopher grew, though, I'd always see him as my sweet little brother. Besides, I couldn't find it in me to flat-out refuse a good-willed request from a family member...and, admittedly, I was a little scared of what our older brother would say if I did.

So, I conceded and let Christopher come.

All in all, as his sister, I was just happy that he was being honest with me about what he needed.



I'd chosen a nice little meadow for our picnic, somewhere a bit removed from the capital. There was even a lake and a forest nearby.

Everything had proceeded smoothly until I'd arrived to pick Lilia up. As soon as I tried to put her on Lady, though, everything took a turn for the worse. Lady made her displeasure *very* clear. I was surprised by how much she protested. She'd allowed Edward and me to ride her before, so the number of riders didn't seem to be the issue.

Maybe even the horses in this world don't want anyone but the hottest guys in their saddles? I wondered. Oh, what a cruel world we live in...

In the end, I traded horses with Christopher and solved the issue. I didn't love

the idea of riding a horse other than Lady, since I wasn't much of a horse girl (okay, I'll admit it—all animals hated me, not just horses), but it had to be done.

Lilia, on the other hand, seemed to be beloved by all creatures big and small. This wasn't exactly surprising, since an affinity for animals was both a very saintlike *and* very main character-like trait.

Fortunately, the two extremes of love and hate seemed to cancel each other out, and we were able to ride Christopher's horse together without any problems.

It was unfortunate that we didn't get this time alone together, but Christopher's company had ended up being a lifesaver.

Nothing beats having a little brother.

After riding together for almost an hour, we stopped at the edge of town to stow our horses and walked to the meadow. When we got there, a huge expanse of verdant grass spread out before us. It was a breathtaking sight.

The three of us climbed a hillock and settled down for our picnic. I laid a handkerchief down for Lilia to sit on.

There are several picnic events in the game. Robert's, for example, features him laying his head on Lilia's lap and falling asleep. It's an impactful scene, mostly for the unusually defenseless expression he makes that sets players' hearts aflutter.

If Lilia and I had been alone, I might've tried that move myself. But with my little brother *right there*? I wasn't so sure that'd go over well. No matter how shameless I was, there was a real risk that it would embarrass Lilia.

I felt a nervous energy forming between us. I knew Lilia was expecting something, since she knew how these picnic events played out. The pressure was on. It felt like the two of us were locked in a standoff, just like a duel between a pair of experienced knights, waiting for the other to make a move.

What now? Are you going to act? Or is this where we call it a draw?

"Aaah! This feels great! C'mon, Ser Burton! You try!" Christopher, who was blissfully stretched out on the grass and completely oblivious to our plight,

exclaimed.

"Christopher! Where are your manners?" I chided.

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

"You used to be such a little angel... When did you get so cheeky, huh?"

Christopher puffed out his cheeks in a huff. In response, I shrugged affectedly and let out a little sigh for emphasis. As she watched our back-and-forth, Lilia let out a little chuckle.

The gentle wind felt great, and the grass underneath us was soft and dry. It wasn't hard to imagine how nice it would feel to lie down on it and look up at the sky.

All right, I thought, forget about the lap-pillow strategy.

And with that, I succumbed to the call of the grass.

"Lilia," I said.

"Yes?"

I gently took her hand in mine, and a deep blush spread across her cheeks. I swung our hands up in a "hooray!" gesture, then fell back with a *thunk* onto the grass, which pulled her down with me.

"Eek!" Lilia let out a squeal of surprise as she shut her eyes tightly.

Why would God create such a tempting creature? I thought to myself as I looked at her, marveling at how adorable she looked even with her eyes closed.

Then I turned my gaze away from Lilia up to the sky. It was deep blue, and thick white clouds floated lazily by. From time to time, a gentle breeze carried the scent of flowers and sunlight to my nose.

It was already summer, but the medieval European setting of my present life differed from Japan. The temperature shift here was a lot more gradual. The weather was still just pleasantly warm—perfect for a day outside. Every time I took a deep breath, it felt like the fresh air was cleansing my lungs. (It wasn't like I was ever subjected to exhaust fumes in this world—even in the capital—but being out here in the meadow made the air feel fresher anyway.)

"Ah ha ha! This *does* feel great! Doesn't it, Lilia?" My question was met with complete silence.

Surely the fall didn't hurt her...? I thought, concerned, as I turned sideways to look at her. The grass was pretty soft, and I'd been careful not to pull her down too forcefully. Just then, our eyes met. Her cheeks were completely red.

"Lilia...?"

I gave her the gentlest, most cavalier smile I could muster. Her face was so red that she looked like a boiled octopus. I wouldn't have been at all surprised if steam started to erupt from her.

"I-I-It...s-sure does!" she sputtered, whipping her head around to look at the sky. I pretended not to notice how forced that sounded.

I hadn't even been trying to look seductive, but maybe seeing me in a more natural state was exactly the appeal for her. (Not sure what would be so appealing about that, but I wasn't about to complain.)

Lilia kept being awkward for a while, but eventually she seemed to notice the sky's beautiful blue color. Her mouth made a little "o" of surprise, and after watching the clouds for some time, she closed her eyes. I looked up and copied her, taking in the crisp scent of the air and enjoying the gentle breeze caressing my cheeks.

For a while, the three of us just lay there, basking in the sun and the breeze, until it felt like we were melting into the grass. It was a similar sensation to one I felt when I was trying to blend in with my surroundings.

Suddenly, I felt something brush my cheek. My eyes flew open.

Thunk! Something slammed into the grass...and right next to my face.

As soon as I turned my head, I saw a fluffy little creature lying right next to me. Its ears were a bit on the small side, but it looked just like a rabbit. Seeing its limbs splayed up in the air like that while it lay on its back, though, I felt like there must be something very wrong with it.

That thing just kicked the bucket out of nowhere. What if it's carrying some sort of deadly disease?

"Aww! What a cutie!" Lilia cooed.

"Whoa!"

Before I could stop her, she scooped the rabbit right up.

Okay, no matter how generous your definition of "cute" is, surely a rabbit in rigor mortis doesn't make the cut? I thought, horrified. Even Lilia herself looked a little uncomfortable.

The rabbit stayed stiff as a board for a few moments, but eventually its nose started twitching. Then, it softened into Lilia's arms, as if releasing all the tension it had been carrying.

Oh, thank god... It's alive.

"Rabbits play dead sometimes, don't they?" Christopher asked, sitting up and looking at the rabbit in Lilia's arms. "This little guy was probably just scared that Ser Burton would catch and eat him."

"Excuse me..."

"Has there ever been an animal that liked you?" he pressed.

I had nothing to say in reply.

For some reason, animals had always seemed to find me utterly repulsive—especially the little ones. I couldn't remember if they'd hated me even before I'd recovered my past-life memories, but for the past ten years, I'd simply learned to accept their hatred of me as an immutable fact of life.

"S-Sir Burton, are you not a big animal person?"

"I wouldn't say that. They're just not big fans of me."

"Really...? I wouldn't have expected that." Lilia released the rabbit from her arms and onto her lap, where it curled obediently into a little ball. "I guess even you have dislikes."

I never said I didn't like them... Oh, who cares?

Lilia looked picture-perfect with that rabbit on her lap. Instagrammable, even.

"He's adorable," Christopher said, peering down at the rabbit.

The smile he wore was so sweet and pure, he looked like an angel. It seemed the rabbit was won over too, because it sprung up and tickled Christopher's face with its whiskers. Both Christopher and Lilia looked so adorable, it would've made for a really cute picture.

What a calming scene...

I found myself wishing that Christopher had been a little sister instead of a brother. Hell, I'd even take a cross-dressing brother. That way, I wouldn't have to worry about competing with him for Lilia's affection. I could just dote on him to my heart's content.

"Huh, that's strange... His ears seem a little short, don't they?"

"Oh!" Lilia exclaimed softly.

As soon as she said that, I realized what was happening: This was an Isaac event.

The rabbit on her lap belonged to a species on the verge of extinction. I think it's based on a species of rabbit from my previous life... Amimi? Amami? Something like that. Anyway, in the game, you run into one that's being chased by poachers. The event revolves around Isaac setting up a trap in the forest to round up the hunters.

When Lilia says, "What a cutie," Isaac replies, "You're the... No, never mind."

Oh, Isaac... You couldn't have fumbled that harder.

It's supposed to be a heartwarming scene, and when I played the game, that's exactly how I experienced it. Now that I was friends with Isaac, though, it felt kind of weird. I wanted to tease him and say, "Wow, lover boy, look at you!"

Anyway, loafing around on the grass was nice, but there were poachers to catch. This was my kind of plot point. I didn't even need to build a trap; I'd have no problem disposing of them with my bare hands.

## Bam!

Just then, an explosion sounded. A moment later, I heard a high-pitched, metallic *clink* right around my arm.

I raised my arm up and looked at it. My cufflink was crushed, and there was

some kind of metal lump embedded in it—a ball of lead or steel or something. I'd never seen one up close and personal before, but I could only assume it was a bullet.

Firearms weren't very advanced in this world—apparently, bows and arrows were much more cost-effective. I'd heard from Gried that most people didn't use them, since they weren't very powerful or accurate. Even worse, you had to load each shot one by one. It just wasn't worth the effort or the money. Judging from this firearm's inability to pierce even my cufflink, its poor reputation was well deserved.

The shot that had grazed my cufflink had gone by slowly enough for me to assess the gun's power (which was pitiful) with my naked eye, as well as trajectory (which told me I'd have no problem dealing with the gunman).

Generally, the only people who brandished guns were wealthy hunters and shady organizations testing out new prototypes. It was hard to tell whether he'd been aiming at the strange rabbit or at *us*, but either way, the gunman clearly wasn't the former.

After taking a look around, I picked up a small rock the size of my palm. I wasn't about to let some guy with a firearm scare me away. What kind of love interest would I be if I didn't stand my ground here?

I wound up my arm and pitched my first shot. The rock arced through the sky, following the trajectory of the shot. Then, after a beat of silence, I heard a coarse shriek. Just as planned, I'd hit a bulls-eye.

But the gunman seemed to still be conscious. *Another throw couldn't hurt...* I thought, then muttered, "Time for round two."

Just as I bent over to look for a slightly larger rock, I heard voices from the bushes I'd just thrown the first one into. The voices were so heavily accented, it was hard to tell what they were saying. From the sound of it, though, there were about four or five people.

"Ser Burton!"

"Sounds like we've got a crowd. Let's head into the woods and shake them off," I said.

I exchanged a glance with Christopher, then grabbed Lilia's hand and cut across the meadow. The aggressors were probably just a bunch of small fries, but there was no point in letting them turn us into target practice.

As I turned to look behind me, I saw a cloud of dust rise up off the ground where we'd just stood. Lilia, who was still carrying the rabbit in her arms, went pale in the face.

In the game, Isaac uses his big brain to get out of this hairy situation. Unfortunately for all of us, Isaac wasn't here right now. I had no intention of letting these gunmen get the best of me, but it was understandable that Lilia might be a little afraid for her safety right now.

"S-Sir Burton... Y-You've been hit!" Lilia cried between wheezes. "Y-You got hurt...protecting us..."

Oh. She was worried about me?

She reached out and gently touched my left arm, still gasping for breath.

Just as we entered the forest, I slowed down slightly so the pace would be a bit easier on her.

"I'm all right," I reassured her. "Fortunately, it just grazed my cufflink."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I cursed myself. The line she'd given me was the same one that the main character gives Isaac in the game when he hurts his shoulder protecting her. It probably would've made for a much more dramatic event if I had been hurt.

Maybe I should cop a shot or two? I found myself wondering.

As we walked quickly through the forest, I heard the faint sound of metal on metal.

"Christopher!" I yelled, yanking his arm forcefully and sending him flying sideways.

He hit the ground with a *thunk* just as the bear trap that he'd been about to walk into clamped its jaws down.

"Eek!" Lilia cried.

"Those traps are too big for rabbits..." I mused. "Maybe they're there to catch poachers. Are you okay, Christopher?"

"Y-Yeah. I'm okay."

Christopher had gone completely pale. Sweat dripped down his face.

"We should watch our step," I warned.

Both Christopher and Lilia nodded gravely. The rabbit in Lilia's arms was the only one who didn't seem to be taking this seriously. All it did was twitch its nose in response as it looked on with indifference.

As we began to walk again, I thought I heard another metallic *clink*. This time, though, it wasn't a bear trap—it was the sound of arrows slicing through the air. I caught three of them, bundled them together in my hands, snapped them, and tossed them onto the ground behind me.

The locals must have *really* hated poachers, because there were a *lot* of traps in this forest. Occasionally, we came across cages with bait underneath and pitfalls. It seemed the townsfolk had trapped the poacher's rabbit traps, hoping to catch them as the illegal hunters caught the rabbits. I couldn't help feeling bad for any poor soul who was simply a bystander and had the misfortune of getting caught in one.

The three of us continued through the forest, evading the traps as we went. The farther we went, though, the more Christopher seemed to be falling behind. He worked out at the training grounds too, so he should've at least been in better physical shape than Lilia. It seemed weird that he wasn't able to keep up with the slower pace I'd set for her.

"Christopher?" I called as I approached him.

He was looking even paler and sweatier than before.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Um, well... It's my foot..."

"Your foot? Let me see."

He seemed to be walking with a limp in his right foot, so I took his right boot off to take a look. There was obvious swelling around his ankle. I could feel a

throbbing heat emanating from the skin.

"I think I might've sprained it when I was avoiding that trap earlier," he explained.

"You should've told me sooner."

"I'm sorry..." he said softly, looking down at the ground.

Should've known I can't pull off a gentle reprimand like our older brother can...

"Look..." I began, before realizing that anything I followed that up with was just likely to make him cry. So, instead of finishing that thought, I knelt down and offered him my back.

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"Um...?"
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"Get on. It'll be quicker if I carry you on my back."

"B-But... I...!"

He glanced over at Lilia, probably embarrassed at the thought of her seeing him in such a compromising position. He was at that tender age, after all. I could understand that he'd probably prefer *not* riding on my back in front of a girl, but we didn't exactly have a choice here. This was no time for adolescent anxieties to be rearing their heads.

"We need to hurry," I urged him, and reluctantly, he hopped up onto my back.



Not to go off on a tangent here, but I've never twisted an ankle before—not in this life or (as far as I can remember, at least) in my last one either. Maybe that's why I'd always kind of thought that a twisted ankle was somehow fantastical, like something that only happened to shojo manga and otome game protagonists.

Huh... Who knew it happened in real life too? I thought. Still, shouldn't it be Lilia with the twisted ankle? She's the main character, so isn't that her thing?

As we continued walking, I heard a voice in the distance. (Actually, "voice" sounds too even-keeled to describe it. Let's go with "bellow.") It seemed like one of the hunters had broken off from the group and was approaching. Lilia seemed to notice too, because she looked up at me with fearful eyes.

Carrying Christopher on my back wasn't nearly enough to slow me down, but I knew Lilia would be in danger if we got ambushed by a group like this. If she got hurt, our exciting brush with danger would turn into a real problem. I needed to tread carefully if I wanted to avoid that.

Forget about rounding up the hunters. All that matters right now is getting Lilia and Christopher home safely.

If anything, that was actually going to be *harder* for me to manage. It wasn't a big deal, though—it was just like the difficulty had been upped from easy to normal, that's all.

We continued our trek. Eventually, we came to a little clearing that was bordered by a four-meter-tall cliff. I looked around and spotted a large tree.

Perfect. I can use that to my advantage.

I turned to face Lilia and told her the plan. "We'll probably be at a disadvantage if they try to attack us while we're on the move, so I'm going to face the gunman head-on here."

"Huh?!"

"You take the rabbit and hide somewhere safe," I instructed her.

I let Christopher down for a moment so I could pick Lilia up. I climbed the nearby tree and sat her down on one of the branches.

"Be a good girl for me."

"O-Okay..." she replied dreamily.

I gave her a little wink and saw hearts pop up in her eyes. She'd looked scared out of her mind earlier, but now it seemed like this event was paying off.

I climbed down from the tree and put Christopher on my back again. I couldn't afford to have the gunmen take him hostage, so he needed to stay put here for the time being.

I stood right where I was, waiting for one of the gunmen to emerge. I knew it was a tense situation, but I wasn't holding my breath. Then I heard the rustling of someone making their way through the bushes.

"No move!" a man's voice shouted. His accent was thick, but I managed to make out the words anyway.

Fortunately, it seemed he was alone. He was pointing a gun straight at me, but at this distance and with this amount of cover available, I couldn't for the life of me fathom why he was still trying to use it.

I know a master never blames his tools...but when your tools are *that* bad, it's time to rethink your strategy.

"Who you?! Gun no work! Why?!" he yelled.

I tilted my head, puzzled. Then I realized that it wasn't just that he had an accent—he was speaking in stilted, broken phrases. *Maybe he's a foreigner?* I thought. That would certainly explain why I hadn't caught what he was saying when I first encountered him.

Foreigners hunting rabbits with guns, huh? Something about this smells awfully fishy.

"What you want?! Speak n—" he began.

In the middle of his sentence, I rushed towards him. Before he could follow me with his eyes, I kicked him right in the chin, launching him up into the air forcefully. He spun several times before landing hard at the bottom of the cliff.

I looked over the cliff's edge and saw half of the man's body sticking up out of a bed of mulch. Since he wasn't crying out (or cursing me out), I assumed he must've lost consciousness.

"S-Sis... Shouldn't we try to find out who he's with or who he works for?"

"Nah. We'll leave that to the guards. My job is just to get you and Lilia back to safety as soon as possible."

"B-But then more of those guys may be after us..."

He had a point there. This guy wasn't the last of them, and his buddies were bound to chase after us when he woke up and told them about our encounter.

Maybe I should tie him up and place him somewhere the guards will be likely to see him? I thought.

I dropped down the cliff to where he'd fallen. My feet slipped a bit on the soft dirt, but I managed to make a landing without any trouble. Using a vine, I tied the man up and hung him from a tree. That way, he wouldn't be going anywhere.

"How about I leave a little note to scare off the other poachers?" I said.

I thought back to a TV special I'd seen in my past life in which a member from a J-pop boy band sat in a tree like a monkey. The menacing phrase he'd uttered to his comrades was all too perfect.

"Like... 'Go home, humans.' Perfect, right?"

"You're gonna scare the townsfolk..."

"You think so? All right. No note it is, then."

In any case, the priority now was heading back into town, where we'd left the horses. I'd track down some guards and let them know what had happened. They could take things from here.

The gunman's buddies will probably find him before the guards do, though, I ruminated as I eyed the closed bear traps around us. As a precaution, I pried them open again...just in case any ne'er-do-wells passed through.

I put Christopher back on the ground and called out to Lilia.

"Lilia! It's safe now!"

I looked up over the cliff to see if I could spot her. She was standing between

some trees, still holding the rabbit.

"Come on down!" I called, opening my arms up wide.

"Huh?"

"Don't worry. I'll catch you."

I might have been at the bottom of a cliff, but it wasn't an especially tall one. Besides, it was soft and mulchy down here. I wanted to get us back to town as soon as possible, and this seemed to be the fastest way.

Not to mention, this was the perfect opportunity to hold Lilia in my arms. *Two birds, one stone.* 

After psyching herself up, Lilia pursed her lips, held the rabbit tightly against her body, and hopped down into my arms.

I wrapped her into a tight embrace. Sure enough, she's light as a feather.

"See?" I said. "Safe and sound."

Lilia's eyelids had been squeezed tightly shut, but at the sound of my voice, they gently opened. I looked straight into her eyes, which were only a few centimeters away from mine.

"Got you, my little rabbit," I said.

I did a little spin, still holding her in my arms. Her face went beet red, and her mouth flapped open and closed repeatedly.

Okay, so, maybe that wasn't my best work...

As much as I would've loved to keep carrying her, she insisted she could walk by herself, so I let her down gently onto the ground. I felt like we were stalling out here, but—in addition to Lilia's protests—I knew it would be a little insane to carry her in my arms while Christopher was already on my back.

And so, with Christopher on my back and Lilia walking nervously beside us, we slowly made it through the dense forest. The trees grew sparser and sparser as we walked, and eventually we could feel the warmth of the sun's rays. I felt certain we were nearing the exit.

From time to time, we heard a cry from deeper in the woods, but I figured it

was just one of the men we'd encountered earlier stepping into a poacher trap. Every time I'd come across one, I'd reset it. It seemed like that strategy had paid off.

Suddenly, I felt a presence nearby. I turned to look towards the brush, where I heard the light scuffling sounds of a very small animal.

"Oh!"

A rabbit hopped out from the brush and stopped right in front of us. It looked a lot like the one Lilia had in her arms, but it was about twice as big.

Wonder if that's the little one's mom?

"Aw... Looks like you've got a friend waiting for you!" Lilia exclaimed, squatting down and gently releasing the tiny rabbit.

The two rabbits approached each other. Once they'd reconvened, they hopped off together back into the forest.

I couldn't help but wonder why the hell rabbits had such cute tails. Their tails *looked* round, but if you asked me to really pin down the shape, I'd say they were actually more triangular than anything. Whatever you'd classify it as, one thing was for sure—they were *sinfully* cute.

No, I thought. That's ridiculous. As if rabbits are even capable of sinning...

That's right—they were innocent little angels. Anyone who would dare do them harm deserved every punishment they'd get in that forest.

Maybe I can stop by on my next jog and annihilate every last one of the poachers.

As soon as we'd made it back into town, I stopped by the guard station near the town's entrance to alert them about the poachers. He ran straight into the forest as soon as I told him what had happened. I felt that his eagerness confirmed my theory; it seemed the townsfolk really were fed up with the poachers.

I took another look around town as we continued, making note this time of a rabbit souvenir shop and a sign advertising rabbit-watching tours. The cute critters must've been a real boon for tourism around these parts.

Our next stop was the stable that was housing our horses. I wasn't about to put Christopher on a horse when he was injured, and there was no way I was making Lilia ride alone. After we talked things over, I decided to hire a carriage instead. I'd arrange for the horses we'd ridden over to be delivered back to the manor at another time.

Personally, I would've been fine with an open-top hackney carriage, but I knew that there was only one correct choice considering Christopher's twisted ankle—and it certainly wasn't *that*. Instead, I hired a nice closed-top carriage for us. It was a reasonably fancy one, at least, which gave me the chance to play up my noble and fabulous roots as a member of the duke's family.

"Wow! This is the first time I've ever seen money in person!" Christopher exclaimed, who just *had* to one-up me in the classiness department.

Despite being holed away in the earl's manor for several years, Christopher had apparently had an upbringing much more befitting of a duke's son than I had.

Most high-ranking nobles didn't walk around with money, after all. If they ever purchased something from a shop, they simply instructed the shopkeeper to send the bill to their manor or to put it on their tab. And if they stopped by a shop that *didn't* accommodate that? Well, they'd just ask their attending servant to pay up on their behalf—with the understanding that they'd be compensated later, of course.

In my case, that wasn't usually an option. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd left the house with a servant or a guard since I'd started school. "Why's that?" you ask? Simple—all they ever did was hold me back, so I made sure to leave the house alone. They'd try to follow me sometimes, but I never had any difficulty shaking them off.

Everyone at the manor knew that trying to assign any attendants to me was utterly useless, and nothing dampens a worker's spirits quite like doing something they know to be useless. The Honorable Duke cared deeply about workers' well-being, so he rarely ever gave them such a dispiriting assignment.

"You really know your stuff, Ser Burton," Christopher noted.

"Well... I go into town from time to time, so it's good to know my way around

these things," I replied noncommittally, giving him a little smile.

Christopher sometimes had a bad habit of chastising me for things like this, so I braced myself for whatever was coming next. Instead, though, his shoulders slumped dejectedly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should've had some money on hand too."

"M-Me too," Lilia added.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that," I said.

They both looked utterly ashamed. It was not at all the effect I'd hoped to have with my grand gesture. Lilia's dejectedness hit me especially hard. I would never expect a woman to take out her wallet, and it was distressing to think I hadn't conveyed that properly. I mean, why else would I have picked up a job, if not to pay for dates?

With Lilia's hand in mine, and Christopher's arm around my shoulder, I stepped up into the carriage. As Lilia sat down next to me, Christopher did as well.

"Christopher?" I prompted him. "There's plenty of space on the other side."

"Huh? Oh, um... Oops, looks like the carriage has started moving! Too late now, I guess!" he said, with a strange little laugh, as the carriage began to sway.

I'd made a point to hire a big carriage, but apparently all this space was just going to go to waste now that we'd crammed into one side like sardines. Just as Christopher had said, though, it was probably too late to do anything about it now that the carriage was in motion. You wouldn't get up and switch seats on a moving bus, and I assumed the same logic applied for carriages (probably to a greater degree, even).

The three of us chatted for a while, but slowly Christopher and Lilia became less and less talkative. I figured they must've been tired from our big day out. As the carriage swayed gently, Lilia moved with it, until finally, her head hit my shoulder with a little *plonk*.

You little minx! I thought, impressed by her deviously natural maneuver to get closer to me. But just as I was privately applauding her, I took a peek at her and

realized that she had *literally* just fallen asleep.

Well, that explains why she'd gotten so quiet.

I looked down at her long eyelashes, which looked even longer now that her eyes were closed. Her silky hair brushed my neck, tickling the skin a little.

I could tell she was trying her hardest to act like a proper main character, but it was so much more endearing when she was just being herself like this. There was just one problem: If you took away the main character-like elements and the artifice from her personality, you'd probably just be left with an awkward nerd.

As I thought about her true nature, I let out a wry laugh. Just as I did, I felt a heaviness on my other shoulder.

I turned my head to see Christopher snoring softly. His eyelashes were long enough to give Lilia's a run for their money, and his soft skin and sweet snoring were every bit as lovely as hers.

I'd have been willing to bet that if you showed anyone the view I was looking at now and declared that Christopher was the main character, ten out of ten people would believe you. Now, I know I'm probably biased, as his older sister...but even if you accounted for that, you had to admit that he had cheat-level good looks.

After studying my little brother's face for a while, though, I was starting to grow a little bored. Thanks to my two sleeping companions, I'd lost both my freedom of movement and my conversational partners.

Maybe I'll sneak a nap in too.

The carriage I'd hired obviously didn't come close to the quality one would expect of a duke's carriage, but its expensive price tag was justified by the reasonably soft cushions. As I sank into them and let myself rock to the gentle swaying, I felt the call of sleep beckoning me. I'd always been a heavy sleeper—I'd be a poor excuse for a knight if I couldn't sleep through any situation, after all.

I was out like a light as soon as I'd made up my mind. In just three seconds, I was asleep.

## As It Just So Happens, That Villainess Was Me

One summer afternoon, Lilia invited me for a walk in the school courtyard. It was the hottest time of the day, when the sun was highest in the sky, and I was feeling the full brunt of its rays as we stepped outside.

I could think of only one reason she'd invite me out in this weather—she was expecting to trigger an event.

I racked my brains, trying to remember any hot-weather events that might be relevant. I came up with just one: a Robert event.

In the game, Robert and the main character take a stroll in the courtyard and invoke the ire of a villainess's posse with their chummy behavior. The posse bumps into Lilia on purpose, sending her flying into a nearby fountain. Robert stretches his hand out to save her, but he winds up in the fountain with her. The event ends with the two of them completely drenched and laughing at their shared plight.

One might even be so bold as to say that they had the villainess to thank for giving them the "push" they needed.

In any case, Lilia seemed intensely interested in the fountain—which seemed to confirm my theory that this was the event she intended to replicate. She'd certainly picked a scorcher of a day for it, so even if we got a little wet, at least we wouldn't need to worry about catching colds. It was the perfect weather for fountain-hopping...if there was such a thing.

As it just so happens, the villainess I mentioned earlier? She was *me*. I felt strangely proud of that claim to fame, despite having absolutely no one to brag to about it. It *did* put a bit of a kink in my plans, though. Unlike Robert, I had no villainess to count on.

That meant that the only way this event was going to play out was for Lilia to trip over her own two feet and voluntarily dive into the fountain. Then I'd have to fall into the fountain with her when I reached out to offer a hand. Of course,

getting hurt was hardly a heart-pounding development (at least, not in a good way), so I'd have to hold her tightly in my arms as we fell in. And we both needed to get soaked, otherwise there was no point.

It all seemed pretty straightforward, but it was clear to me that it would require a little thought. For starters, Lilia was *tiny*. With my core strength, I would have no problem supporting her if she were to take a tumble. As long as I was there to help her, she wasn't in any danger of falling into the fountain—and I *certainly* wasn't in any danger of falling in with her.

Come to think of it, how the hell did Robert flub that so badly? I'll have to revise his training plan if he can't even support a tiny high school girl, I thought. Wait, what am I saying? That's in-game Robert, not the meathead, muscle-junkie Robert I know.

Lilia seemed to be acutely aware of the event's timing too, because she looked completely lost in thought.

God, this is tense... When is she gonna make her move? I wondered.

I focused on her every move with intense anxiety—and it seemed she was every bit as focused as I was.

That's probably why we were too slow to respond to the figure hurtling towards us.

"Eek!" she shrieked.

"Lilia!"

The figure was suddenly right in front of us, bumping into Lilia's shoulder. Panicked, I reached out to grab Lilia's arm and pull her towards me.

Suddenly, there was a giant splash...but neither Lilia nor I were the least bit wet. In fact, we hadn't even stepped a single foot into the fountain. Instead, plopped down in the fountain, soaking wet, was none other than...

"Y-Your Highness?!" Lilia cried, flustered.

...His Highness, Prince Edward.

I could only stare blankly in astonishment.

What the hell is happening right now? Someone please explain to me what the highest-ranking student at this school is doing falling into fountains.

"Your Highness?" I called out without thinking.

Edward pushed his soaking-wet bangs up off his forehead to look at me, giving me a placid smile that seemed wildly out of place on someone who'd just fallen into a fountain. I felt that he'd lost his usual ephemerality since he'd returned from his treatment in the West, but the water droplets trickling down his translucent-white skin gave him an undeniable charm.

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"Well, fancy seeing you here," he said.

"Your Highness, please..."

"It seems I accidentally lost my footing."

"Accidentally?"

"Something the matter?"

"No..."
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It seemed odd to qualify his explanation with a word like "accidentally." I couldn't help but repeat his choice of words, but Edward just gave me his classic fake smile and shot back with a threatening tone that dared me to press the issue. I felt suddenly reminded of the power disparity between us and lost my will to talk back.

"So? How long will my knight leave me to soak in the fountain, I wonder?"

He showed no inclination of getting up himself, so I let out an aggrieved sigh and walked over to help him. I stepped up onto the fountain's edge and reached out to give him a hand.

At least the fountain water's clean, I found myself thinking, Although I guess I'd expect nothing less at a school attended exclusively by the upper class.

But just as the drenched prince grabbed my hand...

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"Oh."
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"Huh?"

...a huge plume of water erupted from the fountain, pouring down on the

both of us.

Typically, the fountain burbled with a gentle stream of water. But for reasons I won't even pretend to understand, one of the fountain's main purposes was entertainment—and, apparently, it was highly entertaining for it to suddenly spray huge volumes of water into the air at fixed intervals. The school considered these sudden bursts to be a little show.

Unfortunately, I was now experiencing the show in 4D.

"Looks like it got you," Edward said slyly, tilting his head a little as he gave me a smile.



On the surface, his smile was pleasant and warm, but his eyes betrayed something different.

Why do I get the funny feeling he had that line prepared? This whole mess was beginning to look unmistakably premeditated. I don't remember doing anything to piss him off, though...

In the end, no one had anything to gain from Edward and me getting soaked in the fountain, but at least the prospect of Lilia being excited to see an SS-tier-ultra-rare hair-down Sir Burton made up for the inconvenience. I'd been meaning to treat her to a rare glimpse of me with my hair down eventually, so this actually ended up working out all right.

Still, there was no way I was going to class looking like a drowned rat. So, I bid Lilia goodbye and headed off to meet Christopher so I could borrow his sportswear uniform—what students normally wore for swordsmanship classes. And, for some reason, it seemed Edward had decided to tag along.

"Lizzie," he said. "You don't have a change of clothes at school, do you? You can borrow my sportswear, if you like."

"That's all right. I'm sure *you'll* need the change of clothes too. I'll just borrow some from my brother."

"Oh, it's no trouble. I have an extra set."

Edward snapped his fingers, and a guard came running over with a towel and a pair of sportswear for me. I noticed it was a different guard than the one who usually summoned me to Edward's office.

Impressive foresight, having an extra pair of sportswear on hand. Is royalty always this well-prepared?

I would've been happy with just a change of shirt and jacket—maybe even a pair of shoes, if I was really lucky—but Edward had probably been soaked down to his underwear. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd prepared a change of clothes for that too.

Women's underwear in this world was basically the same as modern-day Japanese underwear (since it was based on an otome game), but I had no idea

what the situation was for men. Surely they didn't wear loincloths...right? But it was hard to imagine everyone walking around in expensive boxers. For a brief moment, I was struck with the intrusive thought that maybe they all went commando. I quickly banished the thought.

Anyway, if Edward was going to offer me a change of clothes, far be it from me to say no.

"Oh... Okay. Thanks," I said.

"Think nothing of it. You can stop by my office over the weekend to return it."

I didn't reply. This was all starting to feel *very* premeditated indeed. *Did you* do all this just to give me a reason to visit you? I wondered.

Pissed off at the deception, I took the towel his guard had given me and aggressively rubbed his hair dry.

"You're more soaked than I am," I said.

"I can dry my hair myself, thank you..."

"We wouldn't want you to catch a cold, would we?"

"Stop being so rough with it! It's going to get tangled!"

Only once his silver hair had reached a satisfying level of unkemptness did I lay off. I let out a triumphant snicker as he looked up at me spitefully.

"Well, thanks for the spare clothes."

Nothing had changed in the end, but I felt a bit better now that I'd gotten in a parting shot and managed to look completely unbothered. It was all psychological, really.

I just had to keep reminding myself of that when I returned to the classroom and faced an interrogation about what I was doing in Prince Edward's clothes.

Since I was exempt from swordsmanship classes, I'd never had the occasion to wear the school's sportswear uniform. Unfortunately, this meant that I'd had no idea that each student's name was embroidered onto their uniform.



"There's something I've been wanting to ask you. What, pray tell, was my

younger brother doing with the sentimental item I *specifically* entrusted to *someone else*?"

I decided to exercise my right to remain silent. I might have been blessed with a silver tongue, but if there was one thing I knew, it was that silence was golden.

As soon as I'd gone to return Edward's sportswear, he'd assailed me with this question. With the evidence laid out on the desk in front of us, I felt like I was under cross-examination. Unfortunately, the bundle of his hair, wrapped in my handkerchief, spoke for itself.

That's when it all came together.

Riiiight... So that's what that little episode at the fountain was all about.

"I must say, the family crest embroidered onto this handkerchief looks *awfully* familiar. I could've sworn I've seen it somewhere before. Now, who could it possibly belong to?"

After a long pause, I fessed up. "Yeah, all right... It's mine."

The evidence was undeniable, albeit hardly necessary. Considering I'd been the one he'd given his hair to, who else could the culprit have possibly been?

Once I'd resigned myself to my fate, Edward gave me another smile and probed me further. "Well? Mind enlightening me as to what *my brother* was doing with it, then?"

"Okay, see... Robert got really depressed after you went away to the West. I mean, he looked *awful*. I figured, if he knew how determined you were, that he might be at least a little more appreciative of the gravity of his responsibilities and ready to take them on."

"Hmm. That's a pretty good excuse...for something you came up with on the spot."

"I'm honored that you think so."

"That wasn't a compliment," he shot back.

"I know."

Now that I'd started to talk back, Edward was at a loss. He let out a heavy, affected sigh. "You don't get it."

"Get what?"

"Exactly. You really don't understand *anything*. Or do you just like to play dumb?"

"Sometimes, depending on the circumstances," I replied honestly after a pause.

There were plenty of times I'd pretended to know what was going on, despite being completely clueless. Conversely, when it seemed more convenient not to know, I sometimes feigned ignorance. Mostly, I did this with Lilia.

"Let's just drop this," Edward replied with another big sigh.

Honestly, it was hard to blame him for his disappointment. He'd specifically entrusted that bundle of hair to *me*, and I'd gone and given it to someone else. Even preschoolers know better than to lend out other people's stuff.

I'd been so relieved to get rid of the thing that I hadn't even thought about what I'd do when Edward returned. In hindsight, that was a real misstep. As soon as Edward had come back, I should've fetched his hair from Robert and sent it back to him.

Oh well. What's done is done.

But if I didn't want to get dunked into the fountain again, I needed to smooth things over fast.

"Oh, by the way, Your Highness," I said, hoping to put this all behind us, "You did really well at the swordsmanship tournament. I was impressed by how much you'd improved."

"You're terrible at changing the subject. Almost as bad as your brother."

Um... What? Are you trying to show off how close you are to my older brother?

I was baffled. Sure, they may've been close, but he was *literally* my brother. If we were comparing who was closest to him, I'd win that contest any day. I didn't appreciate being compared to him like that, though.

"It was a great match. You fought well when I saw you at the Exhibition Match, but your timing was even more on point this last time. It looked like you'd been working on your stamina too."

"It feels...strange to hear this praise from you."

"If you just put on a little more muscle, you'd be golden," I continued.

"I don't like to break a sweat."

Come to think of it, he mentioned that before, didn't he? I thought he was just bluffing to save face after losing to Robert, but I guess he really meant it.

"You wouldn't have improved that much just from the swordsmanship classes at school, though. Are you still training at the training grounds?" I asked.

"No. I quit my training when I entered the academy."

Now I was confused. I knew of plenty of cadets who'd left the training grounds after starting school—mostly those who hadn't had any ambitions to become knights. But short of him continuing his training, there was no explaining the significant improvement to Edward's swordsmanship skills.

Edward glanced at me. His gaze lingered for just a moment, searchingly.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he began again, in an oddly self-important tone, "When I was out West, the second princess took an interest in me."

"Oh?"

"She asked if she could come home with me as my bride. I politely refused, but..."

"Why?" I butted in. "Wouldn't you have liked to have come back with a bride?"

"Honestly, you have no tact whatsoever," he replied with a glare.

Yeah, I get that a lot, I thought about saying.

Our kingdom was on good terms with the West. They were apparently our biggest trade partners. Surely the second princess of an allied country would've been the perfect bride for him?

I planned on living here for the rest of my life, so I was in full support of the

crown prince marrying a suitable bride—that is to say, one that would bring this place continued prosperity. What could be better than a thriving, peaceful kingdom?

But I knew that Edward also had the kingdom's best interests in mind, and if he had been less than thrilled by the princess's interest, then there must have been something very wrong with her.

"She challenged me to a duel...and demanded my hand in marriage if she won."

"Wait, she wanted to fight you?"

"Yes. She's a skilled martial artist, apparently."

An image flashed in my head of a willful sportswoman. To be fair, it was hard to imagine a girl like that being Edward's type. Still, he was the *crown prince*. Upper-class unions were all about politics, not love or attraction, and this was *especially* true for a crown prince's. Preferences and personal feelings had no place in his marriage.

"Sounds like a pretty good deal to me," I blurted out.

Edward ignored me and continued on his rant. "Thanks to her, my rehabilitation dragged on for a month longer than planned. I wanted to come home as soon as possible, but alas. I've never trained that hard before in my life."

The strange dissonance I'd felt when I saw him after his return made a lot more sense now. So that's why he seemed weirdly sunburned...and buff.

I could think of only one reason he would've been so desperate to return home—to make it in time for the start of the game's timeline. Or, rather, for Lilia's grand entrance.

Of course, he probably knew nothing about the game. But it was highly plausible that he knew a saint would be transferring into the academy. After all, Lilia was the first saint in fifty years. Who wouldn't be intrigued by that?

"I've already sworn my heart to someone else, and I wouldn't dream of marrying anyone but her," Edward declared as soon as I'd started thinking about Lilia.

The timing was so perfect, he might as well have read my mind. When he looked at me with a meaningful glint in his purple eyes, I thought maybe he really *had*.

"Someone else...?"

"You don't know?" he asked, tilting his head. The way he said it, though, made it abundantly clear that he thought I *did* know (or at least, that I *ought* to).

Basically, my prediction was right on the money.

He stood up and leaned over his desk towards me.

Just then, a tremendously loud clatter rang out from the other side of the door.

I moved swiftly to protect Edward, but the door opened to reveal none other than Robert, who had just dumped an armful of sparring swords onto the ground in front of him. From the looks of it, he'd been in the middle of carrying a box full of them before his hands had slipped.

"Robert..."

"I-I'm so sorry! I was just coming to ask if you wanted to face off in a match, Edward. I didn't mean to eavesdrop!"

Robert then looked at me. He straightened his spine and bent down from the waist into an overeager bow. Cold sweat dripped from his face—he must've known he was in for an earful.

I walked briskly towards him and crossed my arms as I glared at him, looking as imposing as possible.

"Did you forget what I taught you, maggot?!"

"N-No..." Robert muttered, still in a bow.

"I told you to always carry sparring swords with the respect you'd give real ones! If these were real swords, one stray step is all it would've taken for you to lose a foot!"

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"M-My apologies!"
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"Hurry up and clean this mess up! You've got ten laps around the castle when you're done!" I yelled.

"Sir, yes, sir!" he yelled back, as if we were back at the training grounds. Flustered, he bent down to collect the swords.

As I watched him from the corner of my eye, I turned back to face Edward.

"Sorry, Your Highness. It looks like I'm going to have my hands full disciplining your brother, so maybe we can pick this up another time?"

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"What?"

"Let's go, Robert!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"
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As Edward looked on, dumbfounded, I accompanied Robert, who'd just finished picking up all the swords, out of his brother's office.

Made it out just in time, I thought. I'd left Edward—and his wrath—behind me. Thanks for the assist, Robert.

## **Sweet Potato Fry Crumbs**

"Commaaaandeeeer!" a piercingly chipper voice called out.

I turned around to see Robert running towards me.

In a big capital city like this one, it was hard to wrap my head around how it was possible to bump into him, even if it was on a weekend. *Guess that's the game's powers that be at work...* 

I glared at him and didn't return his greeting.

Suddenly, as if he'd just noticed Lilia by my side, his smile fell. The words "oh crap" were written all over his face. He approached me hesitantly until he was right by my side. Then, as if his first greeting had never happened, he asked, "Lord Burton, what are you doing here?"

"I thought it might be nice to go out shopping with Lilia," I said, looking pointedly in her direction.

I'd invited her out today in hopes that I could emulate a "date around town" event. The main goal was to do a little window shopping and visit some trendy cafés, but I had no doubt whatsoever that Lilia was expecting an event out of it.

She had dolled herself up for today in a pale blue, striped dress. It was a sweet, summery look, and she looked great in it. For a refreshing change of pace, she'd even tied half of her hair up. And it went without saying, of course, that her face was adorable as usual.

No matter how many times I looked at her, I couldn't get over how cute she was.

"And what are you doing here?" I asked Robert.

"Sir! I'm accompanying the knights on their patrol, sir!"

"Yeah? Well, keep up the good work."

"Yes, sir! It's been a great learning opportunity to see how the knights work. They even let me take up the rear guard when they arrested a gang of pickpockets. It was amazing to coordinate with them on that!"

Robert seemed elated to tell me all about how cool the knights were, but my interest was piqued by something else entirely.

"Did you say 'pickpockets'?" I asked. "There was a whole gang of them on the loose?"

"Th-That's right. But don't worry! We arrested them all!" Robert replied, puffing his chest out with pride.

"Huh?!" I heard Lilia mutter under her breath.

Well, this is unfortunate.

Pickpockets were a crucial ingredient for the "date around town" event. If all of them had already been arrested, then our event was over before it had even begun.

In Christopher's version of the event, the main character is almost robbed by one. Christopher steps in just in time to save her, displaying a surprising show of force that's wholly at odds with his sweet-younger-boy persona. It's a heart-pounding scene for both the main character and the player.

(Of course, only in an otome game would a frail-looking boy be unnaturally jacked like that.)

Anyway, no matter whose route you were doing, the "date around town" event was always an action-packed one. Whether the love interest was up against pickpockets, playboys, mercenaries, or even assassins, there was no shortage of excitement. The whole reason I'd taken up sword fighting was to make sure I'd shine on such an occasion.

(Well...okay, maybe that's not *entirely* true—training became a genuine passion for me along the way, so I guess it wasn't the *only* reason).

My plans were ruined now that the pickpockets had been arrested. *Tch. Thanks for nothing.* 

Under normal circumstances, I would've just switched gears. I was sure I could find some mercenary who'd be itching to snatch a saint up and present her to his wealthy merchant employer.

Just as I was hatching a plan, though, it dawned on me that Robert was right there in front of me, wearing a navy knight's uniform. And not only that, but just a few meters away were other knights out on patrol, who were looking our way and saluting me. Even Robert's guards, who were hanging back a bit, gave me a little bow when we made eye contact.

Everywhere I looked, I saw nothing but knights and people I knew.

Were there *any* criminals out there who'd be bold enough (or dumb enough) to cause trouble right under the noses of a bunch of knights, especially right after an arrest? Of course not. The answer to that was a resounding "no."

Upon reflection, I really should've just waited for some playboy to swoop in on Lilia before I'd met her for our date. Until now, though, I'd been expecting an encounter with a pickpocket or a would-be kidnapper, not a playboy. And besides, I hadn't wanted to keep her waiting.

I could hardly blame myself for that decision. How was I supposed to have known that knights would show up and round up the pickpockets before we'd even gotten here?

Anyway, I know I went off on a long-winded tangent, but the point was, I'd made a misstep.

Oh, well. No point living in the past, right? May as well just make the most of this date.

Now that there weren't any pickpockets to worry about, we'd have plenty of time to enjoy ourselves. We could just do some window shopping like we'd planned, then maybe stop by a café for a nice combo of cake and coffee.

"Comm— Lord Burton? Is something wrong?" Robert asked, probably worried that I'd suddenly stopped in my tracks.

"No, it's just... You said there was a big crackdown, right? I was just wondering if anyone had been hurt," I replied, trying to play it cool and come up with something plausible.

"Oh! No injuries, sir. The townspeople and the knights were both unharmed."

"Well, that's good to hear. The knights sure are dependable, aren't they? It's

impossible not to look up to them."

"S-Sir Burton, I'm sure you wou—" Lilia began, before Robert yelled over her.

"You're an amazing knight, Commander! The best I know!"

Did you just talk over a woman? I thought, horrified. My God... You're a disgrace to gentlemen everywhere.

His exclamation had been so impassioned, even Lilia looked over at him. Now that everyone's eyes were on him, Robert must've realized his faux pas, because he turned the volume down a bit and hurriedly tried to smooth things over.

"Um. What I mean is...you'd make a great knight, Commander."

"Uh...right. Thanks, Robert," I replied. "Well, we'll see you later."

"Oh! I-I'll come too! Let me come with you!" Robert sputtered just as we were about to leave. His inability to read the room was honestly uncanny.

How can such a people pleaser be this oblivious? I wondered.

I shot him a glare from an angle that Lilia wouldn't see, hoping he'd see the threat in my eyes. "Don't you dare get in the way," I warned him silently.

"Aren't you in the middle of a patrol?" I asked.

"I just got back from escorting the pickpocket gang to prison, so the patrol said I could take off for the day. Apparently, it's gonna take a while to process them."

"Well, we're going to be stopping by a lot of girly shops today. You probably wouldn't enjoy it."

"Escorting vulnerable young women is part of a knight's duty! You're the one who taught me that, Comm—I mean, Lord Burton!" he replied, puffing out his chest.

I won't deny that we're in the company of a vulnerable young woman, but she's already being looked after, thank you... And by a bodyguard stronger than you, I might add.

No matter how he tried to spin it, he was just going to be in the way.

"It seems a little backwards for a *prince* to be anyone's bodyguard," I retorted.

"Well, it'll be an average day's work once I'm a knight!"

"Says the guy who never shows up to training."

"That's only because *you* stopped showing up," he said dejectedly. There was a pitiful look in his eyes that called to mind an abandoned puppy.

He was right, though. My plate had been full lately—on the one hand, I'd been hanging out with Lilia often. On the other, I was constantly being dragged around by Edward. As a result, I'd been coming by the training grounds a whole lot less.

You don't have to make those puppy-dog eyes, though...

It was weird to see him look this pitiful, especially when he was so much brawnier than I was. If Lilia hadn't been here, I would've shaken him by the shoulders and told him to guit it.

In the end, though, I caved.

"Fine."

I couldn't refuse him in front of Lilia unless I wanted to look like a heartless monster. Besides, I'd expected to run into an obstacle or two. I wasn't about to let a tagalong discourage me.

"But only till we get to the shops," I added.

"Yes, sir!" he replied happily.



"Robert..."

"Three of them, right?"

"Close. There's four."

Just as we'd turned down an alley near the shops, Robert and I had stopped in our tracks. Since Lilia was walking next to me, I took her hand to stop her too.

"Think they're after the saint?"

"Actually...they might be after me."

"And here I thought you were supposed to be her bodyguard?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Huh? What's happening?" Lilia interjected.

"Lilia, get behind me," I said, moving to cover her. She looked up at me anxiously. Then I whispered, "We've got trouble."

Lilia gasped. Robert nodded.

The knights on patrol had already left for the day, but members of Robert's personal guard were still somewhere in the vicinity. If someone had planned to make an attack, then either they hadn't thought that part through...or they were confident that they could dispose of them.

I only had a self-defense knife on me, but Robert and his guards were wearing swords on their belts. Whoever was lying in wait for us, I felt sure we'd beat them in sheer numbers alone.

Piece of cake, I thought.

I looked down the alleyway. There didn't seem to be any sign of people, but there were several wooden boxes stacked on top of each other.

I stuck my hand in my pocket, reaching for the spare change I'd gotten from the shop we'd just visited, and pulled out the biggest coin I could find.

This corner of town hardly qualified as noble or fabulous. In fact, I was embarrassed to be subjecting Lilia to it, so I decided it was time to spruce it up. Besides, I didn't want the head maid finding change in my pockets again while doing my laundry and giving me an earful for it.

I flipped the coin up with my thumb and threw it at one of the nearby wooden boxes. There was a rustling sound, like grit being kicked around, and then a figure tumbled out from the shadows of the boxes.

Found you.

The figure was dressed in all black. Based on their physique, they seemed to be a man. He looked more like a ninja than a mercenary.

Who're you after, buddy? Robert or Lilia?

Either way, I knew that the fact that he'd come out of hiding could only mean one thing.

"Watch my back, Robert."

"You can count on me!"

Thus, the battle began.

The metallic *clang* of swords clashing rang out throughout the alley. Behind me, Robert's guards crossed blades with several of the ninja's comrades, and more of them were dropping from the roofs above us.

The man from behind the boxes closed the distance between us with a single step, leaping right in front of me. He swung his dagger wildly so that I couldn't pin down his movements. All I saw was the flash of a naked blade.

I slid half a body length to the side to avoid his strike, then stepped forwards with the foot I'd just moved. I repeated this movement again and again. The ninja twisted around too, but he failed to account for just how long my legs were.

I smashed his dagger-wielding hand into the wall with my steel-toed elevator shoes. Then, before he could make his next move, I pivoted off that foot into a flying kick that collided forcefully with his jaw and somersaulted off of the wall. As soon as I landed, I spun around and adopted a defensive stance.

One of the attackers was heading straight for Robert. For his part, Robert was already in the middle of fighting another sword-wielding foe. I stopped the approaching ninja in his tracks with a series of swift palm strikes to the chin. Despite being already engaged in combat, Robert followed up my palm strikes with an attack of his own.

Two more assailants descended from the rooftops into the narrow alleyway. It wouldn't have been uncalled for if Robert had been thrown off by this surprise attack, but he wasn't. Instead, he calmly took down the man that came for him.

There wasn't a trace of panic on his face, and his breathing was completely

measured. In the unlikely event that I didn't manage to take down the other one, I had every bit of confidence that Robert could handle him without issue.

Even after he'd dealt with the foes in front of him, he never let his guard down. From his profile, I could tell that he was as alert as ever.

I was floored by how much my pupil had grown. In fact, I was almost moved to tears. You've turned into a splendid swordsman, Robert. No one would dare call you a "Pea-Brained Prince" now. (I was probably the only one who ever called him that anyway, but...whatever.)

Robert's guards came running up from behind to apprehend the attackers. It seemed they'd finished off the others.

"You're not hurt, are you?" I asked, turning around to face Lilia.

"N—" she began.

"No, sir!" Robert enthusiastically yelled over her.

Oh, for God's sake... Not you!

"Are you all right, Lilia?" I tried again.

"I-I'm okay!" she said, nodding. "Thank you for protecting me, Sir Burton..."

She looked frightened but unharmed. I was pleased to hear her thanks and considered it a massive payoff for all the training I'd done. I'd have to celebrate with some lucky red bean rice tonight.

"Thank you, Robert," Lilia added.

"I'm sure Comm—Lord Burton could've defeated them single-handedly!" Robert replied proudly.

What're you acting proud for?

"S-Single-handedly?" she repeated.

The sharpness I'd seen in Robert's eyes earlier was long gone now, replaced by their usual sparkle.

"Yeah! Lord Burton's always going up against five or six of us cadets at the training grounds. Even three of the most capable instructors don't stand a chance!" Robert explained passionately as he closed in on Lilia. "I bet Lord

Burton alone could've taken down *twenty* of those guys back there no problem!"

"O-Oh..."

"No, it's thanks to you and the guards that this little episode ended without Lilia getting hurt," I said. "Take some credit."

Lilia looked absolutely overwhelmed. I intervened to gently pull Robert away from her.

"But..."

"No matter how strong he is, a man can never compensate for his solitude. Combat often turns into a numbers game. That's why we knights don't fight alone—we fight *together*."

Robert's eyes flew wide open.

I'd slipped and referred to the knights as "we," but I wasn't technically a knight. Oh, well. It's about the vibes, right? "All for one and one for all" or whatever.

"I'm trying to thank you here. Just accept it, okay?"

"Y-Yes, sir!" Robert exclaimed with a nod, and gave me a blindingly radiant smile.

It went without saying that I'd been the MVP of that scuffle, but I wanted Lilia to see just how humble and mature I could be. After all, everyone knows that mature guys are way more popular than insecure, small-minded ones. Plus, girls love a guy who can bring himself to say "thank you" and "I'm sorry."

"That must've startled you, huh, Lilia? The café's just up ahead, but can you walk okay?"

"Uh, y-yes!" she stammered, practically yelping. "I-I can walk!"

"Shall we go then?"

Just as I casually wrapped my arm around her shoulder and began to walk to the café with her, Robert exuberantly leaped out in front to lead us.

Robert, I'm begging you here—get with the program. Even a preschooler could

figure out that this is where we part ways.

"The café's just ahead, so I think we'll be just fine without a bodyguard," I told him. "Looks like your guards are bringing the attackers to the knights' station. Don't you think you should go with them?"

"Never know when you'll run into something that turns into a numbers game, right?"

I couldn't reply. Throwing my words back at me, are you? Clever...veeery clever, Robert...

I curled my finger, gesturing for him to come over.

"You don't like sweets, do you?" I whispered.

"I can't believe you remembered that!" he replied happily.

This really wasn't going the way I'd hoped it would.

To be honest, I had no memory of ever discussing our likes and dislikes. I only remembered that from the game.

"Well, this café is famous for its cakes," I continued. "You probably wouldn't like it much."

"Frank told me it's famous for its coffee too, so I'll just have a cup of that!"

There wasn't a hint of cunning or malice in his grin. He really was just that dense.

Suddenly, I felt something tugging at my sleeve.

"Excuse me, Lady Elizabeth," a voice interrupted quietly. It was one of Robert's personal guards. "We'll be splitting off into groups to gather some intel on what happened and to report back to the castle, so there won't be as many of us available to escort His Highness. Might I trouble you to look after him in the meantime?"

"And what would I get in return?"

"We'll treat you to some drinks later."

"I think you're forgetting one tiny little detail here—I'm underage."

I had a feeling he'd neglected to account for more than that, though...like, maybe the fact that I was the duke's daughter.

I looked to Lilia, then Robert, then Robert's guard and let out a sigh.

Looks like I have no choice.

There was a real possibility that the attackers from before had been targeting Robert. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I refused and something happened to him, and Lilia would probably worry about him. Besides, you know how it goes: People get a real reputation boost when they die. I wasn't really prepared to compete with a dead man.



"This is delicious!" Lilia exclaimed with a beaming smile. Her eyes had lit up the moment she'd taken her first bite of the cake she'd ordered.

An adorable girl with a cute little cake...can't think of a more picture-perfect combo than that, I thought.

She really was so much cuter when she was just being herself and not worrying about appearances. When she was sleeping or eating, she didn't need to force herself to act like a main character. Anyone would've fallen for her in her natural state.

There was just one catch—she ruined it all the moment she started talking.

As I watched Lilia happily eating her cake, something astonishing happened—a little dollop of cream on her cake somehow found its way onto her cheek. She'd only taken two bites so far, and she was eating in a perfectly well-mannered way.

How in the world did she manage that? I wondered. I was absolutely floored.

It was so baffling that I almost suspected it had been due to a flaw in the *cake*. But, then, that was probably just the "main character effect" at work.

If we were in an otome game, what would be the correct response here? I wondered.

If we were dating, the answer would probably be to lick it off her cheek. Unfortunately, our relationship was a little more complicated than that. We were more than friends, but not quite lovers. Licking it off her cheek might've been pushing it a bit. Not to mention *Robert* was at the table with us.

Wiping it off with my finger didn't seem like a great option, though. It would've been one thing if it were a piece of rice or something, but a dollop of cream was a whole other animal. And what would I do once I'd wiped it off? Lick it off my finger? Wipe it off with a handkerchief?

Licking it off my finger would hardly be polite. A piece of rice, I'd eat. I'd probably even eat sweet potato fry crumbs. But a dollop of cream? Now, that was a *real* conundrum.

I racked my brains trying to find the answer, but everything I came up with seemed not entirely appropriate for the world of an otome game.

Maybe I should wipe it off with my finger and feed it to her? No, that would definitely be taking it too far... Wiping it off with a handkerchief would probably be the safest option, but is it romantic? Is it sexy?

After two seconds of going round and round in my head about this, I ultimately landed on what I thought was the most tried-and-true approach.

"You've got some cream on your cheek," I told her with a chuckle.

I leaned over, wiped the cream off with my finger, brought my finger to my mouth, and licked it clean.

"S-Sir Burton, *please*! Just tell me next time!" Lilia said, puffing out her cheeks sulkily. Despite her protests, though, she looked pleased.

Well, not sure if that was the right answer...but at least it wasn't the wrong one?

I'd put way too much thought into it, though, especially considering that it had been a timed choice. I'd have to work on that.

After seeing how much Lilia was enjoying the cake, I found myself wanting to try it too. I'll just have a sip of coffee before I take a bite... I thought, bringing my cup up to my mouth.

Keeping a calm expression, I returned my cup to the saucer.

I'd completely forgotten how much I hated bitter things. I felt like I deserved a

medal for not spitting it right back into my cup. I didn't know if Elizabeth Burton was genetically predisposed towards a hatred of bitter tastes, or if it was something I'd inherited from my past life. Either way, though, I knew that I couldn't stand it.

My family only ever drank tea, so we never had coffee at home. In fact, tea was the preferred drink among most in the kingdom. Now that I thought about it, this was probably the first time I'd even had coffee since being reincarnated.

(In hindsight, it was an incredibly foolish thing for someone with a passionate hatred of bell peppers to order.)

Still, it was bad manners to leave food or drink untouched. And besides, being a picky eater was just a bad look. I was an adult now, and I wasn't about to leave coffee in my cup just because I didn't like it.

I just needed to clear my mind. If doing that could make fire feel cool to the touch, then surely it could extinguish the bitterness in my mouth.

I found myself wishing that I'd added some milk or sugar, but it was too late now that I'd already had a sip. It would've been tantamount to admitting defeat.

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"Comm— Lord Burton."

"Yes?"
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As he looked me in the eyes, Robert picked up the tiny pitcher of milk and poured it straight into my coffee cup.

"Try it with milk!" he said. "You'll love it!"

"At least ask before you dump it in."

"Have some sugar too!"

Without waiting, he popped a sugar cube in my cup too.

"Come on, what did I just say?"

By the time the words had left my mouth, though, the sugar cube had already dissolved. There was no going back, so I took my spoon, mixed the coffee, and took a sip. It had basically turned into a café au lait.

I found myself wondering if I'd worn a disgusted expression for a split second after that first sip and betrayed myself, but it seemed highly unlikely that Robert had the social savvy required to catch that. In all likelihood, he'd probably just heard from Frank that that was the way to drink the coffee here and legitimately wanted me to try it.

Robert was looking at me with a hopeful sparkle in his eyes, so I gave him a wry smile.

"You're right," I said. "It is nice."

He lit up, beaming from ear to ear. "I'm so glad you like it!"

The expression he wore was so earnestly delighted, I found myself completely dumbfounded.



He was so radiant that even the other girls in the café were staring at him now. It seemed neither he nor Isaac had any idea how spellbinding their good looks were.

How are you so elated over one little compliment, though? I wondered. I couldn't help but worry that he'd try to warm up my slippers or something if I left him to his own devices. I'd always thought of him as somewhat apelike, but his fierce loyalty actually made him more like a dog than anything.

Lilia looked at Robert too and tilted her head a bit, puzzled. As far as she knew, Robert and I were just instructor and pupil. And beyond that, we were nothing more than classmates. No wonder she was so confused by his devotion to me.

Actually, she wasn't the only one who was confused. I couldn't for the life of me understand why Robert seemed to worship the ground I walked on. It all seemed a bit...excessive. There were plenty of people out there who were stronger than him. I didn't have a monopoly on that.

I wonder if anyone would take pity on him and adopt him if I left him outside in a cardboard box? I found myself thinking.

I let out a sigh that was quiet enough that Lilia wouldn't be able to hear and took another sip of my café au lait.

## That's Just Who I Am

Summer break was swiftly approaching.

Isaac, Lilia, and I had hunkered down in a corner of the library to tackle our end of semester essays, hemming and hawing as we racked our brains. Just as our break was in sight, this essay had stymied me. I flipped through the pages of a book I'd grabbed for reference, but nothing spoke to me.

I didn't want to leave Isaac alone with Lilia while I wandered off to find a different book, so I asked him to accompany me on my search. I couldn't let my guard slip just as Lilia and I were finally getting somewhere.

Isaac didn't seem suspicious or irritated that I'd asked him to join me, which was a good thing. But I was going to be a *little* offended if that was only because he thought I wasn't capable of finding a book on my own.

I scanned the shelves, looking for the title I was after. Isaac, who had nothing better to do, was grabbing some books for himself from the shelf behind me.

Suddenly, something flew across my field of vision.

A bee!

Instinctively, I reached out and tried to smack it. My palm hit the bookshelf with a resounding *bam*!

But I'd been too slow. The bee had gotten away.

"B-Burton?!"

I brought my gaze back into focus and saw Isaac, wedged awkwardly between myself and the bookshelf I'd just slapped.

If it had been Lilia, I might've played it off, acting like I was just leaning over sexily. Unfortunately, I was leaning over *Isaac*. There was nothing sexy about that.

He was probably startled that I'd suddenly smacked the bookshelf. His eyes were wide as he looked up at me.

Just as I was about to step back and explain what had happened, the bee landed on his shoulder.

"Quiet," I said quickly.

He tensed up slightly, probably having just noticed the bee himself. If he moved, the bee would get away again. I couldn't let that happen. Worst-case scenario, it might fly off and sting Lilia.

"Hey, what are—"

"Just stay still."

I slowly reached my free hand out towards him. For some reason, he squeezed his eyes shut tightly. I grazed his cheek with my finger and— *Got it!* I pinched the bee's wings and plucked it off of him.

"Isaac? How long are you going to stand there with your eyes closed?" I asked.

At that, his eyes flew open. His face was bright red, as if he'd stopped breathing.

I told you to stand still, not to hold your breath...

He shot me a glare, then turned his gaze towards the bee in my hand and let out a big sigh.

"Burton..." he said, exasperated.

"Oh, I forgot. You hate bugs, don't you?"

I felt bad that I'd been holding the bee so close to him.

I need to hurry up and get this little guy out of here, I thought, turning towards the window.

He let out another sigh. "Forget it..."

"Hmm?"

As I opened the window to let the insect out, I saw the back of a familiar figure walking down the courtyard hallway. There were several girls surrounding her. I took another look at the table I'd been sharing with Isaac and Lilia, and sure enough, Lilia was gone.

There was no question about it now—she was the one in that hallway.

Well, well...

A strange excitement welled up in my chest. I let Isaac know that I was leaving and rushed out towards the hallway where I'd seen Lilia.

"Miss Douglas, may we have a word? I know how kind Sir Burton is, but don't you think you're taking advantage of that?!"

"That's right! Saint or not, you've got no right to meddle in other people's romantic affairs!"

"Huh? Uh, um...?!"

As I followed them into the hallway, I came across the beginnings of a tense exchange.

Ah, I know what this is. So, it's finally happening...

This was unmistakably the classic otome game scene in which the main character gets confronted by a bunch of girls for getting too close to one of the love interests. I quickly dodged and hid behind a nearby building so I could watch the scene unfold.

The girls who were confronting Lilia weren't in our class, but I'd seen them around and recognized all of them. I figured they must've been members of my fan club.

Lilia looked incredibly flustered as they gathered around her. She probably didn't know any of them.

It would've been easy to step in and save her, but I knew it would be a whole lot more dashing to intervene just as someone was about to hurt her.

Sorry, Lilia, but I need you to hang in there until things heat up a bit more.

The girls kept inching in closer to Lilia, bombarding her with questions.

"Can't you just let Sir Burton and Prince Edward be happy together?! Prince Edward always wears such a graceful, placid smile...but when he talks to Sir Burton, he blushes like a maiden! If that isn't love, I don't know what is!"

"Oh? I think you meant Prince *Robert*! It's plain as day how smitten he is with Sir Burton. Besides, the two of them have been bound by fate since the beginning! Nothing could tear them apart!"

What the...?

"No, Lord Isaac is the one for Sir Burton! Everyone knows he's turned into a completely different person since they became friends. You can see how in love they are from the way they talk so intimately every day!"

What in the world is she talking about?

"Every day? If that's the measure we're using, then surely Lord Christopher comes out on top! They live, sleep, and eat under the same roof every day. He's the one who spends the most time with Sir Burton! Why, at last year's dance party, Sir Burton even picked him for the first dance. Or have you forgotten?"

?????

As the girls began to argue among themselves, Lilia's eyes widened so much that her pupils looked like nothing more than tiny little black dots.

I could hardly blame her—I felt every bit as mystified as she looked.

In my astonishment, I'd almost stumbled right out from my hiding spot. *Thank God I spent so much time training my core muscles, or I might've lost it all.* 

The war of words seemed to be escalating quickly, and Lilia was already lost. So was I, for that matter.

"But don't you see? Sir Burton only picked him because he was the safest option. It would've caused a scandal to pick Lord Isaac over either of the princes."

"Are you suggesting Sir Burton would have preferred to pick Lord Isaac?"

"Well, naturally. Until Miss Douglas swooped in, Lord Isaac was always Sir Burton's dance partner. They made even the most difficult dance figures look easy. Their breathing was always perfectly in sync, and they looked like they were greatly enjoying each other's company. Sometimes they'd even whisper intimately into each other's ears, like they were lost in their own world..." the girl trailed off dreamily.

Whoa, hold up. You've got me all wrong here.

I'd only picked Christopher for my first dance because I didn't want to pick anyone else, and I'd never forget his sacrifice. As for the "intimate whispering"? That was just me asking if I could copy Isaac's homework.

"Perhaps, but that's in the past now. Sir Burton only ever dances with Miss Douglas these days. Isaac and Sir Burton don't even study alone together anymore, do they?"

"W-Well, that's precisely why Lord Isaac got jealous! He can't stand that Miss Douglas and Sir Burton have been inseparable recently!"

"Speaking of which, Lord Christopher seems to have been relegated to the role of third wheel as of late too. It's simply horrible! Why, not too long ago, Sir Burton was wiping cookie crumbs off his mouth. Oh, you should have seen the smile on his face! And he was blushing *furiously*!"

"I'm certain Sir Burton was only being nice. Besides, how *else* does one treat an adorable little brother?"

"That's right! Surely Lord Burton would do the same for their older brother, the earl!"

"I-I suppose you're right, but...still!"

They'd gotten me right on the money this time. I couldn't remember my older brother ever having made such a mess with his food, but if he did, I would have happily done the same for him. There'd be no need to make a sexy show of it, though, so if he'd gotten a sweet potato fry crumb on his mouth, I'd probably have just plucked it off and thrown it away. Not that there were any sweet potato fries in this world anyway...

"Oh, my... It's sweet that you think any of those other boys could possibly hold a candle to the *crown prince*."

"Excuse me?"

"Prince Edward? We hardly ever see him with Sir Burton!"

The other girl chuckled. "Did you know he has a nickname for Sir Burton? It's 'Lizzie'! The other boys don't use any nicknames, do they?"

"Oh...!"

Is that true? I wondered, tilting my head.

I'd never been one to care much about what people called me. I'll admit I didn't care for weird nicknames like "Commander," but other than that, I wasn't fussy. Elizabeth, Ellie, Lizzie, Beth, Burton...they were all the same to me. I had the sense that people just didn't put that much thought into what they called anyone.

Girls tended to be a bit more *sensitive* to nicknames, though—especially young noblewomen. I couldn't let this misunderstanding fester, so I made a mental note to tell Edward to knock it off next time I saw him.

"However, Sir Burton only ever calls him 'Your Highness."

"Oh, she's right! Sir Burton calls the others by their names, though."

"Surely that's a telltale sign that Prince Edward's love is unrequited?"

"How dare you! Prince Edward has an image to uphold, you know! I-I'm certain Sir Burton calls him by his name in private!"

"Well, what about Prince Robert? I've heard him start to call Sir Burton something else many times before correcting himself. Something that starts with 'com.'"

"You know, I'm quite certain I've heard that too!"

"Me too!"

Crap. They heard that?

I made a mental note to beef up Robert's training regimen as punishment.

"He must be trying to cover up the fact that he's using a pet name! Yes, one that they only use when it's just the two of them!"

"But what kind of pet name starts with 'com'?"

"Oh! I know!" one of the girls exclaimed. "'Companion'!"

The girls then burst into high-pitched squeals of delight.

I was so taken aback, I almost fell over again. Fortunately, my ripped abs

came to the rescue yet again.

I couldn't for the life of me make out what the big deal was. Who cares? I thought. Seems to me like it's the difference between lunch A and lunch B.

Lilia, who had almost disappeared in the midst of the girls' in-fighting, suddenly piped up. "Wh-What are you going on about?!"

Thank you, Lilia. Someone needed to step in and defend my honor here (not to mention the boys').

"S-So you all have different OTPs, but when it comes down to it, you're all extremist yaoi fangirls who want Sir Burton to be the seme— I mean, the top! Is that it?! Don't tell me this world is overrun with you yaoi fangirls too?! I know Royal LOVERS has some fan-favorite pairings, but it's still an otome game, okay?! Those of us who self-insert have rights too, you know! God! You're always, always oppressing us self-insert fangirls!"

Okay, now you've lost me. Her rambling was as baffling as that of the girls who'd ganged up on her. Don't slap a "seme" label on me. Wait...that's not the problem here. Don't ship me with anyone either!

Now that Lilia had gotten her motormouthed, fangirly rant over with, it was the girls' turn to tilt their heads in confusion.

"'Yaoi'? What is that?"

"You know, like, *Boys' Love*. It's when girls like seeing two guys romantically involved," Lilia explained.

"Two guys...?"

"And you should be careful with RPF, you know! Do you have any idea how many problems one person's fantasies can cause people?!"

RPF? Like, "real person fiction"? Is that what we're calling this?

Lilia's ranting aside, I'd had no idea that the fan club girls saw me this way. I was having a hard time taking it all in.

It was one thing for me to play up the BL angle intentionally, but it was a wholly different matter for people to imagine there were genuine love stories playing out between us. I mean, I just wasn't into any of the guys like that...and

they weren't into me either.

Come on, what more do you want from me?

"Miss Douglas, what are you talking about?" one of the girls asked, looking at Lilia with a quizzical expression.

Go on, Lilia, tell her. What in the world are you talking about?

"Sir Burton is a woman," the girl continued.

"What?"

"Wait...what? You really didn't know that?"

"A... A woman?" Lilia repeated.

For several moments, Lilia's face was frozen in an expression of complete astonishment. Then her complexion began to grow paler and paler.

Crap. I got so caught up in this bizarre conversation that I missed my moment. I should've stepped in sooner.

While I hadn't been sure, I'd had a vague sense that Lilia didn't know my real gender. And to be fair, how would she? It's not like you can just go up to someone and ask, "Excuse me, but what gender are you?"

I'd been about two percent confident that Lilia *might've* figured it out, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"Well, we simply came here to give you a warning," one of the girls spoke up again. "We hold no grudges against you. We're just rooting for Sir Burton to find a happy ending with the man of our choice."

"That's right. The girls you *really* have to worry about are the ones that want Sir Burton all to themselves!" added another.

"We consider ourselves to be a peaceful, moderate faction of her fans. That's why we're giving you this preemptive warning—I would suggest you steer clear of those extremists. There's no telling what horrible manner of harassment they might rain upon you if they feel too threatened by your behavior..."

The girls' tones softened as they pivoted to giving their Lilia their warning. As I watched them from the corner of my eye, I switched into brainstorming mode.

Well, cat's out of the bag. Now what? I wondered.

I'd had a feeling this would happen eventually. I'd been hoping, of course, that Lilia would find out *after* she was firmly locked into my route, but even I'd known how unlikely that was. Now that she knew, there was only one thing that mattered—how would I recover from this?

We were less than two months away from the point in the story where the routes branched. It was a make-or-break situation, and it all depended on how I handled it.

It'll be fine. I've gone over this a million times in my head. I just have to put on a carefree smile and confidently waltz in.

I took in a quick breath and let it out.

I made sure to stride across the lawn loudly to alert them of my presence. "What's all the fuss, girls?"

"S-Sir Burton..."

The girls all turned to look at me. There were several of them, but it was only Lilia's soft voice that called out my name. She looked up at me, eyes wide and full of hurt. Her lips were quivering.

She held my gaze for only a brief second before turning her back on me and making a run for it.

"Lilia!"



Here's a question for the peanut gallery: What's the right thing to do when your secret gets out?

The best thing to do, of course, is to take your secret to the grave. But on the off chance it *does* get out, the most honorable course of action is to reveal everything *yourself* while the person who's in the dark still has only an inkling of the truth. If they hear it from someone else, well...it's safe to say you're in deep, deep trouble.

So...what to do now?

There was one thing I knew for sure: When someone runs away, you have to chase them. It's true in almost any situation, not just in the scenario when you've been caught in a lie. If you *don't* go after them, there's a strong possibility they'll begrudge you for it and demand to know why.

So I chased after Lilia.

Thanks to my long strides, I quickly caught up with her. I had a feeling that she'd just made a run for it on a whim, so she probably wasn't seriously trying to escape from me.

"Lilia!" I called.

I grabbed her arm, but she shook my hand off. I studied her face closely. I could see the shock, hurt, and disbelief in her expression. But there was something else too...a desperation to find something, *anything* to hold on to.

I was comforted by what I saw in her expression. Anger would've been tricky to deal with, since the only antidote was time. Shock or sadness, though, I could handle. Those just took a little sweet-talking.

It would be impossible to guess how much time and effort it would take to repair the relationship if she'd been completely disillusioned with me, but fortunately, that didn't seem to be the case. Her trembling eyes and quivering lips, unable to utter even a single word, told me everything I needed to know. She was upset that I'd lied to her, but she would take any excuse to believe in me again.

I can still fix this.

"S-Sir Burton, it's...it's not true, is it? Y-You're not...a w-woman, right...?"

"Lilia, I..."

My refusal to give her a solid answer was as good as an admission of guilt.

"You...you tricked me...?"

"No!" I cried emphatically. I'd already prepared this response ahead of time. "It's not like that!"

As I looked deep into Lilia's eyes, I moved into the next phase of my plan. "I'm sorry... I know that anything I say will only sound like an excuse, but...I never

meant to deceive you."

That was, of course, a bald-faced lie. Even now, I had *every* intention of deceiving and using her.

In my defense, though, the gender thing was technically an act of God. I hadn't set out to trick her about it. So, from that lens, it wasn't really a lie. In the grand scheme of things, though, I was absolutely trying to deceive her.

"I really did mean to tell you sooner. But...the more time I spent with you, the harder it got to tell you. It felt like you were the only one who saw me for the person I wanted to be—for the *real* me."

Lilia's shoulders began to tremble slightly.

Girls love it when you single them out as special. Plus, I had a feeling buzzwords like "the person I want to be" and "the *real* me" would resonate with her, given her own circumstances. I hoped that it sounded like a callback to the conversation we'd had at my house that day she came over, as if she'd foreshadowed this all with her words then.

"I was scared to tell you," I continued, whispering softly like I was talking to myself. "I thought...I might lose you."

As a love interest, I felt like the right call here was to play up my vulnerability and bare my soul to her. I needed to give her a compelling reason for my deception—one that she could understand and forgive.

Unfortunately, there was a key love interest staple that I was missing: a dark past. I'd never gone hungry or cold. In fact, I'd lived my whole life in comfort, doing the things I enjoyed (mostly strength training). I was blessed with an extraordinarily loving family and a small handful of good friends. I was even being pursued by the game's wildly popular main character.

I'd put a great deal of effort into fashioning myself into a love interest, of course, but I hadn't encountered much adversity outside of that. If anything, I'd been living in a slice-of-life comedy. My hand was empty; I had no dark past to speak of.

In the end, I decided to put the dark past problem off a little longer. *I'll deal with that later*, I told myself. For now, I'd play it off like it was something she

could learn about once she'd locked into my route.

"I think I became too dependent on you. I was taking advantage of your goodwill and your kindness towards me. I'm...a real jerk."

Now that part, I meant. I was a jerk. I had absolutely no qualms about deceiving people for my own gain or protection.

I'm a jerk, but hey...that's just who I am.

I'd lived my whole life that way, and I had no intention of changing that.

Lilia kept looking at the ground. Even now that I'd finished my spiel, she remained silent. Her shoulders were still trembling. I was almost certain she was crying, but I had nothing more to say. Besides, I had a feeling that she didn't want me to say anything more. If anything, it would probably just make things worse.

I knew I was unlikely to resolve anything at this point. So I made up my mind to wait it out. That seemed like the best call here.

I reached out to her with my hand and stopped, purposefully, as if I were hesitating. Then I clenched my fist and withdrew it.

"I'm...sorry for stopping you," I muttered quietly, as if struggling to spit out the words, and left her.

## **Take That, Otome Games**

Summer break had begun, but things with Lilia were still as icy as they had been since our confrontation in the courtyard hall. But I'd done everything I could; I just had to leave the rest to time.

Time heals all wounds, right?

It wasn't as if Lilia was *completely* shutting me out, though. I had a strong feeling that she'd eventually come around, and we'd repair our relationship. After all, conflict was an otome game staple. A little strain in the relationship was just the spice that made whatever developments came next a little sweeter.

I'd sown some seeds, and the buds were already emerging. There was no point digging them up and starting over now.

That being said...I was going to start getting nervous if this dragged on too long. No matter how things played out, the only card I had in my hand was an apology.

It was no time to be messing around. The year's dance was soon approaching, and it would be a pivotal event—it was the day that the routes branched.

"Sis, have you RSVPed yet to the Stargazing getaway? If you haven't, I can turn in both ours," Christopher spoke up at the dinner table.

Right, the Stargazing event!

That's when an idea came to me. I clapped my hands together internally.

The Stargazing event was an annual summer break trip that the academy organized. It was something between a school camp and an Obon festival. Ostensibly, the purpose was to watch the stars and reflect on all of those who came before us. In reality, though, it was really more of an overnight hiking/stargazing tour. We even got to stay at a nice lodge.

All students were allowed to sign up, but attendance wasn't mandatory. I'd

actually missed last year's getaway since it had overlapped with one of my latenight patrols with the knights. I'd heard Isaac had skipped it too, though I wasn't sure whether or not the princes had ended up going.

In any case, it seemed like Christopher was interested in going this year, and there were probably going to be more attendees than last.

Now that the game's timeline was officially underway, it was unthinkable for any of the love interests to pass on the event this year.

In the game, the main character loses sight of everyone on the hike and finds herself in a tight spot. The love interest with the highest affection points comes running to her rescue. Incidentally, it's also the exact point where Robert sometimes shows up unexpectedly, even if you aren't actively pursuing his route. I'll never forget the many times I yelled, "Ugh, not you!" at the screen because of this.

I didn't know if things would play out the same way they did in the game, but it was certainly worth finding out. If I could find a chance to get some alone time with Lilia, then at least we'd be able to talk. That seemed like a much better idea than just letting things fester all summer break.

So I took Christopher up on his offer, leading my mother to mutter under her breath, "Sometimes it's hard to tell who the older sister is in this family."



The day of the Stargazing getaway had arrived.

I sized up the path ahead of me. It looked to be a pretty gentle trail up the mountain, and given that we were all gathered in-uniform without any sort of special equipment, it seemed like we were in for nothing more than a light hike.

The trail was pretty wide and not at all technical. We'd be walking through reasonably dense tree cover, but it didn't seem like it was going to impede our view too much. Fortunately, there wasn't any fog or anything either. It was hard to imagine running into any trouble on our hike.

Lilia and I exchanged a look and a brief greeting, but we didn't talk at all after that. I glanced over at her to see how she was doing. Her shoulders were hunched, and she was looking down at the ground dejectedly. It reminded me of when I'd first seen her curled up and trying to disappear that day in the classroom, at the start of the school year. Lately, her spine had been...well, it was still pretty hunched, actually, but at least she'd started looking ahead more instead of towards the ground.

She's grown so much, I found myself thinking.

There were sixty students across all three year levels participating in the Stargazing getaway this year, and they were split into four hiking groups. In classic otome game fashion, the love interests and I had all been assigned to the same group.

Edward had taken on the role of group leader, as if it were only natural that he should do so. He was at the head of the group, guiding us up the trail. Robert, meanwhile, was following me around like a lost puppy. I shook him off and passed by Isaac, teasing him about his panting. Then I joined up with Christopher. As we made our way up the mountain, we chatted about the rabbits we'd seen last time we were in the forest.

I kept glancing over at Lilia as I made the rounds. She seemed to be more fit than Isaac, at least. She might have been a bit slower, but she was keeping up reasonably well with everyone.

Guess there was no need to worry after all. There's no way she'd fall behind on such a light hike, right? I thought, relieved.

Well, let me tell you—I couldn't have been more wrong.

I'd severely underestimated both the powers that be—the invisible hand of the game, if you will—and the "main character effect."

The first person to notice that Lilia had disappeared was Edward. As he paused and turned around to announce that we were due for a break soon, his expression grew perplexed.

"Lizzie," he called out, walking over to me. "Where is Lady Lilia?"

"Huh?"

I turned around to check. Lilia was nowhere to be seen.

Unbelievable. I literally just checked on her, and she was keeping up just fine.

I'd even been careful to keep a close watch on our surroundings. Unless Lilia had disappeared without making a sound, I should've noticed if she'd been kidnapped or something.

"Weren't you keeping an eye on her?" Edward pressed me.

I was surprised by the hint of blame in his voice. But when he put it like that, I had nothing to say for myself. I'd had every *intention* of keeping an eye on her...but with nothing to show for it, what did it matter? I had no excuse.

I had a feeling she might've just been catching up, though, so I decided to wait it out for a bit. But after ten minutes, then twenty, she still hadn't shown up. Our once chatty group grew increasingly quiet.

By the time thirty minutes had passed, everyone was dead quiet.

Lilia was a saint. There was a chance that she'd just lost her way (and in fact, I knew that's what had happened, thanks to having played the game), but there was also every chance that some ne'er-do-wells had gotten ahold of her. It certainly didn't bode well that she'd suddenly vanished into thin air.

No one gave voice to their concerns, but it was clear that everyone was expecting the worst. A heavy silence descended.

That was when it dawned on me—this is the start of an event.

"I'm going to go look for her," I announced, taking a step forwards.

Practically speaking, she had the most affection points with *me*. She wouldn't have had the time to raise affection points with any of the other love interests. If anyone was in a position to know that, it was me—after all, I was the one who spent almost every waking minute with her.

No matter how much of a sucker Robert was, and no matter how strained my relationship with her was at the moment, I couldn't imagine that anyone had more affection points than I did.

As if to prove that theory, no one else stepped up to look for her. And if no one else was going to look for her, then it clearly had to be me.

"It's dangerous to go alone. I'll go with you," Robert proposed.

I shook my head.

"Next to me, you're the most capable swordsman here, Robert. You stay behind and make sure the others reach the lodge. Worse comes to worst, I'll need you to protect them."

"B-But..."

"I'll feel much better looking for Lilia if I know the others are in safe hands. You're the only one I can count on, Robert," I said, grabbing him by the shoulder and looking him straight in the eye.

There was a flicker of hesitation in his chartreuse eyes, but he looked back at me with an earnest sparkle and replied, "Y-Yes, sir! I'll protect them until the end—even if it costs me my life!"

"I'm counting on you. No need to lay down your life, though."

Just then, Christopher came running in from the sidelines.

"S-Sis!" he cried, tugging on my sleeve. "Let me come with you! We can let the teachers know what happened and go look for Lady Lilia together!"

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't waste even a moment finding her...no matter what."

Christopher's proposal had been perfectly sound. In fact, it was probably the most logical option. But as a love interest, my creed compelled me to act in a manner that occasionally flew in the face of reason and rationality.

"Remember what I told you? I've sworn to protect you and our family as a knight. As long as you wait for me, I swear to come back to you."

"You...mean that? Promise?" he asked, tears brimming in his eyes. His voice was quiet and wary.

I puffed out my chest and said, as cavalierly as I could manage, "I promise. A knight *always* comes home to the ones they love."

"And you...won't break your promise?"

"Have I ever done that before?" I asked, winking at him.

For a moment, he was silent. Then, blushing, he let out a roguish laugh that sounded almost just like mine. "Well, don't you dare. Or I'm telling big

brother!"

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Then Isaac spoke up. "Burton, take this."

He took my hand and placed something inside of it. It felt like a small, metal whistle.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's a whistle—use it in case of an emergency. If anything happens, blow it. We'll get the teachers and lodge staff and come to help."

"Ever reliable, aren't you?" I teased with a laugh.

He scoffed and averted my gaze. "Well...not like I could save you from anything."

"Maybe not," I conceded. "But you're the one giving me this whistle, so I think that counts for something."

He met my gaze again. Then he placed another hand on mine.

"Honestly, I'd prefer to stop you, but I know you well enough to know it's impossible once your mind's set...and that I'd only get in the way if I tried to join you."

"Aw, are you worried about me?" I asked.

"Do you even have to ask?"

It felt good to banter like we always did. We made eye contact again and burst into laughter together.

"Don't put yourself in danger. I don't know what I'd do without you," he said.

I let out a chuckle. "Right back at you. You're one of my few friends, you know."

That's when I noticed Edward walking in the exact opposite direction we'd been heading.

"Well?" he said. "Are you ready?"

"Now, hold on. What makes you think you're coming with me?"

It was clear to me that I needed to put a stop to this immediately.

"I'm perfectly capable of holding my own," he said.

"Well, that's great, but if anything happened to you, both Lilia's head and mine would be on the chopping block."

"Is that it? You didn't hesitate to sing Robert's praises with all that tripe about entrusting him with the group's safety. Is *this* all *I* get?" Edward muttered, sulkily.

You know, Edward...you can be a royal pain in the ass sometimes.

"If Lady Lilia was kidnapped, you could offer me as bait and make an escape. I'm worth the most of anyone here," he continued.

"I'm begging you, don't make this hard for me."

"You're the one making this difficult."

I made a show of shrugging my shoulders and let out a deep sigh. I looked at Edward, trying to get a feel for his expression, but he had always been a hard one to read. I had no choice but to take a stab in the dark.

"Your Highness...you tower above all others with your excellence. If anyone should lead this crew to safety, it should be you, the crown prince."

"Thirty points."

"Who else but you could rein Robert in while I'm gone?"

"Fifty points."

"Your Highness. Please."

After a brief, he conceded. "Sixty points."

I peered into his face, smiling hopefully at his ruthless grading. This time, it was his turn to let out a sigh.

"Fine," he said, reluctantly. "You pass."

Well...I'll take it.

Honestly, though, I had no idea what all of them were so worried about. The fact of the matter was that Lilia had just slipped and sprained her ankle—

nothing serious. I wasn't putting myself in any danger by looking for her. Otherwise, I never would've volunteered to go alone. After all, there was no one in this world whose well-being I cared about more than my own.

Besides, had they all forgotten that I was capable of *cleaving steel*? What were they thinking, fretting over a capable swordsman like me? *How 'bout you worry about yourselves instead?* I thought.

I bid them all farewell and gave them a little wave.



Once I'd said my goodbyes, I turned around and headed back down the mountain, armed with the knowledge of how Lilia loses her way in the game. I knew that she veers off the path, pushes through the forest, slips, and twists her ankle.

I focused all my senses, searching for a sign of her as I walked down the path.

In the game, all of the love interests scatter and run around like a bunch of headless chickens looking for her. But if even Isaac—who's not especially gifted in the athletic department—manages to find her, then I knew I didn't need to search the whole mountain. Besides, whenever you're looking for something, it's usually right under your nose. I knew she couldn't have gone far.

The sun was low in the sky now, and the trees were casting long, dark shadows. It felt like the temperature had dropped several degrees too. *I'd* better hurry up and find her so we can get back before dark, I thought.

I knew a bit about camping from knights cadets' trips...at least, if I were to ever go with them. Of course, I'd never actually *been* camping. Father didn't give me permission to stay out overnight, so while everyone else got to sleep under the stars, I wound up having to trudge home every night after dinner and back to camp early in the morning.

I focused my search radius around the trail and slowly walked through the trees in search of Lilia. I knew there was no point in running. Instead, I tried to blend into my surroundings as much as possible and disappear among the trees—that way, I'd be able to pick up on signs of her much more easily.

I heard the cries of nearby birds, the rustle of trees, and the babbling of a

brook. I filtered those sounds out, searching for anything out of place. It was exactly the same process of attunement that I went through on my patrols.

That was when I caught the faint sound of something unusual.

I approached the source. The closer I got, the more obvious it became that it was someone—a *qirl*—sobbing softly.

I broke into a sprint, and before long, I ran into Lilia.

She was sitting with her arms around her knees. Her face and uniform looked a little dirty, but she was in one piece. Just as I remembered from the game, she was sitting near a small cliff. It wasn't anything particularly impressive (in fact, calling it a "cliff" might've been a bit of a stretch), but it was just tall enough that she'd have some trouble trying to scramble up it.

"Lilia!" I called out.

She whipped her head up to look at me with a tear-streaked face. It immediately crumpled again as she broke into another (surprisingly loud) sob.

She stretched her arms out as I approached. I did the same and gave her a hug.

"Sir Burtooon!" she cried.

"There, there. You're okay now," I assured her, rubbing her back.

She buried her face into my chest. I felt fat tears seep into my uniform as she convulsed with sobs.

The head maid's gonna give me a real talking to when she finds all these tears and snot on my uniform, I thought ruefully.

"I-I... I didn't think...anyone w-was coming to help me!"

"Don't be silly. We wouldn't leave you here."

"B-But...I-I haven't been raising affection points w-with any of the love interests..." she mumbled, her voice trailing off at the end.

As usual, I pretended not to hear her monologue.

Are there any routes in the game where nobody comes to the rescue? I didn't think it was possible—at least, not in a normal playthrough. I'd never

experienced it myself. Worst-case scenario, at least *Robert* was guaranteed to show up.

"But...you came," Lilia whispered, her voice so soft it threatened to disappear.

"Everyone's worried about you. Come on, let's hurry back."

"Um, okay. It's just, um..."

"Hm?"

"I-I think I might've...sprained my ankle," she said.

"Your ankle? Let me see."

I removed Lilia's shoe to check. Sure enough, her ankle was red and swollen. That's the main character effect for you...

Everything had been going according to the game's story so far. From here, the scene goes one of two ways—in Robert's route, he gives the main character a piggyback ride back up to the lodge. In everyone else's routes, they spend the night with her in the forest.

Fortunately, I remembered the way back to the trail, and I knew I'd have no trouble carrying her back up to the lodge.

I'd also anticipated that Lilia would sprain her ankle, so I'd studied up ahead of time on how to apply a makeshift bandage out of a handkerchief. Lilia watched me intently as I expertly wrapped it around her ankle.

"That should help keep it in place for now, but try not to move too much. I'll carry you," I said.

"B-But..."

"Don't worry. You're light as a feather, Lilia," I said with a smile as I stood up.

Lilia kept looking down at the ground.

"S-Sir Burton..."

She gripped my sleeve with her tiny hand. Then she looked up at me, her expression full of resolve.

"Um, I—! I'm...sorry about what I said before."

My eyes flew open in shock. Then, with great effort, I relaxed my face into a gentle smile and shook my head. "You have nothing to apologize for. I'm the one who was in the wrong."

"Th-That's not true! It...it was my fault for making assumptions and getting upset. I... I didn't understand your circumstances or your feelings at all."

Lilia looked down at the ground again, clutching her chest as if in pain.

You wouldn't look so contrite if you really understood me, I thought. But then, there were plenty of things in the world that people were better off not knowing about. "Ignorance is bliss," and all that.

"I-I've been thinking, and...! It doesn't really matter if you're a man or a woman! I mean, it doesn't change how dashing you are!" She looked up again, meeting my gaze straight on. Tears were still brimming in her amber eyes, but she didn't break eye contact. Instead, she continued, as if forcing the words out. "Y-You're the only one who's helped me learn the ins and outs of high society when all I knew was my life as a peasant. You're the only one who taught me how to act at school and cheered me on. You told me I could be the person I want to be. No one else did any of that for me... It was all you, Sir Burton!"

Her words weren't lifted from any of the main character's lines in the game, or even her inner monologues...they were all her own.

That was when a vague idea started to take hold for me.

Maybe she isn't pursuing me as a love interest anymore? Maybe she's seeing me as a person? If that were the case, I realized it meant I'd have to start seeing her as a person too—as a girl, not "the main character."

A twinge of guilt swelled in my chest. Am I so desperate to secure a happy ending for myself that I'd stoop to deceiving a sweet, hardworking, earnest girl like her? Is any of this even necessary? Can't we both just find happiness together?

I peered into her face as tears rolled down her cheeks and felt myself wavering. I'd tried to get close to her so I could use her, but maybe somewhere, deep down, I'd grown legitimately fond of her too?

Or something like that...

(Could you blame me, though? She was adorable. How could she *not* grow on me?)

Then Lilia muttered, out of nowhere, "This game is pretty tame since it's rated T, so..."

What in the world is she going on about now? I thought. Why is she talking about ratings?

Her strange non sequitur pulled me right out of my reverie. It was like the haze was clearing, and I was suddenly seized with a sense that the thoughts I'd had weren't even my own. It was like I'd been somehow psychically compelled to put her happiness first and foremost.

It was terrifying to see the main character effect at work like that.

Just as I felt a shudder coming on, I sensed a presence nearby. I could tell it was close. Why didn't I sense it until now? Was it the main character effect at work again? Or was it the game's powers that be?

"What I mean is...I don't care what gender you are, Sir Burton! You're—" "Shh," I said, putting my finger to Lilia's lips.

Her eyes flew wide open, and a blush bloomed across her face. She was probably hoping this was the part where I'd jump in with a heartfelt speech of my own, but unfortunately, that was the last thing on my mind.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. My lungs felt like all the air had been squeezed out of them, and my breathing was shallow. A cold sweat ran down my back.

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"Quiet," I whispered.

"Huh?"

"Get behind me slowly."

"Huh? Um..."
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I led Lilia by the hand slowly until she was behind me. She took her position and turned around to see what I'd been looking out, then let out a doltish "Huh?"

A bear was standing right in front of us.

He was easily two and a half meters tall, and he was *wide* too—wider than any human. Standing face-to-face like this, he seemed so much bigger than the sheer numbers could even convey.

I looked at Lilia out of the corner of my eye to check on her. Her expression was one of pure terror. It was plain as day that she hadn't been expecting this.

But of course she hadn't. *I* didn't remember any bear events in the game either.

After all, even if the love interests were blessed by the game by being total heartthrobs, good looks didn't really do much to help them win against a bear—especially if they didn't have anything more than a sword or two as a weapon. Even hunting rifles were useless at such close range.

"Lilia," I said, placing the emergency whistle that Isaac had given me in her hand. "If anything happens to me, use this. The others will come to help."

She was beyond scared now. She'd sunk down onto the ground in a panic. "What? Um, ah..."

"There's no reason to worry. I'll protect you."

With Lilia behind my back, I faced the bear. I had a feeling I was going to get more than just my hands dirty, so I took my jacket off.

The bear let out a low growl. I could see the glint of his eyes shining in the darkness. I glared back.

To be perfectly honest, I found this whole confrontation to be a pretty exciting development. Ever since I'd received that letter of recommendation that stated the only brute who could take me on was a bear, I'd been a little curious to find out how I'd actually fare against one. I had to try it out at least once, right?

All right, pal. Who's stronger, you or me?

The moment my jacket hit the dirt, the fight was on. It was just me and the bear, mano a mano.

I'll cut to the chase: It ended in a draw.

I don't know how many blows and throws we traded, but the fight left us in shambles. By the end, we'd collapsed onto the dirt together. We'd lost the strength to lift even an arm, much less to stand. Hell, even lifting a *finger* felt like an effort.

Fortunately, the bear hadn't ripped me up with his massive claws, nor had he sunk his sharp teeth into my skin. Likewise, I hadn't even pulled my knife out of my pocket. All we'd used were punches, kicks, grapples, and throws.

At one point, as the bear had launched me into the air, it had dawned on me: The beast was a plot device. I'd found my otome game story.

Every love interest had their own trials and tribulations—obstacles to overcome and pain to confront. Robert was at odds with his older brother. Christopher fought against loneliness. Edward battled his illness. Isaac grappled with his family.

Well, now I'd found mine...and it was this very bear.

It was an epiphany that confirmed something I'd long been wondering about. It signaled that I'd managed to successfully build my own route as a love interest—and not only that, but that I'd also been on the right path this whole time.

Honestly, I'd had my doubts. I'd bulked up and built up an image. I'd molded myself into the perfect love interest. I'd even stolen the other love interests' events and hogged all of the main character's affection...but the doubts had still persisted regardless.

I mean, how could they *not* have? My route didn't even exist in the original game. I knew that better than anyone.

That was exactly why my epiphany brought me such relief. This bear was proof that the universe was officially recognizing me as a love interest. My heart felt like it was going to burst with joy.

And so I fought him fair and square, using every last drop of power that I could muster. Even though I knew I couldn't win, I had to fight him with everything I had.

Gradually, though, I began to care less and less about all of that. *Is it okay that I'm enjoying this fight this much?* I thought, concerned.

The powers that be had granted me the ultimate plot device—my kryptonite. I was earnestly trying to best it, unleashing the full potential of the muscles I'd spent years upon years building up. It had been a long time since I'd last fought a foe I didn't have to hold back against.

There was no mistaking it. This bear was my kryptonite, all right. Just as my brother and the instructors at the academy had suggested, he was the only brute in this world who could live up to that title. And just like with any otome game plot device, I would never be able to beat him without the main character's assistance.

Wait... Huh?

I tilted my head, puzzled. (Okay, well...I tilted it in a *figurative* sense, at least. I was too tired to move my neck, so there was no *literal* head tilting.)

Maybe I was enjoying that fight a little too much? Maybe it wasn't supposed to end in a draw?

Slowly, it began to dawn on me that I was probably supposed to have lost the fight early on—and *badly*—so that the main character could save me with the "power of love." But I'd done too good of a job, and the window had unfortunately passed.

No point dwelling on the past, I guess.

At least I hadn't won. Since our match had ended in a draw, Lilia still had an opening to use her saintly power on me.

Yes, I could see it now... Lilia would awaken to a ferocious power far beyond her the mere paper-cut-healing capabilities she'd had until now and work some kind of magic on me. Buffed by the power of love, I'd stand up again, ready to take on the world. Then I'd beat the *stuffing* out of that bear.

You heard it here first, ladies and gentlemen. This is the brand-spanking-new Elizabeth Burton route.

Honestly, though? If I were Lilia, I would've left a long time ago. Love may be

blind, but it can't blind you to a bear fight that's unfolding right in front of you.

Not to mention our fight had been drawn out for what must've been hours—though at this point, even I wasn't sure how long we'd been at it, to be honest. It might've been a heart-pounding, life-or-death affair at the beginning, but there was only so long she could fret over my safety and cheer me on.

It was dark now. Poor Lilia had had nothing to do but stand there and watch, so it would've been no wonder if she'd lost interest. With the tension from the battle long gone, not even the world's greatest love could've withstood the tedium she must've been facing.

I waited, but I didn't sense any movement from Lilia. The bear, on the other hand, was still stirring...but I didn't think he had any shot at winning if he tried to attack me at this point. The world of *Royal LOVERS* was a forgiving one, so I wasn't likely to get eaten, at least.

What now, though? I wondered.

As I lay on the ground pondering my options, I sensed the rustling of leaves and the sound of footsteps. I felt the vibrations of their movements.

From what I was picking up, there were probably...four people?

"Commander!" a familiar voice called.

"Sis! And...a-a bear?!"

"Ha ha! Ha ha ha!"

A laugh echoed in my hoarse, dry throat. I could taste blood in my mouth. Yes...of course!

I'd been aiming for the main character to commit to my route, but the only ending I wanted with her was a friendship ending. With that in mind, this was actually the best-case scenario. I didn't *need* the power of love to overcome my trial. All I needed was the power of friendship from the relationships I'd been cultivating all this time.

If that wasn't the perfect way to lay the groundwork for a friendship ending, I didn't know what was.

It was an effort to even open my eyes at this point, but I had no choice. I

gently opened them and looked up at Christopher, who'd come to help me.

His face was blurry, but I could still make out his features. His honey-colored eyes were brimming with tears. When he saw my eyes focus onto his face, it was like the dam broke. He called my name again and burst out sobbing.

I took a little look around and noticed Robert. He was standing closest to the bear out of anyone, sizing the creature up nervously and holding his sword at the ready. It looked like he was trying to protect me and Lilia, who was still behind me.

I slowly sat up. My body made a horrible groaning sound as I moved.

Christopher spoke up again anxiously, but I held up my hand to silence him.

When I turned my head, I saw Edward. He was standing behind me, sword in hand, covering Lilia from the rear. The Edward here now, though, was so much fiercer and bolder than his in-game counterpart. His usual ephemeral quality was almost completely gone as he brandished his sword. Instead, he exerted sheer power.

If not for Lilia's bewildered expression, it would've looked like a scene straight out of the game.

"Burton," another voice called out as someone's footsteps approached.

I looked up to see Isaac. He held out a flask of water and put it to my lips. He poured the water into my mouth awkwardly, but at least he managed to avoid choking me.

I knew Isaac, of all people, would never have expected me to give up. This was a man who kept fighting until he won. I didn't have enough strength to expend any of it on speaking, but I looked up into his eyes, nodded, and stood up.

I heard the sound of muscles and blood vessels snapping. I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd broken a bone or two as well. My vision was blurry, and my body felt heavy. Everything hurt like hell.

But I still got up.

No one spoke a word.

I took a step forwards, and it felt like I was dragging my feet—no, my whole

body. I walked past Robert and straight up to the bear. I couldn't see Robert's expression, but he didn't make any moves to stop me.

The bear glared at me as I approached. His tongue was sticking out as he wheezed, his breaths deep and ragged.

I squatted down and wrapped my arms around his torso. I felt his arms twitch slightly, then he started flailing. Unfortunately for the bear, he was even more worn out than I was. He had no chance of stopping me.

I braced myself, positioning my feet firmly on the ground, and used every muscle in my body to lift him up. He was so heavy, I thought I was going to fall right over. I leveraged his mass to create centrifugal force as I swung his giant body round, over and over again. Once I'd generated enough force, I hurled him across the forest.

He flew up into the sky, drawing a giant arc over the trees.



Soon, I lost sight of him as he fell back down into the trees. But from the snapping of branches and the loud *thump* that followed, I could tell that he'd made his landing. The birds that had been resting in the tree cover let out shrieks of consternation.

The force of the throw sent me flying backwards too and straight onto the ground. I felt my face smack into the dirt. I simply lay there; I didn't even open my eyes. This time, I couldn't even lift a finger. It wasn't even a matter of pain—I just lacked the strength to do it, plain and simple. My body felt impossibly heavy...and tired.

Even so, I felt oddly refreshed.

I did it, I thought, confidently. I felt absolutely certain that this was the best way this could've possibly played out.

Take that, universe! Take that, otome games!

Then, as I felt the ground shake slightly and heard the faint sound of voices in the distance, I slipped out of consciousness.

## The Second Dance

I was in so much pain when I woke up that I could barely move. I was essentially bedbound.

And, as if the universe just *had* to kick me when I was down, I hadn't even been able to participate in any actual stargazing. I'd kind of kicked the bear while he was down, though, so I guess that was just karma coming to bite me in the butt.

Anyway, after that little scuffle, I'd apparently been carried back to the teachers and rushed home. According to the doctor, I'd broken several bones, including in my clavicle and my left arm. He cautioned that I might've injured some internal organs too, so he insisted that I be on complete bed rest.

I would've stayed put even if he hadn't told me to, but being told to do so only made me want to get *out* of bed. (What can I say? I've got a rebellious streak.) It was too painful to act on my contrarian urges, though, so I ended up doing as I was told.

My parents were out on a visit to the duchy, so my older brother had rushed home instead. The moment I'd opened my eyes, he'd already started chewing me out.

Please, don't do this to me, I'd thought. He had a habit of crying when he was angry, which was painful to witness and always racked me with an intense guilt.

I'd obediently listened to his long-winded lecture. Unfortunately for me, my parents had soon returned home and subjected me to yet *another* round of tears and lectures.

"Well, even *you're* no match for a bear," my mother had whispered after she'd chewed me out for what felt like hours. She'd sounded strangely relieved.

"I'll beat him next time," I'd said.

Immediately, my father and brother began to scold me again. Whoops. Guess that wasn't the reassurance they were looking for...

My family apparently didn't trust me to stay put in bed, because they put my older brother in charge of supervising me and ensured that I didn't receive any visitors. Whenever my older brother was away, someone else was always ready to take his place—whether that was Christopher, my mother, or the head maid.

Honestly, the supervision was so ironclad that it felt more like I was under house arrest than on bed rest. What gives? I wondered bitterly. Why am I being treated like a criminal? What did I ever do wrong? If anything, I felt like I should be getting showered in adulation. After all, I'd saved the saint, hadn't I?

I was told that my recovery would take a full two months, but I couldn't bear the thought of being stuck here for that long. My muscles were going to atrophy if I didn't exercise them. Fortunately, once I could move my arms again, I got them to let me out of bed occasionally for rehabilitation.

I couldn't help but think that the recovery process would go a whole lot faster if Lilia used her saint powers on me...but since I was aiming for a friendship ending, it felt like that would be too much to ask of her. Besides, it wasn't like I was dying or anything. I could heal on my own just fine.

While I was bedridden, I passed the time learning how to play chess with Christopher—that said, it turned out I was better at breaking the board than winning the game. I couldn't wrap my head around any of it.

For starters, why would they have named the strongest piece "the queen"? If you asked me, they should start calling the king the "princess" instead.

Other than learning chess, I spent most of my time reading letters and dictating thank-you responses to my footman for the gifts sent to me.

Letters...now that's a thought.

One day, an idea came to me. I asked my footman to bring me a pen and some stationery. I decided I would write a letter on my own—not a simple thank you, but a request. It felt a bit awkward to dictate that to my footman, and besides...it'd be good for my rehabilitation to write it myself, right?

Fortunately, my right hand still worked just fine. And ever since I'd become Elizabeth Burton—that is to say, from when I became self-aware at seven years old—my writing had been perfectly neat and legible. I'd also read so many

seasonal greetings that I could probably recite some in my sleep.

Once I'd finished writing, I signed off with my name. But just as I was ready to seal them, I realized something—this was probably the first time I'd actually written letters myself, in my own penmanship.

I handed my mail to my footman and returned to opening more letters from the pile.

Both recipients replied to me immediately.



Before I alighted from the carriage, I double-checked my reflection in the mirror. I was wearing a formal knight's uniform today that I'd borrowed from a friend in the Royal Guard—from Edward's guard, specifically. He was about my height (when I was wearing my elevator shoes, that is), so his uniform fit me perfectly.

The cut of the Royal Guard's uniform was similar to that of the knights uniform, but it was mostly white and featured extravagant flourishes. It was a ceremonial-looking uniform, certainly not fit for regular usage. Even the decorative breast tassel felt unnecessarily complicated. I had no idea how to wear it properly.

It knew it would all be worth it to look even more showstopping than usual, though. After all, uniforms have an almost magical effect.

The garment had arrived at my house with a letter that warned I'd better not get it dirty, so I knew I needed to take extra care with it. I *did* briefly entertain the thought of what might happen if I treated myself to some curry udon, but I quickly banished the thought. For better or for worse, there was no such thing in this world anyway.

My hair and makeup were on point today. I'd even had new elevator shoes made to match the uniform.

Handsome face: check. Tall stature: check. Muscles in form: check. Bones intact: well...that part could use a little work.

My ribs and arm had actually healed up all right. The doctor had estimated a

two-month healing period, but thanks to my high-calcium diet, it'd only taken one. I'd been able to get back to my daily life without any issue. My clavicle, on the other hand, was still...a bit *off*.

Well, it'll heal eventually. All in due time.

My family had finally given me permission to return to school, but only after I swore to my older brother that I'd take it easy. That was how I knew they were serious—they didn't make me swear to God or to the sun, but to my brother.

So, here I was, on my first day back at school. It just so happened to be the day of the dance.

I knew who I'd be accompanying this year. I'd sent her an invitation via letter, and she'd sent me a reply to accept. I stood waiting for her in the front hall of the baron's manor, and before long, she arrived.

"You look beautiful," I blurted out without thinking.

I'd gone into the evening with every intention of complimenting her, of course, but she was so lovely all dressed up that I hadn't even needed to force it. She looked absolutely gorgeous, and she looked so sweet when she blushed at my compliment.

I took her by the hand and escorted her to my carriage.

I gazed admiringly at her as she sat across from me. She really was adorable—like an angel that had dropped right out of Heaven.

She wore a pale-blue princess dress and a dainty diamond necklace. Although the puffy sleeves of her dress emphasized her sweetness, her visible neckline—which was usually covered by her hair—also gave her a seductive, feminine quality. Her hair was pulled back into a braid and tied up with a steel blue ribbon. She was also wearing light makeup, which made her look a little more mature than usual. Although I couldn't see, I suspected she was also wearing high heels.

As I looked at her, my eyes fell on the ribbon that held her hair in place. The color perfectly matched my eyes. It was actually a well-known tradition among the nobility to match their accessories to the hair or eye color of their lover—just as well-known as the tradition of sending a dress to a lover.

Neither of us commented on it. We both knew what it meant. In fact, *I* was actually the one who had taught her about that tradition.

Before long, the carriage arrived at the academy's ballroom.

I took Lilia's hand, and together, we alighted from the carriage. Then, arm in arm, we walked towards the ballroom. *Here we are at last*, I thought. Soon, we'd have our first dance, and then...I'd dump her.

Well, not *exactly*. Technically, I was just going to friendzone her. (Though as far as otome games go, a friendship ending was essentially the same as being dumped.)

But as soon as I thought about what lay ahead, I felt a pang of regret. Did I really want to lose this chance? Was I really about to just let go of such a beautiful, sweet, adoring young woman? I'd worked so hard to get her to fall in love with me. How could I throw that all away?

It's not like I bore a grudge against her, or anything like that. She was sweet and hardworking. Lately, she hadn't even let out any "hee hee HORF"s. But more than anything, it was plain as day that she loved me. Wouldn't it be better for both of us if we actually sealed the deal and started dating, instead of spending time together as just friends?

My head spun with doubts. There it is again, I thought. I've felt this strange compulsion before.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. I took her hand in mine and knelt down. It was like my body was moving on its own. She stared back at me expectantly, and I felt suddenly compelled to say something. But what? What would I even say?

Wait... What was I going to say again? Actually, do the love interests kneel like this in their friendship endings? I'm pretty sure this only happens in the romantic ones...

Before I even knew what I was going to say, I opened my mouth to call out her name.

Then, the ballroom doors flew open with a wham!

Reflexively, I turned to look into the ballroom from where the sound had come.

Standing at the entrance of the ballroom were four incredibly beautiful—and kind of buff—women, striking confrontational poses.

The tallest woman had auburn hair, with bangs that were styled impeccably, leaving her gorgeous forehead fully visible. Her voluminous hair was waistlength, but had been tightly curled and draped in the front with a beautiful bounce, emphasizing her broad shoulders.

Her bold black dress exposed both her back and her chest, including her, well...her *cleavage*, which was proudly on display. She wore an opulent necklace around her neck which featured a prominent pale blue gemstone that looked like it might be tanzanite. Her showy jewelry was no match for her beautiful face, though. She was an absolutely stunning woman.

Her legs, which were peeking out of a slit in her dress, were as taut as an antelope's, and her well-toned thighs and abs helped accentuate her slender waist even without the aid of a corset. She was the perfect hourglass—so shapely, I hesitated to look at her.

She was tall enough as it was, but the extra boost from her high heels—which brought her total height to over a miraculous 190 centimeters—emphasized her toned frame.

Standing next to this knockout was her polar opposite—an ephemerally beautiful woman who carried herself with all the grace of a celestial maiden. She was slender and quite tall herself.

Her wavy silver hair was styled up in a braided bun, exposing her delicate neckline.

The cut of her steel blue, A-line dress gave her the appearance of a higher waistline and longer legs. It was an off-shoulder dress with a décolletage that showcased the slender curve of her shoulders, all the way up to her collarbone. At the sight of the dainty nape of her neck, I let out an unintended gulp. Although her dress appeared simple at a glance, upon a closer look, it was inlaid with delicate embroidery that was only a shade different to the rest of the dress. It subtly changed depending on which angle you viewed it from. The

breast and hem of the dress were embroidered with lace stitching that was so intricate, it was hard to imagine that it could have possibly been handmade.

She wore teardrop earrings that reflected the light with a dazzling sparkle. And on her head, the woman wore a beautiful, understated tiara.

Shouldn't you be wearing an actual crown? I wondered.

The third woman was similarly gorgeous, with glasses framing her narrow, almond-shaped eyes. She wore a dress with ample fabric that covered her all the way up to the base of her neck, exposing very little of her skin. The cut of the dress, however, was decidedly less modest. It was a formfitting, empire-line affair that put her slender figure on full display.

Her hairstyle felt oddly familiar. She had blunt bangs above her eyes and straight hair that fell down to her shoulders. Its indigo sheen was absolutely lustrous, daring to outshine the gloss on her thin lips. She also wore a splash of red eyeshadow at the corners of her eyes as an accent. Her fashionable dress and makeup gave her an austere, modest look that only made her even sexier.

Her dress was a deep blue that resembled the color of the night sky, and as I took it in, I noticed the lace and velvet embellishments. It was an unusual combination of fabrics that gave it an East Asian air. On her arms, she was wearing a pair of lace gloves that had been all the rage lately among young noblewomen.

The large ornament she wore in her hair, which was a gorgeous arrangement of fresh flowers and jewels, was unmistakably trendy. You could only find one of those at the hottest jeweler in town. *Are those flowers anemones?* I wondered. They'd been carefully arranged into a burst of mostly blue-gray, just like the others' headpieces. I had no doubt that a thoughtful and stylish classmate had had a hand in coordinating the ensemble.

The fourth woman was the tiniest among them. She was sweet and girlish, like a small creature. Her big, honey-colored eyes, along with her rosy cheeks and lips, were absolutely adorable. She wore her fluffy, strawberry-blonde hair in a half-ponytail, which was tied up with a steel-blue tulle barrette.

Her ensemble was a pale-yellow princess dress with a full, softly billowing skirt. Its traditional cut gave her an air of purity and sweetness, but the hem

was actually unusually short by this world's standards, stopping right below her knees. The back of her dress featured a long fishtail and a large, bouncy ribbon, giving her a totally different appearance from the front and the back. From either angle, though, it was the perfect look for this tiny, adorable woman. Her youthful vibrancy and sweetness would pique any man's interest and make him trip over himself to protect her.

If you didn't know better, you'd almost certainly assume that she was the main character...but unfortunately, she wasn't.

In case you hadn't guessed by now, the four women were none other than Robert, Edward, Isaac, and Christopher. The love interests were all here at the dance, and they were all cross-dressing.



*Wait...why, though?* 

I was suddenly struck with a deep sense of déjà vu and dread that the nightmare I'd experienced last year was about to repeat itself. What's more, the love interests were dressed to the nines this time—they were even more glammed up than they had been last year.

What's Christopher doing cross-dressing? He hated it when I put him in that dress last year.

I had no idea what my little brother was thinking these days. Maybe he was going through a rebellious phase?

Seeing all four of the cross-dressing love interests together, I had a sense that I was surrounded by enemies—like I was about to face off against the Elite Four. Wherever this was going, it was nowhere good.

Then it hit me: They were all wearing steel-blue accessories. I'd been so sure that Lilia had picked out that specific ribbon to match my eyes, but maybe that wasn't it at all? Maybe that hue was just the latest trend?

Thank God I didn't say anything about her ribbon, I thought. I'd really dodged a bullet. I didn't even want to imagine how mortifying it would've been to make some presumptuous comment and reveal my self-centered vanity. At least I'd realized my mistake before I embarrassed myself. If there was one thing I was grateful to the love interests for, it was that.

"Huh? Wh-What is this? A reverse harem route? Wait, no...maybe it's the opposite? Wait...huh?! I don't remember a cross-dressing event..."

Flustered, Lilia started on one of her motormouthed monologues. I couldn't blame her for being confused. If anything, it would've been weird if she *hadn't* been totally caught off guard by this.

I was acutely aware of the four love interests staring at me confrontationally from across the ballroom.

Surely they don't need anything from us, I thought, optimistically. Unfortunately, my last hopes were soon shattered to pieces.

"Commander! Please let me have a dance at this year's ball! I dressed up just

for the occasion!"

"Lizzie, surely you know who you should *really* be dancing with? Who do you think is the most highly regarded person here?"

"Thanks to you, I've mastered both the men's part and the women's part of this dance. I don't mind taking either role."

"Sis! You forced me into a dress last year, so I hope you're going to take responsibility for it this year!"

I pressed my finger into my brow. What in the world am I supposed to do now? I thought, bewildered. I suddenly had a strong urge to just turn around and go home.

"Sir Burton," Lilia, who was standing next to me, spoke up. For some reason, I could sense a faint hint of blame in her gaze as she glanced up at me.

This is all just a misunderstanding, I wanted to tell her. I swear!

Honestly, though, I wasn't even sure what the misunderstanding was. This time—this one time—I actually hadn't done anything wrong. Not this year, and not last year either.

As the four love interests closed in on me, I made up my mind.

There's only one thing to do here: I've gotta make a run for it.

I swiftly bent down and picked Lilia up. In classic main-character style, she was light as a feather even with her full dress on. Fortunately, this meant that I wouldn't have too much trouble, even with my shaky collarbone.

"Hold on tight," I whispered to her with a wink.

Her cheeks blushed a fierce red, and I saw little hearts pop up in her eyes. I nimbly turned on my heel and hopped up onto the staircase banister.

"Sorry, ladies. I've got some things to take care of, so excuse me for a bit."

And with that, I jumped backwards into the garden as cries of protest rang out after me from the ballroom.

Here we go! My great escape is underway!



After running around campus trying to shake off our pursuers, we finally arrived at the courtyard. It was the spot where Lilia and I had first met on the day of the entrance ceremony.

I searched for a sign of anyone else in the area, but it seemed no one had caught up with us yet. So, for the moment, I put Lilia back down on the ground.

Honestly, what in the world are those four thinking?! They think they can just show up and steal the spotlight... And they weren't content to do it once either. They just had to go and recycle the joke.

I worried for the future of the kingdom if its two princes—including its *crown* prince—and the probable next prime minister were pulling stunts like that. And I knew my parents would break down in tears if they knew I'd gotten my little brother hooked on cross-dressing.

The more I thought about it all, the more my head hurt.

Hadn't their friends known about their plans? Had they all just silently let this happen? *I can't believe no one had the balls to put a stop to this. Some friends they must be.* If they'd told *me* about their plans, *I* sure would've stopped them—and I would've moved Heaven and Earth to do it, if I'd had to.

"Um—! Uh, Sir Burton!" Lilia exclaimed, looking up at me. Then she took a step towards me. "I-I... I love you!"

Wait, what? I thought. Her profession of love felt like it'd come out of nowhere. Give me a sec here. This is a lot to process.

"A-And I don't mean that...as a friend! I-I want to be your girlfriend!" she continued. She bent over into a 90-degree bow and offered her hand. "I... I made up my mind about that the moment I met you!"

Okay, now that's just B.S. I know how you main characters are—you never make up your minds until the very last moment.

For a few moments, I looked down into Lilia's hair whorl and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath in and let it out.

It felt like the clouds that had muddied my thoughts earlier had lifted. My mind was crystal clear now.

It's all right, I told myself. You've got this.

"Lilia," I said.

She lifted her head up to look at me again. The hand she had offered me was shaking now.

"Thank you. I...really care about you too."

Lilia whipped her head up suddenly. From the way that I didn't take her hand, and the gentle smile I was giving her, I knew she'd probably already guessed what I was about to say next.

"But...I don't think my feelings are the same as yours."

As soon as the words left my mouth, tears spilled out of Lilia's eyes. The teardrops glistened as they caught on her long eyelashes.

As softly and as gently as I could, I told her how I felt—not as a love interest, but as *me*. In my own words.

"You're always so full of surprises, and I really enjoy spending time with you. It always makes me smile to see how earnestly you go about things. I can tell you're always putting your all into it. When you accepted me...it felt like the world *itself* had accepted me. It was like a reaffirmation that all of my efforts had paid off. I feel like meeting you saved me. Before I even knew it, being with you had given me a reason to live."

None of what I said was a lie...but none of it was true either. I knew that wasn't very love interest-like of me, but it was authentic.

"I consider you to be...an irreplaceable, dear friend."

All at once, Lilia's tears broke the eyelash barrier and spilled onto her cheeks. They looked like little jewels as they fell. Once one had fallen, it was like the dam broke, and the rest came pouring out with no end in sight.

Come on, don't do this to me. I can't handle it when people cry...

As uncomfortable as I felt, though, I knew I couldn't look away. It would've been dishonest not to face her now. After all, I was the one who'd made her cry. That was my sin to bear. In fact, it was karma. No matter how much I hated to take responsibility, I couldn't shy away from *this*. I had to face it.

"I'm really sorry that I can't return your feelings."

I did feel bad. It felt like I had no right to say that after all I'd done, but I hadn't had a choice. I was aiming for a friendship ending, after all.

"But, if you're okay with it...it would make me really happy if we could stay friends."

Tears continued to stream down Lilia's face, but she gave me a little nod. I found myself feeling grateful that *she'd* been the one to be reincarnated as Lilia Douglas.

I gave her a smile and wiped the beautiful tears off her cheek with my finger.

I imagined hearing a deep *gong* from behind me. It was the sound of relief—of a heavy weight being lifted from my shoulders.

I finally did it.



Just then, I heard the snapping of tree branches. I turned around to see the dumbfounded faces of the four love interests who were standing off to the side. I'd been so focused on Lilia that I hadn't even noticed, but apparently they'd caught up with us and followed us all the way here.

"Lizzie...?"

The first one to speak up was Edward.

"Did I mishear that, or did you say...that you want to just be friends?" he asked hesitantly as he glanced over at Lilia, a curious look in his eyes.

"Hmm? No. You heard right."

Ah, right... This must be really awkward for him to witness a girl getting turned down unexpectedly. Plus, I'm sure everyone thought I had a thing for Lilia.

I doubted anyone had expected me to turn her down.

"What?! But Commander! I thought you were in love with Lady Lilia?!" the ever-dense, meat-for-brains musclehead cried.

He had absolutely no tact. How did he think poor Lilia was going to take that?

Jeez, pal. Way to rub salt in the wound.

"But, I... If you'd turned down my request for the first dance tonight, I'd made up my mind to give up on you and support the two of you together..." Robert continued.

"That's a splendid idea, Robert. It wouldn't do to be held captive by the past. You should make good on your word and give up on her. I'll be doing no such thing, though."

"B-Brother?!"

"I admire your restraint. I could never bring myself to give up on her, whether or not she finds a lover," Isaac added.

Even Christopher chimed in. "Eww, creepy! You're one step away from being a full-on stalker, you know. Not that I care about anything you have to say—you've never been chosen for a first dance, after all."

It seemed a catfight had broken out among the four of them. My head hurt as I remembered how this had played out last year.

Why is everyone so dead set on having the first dance with me? I wondered.

I knew how great it felt to have girls swoon over the sight of two handsome guys together, and that it would probably make a big splash to go that direction for the first dance. But were the four of them *that* desperate to make the girls squeal? Unlike me, they were all genetically gifted enough that they didn't *need* to resort to such cheap tricks. It seemed like they were being unnecessarily—and inexplicably—stubborn about this.

"Um, ah..." Lilia muttered, tugging on my sleeve. It seemed that she'd regained her senses. She looked absolutely dumbfounded by the catfight that had broken out. "I-I'm not going to give up either!"

"Lilia?"

"I'll make you love me, no matter what it takes! Not as a friend, but as a girlfriend!"

Now I was really taken aback.

The game's story had already branched; the main character's ending had

been sealed. There was no point in her saying that now. She'd already been locked out of my romantic ending. Lilia, who'd played the game before herself, should've known that better than anyone.

There was really no need for me to waste a sweet young girl's time like this; the best thing to do in this scenario was to reveal the spoilers as soon as possible. If she knew how things would end, she certainly wouldn't want to date me—she might not even want to be friends.

We'd become pretty close over the past few months. If possible, I wanted to become *real* friends—especially considering that we both came from the same place in our past lives. It'd be a shame to lose the opportunity to talk about my old memories with someone who'd been there, but I knew I had no right to complain.

I felt something squish against my arm. I looked down to see Lilia clinging to me, her arms wrapped around mine. Her chest was pressed right up against me. With a slightly pouty expression, she looked up at me, her eyes red from crying.

She's so soft, and she smells so nice... Wow, she's cute!

As soon as I'd let my guard down, the main character effect had begun to work its magic on me again, smashing through all of my defenses in an instant.

"Wha—?! Lady Lilia! What shameful behavior!"

"N-No, it's not! Burton and I are friends! Besides, this amount of intimacy is totally normal between girls! Right, Sir Burton?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah... Right."

Lilia looked up at me with an expression that was so aggressively cute, I could barely manage to pry my eyes away and stammer out a noncommittal response.

Crap. It's like staring at the sun. I feel like my eyes are gonna burn if I look straight at her.

"Well, we're friends too," Isaac objected, attaching himself to me.

"And I'm her little brother!"

"Y-Yeah! I'm her friend too!"

In seconds, everything had descended into chaos. It was like a scene from Hell.

Guys, I'm begging you. Give me some space here!

I didn't appreciate their clinginess—nor did I appreciate how strangely *nice* they smelled.

"Everyone off," Edward, the highest-ranking of them all, commanded.

His voice held a threatening note, and everyone immediately (albeit reluctantly) stepped away from me.

It was incredibly weird to hear this throng of beautiful women speak in sexy male voices. It felt like my eyes were playing tricks on me. For a moment, I wondered if I was going crazy.

It certainly felt like a friendship ending, with all of the love interests gathered here together, squabbling and chattering away excitedly. But I couldn't help but feel that something was off. Based on the visual alone, it would've been easy to assume this was the harem ending of a bishoujo game.

What's the deal here? I wondered.

I had no idea what was going on, but it was doing a number on me psychologically. I was suddenly starting to miss the girls in the fan club. Being mobbed by Lilia and the love interests made me realize how good I'd had it back when my fans were admiring me from a respectful distance.

Knock it off, guys. If I get a red lipstick stain on this uniform I borrowed, I'm toast.

Edward turned to face me, and seeing how dejected I looked, he cleared his throat to get the ball rolling.

"If Lady Lilia isn't the one you want, then who...or, what kind of lover are you looking for?"

I cocked my head, confused by his question. It felt awfully out of the blue. Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?

He was really putting me on the spot here. Everything I'd done up until now had all been to attract the main character and make her commit to my route.

I'd never even thought about romance outside of that. It had never even occurred to me that it might be something I wanted for myself.

(I realize how weird that must sound, considering that I'd played *Royal LOVERS*—a game specifically for people who love the thrill of romance. But what can I say?)

Now that I'd achieved my goal and Lilia had committed to my route, there was no need to keep up the whole cross-dressing gentleman act.

Still, it was a hell of a lot easier than being a young noblewoman. And besides, I was used to it now.

Maybe I'll keep it up for a little longer...

And if romance was in the cards, maybe I *did* want a taste? I'd never considered the possibility before, but now that it was being presented to me, I found myself intrigued by the idea.

Edward and the others (including Lilia) searched my face for answers. They all seemed deeply interested in what I might say.

What kind of lover am I looking for, hmm? Is he asking if I have a type? I pondered this for a while, wondering if I had one. A type, huh? Someone I like... Someone I want to be with...

Suddenly, an image flashed in my mind.

"Oh! I know... Probably someone like...my older brother."

The crowd went dead silent at this answer.

I'd just blurted out the first thing that had come to mind, but suddenly I felt a bit embarrassed by it. I felt my cheeks flushing at the realization that I'd just given the most childish answer that I could have possibly come up with. It was the kind of answer a seven-year-old might've given...except that I was seventeen.

Though to be fair, I'd never opened myself up to romance in this life—not since the day I'd regained my memories of my past life at seven. I'd basically put all of that on pause. I hadn't had any of the feelings or experiences that a young person usually does as they age into their teenage years. I put my hand to my

mouth and looked away awkwardly. I could feel everyone else looking at me, completely speechless.

"How can I even...compete with that...?"

"Lizzie... You're aiming too high."

"Sis, don't be ridiculous!"

"I know, I know!" I replied, exasperated. "That's why I said 'someone *like* him,' okay?!"

"There is no one else like him."

Well, I couldn't argue with that.

Everyone's responses confirmed what I already knew: My older brother was well-respected by all.

In a world that always put the heartthrobs first, my older brother was the only one these drop-dead gorgeous love interests couldn't compete with. His existence told me one thing, at least: This world couldn't be all bad.

The reason I'd come this far—and the reason I'd be able to keep going in the future—was him.

No matter what I looked like or how recklessly I acted, he'd always brag about me being his "sweet little sister." He had always been there for me, by my side. But that wasn't all he'd done for me.

No matter how much this world prioritized looks, they weren't the *only* thing that mattered. My brother—the next Honorable Duke—had been the one to prove that to me. The respect that he'd earned had nothing to do with his appearance. He might not have been a heartthrob, but he was my big brother—pleasantly plump marshmallow-like body and all. And that was enough to win anyone over.

That had been, in many ways, my saving grace.

Thanks to him, I knew I needed a *lot* more than good looks to get anywhere in life. If he hadn't been my older brother, I wouldn't be who I was today. So, maybe there wasn't anyone else out there like him, but...

"If I meet someone one day who doesn't care about appearances...then I'd consider them as a lover," I muttered, shrugging my shoulders.

I'd kind of just been talking to myself, but everyone whipped around and looked at me at once.

Sheesh, what're those faces for? You're freaking me out here.

I knew exactly what they were for, though. I'd broken the one principle of this world—that looks mattered above all else. It seemed like it would be a long time before I ever seriously considered the prospect of romance.

## **Epilogue**

Well, the dance had ended, and the routes had branched. Now that I'd achieved a friendship ending, nothing bad could possibly happen. It felt like everything was pretty much over now. All that was left to do was—

"Lilia... Could I share something with you? I'd like to tell you...the whole story."

—dole out some spoilers.

As the two of us rode in a carriage to the baron's manor, I told her everything —about my memories of my past life and my knowledge that we now lived in the world of an otome game. I told her that I was basically a two-bit baddie, and that I'd devoted my life to making her choose my route so that I could find my happy ending. I even explained that I'd been trying to get close to her from the very start; essentially, I let her know that I'd been using her this whole time.

I skipped over a bunch of stuff, but it still ended up being a pretty longwinded exposition. The last ten years of my current life had been infinitely more eventful than my lackluster, rice-gruel past life.

Lilia occasionally opened her eyes wide in shock and gave some "uh-huh?"s and "wow!"s, but she listened all the way until the end. Then, after looking as if she were pondering it all for a moment, she asked me a question.

"So...the cross-dressing, the swordsmanship, your whole personality...all of it was for me?"

"Well...sort of. It was all to make you choose my route, at least. I guess it's all the same, really," I said, nodding. "I can understand if you're upset. I mean, I've been using and deceiving you this whole time. I'm sure you could've had a romantic ending if you'd chosen a different character's route. I know how much you love this game, so I'm sure you have a favorite character, right? You could've dated him and activated your saint powers. That'd probably be your happily-ever-after, but I stole that from you. And it wasn't even because I was in

love with you—I did it out of pure selfishness, because I wanted to be happy."

"You've been waiting for me all this time, for ten whole years? You've been putting in all this work just to make me fall in love when I finally met you, right?"

"Sure...you could say that."

Lilia leaned across the carriage towards me. Her amber eyes were glistening.

Hmm? What's happening?

Her reaction was completely unexpected. I was sure she was going to say something like "How could you?!" or "You tricked me!" Honestly, I was even bracing myself for a slap across the face. And of course, I was totally prepared to accept it gracefully.

"I think you just can't see what this *really* is, Ellie! What you just described is *love*!" she declared.

"Huh? What? Wait...did you just call me 'Ellie'? Hold on, Lilia. You've got me all wrong."

"No, I don't. It's love! It's unrequited love, and that's *canon*," Lilia retorted, snorting in smug satisfaction.

"You know, when you throw around words like 'canon,' you sound like a total fangirl," I said, massaging my forehead with my fingers. "Listen, okay? I knew that you were the main character, and I used you for it. I didn't tell you that I was reincarnated too. I *tricked* you. Who'd wanna date—or even be friends with—someone who'd stoop that low? I only told you all of this to make you go away and ease my guilty conscience."

"I did feel tricked when I learned that you were a girl. Despite that, I still wanted to pursue your route...and I still wanted to romance you. Didn't I make the choices that locked me into your route? Didn't I choose you?"

Lilia looked pained as she said this, but I could see the determination in her eyes. It made me smile.

You've never looked more like a main character, Lilia.

"And right now I've got two choices: I can give up on you, or I can decide not

to give up. Well, I'm making my choice—I'm not giving up on you."

"Um... Okay, but—"

"Ellie," she blurted out, interrupting me.

Where the heck did this "Ellie" nickname come from? If we were having any other conversation right now, I'd butt in with a sarcastic remark, but I have a little more tact than that. Seriously, though...quit it with the weird nickname.

Looking straight into my eyes, Lilia continued.

"Main characters are always forgiving." She let out a cheeky, confident laugh. "And they never, ever give up."

What a line! I thought, but I found it oddly compelling. Image after image of all the main characters I'd known flashed in my mind. She's the only one who could drop a line like that and make it work.

"Plus, this game is only rated T!" Lilia added.

"And is that...important?"

"It sure is! Because things don't get any spicier than kissing in T-rated games."

"Oh...right."

Suddenly, I found myself bursting out laughing.

All right, that's enough thinking. If she's happy with that, that's all that matters.

"You devoted the last ten years of your life to making sure I'd fall for you, didn't you? But I've only had six months to make you fall for *me*. It's only fair to give me the same chance you had, don't you think?" Lilia said.

"Ten years is a long time."

"I'll do everything it takes to pursue you, so just you wait!"

Looks like she's not going to listen...

Honestly, I just didn't feel like I was worth that much effort. My handsome face was mostly just a product of makeup, and I had my elevator shoes to thank for my height. I wasn't much of a gentleman either. In fact, I was extraordinarily

selfish. If I had a female friend who was dating someone like me, I'd do everything I could to try to put a stop to it.

There were far better romantic partners out there than me. A saint—and a main character, to boot—would surely have plenty to pick from.

But if I looked at this from a different perspective, it wasn't a bad deal. I wouldn't have to try to get her to pursue me for a whole ten years. Besides, it was very likely that her feelings for me would change over that span of time. She'd probably find someone way better—like any of the other love interests, for starters. Until then, I just had to say "yes." I could just kick back and take it easy.

"But first, let's start off as friends," Lilia suggested, reaching her hand out.

"Okay... I'll do my best to stop trying to make you pursue me."

I took her outstretched hand. Then, before I could even realize what was happening, she pulled my arm. I'd completely dropped my guard, so I fell towards her.

Then she kissed me.



Her kiss landed on my cheek—at the very edge of my mouth, to be precise. I felt her soft lips against my skin.

I straightened up instantly and pushed her away.

She laughed, sticking her tongue out at me. Her girlish expression was vibrant and held more than a hint of mischief. I couldn't help but swoon a little over how cute she was. In a stark contrast, the tongue that stuck out of her lips was a bewitching, seductive red.

"It's a promise, then," she said, bringing her finger to her lips and smiling.

I felt a shiver run down my spine. I knew that if I fumbled this, I'd be in serious trouble. I was more afraid than I'd been when I'd faced that bear. I touched my cheek, and my fingers were cold to the bone. I could feel myself breaking into a cold sweat. My pulse was going a mile a minute, and I could hear it reverberating in my head. It had been a long time since I'd been this afraid for my safety.

This is bad. I can't let my guard down, or she'll eat me alive, I thought. I know what this is all about: it's my core. My core strength is lacking. I can't believe I wasn't strong enough to resist a frail girl tugging my arm like that.

I resolved to visit the training grounds more often, starting this week. I'd need to revisit my regimen. My muscles would never let me down—I just had to give them the attention they needed.

I placed my hand over my heart to try to quell its incessant thumping and took a deep breath to calm the thoughts that raced through my mind.

I'd finally reached the friendship ending I'd hoped for, but it seemed like I still had my work cut out for me.

## Side Stories: Victims of the Elizabeth Burton Support Group II

## My Love Is Stronger Than Anyone's —Robert—

There are two types of people in the world: those who have never been called "maggot" and those who have.

The day I met Commander was the first time in my life that I'd been called a "maggot." Until then, I'd been firmly in the former camp—but all that had changed in a split second.

I can still remember the shock I'd felt.

Even though I was born to the first queen consort and my older brother to the second, there'd never been any question about who the next king would be. I was inferior to my brother in every possible way, seen as the second prince who could never be a serious contender for the throne. It was humiliating—and painful—to be compared to him.

So, I ran from every opportunity to compete against him.

I was a coward, and I knew it too. No one would've called me that to my face, but the knowledge that they said it behind my back was enough to make me want to just give up. I blew up whenever someone so much as even *suggested* that I avoided competing with my brother, but I think I'd also grown used to it.

Still—I'd never been called a *maggot* before.

What's more, the name had nothing to do with my brother. It wasn't a matter of comparison; it was about me as an individual. It hit me like a slap in the face. When she called me that, I saw red.

It was one thing to see *myself* as less-than, but it was a whole other story to be deemed that by someone else.

Before I even realized what was happening, I'd gotten up off the ground and

shouted at Commander. When I'd finally regained my senses, I'd found myself being thrown onto the ground. That had been a real shock too.

When my guards had come running over to ask what had happened, I hadn't been able to get the words out.

Even though I'd lost, I hadn't felt even the faintest stirrings of frustration at my failure. *That's* how enormous the difference in our strength was. I hadn't even been able to follow Commander's movements with my eyes. All I'd been able to see was Commander standing there in a dignified, collected pose. It was like she'd never moved a finger.

To me, on that first day I met her, she looked like a god.



Meeting Commander changed my life.

I followed her instructions and began to train in earnest. If I was still the boy I'd been before I'd met her, I would've complained the entire time. I probably would've even thrown in the towel. But I didn't; I wasn't that boy anymore. And as I pushed myself through my training, no matter how hard it got, I began to believe in myself.

I wanted to grow stronger. I knew I could.

I didn't have any particular reason for it at the time, but I felt that desire in me nonetheless. I felt like something might change if I really could grow stronger. I felt like maybe, just maybe, the boring days that brought nothing more than a growing sense of self-hatred might change somehow...even just a little bit.

That vague hope was all I had to go on, but it was enough. And I was almost positive that many others in the Burton Battalion felt the same.



One day, I heard a rumor that Commander was the distinguished daughter of a prominent nobleman. That little tidbit had apparently come from Instructor Gried, so I knew it must be true.

That was another shock.

It had never crossed my mind that Commander might've been a woman. She just didn't seem like one at all. She was nothing like my mother, the maids, or any young noblewomen I'd met. But more than that...a woman couldn't become a knight.

There was no way that Commander wouldn't have known that, but she never skipped a day at the training grounds. She was stronger than any of the cadets and more devoted to her training than anyone I knew. I respected her all the more for that.

One day, I want to be strong enough to be worthy of standing by her side. Strong enough to cover her back. When she becomes a real division commander, I want to be her deputy. And when she rises to the rank of Commander in Chief, I want to support her as Commander of the Royal Guard. One day, I'd like to build a future with her where we can devote our lives to knighthood.

It was around that time that I cut my hair to match hers.



"Commander!"

"What is it, maggot?!"

That was the first time that I'd tried calling her "Commander." I'd heard from Instructor Gried that everyone else had started calling her that.

When she turned around, I saw a look on her face that I'd never seen before. Her eyes went wide, and she blinked repeatedly. I suddenly remembered how I'd heard that we weren't that far apart in age.

After she stared at me blankly for a while, she let out a whisper that sounded like it had just tumbled out of her mouth. "Robert..."

This time, it was my eyes that widened in surprise.

She remembered my name? And she used it?

Until now, she'd only ever called me "maggot," so it had never occurred to me that she might actually remember my name. I'd never heard her call any of the other cadets by their names either. But I knew what I'd heard—she'd just called me by mine.

For some reason, it was like that was all it took for her to look absolutely radiant.

I straightened my posture and answered her. "You remembered my name! I'm honored, sir!!!"

"Did you cut your hair?"

I couldn't believe it. Not only did she remember my name, but she even remembered what kind of hairstyle I'd had.

Does she remember everything about the other cadets too? I wondered. All sixty-something of us?

I was astonished that someone my age could remember all of that. But more surprising still was that the *Demon Drill Sergeant* would remember those details. She called us all "maggots," but maybe deep down, she cared about all of us?

If that was the case, then she really *was* exceptional. I had no doubt that she was destined to be a leader.

"Yes, sir!" I replied. "I couldn't see much through my bangs, so I went for a more practice-appropriate haircut! I want to get stronger so I can be just like you, Commander!"

"You think a haircut is all it takes to get stronger, maggot?!" she bellowed back, returning to her usual demonic persona.

Flustered, I bent down into a deep bow. "N-No, sir! Pardon me, sir!"

I watched her as she walked back towards Instructor Gried.

She really is amazing... O, Commander! Glory to you, Commander!



"Hello, Robert," my brother called out as I was walking down the castle halls.

I stopped in my tracks. I couldn't even remember the last time he'd spoken to me like this. I felt my throat closing up, refusing to let the words out.

"You fought well in the exhibition match," he said.

"Th...Thank you," I finally managed to spit out.

Whenever I faced my brother like this, I froze up, and all of the comparisons people made between us suddenly sprang to mind.

"Your guards tell me that you've got a good instructor."

"Isn't she amazing?! We're all so proud to call her our commander!" I blurted out.

Edward looked at me with astonishment. I felt the same—I couldn't believe I'd said that with such naked enthusiasm.

That's right, I thought. With Commander here to train me, I've gotten so much stronger.

It was thanks to her and the cadets that I'd been able to beat my brother—my perfect, once untouchable older brother. When I realized that, it was like my eyes had finally been opened.

Seeing my older brother standing dumbfounded in front of me, blinking repeatedly, I was suddenly very aware that he was only a year older than me. Now, he looked like just a boy.

"She's incredible! She's only about my age, but she's strong enough to take on all of the other instructors at once and beat them! She's so cool! But that's not all—she's always totally on the ball at training! She notices where we're lacking and knows just how to help us improve!"

The words just kept spilling out.

Until now, I could've counted on one hand how many times I'd spoken to my brother. But now, it felt easy to talk to him.

Oh, Commander... You give me the strength to handle any obstacle—even this.

"I'm sure you'd grow a lot too if you trained under her!" I added.

"No, I—"

"Why don't you come train with us sometime?"

All he gave me in response to that was a strained smile.



I felt myself cry out, and my eyes flew open. Apparently, I'd drifted off without realizing. I must've been only half asleep, because I'd had several dreams. The last of them had been awful, which I guess explained the crying out. In it, I'd replayed the day that I found out Commander was my fiancée.

Just as I thought I was finally falling asleep again, I felt myself startle awake. I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling.

If I could turn back time to that day, I'd handle things much more gracefully. Then maybe she'd let me take her to the dance. No...if only I could turn back time even *further*, back to that day I'd first met her at the training grounds. Or further yet, back to the day when we'd first gotten engaged. Maybe then I'd be the one smiling by her side.



To be honest, I'd known what was going on for a long time. I knew that Duke Burton had requested that my father annul our engagement. And I knew that both my father and my brother thought it would be for the best. But I still couldn't step up and do what needed to be done.

Only once the final blow had been dealt, and I was utterly defeated, that I'd been able to take that final step.

One day, though, once I became stronger—once I became the kind of man worthy of standing by her side—I wanted to make my dreams a reality with her. That's what I hoped to tell her.

My dream was to devote my life to knighthood with her. I knew I didn't have much strength to offer, but I was a member of the royal family...even if I wasn't a very important one. I'd also honed my capabilities, and I was more capable than many of the men who'd actually been knighted.

It can't be that hard for me to become a knight, I thought.

And when I did, I wanted to fight alongside Commander. I wanted it to be her that I entrusted my back to and for her to entrust hers to me.

If she became the division commander, then I would become her deputy.

That's the relationship I wanted to have with her. I wanted to live my life beside her as she led. There was no reason that Commander couldn't become a knight

all because of some stupid little thing like her gender. Everyone knew that—the cadets, the instructors, and I.

Finally, I found it in me to tell her I was breaking off our engagement. I felt like we could finally move forwards with a clean slate.

We actually started spending more time together after our engagement was annulled. She was softer and friendlier at school than she was at the training grounds.

I was seeing different sides to her now, and my impression of her started to change yet again. I saw her joke around, rely on people (instead of the other way around), and gently lead someone by the hand.

I wish that were me, I found myself thinking. I wanted to spend more time with her and laugh with her too...not just in the distant future, but now.

When I saw that Lilia Douglas was the one to stand by her side, I found myself overcome with jealousy. I wanted to believe that Commander was only spending so much time with her because she was a saint who'd only just recently been adopted by the baron. But I knew those reasons couldn't explain the way that Commander looked at her.

Commander was always kind to those she helped, but I sensed that her kindness towards Lady Lilia went beyond that. I'd been watching her enough to know the difference.

I guess there must be something special about her that caught Commander's eye, I thought. Like, maybe she's a really skilled martial artist? No, that can't be it... I would've noticed that.

And yet...

"C-Commander...I thought you were spending all this time with Lady Lilia so you could help her get stronger. W-Was I wrong?!"

"Huh? Uh, yeah, I think you're a little confused."

I was stunned. What other reason could she possibly have for taking a special interest in someone?

"Th-Then...why are you spending so much time with her?" I asked.

Commander paused for a minute, looking like she was thinking it over.

"Hmm, that's a good question. I can't really explain it well myself, but..." she began, then broke into a smile as she glanced over at Lady Lilia.

Her smile was so much softer and sweeter than any I'd seen her wear before. There was something in the way that she looked at Lady Lilia that I knew, instinctively, was beyond my grasp.

"For some reason, I just can't seem to leave her alone. I guess her hardworking and earnest personality has captivated me," she continued.

Hardworking? Earnest?

I had no idea what she was talking about.

I was hardworking and earnest too. And I knew there were plenty of other people out there who were the same. How could *that* have been the reason she'd taken such a special interest in Lady Lilia?

"Commander... Y-You value the weak over the strong?"

"That's what being a knight's all about, isn't it?" she retorted. Her face said what she'd left unspoken: "Shouldn't you know that?"

I did know that. It was a knight's duty to protect the weak. It had been a stupid question to ask her. But...I couldn't help myself. I couldn't stop.

"But this whole time, I've... I thought I needed to be *strong* to stand by your side—"

"Robert," she said, cutting me off.

Normally, I would've been happy that she'd used my name instead of calling me "maggot." This time, though, it hurt.

"You do stand at my side. You and I are comrades. We fight to protect the king, the kingdom, and all its subjects. That's what knights do: We protect those who can't protect themselves. That's why I trust you and the other cadets to have my back."

Her cold blue eyes were looking straight into mine. I felt the resolve in her gaze. That's how she always was—facing things head-on. *Strong*.

I looked away, unable to bear it.

"I can spend time with Lilia, you, and the cadets. There's no reason those things should be mutually exclusive. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah... You're right... They shouldn't be, but..."

That was all I could manage to spit out.

This whole time, I'd been chasing the sight of her back, wanting to be the person she entrusted it to. I wanted to catch up to her and entrust my back to her too. I wanted to stand and to fight by her side.

And now she'd called me a "comrade." She'd acknowledged me as an *equal*. My wish had come true. Her respect should have been everything I'd ever wanted...but it wasn't.

Why? Is it because I can't stand next to her the way Lady Lilia can? Is it because she won't look at me the way she looks at her?

These possibilities knocked me sideways. I felt my legs wobbling under me.

What is this? Why do I feel so unsatisfied?

Doubts swirled round and round in my head. The answer I finally landed on—that I wanted to be special to her in a way that no one else was—felt embarrassingly childish.

Why do I want to be special to her? I wondered. But I didn't have any answers. Everyone wants to feel wanted...but I wish she only had eyes for me. I don't care if anyone else feels that way towards me.

She was the only one whose feelings towards me mattered.

And with that epiphany, it finally dawned on me that the root of my desire wasn't respect, but something else entirely—something I hadn't even figured out yet.



I heard that Edward was going to the church on official business for the Star-Charting Festival, so I asked to accompany him.

I wasn't particularly religious, but I wanted to learn about this "God" that I'd

been hearing about. I wanted to know if he—or anyone—could explain the feelings I had for Commander swirling in the back of my mind.

It felt like the stars had aligned, because I came across a confessional at the church. Based on the number of guards we'd been assigned for the day, I had a feeling that they hadn't expected that Edward and I would be going separate ways. I didn't want to cause any problems by splitting up. I would've felt awful if something had happened to Edward because of my selfishness, so I dragged him into the confessional with me.

It didn't seem like a big deal if Edward overheard my problems. He already knew that he was better than me in every way, so it should have come as no surprise to him to hear me talk about that. My problems would probably seem petty to him anyway.



"It sounds like *love*," the priest said—although, actually, it sounded like a woman's voice? So, maybe it was a nun.

Hearing her say that made me feel like I'd been struck by lightning.

Love? L-O-V-E?

I'd never even thought about love before. Until just recently, I'd had a fiancée. I'd never needed to think about love. Besides, there was nothing but guys at the training grounds, and I didn't interact much with the girls at school either. After my engagement had been annulled, I'd received several love letters tucked into my desk...but they'd all just said stuff like "I yearn for you." None of them had felt special in any way.

"Love? This is...love...?" I asked, but it still didn't feel real.

Love was supposed to be messy and hard. Well, that was what I'd gathered from hearing the guys at the training grounds talk about it, at least.

They'd always lament about things like "Do you think she likes me?" or "I have a fiancée, but I've fallen in love with another girl," or "I'm in love with the girl my best friend likes." I couldn't understand why they'd willingly invite something like that into their lives, and I didn't want to.

Were these warm feelings that I had for Commander the same thing? Were they considered *love*? When I stopped to think about it, I could admit that whatever it was that I felt now *did* feel a lot messier and harder than when all I'd wanted to do was to catch up to her.

But how long have I felt this way? I wondered.

I'd always looked up to her, and I'd always wanted to be by her side. I didn't feel like either of those things had changed. At the core, it didn't really seem like *anything* had changed. Which was weird, actually, because I'd expected that love would be a lot more dramatic. I mean, surely they didn't call it "falling" in love for nothing, right? Wasn't it supposed to kind of hit you over the head? Should I have been able to confidently declare, "Yes! This is *love*!"?

So many questions swirled around in my head that I felt like I couldn't keep up. Maybe I've been seeing this all wrong? I thought. Maybe I've been in love this whole time, but I just never realized it?

But then I heard Edward's voice, and my confusion deepened.

"O God, forgive me my sins," he said. "I...fell in love with my younger brother's fiancée."



Even days later, I could still remember the look on my brother's face. He'd looked so serious, so earnest. It was probably the first time I'd seen him like that. It hadn't taken me long to realize that he wasn't joking or trying to spite me—he *meant* it.

As I looked up at the ceiling, I thought to myself.

Edward is going to be king one day. He's smart, and he knows how to act like an aristocrat. Everyone's expecting great things of him when he takes the throne, but he doesn't act high and mighty about it. He treats everyone with respect, never acts like he's better than them. The only areas I stand to beat him in are probably swordsmanship and sheer physical strength. If Commander is looking for more than just strength in a partner, then Edward has a way better chance than I do.

If I'm up against an impossible foe like him...can I find it in myself to give up?

As I thought this over, the answer came to me almost immediately: *no way in Hell*.

I didn't know if what I felt towards Commander was *romantic love*, but I knew that I loved her. And I knew my love for her was stronger than anyone's.

I bolted out of my room, as if my body were moving automatically, and ran all the way to Edward's room. I pounded on his door.

His guards hurried to stop me, but they didn't stand a chance. I was royalty, after all, so they couldn't just subdue me with force. Even if they'd tried, I doubted they would've been able to.

After a few moments, Edward opened his door. In his sleepwear, he eyed me warily as he looked up at me.

"Brother!" I exclaimed.

"Robert... Do you have any idea how late it is?"

"I understand now: You're in love with Commander! But I love her too!"

His eyes flew wide open as I said this. Then, slowly, his face darkened.

"I won't lose to you! But I want to fight you fair and square!" I continued.

"Did you come pounding on my door and wake me up just to say that?"

"Well...yes. Partly, at least."

Edward let out a sigh. He seemed to be sighing a lot these days. "Listen, Robert. This may be morning for you, but for the rest of the world, it's still the dead of *night*."

"I also came here to return this to you, since you left it in my charge while you were away," I said.

"What?"

"Here. Commander gave it to me. She said you were entrusting me with it."

Edward cocked his head in confusion as I presented him with the wrapped item I'd gotten from Commander. He took it, and unwrapped it. His eyes widened again in shock when he saw its contents.

"What were you doing with this?" he whispered, still wearing a look of astonishment.

"Huh? I told you. Commander said you wanted me to have it."

"What?"

"Huh?"

Both of us were suddenly at a loss for words. Apparently, whatever Commander had told me wasn't the whole story. After several moments of silence, Edward slammed his fist against the wall. It made an impressive *thud*, much louder than I would've expected from his fragile arm.

"What...is she thinking?!"

The expression on his face was completely different to his usual, public-facing smile. It wasn't the exasperated look he usually gave me either. From just one look, I could tell that he was furious.

That was the first time I'd ever seen him get angry. It didn't seem at all like the kind of face someone would make when they were thinking about the person they loved.

I guess he's only human too, I thought. And in that moment, something else occurred to me. Edward was better than me in almost every way, so he'd probably assumed that this included being closer to Commander...but apparently, he'd been mistaken.

It's just like Commander said: It's never too late.



Commander... My dream is to be with you, to stand by your side. I swear I'll become the kind of man who's worthy of that. So, until then, please let me learn more about you. Please, let me keep your company.

One day, I'll defeat you. I won't even lose—not even to you.

So when that day comes...will you marry me?

## The Knight of My Dreams —Christopher—

They say that dashing knights are only a thing of fairy tales, but I know better. After all, there's one living right under my roof.



When I was seven, I lost my mother. I hadn't known the details at the time, but I'd never forget what she said to me: "I wish you'd never been born." Those words had always weighed heavily on me.

I was told that she'd died. It must be my fault, I thought.

Before long, I was sent away to live with a new family. I didn't question it. I knew there was no place for me at my old home.

My new family was really nice to me. They never locked me away in a dark tower, made me miss meals, or scolded me.

My new older brother was especially kind. He'd take me on fun outings, share his snacks, and tell me all kinds of things. He was always sure to make eye contact with me, and whenever I saw his gentle smile, I felt the weight on my chest lift a little.

But only a little. There was still a deep hole in my heart that I knew could never be filled.



One day—about half a year after I came to live with my new family—I finally heard news of my mother, who was supposed to be dead.

I couldn't hold myself back. I ran off in search of her. I didn't even care if she wanted to see me. As long as I knew she was alive, that she hadn't died because of me, that was enough. I sensed, somehow, that that was what I needed to fill the hole in my heart.



I only knew the general area where she lived, but—thanks to the nice people I met along the way who provided directions—I finally found where she was. I peered into her house from a little window behind the hedges.

She looked so happy. She was laughing with her new family, having so much fun that their cheerful voices could be heard even from a distance. There was a

man with her, talking to her as she held a baby in her arms.

That was when I knew: The hole in my heart would never, ever be filled again.



While I was watching my mother in a daze, a suspicious man called out to me. I could immediately tell that he wasn't just being nice or friendly—the look in his eyes was the same as in my uncle's.

I bolted away from him. As I was trying to escape, I ran into my new siblings, who'd come looking for me.

My sister was carrying my brother on her back, and his arms were wrapped around her neck. They looked so comfortable in that position, it was like they'd done it a thousand times before. If you didn't know them, you'd probably expect their positions to be reversed. But when I saw my brother on my sister's back, I understood that it couldn't be any other way. This was clearly how they'd always done things.

It felt like they were living in a different world to me, probably because that was the first time I'd seen what family bonds look like.

Which is exactly why—

"You too!" my sister yelled at me. "Hurry!"

—I suddenly froze in place.

But my sister just picked me up, as if I weighed nothing, and ran down the dark streets.

I knew I shouldn't have run away from home, so I fully expected my new family to be angry. I could feel a sense of dread welling up inside of me. If I got kicked out of my new home, I'd have nowhere to go.

But my brother didn't scold me. Instead, he said *nice* things. I couldn't stop crying.

"I... I, um, I heard my mother was...still alive," I explained. "So, I..."

"I see," he said, after a long pause. "So you wanted to see her, right?"

"But...she's not my mother anymore."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I started bawling again. I thought I'd be happy just knowing she was alive...but I wasn't.

"I-I saw her holding...a baby. She was with a man I've never seen before. They were smiling and having so much fun."

Now that I'd learned she was alive and seen how happy she was, it felt like proof—proof of how happy she would've been if I'd never been born.

"I don't... I don't have a family at all anymore!" I sobbed.

I tried to wipe my tears away with my hand, but they wouldn't stop pouring down my cheeks. I knew my crying must've sounded awful, but my brother spoke to me kindly, as if to reassure me.

"Hey, Christopher? We haven't been living together for very long, so I know Lizzie and I probably don't feel like family to you yet. I know it isn't something that can be forced either," he said, looking straight at me with his beautiful blue eyes. "But one day, we'd really like to be your family."

At the mention of "family," I felt myself stiffen. It felt like such an alien concept to me—like something I could never have again. And even if I could, the idea of losing it again would be unbearable. Just that thought alone made me want to never have anything to do with it.

"We can enjoy meals together and share smiles as we talk about how delicious they are. We'll worry about you, and you can worry about us. We can come to each other for advice and help each other out. We'll even come up with some secrets to keep from mother and father."

He took my hand. It felt soft as it wrapped around mine. I didn't know what to do with it, so I just stared at it blankly. That was all I could manage.

As we approached our home, I suddenly became aware that my sister was still carrying me as she walked briskly.

I know what my brother thinks of me, but what about her? I wondered.

She'd been kind to me when I'd first met her, and she was currently carrying me in her arms, so she probably didn't *hate* me, at least. But...I was a little afraid of her.

Looking back, I'd probably been on the verge of developing a real distrust of other people. Everything my brother had said and done had indicated that he was okay—that I could trust him—yet I'd still kept him at arm's length.

I'd had even fewer opportunities to talk to my sister. Sometimes I had no idea what she was thinking, so I felt just a little nervous around her.

As we got closer to the manor, she plopped me back down on the ground. I think she realized that I was staring at her, because I saw her steel-blue eyes flicker a bit. They were darker than my brother's.

Then, she swiftly dropped onto one knee before me in one fluid motion. She was a lot taller than I was when we were standing, but now, she was looking up at me. Somehow, that was all it took for my nerves to suddenly calm.

Seeing her rest on one knee, she looked like a fairy-tale knight.

"I'll be your knight, Christopher," she said, taking my hand as she looked up at me. "Because I'm a woman, I can never protect the kingdom as a knight. But I can protect my family...and the people I care about."

Then, she placed a kiss on my fingertips. As soon as I felt her lips touch my skin, I could feel all the blood rushing to my head. I could practically hear my heart pounding in my ears.

"Will you let me protect you?" she asked.

She gave me a tender smile. I'd never seen her look so charming before.

I just barely managed a nod in response.

*She's so cool...* I thought. She looked like a picture-perfect knight straight out of a storybook.

Holding hands with both my new sister and brother, I walked the last few steps towards home. The duke's manor felt like a castle to me now. That alone was enough to make my step feel lighter.

My siblings shared a look and burst out laughing.

I gave each of their hands a little squeeze.



After that night, I felt like I was slowly becoming a real member of the Burton family.

When my sister had said she wanted to join the knight cadets at the training grounds, I hadn't hesitated to back her up. I mean, she was so dashing! She was destined to be a knight. Our brother had agreed to lend his voice too, and the three of us had gone to go entreat father together.

When father had watched me make a case for my sister, he'd hugged me, tears welling up in his eyes. And, at that moment, I finally felt like I was a real member of the Burton family.

By that point, I'd grown used to the way my sister dressed and acted, so I didn't think there was anything wrong with it anymore. No matter what she looked like, she would always be my older sister.

When I'd told father that I wanted to attend the training grounds just like she did, both she and my brother had accompanied me to back me up. I hadn't been allowed to start school at the same time as my sister, but I'd learned something about myself from my request. I'd been surprised by how easily I was able to ask for something so selfish and silly compared to before.

For the most part, I didn't even think about the hole in my heart anymore...although it did still hurt from time to time.



After my brother had graduated from the academy and earned the title of "Earl Burton," he started racing back and forth between the castle and the duchy.

It seemed like sis was pretty popular at school, because letters and presents arrived for her at the house almost every day. Most of them were from girls, which worried my mother and the head maid to no end. The head maid was especially concerned that my sister might find herself on the pointed end of a knife one day, and, privately, I shared her fear.

I wanted both of my siblings to be happy...which meant that I was always worrying about sis.

Brother had told me to look after her for him, but my own concern for her

was honestly more than enough. The older she got, the more she seemed to be the spitting image of a fairy-tale knight.

If this really is a fairy tale, then I hope it has a happy ending, I thought.



One night, I had a nightmare that woke me up. I immediately forgot what it was about, but my pajamas were drenched in a cold sweat. I thought about getting something warm to drink, so I left my room and headed for the dining room.

I happened to pass by my parents' room on the way there, and I overheard them talking.

"What are we going to do about Elizabeth's engagement?"

"I think it would be best to call it off."

Instinctively, I hid behind the door. It was open only a crack, so they probably wouldn't have seen me anyway. But I was so shaken that thought didn't even occur to me.

They're annulling sis's engagement? I thought, dumbfounded. I felt like my whole field of vision had gone dark.

Sis's fiancé was the second prince, so I knew there must've been a good reason for withdrawing the engagement. I'd lived in the duke's home long enough to know that much.

The next thing that sprang to mind was sis's image, smiling as she gently stroked my head. Her kindness only made my heart hurt more.

What's going to happen to her? I wondered, horrified. Does this mean she's doomed to a life of unhappiness?

I couldn't let that happen.

I started to worry about her even more than before. Before long, I'd even started meddling in her affairs.

How can I make sure that she has a happy future? That was all I ever thought about now.

Around that time, I also found out that the academy's dance was coming up. It felt like the perfect opportunity—I'd stop sis on her way to the dance and give her a beautiful dress to wear.

Although she *did* look dashing in men's clothes, I was sure she'd look gorgeous in women's clothes too. And if everyone saw how beautiful she was, I felt sure they'd change their minds about her and realized how amazing she was. If I could just make them see that, I was sure she'd find happiness.

At least, that had been my plan...but on the day of the dance, she slipped past me and left before I could present her with the dress I'd prepared. She always walked to school, but on that day, of all days, she'd apparently decided to take a carriage. I had a feeling that she'd instinctively picked up that I must've been planning something, so she'd prepared the carriage specifically to avoid me.

According to a maid who had seen her, she'd picked out a knight's uniform for the dance. I felt like I was at my wit's end. *You're incorrigible, sis!* I thought.

I immediately sought out the head maid for advice, and she quickly made preparations for me. I grabbed the dress and makeup I was hoping to make sis wear and headed after her in my own carriage.

Wait for me, Sis. I swear I'll ensure your happy ending!



I was furious.

I'd worked so hard to help Sis, but she'd gone and ruined it all. I couldn't believe she'd put *me* in the dress that I'd brought for *her* to wear! Sure, it meant I had her all to myself during the first dance, and sure, she looked really dashing up close, but *still*! And yes, maybe she smiled at me every time our eyes met, and maybe my heart wouldn't stop pounding, but *still*! Who cared that she looked even more like a prince than either of the real princes?! All of that was completely beside the point!

"Christopher? Heeey, Christopher? C'mon, snap out of it," sis said, peering into my face.

I turned away in a huff.

Don't think you can make it all better with just a glance!

Brother just looked on with a pained smile.

"I really am sorry. Please find it in your heart to forgive me?"

I told you, that's not gonna make it better!

Even as I protested privately, though, I couldn't help but look up at her. She was giving me a guilty smile. When our eyes met, she cocked her head as if to say, "Okay?" and gave me a little wink.

I'll admit it—at that point, I caved.

I didn't appreciate being treated like a girl, though, so I ended up being a brat and demanding that she choose a masculine hairstyle for me. We ended up going to a hair stylist that my brother had picked out, and sis consulted with them about my new haircut.

"Wow! You look great, Christopher! Very handsome!" sis exclaimed upon seeing the final look.

I felt like I was on cloud nine.

That was when I realized I wanted her to treat me like a boy.



One day, I accompanied my brother to the castle for a meeting. Though I was acting as his assistant, I didn't sit at the round table with him and the others. Instead, I sat in a chair to the side.

The whole time, I had a strange sense that someone was watching me.

Ever since I'd started going to the training grounds with sis, I'd grown a lot more attuned to noticing things like that—if there was a presence nearby, or if someone's gaze was fixed on me, for example.

When I lifted my head, I made eye contact with the person who was looking at me. They were sitting on the other side of the round table.

The moment our eyes met, a torrent of childhood memories flooded my head. I'd almost forgotten the man's face, almost filled the hole in my heart...but the memories were still there, lurking underneath the surface.

When my uncle realized that I was staring back at him, his mouth twisted into a smirk.

He sat—waiting for the moment my brother stood up from his chair—then he pounced. "Well, look at you now! The adopted son of a duke!"

I didn't reply.

"Don't you have anything to say to your dear old uncle? A show of gratitude, perhaps, for ensuring you found a nice new home? Come now, why don't we have a little chat?"

Again, I remained silent, and my uncle just kept on smirking.



My uncle demanded that I make up an excuse for my brother and the carriage driver, then told me to go with him. If I didn't, he threatened to reveal to my new family that I wasn't actually related to the earl by blood.

I knew neither my parents nor my siblings would care. But still...I felt the hole in my heart widening and anxiety welling up inside of it.

"You know, I feel sorry for the Burtons, pouring all that love and care into raising a bastard brat from who-knows-where," he said with a mocking laugh. "I know they're good people, but are they really open-minded enough to raise a peasant boy as if he were one of their own? I think you and I both know the answer to that, don't we, boy? You don't deserve to live as a duke's son. You know you don't belong there."

I felt my knees start to wobble underneath me. *He's right*, I thought. *I don't belong there*.

It was unthinkable for me to be a member of the Honorable Duke's family. I couldn't argue with my uncle when he said I didn't deserve my place there. I was a nobody; that was why my birth mother had said it would've been better if I'd never been born and why my uncle looked down on me so much.

Then, my uncle locked me away in a tower on his manor's grounds. I found myself all alone in a room that had been locked from the outside and a window that had been fixed shut. It was dark—so much so that only a sliver of

moonlight broke the inky blackness. I thought back to when I'd shared a room like this with my birth mother, and my hands and feet suddenly grew cold.

As he locked the door from the other side, my uncle spoke up, as if he'd just remembered to tell me something. "Your father might never have realized this, but you've got *Wilson* blood flowing through your veins, just like I do. And that's a fact, boy."

I wasn't expecting that at all. Reflexively, I ran up to the door.

"When you get that high and mighty look in your eyes, you're the spitting image of my brother."

He tricked me!

But my realization had come too late. No matter how much I pried and pushed the door, it wouldn't budge.

"I'll let you go home if the Burtons pay a nice ransom for you. No promises that they'll even come looking for you, though."

My uncle's vulgar laugh grew gradually distant as he left. I flopped down on the floor and curled my arms around my knees.



I'd lost track of how long I'd been there when I heard a soft noise at the window. I stood up and ran over to take a look.

Standing by the window was none other than sis, looking as if she belonged there. She must've ripped off the window sill that had fixed the window shut. Bathed in the glow of moonlight, her golden hair looked luminous. Her steelblue eyes flickered in the darkness.

She looks like she came straight out of a picture book, I thought.

"Hey there, Christopher," she said.

"S...is..."

"Come on, let's hurry up and go home. Big brother's worried, you know. Do you have everything you need?"

"But, I..."

Sis had come to rescue me, as if there were no question about it. I knew that was why she was here, but I needed to hear her *say* it.

"I'm...not fit to be your little brother!" I exclaimed.

"But you are," she replied, as if slightly exasperated that I would question it. "If I say you're my little brother, then that's what you are."

I knew I probably had more trouble than anyone believing that. I couldn't accept the thought that I was worthy of happiness. I just didn't believe it.

But if both brother and sis said so...if the new family I loved so much said I was worthy, then I'd made up my mind to believe them.

Sis stopped suddenly, just as she was about to leave the room. "Oh, hey, Christopher? Could I borrow one of your cufflinks? I'll buy you a new one later."



Once we'd left the tower together, sis and I walked to the manor's front entrance where my uncle and brother were waiting. It felt like the first time I'd seen brother look angrier than sis.

He's angry on my behalf, I thought. He's come here to rescue me!

The thought made me so happy. But, at the same time, I felt awful that he looked so upset—especially since it was all because of me.

Without thinking, I ran right up to him and straight into his arms. There were tears glistening in his eyes. For a moment, I berated myself for ever doubting him.

My uncle cowered in the face of sis, and after she landed the final blow, he let us all go home.

After seeing my brother when he was angry, I felt reassured. I knew he would never lose his way. And if there ever came a time where I thought he had...then I probably would've been the one who'd lost my way.

Sis, on the other hand... After seeing her like that for the first time, I was really scared. She hadn't just been *angry*—she'd been downright *hostile*. It'd been like she was facing a mortal enemy. I'd never forget how calculating she'd been, leaving my cufflink behind, or how threatening she'd looked when she'd

cornered my uncle.

If someone doesn't keep an eye on her, she might turn into a real villain, I thought. I didn't have any concrete evidence worth worrying over, but the thought wouldn't leave me. It was like an alarm bell that wouldn't stop ringing in my head.

She can't be left to her own devices.

I felt like I shared brother's worries about her now. I knew she'd come to rescue me, and I appreciated that...but she'd been far angrier than necessary.

After sis had settled things with my uncle, brother took my hand gently in his.

"Family doesn't have anything to do with who's 'good enough.' We care about each other. If you ask me, *that's* what makes us family," he said.

"Big brother..."

"But if you still want to give back, then...it would make me really happy if we could keep caring about each other. We can do our best and help each other out through thick and thin. What do you say?"

He gave me a gentle smile. I squeezed his hand, feeling happy he'd said all of that.

"Oh, and one more thing—I'd appreciate it if you could help me keep an eye on Lizzie too."

"Wait...huh?" sis chimed in, looking at both of us with surprise.

She must've thought she was in the clear now, because she'd totally dropped her guard. Seeing the look on her face, which was a complete one-eighty to the threatening look she'd worn earlier, I burst out laughing.

"Lizzie's a real tomboy, isn't she? I can't keep her out of trouble all on my own. I'd appreciate it if you could keep lending me a hand like you always have. Actually, let's make that two hands—I'll need all the help I can get."

I didn't know if "tomboy" was the word I'd use to describe her, but I felt like I kind of knew what he meant. Sis couldn't be left to her own devices.

"Sis! I'm gonna work hard to look after you!"

"Christopher...?"

I leaned forwards and took her hand. It was warm. Just feeling that warmth, I relaxed a little.

"To tell you the truth, I've been worried about you for a long time now, sis. I mean, you're so strong and cool and kind... You're amazing, but if you keep this up, you'll never find a husband!"

I watched her expression change gradually, but I couldn't tell what she was thinking. I definitely felt better now that I'd told her about my worries, though.

"So I'm going to work hard to help everyone see how amazing you are, sis! And...i-if it comes down to it...I'll take responsibility for you!"

I'd never seen sis look so shocked before. She looked at me, astonished. Now that I'd made that declaration, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my chest.

That's right... If no one else is going to make sis happy, then I'll do it! We can be happy together!

After all, everyone knows that fairy tales always end with "And they lived happily ever after."

Wait...huh?

Suddenly, it dawned on me how crazy I was being. The weight of what I'd just blurted out hit me all at once.

That was basically a proposal!

I looked up, flustered, but sis was busy arguing with brother and didn't seem to be listening. Looking at her face, I felt my cheeks flush.

I need to take that back as soon as I can! I thought. I need to tell her it's not like that!

But, for some reason, the words wouldn't come out. I couldn't help wondering why I felt so relieved now that I'd said them.

Maybe it's not that I just want her to be happy? Maybe it's not about someone else making her happy...maybe I want to be the one who does it? Is

that I want? To live with her forever, happily ever after?

I looked at her again. Sure enough, she was every bit as dashing, amazing, and beautiful as always...just like a fairy-tale character. She was the knight of my dreams. As soon as I realized that, I was so worried that I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

Now that I'd learned this about myself, it felt like I'd found a missing piece of the puzzle. That's right... I'm in love with her!

As I stared at her profile, I met brother's gaze. When he saw my blush, he broke into a big, gentle grin.

## From the Start —Lilia—

I turned on my handheld gaming console. It made its familiar startup sound and displayed the manufacturer's logo. Then, for a moment, everything went black.

The voice actor of one of the game's love interests (who'd just made his solo debut as a singer) began to belt out the game's lively intro song. With a sweeping crescendo, the game's logo burst onto the screen.

Had you there for a moment, didn't I?

It's not actually that kind of game. What actually happens is that the logo floats gently onto the screen, as if carried there by the wind. Various names and lines from the game rapidly appear on the screen, one after another, in a fancy, elegant-looking font. They're accompanied by a revolving door of character portraits for the game's love interests.

When the verse begins, the game's main character (default name: Lilia Douglas) makes an appearance...from the nose down, at least. Her portrait immediately switches to a visual of her silhouette as she runs, with CGs from each love interest's route popping up behind her and disappearing just as quickly.

The last character that appears is Yoh, and once that's over, the main character steps into a puddle. A splash fills the screen, and the camera pans down to an impactful shot of a clear blue sky.

As the song changes key and the music swells into one last crescendo, the screen is generously filled with fan-favorite CGs of emotional scenes from the game. If you've finished the game, then forget being on the brink of tears—the combination is enough to send you into full-fledged waterworks.

Once it's over, the screen fades to a still of the academy under a blue sky, with the logo floating overhead. Then the start menu appears.

It's the menu of my favorite game, *Royal LOVERS*. It might be a stretch to say I've seen this screen more than I've seen my parents' faces, but believe me when I say that I've seen it *over and over* again.

And, faced with it yet again, I selected "Start."



I'd always been kind of a weird kid as far back as I could remember, lost in daydreams and talking about things that shouldn't have even existed. It wouldn't have been surprising if everyone had kept their distance from me because of that, but fortunately, they never had.

My parents had warned me that I shouldn't say weird things to people, but that had been about the extent of pushback I got. Otherwise, my childhood had been pretty smooth sailing.

The first inkling I'd had that something was *off* came when I'd forgotten to bring my books to a church study group session. Surprisingly, no one had been upset with me, even though they'd told off the *other* girl who forgot her books.

All of the adults and kids in my life had only ever been nice to me.

One day, I'd tried broaching the topic with the nice old lady in my neighborhood who always gave me sweets.

"Why are you always so nice to me?" I'd asked her.

"Why, because you're just so cute, Lily dear!"

I'd felt like someone had just hit me over the head. That was when it had dawned on me that I, Lilia, was absurdly, *outrageously* adorable.

From that point on, I totally let it get to my head. I knew I was on a winning streak, and I was determined to take advantage of it.

Looking back on my sordid past now makes me burn with shame. I'd made all kinds of selfish requests and even caused a bit of mischief. Despite that, nobody had ever scolded me for it.

Who knew looks were so powerful? I remembered thinking. I had no idea that's all it took for people to be so nice to me. This world really is different to the world of my past life. Wait... "past life"?

And that had been the moment it had all come back to me: the person I'd been in my past life, the world I'd lived in, the otome games I'd played...and how I'd died.

Before long, I'd realized that I was now living in the world of *Royal LOVERS*, and that I'd been reborn as the main character, Lilia Douglas.



For a while, I just kicked back and enjoyed my life. After all, I'd been reborn into the world of my favorite otome game—and as the main character, no less. I knew a noble and fabulous three years awaited me at First Royal Academy. I'd played the game so many times that I had full confidence I could romance any of the love interests that I wanted.

My favorite character was Edward, but I wasn't sure I was cut out to be queen. It was kind of fun to think ahead and imagine what kind of futures lay ahead for me, though, even if I was counting my chickens before they hatched.

In this life, I was doted on like a princess, all because I was cute. The old me probably would've balked at my behavior. In fact, she probably would've thought I was downright crazy. But present me was cute and childishly innocent, and I was able to adapt to my new self fairly quickly. Besides, everyone around me seemed perfectly happy to let me indulge in acting like a princess. As far as I was concerned, everybody won.

But gradually, I began to grow discontent. It started to bother me that everyone only seemed to care about my appearance. I found myself wishing that they'd look beyond who I was on the outside and find something else—something more *tangible*—to like me for.

In my past life, I probably would've felt lucky to have a problem like this. But

to my present self, it felt like a real problem. I really needed to feel that people could see past my charm.

All anyone around me ever said was "What a good girl you are."

What does that even mean? I thought. How can you say that when you have no idea what I'm even thinking?

I realized that they only thought I *looked* like a "good girl"—or what they thought a "good girl" would look like.

B-But then...what if I wasn't cute?

The moment that thought occurred to me, a cold chill ran through me. I hadn't been all that attractive in my past life, though I'd honestly never thought of myself as being particularly ugly either.

Once I'd been reborn as Lilia, though, I realized how off-putting my assessment of the old me would've been to everyone around me. I certainly hadn't been anything to write home about on the outside, but the same was true for the inside too.

I hadn't been very smart, but I'd looked down on my classmates for being stupid. I'd only ever used social media to complain about stuff and shit talk people. Even back when I'd discuss my favorite games and anime, I didn't have nearly as much fun talking about what I'd liked as I had ripping others apart for all their "flaws."

I'd always complain about how reality sucked and how boring it was. "Why does nothing exciting ever happen?" I'd whine. Meanwhile, thanks to my bad attitude, I never took any steps to make my life more exciting. I wasn't able to bring myself to change anything or to deviate from the path I thought had been laid out for me. Even though, in a sense, I'd chosen that life for myself, all I managed to do was to complain about it.

These superficial idiots only ever judge people based on how they look. I don't belong here, I'd thought. I'd connected with other people online who'd shared my complaints, and we'd created an echo chamber where we'd just licked each other's wounds.

None of those online friendships had ever lasted, though. No surprises there.

They'd only been drawn to me because we'd been birds of a feather. But, just like me, they'd thought they were better than everyone else—including me. Relationships don't last when you look down on your so-called "friends."

Objectively speaking, there was nothing even remotely likable about the person I'd been. The way people treated me hadn't been right, but I'd had a little blame to bear too.

And I hadn't changed much at all on the inside in my new life. In fact, the thought that I should change hadn't even crossed my mind. Even if it had, I wouldn't have had the first idea *how* to change. No...if I'm being honest, that probably wasn't the problem.

I think I was just afraid that people would look down on me even more than they did already. I couldn't stand the thought of being laughed at or mocked. *There's no point in trying*, I'd think, or, sneering to myself, *Effort only gets rewarded in fiction*. I was probably just trying to protect myself from getting hurt.

If I ever came across anyone who *did* see me for who I was inside...honestly, I was just going to pray that they never looked my way. Everyone in my life now was exactly the sort of person that past-life me despised: superficial, only judging people based on the way they looked. But what's worse was that *I* was one of those people too.



After I regained my memories, I became a completely different person. That is to say: I reverted to being the person I was in my past life. For a while, I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to be left alone.

Unfortunately for me, I was too cute for that. I was like a wallflower thrust into a pack of extroverts. I started to feel anxious looking into people's eyes when I spoke to them. I didn't want them to see me for who I really was—a bell pepper, empty on the inside.

I grew scared of starting conversations with people too, because I never knew when their kindness would run out. I didn't know when they'd turn on me and decide I was someone worth making fun of. I was terrified of that happening.

Looking down at the ground and mumbling became all I could manage. And yet, nobody once called me "weird" or laughed at me. Everyone was nice to me.

"Don't push yourself," they'd say, smiling. "You don't need to change."

But all I could think was, Are you kidding me?



One day, on my fifteenth birthday, I healed my mother's injury and everyone realized that I was a saint. They sent me to go live with Baron Douglas as his adopted daughter.

Deep down, I grew hopeful. There hadn't been a single likable thing about me in my past. I hadn't even had anything I was good at. In this life, though, things were different. I was the main character—and a *saint*. Surely there were things I could do that no one else could? Maybe I'd awaken some cheat-level powers or something?

I hated the idea of having to train, but I could easily imagine what might happen if I didn't. "So what if you can heal a little scrape?" they'd say. I didn't want that, so I could put in a *little* effort, at least.

When I asked if there was any training available for saints, though, Baron Douglas just smiled and said, "You don't need to worry about that. You're perfect just the way you are. You don't even need to lift a finger."

Are you kidding me?

The last saint who'd been alive fifty years ago had apparently been able to heal life-threatening injuries and diseases. The best I could manage was a paper cut or a mild scrape on the knee. There was no way in hell that was good enough.

But maybe that's all I'm capable of? I thought. I'm not pure of heart like the game's main character, so maybe I won't be able to fix more than a scrape or two? Maybe everyone knows that, and that's why they always tell me I'm perfect just the way I am?

If that was the reason, then it just meant they'd given up on me. They saw me as a sham—a girl who looked like a saint on the outside but had nothing real to

show for it. They weren't expecting anything from me.

The realization stung. Tears poured down my cheeks.

I didn't know how to prove them wrong, though. I had no idea how to use my powers. It wasn't that I didn't *need* to do anything—I *couldn't*. And that tore me up inside.

I can't do anything! I cried again and again.

Then I realized something. That's right... I'm living in the world of an otome game! And I'm the main character!

The Royal LOVERS protagonist ultimately taps into her high saint's powers only after she falls deeply in love. When the love interest is on the verge of death—either from grave injuries or fatal disease—her newfound powers are great enough to heal him.

That'll show them! Maybe then people will have some hope for me?

If I wanted to be a high saint, then the Good Romance Ending wasn't going to cut it. I needed to max out a love interest's affection points and get their Best Romance Ending. The main character's high saint powers only activate when she finds "true love."

At first glance, it seems almost impossible to get the Best Romance Ending. Fortunately, though, I was confident that I was well-versed enough in the game to pull it off.

There was just one thing that made me nervous.

It was unimaginable for the love interests to not fall for the main character in the game, but what about *me*? What if they realized that it was all just a facade and that I was empty on the inside? I mean, who'd fall in "true love" with a girl like that?

Even if I *did* manage to get the Best Romance Ending, would it even count? It'd mean that I'd cheated my way there with all my knowledge from my past life, after all. And even if the universe gave me a pass on that, could it still be true love if I didn't believe in it?



So, there you have it. Now that you've taken a deep dive into the mind of Lilia Douglas, are you ready to learn how her story plays out?

Okay, I'll knock it off with the cheesy marketing talk. This isn't some character introduction video on a game website, after all. Anyway...back to the present.

I began my first day at the academy with two choices before me: I could either follow the kitten I'd just encountered on my way to the auditorium, or I could crouch down and call to it. Naturally, I chose to follow it.

If I'd called out to it, I would've triggered Robert's introduction event. I didn't really need to focus my efforts on raising his affection points since you wind up with plenty of them as is (whether you want them or not).

No matter whose route you decide to do, everyone knows that picking Edward's introduction event is the best strategy. You only want to choose to call out to the kitten to see Robert's CG from the swordsmanship tournament, and that's about it.

So, I followed the kitten to the courtyard.

The character I found there captivated me immediately. He had golden blond hair that fluttered perfectly in the wind—the polar opposite hair color of Edward, who I'd expected to find here.

Omigod...his legs are so slim and long. And he's so tall! His face is so delicate! Omigod, he's hot!

Ahem! Sorry about that. I kind of lose my mind whenever I see a hot guy.

There was a cool, composed look in his sharp, narrow eyes, which were a very appropriate steel blue. He had a long, straight nose that wasn't particularly deep-set but looked perfectly contoured. He was definitely more hot than he was cute; more like an actor than a J-pop idol.

His beautifully shaped, thin lips were set in a slight smile. He was tall and slender, easily at least 180 centimeters tall—if not taller. And the boy had legs for *days*. The mostly black school uniform looked great on him. His collar was red, so I figured he was probably a second-year student like I was. But he seemed so cool and collected, it was hard to imagine that we could be the same age.

I felt my heart pounding in my ears.

Oh God, what do I do? He's not a love interest... He's not even a minor character that you can romance on the fandiscs.

I knew that could mean only one thing: He was a side character.

But how can a mere side character be so drop-dead gorgeous? What's the deal with this school?

As I sifted through my muddled thoughts, I felt a surprising wave of relief wash over me. If the side characters were this hot, then the actual love interests must've been to *die for*. All my fears about whether or not I'd actually be able to find "true love" suddenly flew out the window. I'd have *no problem* falling in love.

I know, I know. I talked all high and mighty about wishing people wouldn't judge me based on looks alone, but that was the only way I could judge people too.

I couldn't help it. That's just the world I grew up in, all right?

Besides, people are full of contradictions. And my biggest contradiction was that I desperately wanted people to see beyond my physical appearance even when that was all I could see of them.

And anyway, people live in la-la land when they're in love, so who cares? I was sure I'd be able to lie with confidence that I'd fallen for his personality... Well, *pretty* sure, at least.

"Hm? What're you doing here?" the hot side character called out to me with a gentle smile.

Oh, wow...even his voice is hot! Isn't this a little over-the-top for a side character? I thought.

His voice was soft and sweet—a bit sweeter than you might expect based on his cool demeanor. If he were in an otome game, he probably would've been voiced by a woman. They typically reserved female voice actors for the main cast, so it seemed odd that I'd run into a random character who could've been voiced by one.

No...there's definitely something weird going on here. I've never encountered a real side character like him before. Just based on his looks alone, there's no way that's all he is.

"Um, well, actually, I got lost..."

Suddenly, I felt deeply afraid of my reflection in his serene eyes. I couldn't help but wonder how I must've looked to him, especially when he would've had no idea that I was a saint or a transfer student...much less the main character. When I started thinking about that, all I could manage was to look down at the ground and mumble out a vague reply.

"You're lost? I take it you must be new here. In that case..."

Before I'd even noticed, he'd approached me and taken my hand in his. He knelt down in front of me and planted a kiss on my fingertips.

Immediately, I felt every fiber of my being jolt into a panic, and all my blood rushed to my head. I knew there were CGs like this in the game, but I hadn't been prepared for this! I mean, I'd been reborn as a peasant... I'd never had anyone kiss my hand before. I'd had no idea how embarrassing it would be, or how it would make my heart flutter.

"May I show you to the auditorium, gorgeous?" the boy asked me with a wink.

I had no idea what to do in the face of this point-blank fan service. The only person who'd ever winked at me was the lady who worked at the bakery when she'd given me a free pastry.

Okay, hold on... Just hold on a second here! You can't just wink at me like that when you're this hot, or I'm going to fall for you. Fangirls are suckers for this stuff. I'm a sucker for it.

It hit me then that this boy and I had a completely different set of social customs we were adhering to. Whatever the customs were among the nobility here, they were clearly nothing like the ones I'd grown used to in either my peasant upbringing or in my past life in modern Japan.

If this was how *mere side characters* acted, then I was in for a world of trouble when I met the actual love interests.

"I've got an idea. While I'm at it, why don't I give you a little tour of the school? C'mon, follow me," the boy said.

"Huh?!"

"Oh, don't worry about the opening ceremony. I wouldn't want to get you in trouble, so I'll make sure you make it."

He smiled mischievously as he tugged my hand, and I found that I couldn't say no to him. On the outside, he looked like he slotted neatly into the prince archetype, but that clearly wasn't who he was on the inside.

Wait... Huh? That's weird... I picked the 'chase after the cat' option, so I should've triggered Edward's introduction event. What's going to happen if I leave before I meet him?

But I knew that it was too late to worry about that now. I was too anxious to speak up and say, "Actually, I don't think I can do this." So, I let him guide me away from the courtyard and around campus.

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, admiring the beautiful line of his profile, absolutely captivated.

Who is this cute guy, anyway? A hidden character? I'm pretty sure Yoh was the only hidden character, though... Oh, I know! Maybe he was added in when they ported it for a new system or something?

That was certainly a possibility, and it would explain why he had such a sexy voice.

As if noticing my gaze, the boy looked over at me with a sidelong glance.

Wow, he's gorgeous...

The smile that suddenly crossed his lips looked so perfect on his beautiful face.

Oh, well. I don't even care if he's a side character, I thought, fully relinquishing myself to the spell he'd cast on me.



To put it simply, otome games aren't for me. I'm just not cut out for them.

I'd met some of the love interests in the classroom—my classmates, Robert and Isaac, and my underclassman, Christopher—and I had a feeling I wasn't going to be able to romance *any* of them. Seeing them up close in person, they all seemed like normal boys. *3D boys*.

It should've been obvious to me that they wouldn't be in 2D, but it caught me by surprise just *how* 3D they were. No, it was more than that...they were practically *4DX*.

They all had perfectly clear pores and beautiful faces. They had beautiful voices too. I was so freaked out, I didn't think I'd be able to manage a single conversation with them. In fact, I didn't even think I'd be able to *look* at them.

I'd gone in with the intention of finding "true love" and becoming a high saint, but my resolve was quickly starting to waver. I could feel it coming undone at a rapid pace. That was no real surprise, though, since I'd never once worked hard at anything or committed myself to a real goal.

Even the cute younger boy archetype, Christopher, seemed to have passed the beautiful-young-boy stage and stepped over into beautiful-young-man territory. Everyone seemed so much...*manlier* than they were in the game.

Maybe a big part of that is their different hairstyles? I wondered. Isaac's bowl cut probably would've looked a bit janky in 3D anyway, though...

Whatever the case was, one thing was clear: This wasn't going to work. I had absolutely no chance of pulling this off.

If the hot guys in this life treated me the same way they did in my last one, it'd feel like someone had dumped a bucket of cold water on me. The thought of that made me shake uncontrollably. It was a valid fear too.

At the beginning of *Royal LOVERS*, the love interests actually aren't very nice to the main character. Robert and Isaac start off being pretty unfriendly and unapproachable. Edward and Christopher are polite, but they draw a clear line in the sand and make it clear that their politeness is nothing more than common courtesy.

Overcoming these barriers is supposed to be part of the fun of an otome game, but now that I'd come face-to-face with them in real life, I suddenly felt

totally ill-equipped to navigate them. I didn't think I'd even make it past this first stage where they were all cold and distant without my heart breaking.

I didn't have any confidence that I'd be able to keep pushing through unless they were kind and adoring from the get-go. I mean, how are you supposed to get close to someone who doesn't like you? Maybe some people can pull that off, but not me. I didn't have it in me.

It made me wish that the hidden character, Yoh, was here...but unfortunately, you can't pursue him until your second playthrough. There was no point pining after him.

But maybe the boy sitting behind me—the aforementioned hot side character—was an option? His name was "Sir Burton," apparently. I'd checked his name discreetly in the middle of a conversation.

I turned around to look at him. I couldn't believe we were in the same class. It was really starting to appear increasingly unlikely that he was just a side character. Seeing him on such good terms with Isaac, Robert, and Christopher also made me wonder—if he was friendly with the love interests, then surely he was a love interest too? At the very least, there was a strong chance that he was an important secondary character.

He'd even taken the initiative to talk to me earlier when I'd disappeared into my seat, and he'd invited me to eat lunch with him.

Oh, wow... This is the first time in my high school career that I won't be eating lunch alone, I thought.

He took my hand in his, and I couldn't help noticing how big and warm it was —a little coarse too. It was unmistakably a man's hand. As soon as this thought occurred to me, I felt myself break into a blush.

Huh? That's weird... I actually don't mind that he's leading me by the hand. And even when he looks at me, I don't feel scared. Oh God...what's wrong with me? Maybe I really am just a sucker.



I couldn't believe how nice Sir Burton was being to me. I was doing abysmally in my classes, so he spent his free time after school tutoring me. He didn't leave

until I understood everything. He also partnered with me in dance class, and he was even kind enough to forgive me with a smile whenever I accidentally stepped on his foot.

He's probably only doing all this 'cause I'm cute, though, I thought. Or maybe it's because I'm a saint? It could even be because I'm the main character, or because he feels sorry for me that I grew up as a peasant.

But whatever his reasons were, it was the first time that someone had treated me with such kindness.

"You solved that last problem, so I know you can solve this one too. Just take your time and think it through. You've got this," he'd say, or, "You've mastered that step you were having trouble with last week. Looks like your hard work has paid off."

No one had ever spoken to me like that before—like they *believed* in me. He was the only one who told me that my efforts meant something. And hearing him say that, I felt hopeful...as though even a phony like me might be able to develop some substance.

One day, when he was teaching me etiquette at his manor, he asked me about the baron. To both of our surprise, I burst into tears.

"He told me...that I didn't need to do anything," I said.

I tried to cover up my sadness with a smile, but I could tell I was failing miserably. Big tears spilled down my cheeks one after another. I hadn't even realized just how much it really hurt to have no one believe in me.

I started blurting all kinds of things out as I sobbed. I didn't know if I wanted someone to hear them, or if I was just talking to myself, but I couldn't stop. Before I knew it, I was recounting my whole life story.

Sir Burton reached across the table and gently offered me his handkerchief. Even though the situation was probably really awkward for him, he was still so kind—just as he always was. His warmth just made me cry even harder.

"Personally, I think you're beautiful both on the inside and the outside. But if you want to improve, I think you have the potential to be even *more* captivating," he said. He probably had no idea how much those words meant to

me. "Start by picturing the kind of girl you want to be. I'm sure you can think of some qualities you admire, right?"

I felt like I was finally being accepted. His words were so validating—like he was telling me that I *could* make the changes I wanted to see in myself.

Thanks to him, I began to feel like it was okay to be more honest and believe in myself. I knew *he'd* never make fun of me for trying. Even if I half-assed it, I felt he'd smile and say, "Great effort" and encourage me to try even harder next time.

"It's okay if you don't embody those qualities yet, or if you feel like you're lacking in some areas. That's normal. You just have to fake it till you make it," he added, encouragingly. Then he took my hand and planted a kiss on the back of it. "I'll do whatever I can to help you get there, Princess."

He wore a mischievous smile. He looked more boyish than I'd ever seen him, and it set my heart aflutter.

If I'm going to fake being something...then surely it's got to be an otome game protagonist. I'll pretend I'm a main character who loves everyone and is beloved by everyone in turn—someone who can find "true love." I'll be the sole princess, and I'll find a prince who's just for me.

I was so glad that I'd chosen Sir Burton's route. I'd have no problem acting like a main character for him; I'd do it gladly.

That's when I realized: Hey, there's no rule that says main characters can't romance side characters!

On the contrary, I'd read plenty of novels in which the main character of an otome game sidelines the love interests and goes for a side character instead. Being the main character gave me the right to decide who I'd romance. And besides, theoretically, didn't anyone I chose automatically *become* a love interest by default? Surely my interest in them *made* them one?

Then an idea came to me. I could make other love interest's events play out with Sir Burton, instead of them. That'd be a surefire way to raise my affection points with him. That way, even if he didn't have a route of his own, I could create one.

And if I was picking my own choices instead of relying on a walk-through to tell me what the "right" choices were, wouldn't *that* set me on the path to "true love"? If anything, that seemed like a much more promising direction than any of the other options provided.

This time, I felt firm in my resolve: I'd play the part of the main character—an *original* main character, rather than the one from the game—and pursue Sir Burton's route.

In the world of an otome game, main character-esque girls are destined to be loved, after all. I didn't know if I could pull it off...but I was willing to give it a try. It did seem less and less likely that Sir Burton was actually just a side character, but that didn't matter. Even if he *was*, the actual love interests didn't stand a chance against someone as dashing as him.



I started talking to Sir Burton more proactively. I tried asking him all kinds of questions to get to know him better, but he never gave me anything but wishywashy, evasive answers. I wasn't too surprised by this, though. I figured he probably just had a dark past that he couldn't tell anyone about. That certainly wasn't uncommon for otome game characters.

He'll probably tell me all about it once I'm officially locked into his route, I thought. I was already itching to find out what he was hiding.

Ever since I'd committed to his route, I'd spent most of my time seeking him out and trying to talk to him. But sometimes, when we talked, I'd notice piercing glares from girls. I had no doubt that they were probably just jealous.

I'd never experienced any hostility or animosity from girls in this world, so it was actually kind of refreshing. Besides, I knew they wouldn't actually do anything to me—and knowing that it was just jealousy eased any of the anxiety I might've otherwise had. Oh, fine... I'll admit it: I did find their glares intimidating.

But even more than any trepidation I might've felt, I was impressed that Sir Burton had accrued such a following of admirers. In my opinion, it really spoke to how incredible he was. Besides, it was kind of nice to have people jealous of me because I received special treatment from such an amazing guy.

Thank God. I guess the favoritism wasn't just in my head.

Sir Burton was kind to everyone, after all, so I did have to wonder. He always smiled at the girls who surrounded him and chatted with them pleasantly. The girls always seemed to prattle on about the most boring things in the world, but he took them so seriously. I couldn't help but admire that.

Even when he was surrounded by girls, he'd look for me in the distance and call out to me, trying to include me. When we were alone, on the other hand, people just couldn't seem to help themselves from butting in. Lord Isaac, Prince Robert, and Lord Christopher always seemed to appear out of nowhere.

(In case you hadn't noticed, I'd gotten used to addressing them with their titles. When I'd played the game, I'd just referred to them by their names, but that had started to feel really weird lately. So, I'd started adding "Lord" and "Prince" much more often.)

Lord Isaac seemed to have some kind of weird friendship drama playing out with Sir Burton, and our classmates were all too eager to spur him and his clinginess on. The whole thing was bizarre. Sir Burton even made a comment about how Lord Isaac was shy, which I found deeply confusing. He'd never been particularly timid in the game...

Whenever Lord Isaac or the others showed up, though, I found myself totally unable to carry a conversation.

I became desperate to get Sir Burton alone, and I had the perfect idea for how to make that happen. I remembered a secret meeting spot from the game—a hidden bench in the rear garden—that was the setting for several events. Thinking that was my chance, I invited Sir Burton to meet me there.



One day, as I was talking with Sir Burton at our secret spot in the garden, we were interrupted by Prince Edward of all people.

I'd heard rumors that he was studying abroad, so I'd been using the place that was technically *his* secret spot. I certainly hadn't expected him to interrupt us there.

Instead of the school's uniform, he was wearing ceremonial attire. I'd seen it

before in one of his in-game portrait variations. Like the other love interests, he'd also cut his hair short. Otherwise, though, he looked mostly the same as how I remembered him from the game.

Omigodddd! My favorite character, in the flesh! He's reeeeal!

Actually, he does seem more...substantial(?) than I remember. What's that all about? It's like he's got a thicker outline or something. No, what am I saying? He's in 3D now, he doesn't have an outline. But woooow, he looks so dazzling in that white uniform with his silver hair! It's like I'm staring at the sun!

Ahem! Sorry about that. I got a little carried away again.

Seeing him in the flesh, though, I felt the same sense of unease that I'd experienced with the other love interests. He seemed all the more like a real man now, but he also felt somehow...off compared to what I knew of him from the game.

But it was still exciting to see him turned into a real person like this. I mean, just imagine breathing the same air as your *favorite character*. It's a pretty insane opportunity!

He and Sir Burton seemed to be talking about something, but whatever they were saying was going in one ear and out the other. The beautiful clash of gold and silver hair was just...too much... I couldn't take it!

Omigooooood! Eeeeek! I am so blessed on this day! I can't believe I'm seeing my two favorite characters in one frame like this!

Before I knew it, I'd devolved into fangirl mode. Honestly, I felt like I deserved a medal for not falling into a deep bow right then and there before them.

Great job, Lilia, I thought, mentally patting myself on the back. Hold on...I'm a self-insert fangirl, not a yaoi fangirl. I think I'm getting a little confused here.

That aside, who wouldn't want to see their two favorite characters in one frame together? Hallelujah! I wanted to sing. In fact, I wanted to send money to whoever drew this scene. Just tell me their bank details, and I'll send the cash right over.

I'd missed whatever exchange Sir Burton had just had with him (thanks to my

fangirling), but we somehow wound up following Prince Edward to the student council room to help out.

On the way over, Sir Burton referred to me as his "girlfriend," and I almost died on the spot. I'm not even exaggerating. Your heart can stop from shock, you know! Sir Burton brushed it off as a joke, but I wouldn't have been the least bit upset if he'd meant it.

His smiling face was so cute, I thought I'd burst.

Sir Burton must be treasured at all costs! No one's cuter than him!

At some point, sparks seemed to flicker between Sir Burton and Prince Edward, but I had no idea what had caused it. It didn't seem like they were fighting over *me*, though—on the contrary, Prince Edward didn't seem to like me very much.

I peered at him out of the corner of my eye, and he looked back, probably noticing my gaze.

Wait...huh? Is it just my imagination, or is he...glaring daggers at me? I thought. Nope. Definitely not my imagination.

I was much more attuned to dirty looks than other people—probably because I was so afraid of them.

Maybe he's upset because he caught me staring?

From them on, he always smiled at me politely, but I couldn't help but notice an undercurrent of hostility or suspicion. Whatever it was, I was *painfully* aware of it, to the extent that I became scared to even look his way.

Anyway, back to the subject at hand...

While Sir Burton and I were helping to organize the archive room, I thought things over.

I knew that Prince Edward had a bad impression of me for some reason. He wore a placid smile, but he couldn't fool me—I knew from the game that it was fake. The more I pondered about it all, the more a pattern seemed to emerge.

I'd almost been seated next to Sir Burton in class, but Isaac had made him switch seats—almost as if he hadn't wanted us to sit next to each other. And

one time, while Sir Burton and I had been eating cookies, Christopher had showed up out of nowhere and interrupted us. Now, Prince Edward was trying to separate me from Sir Burton by asking me to go organize the archive room by myself.

As for Prince Robert...well, his characterization was so drastically different from the game's that I didn't even know where to begin with him.

In any case, all of the love interests seemed determined to split the two of us apart. It was almost as if they were trying to block me from pursuing his route.

I didn't know if those efforts were conscious or not, but at the very least it certainly made sense. It was probably the game's powers that be at work, trying to stop me from pursuing a character who wasn't meant to be pursued and writing an original story. It was only natural that they'd want to force me back into the game's official routes.

If such powerful forces *were* operating behind the scenes, then I knew it'd be easier just to go with the flow and let them carry me where they would. But...I didn't want to romance the others now. I wanted to romance *Sir Burton*.

It was none other than Sir Burton, after all, who'd said I had the potential to improve. And it was Sir Burton who had said I could be beautiful on the inside too. I'd probably waver in my resolve, complain, and want to give up...but I'd made up my mind to at least *try*.

I'd decided to play the part of the main character, and I was going to go about it with all the passion of a fangirl trying to get all the game's CGs.

Just as I reached up to get a file from one of the top shelves, a shadow fell over me. Long fingers grabbed the file I was reaching for, and just as they pulled it out of the shelf, a scene that could've been straight out of a TV show unfolded.

"Is this what you were looking for?" Sir Burton whispered sweetly into my ear.

I blushed fiercely as I looked into his steel-blue eyes and thought, *This has* got to be a CG. I'll have to check the CG gallery for it later.



Once again, I was looking at the *Royal LOVERS* start menu, just as I had many, many times before.

I pressed "Start," and one of the characters said the game's title. This time, though, it wasn't a familiar voice...

I cocked my head in confusion.

I don't remember any characters who were voiced by a woman...

## Extra Story: Elizabeth vs. the Bear—the Aftermath

After Sir Burton collapsed on the ground, we—Prince Robert, Prince Edward, Lord Isaac, Lord Christopher, and I—heard the low *thud* of the bear falling somewhere in the distance. Then, a silence descended upon us.

Everyone looked in the direction that Sir Burton had flung the bear, then back at Sir Burton.

Did...did she just swing a bear across the forest?

I marveled at how strong and cool that was, (though honestly, "strong" and "cool" didn't even begin to describe that feat). All of us who were there to witness it had fallen into a shocked daze.

The first to come back to his senses was Prince Robert.

"Commander!" he yelled, snapping everyone else back to their senses too.

He ran over to her and shook her shoulders. She was wounded all over, but she wore a strangely satisfied, peaceful expression on her face.

I felt my heart jump in my chest. Ba-dump!

Omigod, I've never seen her make that expression before. She looks so vulnerable... Wow, she's cute...

It seemed almost unfair that someone so cool could be so cute too.

"We have to get her to a doctor," Prince Robert said, sliding his arms underneath her knees and picking her up...bridal style.

I couldn't believe my eyes: There, right in front of me, was a man carrying another man bridal style. (I mean, that was the *visual*, at least. By this point, it was plenty clear to me that Sir Burton was a woman.)

Anyway, it was unbelievable to see someone easily taller than 180 centimeters being lifted up like it was nothing. And Sir Burton was no twig either. I'd once caught a glimpse (just an *accidental glimpse*!) of her insanely toned, sexy—*ahem!*—um, of her body, and let me tell you, she looked *really* 

buff.

Once again, I realized that I'd have to reassess my opinion of Prince Robert. In the game, it had been a struggle for him just to piggyback the injured main character down the mountain. In my new life, I'd seen him duel Sir Burton at the swordsmanship tournament and fend off those attackers in town too. Still, I'd never realized he was *this* strong!

I knew I needed to stop comparing him to the character he was in the game. The moment he'd pivoted away from his arrogant prince archetype, he'd basically become a completely different character. And, on second thought, I supposed it was silly to be bowled over at the fact that he could carry such a tall, buff woman when said woman had been able to fling a bear across the entire forest like it was nothing.

If there was anything to wonder about, it was Prince Robert's nickname for Sir Burton. I'd heard him call her "Commander" on multiple occasions, but I had no idea what that was all about.

Commander of what? Does she command a division? As question after question swirled in my mind, something completely different suddenly occurred to me. Wait... Huh? Is it just me, or does Prince Robert look at Sir Burton with unusual fondness in his eyes?

It was almost like...how he looked at the main character in the game.

"Robert. You're the most capable of all of us, wouldn't you say?"

My train of thought was suddenly cut short as Prince Edward walked out in front of me. Even though he'd rushed over to find us, there was neither a bead of sweat on him nor a single strand of hair out of place.

This world sure does work in mysterious ways.

"We can't be sure that's the last of our bear encounters. If worse comes to worst, we'll be in danger if your hands are full."

"I... I guess you're right."

"Let me take over for you. I'll carry Lizzie," Prince Edward said, looking deadly serious.

Huh? Did he just call her "Lizzie"? But Sir Burton's name is "Elizabeth," and they don't seem close enough for him to call her by a nickname...

As far as I'd seen, they'd never seemed to be on especially good terms. If anything, it felt like Prince Edward just kept butting into her affairs.

Wait... Huh?

I felt like I was stumbling upon a realization that I would've been happier without. I was starting to understand what people meant when they said "ignorance is bliss."

But, wait, come to think of it...

The shock of finding out that Sir Burton was a woman had completely overwritten the strange confrontation I'd had with her fangirls, but it was suddenly starting to come back to me. I'd assumed they'd all just been yaoi fangirls seeing things through their own distorted lenses, but now... Now, I wasn't so sure.

"But, brother... Won't she be a little heavy for you?"

"That won't be a problem."

I was a little floored by how tactless Prince Robert was being. No matter how tall and toned Sir Burton was, that was *no way* to talk about a woman. I could see where he was coming from, though. Prince Edward might've thought he'd be able to manage it, but honestly, he seemed so fragile that anything more than a pair of chopsticks might break him.

As Prince Edward hesitated for a moment, looking down at Sir Burton, Lord Isaac spoke up. "Wait. None of us are medical experts, so we shouldn't be making the call about whether or not it's safe to move her. We should wait here for help."

Oh...I knew it. He's just the same as the princes, I thought, feeling my eyes glaze over.

And before I could refocus them, Lord Christopher spoke up too. "H-He's right! We blew our whistles, so I'm sure the teachers are on their way!"

Him too, I thought. I didn't have any concrete proof, but I felt sure of it.

Then Prince Edward approached them, standing with Prince Robert and Sir Burton behind him, as if to defend them. The corners of his lips turned up into a smile.

"Well, I suppose making that call would be your only recourse...if you're incapable of carrying even one woman," he said.

Whoa.

I could practically hear the barbs on his words. His choice of words seemed specifically designed to rub Lord Isaac and Lord Christopher the wrong way.

Is it just me, or do I see some sparks flying? I thought. No... I'm probably just imagining things. But can you blame me if I'm overthinking this all, though?

I felt like I was starting to catch wind of something. I'd assumed that those girls who'd confronted me were just delusional yaoi fangirls seeing sparks where there were none. But you know what they say—"where there's smoke, there's fire."

"Ah, there you are."

The sound of foliage rustling interrupted the strange anxiety that was welling up inside of me.

Mr. Fisher emerged from the trees, looking as unhurried and relaxed as ever. And, for a brief moment, I saw a strange glint in his eyes.

Our teacher looked like nothing more than a disheveled goofball, but I knew that he was actually a romanceable character in the fandisc.

"And here I thought you'd all just gotten lost... Looks like you've gotten into bigger trouble than that, though, huh?" he asked, eyeing Sir Burton in Prince Robert's arms and the makeshift bandage around my ankle.

He approached Prince Robert with swift footsteps and took Sir Burton from him before he could even react. Prince Robert stood there in a daze, apparently taken aback by how quickly it had all happened.

I wasn't surprised, though. Mr. Fisher was supposed to be the strongest character in the game, so it wasn't exactly a shock to me that he could outmaneuver Prince Robert like that.

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"Okay, kids. Let's get moving."

"Huh?"

"Someone lend Ms. Douglas a shoulder."

"Huh?"
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As Mr. Fisher walked ahead, carrying Sir Burton in his arms, he turned around to look at everyone's shocked faces and let out a sigh. "What's the holdup? If you don't need assistance, then start walking."

All of the love interests looked a little miffed at this new development.

In the end, Prince Robert ended up carrying me. Instead of the way he'd handled Sir Burton, though, I found myself on his back—just like in the game. It wasn't like I wanted to be carried bridal style by anyone other than Sir Burton, so I wasn't about to complain.



"Checkmate," Christopher announced as he moved his knight.

"Ngh!"

I held my pawn, hovering it over different spots on the board as I struggled in vain to find an opening to fight back. Try as I might, I knew I was done for. With a sigh, I held my hands up in a show of defeat.

I'd been put on strict bed rest orders, so Christopher had been helping me fend off boredom by teaching me the rules of chess. He'd given me a thorough rundown, including an overview of all of the pieces.

Obviously, I hadn't managed to beat him yet. I'd also yet to discover what made this game so thrilling, but I had a feeling it just wasn't for me. I didn't really get off on chess's cheap tricks. I didn't get this irritated during card games like poker, and I wondered if that might be due to chess's frustrating physical mechanics.

Surely there must be a better way to enjoy this? I thought. Like, smashing up the board, for example...

"I don't think chess is for me," I said.

"Really? I think it's a lot of fun..." Christopher replied, gently picking up a piece.

I'd watched him and our older brother play before, but even when they'd tried to explain what they were doing, I'd never been able to wrap my head around it. I didn't mind watching the two of them enjoy a game, but I probably would've preferred to just let them have their fun instead of trying to join in.

As I watched Christopher pick up his king, I couldn't help venting some of my pent-up frustrations.

"You know, I think the *queen* is actually the strongest piece. Isn't the king just kind of a sitting duck? I'd be mortified if I were him."

"I've never thought of it like that before," Christopher replied, laughing awkwardly as he cleaned up the chess board.

"I wish I could hurry up and get moving again."

"Remember what the doctor said, sis? You have to stay in bed and rest."

As much as I hated it, I knew he was right. The doctor had scared me straight with tales about what could happen if one of my broken ribs pierced my lungs, so I wasn't about to sneak out of bed or anything. Besides, I needed to make sure that I was recovered for the dance—when the routes branched—and I knew that the only way I could make sure of that was to stay put in bed.

Still, I could feel my muscles growing weaker by the day with all the sleeping and sitting around I was doing. I'd tried asking the doctor if there was any strength training I could do in bed, and he'd looked like he'd really had it with me. Apparently, the answer was a firm "no," which was why I'd been put on such strict bed rest orders. So...that was that.

"You must be bored too. Don't you want to go off and play?" I asked Christopher.

"Nope. I'm going to watch over you and make sure you get your rest, sis."

"Aw, come on. You don't have to supervise me. I'll be good."

He gave me a doubtful look.

Sheesh, where's the trust?

With the constant supervision I was under—both from family members and the head maid—it seemed like they thought I was going to jump out the window and run amok around town if they took their eyes off of me for even a second.

What does my family take me for? A hooligan?

"I wouldn't want to make you cry again," I muttered with a strained smile.

"Huh?"

"You were crying before, weren't you? Well, maybe 'crying' is underselling it. 'Sobbing' is more like it."

"Y-You saw that?!"

I nodded, as if to say, "Yeah, duh." My vision might've been blurry at the time, but I'd still been conscious. Besides, it's pretty hard *not* to notice when fat teardrops are falling on your face.

"Whenever you cry...I feel like I've done something awful," I said.

"Well, you have."

"Sheesh. You don't hold back, do you?"

I laughed, trying to cover up my discomfort, and gently stroked his hair. At first, Christopher just glared at me bitterly, but then he broke into a bashful smile.

Then I heard a knock at the door.

"Come in!" I called.

The head chef came in carrying a plate. "I cut up some melon. Care for a snack?"

I looked at the plate of beautifully cut, bite-size melon pieces. I'd literally just eaten lunch, so it didn't seem like a great idea to be snacking already. I mean, I'd been doing nothing but lying in bed. I was going to get fat if I kept this up.

Seeing that I wasn't about to accept the fruit, the head chef offered it to Christopher. He took the plate and immediately went to work on the bites with a fork.

"Well, I wouldn't want these to go to waste..." he said. "Sis keeps getting so many get-well snacks and treats, and I can't just let big brother eat them all. It wouldn't be good for him."

"They're perfectly ripe, so they need to be eaten immediately. We'll be happy to eat any leftovers," the head chef replied.

Apparently, the servants had cut the melon up to eat after their dinner. They'd just brought some up to share with me since it had originally been one of my get-well gifts. I didn't mind if they wanted to keep it for themselves, though...and I was sure my parents would have agreed.

"Can't people just send flowers or something?" I asked.

"Any more flowers, and they'll start taking over the entrance hall," Christopher said with a nervous laugh.

He was probably right. My bedroom was already stuffed to the brim with flowers, and I'd heard that the entrance hall was an even bigger mess.

"The royal family alone sends *cartloads* of flowers every day. The head maid was complaining that they seem to be running an experiment to see how many flowers it'll take before our manor collapses under them."

Poor head maid. She must be quietly losing her mind.

I didn't know which of the royals was responsible, but I hoped they'd knock it off before she burst a blood vessel.

"Everyone adores you, sis," Christopher whispered, looking down at the plate in his hands. Then he looked over at the bedside table where a mountain of letters sat piled high.

I'd grabbed the footman when he'd had a spare moment to get him to write replies for me, but I just couldn't keep up.

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

I mean, I did have a fan club...

Speaking of which, the fan club president's letters had gotten way out of control. It was a stretch to even call them "letters" now; they were practically tomes. Seriously, though—she was literally sending me hardcover books with

gilded pages. She seemed especially fond of sending me her memoirs.

As Christopher stared at me, he stabbed a bite of melon with his fork and offered it to me. "Say 'ahhh'!"

"Huh?"

I looked at the bite of melon on his fork, then back at Christopher. He was grinning happily.

"You know I can still use my right hand, right?" I asked him.

"Ahhh!" he repeated.

"I can eat just fine mys—"

"Ahhh!"

I had a feeling this little charade wasn't going to end until I took a bite, so I reluctantly ate his offering.

I could tell it must've been expensive given its refreshingly sweet and strong fruity flavor. Although I guess that probably went without saying, since it was literally a piece of fruit... Anyway, it was probably healthier than eating sweets, at least.

Satisfied now that he'd gotten to see me eat, Christopher stabbed another bite with his fork and brought it to his own mouth. He looked absolutely delighted—just like our older brother, he had a real sweet tooth.

God, he's precious.

Just watching him, I couldn't help but relax into a smile too. Even the head chef ended up grinning. All this over a measly melon.

The head maid knocked on the door, which had been left wide open by the head chef, and entered. (Even though she could've walked right in, she wasn't one to abandon her manners.)

As soon as he saw her, the head chef's smile dropped. He braced himself like he was going to be scolded for leaving the door wide open and sticking around to goof off.

It didn't take much for the head maid's blood to boil these days (especially

given that she was under the constant pressure of fending off the royal family's onslaught of flowers), so you *really* didn't want to mess with her.

After striking terror into the head chef's heart with her wordless, icy gaze, the head maid then turned to us.

"Lady Elizabeth. You've received a get-well gift from the Guildford family," she informed me.

"Please tell me it isn't another bouquet of flowers. I think we've got enough of those."

"No. It's a book."

She handed me a parcel she'd been carrying. I opened it to find books with titles such as *Recovering With Physical Therapy, Physical Therapy for Motor Function Impairments*, and *Treatment Plan Milestones*. Just reading the covers was enough to put me to sleep.

These books seemed like classic Isaac choices. But despite their seemingly practical nature, they weren't really of any use to me.

Christopher was looking over at them curiously, though, so I gave him one to pore over.

If there are any tips in here for how to heal bones quickly, then just give me the quick and dirty summary. I don't need any of this other stuff.

"There's...a gift from the crown prince for you, as well," the head maid said.

I frowned, hoping it wasn't going to be another dress. I tried to suss out what to expect from the head maid's expression, since she would've inspected the gift's contents prior to handing it over to me. Based on what I could see in her face, at least, it didn't seem like Edward was about to make gifting me dresses into a running gag...but there was something in her eyes that told me he'd sent something absolutely baffling.

Fearing what I'd find, I took the package from her and peered inside.

Wrapped neatly inside a white handkerchief was a nutcracker. As he looked over at my hands, Christopher's eyes went wide.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Ahh! Lady Elizabeth, I've been looking for that!" the head chef, who'd apparently missed his cue to leave, cried out. He pointed accusingly at the nutcracker in my hand. "I was wondering where that went! You told me you just wanted to borrow it for a bit one day, and then I never saw it again!"

The head maid peered at me with a strange look in her eyes, as if I was some sort of cryptid. "Lady Elizabeth...why did the crown prince send that to you?"

The long and short of it is that I mooched that nutcracker off of the head chef and never gave it back. The story behind it isn't really worth repeating, and besides, it'd take too long...so I'll spare you the details.

"Well, that's all in the past now, right? Anyway, I'm bored out of my mind, so let me crack some nuts for you," I said to the head chef with an over-the-top grin on my face. I studiously ignored the flummoxed head maid.

"I'm afraid there are no dishes with walnuts in them on today's menu..."

"That's okay. We can just sprinkle some on top."

"Gourmet is just a game to you, isn't it?" he replied dejectedly, apparently fed up with all the dietary requests I made.

I didn't care how my food tasted (except for my mortal enemy, bell peppers), as long as he complied with my endless requests to add more protein and cut the carbs. Still, just as you'd expect of a duke's head chef, he always tried to make them as appetizing as possible.

My family held on to our staff for a long time, so I suspected that he'd been working at the manor for almost as long as the head maid and butler.

"I'll go get some walnuts for you," Christopher said. "Just sit tight and behave yourself, okay, sis?"

"I will, I will."

Christopher left with the head maid and head chef, who took the opened packages and empty plate with them. I couldn't believe Christopher trusted me so little that he thought he had to warn me when he was only leaving for a few minutes.

Now that my room was suddenly empty, I had no one to keep my mind

occupied. Out of boredom, I reached for one of the books Isaac had given me.

It had more pictures than I'd expected, which filled me with a shred of confidence that I might actually be able to get through it. But my optimism soon faded—the spike to my blood sugar took its toll, and I was suddenly overcome by drowsiness.

Just as I'd started to nod off, though, I heard a *thunk* at my window. Immediately, I jolted awake.

What was that? I wondered. My room was on the second floor, but there weren't any trees outside my window that were tall enough to touch it.

I got up out of bed and went to take a look. Sure enough, there weren't any tree branches nearby that could've hit the window, and it didn't seem like any small birds had run into it either.

Despite my strict bed rest orders, I was allowed to get up and shower and use the bathroom, at least. So I figured there wouldn't be any issue with me opening a window. Feeling confident in my judgment, I unlocked the window and flung it open.

"Commaaaandeeeer!" a voice from below cried out.

I looked down and saw Robert in the garden peering up at me. The moment our eyes met, his face lit up. As usual, the sparkle in his eyes bore through me like lasers, apparently undeterred by the distance or difference in elevation.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see your face! I feel so much better now!" he exclaimed.

"What are you doing here? You could've just come inside, you know."

"One of the servants stopped me. He said that he was under strict orders from the duke not to let anyone visit."

Wow, they're not messing around, I thought. It certainly explained why, despite the mountains of get-well gifts I'd been getting, I hadn't received a single visitor. Not that I'd been expecting many... I had plenty of adoring fans, but my friends were few enough to count on one hand.

Still, I was surprised that one of the servants had turned away a member of the royal family so bluntly—even if he was the good-for-nothing second prince.

I wondered if it was the head maid or the butler who'd spoken to him. Either way, it seemed this no-visitors policy was to blame for the piles of gifts that had been overflowing and littering the manor, and I wasn't sure that was a price worth paying.

"That's why I came up with a way to see you without stopping in!" Robert continued, unabashed, as the sparkle in his eyes continued to bore through me.

Very clever of you, Robert...

It seemed highly unlikely that the servant who'd shooed him away would look kindly on this loophole. "No visitors" surely didn't mean, "But you can say 'hello' as long as you don't come in."

"How are you feeling?" he shouted.

"I'm dying of boredom, but other than that, I'm fine. I should be all better in about a month."

"A month..." Robert whispered dejectedly as he visibly deflated, all his cheerfulness leaving him at once. All I could see of him now was the whorl of hair on his head. "I'm sorry. This never would've happened if I...if I wasn't so weak."

"Huh?"

"I wish I were stronger... I wish I could've gotten to you faster! We could've taken that bear down together."

He sounded genuinely devastated. It was uncomfortable—even a little embarrassing—to see him so distraught like this.

If he'd shown up any earlier, I wouldn't have had the time I'd needed to have a conversation in private with Lilia. Besides, the ensuing fight with the bear had gone exactly the way I'd wanted it to go. Frankly, that fight didn't have anything to do with him—it didn't even have anything to do with Lilia. It had been a battle between me and the forces that were.

"Robert," I called, getting his attention.

He looked up at me, utterly hopeless, like a dog that had been out for a walk and suddenly found himself lost. I was so taken aback by how pitiful he looked that I burst out laughing.

"You're being ridiculous," I said.

"Huh?"

"That was *my* battle to fight. You being there wouldn't have made any difference."

"B-But—!"

Watching him flounder for his words, I burst out laughing again. So much for being Mr. Hot-Shot-Cool-Guy, I thought. His old characterization was long gone.

"If I need your help, I'll ask for it," I said.

His eyes opened wide in shock.

Hm? Surely I didn't say anything that surprising?

"Y-You mean it?!" he exclaimed eagerly, taking a step towards the window.

"Huh?"

"You'll count on me when you need to?!"

"Oh. Yeah," I said, nodding.

When I need to.

Robert's face lit up so brightly, it was hard to believe that he'd been looking so forlorn just moments ago. His chartreuse eyes sparkled aggressively as he broke into a proud smile. It was like watching a big flower burst into bloom.

Ah, right...he's such a pea-brained prince that I almost forgot he's a love interest.

He was a heartthrob, all right—as long as he didn't open his mouth.

I was so distracted by him that by the time I'd noticed my bedroom door opening, it was too late.

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"Sis? What's—"
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"Oh...crap."

"Commander?"

I turned around to see Christopher standing in the doorway. We locked eyes, and I could see him processing the sight of me standing in front of the open window. As the two of us stood silently, the only sound was Robert, who was yelling up at me from below.

With a sad *plunk*, the basket Christopher had been holding in his hands fell to the floor. Walnuts tumbled out and rolled across the carpet.

"Sis!" he cried.

"It's not what it looks like, Christopher! I swear I've been behaving!"

"B-Brother! Father! Sis is trying to escape!"

"Wait, stop! Don't tell on me! Please, Christopher, I'm begging you!"

"Commander?! What's going on, Commander?!"

"Will you shut up?! Hey! Don't climb the wall!"

#### **Afterword**

Hello, and thanks for reading. It's Masamune Okazaki here.

I still haven't quite figured out how to write one of these, but...the way I see it, if I say it's an afterword, it's an afterword. It's all in the name, right?

I did an interview for the first time recently, which still feels unreal to me. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that I'd be the one being interviewed one day. I don't know if I'll have any similar opportunities in the future, but I was reading some interview articles the other day for fun and realized that there's usually a pretty standard set of questions that people get asked.

For example, manga authors and novelists often get asked which of their characters they think is the most like them.

When I thought about how I'd answer that question, though, I couldn't help but feel that I wouldn't want to be like *any* of my characters. Another standard question is: "Which of your characters do you think you'd get along best with, or would want to be friends with?" Honestly, I don't think I'd get along well with any of them...

That probably doesn't say good things about this cast of characters, but I hope you enjoyed reading their story nonetheless. I love that Elizabeth and company are totally unlike me, and I actually enjoy the fact that we'd probably never be friends in real life.

I think there are a lot of different ways to appreciate a character, whether it's "I like them because they're just like me," or "They're nothing like me, and that's why I like them."

And maybe you've read this story and thought, I've never thought about it like that before, but I like it! or God, this is painful! But I love it.

However you relate (or don't) to these characters, I hope you love them in your own way. I want to write a story that brings a unique experience to each

reader, so that when you read it, you feel like you're facing off in a one-on-one fight.

I want to thank my wonderful illustrator, Hayase Jyun, whose beautiful illustrations breathe life into these characters. I'd also like to thank Gucche and Era Ichi, who are in charge of the manga adaptation, and everyone in the TO Books editorial department.

Finally, let me say my heartfelt thanks to you, my readers, and to everyone involved in the making of this series. Sending my gratitude and love your way!

See you next time, everyone.

Friend Data

**Character Profile** 

Name

Lilia Douglas

The Basics

Birthday

June 29th

Skills

Healing magic (nothing more than scrapes), picking up on people's feelings

Hobbies

Crafts (in past life: otome games, manga/anime)

Family

Adoptive: father, older brother (birth mother and birth father are also alive and well)

Hobbies

Family

2D heartthrobs

3D men, trying not to be awkward



Let's get right to it: is there anyone you have a crush on?

A-Anyone I have a c-crush on?! Um, uh... Well, I-I guess so. I mean...I *know so.* Um, they're actually...here with me right now. J-Just kidding! Ehe he he!



What's your type?

S-Someone sweet and handsome... Someone who gives me the courage to keep trying.



Perfect spot for a first date?

A-A first date? You mean, like, a first date *after* I've started officially dating someone? 'Cause, um, I've already been on a lot of them... O-Okay, how about... dinner at a restaurant where you have a beautiful view of the nighttime scenery?

Friend Data Character Profile Name Robert Diagrantz The Basics Birthday July 27th Skills Sword fighting Family Hobbies Father, mother, half brother **Training** Likes Commander, being physically active Dislikes Sweets Let's get right to it: is there anyone you have a crush on? Yes, sir! What's your type? Commander! Uh...I mean, someone like you, Commander! Perfect spot for a first date? Anywhere that we can be together!

# Friend Data

**Character Profile** 

Name

### **Christopher Burton**

The Basics \_\_\_\_\_

Birthday

February 22<sup>nd</sup>

Skills

Violin

Hobbies

Eating sweets with my siblings, fashion

Family

Adoptive: father, mother, older brother, older sister

Likes

Family, sweets, clothes

Dislikes

Bugs, being alone

Let's get right to it: is there anyone you have a crush on?

 $\mbox{Um}...$   $\mbox{I'm}$  not sure if I should be saying this, but...yes. There is.

Q What's your type?

I'd have to say...someone who would welcome me as family.

Perfect spot for a first date?

I think I'd have fun anywhere, as long as I was with the person I love. It'd be fun to go out for a picnic together. We didn't get to enjoy the last one much, so I'd like to try it again and take our time.









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From Two-Bit Baddie to Total Heartthrob: This Villainess Will Cross-Dress to Impress! Volume 2

by Masamune Okazaki

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